



The Mountain Man's Prize

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: He doesn't want a woman.
He needs her.

When Lila gets lost in the woods during a solo hiking trip, she stumbles upon a remote mountain cabin—and the massive, brooding man who lives there alone. Beau hasn't spoken to another soul in years, but the moment he sees her, something primal snaps loose inside him.

She's not just a visitor.

She's his reward.

His possession.

His prize.

Beau takes one look at the curvy, shivering beauty and knows he'll never let her go. When he finds out she's untouched? He becomes unhinged. The world can't have her. The cold can't touch her. Only he can.

He feeds her, shelters her, claims her—and makes it clear she's never leaving the mountain again.

And the longer Lila stays in that cabin, wrapped in his arms and moaning his name, the less she wants to escape.

Warning: This book is short, filthy, and packed with over-the-top mountain man obsession. Expect a possessive recluse, nonstop steam, and a cabin full of steamy tension, possessive devotion, and one very determined alpha who's done being alone. HEA guaranteed.

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one

Lila

My lungs burnlike I've swallowed fire. The rain lashes my face in cold, stinging sheets, each drop another tiny needle of ice against my skin. I've been walking—stumbling, really—for what feels like hours, but the trees never thin, the storm never breaks, and all I've earned for my trouble is mud-soaked jeans and a rising panic that feels like hands around my throat.

Another crack of lightning splits the sky, illuminating the forest in a stark, blue-white flash. For one heartbeat, I see everything—the skeletal fingers of branches clawing at the clouds, the slick carpet of dead leaves beneath my feet, the endless maze of trees stretching in every direction. Then darkness swallows it all again, and I'm left more blind than before.

"Keep moving," I whisper, my voice thin and useless against the howl of the wind.
"Just keep moving, Lila."

I shouldn't be here. I should be back in my cramped apartment, curled up with a book and a cup of tea, not lost in some godforsaken wilderness during the storm of the century. All because I thought a weekend hiking trip would "clear my head." What a joke. Twenty-three years of city living didn't prepare me for this.

My foot catches on an exposed root, and I go down hard, my palms scraping against rocks and soggy earth. The impact knocks what little breath I have from my lungs. For a moment, I just lie there, rain pummeling my back, mud seeping through my

clothes. Maybe this is it. Maybe I should just stay down.

No. Not like this.

I push myself up, ignoring the fresh sting in my hands and the ache in my knees. My backpack feels heavier with each step, waterlogged and dragging me down. I should have left it behind an hour ago, but some stubborn part of me refuses to surrender even this small piece of security.

The wind shifts, driving the rain sideways into my face. I turn away, using my arm as a shield, but it does little good. My hair plasters against my cheeks and neck, a tangled mess that drips icy rivers down my spine. I'm shivering so hard now that my teeth chatter, each breath a visible cloud that's torn away instantly by the gale.

"Please," I whisper, though I'm not sure who I'm talking to. God? The universe? The indifferent trees? "Please, I don't want to die out here."

Time blurs. One foot in front of the other. Breathe in, breathe out. My thoughts fray at the edges, coherence slipping away with my body heat. I try to remember what I know about hypothermia. Confusion is a symptom, isn't it? And so is the strange, distant feeling washing over me, like I'm watching myself from above.

The rain and wind have become almost familiar now, white noise filling my head. Maybe that's why I almost miss it—a different kind of darkness ahead, a gap in the endless pattern of trees. I blink water from my eyes, squinting. Is my mind playing tricks?

No. There's something there.

I change direction, moving toward this new mystery. The trees thin slightly, and I realize I'm approaching the edge of a clearing. My heart beats faster, hope a

dangerous, fragile thing in my chest.

When I see it, I almost sob with relief. A cabin. Small but solid, nestled against the trees on the far side of the clearing. And there—a warm glow of light from a window.

"Thank you," I gasp, a prayer to whatever force guided me here.

The clearing offers no shelter from the storm. If anything, the rain falls harder here, with no canopy to break its force. But I barely feel it now. My focus narrows to that rectangle of golden light, a beacon pulling me forward.

