



Saved

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Category: Romance, Suspense

Description: He rescued her from the storm,
But who will save her from him?
When a freak accident in the wilderness claims Erin's friends,
She's thankful for her brooding tour guide, Eli,
Especially when a sudden snow storm hits the forest.
Forced to take shelter with him in an abandoned cabin,
Erin succumbs to the visceral energy growing between them,
Relishing the way he takes control.
But she's bitten off more than she can chew with Eli.
Her protector isn't a hero.
He's really the villain.

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Chapter One

Introductions

Erin

“ARE YOU SERIOUS ABOUTthis?”

Peering up at the forest-laden and steep terrain ahead, my eyes widened. The wildlife park had looked glossy enough on the website, but standing at the start of the trail, I wasn't sure I was capable of overcoming it.

“It looks intense.”

“Oh, come on!” James thrust his fist into the air as though he'd already conquered the challenge. “Stop whining, Erin. This will be fun!”

“Fun?” James clearly had a different idea of a good time to me.

“Excuse him.” Chelle perched on the upturned log beside me. “James is just excited.”

“He's like a dog with a new toy.” I glanced her way. “How do you put up with him?”

Chelle had been dating James for six months, and their adventurous hikes had been a feature of the budding relationship. I, on the other hand, was single and preferred the

treadmill to a trek through the forest, but she was my best friend, and she'd begged me to join her. The fact James had brought his pal, Miles, wasn't lost on me, either. Chelle had been trying to set me up with a long list of his friends for weeks. Miles was the latest offering.

"I don't know." Her lips tugged. "I find his enthusiasm alluring, and I like his upbeat and 'can-do' attitude. It's infectious!"

"Yeah, like the plague..." I shielded my eyes from the sun as she rose and strode toward her lover, fighting the tinge of envy simmering within me.

It had been a long time since I'd been in love, and looking back, I was sure that rush of emotion had only been a surge of rampaging hormones. Staring at Chelle and James together, though, I could see how happy she was. No matter how much he grated on me, he must have been doing something right. She and I had been friends for years and I'd never known her so content.

"Ready for this?" A shadow broke the intensity of the early morning sun, and looking up, I realized Miles was responsible for the reprieve.

"I don't know," I admitted. "It looks even bigger than it did online."

I considered offering him a smile but decided against it. I was sure he was a decent guy, but if he was there under the pretense of romance, he'd be sadly disappointed. I wasn't in the market for a man, and even if I was, the last thing I wanted was to be match-made. Being forced into proximity with him for the next few hours was going to be bad enough.

"I'm sure you're fit enough to manage the incline." His lips twitched as though he was tendering a compliment, but his words only jarred.

Was he trying to imply that I wasn't fit enough?

Charming!

Any chance of 'getting to know me better'—which had already been slim—evaporated in that instant.

"Yes, I'm certain I'll be fine." Rising to my feet, I put space between us. "Thanks for your concern."

"I... didn't mean it like that." Miles's brow furrowed as though I'd hurt his feelings. "I was just saying..."

"I said, come on!" James's holler broke the frosty ambiance. "We have to meet the guide in five minutes."

"I don't even know why we have a guide," Miles mumbled. "We're perfectly capable of getting through the trees and to the top."

"It's for safety, Miles." Chelle reached down to grab for her backpack. Like the other three, the bag looked fit to burst with equipment. "James thinks of everything."

"Yeah, right." Miles glanced my way as though he was expecting me to support his droll tone, but for once, I agreed with James.

"The guide is a good call." Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I walked away from Miles. "Someone who knows the territory will help us."

"Bravo, Erin!" James clapped his hands together, his patronizing tone escalating my waning mood. I was only there to support Chelle, but increasingly, the idea of running back to my car looked like a great one. "He's waiting for us at the bridge."

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“Fine.” I trudged past James, attempting to ignore his smug expression. “Where’s that?”

“Up ahead.” James gestured with his head. “You girls go on and I’ll hurry Miles along.”

“Did he just call us girls?” I scowled as Chelle hurried to join me.

“He’s being affectionate, Erin.” She adjusted the straps of the bulging backpack on her shoulders as we walked. “Don’t be so down on him. I really like him, you know.”

“Yeah.” A twinge of guilt twisted in my tummy. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so negative... I just don’t think I’m ready for another relationship yet.”

“Yet?” Chelle snorted. “Girl, it’s been years since you and Ray broke up. Are you ever going to be ready?”

Bristling at her judgment, I glanced out at the upcoming challenge. I wasn’t enthralled at the prospect, but perhaps it would be better than having this conversation with Chelle again.

She’d been trying to woo me into a new relationship long before she’d met James. Chelle seemed to think the root of all happiness in life was coupling up.

“Maybe, maybe not.” I sighed. “I don’t need a man to have a good life, Chelle. But I’m glad you’ve found James.”

“Hmmm.” She sounded skeptical. “If you say so, but thank you. I think I’m in love with him.”

“That’s great.” I suppressed the desire to roll my eyes.

In love with him?

Chelle hadn’t even lived with James yet. What could she know about anyone until she’d been shoehorned into a small space with them? I was willing to bet that reality would take the shine off James’s luster.

“Have you told him how you feel?” Looking her way, I hoped she hadn’t heard anything disingenuous in my tone, but her smile suggested otherwise.

I wanted to be honest with my friend, wanted to share my concerns about James’s obnoxious attitude, but trekking through the wilds of nature hardly seemed like the best moment for my full and frank confession.

I was pleased he made her happy, but his constant need to condescend and bark orders worried me. If he behaved that way in public in the early stages of their romance, what might he say or do behind closed doors after a few years? Chelle was a sensitive soul, and she merited a man who respected her gentle nature. I only hoped James could be that man.

“Not yet.” Excitement brimmed in her eyes as they met mine. “But I’m planning to.” She signaled up ahead. “Maybe when we near the summit.”

“Ladies.”

The gruff tone of an unknown male captured my attention, and glancing from Chelle, I laid eyes on its owner. Dark-haired and with piercing gray eyes, his stubble-covered

chin made it look as if he hadn't seen the inside of a bathroom for years, but there was no denying his attractiveness. Clad in weatherproof layers, his body looked large and strong, and as he folded his arms across his chest, I couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to have those limbs wrapped around me.

"Are you our guide?" I moved toward him, scanning his features a second time.

His dark stare and hard jawline piqued my interest and made me wonder if Chelle had been right all along—it had been too long since I got laid.

"I am." He cast a dismissive gaze over me. "And you are?"

"Chelle." Pushing past me, Chelle thrust her hand in his direction. "And this is Erin."

Thanks, Chelle. I glowered in my friend's direction. I can introduce myself.

"It's a pleasure." His rising brow conveyed anything but pleasure as he grasped her palm.

"Will there be anyone else joining us?" His gaze looked past us. "I was under the impression there would be four of you today."

"My boyfriend, James, is on his way." Chelle sounded giddy as she communicated their relationship.

"There are four of us," I confirmed, leaning against the bridge as I contemplated how best to manage Chelle.

We needed to have that frank conversation sooner rather than later. Much more of her gushing frivolity was not only going to make me ill, but it could very well lead her to danger. A landscape like the one we were about to encounter required her full

attention, but drooling over James meant I doubted she'd invest more than fifty percent.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.” The dulcet-toned guide motioned toward me.

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“Do what?” I met his gaze, conscious again of what an unusual color his eyes were. Hazel flecks swam in his gray irises, the hues swirling as he went on.

“Lean against the bridge.” He took a step closer. “The wood is old and molding. Only a little pressure could see it could give way, and I’d hate to see you at the bottom of the trench.”

Straightening at his warning, I spun to take in the drop he was referring to, the pit of my stomach falling away as I imagined just how far I could have fallen.

“Okay.” Darting away from the wooden barrier, I sounded as flustered as I felt. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” The gravelly resonance of his tone seemed to travel through me. “My role today is to keep you safe.”

“Right.” I sensed heat crawling from my jaw to my cheeks, though I wasn’t sure why I was embarrassed. Perhaps the close shave with danger had inspired it, or maybe it was down to the mysterious guide. Turning away from the intensity of his gaze, I met Chelle’s bemused expression. “Thank you.”

“You were right, Erin.” Chelle’s smirk suggested she thought she knew the reason for my growing blush. “Getting a guide was a good call.”

“There you are!” Apparently eager to introduce himself, James stalked past me, with Miles on his heels. Peering out at the green canopy of trees all around us, I’d never been happier to see him. “I’m James—the one who emailed you.”

“Of course you are,” the as yet unnamed guide replied. “Good to meet you.”

“Same here.” James grinned. “Shall we get going?”

“Wait,” Miles countered. “We still don’t even know our guide’s name.”

I held my breath as all four of us stared at the dark stranger. For some preposterous reason, finding out his name seemed unreasonably significant, as though my future happiness hinged on the answer.

“I’m Eli.” His smile was knowing. “And for the next few hours, none of you will be leaving my side.”

Chapter Two

Serious Business

Eli

JUST LIKE EVERY GROUP of city-dwelling, pampered little darlings who had come before them, the four of them gawped at me. Pulling in a breath, I surveyed the group with my normal level of disinterest. Parties like the one standing before me were always the same. Bordering on middle-age, they were usually demoralizingly unfit, and at least one of them would be on the brink of a personal crisis. That was what the hike into the wilderness was all about, finding themselves, although even after all the years I’d been taking them out into the woods, I still had no idea what that meant.

“What do you mean, we won’t be leaving your side?” James, the one who’d been

badgering me with messages for days, edged closer. “We’ve paid you to be our guide, not a dictator.”

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“Let me be clear.” My smile was forced, but I doubted he was smart enough to notice.

I’d been dealing with annoying little pricks like James—men who thought the contents of their wallets abdicated them from personal responsibility—for too long. I knew their types and the hazards their egos could muster in the wilderness if left unchecked.

“If you want me to be in charge of your health and safety, then you follow my rules. That’s how I keep you alive.”

“I understand.” James’s chin rose. “But we wanted someone to lead us, not control our every movement.”

He glanced around, expecting his cronies to take up his cause, and inevitably, the blonde, Chelle, did just that.

“We want to take pictures!” She piped up. “And maybe have a little time to ourselves...” Her gaze slid to James in the least subtle gesture I’d ever witnessed. My stomach churned at the idea of the two of them coupling in the woods. None of the wildlife deserved to be witness to such an atrocity. “Will that be possible?”

“That depends.” The short answer was no, but seemingly, it would be too difficult for some of them to comprehend.

“On what?” James demanded.

“On how you behave.” I speared him with my scowl. “If you get into trouble up there, it’s on me. That means I’d like us to all stay together until I can trust you.”

“Trust?” The guy who hadn’t identified himself burst into laughter. “Gee, James, I hadn’t realized what a fun-loving guy our guide would be.”

“Me neither.” James shook his head, disdain oozing from him.

“Want to know how ‘fun-loving’ the forest is?” I turned my attention to James’s friend. “Do you know how many guys just like you went into the woods last year and never came home again?”

Usually, I reserved my horror stories for when energy levels were starting to wane, but this lot was pushing all my buttons before we’d even left the bridge. They deserved the brutal reality check.

“People d-die up there?” Chelle gazed past me with nervous brown eyes.

“That’s right.” Scanning the assembled tourists, I noticed the blood drain from their complexions. Even the red-faced Erin looked suddenly pale.

Good.

I liked to set expectations before we left the bridge. They might as well know what they were getting into.

“Every year, the wilderness claims its sacrifices.” I rolled back my shoulders.

“Sacrifices?” Erin glanced around the trees nervously.

“That’s what the locals believe.” I definitely had their attention. “They say the gods

only allow them to live in such beautiful surroundings if they pay the blood sacrifice. Once upon a time, that meant selecting their own people, but now, with so many tourists...”

Pausing, I suppressed a smirk as four concerned faces waited for me to go on. There were natives deep in the forest, and it was true a number of naïve hikers did fall foul of the terrain, but the rest was all a product of my juicy imagination. The tale worked, though, captivating my audience as it warned those about to step foot in the forest of the potential risks. “Well, let’s just say the indigenous people can live in peace nowadays.”

“I don’t remember reading anything about any indigenous people,” James scoffed. “Are you sure about all of this?”

“All you’re proving is that you need to do better research.” I was going to have fun bringing that jerk down a peg or two. “There’s been a tribe of people living in these parts for more than a thousand years and they only accept the constant intrusion and pollution of tours like ours because the inevitable consequences appear to appease their gods.”

James’s brows knitted as though he wanted to argue but had finally realized he had nothing smart to say.

“The environment can be inhospitable,” I went on, “and the weather can change fast, so it’s imperative you stay with me and listen to my instructions. Do you all understand?”

I glanced from James to the other three, waiting for someone to summon a wisecrack, but to my surprise, my question was only met with contrition.

“I understand,” Chelle started. “Thanks for letting us know how serious this can be.”

“Is,” I corrected. “This is serious. Listen to what I tell you and I’ll get you out of here safely, but nature can still be dangerous. It should be respected.”

“We get it,” James replied after a moment. “And okay, we’ll stay close and listen.” He looked around the group as if he was the leader, but I had the sense only Chelle was hanging on his every word.

“And you?” My focus flitted to the other guy. “What’s your name?”

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“Miles.” He blew out a breath. “I understand.”

“Which only leaves you.” My attention landed on the diminutive brunette who’d first spoken. Closer inspection revealed a more youthful complexion than the one I’d first surveyed, but her soft, green eyes spoke of her experience. “Do you agree?”

Her jaw tightened as she nodded, conveying how little she liked being put on the spot. “Yes, I agree.”

“Excellent.” Maybe the group wouldn’t be as ridiculous and unruly as I’d first feared. First impressions could sometimes be wrong, after all. “Then I suggest we get going. There’s a lot to see and a long way to go. The sun sets at around seven at this time of the year. No one wants to still be in the woods when that happens.”

“THIS PLACE IS INCREDIBLE.”

I liked the awe in Erin’s voice as she gazed up at the green awning overhead. I rarely heard wonder from those who paid me to take them into the forest. Most tourists were so interested in reaching their destination that they almost entirely ignored the journey. Her reverence was unique.

“Yes.” I watched as she strained to take in the view of a particularly enormous pine tree. “It certainly is.”

I’d known that tree for years, having laughed, cried, and shed blood by its roots. As

though the memory had awoken the ghoul, a dark silhouette materialized behind the trunk—the outline of a man who'd once walked the same path but never came home. Peeking out from behind the pine, the black spaces that should have been eyes gazed at me, expecting absolution, though I had none to offer.

He was only a fragment of my shadowy past, a ghost sent to haunt me. He had no power over me or what happened next, and turning to survey the others, I knew nobody else could even see him.

His spectral presence existed only in my mind.

“It just looks like a lot of old trees to me!” Miles’s tone was sardonic, but his comment jarred regardless. “The real feat is getting past where the forest meets the mountain and reaching the top.”

“I hope you’re being sarcastic.” Erin frowned. “You can’t come to a place like this and not recognize its splendor.”

“I see it.” Miles tutted as though she were a fool. “I’m just saying that’s not what I’m here for.”

“It’s not what I’m here for, either,” James purred, tugging Chelle, closer. “I’m gonna need a little one-on-one with my girl before the terrain gets any tougher.”

“James!” Chelle giggled like an intoxicated schoolgirl as they stumbled forward. “Not here!”

“Definitely not here.”

They all turned at my insistent tone.

“We talked about this.” My attention slid from one face to the next. “And you all agreed we stay together.”

“I only need five minutes.” James chuckled, pulling her against him.

“Hey!” Chelle whacked his chest playfully. “No way! You need much longer than five minutes!”

“We’re happy you’re happy, but can’t you guys give it a rest?” Erin leaned against the tree she’d been admiring. “This trip isn’t about your sex life.”

“I think your little friend is jealous, Chelle,” James sneered.

“You don’t need to talk about me as though I’m not here.” Erin’s gaze narrowed.

“You need some cock of your own, Erin.” Pulling away from Chelle, James motioned to Miles. “That’s why I brought him along.”

“No offense, but she’s not exactly my type.” Miles sniggered.

“Fuck you!” Erin spat the words at Miles. “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Lifting my hand to my temple, I rubbed at the throbbing in my head. Its volume grew louder with each new cutting remark. So much for not trusting first impressions. I’d been right all along. James and Miles were acting like morons.

“Listen!” Raising my voice, I drew their collective focus.

“What?” Chelle’s brow creased.

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“What can you hear?” It was always fun to play the listening game at that particular juncture. Most hikers were so intent on the climb that they failed to notice what was right on top of them.

“You talking nonsense!” Miles snorted.

“Try harder.” I pushed the words through gritted teeth, raising my gaze skyward. The blue skies that had welcomed us by the bridge had seeped away to reveal their grayer cousins. There had been no precipitation forecast, but I hoped everyone had been sensible enough to pack their waterproofs, just in case.

“Wait.” Erin turned in the direction of the nearby waterfall and leaned toward the noise of the running water. “Whatisthat?”

“Come this way and I’ll show you.” Holding back the neighboring branches, I motioned for her to go ahead.

“Oh, yeah!” James jeered. “I thought there was no time for woodland nookie?”

“All of you,” I hissed, tiring of the men’s incessant witticisms. “This way.”

Erin’s gaze lingered my way as she wandered past. “Thank you.”

“What’s this way?” Chelle asked, following her friend.

“Wait and see.” I smiled at her daunted expression. “It’s nothing awful.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.” James rolled his eyes as he pushed past me.

His bravado poured salt on the wound his attitude had already created, but Erin’s voice cut through my irritation.

“Wow! I didn’t expect this!”

“Careful.” Stalking to the front of the group, I strode out into the tiny clearing to ensure everyone was safe. “Stay back from the edge.”

The trees broke cover about nine feet from the edge of the first of many breathtaking waterfalls in the area. Our elevated position and thousands of years of weather ensured fresh water cascaded from the rocks, falling ultimately to the river below.

“Nice!” Miles barked as he joined us. “This looks like a photo opportunity.”

“Good thinking.” James dropped his pack to the ground. “Let’s do this!”

“Okay.” Sensing where the conversation was going, I interjected, “How about we take a quick break?”

The four were fitter than I’d given them credit for and had matched my pace until the gradient started to become more challenging. That meant we’d made good progress and gave us a chance for a break. I was certainly ready for a holiday from their relentless banter.

“About time!” James clapped his hands together. “We’ve been going for hours.”

“Just over one hour,” I corrected, checking my watch to confirm the point. “We’ve only scaled the first incline.”

“Hmmm.” James scowled as though I was conflating an irrelevant point. “Whatever. Come on, Chelle. Get your camera out.”

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Chapter Three

Descent into Madness

Erin

“IWONDERED WHAT YOUwere going to say to her then, mate!” Miles laughed, dropping his enormous backpack to the floor.

“Why?” James snorted, slapping Miles on the shoulder. “Did you think I was going to say her tits?”

Watching the interchange between the two purported men, shock resounded. How could Chelle be in love with someone who talked about her that way?

“Well, that’d be nice.” Miles’s grin knotted the growing disgust in my belly. They were talking about my friend as though she were nothing but an animal. “I’m sure she has a decent rack.”

“Her tits are the best.” James’s smile stretched wider. “Maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll—”

“Are you going to let him talk about you that way, Chelle?” In the end, there was no choice but to interrupt their diatribe.

Chelle had asked me to give James a chance, but even if she was okay with the public derision, I couldn't abide his disrespect.

"He's only joking." Chelle flushed, somehow able to make excuses for the rudeness inflicted upon her.

"Yeah, lighten up." Miles sighed. "Just because no one wants to see your tits doesn't mean you have to have a tantrum."

"You're pathetic!" I prodded a finger in Miles's direction. "There's nothing funny about this."

"You do need to lighten up." James leered. "It'll be the last time Chelle invites you on one of our little getaways."

"Thank God for that!" Dropping my bag to the ground, adrenaline galloped through my system. "But Chelle deserves respect whether I'm here or not!"

"Oh, settle down." James feigned exasperation. "It's just banter, and Chelle's all right with it, aren't you, love?"

His stare drilled into Chelle's reddening face, encouraging us all to look her way.

"Are you, Chelle?" I prompted, struggling to believe she found anything about James's performance acceptable.

The woman I knew had clear boundaries about respect and how she deserved to be treated, but it appeared that being with James had eroded them.

"Erm." Chelle's gaze flitted between us all, the panic flashing in her eyes suggesting she wished the ground would just open up and swallow her. "I'd rather we just all

change the subject.”

“I said, aquickbreak.” Eli’s voice permeated the rising tension, and glancing behind me, I found him leaning against the nearest tree, his pack deposited by his feet.

He hadn’t said anything overtly to criticize or condone James’s behavior, but I had the distinct impression he was getting fed up with him too.

“If all you’re going to do is argue,” Eli continued, “then we might as well keep going.”

“No way.” James shook his head. “I want pictures! Chelle, where’s the camera?”

“I’ll grab it.” Opening her backpack, she searched around inside.

Perturbed at her lack of response to James’s blatant misogyny, I did the same, rummaging around in my bag in an attempt to avoid eye contact with anyone. Finding my water, I pulled out the bottle and slowly unscrewed the lid.

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How was she okay with the way Miles and James had spoken about her? Even if she enjoyed being lusted after by idiots, then surely, the public humiliation should have caused offense. I couldn't comprehend how simply she'd dismissed the so-called jokes.

Crouching by my pack, I took a sip of water as Chelle passed the ridiculously expensive camera to her lover. He took it from her without a word of thanks, flashing it in front of Miles as he explained the alleged features. I didn't understand their choice of hardware, either. Why anyone would drag a piece of equipment like that all the way along the hike when the cameras on our smartphones did a perfectly adequate job was beyond me. But I supposed the camera was James's style—superficial and seemingly pointless.

“Are you okay?”

Pulse racing, I glanced up to find Eli standing beside me. I must have been so caught up in my resentment that I hadn't even heard him move, but there he was, every inch of the dark, rugged tour guide apparently at my disposal.

“Yes.” I compelled my lips to tug upward. “I just need a drink.”

“I expect hanging around with those two would drive anyone to drink.” Lowering his tone, Eli gestured to the other men who appeared to be arguing over which angle would produce the perfect shot.

“True.” I rose to my feet beside him, although he still seemed to tower over me. At least Eli had acknowledged what asses James and Miles were being. “But I don't

hang around with them. I've only met James a few times before today and I don't know Miles." My murmur mirrored his hushed tone. I had no desire for yet another confrontation if anyone else overheard our chat.

"I'm pleased to hear it." Eli shifted to face me. "But it seems your friend is rather smitten with her beau."

"Yeah." I let out a long breath, resisting the urge to dwell too long on his face. He truly was a good-looking guy, and I was willing to bet he was hiding a muscular body beneath all the gear he was wearing. "I'm afraid so. Thank goodness you're here to dilute the insanity. I'd probably go mad, otherwise."

He smirked at my quip. "I think you'd be fine, Erin. You held your own in the 'discussion' with James."

"Th-thanks." I was oddly giddy as his praise washed over me.

I wasn't used to receiving compliments from strange men, but something about this approval was especially enticing. It had been a long time since I'd sensed a tug of attraction to any guy, but Eli was managing to tick multiple boxes for me without even trying. I liked that he was so physically capable, but I'd also enjoyed the way he'd put James and Miles in their places by the bridge earlier. That was the kind of man I could respect, and it didn't hurt that he was remarkably easy on the eye.

"Someone had to say something," I went on. "And—"

"I said, try again!" James's frustrated bellow broke my train of thought, urging my focus back to him.

He and Miles had backed toward the edge of the waterfall in a feigned pose of triumph. His irritation appeared to have been triggered by a delay on Chelle's part.

“I am!” Chelle insisted, clicking away at the unnecessarily large camera. “Keep posing!”

“I want as many shots as possible.” James hugged Miles closer. “Something for the family album!”

“Move away from the edge, gentlemen.” Eli stalked in their direction. “It’s not safe there.”

“Oh, don’t you start with all the health and safety bullshit,” Miles moaned. “We’re big boys. We’ll be fine.”

“Shall I carry on?” Chelle twisted between James and Eli as though she couldn’t make up her mind who was in charge, which only went to show how impaired her judgment had become. Even a year ago, she’d have heeded the warning and withdrawn, but standing there gripping the camera, she looked utterly overwhelmed.

“Yes!” James insisted. “Get more shots of our guns!”

Untangling himself from Miles, James shrugged out of his hoodie and T-shirt to reveal the body he seemed so proud of. Flexing his arms, he crowed, “Check out those biceps!”

“For God’s sake.” I lifted my head to the heavens, seeking spiritual support. How was I going to survive another hour of male ego, let alone an entire day of James’s drivel?

“You’re not listening.” Eli’s tone was clipped as he strode past Chelle. “I said, move away from the edge or this will be the end of the tour.”

“Enough with the threats!” Miles barked, moving to imitate his friend. Yanking his jacket over his head, he took several small steps backward. “We’ll have our fucking

pictures, and—”

Time shifted in protracted pockets as I watched what happened next. In the frenzy of insulting Eli and determining to strip, Miles seemed to have forgotten just how close he was to the precipice. One tiny move in the wrong direction was all it had taken for him to topple over it.

“Shit!” Miles’s voice emanated from over the ledge. “Help me!”

“Miles!” James leaned over the edge and peered at his hapless friend as Chelle rushed to his side. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you!” Spinning toward Eli, he jabbed a finger at him. “He’s caught on a ledge. We have to help him.”

Placing down my bottle of water, anxiety furred in my stomach as I wandered closer. A glance over the brink confirmed what James had said. Miles had experienced the immense good fortune to have landed on a rocky ridge around eight feet below where we stood. The raging waterfall, however, was now less than a meter from where he was clinging on, spilling water over the already loose nearby pebbles and shrouding him in spray.

“Quick!” James roared. “He’s in trouble!”

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Eli cast an eye over Miles's predicament. "Erin." The full weight of his attention landed suddenly on me. "Run and grab my pack, please."

"Sure." Heart hammering, I moved, wanting to do what I could to help while preferring not to see Miles's precarious fate for longer than I had to. A brief look had told me what I needed to know. One shift in any direction would see him tumble to the water below and hit God knew how many rocks along the way. It was a miracle he'd survived the initial slip over the edge.

Collecting the straps of Eli's bag, I tugged, sensing the thing weighed a ton. Deciding to save my strength, I dragged it the short distance to where he was standing. "Here."

"Thank you." Eli crouched to open the pack. "I told you both to move away, James. Why didn't you listen?"

"What?" James yapped, his eyes wide with panic as he looked between Eli and the edge. "What does that matter now? Miles needs us!"

"It matters because I can't trust you." Pulling out a length of rope, Eli rose to his full, foreboding height. Not for the first time, I was stunned at how tall the guy really was. "It matters that you choose to please yourself without a thought for the consequences."

