



# Guardian of Talon Mountain

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** I came to Glacier Hollow for answers. I didn't expect to find him.

My brother vanished on this mountain, and no one believed me when I said something felt wrong. So I found a way to come here myself. Armed with a research grant and a quiet desperation, I set out to uncover the truth.

I didn't count on Caleb Knox—gruff, glacial-eyed, and about as welcoming as a storm. He says I don't belong here. Says I'm poking into shadows best left untouched.

But when accidents pile up and someone starts tracking my every move, Caleb becomes the only man I can trust. The only man I want. He's raw. Relentless. Protective in a way that sears.

He says I'm his to protect.

But the truth I came for? It's bigger than either of us imagined—and someone will do anything to keep it buried.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

## PROLOGUE

### CALEB

Mountains Outside of Mosul, Iraq

Five Years Ago

The cold never leaves your bones, not in this place.

Most people think of the Middle East as an endless desert—and part of it is, scorched and merciless. But the other part, the part they don't see, is the mountains. Jagged and ancient, high enough to rip the breath from your lungs, and so cold it doesn't just sting—it seeps into your marrow and freezes everything soft inside you. Your warmth. Your instincts. Your mercy.

Even on the flat, inside the compound, where the sun's beating down and sweat clings to skin, the cold is still there. It's the kind you carry inside you. Buried. Tucked deep behind your ribs, surrounding your heart and soul. The kind that only gets worse when you realize it was your call that got your brothers killed.

I crouch behind the stone outcropping, my rifle tight in my grip, listening to the soft crackle of comms and the irregular breathing of men trying not to die. Our mission was to intercept a small-scale arms deal in the mountains near Mosul—likely black market drones, nothing new to us. Intelligence was light, the terrain rough, and our orders were to move fast and clean.

Except we weren't the only ones moving.

I should've known. The signs were clear—Reynolds was jittery, distracted, avoiding eye contact, and checking our six like he expected a ghost to appear. He glanced over his shoulder constantly, as if expecting a ghost, his palms slick on his rifle, and shifting his stance as if the inside of his boots were made of broken glass. His breathing was shallow, off rhythm, like he couldn't find his center of gravity. He was green and eager, yeah, but not useless. He'd pulled his weight before. Still, something was off. I knew it.

My gut was screaming at me, but I shoved it down. I told myself we needed focus, not doubt. Not on this op. And definitely not from me. I'd vouched for him. Backed him when others wouldn't. I just didn't want to believe I'd made the wrong call. Didn't want to admit the man I trusted was already halfway out the door, dragging a trail of betrayal behind him and holding the knife meant for our backs.

Stupid.

The moment the first round whistles past my head, it snaps the air so close it singes my cheek. I know someone set us up. Not a misfire. Not a random shot. Someone planned and calculated this—they sold our coordinates and anticipated our formation. Every hair on my body stands on end. I spin, adrenaline kicking in fast and hard, rage and clarity crashing through me like a wave. Someone wanted us dead—and they knew exactly where to find us.

“Contact! East ridge—two tangos!” I shout into the comm, spinning to cover our flank.

I hear Sandoval's voice crackle in response—calm, clipped, as always. “Copy. Knox, pull back to fallback point Bravo?—”

The explosion cuts him off.

My ears ring, a high-pitched whine that drowns out everything but the thundering of my pulse. Dust chokes the air, thick and cloying in my throat. Grit scrapes across my eyes as I crawl forward, half-blind, every inch of my skin stinging from the blast. I throw myself over the ridge, heart hammering, instinct howling, boots sliding on loose rock. But it's too late. I find Sandoval first—what's left of him. The blast tore his body, twisting his legs unnaturally and crushing his torso beneath crumbled stone and flame-blackened metal. One of his hands sticks out from the debris, fingers curled like he died still trying to reach for his weapon.

Hobbs slumps against the rock, still breathing, but just barely. Blood spurts in rhythmic bursts from his thigh, soaking the dirt, pooling dark and fast beneath him. Arterial. A flood I can't stop, no matter how hard I press. My hands are already slick, the gauze disappearing into the wound like it's being swallowed whole. It's not in a place that the tourniquet can reach, but I keep trying. I can't even process it—just act... clamp down... knuckles white with pressure, praying to gods I stopped believing in years ago that I'm not about to lose another man.

He grabs my arm, eyes wide with pain and something worse.

“Reynolds.” It's all he says before the light fades from his eyes.

I carry him back anyway. His weight is dead and heavy in my arms, limp like something already given over to the earth. Blood soaks into my gear, hot and sticky, a visceral reminder that he was alive just minutes ago. It coats my forearms, runs down to my wrists, and seeps into every seam of my uniform. The wind lashes my face, cold and biting, as if the mountain itself is punishing me for not seeing it coming. My boots slip on loose rock, every step harder than the last, but I don't stop. I can't stop. Not when this is all I have left to carry.

Not because I believe it'll matter. Because I have to do something.

By the time we exfil, Reynolds is gone—no radio, no body, just a phantom trail and silence. No firefight for him, no last stand. He vanished like smoke, leaving behind wreckage and blood. Intel confirms what I already know in my bones. He sold us out. Traded our coordinates to a cartel-linked intermediary for a stack of dirty cash and a coward's ticket out. A man I trusted handed us over like a pack of dogs, then disappeared while we bled for it.

They court-martial me three weeks later. Not for treason or collusion—there was no evidence. But they needed someone to answer for the failure. For the blood. So they hit me with dereliction of duty, command negligence. A slap on the wrist dressed in official language. I'm 'honorably' discharged, because my record's clean and my service too decorated to ignore. But I'm stripped of command, rank quietly erased. Sandoval and Hobbs' families get folded flags and hollow apologies.

I get silence. I bury myself in it.

I look to the North. Alaska doesn't ask questions. Doesn't offer comfort, either. Just space so wide it swallows sound, cold so deep it leeches into your marrow. Just the mountain—ancient and unmoved—watching from behind a veil of mist and pine, holding its secrets like bones buried beneath the snow. It gives nothing. It takes everything. And it never forgets.

It's exactly what I deserve. I believe that—have lived by it, let it shape the edges of my exile. But my sister Wren? She's never subscribed to that kind of self-inflicted punishment. A year after I disappeared into Glacier Hollow, she showed up like a barefoot storm, all wild curls and relentless optimism, ready to set up her business of wildlife research and medic and pretend we were still a family. I tried to ignore her. I really did. But ignoring Wren has never worked—not when we were kids, and not now. She's the kind of force that doesn't wait for permission.

BRYN

Anchorage, Alaska

One Year Ago

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

I'm already halfway through my second soda when I check my phone again.

Still no texts.

Chris is late. Which is weird, because my big brother is never late. Not when it comes to me. Not when we haven't seen each other in eight months, and I'm only in Anchorage for one week.

The little restaurant tucked off Fourth Avenue is half empty, but I picked it because it's quiet, local, and he said it was near where he planned to end his backpacking loop. Some sort of aggressive, unmarked wilderness detour in Glacier Hollow.

I scroll through our last messages, trying not to overreact. My fingers drum against the condensation ring on my glass, a nervous rhythm I don't even notice until the waitress glances my way. Trying not to let that itch under my skin turn into something worse.

CHRIS (2 weeks ago): Finishing the loop early. Should be back around the 18th. Gonna meet you in town. First beer's on me, nerd.

ME: Only if you promise not to lecture me about tagging mountain lions again.

CHRIS: Deal. Bring that sarcasm and your bird encyclopedia. I'll bring the pizza.

That was the last time I heard from him.

I bite the inside of my cheek and glance out the window. Spring's dirty slush, melted

from the snow, lies along the curb, pooling around storm drains and leaving patches of stubborn ice behind. The sky is that washed-out kind of gray that makes everything look tired. A couple in matching parkas walks by, holding hands, their laughter bright and careless, slicing through the gloom like it doesn't belong here. Like they don't know someone might be missing.

He's only a few hours late. There could be a hundred reasons why. Maybe his phone died out in the backcountry, or a moose sat on it like some wilderness punchline. Maybe his truck wouldn't start after sitting too long in the cold. Maybe he got caught behind a landslide or had to help another hiker. But none of those maybes settle the weight in my gut. The longer I sit here, the heavier it gets—like a glacier pressing down, slow and merciless, whispering that something isn't right.

But I know. I know him.

I push my half-eaten salad aside and call his number again.

Straight to voicemail.

The server walks by with a polite smile, and I realize I've been sitting here for nearly an hour.

"Everything okay?" she asks, glancing at the empty seat across from me.

"Yeah," I lie. "Just waiting for my brother."

Two days later, I'm standing in the hallway of a squat government building that smells like stale coffee and defeat. Years of apathy have scuffed and stained the beige walls, and the ceiling tiles sag slightly in their frames. Fluorescent lights buzz overhead like angry hornets, flickering just enough to make your eyes hurt if you stare too long. Neglect has left this place feeling forgotten—just like the people it's



supposed to help.

The state trooper looks bored—slouched in his chair like a teenager in detention, fingers tapping idly on the sticky keyboard, chewing gum with a slow, vacant rhythm like I’m a commercial break interrupting his favorite show. His uniform is wrinkled, badge smudged, and he hasn’t even bothered to take off his sunglasses despite being indoors. His fingers hover over the keys with all the urgency of a man trying not to care.

“So, he was last seen heading into Glacier Hollow?”

I nod. “About a week before I flew in. He was going to finish his route, then meet me in Anchorage.”

The trooper types something, not looking at me. “It’s not unusual. People go missing all the time out there. Rough terrain. No cell coverage. No service roads.”

“He didn’t go missing,” I snap before I can stop myself. “He’s experienced. He had a route. He logged his trip with the Parks office. He checks in every time. He’s done this before. Something’s wrong.”

He shrugs, unconcerned. “Maybe he wanted to disappear. People come up here to lose themselves, Miss Calder.”

My stomach turns cold. My nails dig into my palms.

“My brother didn’t come here to disappear. He came here to live. He had a job. A life. And a little sister who flew all the way from Sacramento to see him.”

He finally looks up at me. A sigh. The bureaucratic equivalent of a shoulder shrug.

“We’ll file a missing person’s report. That's really all we can do. But after a week in the bush, odds aren’t great.”

I leave the station and step into the late afternoon chill; the door thudding shut behind me like a final verdict. The air hits my lungs sharp and unforgiving, carrying the scent of exhaust, wet pavement, and the kind of hopelessness that clings. A weak sun hovers just above the buildings, casting long shadows that stretch like fingers reaching for nothing. And in the middle of it all, one thing rises above the fog of disbelief and doubt—a certainty, raw and stubborn, blooming in my chest like a flare in the dark.

They’re not going to find him. Because they’re not going to look. If I want answers, I’ll have to find them myself.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

Glacier Hollow swallowed my brother whole, but it hasn't met me yet. I'm not leaving until I find out why—even if it means tearing this place apart with my bare hands.

1

BRYN

Welcome to Glacier Hollow. Population: grizzlies, secrets, and one too-stubborn biologist with a chip on her shoulder, a duffel full of gear, and a head full of questions no one wants to answer. This isn't just another dot on the map. This is where my brother was last seen alive, and I'm here to ensure they don't forget he's missing and could still be alive. Either way, I need to know what happened to him. The not-knowing chews at my nerves, leaves a dull ache behind my ribs. Every time I close my eyes, I see his grin, the way he'd tilt his head when teasing me. I just want the truth. No matter what it is.

I drive through the town's main drag with the windows cracked, the smell of pine and wood smoke curling in like an invitation. The buildings are all rustic charm and weathered shingles, a mix of handmade signs and faded paint, like the town gave up trying to impress anyone and decided to just be itself. I respect that.

Still, my grip tightens on the steering wheel. I remember Chris laughing as he showed me how to adjust a bear canister on a pack, swearing up and down that I'd never out-hike him, not in a million years. His laugh is permanently etched in my memory; now it is silent. But silence isn't enough. My knuckles pale, heart ticking faster, a silent dare rising in my chest. I'm not here to back down. Not this time. This isn't a research

trip. Not really. The grant says it is. The permits say it is. But the real reason that my brother disappeared up here, and if no one else is going to take that seriously, I will.

I pull into a gravel lot beside the sheriff's station and kill the engine. The building is squat and gray, with a dented metal door and a faded wooden sign that looks like it's seen better winters. Altitude makes the air crisp and thin, scrubbing your lungs raw and making your skin prickle as if sanded clean. I sit for a second, just breathing, letting the quiet press in around me. Then I square my shoulders, slap on a smile that fools exactly no one, and head inside, boots crunching over gravel like a warning drumbeat.

Sheriff Zeke MacAllister is big, broad-shouldered, and has the kind of weariness etched into his face that doesn't come from one bad night's sleep—it comes from years of carrying other people's burdens. He looks like a man who's seen too many search parties come back empty. His eyes flick over my boots and cargo vest with the quiet assessment of someone who doesn't miss much, then he nods once and asks, "Can I help you with something, miss? You here on official business or... something else?"

I step forward and offer a hand. "Bryn Calder. Wildlife biologist. Temporarily attached to the conservation survey in the Talon Mountain region."

He looks at me skeptically, his eyebrow lifting slightly. "Calder... as in Chris Calder?"

I nod. "He's my brother. He disappeared up here about a year ago. I'm trying to find out what happened."

The sheriff studies me for a beat longer. "No one has seen your brother since he hiked out of here. You sure he wants to be found?"

"Look, Sheriff, I'm not trying to make trouble for you, for Chris, for the town, for anybody. I just want to find my brother or find out what happened to him. If he's alive and wants me to go, I won't like it, but I'll leave him, you and this sleepy little town in peace. But if he's dead, I want to know what happened."

He watches me for another minute, then walks around the counter and jerks his chin toward the back. "Come on. You don't know these mountains. Neither did your brother. If he's dead, that might be what got him killed. But if he's alive, he might be here or he might be nowhere in the area. Alaska's a big place. Either way, you can't go looking for him on your own. You'll need help. Best man for the job would be Caleb Knox."

We stop in front of a wall map of the area, tacked with thumbprints and colored pins. Zeke taps a rough quadrant on the northeast ridge.

"You want someone who knows the mountains, that's where you go. Caleb Knox. Best tracker I've ever worked with. Lives up there like a hermit. Doesn't like visitors."

"Perfect," I mutter. "Grumpy mountain men with boundary issues are my specialty." I roll my eyes as I say it, but my pulse gives a traitorous little kick. Sarcasm's easier than letting the nerves show.

The sheriff grins like he doesn't believe me, then gives me a handwritten set of directions and warns me twice not to approach after dark. "Caleb doesn't take kindly to surprises," he adds, tone half amused, half serious. "He's more likely to meet you with a rifle than a handshake if you show up unannounced after sundown. But you're a woman, so he'll probably ask questions first, and only shoot if he doesn't like the answers."

"Thanks for your help, Sheriff."

I turn and leave and don't bother to tell him I've faced down half-tranquilized grizzlies and sleep-deprived bureaucrats. I can handle a surly survivalist.

The air outside hits colder now, sharper somehow after that conversation. I tug my jacket tighter and cross the street to the Northern Lights Lodge, the only place in town with a vacancy that doesn't require signing a waiver or sleeping with a shotgun.

The woman behind the counter—Mara, according to the hand-stitched name tag on her cardigan—gives me a look that lands somewhere between sympathy and curiosity. I sign the guest book, accept a brass room key, and trudge upstairs without explaining why I'm here.

My room smells like cedar and lemon polish. I set my duffel down at the foot of the bed and stare out the window; the mountains looming in the distance like silent judges. The ridge the sheriff had pointed to is out there somewhere, and so is Caleb Knox.

I decide to go looking for him first thing in the morning. Let him growl at me with his shotgun down. Right now, I need a shower, a decent meal, and a few hours of sleep before I hike into the domain of a man who'd rather shoot than speak.

Tomorrow, I'll start the real search.

First, though, I need food. Real food. The kind that isn't vacuum-sealed or protein-packed. I head two blocks over to The Hollow Hearth café, the warm glow of its windows promising something a little softer than the rest of this town's hard edges.

Inside, the scent of cinnamon, strong coffee, and something buttery and fresh-baked wraps around me like a wool blanket. The space is all worn wood and mismatched chairs, cozy in a way that feels earned, not curated. A few locals look up when I walk in, then return to their conversations with that small-town nonchalance that somehow

still makes note of every outsider within ten seconds.

Behind the counter, a curvy brunette in a navy blue apron and messy bun on top of her head greets me with a smile that's both welcoming and wary. "You new in town or just hungry?"

"Bit of both," I say. "Bryn Calder. I'm staying at the Northern Lights Lodge."

"Sadie," she replies, offering her hand. "Owner, cook, and sometimes therapist. Let me guess—Zeke sent you?"

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I blink. “Sheriff MacAllister?”

“Yeah,” she says, pouring a cup of coffee without asking. “Fiancé privileges. He mentioned a Calder might be coming into town asking questions.”

I take the cup and wrap my hands around it, grateful for the warmth. “That obvious?”

Sadie shrugs, then softens. “Your brother was here about a year ago. He left to go backpacking in the mountains and no one's seen him since. I’m sorry. This place... it can swallow people up.”

I nod, throat tight. “Well, I mean to make your mountain give him back.”

“Stubborn determination. Good. You'll need that here. Most of the people are really good, but the environment is inhospitable on its best day,” she says, setting down a plate with a thick sandwich and a side of soup. “Let's get you started with something warm and comforting.”

I look to see what she's served me and smile. “Grilled cheese sandwich and tomato bisque soup are kind of a universal thing, aren't they?”

“It is. It's my own go-to. It'll warm you and stick to your ribs. You’re going to need it if you’re going up to Caleb’s place tomorrow.”

“You know him?”

Sadie huffs out a laugh. “I'm not sure anyone really knows Caleb—maybe his sister



Wren, but that's about it. Most just know better than to bother him. Don't get me wrong. He's a good man, and one you want on your side in a fight, but he likes his solitude, so he's cultivated a whole intimidating, mountain man persona."

I smile, hoping that it reaches my eyes. "Guess I missed that memo."

After dinner, I thank Sadie, slip her a twenty for the soup and kindness, and walk back through the crisp night air to the Northern Lights Lodge. The stars are so clear here they look like you could reach out and pluck one straight from the sky. The kind of quiet that wraps around you and reminds you just how far from everything you really are.

Upstairs in my room, I shower quickly, letting the water wash off some of my fear as well as the grit and grime. Then I sit on the bed for a long moment, towel-wrapped hair dripping down my back, staring at the window.

Outside, the mountains crouch like sentries in the moonlight—silent, cold, indifferent.

I cross to the window, press my hand to the cold glass, and whisper, "Where are you, Chris?"

Then I pull on a hoodie, grab my notes, and set an alarm for first light.

Because tomorrow, I'm climbing into the unknown.

The next morning, I follow the list of written directions the sheriff gave me.

I leave just before dawn, boots pressing into the frost-hardened earth, the sky bleeding from navy into the kind of pale gray that promises snow. No markings show the trail up the ridge; it's just a series of switchbacks carved into stubborn rock and

shadow. It's silent in that way only remote wilderness can be, where every sound echoes louder because there's nothing to muffle it but trees and time.

My pack shifts on my shoulders as I move, snowshoes clipped to the back just in case. I pass the same tree three times before I realize the trail bends sharper than the map suggests. I follow the directions to the letter, every step bringing me deeper into the wild. For a moment, I wonder if the sheriff gave me the wrong directions on purpose. It takes nearly an hour of trudging through snowdrifts, navigating rutted switchbacks and surviving one unnervingly close encounter with a moose before I finally reach it.

Then the scent of smoke cuts through the pine, thin and sharp. Not forest fire. Woodstove.

There it is—Caleb Knox's cabin, rising out of the woods like it was carved straight from the mountain.

I barely make it up the last few steps before the cabin door swings open. I don't even get the chance to knock. The barrel of a shotgun is already aimed squarely at my chest.

The man I've come all this way to find isn't just reclusive—he's a glacier in flannel. Hard-edged, ancient, and unmoved by time or reason. Not the kind of cold that stings and fades, but the kind that clamps down slow and merciless, creeping into your bones until everything soft inside you freezes solid.

The voice is deep. Cold. Final.

“Get off my land.”

I raise both hands slowly. “Hi. You must be Caleb. I'm Bryn. Sheriff MacAllister sent

me.”

He doesn't lower the gun.

I get my first good look at him—tall, broad, all shadows and scars. He has overgrown dark hair and a thick beard. His eyes are pale, the color of a winter sky, and twice as unforgiving. He looks like the kind of man who hasn't smiled in years and didn't enjoy the experience when he did.

I swallow and try again. “I'm Bryn Calder. I'm here about my brother.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

“I don’t guide tourists.”

“Not looking for a tour.”

His jaw tightens. He hasn’t blinked once.

“My brother’s name is Chris Calder. He disappeared up here about a year ago. Yours was the name the sheriff gave me. He said if anyone can help me, it would be you. He said you know these mountains better than anyone.”

“Then the sheriff was wrong,” he says before unceremoniously closing the door in my face.

I narrow my eyes.

I knock again—sharper this time. “Caleb, you don’t have to like me, but you’re going to listen.”

No answer. Not even a shadow moving behind the glass.

I glance at the door, then the window, then back at the knob.

Screw it.

I open the door. He didn’t lock it—either because he’s arrogant or because he didn’t expect anyone stupid enough to walk in uninvited.

Inside, the cabin is dim, but elegantly furnished—restored antiques and hand-crafted furniture. It looks like something out of a magazine. A stone hearth, an antique stove and fridge. Gear stacked neatly near the door. The space's discipline, utility, and beauty are evident in every detail.

He's standing at the far side of the room, near the woodstove, the shotgun still held loose but ready in his hands, like he's daring me to take one more step.

I do.

“You want me gone? Say it to my face. Don't hide behind a slammed door and a reputation. My brother is missing, and whether or not you like it, you're the only one in this town anyone believes might be able to help.”

He stares and says nothing. He's perfected the whole cold, brooding mountain man act—silent, immovable, and not one ounce of patience for anyone who doesn't belong here.

“Look, I get it,” I say. “You don't like strangers. You've got your hermit routine down cold. But I didn't come all this way to be dismissed by a walking intimidation tactic in a thermal shirt.”

That gets a reaction. His eyebrow lifts slightly and one corner of his mouth twitches—more surprise than amusement, like he didn't expect me to bite back. I see the flicker of curiosity before he reins it in.

“Cute,” he mutters. Then finally, finally, the shotgun lowers.

He jerks his chin toward a leather armchair opposite from where he stands near the woodstove. The floor creaks a little—my guess is it's deliberate so he can hear someone coming. He doesn't move. It's not an invitation—more of a challenge, like

he's waiting to see if I've got the guts to cross the room and sit down.

I do.

"You've got five minutes," he says, going and pouring himself a cup of coffee.

But it's enough to get me inside. I cross the room, drop into the armchair he pointed to, and let the heat from the enormous fireplace seep into my bones. I'm not expecting kindness. Hell, I'm not even expecting cooperation. But I'm done being ignored and dismissed. If there's anyone in this frozen stretch of nowhere who might lead me to answers, it's Caleb Knox. And I'm not leaving until I get them.

He takes his coffee, turns his back, and disappears through a doorway off the main room—probably his bedroom, judging by the heavy door and the flicker of firelight inside. Minutes pass. He doesn't come back. The silence stretches long enough to feel like a dismissal, but I don't stand up. Not yet.