My legs are numb, each step uncertain. The ground beneath me has turned to a slick mire that tries to claim my boots. Twice I nearly fall, catching myself at the last moment. The cabin seems both impossibly close and endlessly far, growing larger in my vision but never quite reachable.

Until suddenly, I'm there. Standing before a wooden porch, three steps leading up to a door. The light I saw comes from a lantern hanging beside it, swinging wildly in the wind. The glass is smudged, but the flame inside burns steady, impossibly bright against the storm's darkness.

I drag myself up the steps, each one a mountain to climb. The porch offers a moment's reprieve from the rain, though the wind still whips around me, stealing what little warmth I might have generated from the effort of walking.

My fist feels like a block of ice as I raise it to knock. The sound is pathetically weak, lost in a fresh rumble of thunder. I try again, putting every ounce of remaining strength into it. This time, the hollow thud echoes, audible even through the storm's rage.

Please be home. Please be home. Please.

I sway on my feet, darkness creeping in at the edges of my vision. I'm going to pass out. Not now! Not when I'm so close!

The door swings open with a suddenness that makes me flinch, spilling warm light and the scent of woodsmoke into the night. I blink, my eyes struggling to adjust after so long in darkness.

A massive silhouette fills the doorway—a man, taller and broader than seems possible. He's backlit by firelight, his features lost in shadow, but I feel the weight of his gaze on me.

"Help," I try to say, but my lips have gone numb, and the word comes out slurred. "Please."

I take one shaky step forward, reaching out blindly. As I do, he shifts, and for the first time, I see his eyes. Blue—a startling, impossible blue, like the heart of a flame. But it's not their color that catches my fading consciousness.

It's the way they look at me.

Not with surprise or concern or wariness.

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With hunger. Raw, undisguised hunger that seems to reach out and touch my skin.

The darkness rushes in, my legs finally giving way beneath me. As I fall, a single thought flickers in my mind, strange and clear amid the fog of exhaustion:

Those wild blue eyes didn't look dangerous...they looked safe.

Then there's nothing but the sensation of strong arms catching me and pulling me into warmth before the world goes black.

two

Beau

I'm not a man who startles easily. Living alone in these mountains for five years has beaten that out of me. But the weak knock at my door during the worst storm in recent memory—that gets my attention. No one comes here. No one knows I exist. That's how I like it. How I need it to be. But something pulls me to the door anyway, some instinct I can't name that has my hand turning the knob before I've even decided to move.

The storm roars in, wind and rain slapping against my face like a challenge. But it's not the weather that freezes me in place.

It's her.

A small, drenched creature with wide eyes that find mine for just a heartbeat before

they roll back. She sways forward, mouth forming a word I can't hear over the thunder. And then she's falling.

My body moves on pure instinct. I catch her against my chest, one arm behind her knees, the other supporting her back. She weighs nothing—a bundle of wet clothes and soft curves that fits against me like she was carved from my own rib.

"Hey," I say, my voice rough from disuse. "Hey, stay with me."

But she's already gone, head lolling against my shoulder, face pale as the moon. Her skin is ice against mine, lips tinged a dangerous blue. Hypothermia. She needs warmth. Now.

I kick the door shut behind me and carry her to the fireplace where logs crack and spit, throwing dancing shadows across the cabin walls. My home is simple—one large room with a woodstove, a small kitchen area, a bed in the corner, and a bathroom behind the only interior door. It's not much, but it's warm. It's safe. And right now, that's what she needs.

I lay her on the bearskin rug in front of the fire, the thick fur cushioning her from the hard wooden floor. Up close, I can see the blue-black shadows beneath her eyes, the way her cheeks have hollowed slightly from cold and exhaustion. Her clothes are plastered to her body, revealing curves that make my throat go dry. I look away, focusing on the practical.

Her clothes have to come off. The wet fabric is leeching what little heat she has left. It's not a question of propriety—it's life or death. Still, my hands hesitate at the zipper of her jacket.

"This isn't like that," I tell myself, voice harsh in the quiet cabin. "Get a fucking grip, Beau."

I've lived alone so long I've forgotten how to be around people. Especially women. Especially beautiful women who fall into my arms like something from a dream I stopped allowing myself to have.