Glancing around, Eli headed toward the tree he'd been leaning against, wrapping the end of the rope around it and securing it into a knot.

"Chelle," he called to my shell-shocked friend. "Over here, please. I need you to keep

an eye on this knot and shout if you see it starting to unravel.”

“Okay.” Chelle threw me a worried glance as she walked to join Eli. “I can do that.”

“What’s going on up there?” Miles sounded desperate. “I’m getting soaked!”

“Miles.” Eli paced to the edge with the remaining rope in his hands and shouted down to him. “I’m going to throw down a line and see if it’s long enough to reach you.”

“Fine.” Miles stared up from the ravine, and fleetingly, my gaze locked with his. Drenched by the showering waterfall, he could scarcely move an inch in any direction without potentially plummeting. “Just do it!”

“He’s right!” James shifted frantically from one foot to the next. “Drop the rope.”

“We need to do it slowly,” Eli warned as he lowered to his stomach and peered over the ledge. “A sudden drop could risk knocking him off balance. Get ready, Miles!”

We waited in stony silence, watching Eli slowly lower the rope. Its descent was suddenly pivotal, as though it was our lives that depended upon its successful journey. Only Chelle remained by the trees, unable to witness the rope’s descent.

“What’s happening?” she called, momentarily drawing my attention from Miles.

“Miles has the rope,” I confirmed when he grasped the end.

“Thank God.” James looked ashen as, shoving me aside, he joined Eli on the ground.

“Hey!” I countered, irritated that even then, with his friend in peril, he was still being a dick.

“Try and wrap the end around you, Miles,” Eli commanded.

“I can’t!” Miles whined. “It’s not long enough.”

“Shit.” Eli’s eyes closed for a fraction of a second.

“You should have secured it to a closer tree,” James protested.

“There is no closer tree!” Gesturing to where Chelle stood, my jaw tightened. James was utterly insufferable. Once we were through the turmoil, I’d definitely speak to Chelle about her life choices.

“Then we’ll have to work with what you have.” Ignoring our spat, Eli remained calm. “Get a good grip of it, Miles, and wrap it around your hand and wrists. James and I will pull you up.”

Eli was on his feet in seconds, followed soon after by James.

“Are you ready?” James cried.

“As ready as I’ll ever be!” came the hollered reply.

“Let me lead,” Eli suggested as he collected the rope in his large hands. “I’ve been involved with this sort of rescue before.”

“He’s my friend,” James retorted. “It’s my face he wants to see when he makes it to the top.”

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Eli exchanged a glance with me, his thinning patience dancing in his captivating gray eyes.

“Fine.” He passed the rope to James. “I’ll go behind you, but we have to work together.”

“Sure.” James wrapped his hands around the rope’s girth as Eli got into position to his rear. “Miles, we’re about to pull!”

“Do it!” Miles screamed from below.

“Ready?” James peered over his shoulder for a moment. “On three. Three... Two... One!”

I swore time stood still as they took the strain, both men edging backward inch by inch until finally, Miles’s voice grew louder. Tension seeped into my body, contorting my muscles until it was difficult to take another breath. I didn’t know Miles—and didn’t much like what I knew—but the idea of him falling to his fate on our so-called adventure was too much to process. Eli and James had to save him.

“That’s it!” Miles cried with excitement. “I’m climbing. Only a couple more feet and I’ll be up.”

“How’s that knot, Chelle?” Eli asked without turning to face her.

“O-okay...” She sounded on the brink of tears, and I considered going to hug her but decided against the move. Better that I was available to help Eli if he needed any new

equipment from his pack.

“That’s great.” Eli’s jaw stiffened as he pulled harder against Miles’s weight.

Moving tentatively toward the edge, I saw the top of Miles’s light brown hair come into view, the sight only escalating my peaking trepidation. He was so close to the top, so close to accomplishing what had seemed at first glance to be near impossible, yet the apprehension inside me counseled caution. Something could yet go wrong. He wasn’t safe until he was on terra firma with us.

Anxiety hung in the air like moisture from the nearby waterfall, ratcheting every second until it seemed unbearable. Only James seemed able to see the bright side.

“Miles!” James beamed as his friend neared. It was the happiest I’d seen him. “It’s going to be okay. Just hold on.”

“I’m slipping.” Miles’s frowning countenance came into view. “My hands are wet, and now, so’s the rope.”

“Here.” Releasing one hand, James edged forward and offered Miles his palm. “Take this.”

“No, James!” Eli yelled. “Hold the rope. That’s how we help him.”

“Take my hand!” James shouted, dismissing Eli’s caution. “Come on!”

“James, don’t!” I pleaded as Miles released his grasp on the rope and reached for James’s hand.

“Damn it, James!” Anger burned in Eli’s voice as he struggled to take the strain. “Listen!”

“Quick!” James shouted to Miles. “You’re so close.”

“Wait, I...” Miles reached for his friend’s hand, clutching first at his fingertips, and then his entire right palm. “I have you! I think I have you!”

“Thank God!” James let go of the rope and grabbed Miles’s hand. “You’re all right!”

“James!” The twang of desperation in Eli’s usually so composed voice was the most disturbing sound so far. “I can’t hold the weight alone.”

“I’ll help!” I ran toward the rope, watching as time started to move in the same strange pockets of slow motion it had lurched into when Miles had first slipped and fallen.

Only inches from the rope, I watched James clutch Miles’s hand, only to see his grip loosen against his friend’s wet skin.

“No!”

James’s panic echoed around the clearing, and then and there, I knew what was going to happen. My heart was pounding so fast that I thought I might vomit.

“Shit!” Miles was the first to articulate their doom as, losing his grasp of James’s hand, he toppled backward.

“Miles!” James went next, lurching forward like a man deranged in a crazy attempt to catch Miles.

Reaching the rope, I clasped its width, but it was already too late. James had let go of the cord to save his friend, and Miles had already abandoned it in favor of James’s hand. I tumbled back into Eli, and we landed on the dirt with a thud as the two

hapless fellows plunged to the rocky depths below.

Chapter Four

Hysteria

Eli

STUNNED SILENCE FILLED the space around us. For the longest moment, I couldn't wrap my head around what I'd just seen. Both men had fallen, and I'd watched it all unravel. I'd acknowledged the terror in Miles's eyes as gravity closed its fingers around him and heard James's agonized cries as he nosedived after Miles, yet still, I couldn't move. Couldn't register what had occurred.

Shock.

I knew its putrid flavor, having tasted it before, but it was even more bitter than I recalled. It held me in place, pinioning me with greater ferocity than the brunette who'd landed on me in the panic as the rope had given way.

In the end, it was her whimper that drew me to my senses. Wrapping an arm around her, I sought to reassure her, to let her know I was still in control—although the reality couldn't have been further from the truth.

“No!” Chelle's scream pierced the air next, creating the soundtrack of our alarm as she ran to the precipice and peered over. “They're gone!”

She spun to face me, her glare accusing, as though I'd pushed James and Miles with my own two hands. "They've both fallen!"

"Oh my God!" Erin tugged at my arm to be free, and I released her without a struggle. Climbing to her feet on shaky legs, she rushed to her friend's side and threw her arms around her. "Chelle, I'm so sorry!"

"You're not sorry." She recoiled from Erin's touch. "You couldn't stand James. You made that more than clear!"

"That doesn't mean I wanted this to happen!" Erin's jaw dropped as though she couldn't believe the venom in Chelle's voice. "I tried to help Miles. We all did. Nobody wanted this!"

"I know." Tears made tracks along Chelle's face. "But he's gone, Erin." Turning back to the drop, she trembled. "What the fuck do we do?"

"We need to call the emergency services." Shifting to my knees, I made it to my feet, although the sense of disbelief remained. I'd seen them go over the edge, but still, I couldn't believe it, couldn't make their absence seem real. "We have to report the accident."

"Accident?" Chelle hissed. "It's no fucking accident. They're dead! You were supposed to keep them safe and now they're gone!"

"Hey." Erin wrapped an arm around Chelle, her gaze traveling to me. "It's not his fault either, Chelle. No one did more to help James and Miles than Eli."

"It was his fucking job!" She lurched forward before falling to her knees. "He said he'd get us all back safely."

“I did say that.” Despondency echoed in my voice as I remembered the conversation.
“But they wouldn’t listen.”

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It was no excuse. I'd dealt with arrogant assholes before, and I should have done better. Should have known how to do better...

"You should have made them!" Overcome with distress, she doubled over as Erin crouched at her side.

"Get away from the side." I sounded like a record stuck on repeat as I moved to usher them away. Gingerly, they edged away on their knees, the sound of Chelle's sobs the only noise audible over the rushing water. "I'm not losing anyone else."

"Oh, God." Heaving in air, Chelle's grief crashed over her in painful, visible waves. "How can this have happened?"

Erin's eyes were filled with the same question as she turned to me. "Who do we call? An ambulance won't make it up here."

"An air ambulance can land on the edge of the park." I'd only had to call one once before, but that experience had taught me how the scenario worked. "They can hike to the bottom of the falls and find them."

"They're dead!" Chelle trembled as she spoke. "What good will an ambulance do?"

"They might have survived the fall." Erin's voice was soft. "We have to try."

"That's right," I confirmed, reaching into my trouser pocket for my phone.

Neither one of us mentioned the probability that Chelle was right. Even if by some

miracle, they had both landed in water and avoided the rocks, they'd have likely been unconscious on impact and therefore drowned before they could take a breath and swim.

I stared at my phone. "I'll call for help."

There was no comfort in the truth.

Not on the tiny clearing by the waterfall. Not when my single most important objective had plummeted to death along with the men I'd been charged with guiding and protecting.

My failure had cost their lives.

That thought resonated as I unlocked my phone and dialed the number. It wasn't the first time I'd fucked up in my life, but I had been in charge.

Everything that had happened was my responsibility. Hurt reverberated in my chest as the idea ricocheted. I'd seen death before, but it hadn't hurt like that.

"What's your emergency?"

I moved away from the cascading torrent to hear the responder. "We're at Niantes wildlife reserve," I started. "Two of our party have fallen from the first waterfall. I need an air ambulance."

"Please hold while I check your location," the woman answered, but I was scarcely listening.

Tracking my phone to identify our location was commonplace, and I wasn't even sure why she was telling me. All I could think about was what had taken place and what I

could have done to prevent the bleak outcome that saw our party of five trimmed to three.

Glancing up at the two women who remained, I tried not to dwell on how I'd grapple them both back to safety, especially while one was so overwrought.

"I have your coordinates." The responder's voice broke my desolate mental landscape. "I'll dispatch the ambulance. Does anyone else have any injuries?"

"No." I pulled in a breath. "There are three of us left. I'm a guide here. I'll get the remaining people down to safety."

"It will be a good idea to have you all checked over," the woman said. "Once the initial casualties have been assessed."

My stomach lurched at the way she made that sound. James and Miles didn't need to be 'assessed'. Hell, we'd be lucky if we found their bodies in one piece.

"What's your name, sir?"

Leaning against an ancient trunk for support, I blinked at her question. From the corner of my eyes, I thought I noticed another dark shadow, but I didn't lift my head to confirm. "My what?"

"Your name, sir," she repeated. "I'll need your name and number in case we get cut..." The signal dropped suddenly, and straightening, I shifted from the tree and wandered back into the clearing.

"Hello?" I stared at the device to ensure the call was still connected before holding it back to my ear. "Hello, are you there?"

Apprehension amplified as the tone rang out to indicate that the call had ended.

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“What happened?” Erin was stroking the hair of the woman curled up on her lap.

“We got cut off.” Checking the phone again, I could see my signal had dropped out completely. “It’s my signal.”

Cut off.

The words resonated in my head.

Cut off—just like we were without a signal.

It’s okay. I inhaled. I know these woods. I’ll get us to safety.

She frowned as she reached into her pocket and tugged out her own device. “Shit, mine too. What does that mean?”

I searched the sky overhead, noting for the first time just how dark the heavens had become since the men had fallen. Any trace of the light blue that had lit the morning was well and truly obliterated by sinister, encroaching gray.

“It could be the weather,” I explained. “But I managed to relay the message before I lost her. Help is coming.”

Even to my ears, the reassurance sounded hollow.

“What now?” Erin looked at me. “Do we just wait?”

“No, we move.” Of that I was certain. My every fiber was telling me to get going. “The weather looks to be turning, and the forest is a grim place to be during inclement weather. Better that we head back to base. That way, we can meet the paramedics.”

“Base?” Erin’s brows knitted.

“Tourist information,” I clarified. “Near where I met you by the bridge.” My gaze scanned over Chelle. “How are you doing, Chelle?”

“She hasn’t said anything else since...” Erin’s eyes closed before she went on. “I think she’s in shock.”

“We all are.” I sighed. “But we really should get going.”

“We can’t just leave.” The snivel came from the otherwise motionless Chelle. “All James’s stuff is still here. I can’t give up on him.”

Erin’s gaze locked with mine as she tried to soothe her friend. “We have to, Chelle. James would have wanted to make sure you were safe.”

Casting an eye out at the leaden sky, I wasn’t so sure I agreed with her analysis. James had come across as a self-centered prick.

“Let’s go,” I instructed, gesturing for them to get up. “I’ll take his pack down with us, so he’ll have his things.”

Not that I believed there was any chance of reuniting the bag with its owner, but still... if it helped to motivate Chelle, I was willing to do it.

“Really?” Chelle lifted her head from Erin’s lap, her red, swollen eyes meeting my

gaze.

“Sure,” I replied, glancing down to where James had dropped it. The tiny clearing that had once been so endearing had been tainted.

I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to go back there again.

“Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Chapter Five

Plan B

Erin

GLANCING TO ONE SIDE, I acknowledged Chelle clinging to me. Her vacant expression had intensified since we'd left the waterfall, and reaching for her hand, I squeezed her cold digits, noticing how the gesture barely even roused her.

"Chelle," I murmured, gripping her hand tighter. "Are you okay?"

Of course she isn't.

After everything that had happened, how could she be?

James might have been a prick, but that didn't mean she thought he was. She'd told me she loved him. Seeing him tumble to his doom was undoubtedly the worst moment of her life.

"I can't do this," she mumbled as her feet ground to a halt.

"It's all right," I consoled, urging her on. "We'll figure things out."

Although, how I was going to figure out James's plight was anyone's guess.

"I mean it." She yanked her fingers from mine. "I'm not doing this."

"But we're going to find James." My tone was pleading as, anxiously, I acknowledged Eli striding away. "We have to go on, Chelle."

"I'm not going down there to speak to officials and pretend he's dead." She clenched her jaw. "I have to know, Erin. Have to know what happened to him. I have to see for myself."

"Can we stop?" I called to Eli, satisfied as he paused and turned back in our direction. Glancing at Chelle, I tried to make her see sense. "The authorities can help with that. Once we meet them, and—"

"No." Resolve resounded in her voice. I'd rarely seen her so determined. "I don't want strangers pawing over him. I'll find out for myself."

"What's wrong?" Eli hollered. Already some distance from where we were standing, he wasn't privy to our conversation.

"I know you're trying to help me." Chelle's despondent expression bored into me. "And I'm thankful, Erin. I am."

"But?" I sensed where the sentence was going.

"But I need to do this on my own." Chelle pulled in a breath. "I hope you understand..."

"What does that mean?" I peered back to see Eli marching toward us. His scowl suggested he wasn't impressed by the delay, but I was more concerned about Chelle's

bizarre behavior.

“It means I’m going.” She backed away from me, her words soft. “Don’t come after me, Erin. He can take you to safety.” She motioned to Eli. “Stay with him.”

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“No!” My voice was louder as I acknowledged her retreat, and abruptly, her jumbles of words started to make sense.

She was going off on her own to look for James’s body. She didn’t want anyone with her as she attended to this one final task for him.

“Chelle!” I ran in her direction, only compelling her to move away even faster. “You can’t go off on your own!”

“Just let me go.” She bumped into a nearby tree, tears blurring in her gaze as she called out. “I need this!”

“But...” I cried out. “It’s not safe! How will you find him? How will you find your way back?”

“Chelle!” Eli’s voice boomed from behind me. “Where are you going? Come back!”

Emotion burned in my eyes as she slipped between two vast trunks and disappeared from sight. Every fiber of my being wanted to go after her and drag her back to the bridge, but that wasn’t what she wanted. I’d seen the fortitude in her sad eyes, and I accepted the facts. She was an adult and could make decisions for herself. I didn’t have to like them, but I still had no control over them.

“What happened?” The urgency in Eli’s voice hit me in the chest like a freight train. “Why aren’t you going after her?”

“She wants to go.” Wiping my eyes with the heel of my hand, I allowed those words

to sink in.

This is what she wants.

“She could die out there on her own!” His expression was scathing, as though the unscrambling events were my responsibility.

“I know.” Fresh tears blurred my vision.

“And you just let her go?” He flung his arm out in the direction she’d retreated.

“I...” Unable to meet the power of his stare, I glanced away. How could I make him understand? “I think that might be what she wants.”

“To die?” His tone was incredulous.

“Maybe.” Shit, what had I done letting her go? “But I can’t stop her. She’s a grown woman!”

“For fuck’s sake” He glowered at me as if I was a foolish child. “Do I have to keep the two of you tethered to me to keep you safe?”

“I don’t know.” My knees buckled as the weight of grief descended. “She’s grieving and she just left. I’m sorry.”

My knees hit the hard earth as the apology escaped, pain ballooning in my head as I struggled for air. WhathadI done? Had I just assigned my best friend to an early grave?

“Hey, it’s okay.” Dropping the bags he was carrying, Eli fell to his haunches beside me, his knee visible in my peripheral vision. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair. None of this

is on you. I'm the one who was supposed to have been looking after you all."

I glanced up in time to see him looking in the direction Chelle had vanished into.

"It's not your fault." I don't know why I wanted to reassure him. He was right, after all. Our safety was his business, but the idea of him losing the plot so far from any relative sanctuary filled me with dread. I still needed him in a tangible way. "Chelle's strong-minded about the things she wants. Nothing, short of tying her up, was going to stop her."

"And if she was tied up, how would I have carried her and the bags?" His tone was sardonic.

"Right." I smiled, even though my heart was breaking wide open for my friend.

"Here." Reaching into his inside pocket, he retrieved a handkerchief. "Take this. It's clean."

"Thanks." Our fingers grazed as I took the cloth from him, and fleetingly, I wondered why he hadn't offered it to Chelle when she'd sobbed over James, but dabbing my eyes, I was grateful for the loan.

Kneeling there on the cold ground, I was struck by an ethereal sense of desolate serenity. The whole world had come crashing down upon me in the last hour. Two people I was trekking with had fallen to their probable deaths, while another—the only one I truly cared about—had fled into the forest on a crazy mission to find the bodies.

Everything had gone to hell.

Yet, being there with him at that moment, even the pain in my head seemed easier.

Closing my eyes, I looked at the sky and pulled in a deep breath. I had to get through this. I had no choice.

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That thought cemented as something cold and wet landed on my forehead, and bewildered, I opened my eyes. Was it raining on top of everything else? That was all we needed.

“Shit.” Eli sighed the word.

“Rain?” I asked, although as I looked around, I had surely deduced the answer for myself. It wasn’t rain that was falling around us, but large white flakes of ice.

“Snow.” His voice was grave. “And it’s falling fast. We need to move.”

“Snow?” It didn’t make sense. I’d checked the weather app dozens of times before undertaking the so-called ‘adventure’ and nowhere had any snow been mentioned.

“But how?”

“This place is a micro-climate. It has its own weather systems.” He shrugged, thrusting out a hand and helping me to my feet. “Like I said, the weather can change fast out here.”

He wasn’t joking. By the time he’d picked up his bag, the ground was littered with white flakes. It really was coming down fast.

“How much farther to the bridge?”

Conscious of how cold the air had become around us, I shivered. The temperature had cooled when the skies grayed, but I supposed the confusion and shock of James and Miles, and the subsequent adrenaline, had meant I hadn’t really noticed until that

moment.

“We still have around an hour to go.” He checked his watch. “And if this keeps up, that’ll be too far. Do you have any waterproofs in there?” He signaled to the bag still on my back.

“I think so. I packed everything James suggested.” My heart rate sped up as I said his name, sorrow mingling with the irritation the guy had produced before his untimely nosedive.

“Okay. Put them on.” He shuffled his pack from his shoulders and delved into its contents. “We’ll never stay warm if we’re wet.”

Following his lead, I slid the bag from my back and opened the drawstring. Bigger flakes cascaded over us as I searched for the waterproof jacket I’d packed, my fingers finally skimming over the mac. Trying not to dwell on his comment about the bridge being too far, I tugged it from the bag and pulled it over my other layers.

By the time I glanced back at him, Eli had donned both a water-resistant jacket and a pair of trousers.

“Is that all you have?” He pointed to my raincoat.

“Yes.” My voice quivered as a fresh tremor of cold sprinted along my spine.

Fuck. With falling snow, it truly was cold, and the sporty leggings I’d worn to hasten our progress were already getting wet and sticking to my skin.

“I didn’t think.” I frowned, trying to recall if James’s missive had indicated we’d require more. “I didn’t expect snow.”

“It’s okay.” The concerned flicker in his gray eyes belied his true feelings. “You’ll be all right. Just stay with me, Erin.”

Stay with him? He must be joking. I wasn’t going anywhere without him.

“Which way do we go?” I pressed my teeth together to prevent the impending chatter. I had a spare sweater with me but not much else, and one look at the skies suggested the snow was in for the duration.

“You’re cold.” It was more of a statement than a question. “Come here.”

He held out his arms and beckoned me forward with one hand.

“I’m f-fine,” I lied, although my feet were already moving in his direction as he unzipped the front of his jacket. Pressing my face into the heat of his sports sweater, I welcomed the warmth of his embrace as it closed around me.

“We don’t need to add hypothermia into the mix of today.” His arms tightened around me. “We need a plan B.”

“What does that mean?” Craning my neck, I met his gaze.

“It means we divert to the nearest ranger’s hut.” His eyes met mine. “Either there’ll be someone there who can help us, or there’ll be a place we can hole up until the snow has stopped.”

“A ranger’s hut?” I wasn’t even sure I knew such things existed, but it was a good plan. “Where’s the nearest one?”

“Not far from here.”

He gestured in the opposite direction from the one Chelle had taken, guilt twisting in my gut as I remembered my poor friend. She was out there on her own, and she had no real protection from the weather.

“Come on.” He pressed his body against me. “I’ll take you.”

Chapter Six

Redirection

Eli

“STAY CLOSE.”

A stark blanket of snow had carpeted the ground in only a few minutes, soaking the bottom half of her body with icy water. If I didn’t get her close to a fire soon, hypothermia would follow rapidly.

I won’t let that happen.

I wasn’t prepared to lose someone else.

“How much farther?” She sounded exhausted as I tugged her against my body. “This pack weighs a ton.”

“Let me take it.” I reached for the nearest strap.

“No.” Dodging my grasp, she almost stumbled on the uneven ground. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It wasn’t a discussion.”

As the only remaining member of my original party, and the one who was by far the cutest to begin with, I was growing fond of Erin, but there were things about me she just didn’t know.

I was a brute, used to getting what I wanted.

If we were going to be thrust into each other’s company in the short term, she’d do well to learn those lessons fast.

Pausing, I tugged at the strap to prevent her from walking away. “Give it to me.”

A crease appeared in her brow as she glanced back at me. “I can cope.”

“You’re my responsibility.” I pressed closer to her body. “And that means I take care of you.”

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I saw the counter-argument gleaming in her eyes. Oh, sure... Just like you took care of the others.

But the words never reached her lips.

“Fine.” She shuffled the pack from her shoulders and thrust it at me. “Take it.”

“Or...” Staring down the defiance flashing in her gaze, adrenaline rushed through my body. “Thank you for offering to take my bag for me, Eli.”

I realized that keeping us there in the falling snow while we bantered over how to speak to one another was counter-intuitive to my goal of keeping her well, but for some reason, I couldn’t fight the urge to correct her.

I was used to getting what I wanted, but her insubordination was swelling something unexpected in me. I didn’t just want her compliance for the sake of our health and safety; I longed to put her in her place.

“What?” She stared at me as though I was mad.

“You heard me.” My voice lowered as the craving she’d stirred burgeoned. “I want to help you, but you can speak to me with gratitude and respect.”

“Oh.” She shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. Apparently, she hadn’t expected to be held to account. “Well, thank you, Eli.”

It wasn’t quite the perfect demonstration of deference I’d conjured in my mind, but a

nod of my head signaled it was good enough. There would be time to deal with Erin, to get to know her better and decide why her large eyes appealed to me so much, but that moment would have to wait.

Swinging her bag onto my free shoulder, I motioned to the upcoming incline, glad I'd elected to leave James's pack behind.

"We just need to make it up this slope and we're home and dry."

We'd actually be neither, but if we were lucky, the hut would be manned and there'd already be a roaring fire for her to recuperate by. If not, then I had to pray that the last ranger had left a stock of firewood because everything outside would already be soaked with snow.

"You call that a 'slope'?" Her eyes widened as we approached.

"It's a slope around these parts." I might have chuckled at her shocked visage had the situation not been so serious. Whatever constituted a workout in Erin's normal life, she'd have to dig down and endure if we were going to make it to the comparative sanctuary of the cabin. "Come on. I have your back."

Peering around at her, I acknowledged once again just how attractive she was. Probably a few years younger than I was, she had wonderful, soft-looking skin and stunning green eyes. Perhaps I'd enjoy the impromptu stay with her more than I'd first anticipated. Spending time with such an appealing woman was certainly no hardship.

"How do you know so much about this area?" She wrapped her arms around herself as we started the ascent.

"I'm a guide, Erin." Fixing my gaze on the zenith of the hill, I scanned the area for

any sign of the hut. It was there—I knew it was—but I couldn’t yet see it. “You know that.”

Another dark shape loomed in my peripheral vision, fleetingly distracting me from the mission.

Not now...

Jaw clenching, I tried to ignore its unnatural movements as it ducked under the bushes and crawled along the aging trunks, but even after all the practice I’d had at dealing with the ghosts of my past, it was challenging to pretend the specter wasn’t there.

Hiding behind one of the encroaching, snow-laden trees, the shadow slinked from one trunk to the next, watching our trek and stealing my focus from getting Erin where she needed to be.

“But knowing where all the park rangers hide away?” Her teeth chattered as she pushed past the latest contorted branch and traipsed on. “This is a little off the beaten track for a guide, isn’t it?”

Smirking, I added ‘smart’ to the ever-increasing list of her assets.

“Very good.” Briefly, I contemplated dodging her inquiry, but there was something about Erin that demanded my honesty. “I used to be a ranger around here. That’s why I know the park so well.”

My admission hung in the air as she struggled over the roots of a neighboring tree. Calming when the sky was a sapphire blue overhead, the trees could be cruel and grasping when the weather turned.