When the stillness becomes unbearable, I push to my feet and cross the room. I pause at the threshold, palm flat on the wood frame.

"Caleb," I say, firm but not loud. "You said I had five minutes. You didn't say you'd spend them hiding."

He doesn't respond.

So I step through the doorway. Not because I'm reckless. Not because I'm stupid. But because I've come too far to be brushed off like a stray.

And if that means walking into a stranger's shadowy room to demand answers about my brother—I'll do it.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

### CALEB

She's still standing in the doorway to my bedroom. Uninvited, unmoved, and undeniably unbothered by my silence. She's harder to shake than most—and I've shaken off a hell of a lot in my time. She's not small, not fragile, and definitely not quiet. All sunlit curls, bright blue eyes, and curves meant to distract. And damn if my body doesn't notice. It's been a long time since someone like her has crossed my threshold—and even longer since I let anyone stay.

I watched her through my windows while I sip coffee that's gone lukewarm. She's determined. When I see the bull moose cross her track, I pick up my rifle, ready to take him down. He's been on this mountain longer than I have, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him kill somebody. The fact is that moose kill more people in Alaska than bears and wolves combined.

Instead of running or screaming, I watch as she quietly backed off the trail and put a large sturdy tree between herself and the moose, and then tosses what looks like one of the commercial moose feeds down the trail, as well as what looks like a handful of apple chunks. Smart—both her and the big bull. He meanders down the trail, giving her only a passing glance. She waits until he's well past her before getting back on the trail and determinedly continuing on her way towards my cabin.

When I slammed the door in her face, I expected her to back off and go away. She didn't. Instead, she opened the door and walked inside. Ignoring her didn't work, so I gestured to the chair by the fire. I expected her to fidget or flinch. She did neither. Just planted herself in the chair with stubborn resolve. All fire and no fallback plan rooted her in the spot. That kind of stubborn either gets you killed or makes you a



legend up here.

Bryn Calder. I know the name. Everyone in town does.

Chris Calder. Her brother's face was on flyers for months. Word was he went into the mountains solo and never came back. People don't last long out there on their own, especially if they think knowing how to pitch a tent qualifies them for bush survival. Or he might have just disappeared on purpose and be living in the Caribbean. I played darts one night with the guy. He talked about her. I can't see him just up and leaving her without a word.

I didn't expect her to come. Hell, most people who lose someone to these mountains never make it past questions and quiet grief. But she showed up—boots on the ground, fire in her eyes—and walked into my cabin like the cold didn't bite and the silence didn't scare her. Like she had every right to demand answers in a place built to hold them back.

She's city soft. Not helpless—she carries herself like someone who knows her body and trusts her instincts—but she stands out in all the wrong ways here. Too bright, too confident, too sharp-edged for a place that thrives on silence and shadow. Her presence feels like a flame held too close to kindling—unnatural, dangerous, and impossible to ignore.

Her jacket's the wrong color for camouflage, her voice too sharp and sure for a place that demands quiet. She doesn't blend in, and she doesn't try to. Her smooth skin, untouched by a harsh winter, contrasts sharply with the fiery intensity of her voice, untempered by silence. She thinks she's ready for this mountain, but this mountain eats people like her for breakfast and spits out their remains.

Still, when she said her brother's name, something in her eyes landed hard in my gut. Not fear. Not grief. Conviction—pure, sharp, and impossible to ignore. The kind of

conviction that would've made Wren pack a bag and charge headfirst into the snow if it had been me who went missing. I know that look because I've seen it in my mirror after the war—when you've already lost too much and made peace with whatever comes next.

I meant to shut the door and let that be the end of it. Let the wilderness do what it does best—swallow noise, spit out bone, erase the names of those who wander too far with too much hope and not enough sense. But I let her in. Because something in her voice cracked through the cold. And for reasons I haven't begun to understand, I needed to hear what came next.

I was just going to ignore her until she got mad and stomped her way back down the mountain. That hasn't worked, and now she's following me into the bedroom. That's not good. Having her in the same room as my antique iron bed puts all kinds of ideas in my brain. My fingers twitch around the coffee mug, grip tightening for half a second before I force them to relax. I shift my stance, jaw locking as I drag my gaze away from the curve of her hips and the fire in her eyes. Christ. She shouldn't be here—not in my space, not near that bed, not setting off sparks in places I thought had gone cold.

I lean against the far wall, arms crossed loosely, the rim of my mug warm against my palm. Her silhouette fills the doorway, backlit by the softer light from the main room. She's hesitant for the first time since she got here—one hand on the doorframe, shoulders taut, like she's weighing the risk of crossing an invisible line. But she doesn't step back. Doesn't blink. She just stands there, still and steady, like she's waiting to see if I'll flinch first.

“I don't hide,” I say flatly from the gloom.

“Really? Could have fooled me. First you put a gun in my face, then you come in here where it's dark and just stand there,” she shoots back.

I sigh through my nose and take another sip of coffee. “I saw your brother. Once. Early spring last year. Came through town looking like a man with something to prove. He was asking questions about abandoned trails up the ridge—places even the locals pretend don’t exist. The kind of places you don’t go unless you’re chasing something you shouldn’t be.”

She steps into the room, slow and deliberate, as if testing the air for lies. Her boots barely make a sound against the worn floorboards, but the weight behind her question could flatten a grown man. “And?”

“And I told him the same thing I’m going to tell you—there are places up there even the animals avoid. Old traplines remain unchecked for decades, rocks are so unstable that they shift with the wind, and sinkholes silently swallow men. Things that don’t show up on maps and never will. The stories that don’t get written. Locals steer clear because they’ve learned better. Smart ones do, anyway.”

Her chin lifts. “Did you guide him?” Her voice is steady, but there’s an edge to it now—a dare, maybe, or the last tether holding back her temper. She already knows the answer. She just wants to hear me say it.

“No.”

“Did you warn him?”

My gaze cuts to hers. “I gave him what I give everyone—truth, not comfort. People who think they’ve already got it figured out don’t listen, anyway. Your brother had that look in his eyes—the kind that says he wouldn’t have turned back even if I’d spelled the danger in blood.”

She doesn’t flinch. Just crosses her arms and looks at me like I’m a puzzle she’s already halfway through solving. “You could’ve stopped him.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. He didn’t strike me as someone who wanted to be stopped. There was a fire in him, something untamed and fixed on whatever goal he carried into those woods. I recognized it—the same edge I saw in soldiers who’d already decided their fate. And maybe part of me respected that too much to stand in his way. Besides, it wasn’t my job to stop him. His eyes had that far-off gleam, the kind you see in people who’ve already decided the risk is worth it—no matter the cost.”

She closes her eyes for a second, then opens them and stares straight into mine. “Where exactly did he say he was going?”

I set the mug down on the edge of the dresser. “Off the ridgeline, toward the glacier pass. Said he was trying to follow markers from a survey team that went dark years ago. Thought he saw something others missed.”

Bryn pulls a notebook out of her bag and flips to a page marked with a red tab. Her fingers move with practiced precision, like she’s done this a hundred times before—cataloguing clues, chasing ghosts one ink stroke at a time. She scribbles something down, eyes scanning quickly, already connecting dots I can’t see. She’s determined. She’s methodical. Dangerous in a quiet, calculating kind of way.

“Did he mention any names?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Didn’t give much. Just asked if I’d ever seen anyone come down from that side of the mountain alive.”

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“And had you?”

I meet her eyes. “No.”

The silence that follows settles like a second skin—heavy, raw, and sharp enough to cut between us. The quiet hangs heavy—a hollow stillness pressing in like a storm that hasn’t broken yet.

I move past her, back into the main room, needing space. Needing air. And not only because of the conversation. She’s distracting as hell. The scent of her—clean, like rain on hot stone—lingers behind me. It winds through the quiet cabin, coils low in my gut, and sets off an ache I haven’t felt in too damn long. My body’s reacting, sharp and aware, and I hate how fast it happens. I hear her footsteps follow a second later, steady and sure, and it doesn’t help.

“You planning to go up there alone?” I ask, not bothering to mask the disbelief in my voice.

Her voice is cool and even. “Yes.”

I turn. “Don’t.”

“Is that advice or a warning?”

“Both.”

She’s back in the armchair, one leg crossing over the other with quiet precision. The

notebook rests in her lap, perfectly placed, like it's always been there. She's composed, unshakable—already claiming the space as hers. She taps her pen once against the page, eyes flicking up with a gleam that tells me she's not simply recording facts—she's assessing, calculating her next move. And the worst part? She makes it look effortless. Worse still? She'll probably win.

“Why?” she asks. “What's really up there?”

I don't answer right away. There are things about this mountain I don't even say out loud. Not because I'm scared of them, but because speaking them gives them weight. And sometimes, in the stillness, I swear the trees remember. Something, almost a voice you can't quite make out, whispers unheard things on the low humming wind. Not because I'm afraid—but because I respect it. And because I've learned that truth doesn't always sound sane until it's too damn late.

“You want to find him?” I say finally. “Fine. But stay off the west trail. Stick to the lower ridgeline and don't go past where the pine starts thinning. If you hear anything you can't explain, turn around. Don't keep going. Don't assume you're imagining it.”

Her eyes narrow slightly. “What kind of anything?”

“You'll know it when you hear it.”

She lets out a breath, sharp and skeptical. “Well, that's not ominous at all.”

I walk to the door and swing it open. Cold air hits me like a slap, crisp and biting, the kind that sinks into your bones and stays. The sky's gone steel gray, layered with clouds that look ready to crack open. Snow hovers just above the tree line, swirling in lazy spirals like it's deciding whether to fall or hold back a little longer. The mountain feels different today—restless. Watching.

“I’m serious, Bryn. If you ignore what I’m telling you, I’ll be the one the sheriff sends to drag your frozen body off that mountain.”

"Would that be a problem for you?" she challenges as she stands slowly, meets me at the threshold.

"Sweetheart, the only place I have any interest in dragging you to is my bed."

Her eyes register shock, but only for a second. “Thanks for the offer,” she says, “but I think I’ll pass.”

"Too bad, I can guarantee I'd keep you a lot warmer and my bed is far more comfortable..."

"You're insufferable," she says, trying to laugh it off, but there's some trepidation in her tone.

Good. Maybe that'll make her keep her distance. I watch her leave, snowshoes breaking over frost-hardened snow, her red scarf the only bright thing in the gray. She doesn't look back.

I glance over my shoulder. Something shifts above the tree line—a flicker of motion too precise to be wind, too wrong to be ignored. A faint crack of branches, low and deliberate, rides the air a half-second later. The scent of pine sharpens unnaturally, threaded with something faintly metallic, like blood on snow. My breath fogs—not from the cold, but from the sudden instinct that something out there just locked onto me. A shiver crawls down my spine from instinct honed over too many missions gone sideways. I turn back to watch her, that blonde hair bouncing from beneath her wool cap like a defiant streak of light moving through the gray.

The mountain isn't the only one tracking her movements. I am too, pulled by

something I can't explain—something far from suspicion. There's a sharp twist low in my gut, a pull I haven't felt in years. Something raw. Possessive. Dangerous. She moves with grit and determination, but I can see the recklessness riding just beneath her stride—like she's chasing ghosts with a match and a can of gasoline, and doesn't care if she burns in the process. I've seen how that ends. Hell, I've lived it.

She thinks I'll let her march off into that stretch of cursed wilderness alone, like she's got something to prove. Hell no. I've seen what that mountain does to the unprepared—and to the brave. Whatever ghosts she's chasing, they won't keep her warm when the sun drops and the wind whispers things best left unheard.

I gear up and grab my rifle on the way out the door.

If she's going up there, I'm going with her. Whether or not she likes it.



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BRYN

Wind slices across my face as I plant my snowshoes at the ridgeline's edge, the gusts sharper this high up, the cold biting deeper with each gust. The sun hasn't breached the eastern peaks, but the sky's bruised with promise.

Steel gray light bleeds across the horizon, enough to catch my breath in the frigid air and trace the faint outlines of the forbidden trail ahead. The one Caleb told me not to take.

He told me not to take it so, of course, I'm taking it. I know I should probably listen to him, but I really dislike people telling me what not to do and then trying to spook me so I'll listen. If you hear anything you can't explain, turn around. Don't keep going. Don't assume you're imagining it. I mean, whosays that to someone? Apparently, former special ops guys do—the ones with that unmistakable look—especially after they've gone full mountain hermit.

I tug the old survey map I found at Chris's place from the inner pocket of my jacket and flatten it across a large rock. The corner is torn, and a few markings have faded, but I can still make out the red circle near the glacier pass. Caleb said my brother was headed that way the last time he saw him... toward old markers and places no one wants to admit exist.

That sounds like exactly where I need to be—off the grid, where questions outnumber answers and are knee deep in the kind of secrets that people bury with shovels and silence. If Chris was chasing phantoms and things that go bump in the night, then I'll chase down every damn one of them until I find the place where he disappeared into

the smoke. I don't care how cold the trail or the weather gets or how much Caleb scowls. If this is the trail that's going to give me answers—then I'm going to damn well follow it.

The first part of the hike is simple enough. I keep my pace steady, conserving energy, not letting my heartbeat spike with the climb. The trees thin as I ascend, the silence closing in the way it always does this high up. It's not the peace-and-quiet kind of silence either.

It's the kind that listens.

An hour into the climb, I pause near a sharp bend along a narrow ridge, taking a long pull from my water bottle. That's when I see it—just a glint, a shard of fractured glass catching the sun as it crests the tree line. I squint, stepping off the trail toward a gnarled spruce hugging the slope. Half-concealed in the thicket, the remains of a wildlife camera dangle from a metal mount embedded in the bark, its casing cracked and the lens shattered. I wouldn't have seen it if the light hadn't hit just right. It's almost like it didn't want to be found. If I hadn't stopped to sip water and check the map, I would've missed it entirely.

The mount is half torn from the tree, twisted and splintered at the edges, like someone wrenched it loose with deliberate force—no storm damage, no animal tampering. This was intentional. Someone wanted it gone from the tree like something deliberately tried to destroy it. Not weather. Not time. Someone targeted this. I step closer, brushing snow off the base. The wires are severed. Cleanly. Not animal teeth—a blade. Whoever did this didn't want to be seen.

A chill slithers up my spine like a wire pulled straight from a glacier, snaking cold through my vertebrae and locking beneath my skin, coiling between my shoulder blades with icy intent. My breath fogs the air, sharp and shallow, but I keep moving. Turning back isn't an option—not when I've come this far.

Chris marked this route for a reason—red ink slashed across a stretch of map that seemed to be all glacier runoff and stone. But he'd drawn a symbol beside it too, one I didn't recognize. Not standard trail code, not a topography notation. Something personal. And if my brother left a breadcrumb like that in a place no one wants to talk about, then whatever he found was worth the risk. Chris, what the hell were you up to?

Thirty yards ahead, I find a second camera—same damage. The surrounding tracks are odd. Not snowshoes. Not boots. Wide, heavy prints spaced too far apart for a human stride, sunk deep in the snow beneath a low overhang of rock where the wind hasn't touched them. I spot them only because the morning sun catches the edge of the impression, casting a long, uncanny shadow across the crusted snow. My breath catches. They're clearer than the others—more deliberate. Someone—or something—wanted them to be seen.

I crouch low, tracing one of the deeper impressions. The snow's not fresh enough to give me detail, but whatever it was, it passed through after the last flurry and before the sunrise.

The feeling of being watched ratchets tighter. A low, metallic sharpness hits the back of my throat—faint and cold, like the whisper of steel against ice. The wind shifts, stirring the underbrush and sending a brittle scent through the air—burned pine and something acrid, chemical, synthetic. Not an animal. Not human. Wrong.

I stand slowly, eyes sweeping the tree line, senses flaring like a struck match. Nothing moves. No chirp, no rustle, no flutter of wings. The silence feels unnatural—too complete, too calculated, like someone hollowed it out of the world on purpose, clearing a space for something else. Even the trees seem to lean in, listening. Just the wind and that low, insistent hum prickling along my nerves, threading beneath my skin with one chilling truth: I'm not alone out here. Not even close.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, sweetheart.”

The voice snaps through the stillness like a shot.

I whirl around, pulse spiking.

Caleb steps out from between two frost-rimmed pines, silent and sudden, his boots whispering over the snow like he’s been standing there, watching, for far too long. My stomach drops like a stone. Adrenaline slams through me, hot and sudden. Part fear, part something else—sharp-edged and confusing, like the jolt before a fall. My breath catches, and heat floods my skin despite the cold.

He’s all shadows and threat, eyes locked on mine with a kind of blistering fury that makes my pulse ricochet in my throat. I brace myself as his gaze sears into mine, already heavy with disapproval and something darker I can’t name. Rifle slung across his back, coat flaring around his thick frame like he owns every inch of the mountain. His jaw is tight, lips set in a grim line, and his stare—black and unyielding—pins me in place with a ferocity that sends my nerve endings scrambling.

I straighten. “Hello to you, too.”

“I warned you.”

“You did,” I acknowledge coolly. “But in case you missed the part where I’m not one of your subordinates, I don’t take orders. Especially not vague, barked threats from a man who thinks scowling passes for communication.”

He stalks closer. The snow doesn’t even slow him down. He moves like a predator, every stride confident, measured, like he’s already mapped out the terrain and claimed it as his own.

“This isn’t a joke, Bryn.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“You should be terrified.”

“Oh, I am... just shaking in my snowshoes,” I deadpan.

Caleb grabs my arm.

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Not hard. Not violent. But with enough force to make my breath hitch. His palm wraps around my bicep, warm even through the layers, grounding and furious all at once.

“You don’t get it.”

I lean in, tilting my chin up to meet his eyes. “Then make me understand.”

The air between us thickens, sharp with friction—like the hush before a lightning strike. Every molecule bristling with challenge.

His jaw flexes, throat working as he reins himself in. For a second, I think he might kiss me—or snap. Maybe both. His fingers flex once on my arm before he lets go, stepping back with a muttered curse.

“There are things in these woods I can’t explain. And now you’re out here following phantom trails with a damn target on your back.”

“Chris followed this path,” I say quietly.

He exhales, raking a hand through his dark hair. “And where did that get him?”

I flinch. He notices.

“Bryn,” his voice softens just enough to cut. “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone. Especially not to a brother who might already be...”

“Don’t.”

The word is sharp. Final. Laced with the kind of pain I don’t bleed in front of strangers.

He closes his mouth, but his eyes stay on me. Searching. Like he’s trying to piece together how I’m still upright with so many fractures in my armor.

“You came up here to protect me,” I say after a moment.

He shrugs. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not.”

Silence blooms again. Different now. Charged, not cold.

I look back toward the broken camera. “Something’s off, Caleb. Poachers and weather might be part of it, but these tracks—something about them is wrong.”

He nods, his expression grim. “I saw more like them to the west. They circle around the base trail and vanish near the ravine.”

“Same direction Chris marked.”

He doesn’t argue. I reach for the map again, but Caleb catches my wrist before I can unfold it. His grip is firm, fingers locking around mine with a quiet intensity that steals the breath from my lungs. Heat pulses through the contact, a tether yanking me out of my thoughts and directly into his gravity.

“If you’re hellbent on chasing ghosts,” he says, voice low and rough, “then you’re not doing it alone. Understand?”

My mouth goes dry, nerves bristling as heat coils low in my belly like a lit fuse, slow and insistent. A shiver slips down my spine as his gaze holds mine, and I swear the air around us contracts, humming with the promise of something just beneath the surface. I manage a single, shallow nod, pulse thudding in my ears.

His thumb glides across the inside of my wrist—slow, absentminded, almost reverent. The touch is light, but it sparks a current that shoots straight up my arm, tightening every nerve beneath my skin like a drawn wire.

“Good.”

He releases me and steps back, scanning the tree line, every muscle in his body taut like he’s expecting something to lunge from the shadows. The hush deepens around us. Not silent—too strained, too alert. The kind of quiet that means we’re being watched. Like the mountain itself is bracing—silent, still, and waiting for something to break.

And if there's someone out there watching us? They're watching. Waiting. Aware that we're closing in.

“We’ll go another hundred yards,” he says. “Then we circle back and regroup. I want eyes on Pete’s...”

"Pete?" I ask.

"Yeah, he's an outfitter based out of Glacier Hollow. Used to run drop sites deep in the woods—regular spots until something spooked him bad enough to pull out. He claimed he shut them all down, but I've got doubts. If someone's hauling freight through this stretch, they're using paths I haven't seen in years."



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I almost smile. “That your way of saying I’m right?”

His grin is quick and dangerous. “Don’t push it, sweetheart.”

But as we set off side-by-side into the frost-thick woods, the mountain whispering its warnings around us, a chill pulses beneath my skin. We’re not alone out here—something else is moving through these trees, deliberate and unseen, tracking our every step with a patience that feels almost practiced.

4

CALEB

Bryn hikes ahead, undeterred by the incline or the thick quiet closing in around us—like whatever broke those cameras and left those tracks in the snow isn’t worth flinching for. She moves with stubborn intent, head down against the wind, her strides long and angry—as long as snowshoes allow—pressing through the snow as if sheer will alone could force the forest to give up its secrets. She doesn’t look back to see if I’m following. She knows I am.

The ridge narrows, snow compacting beneath each step as the trees thin to scraggly sentinels clinging to the slope. My eyes scan the terrain, catching subtle signs: branches snapped high, not by wind or weight but by a hand reaching where it shouldn’t. A wedge of disturbed snow where someone sat, hidden in a thicket. A spent match near a fallen log—fresh, not even damp. Someone’s been up here, and recently.

Not alone. My gut tightens, a prickle at the base of my neck like a warning flare set to ignite. The hair on my arms lifts, instinct humming just beneath the surface as a metallic tang sharpens in the back of my throat, subtle but unmistakable. I strain to hear something—anything—but the woods press in, silent and expectant. I freeze, eyes scanning the slope, muscles coiled, ears straining for the faintest sound of snow shifting or the wind stirring out of rhythm.

“Bryn,” I call, my voice low but firm. “Slow down.”

She pauses at the crest of the next incline, silhouetted against the pale sky. “I’m not stopping.”

“I didn’t ask you to stop. I said slow down.”

She exhales, a visible cloud that bursts and dissolves in the air before turning slightly to glance at me over her shoulder. “You see something?”

I nod once, keeping my gaze on the snow. “Movement,” I say, voice low. “Not animal. Too heavy. Too deliberate.”

Her lips press into a line, but she waits. At least she’s listening. I move beside her and crouch, brushing snow away from the base of a nearby bush. There, half-concealed under the crust, is the edge of a heavy tread—deep, wide, unmistakably human. The pattern’s not from any standard boot I know, and I’ve logged more field time than most Rangers put together.

“Someone was here,” I mutter, crouching to run my fingers along the edge of the tread again. It’s not old—no frost in the grooves, no melting where snow should’ve settled. Whoever left this print wasn’t just passing through. They were watching. Waiting. Close enough to track us, far enough to stay unseen.

She crouches beside me, her breath warming the air between us. “How recent?”

“Less than a day. Possibly hours.”

She frowns, eyes scanning the ridge. “Could it have been Pete?”

“Maybe,” I allow. “But this doesn’t feel like one of his hauls. Too exposed, too direct. He knew better.”

“Then who?”

“That’s what I intend to find out.”