Her jacket comes off first, then the soaked sweater beneath it. My hands work methodically, clinically, even as my brain registers details I have no business noticing. The soft swell of her breasts against a pale pink bra. The gentle curve of her waist. The birthmark just below her collarbone shaped like a teardrop.

I grab a blanket from my bed, draping it over her upper body before moving to her hiking boots. They're good quality but no match for the storm she was caught in. Her socks are drenched, feet pale and cold when I peel the wet wool away. I rub them between my palms, trying to stimulate circulation, watching her face for any sign of discomfort.

Nothing. She's out cold.

Her jeans are the hardest part. They cling to her legs like a second skin, and I have to peel them inch by inch down the soft curves of her thighs, over her knees, past the delicate bones of her ankles. I keep the blanket positioned over her as best I can, preserving what privacy I can give her.

When she's stripped down to her underwear, I wrap her completely in the blanket, creating a cocoon of wool and warmth. Then I grab more blankets from the storage chest, layering them over her. Still not enough. Her skin remains ghostly pale, lips still holding that blue tinge at the edges.

I've read about this. Body heat is most effective. The thought makes my mouth go dry, but I push aside any hesitation. Again, this is survival, not desire.

But that's a lie, isn't it? Because when I lift her blanket-wrapped body and sit with my

back against the couch, tucking her against my chest between my legs, the feeling that courses through me isn't simply practical relief.

It's right. Like a key sliding into a lock I didn't know existed.

Her head rests against my shoulder, face turned toward my neck. Each shallow breath whispers against my skin. I adjust the blankets, making sure the heat from the fire reaches her, and study her face without the scramble of emergency to distract me.

She's young—mid-twenties maybe. Her hair is a deep chestnut, curling damply around a heart-shaped face. Long lashes cast shadows on cheeks scattered with freckles. Her lips are full, the bottom one slightly plumper than the top, creating a permanent hint of a pout. She looks like something from another world—a world of color and life and people. Not my world of silence and solitude.

What the hell is she doing out here? Miles from any trail, in the middle of a storm? Running from something? Or running to something?

I've been out here five years. Five years of building this place with my hands. Five years of hunting my own food, chopping my own wood, answering to no one. Five years of silence broken only by the wind through pine needles and the occasional visit from wildlife.

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Five years of being nobody. Of not existing. Of safety in anonymity.

And now this. Her. Soft and vulnerable and completely dependent on me. The weight of responsibility should feel suffocating. It should make me want to take her to the nearest town as soon as the storm breaks. Instead, I find myself cataloguing the things I'll need to keep her comfortable. Food. Clothes. More firewood to keep the cabin warm.

Something inside me shifts. No, not shifts—breaks. Like ice cracking on a frozen lake, a splitting sound so loud I'm surprised she doesn't wake. It's physical, this change. A before and after I can feel in my bones.

I don't understand it. I don't question it. I just know, with absolute clarity, that the woman in my arms is supposed to be here. That the storm didn't bring her to my door by accident. That the mountains didn't deliver her to me just to take her away again.

She's mine.

The thought should shock me. It doesn't. It settles into my chest with the certainty of something I've always known but just now remembered.

Her eyelids flutter, and I hold my breath, but she doesn't wake. Instead, she turns her face further into my neck, seeking warmth. Her lips brush against my throat, and the simple contact burns hotter than the fire crackling beside us.

"You're safe," I murmur into her hair, not caring that she can't hear me. "I've got you now."

My arms tighten around her, protective. Possessive. Five minutes ago, she was a stranger. Now she's everything. The contradiction should terrify me, but instead, it fills me with a fierce, primal satisfaction.

Hours pass. The storm rages on, battering the cabin with wind and rain, but inside, it's warm and still. Her color gradually improves, pale blue giving way to pink. Her breathing deepens, becomes more regular. At some point, I should move her to the bed, tuck her in, and take the couch.

I don't. I can't bring myself to let go.

Instead, I watch the fire and hold her close and make plans. The storage cellar is well-stocked—I'd hunted well this season, preserved enough to last through winter. There's a trunk of clothes that might fit her with some adjustment. The generator has enough fuel. The water catchment system is full.

We'll be comfortable here. Together.