“You went from park ranger to tour guide?” Puzzlement glinted in those alluring eyes as she paused to catch her breath.

“That’s right.” Even I heard the defensiveness in my voice. “Is that allowed?”

“Sure.” Her eyes locked with mine. “I just wasn’t expecting it, that’s all.”

Reaching around her, I steered her in the right direction. If I was right about the hut’s location, it would be just over the brow of the hill.

“You’ll find I’m full of surprises, Erin.”

Erin

APARK RANGER?

Eli’s previous role surprised me, although I wasn’t immediately sure why. He was certainly fit enough to be a ranger and had the presence of mind the role would require. I didn’t doubt how much he admired nature, but somehow, I recognized a dark glint in the rugged stranger, something deep and foreboding in his eyes that suggested he was more than only a guardian of the wildlife.

Don’t be silly. Wriggling my fingers to keep my blood circulating, I glanced his way. I don’t even know him.

Regardless of his qualifications for the role, I still couldn’t understand why he’d have chosen to go from ranger to guide. Surely, that was a step down the ladder.

What does it matter?

The truth was, Eli was an enigma who was helping me by looking for somewhere we could shelter from the unexpected storm. I should have been thankful—and I was—but I couldn’t shake the niggling feeling there was more to the man than he was

letting on.

“There!” Excitement rose in his voice as he pointed into the distance.

Looking past his finger, a torrent of fresh flakes floated past. The snow was falling so quickly that I had to strain to see through the wall of white, but as my eyes adjusted, I could just make out the outline of what looked like a wooden building.

“That’s the ranger’s hut.” He pulled my bag tighter around his left shoulder as he marched off through the blizzard. “We’re nearly there.”

Trudging behind him, my limbs begged to differ. It didn’t matter that the hut was only meters from where we were or that the building offered hope in an otherwise seemingly bleak landscape. The only things dominating my mind were how excruciating the cold had become and how, given the state of me, even with Eli’s help, poor Chelle wouldn’t stand a chance.

Chelle.

Pain ached in my chest, fresh tears pricking at the thought of my friend. We’d disagreed about James, but that didn’t change the years of support and companionship we’d shared.

If anything happened to her—and at that juncture, short of a miracle, I couldn’t believe in any other outcome—I’d only have myself to blame. I should have made her stay with us, should have grabbed onto her and refused to let her leave.

What sort of friend permitted another to wander off into the wild alone and unprepared? What sort of friend—

“Erin.” Exasperation radiated from Eli in waves as he neared. “What’s wrong?” Now?

His tone expressed the final word he didn't articulate.

"It's Chelle." I was loath to cry in front of him again—he'd think I was an utter fool. "She'll never make it out there in this weather."

He wrapped an arm around me, the concern in his eyes confirming the dread snaking in my stomach.

"She had her bag with her." His voice was gentle suddenly, his tone quite unlike the man who'd demanded I demonstrate my gratitude when we'd set off in the snow. "And she'll have waterproofs too. All being well, she'll have wandered down to the river and found the emergency services." His gaze rose to the sky as though he expected to see the helicopter hovering overhead. All there was to see, though, was more and more falling snow. "She'll be okay."

"I hope so." I sniffed, daring to hope he could be right. I found it hard to believe she'd had the good fortune to find a ranger's hut on her travels. I'd never have survived without Eli's direction. I'd have been curled up under a tree somewhere, close to freezing to death.

"Come on." Squeezing my shoulder, he took my hand and yanked me across the final few meters of snow.

Our destination was at the top of the incline in the middle of a medium-sized clearing. The structure was larger than I'd expected, but the building itself was in complete darkness and inevitably fast being buried under the expansive white blanket smothering every direction the eye could see.

Surveying the black of the hut's windows, I was reminded of the state of my mind. I couldn't ever remember being so cold before or feeling so wretched for whatever reprieve I was about to experience. Why should I get out of the snow when I'd

condemned Chelle to freeze in it? I might not have sent her away, but I'd done nothing to make her stay. My head ached with the weight of the weary contradiction.

"Is this it?" I didn't mean for the question to sound as ungrateful as it did. "I mean, it looks empty."

"Yeah." He stomped the final few feet to the wooden door and surveyed the structure. "It doesn't look like there's anyone at home, so we'll just have to let ourselves in."

Dropping both bags into the newly fallen snow, he tried the door, which, as expected, was locked. He turned and lowered to open his backpack, and I watched, fixated, as he rummaged inside. I had no idea what I expected him to pull from there—a crowbar, perhaps, or a hammer. What he produced from the pack, though, almost stopped my heart altogether.

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“A g-gun?” Panic spiked anew as he tugged the offensive-looking weapon from its hiding place. “Why do you have a gun?”

“The forest is full of predators, Erin.” Lifting the gun, he released the safety gage, and instinctively, I edged away. “Especially as dusk falls. It’s sensible to keep a deterrent handy.”

“Oh.” I didn’t like the idea that he’d had a gun with him the entire time we’d been hiking, but Eli had given me few reasons to distrust him.

“It’s okay.” He sighed as though I was being ridiculous and turned toward the door. “It’s not going to hurt you. It’s going to get us inside.”

“Right.” I huddled my arms around my chest as he took aim. Glancing around as though I was doing something naughty by allowing him to proceed, I imagined someone in authority charging out of the wilderness and hauling my ass to jail.

Stupid. Squeezing my eyes shut, I chastised myself. I’m being stu—

The sentence was halted as a single gunshot rang out around the desolate clearing. Some frightened birds flapped their wings and flew away at the abrupt noise, and watching them flee, I was envious of their freedom. However ‘noble’ Eli seemed, I was stuck there with him until the snowstorm had passed, and however scary that prospect seemed, I knew I should have been thankful for the sanctuary. Whatever his attempted reassurances about Chelle, I couldn’t see how anyone would survive out in the weather for long without assistance. I could only hope his guess was correct and that wherever she’d gone, she’d stumbled into help.

He moved toward the door again, and that time was able to barge it open with his shoulder. Staring into the gloom of the desolate cabin, my heart sprinted faster. From what I could make out, the place didn't seem idyllic.

"Come on, Erin." Holding the door open, he beckoned me toward him. "Let's start a fire."

Chapter Seven

Ablaze

Eli

"WHERE'S THE RANGER who works here?" Erin peered around the gloomy space as I hauled our bags inside and slipped my gun into my back pocket.

Searching the interior, I found it much the same as the ones I'd worked in previously. Designed only for single occupancy, there was one small double bed, a table, chair, and basic provisions.

"They're rarely manned anymore." My gaze traveled to the corners of the place, searching for something to barricade the door closed with. Survival depended on our ability to block out the cold and find our own heat source.

"So, they're just abandoned?"

She seemed perplexed by the answer, although I wasn't sure why. Most wildlife parks weren't government-funded, which meant whatever donations they received went to pay for conservation and repairs. There was no money for rangers—that was

one of the reasons I no longer did the job.

“Look for some wood,” I instructed, bored of her unhelpful questions. There might be time for a q and a later, but the present moment required action. “It might be stored in a corner, or perhaps a box somewhere.”

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“Right.” She glanced back, her expression disgruntled as she edged to the far corner.

Apparently, Erin wasn’t used to being told what to do. My lips curled at the irony. She’d have to get used to it.

“Over here!” She ran toward the corner. “Will this work?”

I bloody hoped so. Even my waterproofs weren’t as effective as I’d have liked. We needed a fire urgently.

“Let me see.”

She held one of the chopped pieces of wood aloft at my approach, her eyes hopeful.

“That’s good.” Taking the timber from her, hope bloomed in my chest. Whoever worked there had left chopped wood. That boded well for our chances. “How much is there?”

She gestured to the small collection. “Maybe fifteen logs.”

“It’s a start.” I didn’t like to mention that we’d need much more than that if the snow was going to persist. “Sometimes there’s a huge box at the back of these places. That might have more supplies.”

“Thank God.” She rose to her feet, her breath visible in the gloom between us. “Do you have a fancy way to light it?”

“Like a caveman, you mean?” My tone was wry as I walked back to my bag and opened the front pocket. All being well, the enormous box of matches wrapped in plastic I’d brought along for emergencies would do the trick.

“No!” She snorted, moving to join me. “I assumed they taught you some techniques when you took the ranger’s job.”

“They taught me to always carry these.” I waved the box of matches at her. “But to only use them with care.”

“Right.” She shivered. “Good thinking.”

“Do you have a flashlight?”

“Yeah.” Cowering from the open doorway, she dragged her bag out of the shrill breeze and searched inside. “Somewhere in here.”

“Once we get the fire started, I’ll find a way to keep that door closed.” I grabbed the matches and the lumber. “Right now, we need the light.”

“O-okay.” Thrusting her flashlight at me, she offered a smile. “Here.”

“Thanks.” I flicked on the beam, directing it around the cabin. Somewhere away from the door, there’d be a makeshift hearth. If I’d been paying more attention on the way in, I might have noticed where the chimney was, but I’d been too distracted by Erin’s upset to pay attention. “Over there.”

Tucked in the opposite corner to the stash of wood was evidence of the fireplace I’d been looking for, and I hurried toward it. It was in a good position—away from the open doorway that could inadvertently extinguish its precious inferno.

Dropping to one knee, I angled the flashlight in its direction and noticed a large bowl pushed away to one side. Presumably, that had been used to carry water or maybe even to cook with. I made a mental note to remember it was there in case we needed to use it, but the immediate concern was starting the fire. Throwing the wood in the ashy remnants of the last blaze, I selected one match from the full pack and struck it, guiding the flame toward the waiting wood.

“Can I help?” Her pained voice was a stark reminder of how cold and wet she was. The sooner the fire was big enough to ease her frozen limbs back to life, the better.

“You can bring another log.” Resisting the urge to glance back, I concentrated on ensuring the flickers took hold and grew into a fire that would warm us. “Thank you.”

Her footsteps echoed behind me as she moved to comply, and within a moment, she appeared at my shoulder, pushing the timber at me.

“Thanks.” Our gazes locked briefly when I took the wood from her and hurled it beside the already lit log. “Stay here and warm up.” Rising to my full height, I grabbed the flashlight and signaled for her to move into my place. “I’ll close the door and find a way to keep the place secure.”

“Yeah.” She lifted her palms toward the flames, her body still trembling despite the sudden heat source. It would take time for her to warm properly and would involve her getting out of those wet clothes. “Some maniac went mad and shot at the lock.”

Chuckling at her, I shook my head as I moved to close the door. With the frigid wind finally trapped outside, the hushed volume inside the cabin was stark. “That maniac was trying to look after you.” Her chiding might have bothered me, but finally inside and with a basic fire started, my mood was buoyed. “You might want to listen to him.”

“I’m trying.” She threw me a guilty half-smile. “This just isn’t how I saw today going.”

“You and me both.” Guiding the beam of her flashlight around, I looked for a suitable barricade.

There were few options. The space only contained the most rudimentary furniture, and Erin’s assessment had been accurate—my gunshot had damaged the lock to the point it was all but useless. Resolving to move the sturdy-looking wooden bedside counter in front of the door, I hauled my pack out of the way and started work. I wouldn’t relax until the cabin was secured. Hungry wolves and bears prowled the area when the sun went down, and the smell of smoke might draw them to us.

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“Are you keeping me here?” Her tone was sardonic as I lodged the unit into place. “Because I don’t remember consenting to that plan.”

“That’s because there was no discussion.” Shrugging out of my waterproofs, I winked at her. “You’re the only one I have left, Erin. I’m keeping you safe whatever happens.”

She glanced at the flames, pressing her lips into a line as if fighting the impulse to smile. “Thanks, I guess.”

“The unit should keep out any unwelcome visitors.” Collecting my gear, I dragged the chair closer to the fire and stretched it out over the seat.

“Visitors?” Her eyebrow arched.

“Any local wildlife that might come calling,” I clarified.

“Oh.” Her bemused expression suggested she hadn’t even considered that option.

“I’d get out of your wet gear too if I were you.” Eyeing her soaking leggings, I looked around for something to cover her with. “Your clothes will need to dry. Do you have spares?”

“Only a spare hoodie.” She sighed. “And no offense, but I don’t really want to wander around half-naked.”

Shame.

My lips twitched as I envisioned the scenario she rejected. I could get used to an attractive, half-naked woman roaming the place.

“There’ll be something you can use.” I glanced back at the bedside unit. “The cabin I frequented had spare blankets.” Three strides saw me back to the counter, and opening the first drawer at the front revealed two suitable covers.

“Here.” Grabbing the additional layers, I threw them in her direction. “Take the wet clothes off and put those around you.”

She frowned as she lifted the covers to her nose. “These smell musty.”

“They’re the best we have.” Heading to the nearest window, I noticed the snow piling up all around the place. With night falling in the next few hours, we weren’t going anywhere for the foreseeable future. “Let’s make the best of things.”

“Fine.” Her curt tone communicated how little she liked my plan. “Can you step out while I change, please?”

My attention turned to meet her reddening face. “No way! I just changed out of my wet gear.”

“But...” She scowled as though I was being ridiculous. “I need privacy.”

“You need to get warm,” I reminded her. “And fast.”

I understood her concerns, but her whining was starting to grate. “Listen, I’ll check out the rest of the place while you get to it. I won’t be looking at you.”

“But you’ll be here!” She sounded disgusted at the idea, her response rousing the part of me that had dealt with enough petulant and ungrateful people to last a lifetime.

“Yes, I’ll be here.”

Her brows knitted as if she’d expected me to fold and go running out into the snow again. Her reaction only proved how little she knew me.

I didn’t run.

“Until the snow is no longer a threat, there’s one thing we both need to understand.” I didn’t know why she was protracting the inevitable. She would have to change out of the sodden fabric currently clinging to her thighs, and the longer it took her, the colder and more miserable she was going to be.

“Oh, yeah?” She straightened, reflexively rising to my challenge.

“We’re in this together.” Ensuring our eyes met, I held her gaze. “That means until you’re safe, I won’t let you out of my sight.”

Chapter Eight

Exposure

Erin

TUGGING THE MAC OVERmy head, I discarded it to the hard floor. “What do you mean?”

Hadn’t he and James shared a similar exchange before the day’s events had unfolded? Eli had vowed not to let anything happen to James as well, but that hadn’t stopped Chelle’s irritating boyfriend from tumbling to his fate.

I faltered at the comparison, aware it wasn’t fair. James had been a fool who’d ignored Eli’s warnings, and that wasn’t what I was doing. I was only asking for a miserly few minutes of privacy to disrobe without his prying eyes.

Staring down at my soaking legs, I couldn’t wait. Despite the welcome heat of the fire, the cold seemed to be seeping into my bones and making it difficult to think.

“Don’t play dumb.” He folded his arms across his chest. “I know you understand.”

“But you said you’d go out there anyway,” I protested, though even as the words left my lips, I wasn’t sure why. Eli’s expression was as unyielding as I’d ever seen it. He wasn’t going to back down without a fight, and he was right on one count; I really did

need to change out of the drenched leggings. “If you go now, we’ll both be happy.”

“I’m not going now.” He blew out a breath. “I just told you the plan. I’m going to see what else is hiding around this place.” He flashed the beam around, momentarily blinding me and forcing me to turn away.

“For goodness’ sake!” Exasperation flooded my system as I lowered to tackle my bootlaces before finally relieving my aching feet of the uncomfortable footwear.

Had I survived the nightmare of the day, only to end up stuck there with Eli’s dictatorship? I wasn’t sure how much more I could deal with.

“You’re wasting time.” His back was turned as he searched around the edge of the bed. I had no idea what he expected to find there, but I didn’t press the point. “You could be changing while I’m not watching.”

“How do you know I’m not?” I scoffed, reaching for the waistband of my leggings.

“Call it an educated guess.” Smug arrogance radiated from his tone as I hooked my thumbs under the elastic and yanked the wet material down my thighs.

“Fuck you.” I mouthed the words at the back of his head as I wrenched the sodden attire from my clammy skin. It was good to be rid of the tormenting leggings, but my legs were so cold that I had yet to notice a difference.

Reaching for the top blanket, I unfolded its length and wrapped it around my middle. My panties were also soaked through, but I wasn’t thrilled about the idea of abandoning those as well.

“I thought you weren’t going to let me out of your sight.” My tone was taunting as, gripping the blanket at my waist, I held the wet fabric aloft. Shuffling forward, I

draped the leggings beside his clothes.

His lips twisted as he spun to face me. “From now on, I won’t.”

How reassuring.

“There.” He pulled in a breath. “I knew you could be a good girl and do as you were told.”

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“Don’t patronize me,” I snapped, vexed at his change of tack. The version of Eli who’d soothed my tears and guided me into the hut was nothing like the mutated adaptation standing in front of me. That version reminded me of James’s chauvinism.

“I’m looking after you.” He articulated the words slowly as though I wouldn’t understand. “I told you that before.”

I considered countering that I didn’t need to be looked after, but that regular comeback didn’t have much clout in the snow-laden environment we’d been forced to take refuge from. The depressing truth was that while we remained trapped there in the ranger’s lodge, I did need him.

Eli had an air of authority about him that had been alluring right from the start. He’d been the guide—the guy who knew which way we should go—but there had been more than only that. There was a surety about him that spoke to my inner child. It assured me that even when he was in trouble, he’d have a plan to put my needs first. Even though the plight of James, Miles, and Chelle didn’t necessarily support the conclusion, I was still certain of his sincerity. He would do everything he could to keep me safe.

“So, what now?” I sensed the fight in me slipping away as he trudged over from the bed. My limbs were warmer in front of the fire, and for the time being, that represented a considerable advance on being stuck out in the freezing weather.

Like Chelle.

Flinching as the thought of her popped into my head again, my focus flitted to the

flames. She was out there somewhere. She might still be alone, and if she was, she'd be hungry and desperate.

Please let someone have found her. I tightened the grip on the edge of the blanket. Please, God, look after her.

"Now, we eat." He dragged the plastic box on top of the small table over to him and pulled open the lid.

"What is there to eat?" If that was the pantry in the place, I couldn't believe the answer would enthrall me.

"Not much," he admitted. "A few tins and a packet of long-life biscuits."

"Sounds exciting." My belly twisted in anticipation. It had been hours since we'd eaten, and the idea of food was a good one. "How about the lunch we brought along?" My gaze landed on my open pack. "I have sandwiches and fruit."

"Good idea." He strode toward my bag and turned to glance my way. "We should ration the food, though. We could be holed up here for a while."

"Okay." I didn't love the idea of the smaller portions, but on a practical level, what he said made sense. We hoped the snow would pass quickly, but we didn't know anything for sure. It was sound planning to save something for later. "I packed four sandwiches. How about one each now?"

"You're prepared to share with me?" His dark eyebrow cocked as though he couldn't believe I'd entertain the idea.

Snorting, I laughed. "I'm not a monster! You're sharing this place with me, so yeah, I'll give you a sandwich."

“Well, thank you.” Finding the foil housing my lunch, his lips tugged into a smile. “Chuck the clothes on the floor in front of the fire. They’ll still dry, but you can relax on the chair while you eat.”

Moving toward the uncomfortable-looking seat, I wasn’t sure anyone could relax on it, but I took his suggestion, draping the wet garments on the ground closer to the flames before I perched on the chair. “What about you?”

“I’ll sit on the end of the bed.”

He motioned to the structure as if I didn’t know where the bed was, and following his lead, my gaze landed on the blanket-covered bedstead. A relatively small double with two disappointing-looking pillows, the prospect of sleeping there didn’t captivate me, but it was only when I scanned the structure that the real problem with the thing smacked me in the face.

“There’s only one bed...” I mumbled the words aloud as though I couldn’t believe the reality hadn’t dawned on me before.

One bed was a problem.

One bed meant only one of us could sleep there.

How could I have been so naïve? The solitary chair should have been evidence enough that the place had only been designed for one person, but somehow, the inevitable conclusion hadn’t occurred to me until that moment.

“Of course.” He tilted his head at my inane comment. “Don’t worry, I won’t get sandwich crumbs on it.”

“Who’s going to sleep in it, though?” Suddenly, it seemed to be the most important

matter in the world.

Never mind about Chelle, or the snow, or the other terrible things that had happened that day. In the firelight, my only focus was the strange little bed and whether or not I was going to get any sleep.

“I sense you’d rather not share the bed.” Moving toward me, he thrust a sandwich in my direction.

“I...” Meeting his eyes, I tried to discern if he was being sarcastic. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Right.” He pressed his lips into a hard line as he retreated to settle on the end of the bed. Peering at the sandwich, his gaze darted to me. “What’s in this?”

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“Two have peanut butter and two have cheese.” I hadn’t appreciated how significant my choice of sandwich fillings had been when I’d gotten up early to prepare. “I wasn’t anticipating anyone else eating them.”

“Peanut butter’s good.” He took a bite, his gray eyes spearing me as he chewed.

“And the sleeping arrangements?” I shifted awkwardly on the hard chair as he took his time swallowing the first bite of sandwich.

The large room was silent, save for the occasional crackles from the fire. Far from reassuring, the quiet only amplified the anxiety his delay was heightening inside me. Fumbling with my foil-covered lunch, I couldn’t even contemplate taking a bite. The pang of hunger that had gnawed at me earlier was almost entirely absent.

“The bed is yours.” In the end, he played the gentleman, smirking before he took a second bite. “Good sarnie, by the way.”

“Thanks.” That was not what I’d expected him to say. “On both counts, but what about you? You need to sleep.”

“I’ll take the chair.” He nodded to the hearth. “And if we’re lucky, we can keep the fire going for a while longer.”

“A while longer?” Fresh apprehension tightened in my tummy at the idea of losing the source of heat we’d only just created. My legs were still freezing cold and our clothes still wet. We needed that fire. “But don’t we need the fire?”

“Yes, but we don’t have much wood.” His brow rose. “So, until I can check what, if anything, is stored outside, we need to ration the timber too.”

“Shit, you’re right.” Why hadn’t I thought of that?

Staring at the dancing flames, I felt like such a fool. I wasn’t even vaguely prepared for the challenges that Niantes had posed for me, and even then, after the ordeals of the day, my lack of experience showed.

“You should eat.” He gestured to the untouched sandwich in my hand. “Fueling your body is as important as fueling the fire. It will help to warm you.”

“I’m not really that hungry anymore.” I eyed the bread. “And anyway, it doesn’t feel right me eating in the warm and dry while Chelle’s out there on her own.”

My attention slid reflexively to the dark window beside the fireplace. The only thing visible beyond its pane was the relentless barrage of white flakes still falling outside. It was like an icy Armageddon had descended on the world without warning.

“You should stop tormenting yourself about Chelle.” He rose from the bed, dropping the foil into my bag. He’d demolished the whole sandwich in the time I’d been sitting there. “She’ll have found help by now.”

“We don’t know that.” The words caught in my mouth. “We don’t know what has happened to her.”

We didn’t know anything.

“Please.” His harder tone captured my attention. “Eat one sandwich and then we can get some sleep.” Wandering closer to the window, he looked out at the pale expanse of smooth ice beyond the glass. “Hopefully, the snow will have stopped by morning.”

Pulling in a breath, I lifted the food to my mouth. Forcing myself to take a bite, my gaze fell back to the blaze.

How long before those flames started to dwindle? How long before the cold swept back into the cabin and closed its grasp around my ankles?

Closing my eyes, I tried not to dwell on the eventuality.

I didn't like Eli's plan, but it was the best we had.

Chapter Nine

Escalation

Eli

THE WORLD WAS A FIRESTORM of hail and ice. Each flake of white torment raged past me at speed as it trailed its private course to the growing bed of its peers at my feet. Even though I'd vowed not to let her out of my sight, I'd headed out into the freezing conditions after compelling a sandwich into Erin. Promising to return soon, I'd ensured the door was closed when I left, but I hadn't expected the exacerbated situation. The wind had picked up since we'd found refuge and made each new step forward a bracing challenge.

"Shit."

Turning my back to the gale that seemed determined to knock me from my feet, I responded to the call of nature and plowed on sideways, surveying the exterior of the cabin for any signs of additional wood stocks. The bad news was that, so far, there was nothing except growing drifts of the same snow that had landed Erin and me in the ranger's hut in the first place. One glance at the sky confirmed there was no shortage of it to come.

I pushed away the trepidation threatening to balloon in my chest. If there was no more wood, we'd have to make do with what we had. Erin already had the benefit of

the fire inside the cabin, and when that waned, she could huddle in her blankets.

I'm doing everything I can to look after her.

It was true, but my stiffening jaw also accepted that my altruism was mainly because I was so utterly responsible for the fate of the rest of her party. Three of them were missing and two presumed dead. Even in a career as long as mine, it was a pitiful tally, and if I'd only done a better job with James and Miles, we might not have been stuck in our current predicament.

"Saving James wouldn't have changed the weather," I reminded myself as I fought past another gust of wind. "All five of us might have ended up here."

That would have been a nightmare.

The grim realization of that scenario did little to lift my spirits as I accepted what had become obvious. There were no other wood stocks to bail us out. We'd have to make the meager supply she'd discovered inside last the course.

However long that was.

An image of Erin burst into my head as I struggled against the force of the tempest. Despite having met in such stressful circumstances, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd laid eyes on in many years.

"And I could have been holding her against me tonight." I'd given her the bloody bed without so much as a fight, cursing myself as I gave in when all I wanted to do was tumble into it with her. "But that's not what she wants."

Pressing my back against the lodge, I considered my conclusion. Erin had thrown me a few breadcrumbs since we'd met. The way her stare had lingered in my direction

and how her face had reddened when we'd spoken, but it wasn't much to go on.

"It's nothing to go on." I stamped my boot into the snow, acknowledging how deep the whiteout had become in the short time we'd been inside. If the blizzard continued at the current rate, the cabin would be virtually buried in a few hours, and without extra wood, it was a grim reality.

'It's no more than you deserve!'

The impish voice rattled along the breeze, my brow furrowing as I turned to acknowledge who it belonged to.

There, able to withstand the strength of the wind with no effort, was the latest ghoul sent to plague me. Tall, dark, and with no discernable features, the creature shifted toward me, floating along the snow as though it were flying.

"Just go away!" I hollered, irritated at the way its presence had derailed me. It was bad enough having lost three of the party and accepting that Erin didn't want me. I didn't need another haunting. "Leave me be."

'You didn't leave me be.' Its voice was a sneer. 'You didn't leave me until I was dead!'

Anxiety gripped my stomach at its accusation. "If you're dead, then disappear!"

Turning, I focused on trudging on and getting back to Erin. The nonsensical ramblings of my latest visitation would have to wait, but its words resounded in my head, even as I fought my way around the side of the hut, its recriminations stinging more than they should have in a man who was paid to put bodies in the ground.

Flinging open the door, I tumbled inside in a dramatic heap of cascading snowflakes before I shoved the door closed with my boot.

“Are you okay?” She edged closer, apprehension flashing in her alluring eyes.