We start moving again, side-by-side. The wind claws at our jackets, slicing across exposed skin like icy razors. Exertion and cold flush Bryn’s cheeks; the wind tosses her pulled-back hair, and stray strands stick to her lips. She’s so focused, so determined not to show weakness. Even now, when we both feel the unnatural stillness in the woods—the kind that makes birds stop singing and the wind hold its breath.

I hate that I admire it—that I notice how her hips sway, how each stride seems carved from defiance, how she’s always on the edge of rebellion. It gets under my skin, sharp and constant, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t stop watching. She’s a challenge I never meant to want.

She drifts too close to the edge, unaware that the snow has thinned over a slant of gravelly shale just ahead. Her snowshoe lands where a patch has already given way, the steady press of snow suddenly replaced by the treacherous slide of loosened stone.

“Bryn, watch...”

The words catch in my throat, too slow to stop what's already happening. Her foot lands wrong on a patch of shale, the snowshoe skidding with a sharp screech that echoes up the ridge. The rocks beneath her shift, the sound like bones grinding together—unnatural, final. My gut drops. The noise hits like a bullet to the chest, instinct shoves everything else aside.

The stone hisses as it gives way beneath her weight. She yelps, arms windmilling wildly, her balance stolen in a heartbeat. The sound of snow gives way to the rasp of gravel and grit. I see the panic in her eyes, the raw surprise as she reaches for purchase that isn't there. Her arms flail, grasping at empty air.

Then she's gone—swallowed by the ridge's edge, her scream slicing through the frozen silence and hitting somewhere deep inside me like a blade lodged between the ribs.

“Shit!”

I drop my pack and lunge forward, boots grinding over slick stone as I sprint downhill, the cold air shredding my lungs. Bryn's scream still echoes in my ears, a jagged sound that slices through the silence like a flare in the dark.

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She vanishes in a blur of motion, swallowed by the white, her scream ripping through the trees—sharp, electric, impossible to ignore. Snow explodes into the air as her body hits a jagged outcrop of ice-crusting rock with a sickening crack that echoes down the slope. The sound alone makes my stomach lurch and my blood freeze, a visceral jolt of fear that steals the breath from my lungs.

I skid the last few feet, knees buckling as I drop beside her, heart battering my ribs in a savage rhythm of fear. My breath saws in and out, sharp and uneven, the cold forgotten beneath the heat of panic. My hands tremble as I reach for her, every instinct screaming to fix this, to do something, while my mind spirals—images of broken bones, fractured spine, the hollow silence of something worse—snapping like fire through the dark. I can't lose her. Not here. Not like this.

“Bryn!”

She groans, eyes squeezed shut. “Ow.”

“Talk to me.” My hands hover over her coat, unsure where she's hurt. “Where?”

“My ankle.” Her voice is tight, pain edging the syllables. “Rolled it, I think. God, that fucking hurts.”

I run my hands along her limbs, checking fast but thorough—no blood, no jagged bone, no trauma that can't wait. But when I reach her boot, she jerks and lets out a sharp hiss that cuts through the wind like a warning shot. That ankle's bad. Probably swollen already. Definitely sprained.

I look up the slope—steep, narrow, and slick with snow-covered shale. Even if she could stand, she'd never make it up. And this stretch? Too exposed to stay put. If whoever wastracking us is still nearby, we're sitting ducks. And I'm not risking her life on a gamble like that.

“I'm carrying you.”

She blinks. “No, you're not.”

I don't give her the luxury of argument. One look at her twisted grimace and pale face tells me hesitation isn't an option. I crouch beside her, unlatching the bindings on her snowshoes.

Weakly, she protests, “Those are rented. If I don't bring them back, it's going to cost a fortune.”

“Send me the bill,” I mutter, flinging them aside into the snow.

Then I step closer, plant my feet firmly in the snow, and slide one arm beneath her knees, the other steady behind her back, careful not to jostle her ankle. Her breath catches as I lift her off the ground in one smooth motion, the weight of her slight but potent—solid heat against my chest, every inch of her pressed to me.

“Caleb—”

“Shut up and hold on.”

She tenses in my arms, stiff with pride and pain, but she doesn't fight me.

I pick up my pack and begin the slow descent off the ridge, snow compacting beneath every step, each one deliberate. My cabin isn't far—less than a mile if I cut through

the gulley and follow the old trapper trail. It's no gentle hike, but it's better than making camp with the shadows crawling in around us.

She's quiet for the first hundred yards, arms folded tight against her chest, jaw set like she's still chewing on the fact that I'm carrying her down the mountain. Her pride's bruised, but she's not complaining. Not yet.

Then, softly, "You're warm."

"Try not to get used to it."

Her snort is half laugh, half grunt. "Not planning to."

But her head settles against my shoulder, a soft exhale warming the skin just below my ear. I feel it like a brand, a heat that sinks straight to my core, even as I force myself to stay focused on the trail ahead. I keep my jaw tight, my eyes on the trail.

One misstep and I'm sending us both over the edge. Still, I can't ignore the way she feels in my arms—like she belongs there. Her presence against my chest feels not like a burden, but a claim. Her warmth seeps into me, steady and grounding, even as every step over the icy trail reminds me of how close we are to disaster. Carrying her feels less like an obligation and more like instinct—like something deep and primal that has nothing to do with logic, and everything to do with the way she makes the silence feel less empty.

I force the thought down, bury it beneath layers of cold. There's no space for fantasy up here—only survival, only control.

By the time we reach the cabin, my thighs burn from the effort and her weight's settled into my bones like permanence. I get us inside and kick the door closed, carrying her straight to the bedroom and place her on the bed.

“Sit. Don’t move.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” she mutters, wincing.

I strip off my gloves and grab a bottle of water and the emergency kit from the shelf—chemical cold wraps, elastic bandages, and painkillers rattling inside the metal tin. I hand her some anti-inflammatories and a bottle of water. “Take this.”

I kneel, bracing her leg across my thigh for stability, and start unlacing her boot. Her breath hitches at the movement, jaw clenched tight as I work carefully, doing my best to avoid aggravating the swelling. Her sock’s damp with melted snow, and tension radiates off her like heat from a furnace.



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I don't let myself look up. If I do, I'll lose the thread—of control, of distance. Her pain is raw, immediate, and my hands are the only steady thing between us. One glance, and I won't be able to hold back.

She watches me, eyes shadowed. "You do this a lot?"

"Take care of stubborn women who don't listen? Only recently."

"Lucky me."

I ease the boot off slowly, the fabric catching against her swollen ankle despite my care. The moment it clears her heel, she hisses through clenched teeth, her fingers curling into the blanket beneath her. "Shit," she breathes, the word sharp with pain. Her eyes squeeze shut, and I can see the muscle in her jaw jump. The sight guts me—far deeper than I'll ever admit. That kind of pain—controlled, endured—is its own kind of bravery. I set the boot aside, the worn leather darkened with slush, and reach for the ice pack.

"Yeah," I say, voice low, "real lucky."

I wrap her ankle, slow and careful, my fingers working with practiced precision even as my mind stutters under the heat of her gaze. She doesn't flinch, just watches me with those keen eyes that strip me down to the parts I never show. Her breath's still coming fast, uneven, as if painkillers she took haven't kicked in, and something else churns beneath the surface.

I finish and lean back on my heels, but I don't move away. Her knee brushes my

thigh—a whisper of contact that scorches hotter than a flame. My pulse leaps, hammering through me in a warning cadence, primal and urgent. I should step back, give us both some breathing room. I don't. I can't.

“You should rest,” I say, not trusting my voice.

“I'm not tired.”

Her voice softens, some of the steel slipping away. We're close. Too close. Her gaze dips to my mouth—brief, sharp—then returns to my eyes with a flicker of something unspoken. Heatcoils in the space between us, crackling just beneath the surface like a struck match daring to burn.

I clench my jaw. “Don't start something you're not ready to finish.”

My voice scrapes out, rougher than I mean it to be, strained and threaded with the restraint I'm barely managing to hold. Every instinct claws at me to close the space between us, to reach for her, to claim—but I clamp my jaw shut, like brute force alone can cage the storm tearing through me.

Her eyebrows lift. “Who says I'm not?”

The air between us crackles—thick, electric, like it's holding its breath. One more beat and I'll close the space, drag her against me, and let everything I've been holding back surge to the surface.

But I don't. Not yet. I turn from her, each step away grinding through me like a battle I'm barely winning, every muscle in my body screaming to turn back—to touch, to claim, to surrender to what I can't afford to want. The floor creaks beneath my boots as I cross to the stove, the fire low and hungry. I toss in another log, the bark catching with a hiss and a sharp snap of ember, and force my attention on the flicker of flame

rather than the woman behind me—the one curled on my bed, her hair spilling wild and golden around her shoulders, like temptation wrapped in vulnerability.

She's not the threat clawing at the edges of this mountain, but she's the one who could crack me open from the inside and leave nothing behind but ash.

“You’re staying here until that ankle heals.”

She scoffs. “Like hell I am.”

I glance over my shoulder and smile. She talks a big game, but sleep has overtaken her. I remove her damp clothes, put her in one of my long-sleeved thermals and tuck her in.

The flames crackle. Outside, the wind howls low and distant, threading through the trees like a predator circling just out of reach—restless, alert, and prowling the boundary of dark woods, biding its time until nightfall.

The trail ends here—for her, at least. While she rests, I’ll keep watch. No one gets near her. Not tonight. Not while I’m breathing.

5

BRYN

I wake to the crackle of fire and the sharp, lingering ache in my ankle. For a second, I don’t move. I just breathe. The room smells like cedar, smoke, and something wild I can’t name. Caleb.

The cabin is warm, unnaturally so, given the howling wind battering the windows and log-sided walls from outside. I glance around. Through the windows, I see the snow

as it falls sideways, gusting hard enough to blur the trees into ghostly smudges. A storm. Of course.

I push myself upright with a groan, the pain in my ankle flaring like a struck match. My breath catches, sharp and involuntary. I barely remember Caleb wrapping it before sleep overtook me—tight, neat, not a wrinkle out of place. The bandage hugs the joint with practiced precision. Efficient. Just like everything else about him—unapologetically capable and maddeningly silent about it.

Someone draped the covers over me, and when I look down, all I have on are my panties and an oversized thermal. Nothing else. The warmth of the bedding and his thermal still seem to hold a residual heat from his body. I press my hand to the comfortable mattress, then shake it off. Don't read into it.

I scan the room from where I'm lying in the iron bed—clearly the centerpiece of the bedroom. The space is separate but not sealed off, the wide doorway offering a clear view into the main cabin. Heavy beams arch across the ceiling, and a stone hearth anchors the central room like a sentinel. Weapons hang in neat rows on one wall—rifles, knives, even a bow, each item clean, sharp, and clearly well-used.

The room has a rugged, masculine elegance—thick rugs soften the floor, and the glow of the fire spills across antique furniture: a weathered chest doubling as a coffee table, a writing desk tucked in one corner, and the sheen of age-worn wood visible in every surface. The maps above the workbench draw my eye—corners curling with age, topographical lines and handwritten notes etched in obsessively tidy script. Routes. Plans. Secrets.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

But it's not all hard edges. I'm lying on a bed layered with soft wool blankets and downy pillows that definitely don't look military-issue. The mattress is firm but indulgent, the sheets a soft flannel that whisper of warmth and winter comfort.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and shift upright; the sheets sliding off my hips. As I plant my foot on the floor, pain rips through my ankle—sharp, white-hot, immediate. I suck in a breath, fingers gripping the thick blanket beneath me. No way I'm walking out of here today. Not with my ankle on fire and my pride already bruised. Still, I try—because sitting still feels like surrender, and I don't surrender easily.

"Don't." His voice rumbles from the shadowed kitchen. I startle, my spine going rigid. I didn't even hear him move. He's leaning against the counter, arms crossed, eyes pinned to me like he's been watching the whole time.

I lift my chin. "Don't what?"

"Whatever you're thinking. Don't."

"You don't get to tell me..."

"I just did," he says taking a bite of something.

My mouth snaps shut. The tone in his voice doesn't invite argument. Not growled. Not shouted. Just absolute.

He crosses the room in three strides, crouches in front of me. His eyes scan my face,

then drop to my ankle. His hand comes up, thumb brushing just above the wrap. I should slap it away. I don't.

"If you don't take care of that ankle, it could be weeks before you can walk easily. You want to be stuck here that long?"

My pulse trips. I narrow my eyes. "Maybe I don't want to be here at all."

"Too bad. The storm and that ankle say otherwise."

I look toward the window. Whiteout. The snow's coming harder now, wind howling through the eaves with a voice that sounds too much like a warning. The windows rattle in their frames, glass fogged and trembling. I'd freeze before I made it ten feet, and part of me wonders if that's exactly what the mountain wants.

Still, I shove to my feet, using his shoulder for leverage, even though my ankle screams in protest—sharp, stabbing pain that rockets up my leg and whites out my vision for a second. It isn't just pain—it's a brutal, blistering surge that rips the breath from my lungs and sends bile rising in my throat. Pride is a hell of a drug—stronger than common sense, and right now, more potent than morphine. I grit my teeth so hard my jaw aches, dragging my body forward on sheer will, because sitting still feels too much like surrender. And I was never taught to surrender.

Caleb rises, broad and unyielding, his gaze steady as I manage three steps before I falter. I wave him off with a sharp glare, one hand raised as if that alone could stop him. "I've got it," I hiss through clenched teeth, even as my knees threaten to give. But I don't have it. Not even close. My ankle buckles and I pitch forward. He's there in an instant, ignoring my resistance.

I protest, weakly at first. "Those snowshoes left where I fell; they're rented, okay? If I don't return them, they'll charge me a fortune." The words come out lamer than

intended, more reflex than logic.

Caleb doesn't flinch. Doesn't even slow down. "They can bill me," he says.

One hand grips my waist, the other braces under my knees, firm and sure. I want to argue, to claw some shred of dignity back—but I can't. He's too strong, and I'm in too much pain. All I can do is cling to the front of his thermal and try not to pass out.

Without missing a beat, he turns and strides back to the bed, carrying me like it costs him nothing. I protest weakly, breath hitching as the pain pulses through my ankle. He doesn't seem to care. Instead, he deposits me onto the thick bedding like it's where I belong, then stands over me, unbothered by my scowl or the way I'm glaring daggers up at him.

"You don't even know where I got them," I snap, breathless from the pain.

"It doesn't matter. You're not hobbling around on a wrecked ankle just to keep some rental company happy." He turns away and mutters, "Stubborn female."

"Overbearing asshole."

His mouth twitches. Not quite a smile, but something close. "You're not leaving."

"You can't keep me here."

"Want to bet? That's a blizzard out there, you've got a bum ankle and are about a third of the way up the mountain. You can't get an Uber up here. So you'll stay."

"Where are my clothes?"

"Drying out by the main fire. I figured you'd be more comfortable without the bra."

I roll my eyes and give him an unlady-like snort. I swat his chest. He doesn't budge. "I want to leave." I know he's making sense, but I really hate being bested.

"Tough shit."

I look up—mistake. His eyes aren't cold. They're like forged steel, focused, and so intensely locked on mine it feels like I've stepped into fire. My stomach flips, a visceral lurch like the floor dropped out from under me.



"I mean it, Caleb."

"So do I."

We're too close. His breath grazes my lips, warm and steady, sending a shiver down my spine. My heart pounds, a frantic rhythm against my ribs, like it's trying to outrun the tension sparking between us.

"You going to hit me again?" he asks.

"Maybe."

"You better make it count."

The heat behind his words barely has time to fade before he moves—slowly and deliberately. One arm snakes around my waist, the other cradles the back of my neck, and he pushes me back against the iron headboard. The metal frame is cool against my spine, unforgiving. His scent—smoke, icy wind, leather—floods my senses, thick and male and unmistakably Caleb.

Heat detonates low in my belly, spreading in a rush of molten want—fast, wild, and overwhelming. My breath stutters, lips parting on a soft gasp I can't swallow down. This isn't some reckless collision of mouths; it's deliberate. Calculated. Dominant. And it unravels me, every nerve ending alive with need. My thighs tense, hips rising instinctively as if my body's already surrendered, craving more. I'm so turned on I ache with it—hunger blooming deep and raw, logic incinerated in the blaze he's lit.

His mouth crashes into mine, stealing the breath from my lungs. For a split second, I freeze—stunned by the sheer force of it, by the raw, consuming heat that rips through me like a lightning strike. Then I surrender, wholly and helplessly. The scent of him—smoke, wind, skin—drowns every other thought. The heat of his chest presses into mine, unrelenting, as his lips devour, demand, and claim like he has every right to.

Everything flares, sharp and immediate, firing through my veins with no warning. My fingers seize his shirt, dragging him closer until there's no space left to breathe, only him. I taste heat, frustration, and a need I've buried so deep it roars to the surface like a blaze meeting oxygen. He doesn't kiss like a man testing boundaries. He kisses like he's setting them in stone—staking a claim, branding it with the press of his mouth and the unrelenting command of his body.

His hands grip my hips, anchoring me with a force that sends a shock of need straight through me. I melt against him before I can even try to stop it—his body all hard muscle and heat, every line of him pressed tight to mine, a silent command my flesh is too willing to obey. The scent of him—smoke, leather, wind—wraps around me like a second skin.

My mind screams warning, flares with every rational reason to pull away. But my body betrays me—drawn to the steadiness in his eyes, the quiet command in his voice, the way he watches me like I'm something worth guarding. Like he sees everything I've tried to hide and doesn't flinch. My body arches into him, greedy and unrepentant, already lost to the fire he's stoked.

I bite his bottom lip. He growls, low and primal, and presses in harder.

I gasp, more from the sharp jolt through my spine than surprise, and he seizes the moment—his tongue sweeping in, coaxing, demanding, claiming. The kiss is a war zone, all friction and fire, and every nerve in my body flares with need. I meet

himstroke for stroke, lost in the heat of it. And for all my resistance, all my pride—I don't want to win.

Then he pulls back, just enough to break the seal between us. My lips tingle, swollen and sensitized. We're both panting, breath mingling in the thick, electric air—his exhale brushing over my mouth like a whispered demand. My pulse thunders in my ears, my chest rising and falling with ragged urgency. The air crackles around us, tension suspended, sharp as a drawn blade.

"Are you done trying to leave?" he asks, voice rough, eyes searching my face.

I can feel my lips are swollen. My pulse is chaos. I meet his eyes, still defiant.

"For now."

He sits back, but not far, and grins. "Good."

Caleb's hand finds my hip—firm, possessive, like he has every right to touch me. His fingers flex just slightly, grounding me, holding me still. Heat unfurls beneath my skin, sharp and electric, and I can't stop the shiver that follows. My skin hums, nerves flaring awake beneath the press of his palm.

"You going to tell me who's been on the ridge?" I ask.

His jaw tightens. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know. And until I do, you're not setting foot outside... not alone anyhow."

I scowl. "You planning on tying me to your bed?"

He grins lasciviously and waggles his eyebrows. "Don't tempt me. You've had worse ideas."

Before I can stop myself, I ask, "Do I? Tempt you?"

He chuckles. "In ways you can't even begin to guess."

I throw up my hands and hit him with a pillow, which only makes him laugh. The fire's roaring now, flames twisting across thick logs, spitting sparks like it's daring the storm to try harder. Each crackle echoes in the stillness, defiant against the wind that screams outside. I hiss as a fresh wave of pain knifes through my ankle. The sheets bunch beneath my fingers as I brace myself, breath hitching in my throat.

Caleb holds my gaze for a beat, unreadable, then finally turns toward the kitchen. I hear the soft clink of metal, the creak of a cabinet door swinging open. A kettle lands on the stove with a deliberate thunk. A moment later, the low hiss of the burner kicks in, and the scent of strong, dark coffee begins to bloom—rich, bitter, and grounding.

## Page 15

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"So this is your plan? Trap me here and ply me with caffeine until I give up?"

"Not a terrible idea," he mutters.

I lean my head back against the iron headboard and close my eyes, the ache in my ankle a dull throb beneath the burn he left on my lips. Outside, the storm shrieks—wild and unforgiving. The cabin groans beneath its weight, as if even the timber bones know what's coming. And inside me, something shifts, restless and rising like heat before a lightning strike.

I should be furious—demanding answers, but all I can focus on is the ghost of his mouth on mine, the way it ignited something hot and wild inside me I can't extinguish.

I open my eyes and find him watching me again. The way he does—like I'm a problem he's not sure he wants to solve.

"That map on your wall," I say, voice soft. "One of the marked routes—my brother hiked it. Before he disappeared."

He stills. "You're sure?"

"Positive. He was staying at the Northern Lights Lodge. Mara gave me his stuff, including his trail journals. It's one of the last places he logged."

He exhales slowly. "Then that's where we'll start. When the storm clears and you're able to walk."

We.

The word wraps around something soft and raw inside me—a tether I wasn't expecting. It lands with the gentle sting of warmth against scarred-over places, like a flare igniting beneath frost. My breath catches before I mask it, tucking the sensation away before it unravels me.

The storm slams against the cabin walls, wind shrieking like a living thing desperate to claw its way inside. The fire snaps and hisses behind me, throwing flickering shadows across the room. And between us, something wilder burns—bright, insatiable, and growing with every breath we steal from each other.

I don't know what's more dangerous. The threat outside...or the mountain man staring back at me with fire in his eyes.

6

CALEB

The storm hits hard, sudden and violent, like the mountain's fury made manifest. It doesn't just batter the cabin—it surrounds it, seething and alive, pressing in like a predator circling prey. Wind howls through the rafters, rattling the shutters like bones in a jar, and the walls shudder with each gust. It feels more like a reckoning than just weather. The kind that shakes loose everything you've tried to bury. It crashes in with a force that mirrors the storm inside me, every gust and crack of thunder a reflection of the pressure building between us. And it's right on time.

I watch her—blanket tangled low around her hips, hair a tousled halo of temptation, eyes sharp with challenge. Her lips are swollen—kissed, red, and trembling. The air between us is thick with her arousal, subtle but impossible to ignore, like the room itself remembers what we almost did. She glares at me like she's daring me to make

the next move—whether to storm off in frustration or let her drag me under the blankets and into the heat we both know is coming.

Either way, she's lit the fuse.

And it unravels the last thread of restraint I've been holding onto. That thread wasn't thin—it was steel wire, coiled tight around everything I'd locked down and buried. Control, distance, denial. All of it snaps in an instant. There's no going back. Not now. Not with her looking at me like that—like she knows exactly what she's doing and dares me to stop her.

Something about Bryn Calder—hell, everything about her—punches through the armor I've spent years welding shut. I've walked away from gunfights calmer than I am right now. Her defiance, her mouth, her body—she's chaos wrapped in curves, and I've had just about enough pretending I can keep my hands off her.

“You going to keep watching me from over there,” she says, voice low and challenging, “or are you planning to lecture me about my ankle again?”

She wants a fight. I'll give her one—but it won't be with words. Not with sharp comebacks or another war of wills. She may not know it, but what she's asking for is to be pushed past reason—stripped down, devoured, until all that's left is fire and instinct. And I'm done pretending I don't burn for her.

My boots move before I tell them to—driven by something deeper than thought, darker than want. I stalk across the floor in three long strides, every inch of me coiled tight, muscles twitching like I've been holding back a tidal wave that's finally breaking loose. The space between us vanishes. I stop at the edge of the bed, heat rolling off me in waves, my heart pounding like it's trying to punch through bone.