I don't know her name. I don't know her story. But I know she belongs here now, in this cabin. With me.

"And now that I've found you," I whisper against her temple, lips brushing skin that's finally, blessedly warm, "I'm never letting you go."

Outside, the storm begins to ease, the violent squall softening to a steady rain. But the storm inside me—the one that started the moment she fell into my arms—that one's just beginning.

three

Lila

I wake in stages, consciousness returning in gentle waves rather than the sharp jolt I expect. First comes the warmth—deep, soul-reaching warmth that makes me want to burrow further into its source. Then the softness around me, nothing like the cold, wet forest floor where I thought I'd die. The crackling sound of a fire. The scent of something rich and savory that makes my empty stomach clench. And finally, the weight of someone's gaze on my face, so intense I feel it before I even open my eyes.

When I do, the world is golden and blurry. Firelight dances across rough-hewn walls. I blink, trying to bring things into focus. I'm on a bed—a real bed with a quilt pulled up to my chin. My body feels heavy, like I've slept for days, but the bone-deep chill is gone.

I turn my head, and that's when I see him.

He sits in a chair beside the bed, elbows on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. Waiting. Watching. He's so large he makes the sturdy wooden chair look like doll furniture. Broad shoulders stretch the fabric of a flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up to expose forearms corded with muscle and dusted with dark hair. His face is all angles and shadows—sharp cheekbones, a jaw that could cut glass, straight nose, and brows that furrow slightly when our eyes meet.

Those eyes. Even in the dim cabin light, they burn blue and bright. Wild. The same eyes I glimpsed before darkness took me.

"You're awake." His voice is deep, roughened at the edges like he doesn't use it much. "How do you feel?"

The question is simple, but the intensity with which he asks it makes it feel profound. Like my answer matters more than anything in the world.

"Alive," I croak, my throat raw. "Thanks to you."

Something shifts in his expression—a softening around those fierce eyes, a slight relaxation of his set jaw. "You were half-frozen when I found you. Lucky you made it here."

I try to sit up and realize two things at once: I'm no longer wearing my clothes, and my body aches in places I didn't know could ache. A flush spreads across my cheeks as I clutch the quilt tighter.

"Your clothes were soaked through," he says, reading my thoughts. "Had to get you dry and warm. You're wearing one of my shirts." A pause. "Nothing else would fit."

I glance down at myself, seeing the sleeve of a flannel shirt peeking out from beneath the quilt. The collar dwarfs my neck, slipping off one shoulder. The hem probably reaches mid-thigh. It smells like him—pine and woodsmoke and something deeper, more primal.

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"Thank you," I say, because what else can you say to the stranger who saved your life and undressed you while you were unconscious? "I'm Lila, by the way."

"Beau." He doesn't offer a last name, and something tells me not to ask. "You must be hungry."

As if on cue, my stomach growls loudly enough for both of us to hear. Heat floods my face again, but Beau's mouth quirks up at one corner—not quite a smile, but close.

"I'll get you something."

He rises to his full height, and I'm struck again by his sheer size. He must be well over six feet, with the build of a man who works with his body, not behind a desk. He moves to a small kitchen area set against the far wall—just a woodstove, a sink with a pump handle, and a few cabinets. The entire cabin is one large room with a partially closed-off area I assume is a bathroom. It's primitive but well-built and meticulously clean.

"How long was I out?" I ask, testing my voice. It comes out stronger this time.

"About eighteen hours." Beau stirs something in a pot on the stove. "Storm's still going, but not as bad as yesterday."

Eighteen hours. I've been unconscious for eighteen hours in a stranger's cabin. That should terrify me. Instead, I feel a strange, disorienting calm.

"Where exactly am I? I was hiking the north trail at Riverside Park when the storm hit. I must have gotten turned around..."

"You're about fifteen miles from the nearest marked trail. These mountains aren't part of any park." He ladles whatever he's cooking into a bowl. "Not many people come out here. That's why I'm here."

The statement hangs in the air, heavy with implication. He's here because he doesn't want to be found. And I stumbled right into his sanctuary.

"I'm sorry," I say. "For intruding."

Beau turns, bowl in hand, and his gaze pins me to the bed. "Don't be."