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“I’m all right.” I was already shrugging out of my hooded jacket and pushing the unit back into its position blocking the door. “But the weather’s even worse than it was earlier.”

Her brow furrowed as I pulled the waterproof trousers over my boots. “Christ, I didn’t think it could get much worse.”

I wanted to laugh at her naivety. Clearly, Erin didn’t spend much time in the wilderness. The climate out there wasn’t only changeable but sometimes brutal.

“Is there someone else out there?” She wandered closer to the fire, which I was pleased to see was going strong. “It sounded like you were talking to someone.”

She’d heard that?

The idea surprised me. The wind was so powerful that I was shocked she could hear anything over its whining gusts.

“There’s a gale blowing out there,” I told her. “You probably just heard it whistling through the trees.”

She stared at me as though she knew I was fudging the truth but didn’t pursue the point.

“If there was any power in here, I reckon we’d have lost it by now,” I went on, happy to divert her from the subject.

The last thing Erin needed to know was that I conjured the demons of my past crimes into reality. I needed to be the dependable, knowledgeable one who would see her through the storm, not someone she would worry about.

“Crap.” She pulled in a fidgety breath. “My phone is getting low on power as it is.”

“Better that you put it in your bag and save power for the time being.” I carried my gear past her to the fire, buoyed by the flames still roaring there. The logs might have been comparatively small, but so was the space. Before I’d ventured out into the freeze again, they’d done a decent job of heating the cabin, and if we were sensible, we could trap what warmth remained while we slept.

It was the best plan we had.

It’s the only plan.

“The signal is still out on mine,” I went on. “And there’s no mobile data.”

“I noticed.” Her answer was a sigh. “It’s so frustrating to have a fancy device that can’t do anything to help us.”

“That’s the problem with technology.” I laid my waterproofs out on the floor by the fire before appreciating its welcoming glow. I was used to hostile conditions, but even I was thankful for its fiery warmth. “Everyone relies on it these days, so we feel helpless when it doesn’t work.”

I was guilty of that too, having used the compass on my phone instead of the good, old-fashioned variety. Fortunately, I always carried a backup with me.

“Yeah.” Her quivering voice revealed the tension she was feeling. Presumably, losing her friends and ending up in an abandoned cabin with me hadn’t been on her agenda

for the day.

I could relate, but from where I stood, things could have been a lot worse. Clinging to the blanket she'd hoisted around her shoulders, her large eyes, full lips, and long limbs were completely mesmerizing. Once more, I wished I was sharing the bed with Erin instead of taking the chair.

"Relax." Standing beside her, I was struck by just how much shorter than me she was. Smaller, less knowledgeable, and obviously needy. My cock stirred at the idea. I liked needy women. The ones who needed me were the most enthralling. "We don't need technology right now. We have food, water, and fire. We're safe."

"But we need wood." She caught her lower lip between her white teeth, her expectant gaze searching my face. "Did you find any more out there?"

"Sadly not." I wished I had better news for her. It would have been good to see some of the tension in her body ebb away. "No storage container and no more wood."

Glancing behind her, I studied the pile of timber we did have. "We'll just have to use what we have sparingly. The trees outside have been saturated and won't be good for burning for a while."

By which time, hopefully, we won't be here anymore.

"Do we have enough?" The same uneasiness I'd seen glinting in her eyes about our sleeping arrangements greeted me, goading me to do what I did best—rush in and take control.

"We'll make it enough." I didn't want to be too brutal with her, but I equally wasn't going to lie. Despite her relative size, Erin was a grown-up. She needed to handle the truth. "Sure, it would have helped to have an extra woodpile, but things could be

worse.”

“Yeah.” Her knitting brows suggested she wasn’t sure she agreed, but she said nothing further.

I could see the anxiety snaking in her, though, wrapping itself around her throat until her breaths became shorter and raspy. She needed me to reassure her and make decisions.

It was just as well I was dying to make them for her.

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“Are you feeling warmer now?” I turned to her, aware that her legs and feet were still exposed.

Bared beneath the blanket I’d offered, she was truly vulnerable. My pulse sped up at the delectable thought. I liked the idea of her helplessness almost as much as I wanted to look after her.

“A little, thank you.” She feigned a smile. “I’m not looking forward to climbing into the bed, though. I bet it will be freezing.”

A glance in the bed’s direction confirmed the basis for her unease. Positioned on the opposite side of the cabin to the fire, it would likely reflect a temperature closer to the door than the flames.

“Want me to move it over here?” I could manage it, especially if she lent a hand.

“Would you?” Her voice was hopeful.

“I wouldn’t offer otherwise.” Stalking to the end of the bed, I moved the chair out of the way. “Can you help?”

“Erm, sure.” She tied the top of the blanket in a knot at her hip. “Okay.”

“I suggest we drag it toward the fire.” It was only a few feet of effort. “Can you take the other side of the bedstead? We’ll see how we do.”

She moved into position. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good.” Weaker and less experienced than me she might have been, but I had no doubt she was capable. She’d exhibited her mettle in the clearing before James and Miles had fallen. “We move on three. Three, two, one...”

Pulling at the post, I hauled it ten inches or so across the timber floor. The noise of the wooden bed grating against the wood flooring filled the space around us, and when I glanced up, I noticed she’d managed almost as far at her end.

“It’s harder than it looks.” Her face lit up in the first natural display of exhilaration since she’d laid eyes on the waterfall, and a shot of hope bloomed inside me. If she kept the faith, I could get her through this.

I have to.

I couldn’t lose them all—couldn’t add another specter to my list of lost souls.

“You’re doing fine,” I encouraged. “Let’s go again.”

Inhaling, she squatted, waiting for my count before she heaved her post further along the floor.

“This is quite the workout.” Her smile was weary as she rose to stretch out her back.

“It will be worth it,” I reminded her. “When you go to sleep by the heat of the fire.”

“I know.” She swallowed. “I want to thank you for letting me take the bed. I know you didn’t have to.”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

I left it at that, preferring not to mention how I’d imagined what it would be like to

climb into the bed beside her and spoon her tempting body. Her reaction to the mere idea of sharing with me had shown me her reluctance, and I guessed that was understandable.

We were two strangers trapped in the cabin. Nothing more. Only two random people thrown together by circumstance.

It was ridiculous of me to contemplate how soft her skin might be, or how it would feel to tangle my limbs with hers, and wrong to imagine the noises escaping her throat when I slid my shaft into her warm, wet places.

“Ready to move the bed again?” Lunging for the post, I held her gaze.

The light shining in her eyes insisted I pause for one further second. Her pupils conveyed a knowing I hadn’t noticed before, a sense that she might know what was on my mind after all, but in an instant, the look was gone.

“Yes.” Her fingers tightened on the wood. “I’m ready.”

We continued, lugging the bed past the table and on inch by inch until finally it filled the space between the spare logs and the fireplace. Peering back into the comparative gloom of the unlit half of the room, I noticed the path the posts had taken scratched into the floor.

“Well, I’m feeling warmer now!” She laughed, flinging her arms out as she collapsed onto the blanket-covered bed.

“Best you get under the covers, then,” I jested, dragging the chair to the side of the bed nearest the flames and sinking onto its hard seat. Adjusting to its uncompromising confines, I wished I’d been less of a gentleman and taken the bed for myself. If I’d climbed into it first, she’d have had no choice but to either take the

chair or share the bed with me. “You need to capture that body heat.”

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“Good thinking.” Stretching out on the covers, she glanced my way. “I’ll do that.”

Chapter Ten

Body Heat

Erin

SLEEP WAS NO FRIEND.

I’d searched for its solace long after I’d bade Eli goodnight, turning under the blankets over and over but finding no relief. Even with the top half of my body still clothed and the benefit of the blaze nearby, the sheets were frozen beneath me, and whichever way I curled, there was no avoiding the cold’s steely grasp.

Huddling into a ball to conserve heat, harrowing memories from the day returned to torment me. Each new recollection intensified the adrenaline rushing around my system, making my ultimate goal of sleep all the more out of reach.

The same could not be said for my tour guide and newfound protector, though. Peering out past the shadows, I could hear the gentle sound of Eli’s breathing cutting through the fire’s reliable hisses, the rhythmic cadence convincing me that he had definitely found rest.

Blowing out a breath, I realized I was glad. My best chance of staying alive was if he

was well-rested, though I'd have preferred for us both to find repose. Pressing my face into the lackluster pillow, I closed my eyes and willed slumber to come. If Eli had managed to sleep on that uncomfortable chair, I could manage an hour or two in the bed.

Wrapping my arms around my chilly legs, I counted my breathing, taking in air for the count of two, and then elongating my exhale for the count of four.

In for two.

Out for four.

The mantra played in my mind like a chorus stuck on repeat.

Staring into the darkness, I was still awake but more relaxed than before.

“Erin?”

My heart rate immediately sped up. “Who’s there?”

Only Eli and I were in the cabin, his gentle snores assuring me he was still asleep, yet I'd heard another voice—a woman.

“Erin, how could you?”

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Sitting bolt upright in the bed, I tugged the covers with me. Someone was there, and she seemed to know me, yet however hard I peered into the dark, I couldn't make her out.

“Who is this?”

The gloom shifted around me as though it were alive, revealing the silhouette of a person—the woman I'd heard. I could scarcely pull in a breath as her shadowy outline edged forward from the blacker hues, but the temperature around me seemed to fall with every second I watched her.

Forcing my gaze away from the mirage, I acknowledged what should have been obvious. The fire had gone out, abandoning the cabin to shadow and ice.

“You left me.” The nameless female was closer still, though I heard no evidence of her footsteps.

Recoiling against the bed, I realized I did recognize her voice.

She wasn't nameless after all.

“Chelle?” My breath was just about visible between us. “Is that you?”

How could she be there? She'd headed in the opposite direction from the cabin and didn't know we'd be there. I wanted to believe it was her, though. Longed to think that somehow, despite the snow and her frantic desperation, she'd managed to cling to life and find her way to me.

“How could you have left me?” Her words came again, but they were steelier that time, as though she’d spat them in my direction.

“You left me!” Tears welled at her recriminating tone. Why was she so angry? I’d begged her not to go. “But I’m so happy you’re here. I’m glad you’re okay!”

“I’m not okay,” she hissed, nudging at the blankets by my feet as her presence neared. I froze, willing my numb toes to move but unable to make them. “I’m fucking dead, you moron!”

“What?” I couldn’t make sense of what I was hearing. “You can’t be dead! You wouldn’t be here talking to me if you were.”

“And yet I am.” Her tone dripped with disdain. “Not an hour dead and I find myself here. Is this the afterlife, Erin?” She snorted. “Or is this hell? Trapped in the darkness with the people who failed to save James.”

“Please.” Thick, ugly tears fell, burning my flesh as they trailed along my face. “Don’t say that. I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t want you to leave!”

“Look at you.” She floated closer still, and even though I couldn’t see her face, I sensed her sneer searing me. Loathing was coming from her energy in waves, forcing me to shrink back against the pathetic pillows. “Parading yourself half-naked with him when you should be out there looking for me and James!”

“Chelle, don’t...” It wasn’t like my friend to be so cruel. She missed James—of course she did—but there was a viciousness to her tone that I didn’t recognize.

Whoever loomed before me was not the woman I’d laughed and clung to for the last ten years. She was someone else.

“Pitiful.” She tutted. “Who knew you were such a whore.”

“No!” Anger flared inside me.

How dare she accuse me of something so disgusting? What was a whore anyway, except a woman judged to enjoy too much of her own sexuality? The Chelle I knew was better than that.

“That’s not true,” I countered. “I’m notwithEli. He’s only trying to help me. I—”

“Whore!” Her voice was louder as she interrupted me. “Nothing but a fucking whore!”

“Stop it!”

Taking a deep breath, I hollered the words so loudly that I burst out of the bubble of hollow sleep I’d fallen into and lurched from the dream.

Awake and trembling, I found myself in a cold sweat in the bed, listening to the wind whipping around the side of the building.

“Erin?” Eli sounded groggy as he stirred from the chair. “What’s wrong?”

Noises reverberated in the darkness, the sounds of him moving, but all I could think about was the dreadful dream. I’d fallen asleep in the end, but all my guilt-ridden mind could drag up was a horrific visit from Chelle’s ghost.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“Erin?” A stark beam of illumination appeared from the flashlight he’d found, forcing me to turn away from its glare.

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“Just a bad dream.” Shivering, I tugged the blankets around me. Drenched in a layer of sweat, I was colder than ever.

“You’re freezing.” He scowled, moving closer.

“Can we light another fire?”

Though, even as I asked, I knew the answer. There wasn’t enough wood.

“Not yet.” His tone was soft. “Best we preserve what we have.”

“Yeah.” I knew he was right, but my quivering limbs begged to differ. I needed warmth from somewhere, and I needed it soon. “But I’m so c-cold.”

“Let me help.” His body grazed the edge of the bed, his face only just visible in the periphery of the beam’s intensity, and I noticed he’d undressed from the waist up.

“H-help how?”

“I don’t feel the cold.” He chuckled. “I guess that’s part of the reason I’ve been so good at the job.”

“So?” I wasn’t following his train of thought.

“So, you can have some of my body heat.” Placing the flashlight on the bed, he stared at me.

“Sh-share the bed with you?” I thought we’d had that conversation already.

“You’re making it sound illicit.” His stare hardened. “When that’s not how I mean it. I’m just saying, I’m hot and you’re not.”

He reached for my hand, encasing my pale fingers in the weight of his larger and considerably warmer palm. “See.”

Ididsee, or ratherfeel.

Even though there was only a single shaft of light in the space, the temperature of his palm was suddenly everything. If all of Eli was as warm as his hand and he wrapped those long, lithe limbs around mine, I’d be toasty again in no time.

But it will mean sharing the bed with him.

My breath hitched. Contemplating sharing with him while the memory of Chelle’s recriminations rang in my ears stung. Even though I knew she hadn’t really said those words, they’d still injured me. Not least because the absence of Chelle in the cabin could only mean one thing—that I’d invented those insults for myself. Somewhere, deep down, I believed my attraction to Eli was, at least in part, to blame for what had happened to her and the others.

The twisting knot of energy in my tummy reinforced the doubts. If I hadn’t felt that tug to Eli, I might have been kinder to James. If I hadn’t been eyeing the rugged good looks of our guide, then maybe I could have talked him and Miles down from the edge of the clearing.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...

I wasn’t sure any of my mental ramblings constituted the truth, but they were lodged

there in my psyche, regardless.

“You are warm.” I clung to his hand.

“So?” Leaning toward me, his face came into view. Twinkling with a mischievous glint I’d never noticed before, his eyes persuaded me that it wasn’t half as cold as I thought. There, in that moment, his gleaming gaze seemed able to warm me without even the need for touch. “Is that a yes?”

Chapter Eleven

The Thaw

Eli

“YES.” ERIN’S VOICE rasped as she opened the covers and slid across the bed. “Thank you.”

A chorus of angels I didn’t believe in cheered in my head as I stowed my gun safely by the side of the bed and dove between the sheets after her. Securing the blankets over us, I flicked off the flashlight and inched closer. That a woman as lovely as Erin had assented to me holding her at all, let alone thanking me for doing so—whatever the circumstances—was worthy of celebration, but I wouldn’t waste time reveling in my glory. I intended to savor every second of being close to her.

“This is weird.” She sounded nervous as my arms found her body in the darkness and snaked around her.

“Don’t let it be,” I whispered. “Come back toward me.”

She wriggled in my direction, her cute little ass and bare legs the first to graze my trouser-clad legs. Even though there was no skin-to-skin contact, the energy in the room shifted at the new closeness, each breath ramping up the sizzling intensity of what was transpiring.

We're close.

Much closer than we'd ever been, and Erin seemed at ease with the change.

"Wait!" As though she'd heard my thoughts and sought to contradict them, she twisted in my direction. "Your boots! They'll be filthy. You'll need to remove them."

My lips curled at her concern, though she wouldn't have seen the gesture. With my hulking frame beside her in the sheets, she had far bigger things to occupy her than my boots, yet those had been her first thought.

"I took them off hours ago." Along with my sweater and shirt.

Squeezing her shoulder lightly, I encouraged her to relax and felt some of the tension releasing from her muscles. "Don't worry."

She swallowed, the sound amplified in the shadows. "Okay."

"You'll be warm in no time."

Cocooning her body, I sensed she was reticent to fully let her guard down. That was understandable; she'd found herself half-naked in bed with a stranger. Clearly, whatever her objections had been, they had not been strong enough to overrule her reason. She needed to stay warm to stay well, and without the fire, only I could provide that for her.

Wrapped around her diminutive frame, I could exult in all the tiny things I'd never had a chance to enjoy until that moment. The weight of her body pressed against mine, especially when I tightened an arm around her, the little gasp that escaped her lips when my embrace stiffened, causing her breathing to spike, and the honeyed scent of her hair as I snuggled behind her. Those were all treasures I'd never been

allowed before, but finally, they were mine.

“How’s that for you?” My cock swelled at her sudden vicinity, throbbing as I took in her sweet, soothing smell.

“Better, thank you.”

Once more, she hesitated, the lingering unwillingness to accept there was anything going on except two people sharing body heat. Perhaps, for her, that was true. Maybe she truly felt nothing for me save for the need to survive, but being so close to her body made it all but impossible for me to think of anything but what it would be like to slide my hand beneath her top and discover how her nipples would respond to my caress.

Stop it. My jaw clenched. She doesn’t want that.

“Good.” I wondered if she could hear my growing arousal from my strained tone.

The bulge in my pants was shielded by the layers between us, but surely, she was a woman of the world. Erin was in her forties. She knew what men thought about when they held a woman, especially in bed. It couldn’t be long before she noticed my interest.

“Try and sleep.” Squeezing my eyes closed, I willed myself to do the same, but I knew already it was hopeless. No man could sleep with a raging erection and a beautiful woman within his grasp. “You’ll need your energy for tomorrow.”

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“Yes.” She squirmed beside me, grazing her alluring backside against my trousers.

Fuck.

I bit back on the moan that tried to escape my mouth. Had she done that on purpose, or was it just the action of a woman attempting to get comfortable?

Curled around her in the shadows, there was no way of knowing, but it didn’t change reality. She did need to rest—we both did. I was pretty damn certain there’d be no sleep on the horizon for me, especially if she was going to writhe that way all night.

We lay there together in silence, both pretending to sleep, when I suspected we were both wide awake. I could hear her rapid breaths and feel the tension in her body as she, presumably, consciously considered each move at my side. Suddenly, her senses seemed heightened, as if she was well aware of how each precarious wriggle might affect me. Inching my head closer to hers on the pillow, I breathed in her delightful aroma again, thankful for the good fortune that had found me there in bed with her.

It had been a long time since I’d been in bed with any woman.

Too long.

I’d started to wonder if I would ever know that delight again, but then James’s job had landed in my inbox—a thousand bucks for taking four city-dwellers around the park for the day—and it had been too good to refuse. I’d snapped up the offer, wanting the cash, and generally, enjoying the work.

The forest was an old friend of mine and one I respected. I'd been living in and around it for so long that taking tourists under my wing had become a necessary, if laborious, part of my life.

"Thank you again for this." She broke the edgy quiet, turning her head a little my way. "I know it's..." She paused, apparently unsure how to proceed.

"What?" I prompted, eager to hear her thoughts.

Had her provocative little ass wiggle been inadvertent, or a symptom of a much deeper yearning she was attempting to suppress?

The latter. My pulse accelerated at my silent prayer. Say it's the latter.

"Different." She heaved in a breath. "Being here, with me, like this."

"It's my job to keep you safe, remember?"

"I remember." She snuggled her head into the crook of my collar, sending a fresh wave of her honeyed scent washing over me as I welcomed the latest intimacy. Choosing to be so close to me had to mean something, didn't it? Save for consenting for me to join her there, it was the closest thing to an invitation she'd offered. "But I can't imagine holding your clients like this is usually part of the deal."

"No," I agreed. "It's not, but I'm happy to take the perks of the job."

A heavy wall of hush descended at my quip, and staring into the gloom, I didn't know what that meant. Had my witticism upset her? Had I gone too far already and driven a wedge between the wonderful new status quo and any chance of getting to know her better? The black of night shrouding us offered no clues.

“Is that what this is?” Her voice was breathy. “Is that what I am? A perk?”

“You’re a beautiful woman,” I clarified, relieved at least that she didn’t sound snubbed. “But I’m sorry if I offended you. I meant no insult.”

“You didn’t...” She paused as though she couldn’t believe she’d said so aloud. “And thank you... for the compliment.”

“I mean it.” Taking a risk, I skimmed my left hand down to her bared thigh and rested it on her soft skin. She was so fucking enticing, so close to me and yet still so far. “It really is a pleasure to look after you.”

“I don’t normally do things like this...” She suddenly sounded so unsure.

“Like what?” My thumb traced invisible circles over her skin, and I waited to see if she’d respond. Maybe, irritated by the gesture, she’d bat the hand away, or perhaps she’d relax, inviting more. “Go hiking?”

We both knew I was being facetious, and I smiled at the sound of her anxious laughter.

“I definitely don’t normally do that.” Her tone was emphatic. “And after this, I doubt I’ll ever come to the woods again.”

“That’s a shame,” I breathed onto the side of her neck, grazing my hand a little higher along the curve of her ass. My dick throbbed urgently at my hand’s progress, demanding that it, too, be permitted to make the journey, but I ignored its urgent call. “Nature is beautiful.”

“And lethal.” Her tone was clipped, yet still she didn’t try to fend me off.

“Sometimes, yes.” I hesitated, aware it was James and Miles on her mind and not me.
“But not always. When it comes to destruction, nature doesn’t hold a candle to man.”

“That’s true.” Her hand reached for mine, but rather than push me away, she only splayed her fingers, enmeshing them with my digits. Triumph roared in my mind, forcing my lips to curl. It was the first time she’d touched me, and it boded well.
“Man can be a problem.”

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“Yes... but sometimes, man can be advantageous.” I liked the way our interaction was heading. Her body seemed to soften with every gentle word, and she lifted one foot, draping it tentatively over the top of my leg.

“Advantageous, how?”

Her teasing tone begged me to be bolder, and dragging my palm to the underside of her ass, I abandoned her hand and squeezed her tight behind. Desire rocketed at the feel of her taut backside, insisting I dip my fingers between her pert cheeks, but I resisted, waiting to see how she’d react to my temerity.

“What are you doing?” That same husky tone met my ears.

“Exploring you.” Leaning closer, my mouth found her neck, and I nuzzled on her tempting nape. Seconds merged into minutes as our skin collided, her gasps only intensifying my pursuit.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “We shouldn’t.”

Trapped between my lips and my hands, she twisted, exposing more of her neck, and I obliged gladly, imagining the red marks my attention would leave on her sensitive skin.

“I’m here to warm you,” I whispered eventually, covering her seat with my palm. She was so petite that the underside of my hand almost covered her alluring derriere entirely. A rush of energy raced along my spine, temporarily robbing me of breath as I considered landing that palm on her ass repeatedly. How would she react to the

physical rebuke, and how could I possibly justify the brutality? “And that means all of you.”

“Yes.” She rolled onto her back, crushing my hand beneath her until I snaked it free. Something had altered in her as she stretched, and I didn’t need the light to see it. Whatever walls she’d erected to keep me out had begun to crumble, and her voice spoke of desire. “All of me needs body heat.”

The breathless and wanton banshee squirming beside me was nothing like the coy and reserved woman who’d requested to sleep in the bed alone. Perhaps whatever barriers she’d constructed had weakened the moment the lights had gone out, and there, in the sway of the night, a new power had overtaken her, one that had possibly even taken her by surprise—the strength of her lust.

She wants me. The thought lit me up, tightening my balls as it consumed me. She’s too afraid to say it, but she wants me.

“Come here.” Drawing her closer, I wrapped my free arm around her.

She shifted without complaint, squirming against me as she yielded and pushing her panty-covered sex toward my groin.

“Eli.”

Had anyone ever made my name sound so fucking dirty and flawed before?

She’d complicated everything—with her complexity of emotion and her so-called friends. The woman was a living contradiction. She didn’t want to hike, but she’d enjoyed being in nature. She hadn’t wanted to share the bed but seemingly had changed her mind on that score. Everything she touched spoke of paradox, while each sensation she inspired magnetized inside me.

“Tell me what you want.”

Heat surged between us as my palms separated and swept around her body. My left hand delved beneath her underwear between her legs, stroking at her inner thigh, while the right one lived out the fantasy playing in my head and slid beneath her clothing to find the soft cups of her bra.

All thoughts of the tour guide who’d sought to make a good impression on her were lost. That version of me—the one who’d given up the bed—had evaporated between the sheets, replaced by one at the mercy of his rampant lust.

I’d wanted her from the first moment I’d laid eyes on her. The pretty brown-haired woman with the large green eyes and the bristling defiance was the personification of everything I’d spent long nights dreaming about and, in that moment, she was mine.

“This.” Her voice was pained, as though admitting her need had stung.

Perhaps it had.

I didn’t know her or her history. All I could promise in the confines of the cold cabin bed was that while we were sprawled together, I would ensure she had everything she needed.

“You.” Her hand pushed my palm to her breast, urging me to take what I wanted.
“Please.”

“Like this?” Brushing over her nipple, my fingers elongated the bud until she released a throaty cry.

“Oh, God.” Her hips rolled forward. “Yes!”

That noise—the sensual sound of her surrender—was everything. In one blissful instant, it became the center of my entire universe.

Her breasts were so responsive, her nipple puckering between my fingers as I coaxed more breathy whimpers from her.

“And this?” My other hand yanked at her panties, pulling them up until the fabric tugged at her clit.

“Jesus, Eli.” She threw her head back against me. “What are you doing?”

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“Giving you what you need.” There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that she yearned for the attention. Her body communicated all the needs she was too afraid, or ashamed, to say. “I bet this little clit is desperate for me.”

Slipping a finger underneath her bunched panties, I brushed my fingertip over the bundle of nerves, grinning at the way she lurched.

“Fuck!” She reached for the hand, halting its progress, but I nudged her fingers away.

“Keep your hands to yourself,” I cautioned. “Or I’ll find a way to keep them out of my way.”

“What do you mean?” She writhed harder when my free hand found her other nipple and started work on beading and teasing the bud.

“I mean, I’ll tether you.” I was sure I had another length of rope in my rucksack.

“But...”

“But nothing.” I pulled her hand down to her side. “That’s your first and only warning, Erin. Now, open your legs.”

“You can’t do this.” Her ankles slid wider, despite the protesting noises from her mouth. “You can’t threaten to bind me.”

“It’s not a threat.” My shaft was so hard; the pulsing organ was painful as it grazed its fabric prison. “It’s a promise.”

My fingers dove back to her underwear, ripping her damp panties to one side and skimming a line over her pussy. Hot, slick moisture met my fingertips as they enjoyed her wetness, my cock aching to be allowed to take their place.