“Get up,” I say, voice gravel and thunder.

She tilts her head, lips curling in that grin that makes me want to snap the headboard in half. “Pretty sure a doctor would tell me to rest...”

“I said. Up.”

She doesn’t move at first. Her eyes narrow slightly, jaw tightening just enough to show she’s running the odds—measuring power, control, and risk like a seasoned poker player. I can practically see her thoughts flicker behind those sharp blue eyes, debating whether this is a bluff or a line she actually wants me to cross. What she doesn’t know is I’ve already crossed it.

I reach down and grip her wrists, pulling her forward until she’s kneeling in front of me on the bed. Her breath whooshes out in a gasp, eyes flashing as she plants her hands on my chest for balance. The heat of her radiates through every layer between us, and when our gazes lock, the rest of the world disappears. Her fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt, dragging me closer, like she’s done pretending too. That’s all I need—permission and provocation rolled into one.

“This what you do with all your injured guests?” she breathes, but it’s not fear in her voice. It’s heat. Daring.

“Only the ones I’m going to fuck senseless.”



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 pm*

The words leave my mouth rougher than I intended, darker than I expected. And the second they do, something in my chest twists—sharp, electric, dangerous. It should've stopped me. Instead, it fuels the possessive edge clawing its way to the surface.

I take hold of her waist, easing her down and back until she's braced against the headboard, her gaze meeting mine with fire and need. Her breath catches when her back touches the cold iron—sharp enough to steal her breath for a beat. But the way her body arches into mine says it's not the cold she feels now—it's the heat radiating off me, pouring into her with every inch of contact.

My mouth crashes into hers—hard, claiming, desperate. No prelude. No mercy. Just the raw, ruthless hunger that's been caged from the moment I saw her. I'm not usually thrown off by women—years of discipline see to that. But Bryn? She's different. There's something in the way she moves, all determination and quiet fire, that grabs hold of me and doesn't let go. She doesn't flinch, doesn't back down, and somehow that calm defiance has broken through the control I usually keep sealed tight.

Our teeth clash, breaths tangling, mouths open in a storm of heat and need. I devour her like a man stranded in a snowstorm who's just found fire. Her fingers twist in my hair, nails dragging fire across my scalp, pulling me deeper, closer, until it feels like she's trying to merge our bodies into one. Her kiss isn't sweet—it's savage. And I match it with everything I've got.

I let her climb into me with every touch, every gasp, like she belongs there. Her heartbeat presses against mine, wild and unrelenting.

I grip her thighs and spread them wider, my palms dragging slowly up the soft flesh as I press her back. Her breath hitches as I strip off my clothes and cover her body with mine. Her hips shift beneath my grip, locking me in place. I grind into her—hard, slow, deliberate—feeling her heat soak through the thin cotton of the thermal she’s still wearing. Then I reach down, yank her panties off, and push into her in one deep, claiming thrust. Her body welcomes me, hot and slick and impossibly tight, and a growl tears from my throat as I bury myself to the hilt.

The shirt clings to her flushed skin, stretched and damp, revealing every curve. The friction sends a pulse of heat straight through both of us, and I can feel the way her body answers—urgent, slick, already begging for more. She gasps my name, low and broken. I want her to feel every inch of what she's done to me.

She moans—low, sharp, and guttural—and the sound slams through my chest like a shockwave. Her body arches into mine, thighs trembling as she clamps around me with fierce, almost frantic urgency. She’s not playing now. She’s wild—untamed heat and writhing need, sweat-slicked skin and parted lips, hips rocking to drag me deeper. Her nails rake down my spine and I bite back a curse, everything inside me coiling tighter. She’s lost to it—and I’m done pretending I don’t want to lose myself with her. Every inch. Every gasp. Every fucking part of her.

I wrench my mouth from hers long enough to grab the hem of the shirt and peel it up, baring inch after inch of her flushed skin. She raises her arms, breath catching as I pull it over her head and toss it aside. The firelight flickers across her bare body—breasts heaving, nipples pebbling in the cool air, lips kiss-bruised and parted in anticipation. Her eyes lock on mine, pupils blown wide, daring me to take all of her. The sight doesn’t just knock me out of the moment—it detonates something primal. I’m past the point of restraint. All I want is to claim, consume, own.

I bury my face in the curve of her neck, nipping, nuzzling and sucking. My hands slide over her ribs, her hips, everywhere I’ve been denying myself from the moment

we met. For a split second, something pulls taut inside me—a flicker of hesitation, not from doubt, but from the weight of how much I want her. Her body, yes, but also her mind, her will, her soul. The craving digs in deeper than I meant to let it. She bucks against me, trying to force more friction, more anything, and I give it to her—thrusting my hips forward until she cries out and digs her nails into my back.

“You think you’re in control?” I growl against her ear, voice low and rough. “You’re not.”

Her breath hitches, and for a split second, her pupils flare with something raw—surprise, arousal, submission. Then her mouth curves, slow and wicked. “Prove it.”

She doesn’t have to say it twice. I grip her hips and slam forward, claiming her in another brutal thrust that knocks the breath from both of us. Her back bows, a ragged cry tearing from her throat as I fill her completely—again, and again—driving into her like she’s the only thing anchoring me to this world. I don’t hold back. I can’t. She begged for it—and I’m giving her exactly what she asked for with everything I have. I don’t hesitate. I don’t ease up. I answer her dare the only way I know how—with force, fire, and the kind of hunger that leaves no room for regret.

My grip tightens, my body slams forward, and I bury myself in her again—deeper, harder, until she cries out and arches into me like she’s trying to burrow beneath my skin. What began as want has sharpened into need. And I give it to her like it’s the last thing I’ll ever do.

She meets every brutal thrust with a fierce roll of her hips, grinding up into me like she wants to brand herself onto my bones. Her heels press into the backs of my thighs, locking me in place, while her nails rake savage trails down my spine—claiming, daring, demanding more. She doesn’t break. Doesn’t falter. Like a force of nature, she rides the onslaught, wild, wet, and utterly unashamed, taking

everything I give her as if she were made for it. For me. For this.

The room fades. The storm outside, the weight of everything I've been burying—all of it disappears into the way she moans my name like it's the only word she knows.

The sharp, rhythmic slap of flesh on flesh echoes off the log walls, primal and relentless, until her body bows beneath me. She shudders, back arching as her climax overtakes her—loud, raw, consuming. Her cry tears free from her throat, unguarded and wild, and I feel it in every muscle, every breath. Her inner walls flutter and clench around me, pulling me deeper, milking every inch. She trembles in my arms, taut with energy, lips parted in a soundless gasp, nails digging into my shoulders. But I'm not done. Not even close. Her body's still trembling, still open and wanting, and I'm going to give her more—until she can't remember her name, until the only thing she knows is me.

Every time I drive into her, she gasps—sharp and shivering—as if my touch is fire licking through her veins. Her nails clutch at my back, thighs trembling, breath catching in broken moans that curl hot against my ear. I feel her coming apart under me—tightening, pulsing, clenching with every stroke until her body spirals out of control. Her eyes lose focus, her lips part in a soundless cry, and I know she's unraveling—pulse for pulse, breath for breath, until she's nothing but sensation and need, and I'm the only thing anchoring her to the world.

When I finally come, it's a brutal, blinding rush that detonates low and deep, tearing a growl from my throat as her name rips off my lips like a prayer and a curse in one. Her nails dig into my back, anchoring me as I shudder through the release—hot, thick, overwhelming. I spill into her with a force that feels like surrender, like something breaking loose from the inside out. This isn't a climax—it's a claiming. Violent. Raw. Final.

We collapse in a tangled heap, gasping, slick with sweat, skin still humming from the

aftermath. For a long moment, I can't move—can't think. The world's narrowed to heat and heartbeat, to the ragged edge of something I wasn't ready for. My body says I've conquered. My mind knows I've surrendered.

And that's when it hits me... this wasn't just sex. This wasn't just getting her out of my system. It was more, so much more.

She lies sprawled across my bed, limbs draped across the rumpled bedding, breath still ragged, her skin flushed and glowing in the firelight. The curve of her spine, the soft rise and fall of her chest—it hits me like a landslide, sudden and unstoppable. Something in my chest shifts—tight and sudden, like a snare pulled taut. Not panic exactly. Not dread. But a warning. A flare of knowing that what just happened isn't casual. It's not disposable. It's the kind of shift that reconfigures fault lines—dangerous, permanent, and already too deep to undo. Tightens. A bond forming, whether or not I want it.

I brush a strand of hair from her cheek, fingers lingering on her flushed skin, still damp from the heat we shared. Her lashes flutter like wind-tossed snow, soft and unsure, and her lips part with the remnants of a sigh. Then her hand finds my chest—slow, deliberate—spreading over my heart with a weight that feels like possession. Her palm is warm, her touch unshakable, as if she's imprinting herself on me, branding her presence into my skin. It's not gentle—it's declaration. And I feel every beat of my pulse thrum up into her hand like a vow I didn't mean to make.

And god help me, part of me aches to give in—to let her past the last locked door inside me. But I know what that would mean. What it would cost. I've seen how love becomes a liability. How soft turns to shattered when the wrong person breaches your defenses. And I built those walls for a reason—to survive what I couldn't protect before. Letting her in now... it feels like handing her the match and daring her to burn it all down.

She lingers in my bones, woven through the quiet spaces I can't reach. She's already past the point of no return—and my chest tightens with the realization. It's not a gentle shift. It's a hard punch of clarity, like breathing in cold air too fast or hearing a shot in the dark. Final. Irrevocable. And I can't tell if the taste in my mouth is awe, or something closer to fear.

I don't know if I can survive what comes next.

"I probably should have said this before," she whispers, "I'm on birth control. The last time I had a checkup was right before I came up to Alaska, and I'm clean."

I kiss the top of her head. "You're right; we should have talked but I'm clean as well and if there was a chance of you getting pregnant, it wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen."

She sits up and looks down at me. "I'm not ready to have kids..."

"Take it easy, Doc. We're on the same page, but sometimes fate steps in and throws precaution and preparation to the wind. I just want you to know, you wouldn't be facing anything alone."

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She relaxes and snuggles back down against me. "Thank you."

As she falls asleep against me, trusting, warm, mine, the wind tears through the trees in long, low moans that sound too much like a threat—and beneath it, something else. A sound I can't name. A presence I can't see. But I feel it. Watching. Waiting. And I know, deep in the marrow of my bones, that this calm won't last.

7

BRYN

Caleb's heart beats steadily under my cheek. It echoes in my ear like the storm hasn't fully left him. What the hell did I just let happen? It was consensual, yes—but I barely know Caleb.

Outside, the storm's howl fades. It shifts from a threat to something more distant—but no less menacing. The cabin has gone almost oppressively quiet—just the pop of embers from the main room and the soft rasp of our breathing trying to find a civilized rhythm after everything we did with each other. His arm is iron around my waist, heavy and possessive. And God help me, part of me wants to melt into it forever.

But the quiet is deceptive. The night isn't finished with us yet. My mind is finally clearing and the real reason I dragged myself up this mountain is clawing for airtime. Chris. Secrets. In his journal he called it a pipeline—unofficial, hidden, bleeding through the forest where no road should be. Some kind of route no one will even admit exists.

Careful not to wake Caleb, I ease free, sliding one thigh, then the other, from beneath the weight of him. My ankle twinges in warning, the dull ache a useful reminder that I'm still something besides a mess of needy hormones. I'm here to find out what happened to my brother.

I scoot to the edge of the mattress, pull on his thermal shirt like a makeshift minidress—the one he stripped from my body—the scent of wood smoke and Caleb's skin clinging to the fabric like a second warning, and plant one foot on the hard plank floor. For a fleeting moment, I wonder at the kind of time and attention it took to make these floors feel satin smooth.

A faint shimmer of red catches my attention at the edge of the windowpane—probably just the firelight reflecting weirdly through the glass. Still, it hums in the back of my mind, unsettling. I blink, try to shake it off, but the unease lingers, drawing my eyes toward the window again. The moment passes. What I thought was a red light disappears.

“Going somewhere, little fox?”

There's no sound—just a shift in air, a subtle change in the room's weight—before the deep rumble materializes behind me. A large, callused palm swats my backside—hard enough to make me yelp and stumble forward, sending pain screaming up my already sprained ankle. I suck in a breath, a curse half-formed—but before I can even twist around, he's already behind me, close enough to land that swat and still move like a shadow, silent and certain, his presence as inevitable as the cold settling into the cabin walls. Big hands circle my waist. In one dizzying lift, I'm airborne—then wrapped back in his arms.

“Caleb! I need water—Chris's notes?—”

“What you need,” he growls, settling back against the pillows with me captured



across his lap, pulling the quilt up around me, “is to stay off that ankle and remember who’s responsible for keeping you in one piece.”

I open my mouth—probably to snark, possibly to swear—only to have two fingers press gently beneath my chin.

“Talk,” he says.

Not a command to be disobeyed. Something inside me unlocks, wide and sudden, opening like a door caught in a gale. I swallow hard, heart drumming a little faster.

“Chris was brilliant,” I start, voice husky with exhaustion and something softer. “He wasn’t your average weekend backpacker—he trained in environmental engineering. Last year he started sending me articles about shadow routes through protected land. He thought someone was moving contraband—animal parts, maybe minerals—past the ranger stations. He joked that he’d hiked enough strange trails to map the entire region better than the park service—especially the ones that weren’t supposed to exist.”

Caleb’s thumb draws slow circles on the inside of my knee, soothing and distracting. “And you think that network runs through Glacier Hollow?”

“I’m fairly certain.” I curl against his chest, letting the quilt slip enough to pool in my lap, allowing my skin to meet his. “He found satellite anomalies, fresh gouges in the snowpack where no seasonal road is logged, and surveyor stakes that aren’t on any state plan. He called it a pipeline—said it looked like something was scarring the forest, carving through places it never should have reached.”

Caleb’s breath hitches—almost imperceptible, but I’m draped over him; I feel the tiny pause. “Show me.”

I point to the counter in the kitchen. “Notebook. Green elastic.”

He shifts, easing me gently to the side as he rises from the bed. A few strides carry him out to the kitchen. He returns with the notebook, handing it over as he climbs back into bed and pulls me onto his lap. The battered cover is warm from his palm. My heart gives a strange jolt at that.

I flip pages, the smell of pine tar and graphite wafting up. “These red triangles are places Chris noted unusual activity. Game trails blocked, cameras smashed. The circles are where I found matching damage yesterday.”

Caleb studies the sketches, the storm-scarred ridge lines and hand-drawn arrows. His eyes sharpen, the soldier sliding back into place. “This run here—” he taps a line that snakes under a drawn mountain silhouette “—cuts behind the old gold-rush tunnels. There’s an abandoned rail spur no one patrols because the rock’s unstable.”

My pulse skips. Something flickers in Caleb’s eyes—recognition, maybe, or dread. I sit up straighter, suddenly more awake. “You know it?”

“Helped dynamite a fallen boulder for Zeke. We thought it was a one-off doodle for local vandals, but...” He leans over me, flips a few pages. “Your brother marked another point fifteen miles northeast—deep enough that even snowmobiles bog down.”

“Unless,” I say, catching his train of thought, “someone’s laid in a secret track, seasonal only, light enough to erase after each run.”

Caleb nods once—sharp, decisive. “Gear up for tomorrow. We set out at first light. I’ll snowmobile us as close as I can to it, then we’re on foot. The only way you’re going to be able to do that is for you to keep that ankle elevated and wrapped. Then when we’re hiking, you’re going to have to take it slow and easy.”

I snort. “You going to bubble-wrap it too?”

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A flash of white teeth—wolfish and unexpectedly fond. “That probably wouldn't help, but what I was thinking, Dr. Calder, was I could just tie you to the bed to wait for me to check it out and return.”

I start to protest and he waves me off.

“Or if you think you can do as you're told, I'll link us together with climbing rope for the hike up to the marker.”

Heat rolls through me that has nothing to do with his dirty threat and everything to do with the way he says my name—equal parts tease and reverence.

But the urgency creeps back in. “There's more.” My fingers hesitate for a breath, hovering over the notebook's worn edge. Caleb's gaze sharpens, but he doesn't rush me. I turn to the pocket at the back of the notebook and slide out a folded topography map. A small plastic evidence bag sits taped to the corner. Inside: a jagged shard of black composite. “I pried this out of a tree half a mile from your cabin. It's not camera casing—wrong polymer.”

Caleb holds it up, brow furrowing. “Looks aerospace. Carbon-fiber laminate?”

“Maybe. Chris wrote about drone fragments near a high saddle to the south.”

Caleb's jaw tightens slightly, eyes narrowing as he turns the fragment over in his hand. A muscle jumps in his cheek—a tell I've started to recognize. Something about this hits a nerve, though he doesn't say it aloud. “Whoever's scouting isn't messing around. The money spent on that tech could buy this cabin outright.”

His jaw sets, that forbidding line I've learned means action. "Which means whoever's up there has deep pockets and no intention of stopping or leaving witnesses."

The words drop between us like fresh snow—silent and heavy. My breath catches, heartbeat loud in my ears, like the mountain itself is holding its breath. My chest tightens with the weight of them, the truth too sharp to ignore now. I glance up at Caleb, but his expression is unreadable, carved in stone. There's a beat of silence, thick and bracing, before I speak again—my voice low, almost reverent.

"Then we're already in it, aren't we?"

He shifts, sliding me off his lap and under the quilt. My breath catches, pulse ticking faster at the sudden distance, wondering what's coming next. Then he braces one forearm beside my head. Dominance radiates off him, but his voice softens. "Sleep while the storm still hides us. Come dawn, I'll need you sharp." A faint grin tugs at the corners of his mouth. "And riding behind me on a snowmobile with that ankle will be punishment enough."

"I could always drive," I mutter.

"My bike weighs six hundred pounds and answers only to me." He kisses my forehead—unexpected and disarming. "Eyes closed, Bryn."

I obey—mostly because exhaustion snaps my lids shut. His weight leaves the mattress; the stove door squeaks, metal clangs as he gets dressed. Boots scuff. He's checking perimeter locks, sliding shells into the pump shotgun. Good.

I drift. Snow gusts shake the windows, but inside is warm, cedar-smoke sweet. My brother's grin flits behind my eyes, morphing into the jagged half-smile Caleb just wore. Different men, same brand of reckless courage. My heart squeezes. I hadn't realized that until now. Maybe that's why I feel so comfortable with Caleb.

Floorboards creak. The mattress dips; his big body curves behind mine, spooning, protective. The quilt tucks under my chin, his breath sifts through my hair. Almost safe.

Almost; because through the wail of wind, a second sound threads the night—metallic, distant, but deliberate. Clink. Like chain against steel, muffled by snow but carried on the gale.

Caleb's entire frame goes rigid. "Bryn," he whispers, voice low as the dark. "You heard that?"

My pulse rockets. "Yeah."

He slips from the bed, muscles rippling, shotgun already in hand. He strides to the window, parts the curtain an inch.

Outside, a single pinprick of red light flickers among the pines. Then blinks out. Gone. Like it was never there at all.

Caleb turns, jaw granite. "That wasn't the storm." He chambers a round with a quiet, lethal chick-chick. "Stay down. We're not alone on this mountain tonight."

The wind surges, rattling the shutters, and somewhere in the dark, the red light sparks to life again—closer.

8

CALEB

There it is again—thin, predatory, pulsing between the spruces like a vein of fire in all that black.

Red light.

Closer this time. Snow ghosting sideways across its glow makes it look alive.

I keep the curtain open only an inch, enough to sight over the barrel of my shotgun. Safety off. Bryn sits behind the bedframe, quilt up to her chin, wide-eyed but silent. Good girl. I tilt my head, listening. Wind, roof creak, stove pop... and a faint whir. Motorized. Too small for a snowmobile, too steady for the trees.

Drone.

I ease the window a hair wider and squeeze the trigger. The shot shreds night—white flash, recoil thudding bone—and the red pinprick blinks once, twice, then dies. The whirring cuts out mid-breath. Silence avalanches in.

“Clear,” I tell Bryn. “But stay down.”

I grab boots, jacket, headlamp. I’m out the door, snow up to my knees and still falling. Steam rises off the shotgun muzzle. Twenty paces in I find it: a carbon-fiber tri-rotor drone, palm-sized, half-buried in the snow. The design’s sleek and tactical—built for surveillance, not recreation—and it’s outfitted with high-end camera gear. No corporate logo, no ID tag—just a cracked lens and a faint smell of burned electronics. Whoever flew this didn’t want it logged with the FAA.

Inside again, Bryn’s perched on the mattress, cheeks flushed with worry and adrenaline. I hand her the drone.

“Your brother wasn’t paranoid,” I say. “Whoever’s running that pipeline? They know you’re here.”

The worry hardens into something like resolve. I like that look on her—steel under all the gold.

The storm lifts at first gray light, leaving a brittle calm. The air tastes like metal—sharp, anticipatory—as if the mountain itself is bracing for what comes next. Zeke’s SUV growls up the track an hour later, Nate Barrett, the cop from Anchorage,



riding shotgun, both men armored in Kevlar and early-morning scowls. Wren arrives right behind them on her snowmobile, goggles iced at the edges, patch pockets stuffed with tranquilizer darts and data cards.

We convene in the main room of the cabin, the air still heavy with the scent of coffee and breakfast lingering like an afterthought. Mugs steam on the side table, the fire crackles low in the hearth, and every movement feels weighed down by what we just learned. Bryn's there already, dressed in jeans and a heavy sweater, her hair still damp from a recent shower. She sits near the fire, one ankle propped on the hearth ledge, notebook in hand but silent—smart; she's listening, eyes sharp, tracking every word like she's mapping something none of us can see yet.

Zeke lays a battered evidence box on the table and flips the lid. Inside are dog-eared trail maps, half-melted granola bars in evidence bags, and a cracked GPS unit with a bloodstained lanyard. "Three hikers missing in the past few months," he says grimly. "Two were supposed to be in and out by nightfall. The third had a backcountry permit for five days. None of them came back. Search crews found gear, blood, and drag marks—but no bodies."

Nate adds a manila folder. "We've got a separate string out of Anchorage—four animal bodies in the last year. Not hunters' kills—these were butchered post-mortem, organs harvested with precision. Bears, moose, even a lynx. They look like black-market trophies, but those cuts? Surgical. This is organized—systematic, profitable."

"Same M.O. here," Zeke says, flipping photos across the wood. Moose carcass, wolf carcass, both missing specific pieces. Bryn flinches but doesn't look away.

Wren unzips her jacket, pulls out her tablet. "Wolf-pack telemetry shows fourteen collars offline in the last six weeks. Not random mortality. Zones are tightly clustered." She taps a blinking map; bright X's bloom along the ridge Chris marked in his journal.

Bryn's hand curls on the notebook. "That's the same corridor Chris tracked."

I fold my arms. "It feels like somebody's using those tunnels..."

"What tunnels?" Nate asks.

"Old mining shafts. This mountain is riddled with tunnels—some connecting the mines, some used to stash smuggled goods, some used to move people or product from place to place. Could be animal parts, maybe something else. Chris marked old mining shafts in his journal—routes that haven't appeared on official maps in decades. If they've been reopened, they're the perfect cover. The drone last night means they're protecting the route."