He returns to the chair beside me, sitting down with the bowl. Steam rises from what looks like a thick stew, the aroma making my mouth water. I try to take it from him, but he shakes his head.

"Let me," he says. "You're still weak."

Before I can protest, he dips a spoon into the stew and brings it to my lips. The gesture is so intimate, so unexpected, that I freeze. His eyes hold mine, unwavering and unreadable.

"Open," he murmurs, and my lips part on command.

The stew is rich—venison, I think, with wild mushrooms and root vegetables. It's the most delicious thing I've ever tasted, or maybe that's just the hunger talking. Either way, I can't contain the small sound of pleasure that escapes me.

Something flares in Beau's eyes. His hand remains steady, but his knuckles whiten

around the spoon. He dips it back into the bowl and brings it to my mouth again, watching intently as my lips close around it.

"Good?" he asks, voice low and rough.

I nod, unable to look away from his face. There's a scar bisecting his left eyebrow, another at the corner of his mouth. His dark hair is too long, curling at the nape of his neck and falling across his forehead when he leans forward. He hasn't shaved in days, maybe weeks, the stubble along his jaw nearly a beard. He looks untamed. Dangerous.

And yet, his hands are gentle as he feeds me, careful not to spill a drop.

"Why were you out in the storm?" he asks between spoonfuls. "Riverside Park is a day hike. You weren't equipped for overnight."

I swallow, heat creeping up my neck at how foolish I must seem to him. "I wasn't planning on staying out. I just wanted some air, some space to think. When the storm started, I thought I could make it back to the trailhead, but..." I trail off, embarrassed. "I made a stupid mistake."

Beau's expression softens fractionally. "Everyone makes mistakes. Not everyone survives them."

His bluntness is oddly comforting. No platitudes, no reassurances that it wasn't that bad. Just acknowledgment of the truth—I nearly died out there.

"What about you?" I ask, as he offers another spoonful. "Do you live here year-round? All alone?"

Something shutters in his face, but he answers. "Five years now. And yes, alone."

"Why?"

The question slips out before I can stop it. Too personal, too direct. But instead of shutting down completely, Beau's mouth quirks again in that almost-smile.

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"Maybe for the same reason you wanted air and space to think." He sets the now-empty bowl aside. "Some people need more silence than others."

I nod, understanding too well the need to escape. Isn't that why I was in those woods to begin with? Running from a life that felt increasingly hollow?

"Thank you," I say again. "For saving me. For feeding me."

"Don't need thanks for doing what needed to be done." His gaze drops to my exposed shoulder where his shirt has slipped again, lingers there. My skin prickles with awareness.

He reaches out suddenly, brushing a strand of hair from my face. The contact is brief, but it sends a jolt through me, like touching a live wire. His fingers are calloused but warm, steady but somehow hesitant, as if he's forgotten how to touch another person.

"You should rest more," he says, voice dropping to a near whisper. "Your body's been through hell."

I should feel nervous, being here alone with this large, intense stranger. I should be planning my exit strategy, figuring out how soon I can leave. Instead, I find myself searching his face, trying to understand the hunger I see there—hunger that doesn't seem entirely about desire, but something deeper. Something almost like recognition.

"Will you stay?" I ask, surprising myself. "I mean, nearby? While I sleep?"

Beau's eyes darken. "I'm not going anywhere, little dove."

The endearment catches me off guard. So does the possessive note in his voice, the way his hand curls around the edge of the bed, inches from my blanketed thigh.

As I slide back down under the quilt, his gaze never leaves my face. It's like being wrapped in something tangible, that look. Something that warms me from the inside out, different from the fire, different from the blankets.

I should be unnerved by his attention, his size, his isolation. I should be counting the hours until the storm breaks and I can return to civilization.

Instead, as sleep pulls me under again, a single thought drifts through my mind: Why does this feel like home?

And why, God help me, do I want it to be?

four

Beau

She's wearing my shirt and nothing else. The knowledge burns in my gut like I've swallowed live coals. Three days she's been here, recovering her strength, and each hour is another turn of a screw in my chest. I've given her space—as much as possible in a one-room cabin. I've been careful. Respectful. But there's only so much a man can take, and watching her pad across the wooden floor, my flannel hanging to mid-thigh, those long legs bare and perfect in the firelight—Christ, I'm only human.