“So wet for me.” I couldn’t have been prouder. “Already.”

“I...” Her breathing was labored as her hand reached north for my hair. Burying her fingers in its dark length, she whimpered, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Oh, there’s nothing wrong with you,” I assured her. “You’re fucking perfect.”

Pushing one digit into her sex slowly, I relished every second of her mewled response.

“You want more?”

“Please,” she panted, her fingers tightening in my hair. “Oh, yes.”

My shaft throbbed desperately, concurring with the longing in her voice as I slid a second finger to join my first. Easing them from her sex, I enjoyed the benefit of both bared breasts now that her troublesome bra had been pushed aside.

“Fuck.” She sounded frantic, her hips moving in unison with my fingers, rising when they delved into her sweet pussy and falling ever so slightly when they eased away.

Her growing euphoria filled up the cabin, the feverish noises escaping her lips coupling with the wet sounds of her sex to create an orchestra of her desire.

“That’s it,” I enthused as she ground her clit against the palm of my hand. “Use me. I want you to come apart. I want to feel it.”

“Eli!” She lurched, her limbs tensing as she called my name. “Oh, God. I’m going to come!”

I considered withdrawing, making her wait and suffer while I took what I wanted but decided then was not the time. There would come a moment when her savior—the man who’d rescued her from the wild and protected her interests would reveal who he really was—but pushing her to the stars was not that time.

Let little Erin have her moment in the sunshine.

Let her bask in its rays until all she knew was the heat ravishing her body.

The winter would be waiting.

Chapter Twelve

Fallout

Erin

SLEEP CRASHED OVER me after the high, its intensity so great that when I stirred from its grasp, I couldn't immediately recall how I had succumbed to it. I remembered the weight of the pleasure as it robbed me of breath. It was greater than anything I'd experienced without the use of my vibrator, but then—where there should have been the solace of Eli's touch, or maybe even pillow talk—there was nothing.

Nothing.

My brow creased. How could there be nothing? Something must have happened in the aftermath.

Had we talked? Murmured words in the aftershocks that my foggy brain couldn't remember? I didn't know, and when I tried to recall, all I could recollect was the scent and strength of him.

I still knew nothing about Eli, how the hell we were going to get out of the abandoned cabin, and worse, no idea if Chelle was alive.

Guilt ricocheted in my chest at the thought of my friend. I'd welcomed him into the bed and assented to pleasure while she could have been out there, freezing in the wilderness.

What had I been thinking?

Swallowing down the nausea threatening to rise at my complicity, the answer hit me squarely in the face—I hadn't been thinking.

I'd recognized how attractive Eli was from the beginning, but I'd never have allowed myself to give in to those feelings. It was only the sheer enormity of my predicament when he'd found the cabin—my exhaustion and the grim knowledge that we didn't have enough wood to keep warm—that had worn me down and lubricated the wheels of my consent.

My eyes flitted closed.

The dream I'd had about Chelle before I'd woken screaming, where she'd accused me of being a whore, had turned out to be a dark prophecy. When push had come to shove, I'd reveled in the climax he'd offered without so much as a thought to Chelle, or even for the man who'd delivered the crescendo. In the end, despite how much he'd turned me on and my soul-shattering release, I must have fallen straight to sleep. He hadn't forced himself on me—a quick squeeze of the muscles between my legs confirmed that—and he hadn't made any other demands. I'd seemingly taken what he had to offer without so much as a thank you.

Gulping down my rising shame, I couldn't decide what troubled me the most. The fact that hours had passed, and I still didn't know where or how Chelle was, or the slutty memory of permitting his caresses while selfishly exulting in them.

I shouldn't have cared what he thought of me—shouldn't have needed his

approval—yet the reality remained that I did. The idea that he might be angry or upset knotted concern deep in my belly. Eli had done nothing but help me. He'd even offered to warm me once the fire had died, and what had I done in return? I took the orgasm he gifted and slipped straight into unconsciousness.

Not that it isn't what men have done for centuries.

I cringed at the sorry performance, knowing my exhaustion was to blame. I'd never known a day like the one I'd just lived through, and despite the solace I'd found in his arms, I hoped I never would again.

Tuning into the room around me and concentrating on what I could hear, I attempted to focus. His rhythmic breathing sounded from behind me, reminding me of the way I'd behaved and compelling me to edge away onto the cold portion of the bed. I didn't have a plan as I shuffled from the sheets and allowed my sock-covered feet to hit the cold, hard floor. All I knew was that I'd made a series of mistakes. I should never have let Chelle leave us, should never have permitted Eli to join me in the bed, and absolutely shouldn't have allowed him access to my body.

Yet, I'd done all three things, and I had to live with the consequences.

Tugging my underwear back into place, I rolled down my clothing. Dawn was breaking on a distant horizon, letting the first beads of light radiate through the cabin's dark windowpanes. The dim illumination lit a portion of the bed, revealing the top half of his bared, muscular body. My gaze raked over his expanse of pectorals, the sight doing nothing to quell my wretched emotions.

He was gorgeous—a quiet, deep thinker who was good in a crisis and just happened to have an incredible body tucked away under his clothes— but however good he looked, I didn't know what to do next. Was it better that I dressed and left, that I slipped away and took my chances alone, or should I wait for him to rouse and deal

with the fallout? Perhaps I could pretend nothing had happened between us and carry on as we'd been before.

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The churning anxiety in my stomach concluded what was obvious. Both plans were equally dreadful. I wouldn't do well out there on my own, yet the idea of staying and waiting to see how angry he was with me didn't thrill me, either.

Creeping around the edge of the bed, I lowered, finding my leggings in the shadows. All the garments had been parched by the flames, and though the leggings didn't feel soft or comfortable, they were at least dry. Perching on the edge of the chair, I held my breath as I slipped them on.

There was no conscious decision to leave as I moved, no conclusion that required me to abandon Eli, but by the time I'd dressed, put on my boots, and found my raincoat, my mind was made up. He'd done what he could for me, but it was time for me to move on. I vaguely recalled the route we'd taken up the hill to find the cabin, and from there, I could use what remained of the path to find a route down. There would be someone at the tourist information center who could help me, and hopefully they'd have news of what had happened to Chelle and the others.

It wasn't a perfect plan, but at least I'd decided.

A glance out of the window revealed the snow had finally stopped coming down, the view brightening my spiraling mood. The optimism was dashed, though, when I noticed how deep the drifts were against the base of the nearby trees. One or two piles of snow looked so deep that I might disappear to the waist if I were to step out into them.

I paused at the sight, my resolve to leave solo wavering. I still didn't have adequate attire for the conditions, and we'd already eaten some of the food I'd brought, but

still... the notion of waiting for him to wake and bombard me with questions motivated me to move.

Surely, it was better to just leave and alleviate our embarrassment.

“Disgrace, you mean!”

It was Chelle’s voice that whipped through my head, though when I spun around, she was just the way she’d been in the dream—nowhere to be found.

“Chelle?”

I whispered her name, conscious not to wake Eli, although even as I spoke, I knew she wasn’t really there.

I was no longer sleeping and privy to the whims of lurid dreams. Wide awake, I could tell the difference between what was real and what was only happening in my head, and I knew my friend wasn’t in the cabin.

“I saw you...” Still, her voice came, oozing with disdain. The resonance of her disgust seemed to bounce off the thin, wooden walls, although I accepted it was only truly reverberating in my mind. “Writhing about with him, chasing your fucking orgasm when you should have been worrying about me!”

Chelle.

I forced myself to say the word mentally, refusing to give into the madness of talking aloud to a figment of my own imagination.

That’s not true, Chelle.

But it was.

In all the time I'd snaked in the sheets with Eli, I hadn't thought about her once, hadn't considered her frozen fate or whether she was even alive. Culpability stabbed in my chest, reminding me what a self-serving bitch I was.

"Do the right thing for once!" Chelle's voice taunted. "Get out there and fucking find me!"

But...I glanced around wildly. I don't know where you are.

"I almost made it." The anger radiating from Chelle's voice was replaced with sadness. "I stopped by an enormous fir tree for rest, closed my eyes, and never woke up again."

Fuck. The well of nausea twisted inside me until my hand flew to my mouth to prevent the upcoming onslaught. I'm so sorry.

Grateful not to have to vocalize the words, I registered the tears burning in my eyes.

Was she dead?

The hopelessness of her potential plight cemented my decision. Whatever had happened with Eli was irrelevant. I had to do something, had to get out there and discover her, even if that meant bringing her body home to her parents.

Wiping the water from my eyes, I headed for the old bedside unit standing between me and freedom. I hadn't had to move it the day before, but it wasn't that big. I was sure if I put my back into it, I'd be able to clear the doorway. Pausing in front of the thing, I contemplated how to push it without disturbing the sleeping giant in the bed behind me. Whichever way I considered the problem, though, there was no easy

answer. I had to move the furniture to get out of the door, and there was no quiet way to achieve that.

“Shit.” I muttered the word, glancing back quickly to ensure Eli was still asleep. Sure enough, the still form sprawled out in the bed was peaceful and mercifully unaware of my plan. “Here goes nothing.”

Lowering to center my weight behind the unit, I shoved against the wood and prayed by some miracle that the noise of it scraping against the floor wouldn’t stir Eli. Trepidation clawed at my insides, the scratching sound seemingly even louder than the relentless rhythm of my rampant heartbeat.

Oh, God.

I had to get away for Chelle’s sake, but I couldn’t bear the inevitable argument that would follow if Eli woke up. Things would be difficult enough after last night’s one-sided passion, but if he found me about to leave, there’d likely be hell to pay.

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By the time I'd pushed the unit far enough to open the door and slip outside, I hardly dared to peek back in Eli's direction. I hadn't heard any obvious movement from the bed, though, and he hadn't barked any questions at me.

I've got away with it!

Hope bloomed as I edged quietly to my bag and lifted it from the ground. I didn't mean Eli any offense. He'd done more for me than I could have hoped, but things would be better all-around if we just put last night down to experience. We'd been tired and he was trying to comfort me. There was nothing more to talk about.

Steeling myself, my attention turned to what was to come. More snow, more bone-biting cold, and an uncertain future, but at least I wouldn't have to deal with the consequences from the unexpected chemistry I'd found with the rugged tour guide.

Inching forward, I was resolved. I wasn't choosing the easy option to stay and be looked after, but it was the right choice for me, and there was an odd satisfaction to that outcome. One day, I'd look back at that moment—hopefully with Chelle in tow when my dark prediction about her fate had been proven false—and we'd laugh about the encounter. Of course, she'd still be sad about James and Miles, but we'd be able to chuckle about my one night with the enigmatic Eli and how I nearly didn't get away.

I'd got as far as the door handle before that same knowing tone that seemed to be burned into my memory for all time rang out from behind me.

“Erin.”

I froze, my heart hammering at the same moment my feet grew roots to the spot.

“Where are you going?”

Shit.

Every expectation I’d harbored about slipping away into the snow crashed down around me in a thousand shards of glass. Eli was awake, and he’d want answers.

“Eli.” I turned, aware of my face reddening as I struggled to think of a decent comeback.

Why hadn’t I thought about that before I’d got ready to leave? I should have prepared a dozen smart one-liners to armor me, but instead, I’d been hellbent on my so-called plan, and I was clueless.

“Well?” He was out of bed and on his feet in a heartbeat, his lithe movement and lean, strapping body taking me by surprise. A man as large as him shouldn’t have been able to demonstrate such agility, yet somehow, he moved like a feline, closing the space between us in a few casual strides. “I’m waiting for your answer.”

“Are you?” Something about his conceited tone riled me more than it should have. I didn’t intend to snap at him, yet the words falling from my lips were catty and curt. “I don’t owe you anything, including an answer.”

“And that is the wrong answer.” He stalked closer, his expression hard.

In all the potential outcomes I’d played out in my head, I hadn’t imagined one where he was so damn foreboding. I’d anticipated his anger and a few stinging words, but not his sheer physicality.

Stupid.

It all seemed so fucking obvious in the cold light of day. Eli had been physical from the outset. He was a tour guide, for God's sake—paid to be outdoors in the wild all day. I'd rarely met a man as physical as him. His reaction should have been as inevitable as the dawn.

"I'm leaving!" Apprehensive at his sudden proximity, I blurted out my explanation.

"I see that." Folding his strapping arms across his broad chest, he looked almost amused. "And where, might I ask, are you going?"

"Chelle." I didn't sound half as confident that time, my bag skimming the door as I retreated from him. Backed against the wood, I stared into his magnificent eyes, wondering where the conversation would end. I already sensed I'd be on whatever pertained to be the losing side.

"What about Chelle?"

He cocked one dark eyebrow at me, as though he was daring me to offer another paltry response. Not that anything about Chelle was insignificant to me.

"She's out there!" An abrupt surge of emotion rushed from me, stealing the final remnants of my defiance. With it came a rush of heated emotion, the latent guilt that had pressed heavily on me since I'd stirred. "I think she's dead."

"Erin." His brows knitted at my outburst. "We've been through this. She'll have been found by the emergency responders hours ago."

"She wasn't!" Why couldn't I pull myself together around the guy? I was either falling to pieces or practically begging him to fuck me. "She came to me, Eli. She

told me she was dead.”

His chin rose, concern flickering in his otherwise annoyingly captivating gray gaze.

“Erin, are you okay?”

Well, was I?

My reply was a jumbled mess of neurotic ramblings. No wonder he clearly thought I was mad.

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“I know I sound crazy.” Sighing, I sensed my entire plan crumbling around me. “But please, I have to help her.”

“The best way you can help her is to calm down.” He pulled in a breath, and I sensed it was taking every ounce of his patience not to lose his temper. “Stay here and I’ll get another fire going.”

“But Chelle.” I glanced behind me at the door standing between me and the hundreds of feet of snow keeping Chelle and me apart.

“...is okay, Erin.” He edged closer until only inches separated us. “Put the bag down and let’s talk.”

Talk.

My eyes fluttered closed for a moment. The last thing I wanted to do was talk. That was why I’d wanted to go before he woke up.

“No.” I denied the tremble in my voice.

The fact he was there, as large as life, was immaterial. I couldn’t let his handsome looks or domineering character change things. Chelle had told me to find her, and I had to go.

Spinning on my heel, I reached for the door handle. “I’m leaving.”

Drastic Maneuvers

Eli

REACHING OUT, I CAUGHThold of her shoulder strap and tugged her backward.

“I said no.”

Perhaps I hadn’t been clear enough when I’d spoken before. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“What makes you think you’re in charge?” Her brow creased as she glanced around to see what was halting her progress, and at any other moment—if she wasn’t about to act in total defiance to all sense and logic—I’d have found her expression insanely cute.

Her face was heated, much the same way she might have looked after the climax I’d ripped from her sweet cunt in the early hours, but I never had the pleasure of seeing her then. I’d felt her, though. Known the warmth of her body as, overwrought, she’d jerked and moaned through her orgasm, and God, how I’d wanted her. I’d intended to replace my slippery fingers with my rock-hard cock, but by the time I’d looked for consent, she was already fast asleep, her body limp in my arms.

As it was, the version of Erin who’d greeted me when I awoke had me riled up in an entirely different way. That time, instead of seeking my own gratification, my adrenaline was focused on trying to keep her safe. The woman was about to open the door to goodness only knew how much snow and bring it potentially crashing into the hut. She didn’t seem to have thought through her decision.

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“Erin.” My tone was firmer that time. “Enough of this. You’re staying here with me.”

I yanked at her bag for good measure, pulling it from her shoulders despite her reluctance to cede it. Stamping her foot, she swung around as gravity took its weight to the floor between us.

“Why won’t you just let me be?” Her chest was rising and falling at speed, reminding me of the writhing pussy cat who’d taken me right to the edge and then promptly fallen asleep in my arms.

What had happened to that woman?

If I was honest, I’d been pretty disappointed with the way our spontaneous intimacy had concluded. My cock had been ready to explode as she’d spasmed around my fingers, and I wouldn’t forget how the teasing minx had favored sleep over reciprocation, but I much preferred that softened, sexy woman to the insolent version of Erin.

“Because it’s not safe!” How many times did I have to go through this? “Neither of us are going out there until we’re warm again, have eaten, and have a plan.”

I wasn’t exactly being unreasonable.

“But Chelle.” She stared at me keenly, as though she expected me to change my mind, but that wasn’t an option.

Not only was she the sole remaining person left in the party I’d been charged with

leading, but in the hours we'd been forced together, I'd grown rather fond of the riveting brunette. Her actions didn't always make sense to me, but I respected the way she stood up for herself and how much she cared for her friend. Of course, the fact that she had a great body and I knew how good it was to hold her also did nothing to assuage my desire.

I wanted her there with me, wanted more time with her. Whatever the weather, the moment that door was opened, the delicate shoots of that fantasy would be erased. Deep down, I feared that outcome. I wasn't sure why I was so drawn to Erin—she wasn't the first attractive woman I'd taken into the forest—but I sensed there was something special about her. Something I needed to explore.

"I can't just leave her!" She was constantly on the edge of either tears, tantrums, or as I remembered, tantalizing climaxes. "Why can't you understand?"

"I do understand." That was a lie. Little of her behavior made sense to me. "But going out there and getting yourself killed won't help anyone, least of all Chelle."

She frowned, evidently wanting to argue and yet struggling for the right words. "Jesus!" Fresh tears emerged from her beautiful eyes as she slammed her palm against the door. "Why did you have to wake up? I just want to go."

"You won't last out there." Resisting the urge to grab her hand and insist she come away from the exit, I folded my arms in front of me. "I know it and so do you."

I tried not to take what she said personally, but glowering at her, I heard her words ringing in my ears.

Why did you have to wake up? I just want to go!

That hadn't been the greeting I'd hoped for when my arousal had finally ebbed away,

and I'd given in to sleep. I'd hoped for something warmer—a little gratitude perhaps, and a chance of pleasure for myself. The impertinent expression on her face made me wonder why I'd bestowed the carnality on her in the first place.

“Fuck you!” Chest heaving, she jabbed a delicate finger in my direction. “I’ll do fine out there, but you won’t let me leave.”

“That’s funny.” I’d had just about enough of her attitude. I might have respected how feisty she could be, but there was a limit to my patience, and whether she realized it or not, little Erin was rapidly approaching it. “Fucking me was just what I had in mind this morning, but instead, I get this little song and dance routine.”

“There’s no way you’re fucking me.” The venom accompanying her hissed words hurt more than their meaning. “I wouldn’t fuck you if you were the last man on Earth!”

Logically, I accepted she was angry at some perceived loss of liberty, although God knew why. I was trying to look after her, not harm her. But I couldn’t tolerate the way she thought it was acceptable to weaponize our arousal against me. I’d been there with her in the dark. I knew precisely how aroused she’d been, recalling her deliciousness in agonizing detail. Any inference to the contrary wasn’t only cruel, it was patently untrue.

“Watch your tone.”

“Or, what?” She leaned toward me, audacity glaring in her eyes as though she was daring me to bend her over and show her ‘what’ would happen. “What are you going to do, Eli?”

“I’m glad you asked.” I could have laughed at her performance. She was begging for someone to take her in hand, and that someone was me. “I’ll show you.”

I moved like lightning, wrapping my hand around her wrist and yanking her toward me. Lurching forward, her expression crumbled from temerity to shock. Apparently, despite her gall, she hadn't expected me to respond. Turning toward the chair, I suppressed my growing glee. Things were only going to get tougher for stunned little Erin.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she gasped as I hauled her with me. "Stop it! You can't do this!"

"Which is it, Erin?" Pausing suddenly, I smiled as she stumbled straight into me. "Are you asking what I'm doing, or do you already know?"

"What?" Her gaze flitted from the place I held her to my face, desperation flashing in her wonderful eyes. I'd have wagered she was contemplating whether she could prize my fingers from her, but her hesitation was smart. Even if I allowed the deed, it would not go unpunished. "Please, Eli. You're hurting me."

My attention darted to the same spot reflexively. "I'm not hurting you." Yet. "But I am showing you what happens when you don't speak to me with respect."

Confusion flickered in her expression as she tried, and failed, to pull her arm from me. "So, why have you dragged me across the cabin?"

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Smirking, I nudged the chair into place with my foot and perched on the edge of its seat. Refusing her frantic pleas to be free, I insisted she come with me, yanking her to my right side. Teetering on the brink of the moment I'd fantasized about since I'd first laid eyes on her, there was no way I was going to back down. Little Erin had pushed, apparently anxious for a response, and she was about to get one.

"Eli, please."

"Much though I like to hear you beg, you can save it for now." My grip on her wrist stiffened as her face blanched. "I'll help you, Erin, but I won't tolerate such flagrant disrespect."

"I..." That stopped her in her tracks, her free hand rising in a conciliatory gesture. "Okay, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be such a bitch. I'm just worried about Chelle and..." Her voice trailed away.

"And?" My stare drilled into her. "Andwhat, Erin?"

"And I'm embarrassed." She twisted away from me, avoiding eye contact. "About what happened last night."

"Embarrassed?" What did that mean? Did she regret what we'd done?

I'd assumed her behavior was down to her neurosis about her friend. It hadn't even occurred to me that she was uncomfortable about the orgasm I'd inspired.

"Why?" Tugging her harder, the front of her thighs grazed the side of the chair. There

was no way for her to avoid my gaze anymore, her focus forced back to my face.
“Why are you embarrassed?”

“Because...” She squeezed her eyes closed, her only remaining option to block out the sight of me.

I was definitely losing patience. “Because you seemed mightily fine with me looking after your needs last night. I don’t remember any complaints.”

“Fine!” She straightened. “Because I’m mortified that I fell asleep afterward!” She spat out the words as if they’d left a nasty taste in her mouth.

My lips tugged at her reluctant admission. “Is that all you’re worried about?”

“No.” She tried futilely to free her wrist again. “I’m worried about Chelle. I was just trying to avoid having this conversation with you, that’s all.” Her concentration fell to the floor. “I was wrong. I should have stayed to talk before I left.”

“Yes, you were wrong.”

The way she swung from one emotion to the next fascinated me.

“But you have nothing to be embarrassed about.” My free hand rose to capture hers, our digits enmeshing as I continued. “I bloody loved pleasuring you.”

A spot of rouge pooled on her cheeks. “I’m not good at this, Eli.”

“Telling the truth?” My tone was wry. I was the last person in a position to lecture her about honesty.

“Maybe,” she mumbled. “Not where my feelings are concerned, anyway. I just

wanted to get out there and help Chelle.”

“Okay.” My thumb stroked the side of her hand. “I get that Chelle was your focus, but it still doesn’t mean you can indulge in outbursts like that around me.”

“Why?” Her breathing had accelerated again, as though she instinctively understood how risky that line of argument was.

“Because there are consequences.” My fingers closed over hers.

I’d intended to drag her over there and haul her pretty little ass over my lap for a well-needed spanking, but her sudden contrition had altered things. She was still going to have her ass tanned, but I was more inclined to talk her through her mistakes rather than only act.

“What kind of consequences?” Her tone had shifted to little more than a teasing purr, suggesting she might already know the answer.

“The type that sees your backside red and sore.”

Her eyes were the size of teacups. “What?”

Obviously, I’d been wrong. She hadn’t seen my answer coming.

“You heard me.” The excitement whipping around me had morphed into that same visceral energy that had seen her surrender so beautifully in bed. “I’m going to spank you.”

“I’m not a child.” Her protest was weak by comparison to her earlier outrage, and I noticed how she no longer tried to pull away.

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“No.” Unable to suppress my smile, I met her gaze. “I can confirm you’re most definitely not.”

“You don’t spank grown women.”

I swore her body swayed closer as she caught her lower lip between her white teeth. Every fiber of her being was focused my way as I gave my answer. “I do.”

“Eli...”

Yep, her voice had that same rasping quality I’d heard when she’d opened her legs for me. Erin’s body was surrendering, even if her mind was struggling to catch up.

“What?” My free hand left hers and settled on her ass. The perfect cheek beneath my palm tensed, and I waited to see what she’d do next.

“We both know you deserve to be spanked for the way you behaved.” My brow rose, challenging her to counter the point.

“I’ve never been spanked in my life!” She inhaled as I took the additional liberty of squeezing her delectable cheek.

Fuck.

The act spoke directly to my cock, which was still unhappy with denial. It sensed an opportunity, though, there in the cabin—a chance to finally right that wrong. The room should have been cold. There hadn’t been a fire for hours and there was nothing

but snow-covered terrain in all directions for miles, but somehow, the temperature seemed to be rising.

“Then this will be your first time.” My palm skimmed to her upper thigh, clutching her gently. She was fucking flawless, and in the morning light, even the contradictory parts of her nature that riled me only amplified my desire.

I wanted her, and she wasn’t going to get away again.

“You can’t be serious.” She glanced around as though there was someone else to come to her rescue, but I had bad news for Erin. It was only her and me in that cabin, and I’d been left waiting for long enough.

“I’m deadly serious.”

One little push. That was all she needed, and in a heartbeat, my hand rose from her ass to her lower back to provide it. She went with a yelp, tumbling over me with such grace that I couldn’t believe she hadn’t known it had been my plan all along.

“Oh, God!” She twisted back to glance at me, but rather than the recriminating glare I’d expected, concern danced in her eyes. “Eli.”

“Hush.” My palm pressed against her backside again, taunting my dick with the object of its desire. “You’re getting spanked, Erin, and I’m not promising to be gentle.”

“But...”

Lifting my hand, I ended her sentence as I brought my palm crashing down hard over her leggings-covered ass.

Chapter Fourteen

Shock Waves

Erin

ICOULDN'T BELIEVE what was happening. I'd been at the door, ready to fucking leave, and then suddenly, he was on me, his vice-like grip making it clear I had no option but to come to heel.

Gasping when his hand struck my upturned cheeks a second time, I could hardly think, but the muscles at the apex of my sex clenched at the debilitating idea of my submission. Eli had brought me to heel. There was no greater demonstration than the humiliating ordeal he was putting me through at that moment. I should have been fighting to be free, yet for some reason, I was just sprawled there, accepting the supposed punishment.

Why?

The question pinballed in my head just as his palm struck me again. He hadn't been joking when he said he wouldn't be gentle; the latest swat forced my lips to open and release the air I'd been inadvertently holding.

"I want to help you, Erin." His voice thundered over me as though he were a dark god.

Pushed unceremoniously over his thighs and the edge of the damned chair, I guessed in a strange way, that was exactly what he was. Trapped between the insufferable weight of my indignity and the brunt of his hand, there didn't seem to be any way I could change his mind.

Perhaps I could have kicked and screamed to get away. I could have tried to rise and fight him off, but I wasn't an idiot. I'd seen some of his body, and even in the half-light, I had made out significant biceps and pectorals. The impact of those muscles was currently still reverberating around my poor ass, so I, better than most, acknowledged how strong he was.