Nate frowns at the wrecked tri-rotor I'd tossed on the table. "Custom build. Military-grade optics."

"So a poaching ring with defense-contractor toys," Zeke mutters. "Great."

Bryn looks fierce, chin up. "My brother spooked them. Now they're watching us."

I catch the tremor in her voice—fear edged with fury—and something territorial claws inside my chest. I shove it down. "Which means we stop watching and start hunting."

We spread maps across the table in the cabin's main room, clearing space between empty mugs and Zeke's evidence box. Bryn's red triangles butt up against Wren's X's and Zeke's missing-person pins. The pattern is ugly: a loop skirting the official parkland, dipping through federal timber, then vanishing into old mining shafts.

Nate rubs a hand over his jaw. "If someone is trafficking this wildlife, serious money is flowing through Glacier Hollow. Black-market rates for organs and pelts like these

can fund a small army—ex-military contractors, encrypted comms, even drone surveillance. That’s not backwoods poaching. That’s organized crime.”

“Or dirty locals,” Zeke says, voice flat. “Big Pete’s trap-supply business took an unusual shipment of steel jaw sets last fall. Not the kind a licensed trapper would use—too crude, too heavy-duty. Word is, the order was cash-paid and rushed, but there’s no paper trail.”

Bryn perks up. “He sold me bear spray when I was in there. He said bear encounters were up. Could it be because predators are disappearing from the food chain?” Her eyes flash. “You shut the wolves down, moose populations explode, bears follow the meat.”

Smart woman. I file the data, heat curling in my gut, my chest tightening with a rough surge of pride. She’s sharp—sharp enough to keep pace with me, maybe even outstrip me. The knowledge lands hard, leaves a deep burn behind my ribs that I don’t entirely want to cool. A brutal kind of pride rises in me—knowing she’s keeping pace, spotting patterns I missed. She isn’t just an ally anymore. She’s in this fight with me, blood and grit and fire.

Wren leans in, braid slapping her shoulder, eyes locked on the blinking screen. “Collar telemetry shows one live tag inside the restricted zone—alpha female, pack’s linchpin. She’s circling the perimeter like she’s scenting something off. If we can track her, she’ll walk us straight through the operation. And if she bolts, we’ll know exactly where the threat is coming from.”

Bryn nods. “Let me download her ping table.”

“No.” I set a hand on her notebook. “You’re not touching that ankle to hike yet. It’s still swollen.”

Her glare could peel paint. For a split second, it knocks something loose in me—a jolt of heat mixed with exasperation—but I don't let it show. “We don’t have time for caveman rules, Knox. You said we could use the snowmobile and Chris is my brother.”

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“That was before the posse showed up—you know, the sheriff and a cop? And they aren't rules... not really. The fact is, you would slow us down. If this is as big as it seems, they won't take anyone prisoner. They'll shoot first, bury the bodies, and ask zero questions.”

Zeke lifts an eyebrow, skepticism etched deep into the furrow between his eyes. He crosses his arms, shifting his weight slightly before nodding once. “Caleb's right. One misstep and we're body-bag material.”

Bryn's shoulders sag, but her eyes stay hot. “Then pair me with Wren on the snowmobile. I can monitor telemetry while you and Nate scout the ridge.”

I weigh it. Wren's lethal with a gun—be it dart or bullet—and cooler under pressure than most soldiers I've known. Watching her move, calculated and unshakable, always sends a bolt of pride through me. She's my sister—and a force of nature. With Bryn riding behind her, that snowmobile becomes a damn missile. Fast, efficient, and near impossible to touch. If anyone can keep Bryn safe out there, it's Wren.

“Fine,” I say. “But from the moment we leave here, you stay within arm's reach of either Wren or me. Period.”

She opens her mouth—sass loading—but something shifts in those sea-glass eyes, and she nods once. Submission, but earned, not given. Tension coils in my chest, born of command and something sharper—the raw, unrelenting need to earn her trust, to keep her safe. A pang hits low in my gut, part hunger, part reverence. Later, I'll unpack that—when the mountain's quiet and she's sleeping beside me instead of charging into its teeth.

Zeke peels off down a narrow prospect trail, moving wide toward the southern ridge on a snowmobile. We plan to go part of the way on foot to keep the noise level low when we get closer. Wren revs the lead snowmobile, Bryn seated behind her, telemetry unit strapped snug between them. Nate and I bring up the rear on the third snowmobile, eyes tracking the tree line like a predator on scent. No one's left behind. Not on my watch.

Frost-laced air slashes my lungs with every breath. Sharp, unrelenting, it bites deeper than windchill—cold iron threading my ribs and tightening every breath like a vice. I grit my teeth and breathe through it, steadying my grip on the shotgun, willing my focus to the terrain ahead. Boots crack through the wind-scabbed drifts when we dismount, the snow bright under a bleeding sky. Sunlight slants over the peaks, casting long shadows. The mountain doesn't just watch—it waits. Every muscle in my body coils tighter, ready to strike if it has to. My boots shift in the snow, crunching like brittle glass beneath the weight of what's coming.

Nate keeps his voice low, a whisper drifting between the pines. I tighten my grip on the shotgun, the cold steel biting into my palm as I scan the tree line. My ears strain for sound, pulse pounding, every nerve drawn taut like a wire in a winter storm.

“You trust her?”

My jaw tightens, breath fogging in the bitter air as I scan the tree line again, shotgun steady. The weight of the question cuts deep, unspoken memories surfacing like old scars beneath fresh bruises.

“With my life.” The words land before I can second-guess them. Too easy, too fast—but true. And that truth hits harder than I want to admit, and it rattles something deep—because I do trust her. Not blindly, not without reason. It's not that I don't believe in trust. I just never thought I'd find someone who made me want to risk it again.

He glances sideways. “Funny. You used to say trust was a liability.”

“It still is.” I scan the timber. “Doesn’t change the fact that I’m in.”

“Copy that.” He taps the comm. “Sheriff’s in position—armed checkpoint at Pete’s.”  
Meaning: Zeke’s securing the valley exit in case the traffickers bolt.

Static crackles. Wren’s voice: “Telemetry acquired. Lone wolf tag moving southeast—looks spooked.”

Bryn’s tone follows, steady but excited. “We’re shadowing. Coordinates uploading to Caleb’s dash.”

I glance at the handheld GPS: a green dot beelines toward tunnel mouth three. “She just gave us a guide dog,” Nate murmurs.

“Let’s move,” I say as we park the snowmobile. I tighten my grip on the shotgun and give a sharp nod toward the trail. The snow muffles everything but the thud of my boots and the pounding urgency in my chest. There’s no room for hesitation now—every second counts.

We break into a half-run—more stumble than sprint in the snow—keeping low and pushing through the drifts with gritted resolve. Pine scent and what feels like shards of ice in my lungs. Snowflakes spin off branches like sparks off a grindstone.

My pulse stutters—like a snapped line yanking tight—dread cinching around my ribs until I can’t breathe right. The blinking dot on the GPS screen flickers once more... and then freezes, silent, still, a heartbeat stilled in the snowbound dark.

A single gunshot splits the valley open, echoing off the ice-laced peaks like a war drum. It rolls through the trees, sharp and jarring, yanking my breath short and

sending a jolt straight through my spine.

“Wren!” I bark into the mic.

No answer.

Bryn’s voice bursts through, breathless. “Shots fired—north ridge. Wren’s okay, but the snowmobile’s hit. They’re on foot, heading our way.”

“Hold position,” I growl.

“Negative, Caleb. They’re tracking the wolf. I’m not letting them kill her.”

Of course she isn’t. I bite off a curse. “Stay alive. We’re en route.”

Nate and I break into a sprint. Four hundred yards downhill, I spot movement: two figures in white camo, rifles slung, dragging a sled loaded with burlap shapes—limp animal forms. The shapes are unmistakably animal—furred, too small and contorted to be human. Poachers, not murderers. Not this time.

One glances back.



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"Tangos," I whisper. "Poachers confirmed. Two hundred yards out, half-hidden behind snow-laden spruce."

Nate raises his carbine. "Two-man stack. You call it."

I exhale winter air, cold and merciless. "We flank hard and take them quiet. Bryn's somewhere beyond. We end this before they see her."

I wedge the shotgun butt tight against my shoulder.

For Bryn. For Chris. For every wolf stripped from this mountain.

The next squeeze of my trigger will decide if Bryn gets out of these woods alive—or if I lose everything all over again.

9

BRYN

Snow swallows every sound—until it doesn't.

A single muffled crack ricochets through the trees, rolling down the ridge like a predator riding the wind. I flinch, breath fogging my face shield. Wren's gloved hand closes over my forearm before an instinctive reaction can shove me into the open.

"Easy," she murmurs, eyes tracking the tree line. "That was Caleb's twelve-gauge. Pattern's tight. He never wastes a shot."

I want to trust that calm certainty, but my pulse is stampeding. We're crouched in a snow-slashed gully beside the damaged snowmobile, telemetry tablet glowing faint green against the whiteout. Somewhere beyond the ridge, Caleb and Nate are stalking poachers who butcher animals with surgical precision. Somewhere out there, my brother's trail is still bleeding.

I steel my voice. "You sure they're okay?"

"If they weren't, you'd hear two more shots." Wren flicks me a sidelong smile—steady, lethal. "Knox protocol: engage, confirm, finish."

Distant voices float through the spruce—low, guttural, not English. A harsh syllable snaps out, then another—Caleb's voice, unmistakable in its clipped command. Branches crack. The forest stills again, tension folding back into the snow like nothing ever disturbed it.

Minutes stretch like wire under tension. Then movement ghosts between the trees. Nate appears first, carbine slung over his shoulder, visor up. Caleb strides behind him, one poacher zip-tied, the other limp over his shoulder. Even buried in winter camo, he's unmistakable—broad, relentless, carved out of the mountain itself. Relief slams through me so hard my knees nearly buckle.

He sets the unconscious poacher in the sled, then meets my gaze. Those glacier eyes melt for a fraction of a heartbeat—just long enough to say, 'I'm here. You're safe.'

And God help me, that look feels like the first clean breath after clawing through an avalanche—sharp, cold, necessary.

Getting back to the cabin takes time. Nate drives the repaired snowmobile, with Wren riding behind him. Zeke drives the snowmobile with the sled holding the two prisoners. Caleb and I bring up the rear. I'm pressed against Caleb's back, my arms

locked around his waist as wind claws at us. The cold eats through layers and settles in my bones, but I don't care. I'm still riding the high of seeing him walk out of that forest.

By the time we're all inside, the heat from the woodstove and fireplace feels like stepping into another world—one that's warmer, safer, and laced with the sharp scent of pine smoke and wet wool. Caleb and Nate hauled the prisoners from the snowmobile and sled to Zeke's SUV and locked them in. They join the rest of us as we gather tight around the kitchen island. Copper light flickers over maps, evidence boxes, and two lawmen and Caleb, all too wired to blink. Steam curls from mugs of coffee, but no one's drinking yet.

Caleb drops a blood-sprayed burlap satchel onto the table with a damp thud. The scent of iron and musk billows up in a wave, pungent and primal. It hits the back of my throat like a warning shot. I flinch, recoiling instinctively, stomach turning as I eye the stained fibers and the grotesque promise of what lies within.

"Two fresh wolf pelts," he says, voice hollow. He wipes his hands on a rag, then clicks a flash drive into my laptop. "Poachers had drone footage of every active trapline—including the one Chris marked. Found the satchel stashed in a snowbank just off the old mine trail. I didn't bring it inside for fun."

A sick churn twists through my gut like barbed wire. I force down bile, fingers trembling as I advance the footage frame by agonizing frame. Wolves writhing in iron jaws. Moose splayed and flayed, skinned with clinical detachment. Each grim scene bears Chris's map coordinates like a cursed watermark—proof that this isn't random. It's a system. A business. A violation scrawled in blood across everything my brother fought to protect.

Zeke swears under his breath. "That's enough evidence to level federal charges."

Nate folds his arms. “Assuming the ring doesn’t burn itself before we get a warrant. We need Bryn’s notebooks, Wren’s telemetry logs, and anything else tying tunnels to revenue.”

Wren passes over her tablet. “Collar pings match the butchering sites. Fourteen wolves down, one still active but heading south—fast. Probably spooked by gunfire.”

Caleb’s jaw tightens. “We can track her at first light. That wolf should lead us to the primary hub—or her den. Either way, we end it.”

Zeke nods. “I’ll process the prisoners in town, loop in Fish and Game. Bryn, you should bunk somewhere safe till morning.”

Wren taps my arm. “My cabin’s closer. Less target-rich.”

Zeke counters, “I can take you back to the bed-and-breakfast. It's centrally located, and safe. I can post a deputy there if you like.”

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Both turn to me like I'm a misdelivered package—something to be rerouted, not considered. The irritation scrapes low and hot under my ribs, but I keep it buried and pivot toward Caleb instead. His expression gives nothing away, cold and unreadable as glacier stone.

"I'd prefer she stays here," he says, calm but final. No argument follows. Nate lifts an eyebrow, Wren shrugs, and the corners of Zeke's mouth seem to be tugged up. I guess that's that.

The cabin exhales silence after they all leave. Caleb stacks fresh wood by the stove, snow melting in his hair and beard. I busy myself at the propane range—only because pacing holes into the floor feels less productive. Venison stew bubbles, the aroma thick with garlic and juniper. Anything to drown the metallic smell of burlap death that Caleb has removed from the cabin.

He steps in from the cold, boots thudding softly against the wood floor, snow steaming off his jacket, beard and hair. The shotgun slung over his shoulder looks like an extension of him—lethal and steady. "Perimeter's clean," he says, voice like gravel and midnight. "I rigged trip-wires with flares—nothing gets close without lighting up the damn forest."

I ladle stew into two enamel bowls, the rich scent of juniper and garlic rising with a hiss as the hot liquid meets the cold metal. The aroma cuts through the remnants of tension like a balm, earthy and grounding in a way I didn't realize I needed. I pass one bowl to Caleb, then curl my fingers around mine, grateful for the burn against my palms.

“Dinner’s contraband and poacher free,” I murmur, trying to anchor us both in something human, something normal.

“Good.” He sinks onto the bench opposite me.

Steam wreathes his face, curling through the cabin air like breath made visible. Shadows flicker across cheekbones sharp enough to cut, stark against the firelight. I hand him a spoon, and our fingers brush. The jolt is immediate—heat skating under my skin, tangled with leftover terror, unresolved hunger, and something darker I’m afraid to name.

I clear my throat. “I’m not sitting out tomorrow.”

“Your ankle is still injured.” He stirs the stew exactly once, as if testing viscosity instead of flavor.

“I can ride a snowmobile and work a telemetry tablet.”

“No.” The single syllable drops like a boulder.

I sit straighter. “You need me. My data, my insight?—”

“I need you alive.” His voice is low, dangerous.

I breathe through the flare of anger. “Keeping me caged won’t fix anything.”

“Alive is not caged.”

“Alive is useless if I can’t help.”

He sets the spoon down—quiet, deliberate. “Rules, Bryn. Hard boundaries. You

follow them, you stay by my side.”

I meet his gaze head-on. “And if I don’t?”

Steel flickers in glacier blue. He leans forward, voice rough velvet wrapped around steel. “Then I strap you to the damn sled and tie you to me until this is over.”

A shiver—not entirely fear—ripples down my spine. I inhale steadily. “Fine. I’ll agree to your boundaries. In return, you tell me why a man who can dismantle poachers in a blizzard still looks like he’s bleeding on the inside.”

Silence stretches, thick as storm clouds. His jaw works once, twice. Then he exhales, slow and rough, like he’s releasing shrapnel he’s carried too long—each breath a wound that never fully healed.

"I could use the old 'if I tell you, I'll have to kill you' excuse."

"But you won't," I say with a great deal more confidence than I should feel.

“Mosul, five years ago. Intel op went sideways. I trusted the wrong teammate—a guy named Reynolds. He sold our coordinates for cash. Two of my brothers died. The military court-martialed me for failure of command, then dressed it up to look pretty in an honorable discharge.”

I swallow hard, the weight of his confession pressing against my sternum. “You blamed yourself.”

“I still do.” He rubs the heel of his hand over his chest, like old wounds itch beneath scar tissue. “Solitude was simpler. Until you crashed my mountain.”

The corner of my mouth curves. “You’re welcome.”

A ghost of a smile crosses his lips—blink and it's gone. "My rules: you ride with me or Wren, never alone. You keep comms active, answer on first ping. You carry bear spray, trauma kit, and pistol loaded safe. You obey instantly if I call a retreat."

I nod. "My rule: knock before you strip away my autonomy. And trust that I'm stronger than something breakable you need to put away."



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:32 pm*

His gaze warms—liquid heat under ice. “Deal.”

We eat in companionable silence, the only sounds the gentle scrape of spoons against enamel and the occasional creak of the cabin settling. Outside, the wind prowls like a restless ghost, but in here, it's warm, grounded, real. Bit by bit, the tension leeches from my shoulders. By the time our bowls are empty and the fire has settled into glowing embers, some part of me I didn't realize was clenched finally starts to loosen.

I stack dishes, hyper-aware of the quiet gravity behind me—large, silent, watching. The cabin feels smaller somehow, as if the air itself has thickened. Heat prickles across my skin, tension coiling low. I turn, the dish towel twisting between my fingers, an anchor I didn't know I needed.

“Caleb...”

He crosses the distance in three strides, palm curling at my nape. Not a kiss. Just contact—steady, grounding. “Sleep. Tomorrow we finish this.”

I press my forehead to his chest. “Together?”

“Until my last breath, Bryn.”

I believe him—and that terrifies me in a way drones or poachers never could. Because trust, once given, doesn't bend. It breaks. And when it does, it cuts deeper than any trapline ever could.

Outside, the wind rasps across the roof, threading through the eaves like a warning whispered by the mountain itself. It moans low and steady, a reminder that out there, the wild is never silent, never still.

Tomorrow, the mountain demands payback. A distant howl slices through the night—wolf, raw and aching. It echoes like a challenge hurled into the dark. The alpha's still running. And tomorrow, we follow where she leads—through shadow, through ice, toward whatever truths wait buried beneath the snow.

Dawn promises blood or answers—maybe both. And for the first time, I'm not backing down from either.

10

CALEB

Dawn leaks into the world like cold metal—sharp and biting at the nostrils with a sting of frost and iron. The silence carries a far-off creak of shifting ice, a brittle warning that the mountain is waking—thin, metallic, ready to burn, its bite sharp in the back of my throat. The air carries the ghost of frostbite and pine, prickling along the edge of awareness like a warning shot.

Bryn's asleep when I ease out of bed, but her fingers catch my wrist—barely a twitch, and still, it grips something in my chest. For a second, I pause, watching the slow, steady rhythm of her breath, the crease between her brows that never fully relaxes. Even asleep, she's on guard. It makes me want to keep guarding her back. I press a kiss to her hair. "Fifteen minutes," I murmur. "Layer up." She nods without opening her eyes, fierce even half-dreaming. That stubborn fire keeps me breathing.

Outside, the air is knife-sharp: minus-twenty, no mercy. Frost crystals catch the early light, glittering like broken glass across the hard-packed snow. Two snowmobiles idle

in the half-light beside Zeke's SUV, their engines puffing steam into the frozen stillness. Nate finishes tightening the cargo sled to his snowmobile, breath clouding around him, while Wren checks tranquilizer darts clipped at her hip with surgical precision.

Bryn limps out in my spare parka, ankle wrapped in fresh tape visible under her boots. Her breath comes in sharp, determined puffs, misting the air with each exhale. Cheeks flushed from adrenaline, not cold, she looks like she was born for this hunt. The telemetry tablet is clutched in her hands like a weapon, her fingers moving fast across the screen, eyes locked on the data. Each step is deliberate, defiant. She isn't along for the ride—she's part of the mission, wired into every step.

"Wolf collar pinged three minutes ago," she says, tapping the screen. "Heading west-southwest, fast."

"That's the ice shelf line," Wren adds. "Crevasse fields all over."

Even better.

I nod toward the slope. "We'll split up," I say, already visualizing the route. "Zeke with Nate on point. Wren rides pillion behind Z. Bryn stays with me."

Zeke raises a brow. "You sure? She's baggage on rough ice."

Bryn answers for me. "I'm cargo with brains. Works out."

I bite back a grin. "Cargo climbs behind me. Now."

She huffs under her breath but moves, planting her foot with deliberate pressure onto the snowmobile's rail. Her arms slide around my waist a second later, tight and sure. I feel the flare of her defiance in the way she grips me—strong, unyielding. Her chin

rests between my shoulder blades, and for a moment, the world stills, heat and heartbeat throbbing in tandem. I know her jaw is set and her eyes are sharp without looking back.

Her warmth anchors me, settling low at my spine like purpose forged in fire. I gun the throttle. Snow spits. The machine growls, claws at the earth, and we rocket downslope. Treetops blaze in pink light as dawn slices the horizon wide open.

The GPS beeps in my chest pocket—steady pulses marking the alpha’s collar. Bryn calls ranges over engine roar: “Four-hundred meters... three-seventy-five... she’s veering right!”

I lean into the turn; the machine snarls, treads clawing powder as the cold whips across my cheeks. Pines blur past in dark streaks. Ahead, the trees break open into a glacial bowl, its surface a hard sheen of blue ice, wind-scoured and gleaming like a death trap. The air shifts—sharp with ozone and the faint bite of mineral frost—every inch of it lethal.

Ice shelf. One wrong throttle and we’re swallowed by the mountain—crushed in fractures no wider than a breath, entombed in glacial silence. The wind howls across the frozen surface, sharp as razors, and each vibration from the engine feels like a dare. I tighten my grip on the bars, eyes scanning the pale sheen for the faintest spiderweb crack or shadow of collapse.

I ease off, letting the snowmobile glide. Bryn’s grip tightens. “Shelf edge thirty meters,” she warns.

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Across the bowl, Zeke's rig angles left, hugging a ridge of wind-packed crust that curves like the rim of a shattered bowl. His form is a steady silhouette against the rising light, the kind of dependable anchor I've leaned on more times than I can count. Wren, riding behind him, flashes a gloved thumbs-up—sharp and confident—before she lowers her body tighter against his back, ready for whatever comes next.

The wolf ping darts south again—straight over the shelf, as if daring us to follow. My jaw tightens. She's heading straight into the most unstable stretch of ice on the mountain, a death zone even seasoned hunters avoid. I glance at the glimmering ridge ahead and mutter, "She's pushing us into the worst of it." Bryn nods, eyes wide but determined. "Or she's running from something even worse."

"Smart girl," Bryn mutters. "She knows the cracks."

"Or knows we don't."

I feather the throttle. Steel cables hum beneath us. The engine's vibration buzzes through Bryn's chest into mine, syncing heartbeats in a rhythm too steady to be accidental. She tightens her arms a fraction, and I feel it—our pulses lining up like twin wires humming with intent.

We crawl across the ice, the snowmobile's skis whispering like breath on a blade. Two hundred meters of glacial glass stretch beneath us, a thin skin over an abyss that wants to swallow us whole. Every exhale hangs like silver thread in the frigid air—fragile, breakable, trembling with the weight of everything we don't say. My palms sweat inside my gloves, a traitor heat against the cold, and I feel Bryn's tension

ripple through her arms, locked tight around me. Beneath us, the groan of ancient ice murmurs low—ominous, alive.