I grip the edge of the table, wood creaking under my fingers. She doesn't notice, busy examining the books on my shelf. Her hair has dried fully now, falling in soft waves past her shoulders. The firelight catches copper highlights I hadn't noticed before. Everything about her glows—her skin, her eyes, the curve of her calf as she rises on tiptoe to reach a higher shelf.

My throat tightens. My pulse pounds in my ears, drowning out the howl of the wind outside. The storm hasn't let up, trapping us here together. A cruel joke or a gift, I can't decide which.

"You have so many books," she says, glancing over her shoulder at me. "I wouldn't have guessed."

Her voice is soft, with a slight rasp that makes my skin tighten. What wouldn't she have guessed? That a man who lives alone in the mountains would read? That someone who looks like me would have a library?

"Winters are long up here," I answer, voice rougher than I intend. "Books help pass the time."

She pulls one from the shelf—a collection of Frost's poetry I've read so many times the spine is cracked and pages dog-eared. Her fingers trace the cover with a gentleness that makes my chest ache.

"This one's well-loved," she says.

"It reminds me why I'm here."

She looks up, curious. "Which poem?"

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

A smile touches her lips. "The one about promises to keep? Miles to go before you sleep?"

I nod, pleased she knows it. She opens the book, flipping through pages until she finds what she's looking for. Then she reads aloud, voice soft and melodic in the

cabin's hushed atmosphere.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep..." She pauses, looks up at me with those wide, clear eyes. "What promises are you keeping out here, Beau?"

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The question slices through my defenses. No one has spoken my name in so long. No one has looked at me and seen a person, not just a threat or a tool. No one has asked me about promises.

Something inside me fractures.

I'm across the room before I realize I've moved, standing so close to her I can see the gold flecks in her hazel eyes, count the freckles scattered across her nose. She inhales sharply but doesn't back away. The book dangles forgotten from her fingers.

"You shouldn't ask questions you don't want answers to, little dove," I say, voice barely above a whisper.

Her eyes widen, pupils dilating until only a thin ring of color remains. "What if I do want the answers?"

That's it. The last thread of my restraint snaps.

I take the book from her fingers, toss it aside. One hand cups the back of her head, the other her waist, and I pull her against me as my mouth crashes down on hers.

The kiss is hard, desperate, years of isolation and want pouring out of me at once. I expect her to push me away, to stiffen in shock. Instead, she makes a small, surprised sound against my lips before melting into me, her hands sliding up my chest to curl around my shoulders.

Christ, she's soft. Everywhere my hands touch—her waist, her hair, the fragile curve

of her neck—I find nothing but yielding warmth. Her mouth opens beneath mine, inexperienced but eager, and I groan at the first brush of her tongue against mine.

I back her against the bookshelf, pinning her with my body. One of my legs slides between hers, and I swallow her gasp as my thigh presses against her core. Even through my jeans, I can feel her heat. My hand slides from her waist to her hip, then lower, finding the hem of my shirt and slipping underneath to touch bare skin.

She trembles at the contact, a full-body shiver I feel everywhere we're connected. Her fingers tighten on my shoulders, nails digging in through my shirt. I should slow down. I should give her a chance to breathe, to think, to stop this if she wants to.

But then she whispers my name against my lips, and rational thought dissolves like sugar in hot coffee.

I lift her, hands gripping the backs of her thighs, and she instinctively wraps her legs around my waist. The position presses her center directly against the hard ridge of my erection, and we both groan at the contact. I carry her to the bed, never breaking the kiss, laying her down with more care than I thought possible in my current state.

Hovering over her, I finally pull back enough to look at her face. Her lips are swollen from my kisses, cheeks flushed, eyes heavy-lidded with desire. She looks like every fantasy I've denied myself for years. But there's something else in her expression—nervousness, uncertainty.

"We can stop," I force myself to say, though it might kill me. "If you don't want this?—"

"I do," she cuts me off, reaching up to touch my face. Her fingers trace the scar at the corner of my mouth with a tenderness that makes my chest constrict. "I do want this. I just... I've never..."