I'll never be able to overpower or outrun him.

Resistance is all but useless.

The weight of his free hand at the small of my back warned me just how futile the protest would be.

How would he catch me, and then what would happen? My throat dried as yet another smack landed on my poor defenseless ass. If he reacted to me shouting at him with an impromptu spanking, then what would the penalty be for an attempted 'escape'?

A shiver rushed through me as I contemplated what that meant. The idea that I even had to escape chilled me to my bones, but there I was, face down on his lap and receiving my so-called penance.

"And I will help you." His voice rumbled through me like the resonance of an electric bass guitar. "But there are rules."

Rules?

What did he mean by that? A torrent of fresh smacks rained down on me, obliterating the question as my fingers clawed at the wooden floor.

Fuck, this hurts!

Writhing over him, one of my hands rose to try and protect my behind, but the palm pressed against my back caught my wrist and hiked it up toward my shoulder blades.

“Please!” I didn’t know what I’d expected when he’d pulled me down and promised me a spanking, but it hadn’t been pain as intense as that. Whatever I’d done, I didn’t deserve it. “Please, Eli!”

“You can’t be begging again already.” He sighed theatrically, delivering a succession of fast swats while I thrashed over him. “We’re nowhere near done yet, little girl.”

Wait, what?

I stilled in the haze of my discomfort and embarrassment. Had he just called me ‘little girl’?

That couldn’t be right, could it? I was closer to fifty years old than forty, and while I’d once been a slim young thing, there was definitely nothing ‘little’ about me anymore. I was a grown woman with curves in all the right places.

“I can’t hear you.” His hand struck me again, that time focusing the hurt on the place where my ass met my thighs. I inhaled at the change of tack. Somehow, the new location hurt even more. “Are you begging me?”

“No!” I screamed, trying to twist and catch his gaze. In truth, I had been pleading, but I wasn’t going to bloody admit it. “But it hurts!”

“Good.” In the brief moment I caught sight of him, he looked irritatingly smug.

Fucker.

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My hands balled into fists as I slumped back over him. I loathed that he had the strength to behave that way, but in the short term, I had no choice but to bear it.

“It’s supposed to hurt, little girl.” His chuckle ratcheted my growing mortified disdain.

“Don’t call me that!” Kicking my boots against the floor, anger ruminated in my blood.

How dare he do this to me?

I hadn’t consented to being assaulted. I didn’t say it was okay to be flung over his lap. Hell, I was the one who’d wanted to leave. He had no right to do anything.

“I’ll call you whatever I choose when you’re being spanked.” He sniggered, as though there was anything even vaguely amusing about the way he was treating me. “It seems you’ve been in need of this for a long time.”

Fuck you!

The words screamed in my head, though I dared not speak them.

Fuck you, and your spanking, and your rules.

I hadn’t signed up for any of it. All I’d done was go hiking with my friend, and if I hadn’t, I’d still have been tucked up in bed at home.

“Oh, God! Just stop!”

I bit down before anything further could escape my lips, closing my eyes as another barrage of hard spansks peppered my vulnerable backside. Tears brimmed, conveying how difficult I was finding the nightmare, but I blinked them away. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing how far he'd pushed me, couldn't let him know that if it wasn't for the relative protection of my leggings, I didn't think I'd have survived.

"First, you revel in the benefits of sharing a bed with me." He landed an exceptionally sharp spank, temporarily stealing my breath. "You use my body heat and ride my fingers to orgasm, and then you fall asleep before I can even enjoy you in return."

Shit. Somehow, I knew that little faux pas would return to haunt me.

"I'm sorry about that." I despised my pleading tone, but I couldn't hope to get through much more of the onslaught he was delivering. "It wasn't intentional, I promise."

"I'm sure." He rested his palm over my sore backside, my first reprieve since the ordeal had started. "But I can't say it didn't sting, little girl."

There was the odd name he'd contrived for me again, my toes curling at how horrifying it sounded. I wasn't a child and didn't appreciate the comparison.

"I'll make it up to you."

Wait, what was I doing trying to appease him? Making promises I had no intention of keeping would only end up exploding in my face.

"Really?" He squeezed both of my cheeks in a way he had no right to do, but then, he had no right to do any of it. "And how would you do that?"

Bloody hell, I had no idea how. I'd have said just about anything to get him to stop spanking me and try to regain an ounce of my dignity.

"I don't know." My honesty might not have been appreciated, but I had to say something. "What do you want?"

"Sir." He applied a little more pressure to my hand held in the middle of my back. "You can start by referring to me properly. It's 'what do you want, sir?'"

Unable to believe what I was hearing, my brows knitted. He wanted me to call him 'sir'?

Was he fucking joking?

One swift swat to my backside assured me he was not.

"Okay!" Beaten, I ignored my tears as I ceded. "What do you want, sir?"

My hand balled into fists at the utter humiliation of the task. Eli was nothing but a tour guide. How dare he demand my deference? I didn't owe him anything.

"A little more contrition won't do you any harm." He tapped my ass lightly, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

"I don't know what you want me to say!"

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Hysteria wavered in my voice as I articulated my desperation. As if the torment of the spanking wasn't bad enough, I was demonstrating how awful it was just by speaking.

"Sir!" His voice was harsh as his palm left my ass again and landed another unrelenting spank.

"Sir!" I spluttered out the response, willing away my burgeoning headache.

"I want you to tell me how you're planning to make it up to me." His tone was softer then, reminding me of the seductive purr he'd employed in bed.

"You want your orgasm." It was more of a statement than a question. "Sir."

I added the final word begrudgingly, knowing mollification was my fastest route out of the tribulation, but I hated myself for doing so. I intentionally didn't dwell on the implications of my words or what that meant for me. On some level, I accepted them, but my stinging ass refused to allow me to linger on the details.

"That would be a start." Splaying his enormous palm over my behind, his thumb rubbed tiny circles into my leggings. "But I'd like more, little girl."

More?Squirming over him, I dared not ask what that meant.

"Do you have any suggestions?" He was clearly enjoying himself, his tone relaxed as he stroked me.

"No," I squeaked. "Sir."

Lifting my hand, I rubbed at the throb in my temple.

“Shame.” Releasing my left hand, he guided it to the floor before he leaned over me. Relief emanated from my shoulder, and time protracted as his warm body doubled over mine. “I enjoyed making you orgasm, Erin. I don’t think you’d loathe returning the favor.”

My pulse sped up as something light skimmed over the curve of my ass, and based on the fact one of his hands was still holding down my back and the other had grazed along my thigh to the back of my knee, I could only imagine it was his lips.

I held my breath.

He’s kissing me?

After the recent brutality, the sudden show of tenderness made even less sense.

“But it’s okay.” The hand at my knee brushed along the back of my leg. “I understand this has been a lot, so I’ll make you this offer.”

An offer?

The pounding in my head was clouding my ability to think clearly.

“You give me what I want, and not only will the spanking end, but I’ll even promise to make you come even harder than you did last night.”

Make me come? I rasped for breath. Hanging over him in the most ungainly way, the last thing I was thinking about was pleasure.

“What do you want me to do, sir?” As if I couldn’t guess.

“I want you on your knees, begging for my cock.”

My brows knitted at the ignominy of what he described. “Begging?”

“Yes,” he enthused. “And once I’m happy with your effort, you’ll take my cock in your mouth and pleasure me.”

That much I had been expecting. The strange thing was, if he hadn’t flipped me over his lap and put me through the latest test, I’d have happily opted to fellate him myself.

“Okay.” The word was a sigh from my lips.

I wasn’t crazy about the begging part, but perhaps, once I was there and willing to offer him hedonism, he’d forget my pleading and just revel in his supposed victory.

It was worth a shot.

“Okay?” He chuckled at my reticence. “Is that all you have to say?”

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“I’ll give you what you want, sir.” I swallowed at the insistent degradation of having to refer to him that way while still being upturned over his thighs. Goodness only knew how I’d ever look him in the eyes again.

“Yes, you will.” Apparently pleased with himself, he patted my rump again. “And two more things...”

Tensing, I groaned. Whatever else his ‘deal’ was, I thought we’d accepted the terms. The idea of throwing in more conditions was perturbing.

“More things?” My nails grazed over the dirty floor.

All the time I remained there with him, caught in the dreadful game of cat and mouse was time I wasn’t tending to Chelle’s needs. Whether my visions of her were a mental delusion or not, she was still my friend, and I needed to know if she was okay.

“Two more.” He spanked me lightly twice to reinforce the point. “I’ll need two more things from you for the pact to stand.”

“But I thought...”

My voice trailed away as I accepted what should have been obvious from my current position. There was no benefit in trying to negotiate. Eli held all the cards, and whatever I did or said was only likely to exacerbate the outcome for me.

“Something you want to say?” His tone was imperious.

“No, sir.” Wilting over him, I couldn’t believe how pathetic I’d become. Spanked and no closer to getting to Chelle, I was utterly demoralized.

“I’ll press on.” His hand stroked over my ass, his fingertips sliding beneath the waistband of my leggings. I froze at the development, unsure what the caress meant but certain he wouldn’t leave me waiting long to find out. “To sweeten the deal, I’ll be delivering ten final spans.”

“What?” I hadn’t meant to speak, but his audacity was fucking breathtaking. “You said the spanking would be done.”

“It’s done when I say it’s done.” Lifting the waistband from my skin, he ran his fingers along the small of my back. “And I say you need ten more.”

But why?

I managed to hold that plea back, but I sensed new tears, inspired by my frustration. The blowjob was supposed to be in exchange for the end of the spanking, not something offered in addition.

“Furthermore, I’ll deliver these final ten without the protection of your leggings, little girl.”

“Oh, come on!” Contorting my body to see him, I couldn’t hold back the rage swirling in my veins. “No way! None of this was the original deal!”

“This is still the original deal.” Devils danced in his gray gaze as he leaned closer. “And if you can’t remember how to talk to me, we can make it twenty strikes without your leggings.”

“No!” Floundering, I turned back to glance at the floor. Being draped over him was

becoming increasingly difficult to tolerate. I wanted it over with as soon as possible.
“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll take the ten strikes.”

Once again, I detested the way I succumbed, cringing at my complicity, but equally, I accepted there was no other way. Not in the short term. Not until I could get up and think.

“Yes, you will.” His conceit sent a shiver along my spine.

Eli had demonstrated his domineering side both in the forest and in bed, but the arrogant sense of knowing was something new—something I liked considerably less.

“You’ll take them, and you’ll thank me.”

Thank him?

“Yes, sir.” I couldn’t believe his nerve.

“And before you pleasure me, I want the fire going again, so once your cheeks are reddened, you’ll wait against the wall while I see to that task.”

Nothing he said seemed to make sense anymore.

“Against the wall?” I couldn’t have heard him correctly, but I knew I had.

“Yes.” His laughter reverberated over me, jarring the pounding in my head. “With your nose to the wall, little girl. Once the fire is going, you’ll give me what I want on your knees.”

The purported deal was getting worse by the second.

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“That’s a lot, sir.” Self-pity swirled in my despondent tone, reminding us both who had won that twisted exchange.

“It’s the least I deserve.” His tone was curt. “And I will have what I deserve, or I promise you, the repercussions will be much worse.”

What was worse than having to be spanked by a stranger before giving him head in the crappy little cabin I’d once foolishly assumed was a sanctuary was beyond me, but strewn over him, I didn’t have the courage to ask.

I had little choice but to do what he said, little choice but to accept the completely unwarranted physical punishment and endure the ordeal, but as I processed the truth, something hit me. There was a part of me—a tiny and clearly fucked-up facet—that was leaning into his command.

It was a relief not having to think about what came next. I’d never much liked having to lead, but running a business on my own meant there was little choice. But then, from out of nowhere, Eli had blown into my life, much like the snowstorm had fallen from the skies, and in the frenzy of losing James, Miles, and then Chelle, and then finding the cabin, the dynamic between the two of us had shifted. He’d always been in charge of the tour, but from the moment we’d stepped foot in the hut, he’d been in charge of me.

The man humbling me was a bolder, steelier version of the rugged guide I’d met, and I, for my part, was being compelled to rediscover what it was like to let go of the reins. The strangest part of the whole exchange was, for all my honest protests at the way he was treating me, I’d rarely known serenity like the kind that was crashing

over me.

I loathed that he could treat me that way, yet at the same time, I sensed myself softening, the same way I'd done when he'd slid his finger into me in bed.

Oh, God.

My rational mind was having trouble comprehending, but deep down, I accepted something I'd never acknowledged before.

It could be sexy to cede.

"I'll assume your silence is approval." Flicking the waistband of my leggings back against my skin, he squeezed my left cheek roughly. "And that we're agreed?"

Was that what we were—in agreement?

Shell-shocked, I still couldn't decide how any of it had happened, but there I was, bartering sexual favors to the man who'd been paid to look after me.

"And I'll take that as a yes." His smug laughter whipped around me as both of his hands moved to the top of my leggings. Holding my breath, I winced as one hard tug forced the fabric down, exposing my ass. "Let's get this show on the road."

Chapter Fifteen

Admonished

Eli

SWEEPING MY HAND OVERher bare skin, my every sense was focused on Erin. Without her leggings, only the back of her tiny blue thong was visible above her cheeks, her creamy flesh teasing my already desperate cock. I knew the hot, wet places the fabric hid between those pert orbs, and I couldn't wait to explore them again.

Fuck.

My throat dried as my free hand shifted to the middle of her back. I'd allowed her other hand to fall loose by her face, but I'd keep one palm available to hold her in position. Swats without her clothing would be harder for her to endure, and I expected her to make a fuss. Perhaps, if she was foolish enough, she'd even try to get up without my say so, though she wouldn't appreciate the consequences if she did.

"Ten strikes, little girl."

A slight rosy hue lit the underside of her seat from the prior spanks, but there was no other evidence of her plight.

That was about to change.

"Oh, God."

Her cheeks tensed beneath my palm, but if she thought preparedness was her ally, she had another think coming. There would only be ten swats to enjoy, and I intended to make them count.

"You can thank me for each one." Massaging her right cheek, my grin grew at the sound of her breathy whimpers.

"Why are you doing this?" She pushed the question through gritted teeth.

"You know why," I chided. "And if I need to remind you once more how to address

me, then I'm adding strikes."

"But, please!" She obviously had no idea how her despair tightened the knot of my arousal. If she had, I'd wager she wouldn't have put on such a mesmerizing display.

"I-I don't understand, sir."

Despite her sexy performance, I'd heard enough.

It was time to act.

"Yes, you do." Raising my hand, I tipped my right leg a fraction higher, forcing her hips further into the air, and took aim. My satisfaction swelled when my palm connected with her flesh.

"Fuck!" Her hips danced over me. "That really stings, sir."

She'd used the correct address, but I didn't love her language.

Patience, I admonished myself. This is all new for her.

"No more profanity," I warned, rubbing the flesh I'd just swatted. I wanted to worship her, but she needed to toe the line.

Even from the limited time we'd spent together, I could tell how much Erin needed correction. She seemed permanently tense and poised to fight, whether it be her friend, her friend's ridiculous boyfriend, or me.

She'd benefit from my discipline. She just didn't know it yet.

"Now, thank me," I commanded.

She pulled in a breath, and I sensed how much effort it was for her not to tell me to go and fuck myself.

“Thank you, sir.” She released the air slowly, as though the speed of her breathing had any influence over my palm or what came next.

Christ, she was beautiful, especially when she finally relented.

The fire burning inside of Erin was one of her most appealing traits, but her sassy display in the doorway had convinced me what she needed most was someone to take control and shoulder the worries she was being forced to carry.

Someone like me.

I was the guy who would help her with that. A lone wolf who’d been living outside of societal norms for so long, I barely cared to recall them. I was easily big and strong enough to handle both our concerns. All she needed to do was learn to cede.

“Two.” I numbered the spank as it landed, the crack of our flesh colliding echoing around the wooden structure.

Watching the satisfying ripples spread over her ass, my gaze rose to the hearth. I should have got the fire going before I dealt with her behavior, but Erin had left me with no choice. If she wouldn’t listen to reason and insisted on shouting insults, then I had to act.

As it turned out, there were flames rising every time my palm landed on her unprotected backside, they just weren’t growing in the fireplace. I had little doubt they would go some way to warming us both, though.

“Thank me, little girl.”

She pushed out the words slowly.

“Three.” Intentionally swatting her between her legs again, I studied her responses carefully.

She hissed at the impact, her ass rising to meet my hand before it settled back in place. That time, she answered me before I could prompt her, her obedience meriting the caresses I offered her lower back.

“Very good,” I praised. “Only seven left. Open your legs wider.”

She peered over her shoulder at the instruction, her cheeks flushed and her eyes questioning, though the queries never reached her lips.

“Yes, you heard me correctly.” My tone was clipped, feigning a disapproval I didn’t feel. “Open them.”

She shuffled her ankles wider, her breathing speeding up as she accepted what the deed meant. With her hips elevated and her legs apart, only a thin layer of material separated my fingers from the tantalizing place I wanted to explore.

“You’re beautiful...” I could hardly believe how wonderful she was.

Night after night on my own had persuaded me there was no future that involved tanning the ass of a gorgeous woman. My good fortune still seemed astonishing.

The dynamic between us had shifted since I'd committed to taking charge, and there in the flourishing daylight, I was able to witness all the tiny details previously concealed by the shadows—the color of her skin and how good her thong looked disappearing between her buttocks. She was scintillating.

“Do you know why I want these gorgeous legs apart?” I patted her pink cheeks, glancing at what I could see of her face. Hanging over me with her dark tresses scraping the floor, she clearly did know why, but I wanted to see what she was willing to admit.

“No, sir. I...”

Her sentence dried up as my hand shoved her panties aside and dipped between her cheeks. Then and there I resolved to take what I wanted. She might not have been prepared to say, but I sensed what she wanted.

Stretching her cheeks apart with my free hand, my thumb skimmed over her tight little rectum, and I relished the frantic gasp that rushed from her lips.

“Sir!” Thighs stiffening, she tried to force the top of her legs together, but one hard wallop demanded she reconsider.

“I’m not hurting you,” I reminded her, sliding one, and then two digits down until they brushed over her sex.

Trapped inside its fabric prison, my cock screamed for gratification. I’d played the gentleman for too long, pandering to all her needs without much thought for my own, but hauling her over my lap had changed all that.

The gutsy little girl who’d stood her ground with James and Miles was finally where she needed to be—being held to account for her unruly behavior.

“Tell me why, Erin.” My order hung in the air between us.

“To have access to me... sir.” She croaked the answer, barely avoiding additional punishment with her needless delay.

“That’s right.” I traced a line along her wet pussy lips, thrilled at the evidence of her growing arousal. “You want me to have access, don’t you?”

Just like she’d wanted to sprawl in my arms and fuck my fingers as we tangled in the sheets. Nothing was happening that she didn’t already crave.

“Oh, God...” Her reply was little more than a strangled sob, her reticence thrilling me almost as much as the hot little pussy I was toying with.

“Tell me the truth,” I cautioned. “Tell me the truth and I’ll give you pleasure before I finish spanking you.”

Her hips rose, giving me their answer before she responded. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, sir, what?” Reaching around her, one fingertip nudged her clit, circling the bud until she mewled.

“Yes, I want you to have access to me!” Desperation strained in her voice.

“Mmmm, I know you do.”

I slipped the other digit inside her, willing self-control as I slowly fucked her with it. All the while, my thumb pressed at her dark hole, applying just enough pressure to remind her who owned it. I had no idea if she’d ever been fucked in the ass before, but I’d already made up my mind—I was going to screw her delightful derriere before she left the cabin.

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“Eli!” Her voice was caught somewhere between alarm and rapture. It was a sound I’d have been happy to hear for the rest of time.

“Wrong answer.” My free hand crashed down on the top of her cheeks as all three digits on the other hand continued to stimulate her. Writhing between my palms and my thighs, she squealed as though she might never survive the sensory overload. “You know how to refer to me.”

“Sir!” She practically choked out the word, her hips rocking rhythmically to welcome my fingers. “Please!”

“Oh, you like that?”

Who was I kidding? Of course she fucking did.

The whimpering and writhing mess of a woman draped over me might have complained about her predicament, but it was obvious that if she’d ever been hornier, she couldn’t remember when.

“Oh, God, yes!” Her hips rolled back to receive more of my fingers. “Yes, please.”

Sniggering at her display, I reveled in the feel of her. The sensation of her delicious arousal sliding around my digits coupled with the sight of her punished flesh. She still had a number of strikes coming to her, but not until I’d taken her right to the very edge of heaven.

Heeding her cue for more, I pushed my thumb deeper into her ass, my erection rock

hard as she groaned at the intrusion.

“This ass is begging to be filled.” My thumb stroked the same cadence as my fingers.

“Isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” There was no hesitation from her that time, only the frantic sounds of a woman perilously close to the precipice.

Smiling at how quickly she’d morphed from complaint to capitulation, I pulled in a breath. Erin was a delight.

“Tell me,” I ordered. “Tell me you need me to fill your ass, little girl.”

“Yes.” Her head rose as far as her weary muscles would allow. “Yes, sir. Please fill my ass.”

Grinning at her inevitable surrender, I pumped my fingers faster, allowing her a little more of what she wanted before I called time on the proceedings. It was pleasing to know my little girl was enjoying my attention so much, but that didn’t change anything about why she was there, stretched over me with her leggings around her thighs.

I’d offered her pleasure, but not fulfilment. She needed to be punished for the way she’d spoken to me, and there was no way she was coming again until after I was satiated.

“Sir!” Her throaty gasps reminded me of the way she’d sounded in bed. “Yes!”

Withdrawing my hand in one smooth motion, I brought it crashing back down over her exposed bottom, leaving her wanting.

“Number four.” The impact reddened her defenseless backside. It was absolutely sublime. “You know what to do.”

“Wh-what the...?” She spun around as best she could, gawping at the abrupt change of pace. “I was so close, and you said I could have pleasure!”

“And you did.” My smile was no doubt knowing. “I recall what it’s like—to be desperate for release and yet ultimately be denied...” Pausing, I let that thought sink in. “Now, either thank me or we go to fifteen.”

“Okay, okay!” Slumping over me, she heaved in a frustrated sigh. “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome, little girl.” I just finished the sentence before swat five landed. The resulting resonance was one of the most magnificent melodies I’ve ever heard. “You’re going to get everything that’s coming to you.”

Chapter Sixteen

Pretty Tied Up

Erin

THE WALLS OF MY WORLD folded in around me. I couldn't think, couldn't believe what was happening, yet the ungainly way I was stretched over him and the final strike he landed reminded me that my very lurid humiliation was real.

Despite my fogging head, though, and the shock reverberating around my body, the heat between my legs was every bit as tangible as the pain. Utterly chastened I might have been, but the hot need emanating from my core seemed even more intolerable.

It was awful enough to be treated that way—to be 'punished' by the brute who was supposed to be looking after me—but discovering the spanking he'd subjected me to had actually turned me on was a bridge too far. Even though I acknowledged the actualities of my predicament, my head was unwilling to join the dots. I knew I was horny at the cringeworthy treatment, knew that if I swept a finger to my pussy, I'd enjoy the proof for myself, but I couldn't understand it. Intensifying my woe was the knowledge that he'd taken me so close to the edge of hedonism, only to leave me hanging.

Bastard.

“Your spanking is over.” He pressed his palm on my sore flesh as though he was waiting for a reply.

What the hell was I supposed to say?

If he wanted gratitude for the humbling ordeal he’d put me through, as far as I was concerned, I’d offered him more than enough already.

“Up you get.”

His words suggested a reprieve, but the idea of getting back to my feet and having to meet his eyes was no more appealing. Unwilling to risk the possibility of yet more so-called punishment, though, I moved, and with the help of his left hand, I eased to my knees.

Head falling, my gaze flitted to the hard wood floor. Wood had become my entire world since he’d broken us into the cabin—it comprised the walls, the roof, and the floor, as well as being the one source of heat in the space—but it had rarely been as soothing as it was then.

“Up, Erin.”

He rose to his full height, looming over me as he thrust a hand in my direction. I noticed it in my peripheral vision, eyeing the hand accusingly. That same palm had spanked me, lighting a fire he apparently wasn’t prepared to extinguish. It was both punisher and tormentor.

To spite me. My eyes closed briefly at the grim thought. He’s doing it in retaliation for last night.

Heaving in air, I realized there was no choice but to obey. Non-compliance chanced

another spell over his thighs, and I wasn't prepared to take that risk. I didn't know how to rationalize what had just taken place, but I sure as hell wasn't prepared to empower him for round two.

Rising on shaky legs, I let go of his hand to drag my leggings up and over my spanked backside. Covering myself seemed pivotal. I'd stand if I had to, but I wasn't ready to meet his conceited gaze while I was still bared.

"I don't think so, little girl." That same hand I'd learned to loathe moved to halt my hand's progress, holding my waistband at my thighs. "Your clothes stay where they are."

"What?" I glanced up reflexively, the fury festering inside me overcoming the weight of my shame. "You can't be serious."

The way his dark eyebrow slowly arched sent dread ricocheting through me.

Oh, God. My hand fell to my side. What have I done?

There were no logical reasons why I shouldn't cover myself. I should never have been bared in the first place, but in the short time we'd been stuck together, he'd managed to condition me to dread the gesture.

"Do you want to rephrase that, Erin?" His tone was irritatingly calm.

"Why can't I cover myself, sir?" Why did I even have to ask? I was a grown woman, and I deserved dignity and respect. "You said my spanking is over."

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“It is.” He glowered at me. “And will remain so as long as you can control that mouth of yours.”

His glare was simultaneously arousing and alarming.

A man like Eli would have turned my head if we’d met on the street, but in the intensity of the cabin, he’d taken on an amplified persona—the sexiest and most foreboding person I’d ever met.

“Your spanking might be over, but I want you bared.” He gestured to the wall beside the bed. “Go and stand over there with your nose to the wall.”

What?

I managed to hold the word in as I followed his finger with my gaze. He wanted me bared with my fucking nose to the wall. What was he, a sergeant major in the military, suddenly authorized to order me around at will?

“Is there something you don’t understand?”

His tone warned of greater repercussions if I didn’t comply, though I couldn’t imagine what those could be. In more than four decades on the planet, I’d never been dealt with so roughly or unfairly before. The sense of injustice was overwhelming.

“No, I...” I couldn’t bring myself to repeat his instructions.

“Then, why am I waiting?” He tapped his foot against the floor, reminding me that

his feet were bare while mine were encased in the boots I'd borrowed from Chelle.

The contrast jarred, directing me back to his demand. He wanted me to stand against the wall.

Why?

I hoped my eyes screamed the question I was too afraid to ask, but the nervous energy furling inside me cautioned against hesitation. Pissing him off wouldn't make anything any better for me. I had to move.