Bryn murmurs, “I hear it... little pops. Shear tension.”

“Keep your eyes down.”

A spider-web fissure snakes ahead, thin but fresh, glinting under a fresh dusting of powder. The ice shifts with a subtle groan—a sound that hums through the machine and settles deep in my spine. My breath fogs the visor as I steer left, veering from the danger like a hunter sidestepping a sprung trap, following a trackless lane of virgin snow that looks just sturdy enough to hold the weight of our pursuit—and the weight of what’s coming.

Ping—ping—ping.

The collar signal halts abruptly. For one breathless moment, the screen goes dead—no pings, no movement. Then, a new signal blinks into existence, fifty meters beyond the ice shelf, pulsing like a heartbeat in the tree line. Not a glitch. A leap. That wolf made the impossible crossing—clearing the dead zone like it was nothing. My breath catches as the implication sinks in: She survived, not by accident or chance, but because she believed she could.

The wolf made the jump. That means she’s alive—still out there, still fighting, still clever enough to outmaneuver every trap thrown at her. My heart kicks hard against my ribs. Alive—and thriving. That leap wasn’t luck. It was calculated. She knew the risk. She chose it. And she made it. Whatever else is out there—she’s surviving it. That gives us hope. That gives us proof. out there, still running.

I squeeze the brake. “Shelf’s closing behind us. We’ll take the long route around.”

“Long route costs us fifteen minutes.” Bryn’s frustration flares hot against my back.

“Beats fifteen seconds of freefall.”

Nate’s voice crackles over comms. “Copy detour. We’ll circle from the north.”

We backtrack, hugging stable ground as the snowmobiles groan against the slope, engines humming low to avoid drawing attention. Bryn’s grip stays iron around my waist, her breath warm against my back, and every step beneath the treads echoes like a challenge. The air feels heavier here, thick with the scent of pine sap and anticipation, as if the mountain itself is bracing for the next move.

I glance behind—Zeke rides flank, Wren’s silhouette hunched low, eyes scanning. We’re exposed, but not helpless. Every shift in the trees, every flurry of snow carries the threat of a strike, and we move like predators re-entering the kill zone—silent, watchful, and wound tight with purpose, engines droning low through the brittle silence. Morning sun glints off the ice like broken mirrors, jagged and deceptive. Each shimmer cuts the landscape into fractured reflections of danger. I can almost feel the mountain watching—cold, ancient, and alive—judging our hesitation, weighing our worth.

We regroup on a ragged timberline where the wolf’s track dives into a choke of deadfall. Bryn toggles night-vision on the tablet. “Collar’s moving again—slow, like she’s stalking.”

Zeke swings his rifle. “Then so are we.”

I crank the sled forward. Thirty yards. Forty. The snow changes—shifts beneath the treads. Loose powder coats a layer of unnaturally compacted crust. My gut clenches. Something’s off. The scent of disturbed earth mingles faintly with exhaust and cold air—wrong. I open my mouth to warn?—

The ice shelf hums low—then a puff of powder bursts beneath Nate’s snowmobile’s skis, a sharp concussion tearing through the air like a slap of thunder. WHUMP. His rig jerks violently, skidding hard to the side before slamming into a birch with a sickening crunch of metal and bark. The blast kicks a concussion wave under my snowmobile—no searing heat, no jagged fragments—just a gut-thumping shock that rattles my bones. Not a kill strike. A low-yield motion mine, tuned to wound, not destroy. Designed for screams, not silence.

“Down!” I snarl, slamming Bryn down behind me and throwing my body over hers as another mine erupts—flash-bang brilliance and a thunderclap that feels like it splits the sky.

The snowmobile rocks hard, metal skidding under us as snow blasts upward in a whiteout wave. The concussion punches through my chest, my ears ringing. It’s a deterrent—sound and kinetic, meant to disorient, maybe crack bone—but not kill. Poachers don’t want corpses. They want product—injured, scared, but intact. My grip tightens on Bryn. No one’s taking her.

Zeke vaults off his rig with a roar, snow kicking up as he slides to Nate’s side. He drops to one knee, scanning for bleeding, while Wren charges in, her med-kit already open. Nate hisses through clenched teeth. “I’m fine,” he grits out, face pale.

Wren pulls his pant leg back with clinical speed, her gloves stained with snowmelt and adrenaline. “Nothing broken, but it’ll bruise a lot,” she confirms.

Nate grunts through the pain. “I’m not dead, not even badly hurt. That’s your win for the morning.”

Snow settles in thick, whispering layers, muffling the aftermath like a shroud. The trees stand silent sentinels, breathless under the weight of tension. Silence blooms—not peaceful, but taut, like lungs holding a final inhale, waiting for what



comes next.

Bryn pushes upright. “You saved me from shattering my spine,” she mutters.

“Occupational habit.”

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I scan the tree lines for over watch—any glint of glass, silhouette, or movement. Nothing. No snipers, no lookouts. Just the hush of snow-laden branches and that eerie quiet that follows a detonation. The minefield's automated, not manned. That tells me plenty—whoever set this up has tech, planning, and the confidence to stay invisible. Too confident.

She grips my sleeve, urgency flaring in her voice. "If they're mining access routes—setting up traps and sensors—then haul night's coming fast. They're clearing paths for transport, maybe even marking the perimeter to move product under cover."

"Yeah." My pulse is a war drum. "And we just tripped their early-warning system."

We drag Nate's snowmobile and the sled clear with gritted teeth and wordless effort, every muscle strained against resistance. Then we break out the snowshoes and begin to follow the wolf's track on foot for a half-mile across uneven snow crust to a shadowed ravine.

The silence feels watchful, every step breaking the stillness like a shout. Inside, tucked beneath a jagged rock overhang dusted in frost, sit three insulated crates—military-grade, reinforced corners, the kind smugglers use when they expect a fight. They're half-buried in wind-blown drift, no surrounding prints. Airlift drop—precise, practiced. Someone knew precisely where and when to place them for discovery. The scent of scorched ozone and bitter antiseptic clings to the still air, sharp as accusation.

I crack the lid of one of the crates. Dry-ice fog spills out.

Inside: Organ packets—vacuum-sealed, slick with condensation and labeled in Cyrillic. Pale tissue, unmistakably non-human, wrapped in sterile gauze and heat-shrunk plastic. The air inside the crate reeks of antiseptic and freezer-burnt flesh, a sterile violence that churns the gut. Ivory shards, each piece wrapped tightly in stained oilcloth. A sat-phone—blinking red—rests atop the cache like a waiting viper.

Bryn's breath hitches. "This is tonight's export, isn't it?"

"Looks fresh enough." I lift one packet—still pliant. "Collected yesterday at most."

Wren crouches beside the crates, her breath curling in the cold as she snaps high-res photos from multiple angles, then logs coordinates into the GPS with brisk, practiced fingers. Her movements are clinical, methodical—the kind of calm precision that makes me trust every readout she hands over.

I pocket the sat-phone, its surface still warm from use, the blinking red light a silent dare. It's locked tight—encrypted, military grade—but salvageable. I'll crack it. I've cracked worse. If this thing holds transmission logs or GPS data, it'll bleed out the rest of their operation—names, coordinates, maybe even the chopper route. Every predator leaves a trail. This one just handed me a map.

Zeke kneels by the crate. "They'll return for this at haul night. Forty-eight hours, based on pattern?"

Nate, leaning on a ski pole, grimaces. "Make it twenty-four. Weather turns ugly then. Perfect cover for a pickup."

I thumb the lid shut. "Ex-mil contractors won't risk storm hover time. They'll prep the load here, then sled it to a chopper landing zone."

Bryn points to the crate labels. "The boxes are numbered four of six. Two more

caches east or south.”

“East is that smelter ruin,” Nate says. “Wide roof, flat ground.”

I nod. “Multiple insert points, re-welded shafts. Could hide a chopper.”

Zeke’s radio squawks—dispatch confirming visual and radar contact with an unregistered aircraft two nights prior, seen skirting the mountain’s no-fly zone. Russian tail numbers had been digitally scrubbed, but the silhouette and flight path match a Kamov transport chopper. Black-market favorite.

“That seals it,” he mutters.

My gut ices over. This may look like a poaching op, but it’s a war front in camouflage. Organ packets in cold storage. Mines rigged to rupture joints without killing. Long-range drones with infrared overlays. Whoever set this up is ex-military, and they didn’t forget a damn thing.

Bryn adjusts her sling pack and glares uphill. “We stake out the smelter tonight.”

“No.” I hook two fingers under her chin, make her look at me. “You stay tethered to me. Eat, breathe, move when I say.”

Her eyes flash sea-glass defiance. “You can’t leash me, Knox.”

“Watch me.” I turn to Zeke. “Nate and Wren will scout the shafts. Bryn stays inside my shadow.”

She huffs, defiance written in every line of her body, then shoves the tablet in my vest with a sharp motion. Her jaw is tight, lips pressed into a line that dares me to argue. I feel the tension radiating off her—raw, electric, almost vibrating through the cold.

She doesn't like being ordered around, but she's not walking away either. That means something. "Fine. Shadow, but I'm holding the light."

I almost smile—almost. "Keep it pointed where I tell you."

We load crates onto a working snowmobile; the runners groaning under the added weight. Wren doesn't simply tuck the beacon inside—she wedges it dead center between the organ packets and the ivory shards, making damn sure the signal won't be missed. It's more than bait. It's a beacon-shaped middle finger. Her lips press into a grim line as she slams the lid shut, sealing the trap with clinical finality.

As we roll out, I scan the snow. Fresh boot prints lead away from the drop—deep tread, angled with intent. The snow compresses unevenly beneath each step, betraying weight and direction, the stride long and deliberate. I kneel beside the trail, tracing the impression with a gloved hand.

The air smells faintly of old tobacco and something acrid—like engine grease and frost-bitten ozone—a scent I remember from nights when we waited to die on foreign sand. These aren't the tracks of a scavenger. These are a soldier's prints. And every step screams Reynolds—deep tread, custom sole. My gut clenches as I kneel for a closer look. Diamond-pattern heel, shaved at the edge—standard issue for evading infrared. My breath fogs the air. I've seen this exact cut before. Once. Reynolds. No doubt.

Reynolds used to shave the edges of his boot heels—standard military tread—specifically to ghost thermal imaging. I remember the first time he showed us how, back in the desert heat of Mosul, scraping the rubber with a razor blade like it was a ritual. That angled cut wasn't just tactical—it was personal. It was his signature. And now it's here, burned into the snow, unmistakable. The bastard's alive—and he's walking in my woods like they belong to him.

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The bastard's alive—and closer than I ever let myself believe. The print's still fresh, angled in a way that says he wasn't just passing through. He was watching. Waiting. Plotting his next move like this is a game he's already won.

I clench my jaw. No more running. No more ghosts. What Reynolds did wasn't a simple betrayal of a team—it was the fracture of a brotherhood. And now he's made the mistake of bringing his war to my mountains.

I won't leave them. Not while there's breath in my lungs and vengeance in my blood. I won't stop until I completely destroy the operation—and him.

My pulse steadies—not from fear, but something colder, sharper. Purpose that slices clean through the fog of memory and rage, anchoring me in the now. I'm not flinching. I'm hunting.

You sold out two brothers, I think, memorizing the print. You don't get a third.

Ahead, a gray sky thickens, storm front swallowing the summit. Somewhere inside that brewing night, Reynolds waits—dragging ghosts from Mosul into my mountains. He has forty-eight hours of freedom; after that, I'm coming to collect.

11

BRYN

Cold air stings my cheeks the moment Caleb straightens from the boot-print. His shoulders lock, every muscle taut, his jaw is clenched so tight I half expect to hear the

crack of bone. The fury in his expression isn't loud—it's lethal in its quiet focus. The tension in him coils sharp and unyielding, like braided wire pulled taut to the edge of snapping. The shape of the boot-print seems familiar to Caleb, as if it is burned into his memory. His gaze sharpens, breath tightening. He doesn't say the name, but his entire body goes still in a way that tells me everything.

Caleb doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Then, with a slow nod, he finally speaks—his voice flat and low, like gravel sliding beneath steel.

"That tread print—heel drag, shallow toe. That's Reynolds—the bastard who betrayed my team and left us to die. He used to wear custom Salomons. Their tactical boots are favored for their grip and durability. Same mark left outside Mosul the night he vanished. I'd know it blind."

My stomach clenches. The name tastes metallic now, real and raw in the open air.

"You're sure?"

Caleb's eyes slide to mine. "I'd bet my last breath, he's alive. And something far more dangerous than before. He's here—and pulling the strings."

His eyes meet mine, fury burning cold and controlled beneath his words. The fury in his eyes confirms it. That bastard's alive. And he's here. The betrayal, the fury—it's all etched deep, like old scars that never healed, branded beneath his skin.

I lay a hand on his arm, grip firm. "Later," I murmur, low and deliberate—quiet code between us that says, we will talk, but not here. Not now.

Right now we need to move the evidence and get Nate's injury cared for before the storm eats the pass. Caleb's nod is barely there, but it's enough to make the team start hauling crates back to the sleds. Snow compacts beneath boots, a sharp contrast to the

low groan of wind pushing through the pass. I catch Caleb's eye—one shared look says it all. The storm is coming, and with it, the reckoning.

Zeke's SUV skids into Glacier Hollow just ahead of the front edge of the blizzard. Snow swirls under yellow streetlamps, turning Main Street into a shaken snow globe. The moment we unload the contraband, Zeke slaps a shiny deputy's star onto my parka.

"Temporary authority to catalog and secure electronic evidence," he says. Translation: you're officially on the payroll, kid—now don't break the chain of custody.

Caleb's already stripping weapons and ammo from a locker in the station armory, movements swift and precise. The harsh clack of metal echoes in the space, underscoring how focused he is. For a moment, I just watch—drawn in by the way the storm-light glints off the hard angles of his face, the grim set of his jaw. It's like seeing him fully in his element, dangerous and unshakable—and it sends a ripple of heat through my belly despite the cold clinging to my gear.

He glances over, his gray eyes flicking from the badge to my face, like he wants to pin it farther inside the coat—somewhere closer to my heart where no one else can pry it loose.

"You good?" he asks.

"I'm golden," I shoot back, even though my ankle throbs with every heartbeat. Painkillers can wait. Data can't.

Wren has set up a makeshift lab in the back room of The Hollow Hearth: one long folding table, a battered laptop, and half a dozen GPS collars blinking like Christmas in purgatory. I join her there and we connect the sat-phone Caleb pocketed to my rig.



My fingers fly over the keys, each command a coaxing breath. The encryption holds for seventeen minutes before the first breach flickers on-screen—then buckles entirely by the twenty-minute mark.

My pulse ticks faster. "Gotcha," I whisper, tasting the metallic thrill of progress.

"Look at this," Wren says, spinning her screen. A writhing pattern of red dots fans across the map, then funnels inward toward a black circle labeled Ironvale Smelter—Abandoned.

"Every collar pinged from that perimeter before going dark," she adds. "They're funneling wildlife into kill boxes, dragging the carcasses inside, quartering them in the tunnels."

My stomach flips. Chris's last notebook sketch—a crude map with the words *smelter?* scrawled beside a jagged line—comes roaring back. He knew.

A flicker of unease prickles at the base of my skull a second before Wren's phone buzzes with Sadie's name—odd, since she's working just steps away in the café kitchen.

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“Tell me you’re not calling about coffee,” I joke.

“Wish it was.” Her voice is tight. “Two busloads of Insta-tourists booked a guided snowshoe loop—Forest Service approved—right past Ironvale the day after tomorrow.”

Haul night. Perfect.

I meet Wren’s gaze. “If civilians wander in while Reynolds is cleaning house, we’ll be bagging wolves—and bodies.”

"We'd best tell the boys."

I love how Wren refers to Nate, Zeke and Caleb as boys. There's no way anyone would mistake those tall, muscular men for boys.

"I'll go," I say as I electronically save everything, and grab Caleb's over-sized parka.

“I’ll come with,” says Wren.

We make our way to the sheriff’s office and stride into the squad room where Caleb and Zeke are bent over topography maps, their faces lit by the harsh overhead fluorescents.

“We're going to need remote cameras in the smelter tunnels tonight,” I announce, voice steady and urgent.

Zeke nods. “Sadie told me about the tourists. We're going to need visual confirmation, timestamps, everything. If Reynolds is staging from that site, I want eyes on him before the tourists stumble into something they can't walk away from.”

Caleb's eyes narrow as he looks down at my ankle. “That ankle says you stay put.”

“My ankle's attached to the best shot you've got at handling live surveillance gear,” I fire back. “Wren and I can plant four cams in under an hour. I realize you're all big tough mountain men, but Wren and I both have more experience with wildlife and field cams. You can monitor everything in real time from the ridge.”

Zeke rubs his temples. “We don't have manpower for a three-prong op and babysitting.”

Caleb exhales like a man choosing which limb he can live without. “Fine. Bryn rides with Wren and stays on comms.” He turns back to me. “At the first sign of trouble, you two will bug out.”

Wren salutes with two fingers. “Scout's honor.”

Caleb hooks a finger under my chin for half a second—just enough for my pulse to trip. “You disappear on me or if anything happens to either of you, I'll burn that mountain to bedrock, understood?”

Warmth coils low in my belly. “Roger that, Commander Overprotective.”

The wind bites harder the higher we climb, spitting snow as Wren and I veer off the main track and push the snowmobile through a narrow cut in the trees. The snowmobile's engine growls beneath us, the only sound cutting through the mounting wind as we climb. Neither Wren nor I speak; the weight of what we might find ahead presses against us like the rising storm.

We follow a snow-choked service road; old mining records indicate its location, and its path is barely visible under the snowdrifts. Caleb's clipped voice feeds us instructions through the comms, guiding us up switchbacks slick with ice until we reach the smelter's GPS coordinates.

When we finally kill the engine, only the sound of wind through spruce needles remains. We leave the snowmobile behind a tangle of dark branches and unstrap our gear. The smelter hulk rises ahead like a rusted beast, windows gone, roof half-collapsed. My breath curls in the cold air as we slip through a buckled loading door, the faint light from outside catching on rusted metal and casting jagged shadows across the ground.

Inside, the air hits like a slap—sour with old ash, tinged with blood and rot. The stench clings to my throat, thick and metallic. We move fast. I climb the edge of the rusted conveyor platform while Wren braces the ladder. The infrared lens on the trail cam gives one defiant blink—red, then nothing—as it goes dark, programmed to wake at the first hint of movement.

Wren whispers, “Two more.”

We edge into a lateral tunnel choked with rusted ore carts, their metal frames jutting like ribs from a dead beast. The air grows colder, damper, pressing against my lungs with a chill that tastes of mold and blood. Every creak beneath our boots echoes like cannon fire.

Then—voices. Sharp Russian consonants ricochet off the walls, followed by clipped English commands, each syllable tight with command and violence. My pulse stutters. This isn't an empty tunnel. We've walked straight into their den.

“—get tonight's quota staged?—”

“—pilot wants wheels up before white-out?—”

Bile climbs my throat, thick and acidic. They're already here. My hand trembles as I edge the mic closer to my lips, the metal cold against my skin. "Coordinates inbound," I whisper, barely above the surge of panic trying to claw its way out.

Caleb's gravel reply hits my earpiece a breath later: "Copy. Keep moving and get out of there."

I swallow hard, forcing my boots to move, each step echoing in the tunnel like a warning bell. The weight of the voices behind us grows louder in my ears, dread curling sharp and cold beneath my ribs. We're no longer observers—if we're caught, we become prey.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:32 pm*

The second camera goes onto a corroded I-beam. Dim light from a narrow roof slit spills across a row of pelts strung like macabre bunting—wolf, lynx, even a torn bear hide. Drugged? Snared? Mauled by steel traps? It doesn't matter. The sight blurs my vision with rage, each hide hanging like a brutal warning, a grotesque tribute to the merciless slaughter that took place here. My hands curl into fists involuntarily, fingernails biting into my palms, fury thrumming through me with every heartbeat.

Footsteps. Close. My breath catches. Every muscle tightens like a tripwire, heart hammering loud enough to drown out the storm. Wren yanks me behind an ore chute as two men pass—one in pixelated camouflage fatigues, the other wearing Big Pete's outfitter logo like a damn billboard. They unload frozen organs into a cooler, talking about "tonight's chopper" and "Reynolds's cut."

My recorder captures every syllable—the tension in their voices, the stomp of boots on concrete, even the rustling of plastic-wrapped organs. Each sound is another nail in the coffin we're building for them.

We circle back toward the exit, our steps tense and deliberate. A sudden jolt of white-hot pain slices through my ankle, buckling my knee mid-stride. I gasp and pitch forward, barely catching myself. The flashlight jolts from my grip, tumbling end over end down the metal chute—each clack of steel on steel echoing like gunfire in the tunnel's hush. Dread seizes my chest. That sound was not quiet. That sound was a beacon.

"????!" one guard barks.

A rifle clacks.

“Run,” Wren hisses, shoving me toward a side shaft.

We shove through cobwebbed boards into an emergency ore slide—basically a sheet-metal luge coated in decades of grease. We hurtle down it on our backs, boots braced, friction singeing cloth, the shriek of metal echoing around us. Heat builds from the speed, a burn through soaked fabric and adrenaline.

My breath tears free in gasps, vision streaked with tunnel-light and motion blur as the ore slide rattles like it might split apart beneath us. Wind roars inside, then frost-smack—we spill onto a snowy ravine just as a rifle shot cracks overhead.

I gasp, lungs on fire, chest heaving against the weight of panic and effort. The wind howls as snow begins to whip sideways, thick and fast—each flake a needle against exposed skin. The storm wall isn’t just coming—it’s crashing toward us like a freight train through the trees. A perfect cover. Or a perfect trap.

Wren drags me behind a boulder, pops a flare that dumps red smoke. Caleb’s snowmobile engine wails in response from the ridge, a mechanical howl that cuts through the rising storm like a beacon. The sound vibrates through the snowpack beneath us, sparking a burst of adrenaline as we ready ourselves to run. Relief swells in my chest, hot and fierce—he found us. We race the squall and beat it by heartbeats.

Back at the cabin, Wren rigs the cams to a portable monitor. Footage pops on-screen—gray grain. We watch Big Pete lead Reynolds into frame. I recognize him instantly—his face older, scarred from years of violence, but still unmistakable. Caleb showed me his dossier photos, preparing me for this moment.

Now, even through the grainy cam feed, that same cold, calculating smirk etches his face. The image hits like a punch to the gut. No doubt. It’s him. Alive, running this operation, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Big Pete—the local outfitter from Glacier Hollow who Caleb’s always distrusted, now caught in the act. The betrayal

runs deeper than we thought. Reynolds shakes Pete's hand, then gestures to a pallet of sealed crates.

My breath lodges halfway. "Local outfitter. Former SEAL traitor. That's the supply chain."

Caleb's jaw knots; I swear I hear teeth grind. "Now we know where to strike."

I hit the space bar to freeze the frame—Reynolds's grin, Pete's eager eyes, blood on the floor between them.

Tomorrow we slice the head off this beast... if it doesn't swallow us first.

12

CALEB

Snow is still swirling in the lantern light when Bryn freezes the last frame—flakes hissing against the windows, the scent of wood smoke curling through the cabin like a warning—Reynolds, smirking beside Big Pete, blood spattered between their boots. The cabin seems to shrink around the image, every crack in the log walls pulsing with the thud of my heartbeat.