"Fine." Murmuring the word, I shuffled from his grasp toward the wall, and with my leggings caught around my thighs, I really did have to 'shuffle'.

Shame emanated through me as I moved, fresh tears pricking in my eyes as I reached my destination, but I adamantly refused to acknowledge them. I wasn't fucking crying again. I wouldn't give the asshole what he so obviously wanted.

"Are you in position?" His voice thundered from behind me.

"Yes." My jaw clenched, knowing what I'd need to say next to appease the wanker.
"Sir."

"Is that pretty little nose grazing the wood the way I asked?"

My brow furrowed. I couldn't remember anything about 'grazing' in his ludicrous command, but I shifted forward regardless, unwilling to get spiraled into a doomed conversation I'd never be able to win.

"Thank you." He sighed as I moved into place, as though there was anything exasperating about this situation.

He wasn't the one with his ass exposed.

He wasn't the one who was crestfallen after being unceremoniously spanked.

He hadn't lost his friend and been overwhelmed by guilt and upset.

None of it was happening to him.

"I want you there while I light the fire, and while I'd love to trust you, little girl... I really don't."

I wanted to snort at that. After everything he'd just put me through, how could he be the one with trust issues?

"So, I'm afraid I'll need to take some preventative measures."

The sound of his feet padding against the floor resounded from behind me, rousing my already inflated suspicions. I considered glancing around to see what he was doing but accepted begrudgingly that I was too scared to risk his wrath if he caught me.

How pathetic is that? I swallowed at my reticence. I'm a grown woman and I'm too afraid to turn around.

The truth magnified in my chest until my head slipped lower, my forehead replacing my nose against the wall.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I should be better than this, shouldn't I? Should know better than to give into the whims of a man like Eli?

But nothing about the woman who'd failed to leave the cabin and had succumbed to Eli's stinging palm reminded me of the Erin I thought I'd been only a few days before. One night trapped in the cold with the brute and I appeared to have fallen to pieces.

"I thought I said nose against the wall."

Tensing at how loud his voice had suddenly become, I leapt, adjusting my stance as I sniffed back tears.

"You really are having a problem doing as you're told, aren't you?"

Loitering behind me, he sniggered. Somehow, the bastard had managed to walk over to me without me even noticing.

"I'm sorry." I wasn't sorry in the slightest. "I'm not used to taking orders."

"Evidently." His voice was softer as his body brushed against my defenseless backside. I gasped at his proximity, simultaneously thrilled and fearing what it might mean. "It's okay, little girl. I want to help you."

Help me?

Nothing he'd done since he'd woken up had done anything to help. Being told what to do and then humbled in such an old-fashioned way had totally blindsided me.

"Put your hands behind you." He mumbled the order against my nape, his warm breath eliciting a shiver along my spine.

It shouldn't have felt as good as it did to be commanded by the cocksure tour guide who'd ripped pleasure from me in the frenzy of our shared bed, but for perhaps the same twisted reason I'd relished submitting to him, I accepted that it did.

I liked his authority, even if, at the same time, I despised it.

"Why, sir?"

No facet of me wanted to move my hands. I understood without being told what the outcome of that little adventure would be, and I wasn't up for being bound by anyone, let alone a man I didn't trust. Despite the apprehension bubbling in my belly, I refused to surrender willingly.

I had to at least demand his logic.

"Just. Do. It," he breathed, squeezing my left cheek roughly.

He had no right to touch me at all, least of all handle me that way, and yet the desire for him to push me up against the wall and slide his cock into my pussy was stronger than I'd ever known. I wanted to yield, even though I hated myself for the urge.

"I promise things will be easier if you obey." His voice had taken on a disturbingly melodic quality, as though he hoped to lure me into submission with song. Little did he know how badly I longed for the outcome, and it wouldn't take much of a push to see me slide into the deference he seemed hellbent on.

Easier for who?

I wasn't a heady schoolgirl falling in lust for the first time. I should have been able to fend off his advances with ease, but I didn't seem able to close the doors Eli opened.

"But I'm afraid." Fresh embarrassment washed over me at the admission, if it was possible for the woman with the bared bottom to feel any more mortified than I already did.

Which I doubted.

"We have a deal," he whispered. "Honor your side of the bargain, and I'll do the same. You have nothing to worry about."

Funny, I didn't remember any part of the deal that mentioned binding me—which was clearly what he had in mind—but my anxiety-ridden paralysis meant I didn't dare mention that caveat.

"And what about Chelle?" My breathing was labored, the heat of his breath on my neck and his roaming hand making it difficult to focus.

He was so close.

Tooclose.

"Forgetabout Chelle." The resonance of his growl danced down my spine. "Until this thing between us is resolved, I don't want to talk about her."

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Easy for you to say...

Yet when his lips brushed my skin and my eyes fluttered closed, I realized how perilously simple it would be to do just that...

Forgetting about my friend's fate was as simple as his large hand fondling my breast and the lingering passion of his insistent kisses.

What was happening to me?

"Eli?" My voice showed signs of the strain tearing at my core. The spanking had wound me so tightly that I couldn't seem to think. Standing there on display for no better reason than his amusement, all I could contemplate was finding a way to relieve the pressure at my clit. "I mean, sir?"

He chuckled, spanking both cheeks lightly as he shifted position. "What is it, little girl?"

Pressed against the hard wood, his new name for me didn't sound so preposterous anymore. He was so much physically bigger than I was, and in the cabin in the forest—his environment—I seemed smaller than ever. Mouth drying, and with my nose skimming the wall, I contemplated what the world would be like if I succumbed and was nothing more than the diminutive woman he could order around.

Oh, God.

The idea of such utter subjugation should have outraged me, yet as his hand snaked

around my hips to the front of my underwear, I could only imagine how good the sex would be, and fleetingly, I considered whether I'd be happier in the confines of his crazy rule rather than finding my own way out there in the real world.

"Please," I moaned. "I'm so horny..."

My pitiful tone induced fresh laughter from my unexpected persecutor.

"That's exactly how I want you," he purred, his other hand skimming my breast. "Always wet and eager. Be a good girl and I promise to put your little pussy out of its misery."

As if to reinforce the point, his hands withdrew and reached for the side of my panties before abruptly tugging them down to join my bunched leggings at my thighs.

"No!" Practically naked from the waist down, the latest indignity was too much to bear.

"Oh, yes." His voice oozed enthusiasm as he jerked my hips further back and nudged the side of my boots apart with his foot.

I complied in desperation, taking on the stance he wanted, even as terror and longing warred in my head. Did I want to kick him in the nuts and take my chance in the snow, or, as my pulsing clit demanded, did I want to give in and take everything he had to offer? The weight of my colliding emotions ensured there was no way to discern the answer, but the question remained, taunting me as he continued.

"Stay just like that."

Immobilized with bewildered passion, I was trapped between the wall and his body, and dwelling on my misery, I sensed the first length of something coarse wrap around

my left wrist.

Rope. My heart sped up. It had to be rope.

I hadn't seen him bring any over to where we were standing, but then, with my nose to the wall, I hadn't seen anything. Instinctively, I peered around to confirm my suspicions and was greeted with a much harder slap to my bare behind. I moaned at the impact, aware that the sting only heightened my need as the strike spread across my cheeks.

"Into position," he snarled, seemingly without looking up from the knot he was securing at my wrist. "Now."

Gulping back on my impotency, I shifted my weight from one hip to the other as he worked on the rope. By the side of the bed, I spotted the handgun he'd dropped there, the sight urging me to resist. There was still time to fight back, time to swing my arms and avoid his clutches, but I wasn't doing anything.

Why aren't I doing anything?

"Oh, God." I couldn't take much more of the desire burning inside.

"Your God won't take pity on you." He placed a chaste kiss on my nape. "But if you stay right there, I might."

The words rang in my ears as he walked away.

All there was in the world was Eli and the damn wood of the ranger's hut. Caught in his ropes and the sexual rapture he'd conjured, I couldn't see a way out.

Chapter Seventeen

On her Knees

Eli

SHE WAS FUCKING PERFECT.

Half-stripped, bound, and trying in vain to keep her pretty nose to the wall, my little girl couldn't seem to keep still.

She knew what was coming next—I hadn't been secretive about what I wanted—but she didn't yet know how things would go. In my mind's eye, I saw the events unfolding, felt her lips wrapped around my prick and heard her gagging around its length.

It was going to be sublime.

Skipping from one foot to the next, she wasn't the picture of obedience yet, but I had the sense her subservience would grow with time and persistence on my part. What she was, though, for the first time since I'd woken, was not trying to cause a ruckus. Despite her situation, my expectations, and her obvious agitation, she seemed to have accepted her predicament.

For now.

Grabbing the box of matches left by the fireplace, I lit one and held the flame to the log I'd already selected from the remaining pile. The cold hadn't appeared to bother either of us since I'd spanked her, but I had to be reasonable. There was several feet of snow on the ground outside, and I expected her to get on her knees and serve me. The very least she merited was the comfort and protection of a fire while she attended to my needs.

"How are you doing, little girl?" Peering over my shoulder, I noticed how her awkward little dance seemed to have subsided, leaving her still aside from her exaggerated breaths.

I adored how well she seemed to have taken to her pet name. She'd countered it initially—understandably perhaps as it inferred she was a child—but leaning against the wood with her magnificent ass on display, there wasn't a murmur of complaint from her lips, and from where I crouched, the name had never seemed more fitting.

Whatever she said, Erin needed me to quiet the chattering chaos of her mind. Yes, she'd seemed embarrassed to have been exposed and chastised, but she was infinitely calmer then than she had been when I'd first woken.

There was a pride in that knowledge.

I'd helped to settle her by giving her one thing to focus on—me.

"I don't know, sir." She sounded wretched at her own powerlessness.

Her tone might have concerned me more had I not already known just how wet being so helpless was making her. Not only had I enjoyed the pleasure of her pussy when I'd taken control between the sheets, but I'd seen the evidence for myself when I'd yanked down her tantalizing panties. Armed with that knowledge, rather than move me, her sad little display only enthralled me.

“You look damn good from here.”

With her arms tethered in the small of her back and her delectable ass and pussy presented for my viewing pleasure, she was like every fucking wet dream I’d ever had—a beautiful woman who was bound to serve me.

Glancing back to check the flames before I ordered her to come to me, I collected the chair I’d fallen asleep on and placed it in front of the fire. I took my time, enjoying the sense of power I held as I sat down and beckoned her toward me.

“Okay, come here.”

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She straightened and turned to face me, the cheeks on her face even rosier than the ones I'd spanked. The silence stretching out in the space crackled with anticipation as she hobbled to where I was sitting.

Fuck.

Gulping down my excitement, I forced out a breath as she neared.

"On your knees." I pointed to the floor as though she could have forgotten where it was.

Witnessing her awkward journey had been the cherry on top of my already deliciously iced cake, and I eased my cock from my pants as she fell to her knees in front of me. There wasn't a hint of reticence about the task she'd been commissioned to perform as she settled. In fact, the glint in her green eyes as she glanced up to take in the sight of me spoke of a lust-filled need I'd never noticed in her gaze until that moment.

She wanted me—and I was ten feet tall at the thought.

"Do you know what you need to do, little girl?" The enormous dick in my right hand surely left little to her imagination.

"Yes, sir." Inching closer, she nibbled at her lower lip.

"Excellent." The version of Erin by my feet was all my Christmases come at once. If there was any hesitation left in her—any reluctance to satisfy me—I saw no proof of

it. “I just need to see a little more of you to enjoy the full ‘Erin experience’.”

“Sir?”

Her head rose, but I moved to answer, leaning forward to collect the hem of her shirts and yank them over her head. Her objections were muted as the material passed over her mouth, bundling behind her head.

Her stunned expression met my eyes, her protests silenced.

“Better.” There was no choice but to smile. “But not quite perfect...”

Hiking the bra up her chest to release her breasts, I finally had her where I wanted her—on her knees, beautifully exposed, and without the use of her arms. Her breasts looked just as wonderful as they’d seemed when I’d handled them. Full, round, and surprisingly pert for her age. Her nipples had already beaded without so much as a single caress from my fingers.

Sliding to the edge of the chair, I thrust my cock in front of her face. “You’re flawless.”

She blew out a breath, the warm air grazing over my aching erection and teasing my flesh with the promise of her throat.

“Get over here.” Burying my fingers into her hair, I urged her the remaining couple of inches, reveling in the gleam of pain glinting in her eyes as her knees scraped into position. “I assume this isn’t the first time you’ve performed fellatio?”

My tone was sarcastic. A woman of her age must surely have given head dozens of times in her life, and based on the lust flickering in her eyes, she had no objections to my plan.

“No, sir.” Her sexy eyes darted to mine.

“Good.” My digits relaxed a fraction as she lowered to her haunches. “I want to make this last. Start by licking my balls, little girl.”

Her gaze widened a fraction, but she didn’t comment as she leaned closer, her tongue already poised to perform as I’d commanded.

Opening my legs, I eased my balls from their fabric prison and held my breath. After so long wondering how she’d react to my dominance, I was about to get my pleasure.

Time shifted into slow motion as she lapped at my right testicle, the gesture tentative as she warmed up to the mission. My cock responded immediately, though, imploring her attention north to its veiny shaft with a glimmer of precum as she shifted to lick my left ball.

“Harder,” I ordered. “Lap like you mean it, little girl.”

Moaning softly, her attention flitted to my face as she obliged, lowering to deliver a more earnest act of devotion. With her hands tied and my hand lodged in her hair, she had little choice but to obey, but her breathy mewls suggested she was enjoying the deed more than even she might have believed possible.

“Well done,” I praised, dragging her head higher. “Now, offer the same admiration to my cock. Take every inch of me.”

She rose to her knees, her lips already parted as my crown shoved past them.

“Fuck.”

The heat of her mouth was so good, heightening my already overwhelmed passion.

Withdrawing, she started slowly, lapping at my tip and taking a few inches, but when she tried to pull away a second time, I insisted she take more. Pulling her down and holding her in place, I groaned when my cock skimmed the back of her throat. Hot, wet, and enveloping; she was everything I longed for.

“You feel so good.” I was close to the edge, hours of contemplation colliding with her rhythmic heat to produce an inevitability I wanted to protract at all costs. “But slow down, little girl.”

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I realized what a contradiction I offered as I eased from her delicious mouth, and her brows knitted to reflect her confusion. I was the one compelling my cock inside her, yet there I was, commanding her to hold back.

It was the latest incongruity in our visceral connection.

We should never have been alone in that cabin together. There wasn't supposed to be a storm forcing us to flee for refuge, and there should still have been four in her group, but the universe, it seemed, had its own plan for Erin and me.

Stroking the side of her face, my balls ached at the idea of covering her in my seed. I'd never been one for coming over women before, but something about Erin begged to be marked that way. As though stripping and tethering her wasn't evidence enough of my possession of her body, the idea of smothering her face in my hot cum flooded my mind, ratcheting my arousal.

"I want to enjoy you."

Meeting her gaze, I was struck again by just how bloody attractive she was. With her soft skin and bright eyes, she could easily have been mistaken for a much younger woman.

"Yes, sir." She choked out the words when I allowed her to come up for air.

"I love that feeling when the end of my dick hits the back of your throat." It was scintillating to stare into her eyes as I enunciated the red-hot details. "I want more of it."

She caught her lip between her teeth. “I liked that too.”

“Is that right?”

So much for quelling my passion. Our spontaneous chat was only intensifying my need to ejaculate all over her.

“Yes, sir.” A mischievous smirk lit up her face.

“Good to know.” Rising to my feet, my grip on her hair tightened as I directed my cock past her lips. If she was going to be so brazen, then I’d happily give her what we both wanted. “Thank you, little girl.”

Pushing my length all the way down her throat, I withdrew, repeating the deed over and over. Her breathy whimpers resounded, morphing into louder complaints as my relentless pace continued, but I took no notice as I lunged past her lips, allowing her frantic sounds to amplify my spiking arousal. Lost to the rhythm, I was vaguely aware that I was still standing in the cabin, but my euphoria had lifted me from the ground, floating me close to the sun.

“Fuck.”

I shifted my hand to the back of her head, holding her against my balls as my need burgeoned. The time for gentle generosity was over. She said she wanted to feel my cock at the back of her throat, so that was what she was getting—a hard and frenzied face fucking that would ease from the never-ending, goading arousal that had plagued me in her presence. All hints of her protest were only welcome kindling for the flames of my passion.

As the crescendo loomed, there was only the absolute truth of that moment. Erin had crashed into my life as one of just another group of irritating nobodies, but thanks to

the idiocracy of two strangers, the weather, and fickle circumstance, she'd become so much more.

The woman on her knees was far more than any tourist I'd ever encountered, and giving the order for her to take everything I had, there was only one certainty.

She was mine.

My little girl.

My personal whore.

Erin wasn't going anywhere.

Chapter Eighteen

Shell Shocked

Erin

STARING UP AT THE DARKgod who'd taken me to the brink, I was numb. When I'd said I wanted his cock to skim the back of my throat, I'd meant once or twice in a build to his climax, not more than a dozen times in a frenzy of what seemed like ruthless ownership.

The muscles between my legs clenched. That was precisely what had just transpired. He'd used me as though he owned me—as if I was there only to grant him pleasure—and by some fucked-up logic, I'd allowed it.

What choice did I have?

I tugged at the rope around my wrists to reinforce the point. Under the weight of his giant palms and without my hands, there was little I could have done to stop him, but my powerlessness did nothing to quiet the nagging sense of my complicity. I'd told him I wanted his cock. I'd given him free license to live out his indecent fantasies.

He'd taken me to the cabin under the pretense of protection, but the things he'd done since had been far from honorable. But by treating me roughly, he'd managed to take me to highs I'd rarely reached alone, let alone with another lover.

How was that possible?

The loitering headache in my temple offered no answers, and as his cum slipped from my chin, the knot of energy at my pussy tightened. Even after everything he'd put me through, I still wanted to reward him for the onslaught, still longed for him to fill the empty space that called for completion.

I wanted Eli to remind me that I was a woman.

"You look great." Fastening his pants, his lips spread into an arrogant sneer, the expression eroding the last preserves of my sanity.

Whatever had happened, I'd managed to hold onto some semblance of reason, but being objectified so thoroughly appeared to have been the final straw.

"Jesus, Eli."

My gaze fell to my knees as the suffering of the last half an hour threatened to spill from my lips. I wanted to tell him what it was like to be used, and that, however much I might have liked the idea, I hadn't been ready for the reality. In the end, there were no words to explain how overwrought I was feeling.

"Hey." One of his hands shifted to my chin and compelled my attention back to his face. "I never said you could look away."

"My throat hurts," I croaked.

His furrowing brow suggested concern. "Ask for a drink and I'll get you one."

That's it?

I glared at him. That was all he was going to give me? No apologies? I wasn't sure why, but I'd expected better.

"I'd like a drink, please, sir." Closing my eyes, I did my best to block him out.

He might have control of my body, but I still decided what I thought.

"Hmmm." His thumb caressed the side of my face. "I'd prefer to see your beautiful eyes when you ask."

Tough shit. My jaw tightened beneath his finger.

"Please, sir." Pulling in air, I compelled my eyes open, though I didn't meet his gaze. It riled me that I had to mollify the moron to make him move. "I'd appreciate it."

"Okay," he barked. "Wait here."

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His harder tone would have evoked tension in my weary body at any other time—an indication that I was somehow in trouble again—but kneeling there, something seemed to have shifted inside me.

Whether it was the viciousness of the blow job, the fact he hadn't moved to untie me, or some other mental and emotional adjustment to my predicament I hadn't yet registered, I didn't know. I only acknowledged the difference in my demeanor as he stalked from my side. There was no longer the latent sense of dread snaking inside; the fear was replaced by a need to fight for something braver.

James and Miles might not have been my choice of companions, but so far as I knew, they'd both plummeted to their deaths on the hike, while my closest friend could still be out there somewhere, lost—or worse, dead—in the snow. What I'd endured on my knees was nothing by comparison. It didn't matter how much he turned me on. I had to find the necessary steel to stand up to Eli's bullying tactics. I had to get away.

Which will be easier once he unbinds me.

Following his progress to my bag, I watched as he searched for my water bottle, producing it a moment later. Straightening, he turned and locked gazes with me as he walked back to my side.

“Open up.” Unscrewing the lid, a hint of the same smirk that had greeted me in the aftermath of his orgasm painted his face.

“Why can't I use my hands, sir?”

“Because I’m not removing the rope yet.” He didn’t even try to disguise his glee. “So, if you’re thirsty, I’ll help you.”

“But...” The pounding in my temple increased, fraternizing with my growing fury to aggravate my headache.

“Do you want the water or not?” He lifted the bottle to his lips, taking a large slug in a gesture that was no doubt intended to goad me further.

Fuck you.

Gritting my teeth, I fought against the urge to articulate the view, but I was sure he read it in my expression, his chuckle proof that he’d recognized my disgust.

“I’d watch how you look at me if I were you, little girl.” Lowering to his haunches, he hovered the bottle in front of me. “You do not want another spanking right now.”

“I’d like the water, please, sir.”

The combination of anger and despondency swilling in the pit of my chest was a pungent mixture. I detested him at that moment—despised everything he represented, hardly recalling the gentler man who’d brought me enormous pleasure only hours prior. Until he agreed to release my wrists, I was obliged to accept his so-called generosity, and if I wanted anything, including the water my throat so badly needed, there was no choice but to swallow whatever remained of my shattered pride and play his warped game.

“There.” The smile that had once seemed so handsome sliced at my self-worth like a blade. “Show me you can be a good girl and open that lovely mouth again.”

My lips parted, not from a misshapen desire to please the tyrant, but from thirst alone.

I waited as he tipped small quantities of water past them, allowing me to swallow before he offered more. The fluid was a welcome relief, that one tiny gesture seeming normal in a rush of otherwise giddy angst and perversity.

“Good.” He screwed the lid back onto the bottle and placed the plastic down by my side. “That’s more like it.”

Flitting from his face around the room, my focus looked for anything that meant not having to look him in the eyes while he delivered yet another lecture about my alleged behavior. I couldn’t handle that. Not when he was the one who’d behaved so badly and I was still tethered on my knees.

As my attention swept the inside of the hut, his rambling words faded into the background. Instead, I took in the dark corners the light had invaded, scanning the wooden rafters and the breadth of the floor. I dared not dwell on the state of the place or what I might be kneeling on, preferring to fix my concentration on things I hadn’t previously noticed, like the redundant cobwebs hanging on the beam over his head and the long, dark object slid against the side of the wall that was barely visible from the withdrawing shadows.

Wait, what?

My heart sped up as my gaze traveled back to the floorboards in question. The space would normally have been covered by the bed, but we’d moved it in an attempt to keep me warm. Eli had seemed so accommodating then, willing to do almost anything to please and protect me. He was nothing like the idiot ranting over me.

“...and that means looking at me, little girl!”

I glanced at his face, noticing his eyes burning with emotions he had no right to feel.

I was the one who was angry. I was upset. I was vulnerable, whereas he was struggling to even stay self-righteous.

Asshole.

The echoing word in my head was oddly comforting, the notion permitting my concentration to travel back to the strange item that had caught my attention.

“What is so fucking fascinating over there?” He peered over his shoulder in the same direction I’d been searching in.

“I thought I saw something, sir,” I mumbled. “I hadn’t noticed it until now.”

Probably because I’ve had your cock shoved down my throat.

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My pussy clenched at the recollection. I was still hideously turned on despite how much I abhorred the treatment.

“Yeah...” His voice trailed into silence as he rose to his feet and walked toward the space. “I see it.”

“What is it?”

The shifting shadows revealed what looked like a black butt of a gun.

Another gun?

Whatever trepidation I thought I’d known before that point was dwarfed by the ballooning horror swelling at the sight.

“It looks like a rifle.” He peered back at me as though he, too, was surprised. “The last ranger must have left it.”

A thousand alarms sounded in my head.

Why was there a freaking rifle in the cabin? It was awful enough that he was carrying a handgun for ostensible protection in the forest, but the weapon he collected from the floor looked far worse—blacker, longer, and more foreboding.

“Get it out of here, please.”

I forced myself to my feet on shaky legs, no longer waiting for his purported

permission to rise. There were two guns in the cabin, and I couldn't just kneel there like a hapless target, although how I expected to defend myself without my hands was anyone's guess.

"Little girl." A line appeared in his brow as he turned to discover me no longer in the place he'd left me. "Who said you could move?"

"Please!" I was practically hyperventilating as I edged backward. "I hate guns."

"It's okay." Cocking the weapon, he checked the barrel for ammunition. "There are no bullets."

"Thank God." Relief radiated from me.

Eli had already proved himself both unpredictable and comfortable with a gun. The last thing I needed was a second, unknown weapon in the vicinity.

"You didn't answer my question, little girl." He'd traveled the length of the cabin to tower over me. "I never told you to move, so who did?"

"No one." Nausea stirred in my stomach. "I'm sorry, Eli. This has been fun and all, but I can't do it anymore."

"You can't do what?" His hand rose to my chin, directing my focus to his face. "And don't think I haven't noticed how you're not referring to me properly."

I pulled in a breath, turning away from his insistent fingers.

"I can't do this." My gaze gestured around the room. "Whatever this is. I can't be here with you anymore, like this..."

My attention fell past his hand to my exposed breasts. It had been some time since his climax, and he still hadn't even offered to cover me. Presumably, he was more than content with the status quo.

"I need to get dressed and get out of here." Scanning his face, I searched his eyes for any sign of the man who'd wanted to look out for my welfare. He had to be in there somewhere. "Chelle could still be out there, and—"

"Oh, Erin." He pressed his fingertips to my mouth, and the way his lips curled sent shivers racing rapidly along my back. "Don't be silly, little girl. You're not going anywhere."

Chapter Nineteen

The Swinging Pendulum

Erin

“WHAT?” BACKING AWAY from his hand, my calves hit the edge of the bed frame. “What do you mean, I can’t leave?”

“I mean, you can’t leave.” Amusement flickered in his gray eyes as he watched me contemplate my dilemma. “I need you here where it’s warm and safe.” He motioned to the fire crackling happily beside us.

“But...”

Glancing at the dancing flames, even I had to admit its warmth was consoling, but the fire wouldn’t help me out of the ropes or the larger bind I seemed to have found myself in with Eli. The chemistry tugging between us was like those flames—hot and intense and yet wild and unpredictable. I didn’t like how much he affected me.

“But nothing.” He took a step toward me. “I’ll look after you and you, Erin, you’re going to keep looking after me.”

The same old devils were back in his eyes, taunting me with their mocking smirks. After the shock appearance of the rifle, and even after an orgasm that had seemed

powerful, his attention had returned to carnality. That was why his hungry gaze devoured my breasts, and perhaps why my pulse seemed to have picked up its pace.

Oh, God.

My throat dried as he pressed against me, the soft, dark hair of his chest grazing my nipples as his fingers tipped my chin, once again demanding I meet his nefarious expression.