"That's our smoking gun," she whispers.

Her voice is steady, but her hands tremble on the keyboard, fingertips tapping a stuttering rhythm that betrays her nerves. My eyes track the slight quiver, the pale tension in her knuckles, and something splits beneath my ribs. She's trying to hold it together—for both of us—but the fear and adrenaline are still coursing through her, twitching just beneath the surface.



Mine don't shake. They clench. Grief, rage, relief—all of it churns in my gut like ground glass, each shard pressing inward, sharp and relentless. But the only thing I let her see is steel. I reach across her shoulder, fingers brushing the warmth of her collar, and power down the monitor, blacking out Reynolds' smirk. My thumb hovers on the switch half a beat longer than it should, the urge to punch through the screen surging before I master it. Then I slam the laptop shut with a finality that echoes in the small space like a warning shot.

"Enough screen time," I growl. "You almost got ventilated tonight. Sit."

She lifts her chin. "I'll sit when you stop acting like I'm breakable."

My answer is silence and motion. I scoop her off the bench before she can blink. She yelps, fists battering my chest in protest that's mostly for show, and I stride through the cabin to the leather sofa near the hearth. Snow-damp gear scatters in our wake—her parka, my shoulder rig, Wren's med-kit. The storm outside gusts against the shutters, rattling them like warning drums. A log shifts in the fire with a hiss and crack, sending sparks up the flue. Inside, the air simmers with something hotter than the blaze—something primal, unspoken, electric.

I set her on the cushions, kneel, and unlatch her boot. She braces, eyes flashing. "Caleb?—"

"Let me see."

Her ankle is puffy, mottled violet, already ballooning with fresh bruising. When I press my thumb against the tendon, she jerks and hisses through her teeth, shoulders tensing. I don't let up. I need to know the damage. My gaze pins hers. "Pain level."

"Six," she lies.

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“More like eight,” I snort, gripping a roll of elastic wrap, anchoring it above the swelling. “You don’t get to bluff with your body. Not to me.”

She sucks a sharp breath but doesn’t break eye-contact. “And you don’t get to bark orders and expect me to roll over.”

My lips twitch. “Never asked you to roll. Just heel.”

Her bark of laughter slices through the tension. Then my hands smooth the bandage into place, fingers lingering. The second I finish, she captures my wrist. “I’m not made of glass, Caleb. Maybe you should let me prove it.”

I stand, towering over her. “Prove it how?”

Lightning flickers in her blue gaze, like a storm barely held at bay, and for a split second, I see the collar ping—her ankle turning, the leap. The visual snaps into place just before the panic. She digs her good heel into the rug, pushes upright until her chest meets mine. The top of her head brushes my chin, blond hair smelling of snow and smoke. “You’re wound tighter than a trip-wire. So am I. We both looked death in the eye and saw it staring back tonight.” She presses closer, breath grazing my throat. Her voice dips to a low challenge, threaded with heat and daring. “Do something about it.”

A flicker of defiance burns in her eyes—Bryn refusing to back down, even now. That fire... it guts me in the best way, a raw surge through my bloodstream like a jolt of wildfire. It reminds me she's not some fragile thing I have to shield—she's the fight beside me, not the fear behind me.

I don't need a second invitation. I spin her, back against the log wall, hands fisting in her thermal Henley. The fabric strains and pops as two buttons give under my thumb. Her breath stutters, pupils flaring dark, lips parted on a gasp that's half shock, half invitation. Her one boot is still on, gear half-stripped—there's no time to be gentle, no patience for ceremony.

The sharp, bracing scent of pine resin coils through the cabin, tangling with the intoxicating musk rising from her skin—warm, feminine, wild. Firelight crackles and dances across the walls, igniting flickers of gold and bronze in her flushed cheeks. Her body presses against mine, heat searing through every inch where we touch.

I claim her mouth with a hunger I've held at bay too long—her kiss is sweet and feral, threaded with adrenaline and fire, a challenge and surrender all at once. She tastes like survival and sin, like the edge of a cliff I've already jumped. Alive. Wild. Undeniably mine.

I trap her wrists above her head with one hand, pressing them firmly into the rough-hewn logs, my grip unyielding. My other hand drifts down her side, slow and possessive, charting every bruise and every patch of smooth, fevered skin. Her breath shudders out, chest rising to meet me. When my thumb grazes just beneath the swell of her breast, she writhes—not to escape, but to challenge. "Harder," she grits, the word low, rough, soaked in need and defiance. Her eyes blaze like twin infernos, daring me to claim her completely.

My control snaps—not from fury, but from savage, desperate relief. I hitch her good leg around my hip, anchoring her against me, I drive into her with a raw hunger sharpened by fear and longing, each thrust a carved promise etched in sweat and breath: You're safe. You're mine. You came back to me.

As I pound into her, she meets me with fire—nails scoring my shoulders, jaw nipped between her teeth, her hips rising to claim me deeper. The slick heat of her surrounds

me, a living brand that sears through every layer of restraint. Her gasp breaks against my mouth, equal parts demand and surrender, and I swallow it whole. The room contracts to sensation: the blistering sting of scraped wood at her back, the low roar of blood in my ear as we slide to the floor.

Outside, the storm rages—wind battering the shutters like fists, shrieking through the eaves like a warning. Inside, the air hums with heat and hunger, a feral rhythm that drowns out thought. We move in a frenzy of limbs and breath—clothes tangled around thighs, her boot scraping the wall, my fingers digging into the rug like claws trying to anchor us to something real. Her skin is scalding satin beneath my hands, slick with sweat and need. I drag my mouth along her throat, tasting salt and snow, the raw musk of adrenaline clinging to her.

She arches into me with a gasp—sharp and urgent, the kind that starts low in the belly and hums through bone. Her muscles tighten, body singing around mine, and I lose myself in her. The moment breaks over us like a wave—raw, brutal, obliterating. Her cry is muffled by my mouth as I drink her in, my groan vibrating against her throat. Her legs lock around me, one heel hooked behind my thigh as her body pulses in hot, greedy waves. I stay deep inside her, unmoving, holding her through every tremor that ripples from her into me and back again.

Sweat slicks our skin. Her heartbeat thrums wild beneath my lips as I bury my face in her neck, breathing in the salt of her surrender. I don't pull away. I can't. I hold her—chest to chest, heart to heart—while her hands clutch my shoulders, her breath still broken against my throat. She trembles in my arms like the last echo of a storm, the scent of sex and firelight clinging to the air around us.

I murmur something rough and meaningless into her hair, just to hear my own voice, just to anchor us in the now. The storm still rages outside—but inside her arms, the world begins to steady, piece by fragile piece.

Only when her breath steadies—broken gasps softening to small, rhythmic exhalations—do I reach blindly for a blanket and tug it over us, cocooning her against the chill still roiling outside. Her body molds to mine, heat-to-heat, heartbeat-to-heartbeat, and for a moment, the only sound is the soft crackle of firelight and the lingering echo of what we just survived—and claimed.

She presses her cheek to my chest, breath still unsteady. “Tell me why Reynolds wrecks you,” she murmurs. “I need to understand the man I’ve just chained myself to.”

Chains—she has no idea. I inhale once, the pine-smoke air scraping my lungs.

“Reynolds was my responsibility. I brought him into the unit, trusted him with lives that weren’t his to wager. He sold our coordinates before Mosul. We walked straight into an ambush.”

Her breath catches, but she doesn’t pull away.

“Two men died that day,” I continue, voice rough. “One was my best friend. I buried what was left of him in a body bag we had to sew shut with comms wire.” My throat tightens. “At first, I blamed command. Then the truth came out—Reynolds took cartel money. After that, I didn’t know who to blame more—him, or myself.”

Bryn’s arms tighten. “You didn’t pull the trigger.”

“I might as well have.” I cup her jaw, forcing her to see the truth in my eyes—gray, unflinching and storm-laced, daring her to look away. Unblinking. “Tonight confirms he’s alive and still cashing in on blood. I won’t let him vanish again.”

“Then we won’t,” she says, simple as gravity. “We have proof he’s inside the smelter and an outfitter is smuggling bodies for him. We use it.”

“Evidence alone won’t be enough to shut them down.” I sift my fingers through her hair. “We take him alive if possible. He’s leverage. Without him, they regroup. With him in custody, the whole ring collapses.”

Bryn pushes up on her elbows, her ankle braced between us. “He’ll go to ground the moment those tourists are diverted. We have one shot.”

I nod. “First light, Wren plants directional mics. Zeke blocks the highway with a ‘rockslide.’ Nate sets remote charges on the service road. Twenty-four hours from now, Reynolds’ exfil bird lands. We’ll be there—armed, ready, and invisible. No one gets past us this time.”

She studies me, proud fire in her gaze. “You set that countdown, commander. I’ll keep up.”

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A low rumble shakes the cabin—at first, it sounds like distant thunder, a rolling groan buried beneath the storm’s breath. Then comes the sharp crack, like bone snapping under pressure, followed by the hiss of ignited magnesium that scorches the silence. Not thunder. A flare. The acrid tang of burning chemicals threads through the air even before the crimson bloom pulses through the frost-glazed window. Red light washes across the cabin interior, licking the walls in an ominous glow that makes every shadow seem to crawl.

My blood goes ice cold. “Flare on the east perimeter.”

Bryn’s breath catches. “Trip-wire.”

I’m on my feet in a heartbeat, snagging jeans, rifle, radio. “Stay here, keep pressure off that ankle.”

“Not happening.” She grabs a pistol, chambers a round, and gives me a look that dares me to stop her. The click of the slide echoes louder than it should in the charged silence, slicing through the tension like a flare through fog. “Partners, remember?”

I glare, but there’s no time. The outer sensors blink crimson on the control panel—one, two, three. Multiple contacts, circling, closing. A low hum buzzes from the panel, joined by the barely audible crackle of static interference. Somewhere outside, the wind shifts, carrying a faint metallic scent and the faint tread of boots moving over snow. Reynolds’ crew is probing, testing our defenses—they’re not scouts. They’re predators, scenting blood.

I slam my spare mag into place. “Fine. But stay on my six, Bryn. If they want a war,

we'll give them one."

Wind howls as I throw the door wide, the cold slamming into me like a punch to the chest, dragging every ounce of my heat—and hers—into the black. Snow billows in tight spirals, ghosting around the red flare sputtering in the drift, its glow painting the white in blood.

The metallic stench of spent magnesium lingers sharp in my nose, and from beyond the flare's dying light, movement stirs. Shadowed figures ripple through the tree line like wraiths, rifles glinting like fangs under the bone-pale moon.

They came hunting.

I tighten my jaw and step into the snow, boots pressing through the frozen crust with a brittle snap beneath each step. The cold bites at my cheeks, and my breath spills out in pale streams, curling like smoke in the frigid air, vanishing as quickly as it forms.

They may not know it, but they have become the prey, and the predator is on the hunt.

13

BRYN

Snow hisses off the barrel of my pistol as Caleb and I sweep the tree-line one last time. A sharp gust slashes across the clearing, stinging my cheeks and tugging strands of hair from beneath my knit cap. The cold air bites deep, carrying a residual trace of burnt powder—faint, nearly gone, but enough to stir a warning deep in my chest.

My body stays coiled, tension locked in every joint, like a bowstring stretched to the brink. I hold still, muscles trembling from the strain, the wind sliding over me like a



blade. Every instinct screams to move, to strike, but I wait—silent, loaded, deadly. The cabin door creaks behind us—a low groan half-lost in the wind—but it's enough to tether me. My boots press over the hard-packed snow with steady, deliberate steps, each one sharp and alert.

The forest beyond is quiet now. No muzzle flashes split the dark. No blinking threat markers. Just the wind threading through spruce needles and the flare's dying glow collapsing into cinders. The lantern on the porch flickers behind us, casting a pulse across the clearing like the heartbeat of something fierce and waiting.

Headlights crest the rise—Zeke's SUV fishtails, chains grinding. It skids to a stop beside our snowmobiles, engine ticking in the cold. Nate climbs out of the passenger door, shotgun ready, scanning the horizon like the city cop he pretends he isn't. Relief prickles my skin; seeing familiar faces roll up in that SUV, armed and ready, instantly hits like a second wind.

"Perimeter is clear for the moment," Caleb says, voice a granite scrape. He lowers his rifle but doesn't sling it over his shoulder. "See anything on the way up?"

"Just taillights running scared," Zeke answers, popping the hatch. "Left you a calling card—a slug casing with a hand-carved R." He opens the back door and helps Sadie out. She's holding two thermoses of what I hope is coffee and a bakery box big enough to make angels sing.

I holster my gun and limp toward the porch. Pain blooms hot up my calf and my ankle throbs with each step, the ache flaring deep into the bone. I clench my jaw and push forward, knowing I'll pay for it tomorrow, but right now, it's survival—momentum. No time for ice, no space for weakness. Not with another fight coming.

Wren meets me on the steps, knit cap pulled low, a medical bag slung over her

shoulder. Her eyes flick to my bandage, then to Caleb, and back to me—silent question. I give her a shrug that translates *to still attached, still pissed*. She smothers a laugh and ushers me inside, followed by the others.

The cabin's main room feels smaller with five bodies and enough gear for a platoon. Flames roar in the river-rock hearth, casting dancing shadows across the smooth floorboards. Caleb—ever the one thinking three steps ahead—has stacked extra logs within easy reach, a silent promise the heat won't falter tonight.

Sadie thrusts a steaming mug of rich, dark coffee into my hands. The warmth blooms instantly across my fingers, a contrast so jarring it nearly buckles my knees before I even shrug out of my coat. The coffee boasts a deep, rich intensity with bold, smoky undertones and a lingering, bittersweet finish. It punches through my exhaustion, curling up into my sinuses like the warm embrace of something good and familiar. Steam fogs my lashes, clinging like mist to frozen bark, and I wrap both hands around the ceramic, greedily soaking in the heat.

“The café may be closed, but heroes drink free,” she says with a tired smile, pressing a plate of still-warm cheese biscuits into Wren's hands.

The scent wafts up—sharp cheddar and melted butter—and my stomach growls like a threat. I squeeze Sadie's elbow in silent thanks, my throat too tight, too full of everything I can't put into words. Her warmth anchors me, even as the war still simmers just outside the cabin walls.

Nate thumps a stack of ammo boxes onto the kitchen counter, the metal corners clanging against wood. “No more scouts on the road,” he says, looking around the room. “Just a probing party trying to test our perimeter. They didn't stick around long.”

“That won't last,” Caleb mutters, sliding a fresh mag home with a series of precise

clicks that reverberate through the quiet like a countdown. “We hit them harder than they expected. They'll be back—stronger, smarter.”

Wren jerks her chin toward the chair. “Foot up. Now.” Apparently condensing language to its smallest number of words is a family trait.

She doesn't wait for a response—just steers me down like a sheepdog herding a limping lamb. Her fingers work fast, unwrapping the bandage with practiced efficiency and the merciless touch of someone who knows healing hurts. My breath hisses through my teeth as the fabric peels away to reveal angry, purpling skin swollen tight around the joint.

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She mutters something low under her breath—probably not fit for polite company—before repositioning the ice pack and securing it with fresh elastic. A folded blanket slides beneath my heel, elevating it just so. I lean back, biting the inside of my cheek, and Wren gives me a look that says she knows exactly how bad it hurts—and exactly how little she cares about my complaints.

“You limp on that tomorrow,” she warns, “I’ll tranq you and drag you on a sled.”

“Copy that,” I say around a burning grin. Caleb’s eyebrow ticks up—he approves of threats involving tranquilizers. Figures.

Sadie clears the plates with efficient grace, her movements quiet but purposeful. Zeke steps up beside the table, unfolding the Ironvale Smelter blueprints with a crisp snap and spreading them flat, corners anchored by various kitchen utensils that thud against the wood like the opening move of a long-awaited game.

The air shifts—focused, electric—as everyone gathers, shoulders brushing, breaths syncing, the tension in the room spooling tighter with every second. Nate overlays glossy drone photos; Wren boots my laptop, projector cable snaking to the whitewashed wall. GPS data blossoms in neon ribbon trails—wolves in green, moose in blue, collared lynx in furious fuchsia.

Caleb stands behind me, one hand braced on the chair back, gray gaze slicing through layers of data. His presence is weight and warmth—steady.

I highlight the primary game corridor leading straight past Tunnel Three. “Poachers drag carcasses down wildlife paths—fewer human tracks, less chance of patrols. If

we reroute animal interest away from Tunnels One and Four, we can funnel them to Tunnel Three."

Zeke nods. "That's where I can station deputies unseen. One choke point beats four firefights."

"What's your lure?" Nate asks.

"Moose," I answer, grinning.

Wren nods. "I have two spare collar transmitters in storage that a couple of the rangers left up here last season."

"We can drag the decoy carcasses with scent lure—make them smell like actual kills. That should ping the poachers' receivers and draw them in. If the poachers receive a ping, they'll bite."

Wren leans over the blueprint, her braid swaying. "I'll plant a predator-call repeater fifty meters deeper. Keeps them chasing sound."

Caleb's fingers flex on the chair. "We wire this side exit," he says, tapping an annotated service ladder. "Blast the stairs after the last man drops—no retreat."

A hush tightens the room, dense and breathless. We're apex hunters now, coiled around the strike zone like a pack ready to lunge. Every map and mark we lay down is a claw, a fang, a warning. No one speaks, but the fire crackles in the hearth like distant gunfire. Outside, the forest listens—waiting.

The air grows heavy, charged with anticipation, like the thick static before a lightning strike. Floorboards groan beneath shifting weight, a rifle's bolt slams home, and the steady glow from the hearth washes the room in restless, amber light. The moment

breathes like a held pulse, and tomorrow night, only one side walks away.

When plans are mapped, Zeke and Nate load gear back into the SUV and Sadie goes with them, promising to send breakfast at dawn. Caleb latches the door, and suddenly it's just the three of us—me, him, Wren—plus a cabin full of ticking nerves.

I break first. "I can't lose anyone else." The words scrape out of me, tight and raw. "Chris is still out there—maybe forever lost—and that hole already feels like it's swallowing everything."

Wren's expression softens—only a degree, but enough. "We don't know that you've lost Chris, and you won't lose us."

"Promise me," I demand, turning to Caleb, heat prickling my eyes.

He steps closer, rough palm cupping my jaw, thumb tracing my cheekbone. "I promise. No one on this team dies tomorrow, and we'll find out what happened to Chris. But whatever happens, you are no longer alone."

Before I turn, a flash of memory grabs me—Chris, grinning with one arm slung around my shoulders, his hair wild from the wind and his cheeks streaked with dirt from our last backcountry hike together. That smile of his always said trust me, we'll make it. It lives inside me now like a ghost tucked behind my ribs. The ache is sharp, but it steels me. I'll see this through—for him.

Wren clears her throat. "What he said." She squeezes my shoulder—"Sister's vow." For a breath we stand like a three-link chain no blade can cleave.

Boots thud heavily on the porch, wood creaking under each deliberate step. Nate storms back in, shaking snow. "I just got word. The judge finally signed. We've got a federal warrant that's valid for forty-eight hours."

Zeke and Sadie follow him. "That means we have an official seal on our little op," said Zeke with a smile.

Nate nods. "Anchorage tower logged a charter request. Cargo chopper, tail number Sierra-Two-Uniform-Nine. ETA tomorrow twenty-thirty at Ironvale coordinates."

Caleb's slow smile unfurls with lethal intent, like a wolf scenting blood on the wind—calm, quiet, but pulsing with promised violence just beneath the surface.

Wren exhales a single word: "Showtime."

I swallow the last curl of fear, feeling it trail like a smoldering ember down my throat and catch fire in my chest. It sears as it settles, smoldering low and fierce beneath my ribs. The burn doesn't fade—it forges, reshapes, tempers me like steel drawn through flame. It makes me sharper. Harder. Ready to carve through whatever comes next.

Tomorrow, Reynolds will land in our snare. My heart thrums like distant war drums, each pulse syncing to the storm building around us. Wind rattles the windows, the glass humming faintly in its frame, as if the mountain itself braces for what's coming. When it happens, Talon Mountain will breathe again—its freedom carried on wind that doesn't whisper, but roars it to the sky in a cry of primal triumph.

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Wren tugs on her parka and gives me a last glance, something unspoken passing between us. Caleb nods once, and she slips out the door, heading for her snowmobile. The engine coughs to life, headlights cutting through the trees as she disappears into the mountain dark, bound for her remote cabin.

Nate claps Caleb on the shoulder. "We'll sweep the highway, keep Glacier Hollow on alert."

"Sadie is going to run comms from the café," Zeke adds, already moving toward the SUV. "We'll have radio contact every two hours."

They file out, weapons loaded, boots heavy on the porch. The SUV roars to life and vanishes down the ridge, taillights flaring once before the forest swallows them whole.

14

### CALEB

The door shuts behind Zeke's crew with a final echo of engines and fading taillights. Their SUV disappears down the ridge, swallowed by snow-slick pines and moonless dark. A cold wind slithers through the branches, and the distant creak of settling ice echoes like a whispered omen. One heartbeat, two—silence settles like powder on fresh tracks. Bryn stands with her back against the timbers, coffee mug forgotten on the table, blue eyes reflecting hearth-fire and nerves she refuses to show.

I cross the room, palm bracing the log wall beside her head. "Five hours until first



light,” I murmur. “Grab what sleep you can.”

She tips her chin, stubborn. “You’ll take the same advice?”

“Soon as I finish rechecking our kit.”

A quick nod—then she pushes onto her toes and kisses the corner of my mouth, heat sparking through the chill clinging to our clothes. “Wake me at zero-three-hundred.”

“Count on it.”

Pre-dawn bleeds pearl-gray across the peak of Talon Mountain. Bryn and Wren roar away on a snowmobile before the sun crests—narrow taillights threading a switchback of ice and shadow. Their snowmobile tows a sled with sealed dry-boxes packed with scent-lure, transmitter collars, and motion-trigger cams.

I watch until the last flicker of red vanishes, then sling my rucksack over my shoulder and trek north along the ridgeline, breaking trail through crusted drifts that crackle under my weight. The wind knifes across my cheeks, but I welcome the sting—it grounds me. Each step sinks into the packed snow with a brittle snap and frozen pine needles, sharp and sure.

I think of the two people I love and trust most in this world: my sister, Wren—my compass since we were kids—and Bryn, the storm I didn’t see coming but now can’t imagine living without. That second name still catches me off guard, not because I doubt it, but because loving her feels like it rewired something deep in me. I love her. Somehow, between firefights and fleeting silences, she slipped under my defenses and anchored herself there. Now I carry that truth like armor, forged not from guilt or duty, but from something harder—hope.

One kilometer east of the smelter ruins I find the first vantage—a granite spur

overlooking Tunnel Three. Frost-coated spruce branches veil the ledge; I prune only what I must, keeping my silhouette swallowed by shadow. Twenty meters back, Zeke and Nate rig a claymore bracket to a dead stump, angled toward the exit ladder. They work quietly, gloved fingers sure. We exchange nods—no talk needed.

By noon, Nate's crouched in the main shaft splice, drilling holes with an old-fashioned hand drill for shaped charges. His breath ghosts in front of him; sweat ices on his temples. "Two detonators," he mutters. "Primary and fail-safe."

"Good," I answer. "Give me the trigger remote when you head out."