In another world, at another time, I'd have been impressed by his well-built body. The truth was, although I didn't want to admit it, I was. Eli had strong, powerful-looking shoulders and a huge expanse of chest that I already knew was lovely to be held against. I'd admired his nakedness in bed, but seeing his muscular form so close up was something else.

The problem was, the man in control of that body was preventing me from leaving, and instead, seemed determined to get close to me again.

"I know you enjoyed the blow job, little girl." His hand rose to my hair, but I ducked out of its way and edged along the side of the bed.

Enjoyed it?

Was he insane? I was as happy to give head as the next woman, but nothing had prepared me for the ruthless approach Eli had taken. I'd expected care as I offered him pleasure, but he'd taken what he wanted with force.

"Eli, I..." What did he expect me to say? "You were rougher than I would have liked."

In the end, I opted for diluted honesty, although only God knew what it would earn

me.

“Rougher?” He actually had the audacity to laugh at my suffering as he wandered closer. “Oh, come on, Erin! We both know you loved me using you that way.”

My clit throbbed in reply, apparently—and unbelievably—in agreement.

“Whether I enjoyed it or not is irrelevant!” How dare he try to maneuver his way out of any responsibility for the things he’d done by downplaying the deed? “You have no right to treat me that way!”

“I have every fucking right.” Looming over me, he snarled the words into my face. “You’re mine, little Erin.”

Time stretched out around me while those words played over in my head like a dreadful record stuck on repeat.

You’re mine, little Erin.

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You're mine...

Mine.

It wasn't that I was surprised by his possessive streak—his performance since he'd stirred had helped me to realize the way he saw the dynamic between us—from refusing to let me leave the cabin to the outrageous spanking he'd delivered, but there was something so menacing about hearing the intention plainly from his lips.

I washis.

End of story.

But I had news for the huge man pinning me in place by the bed. It wasn't even close to the end.

I wouldn't be the ending he'd written for me.

“Nothing smart or sassy to say?” He tilted his head, apparently bemused by my silence.

Staring at him, I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn't find the words. I had plenty to say, but nothing that would empower me out of the large Eli-shaped hole I'd fallen into.

“Come on... Have you seen it out there?” His free hand reached for my left hip and squeezed gently. “Even if I let you leave, you'd never make it more than a few

hundred feet in those snow drifts. You must see that I'm right."

My focus flitted past him reflexively to linger on the view out of the small window. I didn't have experience in the conditions to know if he was right, but the fact I'd failed to pack the correct attire lent weight to his theory.

"It would be totally reckless of me to let you do that." His voice had morphed into that silky purr again, the one he no doubt thought would seduce me. "You're my responsibility, remember?"

"I wouldn't quite put it that way." My breathing had sped up, matching my pulse and acknowledging the knowing glint in his gaze. Evidently, Eli had decided getting me back into bed was the plan, but I wasn't agreeing to another tumble in the sheets while I was bound and he was being so obstinate. "I paid you to look after me in the forest, but none of us anticipated this happening."

"True." The fingers of his free hand slid to circle my right nipple. I gasped, paralyzed not only by the gesture but the sinking feeling that there was really nothing I could do to resist his touch. Worse, the pulsing need at my clitoris only grew as his circles slowed, the tiny nub of nerves willing him to keep going until he tugged the beading tissue between his thumb and forefinger. "But we're making the best of a bad situation here, little girl."

His eyebrow arched, inviting me to defy him as his hand moved to fondle my whole breast.

"I wouldn't call what happened by the fire the best, sir."

He could throw his weight around as much as he liked, but I wouldn't allow him to whitewash what he'd done. Choking me with his cock had been cruel, even if my pussy had relished the degradation. We hadn't discussed him treating me that way,

but then, we hadn't talked about anything that had transpired since the sun had risen.

"Oh, is that right?" His grasp on my sensitive tissue tightened a fraction, as though I needed a reminder of which of us was bared while the other was dressed, and which of us was tethered while the other was free to do as he liked. "Do you have a complaint, little girl?"

His mouth neared, and for one heart-stopping moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. I froze, unsure how I felt about the intimacy. Would I tell him to bugger off and risk remaining in his ropes, or did I welcome his lips and the promise of the tenderness he'd so far failed to give me? "Because if you do, I'm going to need that complaint in writing."

"In writing?" I stared into his eyes, caught between the absurdity of his suggestion and the simmering raw energy stirring between us. I sensed its magnetism, pulling me in his direction even when logic implored me to run. "I don't think that will work, sir."

How the hell was I going to put anything in writing until he released the ropes? As it was, my arms were starting to ache at their predicament. He couldn't keep me bound forever.

But even as that reasonable line of argument filled my head, I sensed the way his fingers were weaving their magic at my chest. Each grasped caress tightened the tangle of need inside me, obscuring my judgment and making it difficult to recall precisely why I was so angry with him.

"Oh, yes... definitely in writing." He grinned, no doubt conscious of the effect he was having on me, though his tenting trousers conveyed his interest too. "And I don't even think we have a pen between us, so... I'm afraid I won't be able to accept it."

The hand at my hip brushed along my midriff, rising to tug at my other nipple. I bit back on the groan that threatened to escape my throat at the provocation.

I shouldn't have liked the way his fingers felt on my skin, should have rejected any trace of his advances, but as I craned my neck to look into his eyes again, I already knew that wasn't what I was going to do.

"What a surprise." My voice was husky. "I didn't think you'd listen to anything I had to say."

"I'm listening." The hand at my right breast skimmed north to settle at my nape, his fingers stroking the back of my neck in a simultaneously soothing and unsettling gesture. The fact that he could hold me there without objection incensed me, but at the same time, a distant part of me wanted to lean into his strength and believe he truly could look after me. "I'm just not promising to act on what you say."

"Why?" Succumbing to the latter need, I inclined toward the large hand cradling my neck. "Why not listen to me for a change?"

He ran his tongue over his perfect line of white teeth. "You paid me to be in charge. That means you're not only my responsibility, little girl. You're my property."

"What?"

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I spat out the reply, my voice carrying more bravado than I felt as I straightened. I wanted him, could feel myself yielding, but I couldn't abide his misogynistic views. The bastard had just called me his property. However horny I was, I couldn't let that stand.

"That's ridiculous, Eli. You can't say that to me!"

"Oh, Erin..." The fingers at my nape stiffened, holding me in place as his lips brushed over mine. His earthy scent washed over me, reminding me of how I'd felt when he'd rocked me to ecstasy. "I don't care if you're a princess out there in the big, bad world. When you're with me in this cabin, we both know what you really are."

His mouth descended before I could muster a defense, colliding with mine with punishing force. Without my hands, there was little chance to fight him off, and when his tongue darted past my lips with such authority, I knew the final fragments of my resistance had fallen away. I groaned as he kissed me, resting against the same strong hand that had spanked me as he took his fill. Alive with the competing sensations he inspired, my outrage of the liberties he took ceded to my ballooning lust until I could think of nothing except how bloody good it was when he slipped into the driver's seat.

Eli.

With his wicked gray eyes, roaming hands, and insufferable gall.

The man had become the center of my entire world.

I was breathless as he slowly withdrew, his eyes burning with emotions when he whispered against my skin.

“How was that, little girl?”

“Fuckyou.”

The defiance tumbled from me in a last-ditch effort to show that even when he had me trapped in ecstasy, he couldn't have everything his own way.

Until he'd pressed himself against me, I hadn't expected the kiss he'd offered, but the sudden caress had altered things in my head. I'd sensed my body soften as I opened for him, knew that despite my better judgment, I was giving in to his relentless pursuit, but I couldn't succumb entirely without a battle.

The clouds in his eyes darkened; the first cue about what was going to happen next. “You want me to fuck you, little girl?” Clutching my shoulder with his free hand, he spun me roughly to face the bed. “I promise I can do that.”

One small shove was all it took to send me stumbling forward. I tried to lift one leg to break my fall, but it was his arm snaking at my middle that prevented me from unceremoniously crashing face-first onto the covers. Easing me down onto the blanket, he yanked my leggings and panties down to my ankles and prized my knees higher until they splayed on the bed.

Terror and excitement pooled in equal measure. That was the version of Eli I'd summoned—the version who would fuck me like I'd never been fucked before—and I wasn't sorry.

“You should be careful what you fucking wish for.” His hand crashed down on my prone ass, eliciting a louder moan as the swat boomed around the cabin.

“Yes, sir.” Pushing my face to the covers, I smiled at my predicament. Whatever transpired, I’d provoked his fiery attention, and I’d just have to revel in his dominance.

“Is this what you want?”

Forcibly massaging my ass cheeks, he pulled them apart before spanking them both again. The sting of each swat reverberated through me, traveling straight to my desperate clit. Pushed against the bed sheets, my nub accepted the strikes gladly, sending signals to my brain that it was exactly what I wanted and forcing me to mewl an answer.

“Yes, sir.”

Unlike the prior spanking, which had caused pain and frustration, the fresh swats he rained down were wonderful. I needed his brute strength, and arching my back, I grazed my clit against the bed as I welcomed another strike. Warmth diffused from his hand, spreading as arousal between my legs. The heat was stifling, burning me up from the inside as a fast succession of blows landed one after the other, but rather than call out for him to stop, I never wanted it to end.

“My, my, Erin...” Skimming his hand over my bare behind, he laughed wryly. “You’ve changed your tune, little girl.”

My heart galloped, my thoughts in freefall about what he’d do next, but deep down, I accepted that was why I’d goaded him. I wanted him to do exactly what he’d promised—to fuck me—and I prayed he’d ram my sex as hard as he’d taken my throat. Whatever my rational doubts about the idea, I needed his cock inside me, needed him to do what he did best and take the lead. Bound and bent over, I couldn’t be culpable for what happened. I could just bloody relish it.

“Oh, God, just fuck me, will you?” Writhing on the bed, I couldn’t remember ever being so frantic for anyone.

“Are you giving the orders now?” His laughter deepened as he rose, collecting my ankles and dragging me down the bed to where he wanted me.

“Maybe.” Twisting, I peered behind, our gazes locking for a fraction of a second before the pressure at my neck became intolerable.

“Wrong answer, little girl.” Maneuvering my knees into position beneath me, he wrapped an arm around my chest and eased me upright as he climbed onto the bed behind me. “I’m not going to be gentle, and I don’t do fucking condoms.”

Helpless to stop his hand from manhandling my breast, I bit back on my smile. I could no longer conceive, and the last thing I wanted anymore was gentle.

“Got it?” He snarled the word into my ear, sending electricity coursing through my system.

“Yes, sir.” I turned my head toward him, bracing myself as his cock nudged between my legs to find its target. “Oh, fuck.”

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That was what I wanted; the complete sense of abandonment that only a relentless fucking could bring. With no say over the pace or the intensity, I was little more than a vessel for our mutual pleasure as his thrusts drove me into a haze of sensual hedonism. If he reckoned he owned me, then I wanted to see what he could do, and laying down the gauntlet had never seemed so right before.

The sounds of our flesh colliding filled the air, fusing with his grunts and my strangled cries, and in the fever of the act, my head was finally silenced, surrendering to the then and there instead of worrying about what came next.

“Oh!” I threw my head back against him, brushing my fingertips over his skin as he squashed my hands between our bodies. “Don’t stop!”

“I’ll say it one more time,” he growled, slowing his pace and accentuating each new syllable with a fresh lunge. “I. Give. The. Fuck. Ing. Orders!”

Ignoring him completely, my hips continued their lusty dance, arching back to receive more of him before thrusting forward to search for the sweet friction of the bed, his arm, or anything else they could enjoy.

At the rate he was giving it to me, I wouldn’t last much longer, and after the cruel game of denial he’d inflicted earlier, I deserved the orgasm at the end of the effort more than ever.

“Look at you!” he hissed, drilling into me over and over again. “Practically begging for my cock!”

“Yes,” I groaned, snapping my hips forward again.

Who was I to argue?

If he hadn’t caved in so easily to provide me with what I wanted, I would have considered begging for it, but Eli had made the union simple, taking my bait and whirling me around for the most powerful and passionate fucking of my life.

“Fuck!” Balling my hands into fists, I called out at our unadulterated fervency.

I hadn’t known the craving existed within me until he’d come along and ignited it, but awareness meant I wanted more—much more—of all the ardor he could bring.

Tilting me forward, his weight pushed me back to the covers, leaving my ass prone and my pussy entirely at his mercy. The hand that had fondled my breast shifted, finding my clit and flicking and tugging it as I bit down on the bed sheets.

The last thing I remembered screaming before the wave of bliss shattered all cogent thought was his name—two syllables piercing the air as he pummeled me straight over the precipice.

Collapsing over me a moment later, his body jerked as my pussy spasmed around his cock, and even though my hands were numb and my shoulders ached, I’d never known contentment like it.

Chapter Twenty

Aftermath

Eli

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:57 am

THE WORLD AROUND ME was fuzzy and warm, and until Erin's desperate whimpers roused me from my ecstatic stupor, that was enough. Floating through the haze of satisfaction, the 'how' and 'why' of it all no longer mattered, and neither did the man I'd become.

My past was a dirty, dark web of violence that the woman bound beneath me knew nothing about, and I'd have liked to have left those days to history. But history had a strange way of repeating itself sometimes, and the deeds I'd committed and would rather forget tended to rise to the surface.

At those moments of despair, ghosts I thought I'd banished breathed guilt and judgment into me when they demanded their five minutes in the sunshine. They came all too often, haunting me with their heads held high and their black, lifeless eyes that seemed to bore into my very soul, and there was nothing I could do to repel them.

There were days when those specters had surrounded me, making it difficult to breathe until I responded to their insistence, but I had no answers for their restless souls; no confessions that could quell their impending doom.

I was a killer.

I'd done what I'd done, and while I took no pride in the brutality, I'd pocketed the cash. That was the monster I'd been before I took tourists around the wilderness.

Shifting my weight from Erin, I rolled beside her on the bed to catch my breath, and for the first time, I realized something. Being around her had hushed those ghosts. Since I'd taken her over my knee, our energy seemed to have vanquished those

unwanted spirits completely.

Turning my head, I watched her roll onto her side to face me, her eyes full of questions. I had queries too—about her transformation from resistor of my touch to someone who appeared to revel in it, but I had no will to speak them and burst the precarious bubble we'd created.

The feisty brunette had swung from angry to yielding in a matter of moments, and while I'd loved every moment of the passion, I had no idea how long the change would last. Whatever happened, I wasn't ready to let her go, wasn't ready to give up on the blissful distraction she'd brought with her. If that meant keeping her in ropes until I could trust her behavior, then so be it.

"Is that better now, little girl?"

For the first time since I'd darted out of bed to stop her from starting her lunatic trek out into the snow, I actually cared about the response. I didn't claim to understand the woman, but I knew the best way to keep her around was to offer her at least a little of what she thought she wanted.

I was certainly happy to keep fucking her.

"Much." She nibbled her lip. "Thank you... sir."

My lips curled at her breathy reply. Whether she'd realized how much she enjoyed submitting before I'd directed her behind the cabin's door, I didn't know, but her body's primal response to my lead seemed almost too good to be true.

"Good." I wanted to reach for her, to offer something in the way of solace in the afterglow of our climaxes, but I didn't.

The atmosphere around us had shifted, as though the energy had built to the ferocious fuck we both craved, and in the aftermath, an uncomfortable calm had returned.

Staring at her, I wished I could be honest about the power she held over me, but that type of sincerity would destroy the fragile connection we'd carved. She could never know who I really was, where I'd been, and what I'd done. I just needed to keep her around to keep my demons at bay.

"My shoulders are hurting, though, sir." Her brows knitted. "Can you untie me now, please?"

A pang of guilt echoed in my usually empty chest, and pulling myself upright, I leaned closer to assess the ropes.

"How are your hands?" Tugging at the binds, I loosened them a fraction. "Can you still feel them?"

I'd been remiss in my duty of care to her. Forcing her to her knees and shoving my dick down her throat had been one thing, but not taking care of her physical needs was quite another. As it was, we'd barely eaten, and if we stayed at the cabin too much longer, we'd run out of wood for the fire.

"They went a little numb when you were fucking me." Her lips tugged. "But it's my shoulders that are bothering me."

No doubt Erin wasn't used to being anyone's captive.

"I'll release you." It pained me to have to say it. Even though her request was entirely reasonable, I'd grown used to the titillating display she provided. "But I'm going to need you to be good, little girl." I ensured my gaze pierced her. "That means no dashing out into the snow until we're ready."

Her cheeks flamed. “We’re ready, sir? Does that mean you’re coming with me?”

I laughed as I unfurled the knots I’d secured. “I’m certainly not letting you venture off on your own!”

“You don’t think I’m capable, do you?” She sighed, glancing down at the bed as though there was any shame in the admission.

“I think if any of you had been capable, you wouldn’t have paid James to hire me.”

“Yeah.” Her jaw tightened. “You’re right.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Yanking away the final bind, I eased the rope away from her delicate wrists and threw it on the other end of the bed. It had done its job for the time being. “That’s my role now.”

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She smiled as I eased her arms to her sides and helped her to sit up. “Well... thank you?”

“You’ve got it.”

It was strange to be so cordial when we’d been at loggerheads, but the shift in energy and two mind-blowing orgasms had altered my point of view. A centering sense of tranquility had settled over me, helping me to think. “Stay by the fire and keep warm. I’ll get us some food.”

“Mind if I cover myself now, sir?” Her sarcastic tone begged for another spanking, but the veil of easygoingness that had fallen over me offered her an amnesty.

For now.

“Fine.” I didn’t love the idea, but I understood keeping her naked in an environment like the hut was far from ideal. “But you should know, if you act up again, I’ll have you bared and over my knee faster than you can take a breath.”

“I don’t have to put up with your Neanderthal behavior, you know.” Her tone was playful as she tugged her bra back into place and hiked up her leggings. “That wasn’t what I paid for, and I wouldn’t take it from just anyone.”

My brow rose at her verdict. What did that mean?

Was she taking it from me because she was afraid and felt there was no choice, or was there another, more tantalizing motivation for her compliance?

Watching her redress, I considered asking, but turning my attention back to food, I decided against the idea. Whatever her reasoning, I wasn't ready to give up on the bubble of carnality we'd conjured in the cabin, and probing her for the truth risked destroying it.

"But you do seem to like the results, little girl." Pausing my search for the sandwiches, I glanced up at her. "You were so fucking wet."

Perched on the edge of the bed, she squirmed. "No one would like being treated that way."

"Please don't lie." I met her widening gaze. "If you lie to me, that's one thing, but lying to yourself is something else."

We both knew how horny both the spanking and manhandling had made her. I wasn't going to listen to her spinning a new narrative to suit her rising shame.

"I'm..." Her brow creased, and I had the sense she was about to deny the untruth but was pleased she held back. "I'm just saying I didn't deserve to be treated that way."

The matter of what she merited was no longer moot as far as I was concerned. It was a convenient distraction to avoid the more pressing matter of what she'd liked.

"But you didn't enjoy it?" I cocked a brow at her, relishing the way she seemed unable to keep still.

Guilty conscience, I concluded. I should know.

Except after so long, my heinous deeds inspired little in the way of consequences, save for the sinister specters that liked to pursue me through the forest.

Perhaps her fidgeting was related to the spans she'd taken. I wondered, if I asked, would she lie about that too?

"Some of it, maybe." She spat out the words as though they were poison. "But I didn't want to."

"Right." My voice was wry as I spotted the foil-covered food next to the place she'd stashed her phone and dragged it from the bag. "Because it would be wrong to want to be treated that way, right?"

"Absolutely." Her reply was a little too immediate to believe.

Maybe she hadn't reconciled her desires to herself yet. That, I could understand, but I couldn't allow her to twist the story into a tale where I was the villain and she was the helpless heroine. I was a lawbreaker, but she didn't know that. To Erin, I was nothing more than a tour guide turned lover, who liked to tie her up and spank her. Fortunately for my little girl, she'd met a man who had met her challenge head-on.

"Here." Striding toward the bed, I thrust the foil at her. "You should eat."

She eyed the food suspiciously, her attention falling to her lap. "I need to pee. Is there a toilet in these places?"

"A toilet?"

I nearly laughed at her request. We'd been in the hut a long time, so I wasn't surprised she needed to go—I'd had the sense to relieve myself when I was out in the storm the day before—but the idea that there was a hidden bathroom amused me.

"No, there's nothing like that. We'll have to find somewhere for you to squat instead."

“In here?” She recoiled as though I’d suggested she sleep out in the snow.

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“Yes,” I answered slowly. “That pot ought to suffice.”

I gestured to the large container by the side of the fireplace, and her gaze followed my signal.

“I can’t...” She shook her head.

Here we go. I blew out a breath. The spoilt princess has returned.

Most of the time, Erin was a reasonable woman. Empathetic to her friend’s needs, sure, but sensible. On occasion, though, she appeared to dramatize, spiraling events into panic. That was what had happened when she’d determined to leave that morning, and it seemed to be where she was headed at that moment.

“We don’t have a better option.” Closing my eyes briefly, I fought for patience. “Come on, it’s not so bad. I’ll turn around while you go.”

“But... you’ll hear me!”

She screwed up her face as if the idea of urinating was the worst she could conceive.

“Here.” Striding past her, I eased the pot out from its place in the shadows and lifted it into my arms. “I’ll put it in the opposite corner for you.”

“Th-thanks.” Her creasing brow conveyed how little she appreciated the gesture as I carried it to my proposed spot and placed it on the ground.

“Go!” I motioned to it with one arm. “I promise I won’t look.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Captive

Erin

PERCHED OVER THE POT with my leggings and underwear yanked around my ankles, where they’d been while Eli had screwed me, I tried to relax. It wasn’t easy, though. Even with Eli’s attention fixed firmly on the fire, I couldn’t ease the tension from my muscles for long enough to achieve my purpose, and after crouching there for several minutes, my thighs started to ache.

A part of me still couldn’t believe what had happened. Couldn’t believe the intensity of passion we’d shared or the fact I’d been so caught up in the hedonism that I’d been nonchalant about not using condoms. I was too old to get pregnant, but sexually transmitted diseases were still a threat. I should have been smarter, but the wave of lust had risen up and swept me away.

“Are you done yet?” His tone was skeptical.

“No, I’m...” Frustrated shame simmered in me. “I just can’t. Maybe I’ll be able to relax if I try to go outside.”

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I didn't want to squat in the snow and freeze my bits off, but anything would be better than the embarrassment of peeing in the same room as the guy who'd just spanked and fucked me. There was a limit to how much humiliation I could take in one day, and apparently, I'd reached it.

"Outside?" Rising to his full height, he swung around to face me. My thighs squeezed together at the weight of his scrutiny, although I didn't know why. He'd already seen the parts I was trying to conceal. "Have you got any idea how cold it is out there?"

"No." But I could guess. Huddling so far away from the fire had revealed the plummeting temperature to my exposed and vulnerable skin. "But I won't be long."

"Erin." He stepped toward me. "I relieved myself last night when I went out to look for wood, and even for a guy, it was touch and go. I haven't got you this far for you to get hypothermia now."

He was probably right. There was no simple way to pee in the snow without half undressing and crouching perilously close to the snow.

"Just go here and make your life easier." He folded his arms across his chest.

"It's so undignified, though!"

"But you like the indignity, don't you?" His voice was dry. "We already established that."

"No." Swallowing, I refused to accept any similarities between my current ordeal and

the fact I'd been aroused by his rough treatment. Rising from over the bowl, I yanked my clothing up to cover me, rage swelling in my chest. "Not like this!"

"You always say that." His lips tugged. "You whined when I hauled you over my knee and complained again after the blow job. Maybe it's time you started to accept who you are."

"What?" My old headache taunted me with its predictability.

I was no closer to discovering what had happened to Chelle, and even though the sexual tension between us was thick enough to cut with a knife at times, I was overwhelmed by its intensity. Driving me wild with lust was captivating, but it wasn't enough to keep me there.

There was a world beyond the oppressive little cabin—a world I'd been a part of only a day before—and I'd be damned if I let the giant of a man mocking me stop me from getting back to it.

"I'm sorry, but I need to leave." I didn't meet his eyes that time, heading straight for the door before he could argue.

I knew he'd be on me, knew he was bigger than I was and the odds were stacked against me, but blinkered with my cemented resolve, all I could think about was getting outside to where the air was clear and I could pee in peace.

The bedside unit was nudged out of the way from my earlier effort, and it only took a few hurried strides to reach the door. My adrenaline spiked as I yanked the handle.

This is it!

Frigid light spilled in when the door opened, ratcheting up my anxious excitement as

I glanced back to collect my bag. I could sense Eli over my shoulder—an omnipresent threat—but I was determined not to fall foul of his domineering authority again. I was finally getting away from his clutches, and whatever came next, at least it would be on my own terms.

“I’m going!” My heart was racing as I hiked the bag on my shoulder. I didn’t have much food left and my bottle of water was still over by the hearth, but if the worst came to the worst, I could always eat snow. That would keep me going for a few hours and I’d be back to the tourist office by then. “Don’t try and stop me.”

Dizzy with anticipation, I edged back to the open door, keeping my gaze fixed on him.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” His smug tone might have irritated me had I not been so close to freedom.

“I said, don’t try and stop me!”

I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t coming after me. Not that I was complaining, but after hours of his possession, his hesitation was strange.

“I’m not the one who’s going to stop you.” His palms rose in a conciliatory gesture. “But I would advise you to turn around.”

His emphasis on the final two words grated, convincing my feet to pause. With my heart hammering, I twisted to see what he was rabbiting about, but I didn’t expect the sight that met my eyes.

“Shit.” Dropping my bag to the floor, I stared up at the wall of ice blocking my exit from the cabin.

“More like snow.” His droll tone sliced through me. “And frozen snow at that.”

“H-how?” I heaved in a breath, unable to fathom how an entire ice blockade had sealed us in during the night.

There hadn’t been that much snow, had there?

“Hours of relentless snow and then plummeting temperatures.” His brow rose.
“We’re sealed in for the time being.”

“But...”

A hundred panicked questions flooded my brain as I tried to make sense of what was happening. I'd been so certain I was getting away, but as it turned out, I was still stuck there with the man who was resolute on my sexual obliteration.

“Close the door, little girl.” That familiar dark glint shone in his eyes as he closed the space between us.

“What?” My throat dried on instinct at his foreboding demeanor. I didn't know what he had in mind, but my experiences so far belied any reasons to trust him. Yes, the pleasure had been fantastic, but his perverted mind games were starting to wear.

He didn't own me, and he couldn't tell me what to do.

“You heard me.” His hands fell to his hips, showcasing his ripped pectorals and shoulders. “It looks as if we're going to be here a while longer, so close the door.” With a sly smile, he beckoned me forward with his index finger. “You're letting the cold in.”

The End