He snaps the hard case shut. "Planning to stay inside?"

"I'll be topside—helipad."

Nate's brow lifts. "That's lone-wolf even for you, Knox."

"Better me than anyone else."

He studies my face for a beat longer, jaw tight with unspoken understanding, then silently passes the remote. In our world, respect isn't verbal—it's earned in scars, grit, and the willingness to shoulder the danger so someone else doesn't have to.

Mid-afternoon, clouds crawl all the way up from the harbor, gray and heavy. Bryn's voice crackles over comms: "Decoys planted—Trail Seven. Cameras up, signal steady. Heading to repeater drop."

"Copy," I reply.

She speaks in a focused, professional tone, but I hear fatigue beneath it. Ten minutes later Wren checks in—"Repeater anchored, transmitter humming."

They swing wide and angle back toward the cabin by 1600, snowmobile runners spraying powder as they crest the ridge. Frost streaks Bryn's parka; her ankle wrap is dark with melted ice and grit, but her smile is feral—mission bloodhound and proud of it.

We hunker inside for the final briefing. I unroll terrain sheets across the table; the corners curling slightly from stored creases. The edge of my glove brushes over the worn grid lines as I press them flat. My thoughts flick briefly to Wren, and to Bryn—two people I never expected to be my reason for fighting this hard.

Loving Bryn snuck up on me. I didn't plan for her, but now the thought of losing her is like ice in my veins. I push the emotion down and anchor myself in the task. Bryn overlays liveGPS feed from the moose collars; green dots shimmer, migrating exactly where we need them. Wren toggles a view and a red grid blooms: sensors along Tunnel Three pulse bright with each collar ping.

Zeke double-checks our coordinated placements on the map, then slaps the table. "That's our kill box."

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Sadie's voice crackles over the handheld: "The town seems to be clear. Sheriff station ready on standby. Breakfast promised if you bring Reynolds in alive." She tries to sound light. I can hear prayer in the crackle.

"Appreciate it," Bryn tells her. "We'll see you at dawn."

I glance at Bryn's ankle. She's leaning on the table to take weight off it, pretending she isn't. "Stick close to Wren in the control snowmobile," I order. "You're the eyes tonight, not the spear."

Blue eyes slit. "Yes, commander."

I quell a grin. "Don't test me, biologist."

Full dark drops at 18:14. A new-moon sky—black as wet obsidian—hides everything but the stutter of our infrared beacons: small devices that emit invisible light, seen only through night vision goggles or thermal scopes. The temperature dives—my breath hits the cold air and freezes instantly, crusting delicate frost along the wool balaclava.

But the man I've come all this way to find isn't just reclusive—he's a glacier in flannel. Hard-edged, ancient, and unmoved by time or reason. Not the kind of cold that stings and fades, but the kind that clamps down slow and merciless, creeping into your bones until everything soft inside you freezes solid.

At just past seven, a sharp double-ping crackles through my earpiece at the helipad—Bryn's voice follows a beat later, clipped and steady. "Moose Collar Alpha

just triggered the carcass receiver.”

That’s our bait. Good.

Two minutes crawl by.

“Contact,” she whispers again, quieter now. “Three targets entering the main shaft. Heavy packs.”

Her words tighten as she speaks, adrenaline cutting through her usually calm tone. I can’t see what she’s looking at, but I don’t need to. I hear it in her voice—the tension, the certainty. Whoever just crossed into Tunnel Three isn’t out for a hike. They’re coming loaded and ready. Predators, moving through the dark.

“Stand by,” Zeke answers from the west ridge. Volunteers from neighboring towns ghost forward, snow camouflage blending into drifts, rifles held low but ready, eyes sharp and scanning the dark for movement. Their footsteps are nearly silent, disciplined, each footfall a calculated glide rather than a stomp, keeping the element of surprise intact. A few adjust their grips, fingers curling around triggers with a readiness honed by long nights and harder training.

Zeke and Nate had taken extra care in whom they brought in to keep Pete in the dark.

Another pulse—five more signals. Then voices. Clipped Russian, rapid English. Foot soldiers. Perfect.

“Tunnel exit clear,” Nate breathes. “Charges primed.”

“Hold,” I reply.

My post is the helipad: a cracked concrete circle behind the smelter, half buried under

a drift. I crouch behind a rusted forklift, night-vision goggles painting the world in eerie greens. Wind keens through broken scaffold—no rotor wash yet.

Inside the shaft, muffled scuffle, a curse. Bryn feeds updates: positions, numbers, weapon shapes on thermal. Her voice is calm, anchor-steady. Makes my pulse hammer with wicked pride.

Zeke strikes first—flashbangs thunder. The volunteers with him swarm. Shots crack, short and controlled. In less than ninety seconds: “Tunnel secure. Six in cuffs.”

A rotor thump rolls over the ridge—the deep thunder of a heavy lift chopper. I step from cover, but remain in the shadows, automatic rifle raised. Helicopter belly lights sweep the pad once, twice, then settle. Side door slides open; Reynolds drops to the ground, parka hood up, satellite phone clenched in gloved fist. Two riflemen fan out.

I train my rifle on him as I step forward into the landing lights. “Long time, Reynolds.”

He freezes, recognizing my voice even before the goggles. “Knox.” His laugh is all gravel. “Should’ve guessed you’d crawl out of your hole.”

“Didn’t crawl. I tracked.”

He waves his men aside and draws a combat blade. “Let’s finish this.”

Before I can react, before anything is decided, Reynolds’ men turn and run. I guess money doesn’t buy loyalty anymore. We can catch up with them later. For now, I need to deal with Reynolds—that poor bastard always did believe his skills were greater than they actually were.

For a split second, a memory flares—Mosul, the dust and the chaos, and the betrayal

that left two of my brothers bleeding out in the sand while Reynolds vanished like a ghost. That betrayal carved itself into my bones. Not this time.

I sling the rifle across my back and unsheathe my blade, its polished steel catching the harsh floodlight's glint, casting fleeting, sharp reflections that dance menacingly along its edge. The cold air is a razor slicing into my lungs with each breath, as sharp and biting as the weapon I grip with white-knuckled intensity. We circle each other with deadly intent, our boots dragging ominously through the whispering snow, leaving chaotic patterns on the once-pristine ground.

Reynolds lunges with a clumsy, telegraphed feint to the left, his movements awkward and desperate. I sidestep with lethal precision, parrying his attempt, and drive my elbow into his throat with bone-jarring force that reverberates through my body like a shockwave. He staggers back, coughing violently, his blade flailing in wild desperation. It slices across my bicep, a shallow sting that ignites every nerve in my body, more insulting than injurious yet electrifying.

I pivot with ferocious speed, hooking his wrist with a practiced, savage motion, twisting it with a vicious snap. The sickening pop of tendon and knuckle echoes through the frigid air like a morbid symphony. His blade slips from his grip, clattering uselessly into the snow with a dull, defeated thud.

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Wasting no time, I drive a knee into his gut with brutal, unyielding force, folding him over with a guttural wheeze of agony. A forceful shoulder check sends him sprawling, his body crashing face-first into the snowdrift with a violent impact. Before he can reclaim his senses, I'm on him, my knee grinding into his spine, and with ruthless efficiency, the cable ties snap around his wrists, locking him inescapably in place.

He thrashes once, a futile, instinctive effort, then goes still, his breath heaving clouds of steam into the frigid night air. The wind howls ferociously around us, a haunting, enraged symphony of nature's wrath, but it's nothing compared to the hurricane of adrenaline still roaring in my veins, a relentless, deafening storm that refuses to be silenced.

Bryn's voice in my ear: "Big Pete exiting Tunnel Two—east side."

"Copy." I drag Reynolds to a forklift strut and lash him there.

Pete stumbles into view—camo parka, hauling a duffel. He spots me, grabs for a weapon—then drops like a tree. Not from my shot. Nate stands behind him, tranquilizer rifle lowered.

I cuff him beside his boss. Rotor wash kicks snow in spirals as federal marshals rappel from the hovering bird. They take charge of Pete and the other prisoners as Zeke's crew march them from the tunnel.

Bryn and Wren arrive on the snowmobile, skidding to a halt; Bryn's grin is ice-bright.



Zeke cuffs Reynolds, reads him the charges. He sneers at me, lip split. "Could've joined me, Knox."

"Rather eat glass."

They haul him into the bird. The chopper lifts. Bryn steps beside me. We watch till the lights fade.

Minimal casualties. Talon Mountain is quiet again.

We stumble into the cabin just after midnight, our bodies weary and grime-covered, reeking of sweat mingled with the heady scent of triumph.

The fire crackles energetically, its warm glow casting flickering shadows on the walls; an enormous copper tub sits invitingly in front of the hearth, steaming with water that is scalding hot, the steam curling into the air like wisps of a ghost. Bryn's breath catches in her throat, a mix of surprise and relief washing over her.

"Looks inviting," she murmurs. "But how did it get here?"

"My guess? Wren. Now, strip," I order, voice raw as gravel. "You're freezing."

Boots, pants, parka hit the floor. I divest her of thermals, careful around the ankle brace. She stands naked in firelight, mud streaking her thighs, hair wild. My pulse trips. I peel off my own layers, muscles protesting every motion, and step into the tub, water lapping my ribs. With a grunt, I lift her and slowly lower her between my spread thighs. She gasps as the hot water envelops her body.

I wash her methodically, but nothing about it feels clinical. The washcloth trails over her shoulders, slick with soap, gliding down the smooth slope of her spine before curling around to follow the curve of her ribs. Her skin rises with goosebumps, heat

blooming beneath my fingertips as steam rises around us in lazy, curling tendrils. I drag the cloth down her legs, kneeling to run it across her thighs and over her scraped knees.

Mud and grit dissolve into the water, turning it cloudy, but I don't stop. Her breath hitches as I reach the sensitive backs of her calves, and her fingers spread across my chest—firm, seeking, the scrape of her nails catching the shallow cut on my bicep. The sting barely registers over the sear of her touch. Every brush of skin, every slick pass of the cloth, is deliberate. She moves beneath the water, cleansing skin and memory, while I claim her all over again—every inch, every breath, steeped in heat, wood smoke, and want.

"You're bleeding."

"Not important." I capture her wrist and tenderly kiss the pulse there.

She bites her lip, eyes darkening. "Caleb..."

I rise with her cradled against me, her slick body molding to mine, water cascading from us in hot rivulets. She clings to my shoulders, shivering from cold and something deeper, her breath damp against my throat. I cross to the hearth, muscletightening under her weight and need, and lower her onto the thick fur spread before the fire. The flames kiss her skin with light and shadow, every curve gleaming like a sculpture.

I reach for a towel and begin drying her slowly, reverently—each stroke an invocation. Over her collarbone. Down the dip of her waist. Between her thighs. Her breath deepens, her legs part slightly, inviting more. I take my time, letting the rough nap of the towel catch the moisture, then my hand replaces it—bare skin on skin. I'm tending to her—pulling us both back to solid ground. This isn't about rush or frenzy—it's the calm between storms, the ritual after fire. She looks up at me, eyes

heavy with heat and trust, and I know: everything that matters is right here in front of me.

"Shh." I whisper against her skin. She wobbles as the firelight paints her skin molten gold. I towel her off—slow, possessive strokes—until she's trembling.

Bryn's knees hit the floor, her eyes locked onto my fully erect member, a predatory glint in her gaze. As she inches closer, her hand tenderly reaches out, fingers sliding along the inside of my thigh until they find their target. She wraps her fingers around the base, and I can feel the warmth radiating from her palm.

Her pink lips part, revealing her soft tongue that flicks out to tease the sensitive tip. My body shudders with anticipation. Bryn's mouth opens further, and she takes me in slowly, inch by inch. As her head descends upon me, I can see my pulsing length disappearing between those luscious lips.

The sensation of her warm, wet mouth enveloping me sends electricity coursing through my veins. With each bob of her head, I'm drawn deeper into her throat while her tongue works miracles alongside her agile cheeks. Unable to resist, my hand instinctively reaches for her hair, gripping firmly without causing discomfort.

Bryn's blue eyes look up at me from beneath long lashes even as she devotes herself to pleasuring me. The sight of it only amplifies the sensations that threaten to overwhelm me. My jaw clenches tight with each flick and swirl of her talented tongue.

I can feel the mounting pressure deep within, signaling that our erotic dance is nearing its crescendo. Sensing this, Bryn increases her pace and intensity, determined to coax every last ripple of pleasure from our intimate encounter. Our connection grows more intense as we share this raw moment in time until stars begin to gather at the periphery of my vision, heralding an exquisite release that looms just beyond

reach.

"Enough," I growl, hauling her up. She moans her disappointment—a rasp of need—then gasps when I lay her on the bed, ankle cushioned by pillows. I take a moment to admire her spread before me—every curve, every inch of glistening skin begging to be touched.

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I glide my fingers down her body until they slip between her thighs, finding the slick heat that craves my attention. She moans and arches her back as I tease and stroke her most intimate flesh. Then, with a breathless sigh, I position myself at her entrance and press inside her in one slick thrust. Bryn's body arches off the bed, a cry escaping her lips as she adjusts to the fullness within her.

I begin to move, our bodies locked in a raw, primal rhythm that blurs the line between lust and love. Her thighs tighten around my hips, heels digging into my lower back, urging me deeper with every powerful thrust. The air between us pulses with heat, with the slick slide of skin on skin, the low moan that slips from her throat when I grind against the sweet spot inside her.

Her gaze locks with mine—stormy, daring, so damn alive—and it dares me to hold anything back. I don't. I drive into her with aching hunger, our connection a wildfire, consuming everything but this moment.

We climb hard and fast together—battle hunger transformed into raw devotion—our bodies moving in perfect synchronicity until we both shatter into ecstasy, trembling and gasping for air. I collapse beside her and pull her into my chest, hearts drumming in frantic unison.

"I love you," she whispers, voice wrecked.

My throat tightens. "I know." I kiss her temple. "I love you too."

Nate's voice crackles over the radio: "Reynolds was small fish. Meet at Zeke's at 0600. Round two's coming."

Bryn stiffens beside me, her eyes blazing with a mix of adrenaline and fury. “Round two?” Her voice is sharp, disbelieving.

I nod slowly, my expression turning grim. “Round two.” I glance out the cabin window where the darkness presses thick against the glass. “There’s always a round two.”

15

BRYN

The radio is still hissing when dawn presses thin blue light through the cabin windows, the cold air curling in through the seams like a whispered warning. Caleb’s arm lies heavy across my ribs—possessive even in sleep. I ease out from under him. The wood of the floor creaks softly beneath my foot as I shift, the chill nipping at my toes through the worn boards. Hearing the sound, his eyes snap open. Predator reflex. Lover reflex. Both.

“0600,” he rasps, voice gravel-deep. “Sheriff’s office in forty.”

I stretch, wincing when stiff muscles protest last night’s... activities. The bath, the fire, the things he did with that towel—every inch of me knows exactly how completely I’m his. And I’m absurdly okay with that.

Caleb pulls on fatigues, straps a sidearm to his thigh, and laces my boots before dealing with his own. Dominant, infuriating, sweet. I kiss the top of his head while he ties the last knot. “I can lace my own, caveman.”

“One, you like it,” he murmurs, standing. “Two, you limp less when I tighten them.”

I hate how correct he is.

The sheriff's office smells like over-brewed coffee and wet wool. Zeke lounges against a filing cabinet, Sadie perched on his desk passing out hand-thrown ceramic mugs. Wren sits cross-legged on one of the other desks, ledgers and seized tablets spread around her like a forensic campfire, her eyebrows drawn tight in focused concentration.

There's a determined glint in her eye, the kind that says she's closing in on something big, and the curve of her mouth hints at a satisfaction she's not ready to voice just yet. Nate hovers behind her chair—broad shoulders, protective as a grizzly—glancing down every few seconds with an expression halfway between pride and wanting to eat her alive.

Wren flips another ledger, braid swishing and almost hitting Nate in the face.

“I've found four shell corporations. It's the same handwriting in every log: weight of contraband, payout columns, a weird cipher.” She stabs a line of neat, aggressive digits. “Numbers match accounts Reynolds used to charter the cargo chopper.”

Nate grins, claps a mammoth hand on her shoulder. “You just secured my next promotion.”

Wren arches an eyebrow. “And your next wilderness-survival lesson. You almost broke your neck yesterday.”

He leans closer, unashamed. “Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. And it's a price I'm happy to pay. Next session, I'll bring marshmallows, chocolate and graham crackers.”

Their flirtation crackles hotter than Zeke's woodstove. Caleb clears his throat—low, commanding—and the room falls into orbit around him. It's fun to watch him watch his little sister and Nate. Part of the time he seems to enjoy egging one or both of them

on, then he growls at Nate if he gets too close.

Caleb rolls out a fresh map Nate brought from Anchorage: an updated grid of Talon Mountain and the surrounding area, dotted with new search sectors.

“The smuggling/poaching ring is done,” Caleb says, tapping the map. “The feds will mop up the rest of this group. That should free up some of the search and rescue teams.” He meets my gaze, eyes softening almost imperceptibly. “After the Spring thaw, we can expand the grid for Chris. Thirty-kilometer radius west of Trail Seven.”

Gratitude slams into me like an avalanche, sharp and overwhelming. For a year, every knock ended in rejection, every lead a dead end. But now, the most lethal man on this mountain—my man—is making my brother his first mission. The force of it steals my breath. I nod once—military crisp—because if I try to say anything, the tears will come fast and loud and unstoppable.

Zeke passes the ledger stack to Caleb, the worn covers creaking slightly in protest. “Feds want these by courier—evidence chain and all—but Wren already digitized everything and uploaded it to the secure server. Paper trail’s just for show now.”

Sadie slides a fresh mug into my hands. “Drink,” she orders. “You’re white as the snow you hate.”



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“I don’t hate snow,” I mutter. “I hate losing people in it.”

Caleb’s free hand claims the nape of my neck, thumb rubbing slow circles. “You haven’t. You won’t. We’ll find him.”

He doesn’t add ‘one way or another’ or ‘alive or dead,’ but I know it’s what we’re all thinking. But until I have evidence otherwise, I am going to choose to believe I will see my brother again... alive.

The debrief wraps by mid-morning. Outside, sunlight glitters on the ridge like spilled diamonds, the kind that shimmer deceptively before a storm. My boots slip slightly on the frosted steps, and Caleb’s warm hand closes more firmly around my elbow, steadying me with effortless strength. The cold bites through my jeans as a gust cuts sideways across the lot. Halfway down, he stops abruptly, pivoting me toward him until the jagged white peaks rise behind him like a crown. His gaze doesn’t waver.

“Stay,” he says. One word, heavy as bedrock. “Winter’s half over. Come spring, we can build a research base here for you. Hell, we’ll build ten. I’ll keep the poachers away.”

I laugh and realize how very much I love this man. “You offering personal bodyguard rates?”

“Offering my life,” he answers, grey eyes knife-bright. Then he actually drops to one knee, snow dampening fatigue, and my breath exits in a full-body gasp.

He pulls a stunning platinum band with a diamond surrounded by sapphires from his

breast pocket.

"Holy shit," gasps Wren.

The ring catches the sunlight, flashing fire like a glacier under dawn. "Bryn Calder, marry me. Be here, be everywhere with me. I'll argue, I'll protect, I'll carry your gear and kiss you silent when you start lecturing wolves. Say yes."

The world tilts, snow-glare haloing him. I barely manage a whisper: "Yes, Caleb Knox. A thousand times yes."

He slides the ring onto my finger with a reverence that sends a pulse straight through my core; it fits like destiny, like my hand has known its weight forever.

He stands and gathers me into his arms, the rough plane of his chest pressing into mine. His mouth finds mine in a kiss that starts slow—an exploration, a promise—and deepens with every passing second. His tongue teases, tasting me, claiming me with a heat that floods my skin. One hand anchors at the small of my back while the other tangles in my hair, pulling me tighter, closer, until there's no space left between us, only the thunder of shared breath and the seismic shift of two lives fusing into one.

Sadie's whoop shatters the moment. She's standing next to Zeke, staring at him pointedly.

Nate's booming laugh rings out. "It's about damn time!"

The café smells of cinnamon, spruce, and the lingering scent of fried hash browns—the kind of grease that clings to flannel and triumph alike. Zeke taps a spoon against his coffee mug. "Official toast: To new fiancées, retired warlords, and poaching rings ground to dust."

Glasses clink. Sadie slides an oversized cinnamon roll in front of me—heart-shaped, because she’s ridiculous—and kisses my cheek. “Bet you’ll name your first kid Moose.”

“Only if Caleb vetoes Lynx,” I shoot back.

Laughter ripples. Nate lifts a folder marked Wildlife Protection Division. “Got offered a promotion—a permanent slot coordinating statewide anti-poaching ops.”

Wren grins, pressing her spare compass into his palm. “You’ll need this. And maybe a flare gun.”

He pockets the compass like a wedding token. “Deal. First training hike, you lead.”

Caleb’s eyebrow climbs. “No one dies on her shift, Nate.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips. Seeing Nate so transparently into her—Wren, my fierce, brilliant friend and soon-to-be sister-in-law—hits me somewhere warm and rare. For once, it feels like the right people are finally in the right places.

“Scout’s honor,” Nate replies, though everyone here has questionable scouting credentials.

Late evening finds us on Caleb’s snowmobile, engine thrumming like a heartbeat beneath us as we climb the darkening spine of Talon Ridge. He rides in front, broad back shielding me from the wind, while I sit behind, arms snug under his coat, fingers splayed over the steady drum of his heart. The bite of cold air scours our cheeks, the scent of pine sharp in every breath. Below, the valley sprawls quiet and endless, each treetop frosted silver and glinting beneath the slow rise of the moon.

At the summit, he kills the engine. Silence opens around us—vast and reverent, like the hush before a sacred vow. We step off, snow whispering beneath our boots, brittle

and dry in the freezing air. The wind cuts across my cheek like a blade of ice, stinging sharply. The air is so cold it tastes of iron and ozone, like breathing in the mountain's breath itself.

Then—motion above: ribbons of green shimmer across the sky, rippling like wind through tall grass before bleeding into violet, then pulsing with electric-white brilliance. The aurora stretches like a living crown over the valley Caleb's sworn to protect, dancing with ghost-light and cosmic fire. My chest swells, tight with wonder and awe, the beauty of it crashing into me like a wave I never saw coming.

He slides an arm around my shoulders, tugging me close against the steady wall of his body. The warmth of his side seeps into me, chasing away the sting of wind on my cheeks. Steam rises from our mingled breath, curling upward like smoke signals dissolving into the aurora overhead—fleeting, intimate, ours.

I rest my head against him, ring glinting Northern-Light green. "We made it," I whisper.

Caleb kisses the top of my hair, voice a low vow. "We'll make everything that comes next."

Below us, Glacier Hollow glimmers—tiny, safe. The sight tugs something deep inside me loose. For a year, every horizon held dread. Now, it looks like promise. I flash on Chris's lopsided grin, the way he used to call me "professor" when I rattled off animal facts, and the way he always knew when I needed a laugh. He's still out there, somewhere. And I'll find him. Not because I owe it to the past—but because I finally believe in a future. Behind us, Nate and Wren begin charting their own course down the mountain. Ahead of us, endless sky. I take a slow breath, letting the cold carve away what's past and fill my lungs with what could be.

Whatever tomorrow brings, the mountain finally feels like home.