The implication hits me like a physical blow, stealing my breath. "You're a virgin?"

She nods, that blush deepening. "Is that...is that a problem?"

A problem? Christ. It's the opposite of a problem. It's a gift I don't deserve, a responsibility I should run from, and a primal satisfaction I can't deny.

"No," I say, voice dropping to a growl. "But you need to be sure, Lila. Because if we start this, I don't think I'll be able to stop."

Her eyes widen at my honesty, but instead of fear, I see a matching hunger ignite. "I don't want you to stop."

Something dangerous and possessive uncoils in my chest. I lower my head, my lips brushing her ear as I whisper, "Let me be your first. Your only."

She shivers beneath me, a small sound escaping her that might be "yes" or might just be a sigh of surrender. Either way, I take it as permission and claim her mouth again, this time with more control, more purpose.

I worship her with my hands and mouth, learning her body inch by inch. The silk of her throat. The delicate wings of her collarbones. The perfect weight of her breasts in my palms, the way her nipples tighten at the brush of my thumbs. She's responsive to every touch, arching into my hands, gasping and whimpering as I discover what she likes.

When I unbutton the flannel she wears—my flannel, marked now with her scent—and spread it open to reveal her body, I have to take a moment just to look at her. She's all soft curves and smooth skin, a stark contrast to my own hard angles and battle scars. The firelight bathes her in gold, turning her into something otherworldly. A nymph. A dream.

"Beautiful," I murmur, and she tries to cover herself, suddenly shy. I catch her wrists, pin them gently above her head. "No. Let me see you. All of you."

Her breathing quickens, but she nods, surrendering to me. I release her wrists and continue my exploration, trailing kisses down her sternum, across the gentle swell of her belly, to the juncture of her thighs. When I settle between her legs, she tenses.

"Beau—"

"Trust me," I say, looking up the length of her body, meeting her wide-eyed gaze. "I'll make it good for you. I promise."

She bites her lip, then nods again. I waste no time, burying my face between her thighs, tasting her for the first time. The flavor of her explodes across my tongue—sweet and tangy and perfect. Her hips buck at the first touch of my tongue, a sharp cry escaping her. I hold her hips down with one forearm, using my other hand to spread her open for my mouth.

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I work her with my tongue and fingers, careful and thorough, building her slowly toward release. When she comes for the first time, it's with my name on her lips and her hands fisted in my hair, her thighs trembling around my ears. The sound she makes—half sob, half moan—nearly undoes me.

I crawl back up her body, stripping off my shirt as I go. Her hands immediately find my chest, exploring the muscles and scars with curious fingers. When she reaches for the button of my jeans, I catch her wrist.

"Are you sure?" I ask one more time, voice strained with the effort of control.

In answer, she pulls me down for a kiss, tasting herself on my lips without hesitation. "I'm sure," she whispers. "I want you, Beau. All of you."

Something inside me breaks open at her words. I strip off my remaining clothes, then position myself between her thighs, the head of my cock nudging at her entrance. She's wet and ready, but I know this will hurt her. The thought both agonizes and inflames me—the pain I'll cause, but also the knowledge that no man has touched her like this before. No one but me.

"Look at me," I command softly, and her eyes lock with mine. "Keep looking at me."

She nods, hands gripping my biceps. I push forward slowly, watching her face for any sign of too much discomfort. There's resistance, then a sudden giving way as I breach her completely. She gasps, eyes widening, nails digging into my arms. I freeze, buried to the hilt inside her, letting her adjust to the intrusion.

"Breathe," I murmur, pressing my forehead to hers. "Just breathe."

I hold still, though it's torture. She's tight and hot around me, her inner muscles clenching as she adjusts. After what feels like an eternity, she shifts beneath me, a tiny movement of her hips that tells me she's ready.

I begin to move, setting a slow, gentle rhythm that soon has her sighing and lifting her hips to meet mine. Her discomfort fades, replaced by pleasure I can read in every line of her body. I drink in the sight of her—head thrown back, lips parted, eyes half-closed in ecstasy.

Mine. The word pounds in my head with each thrust. Mine. Mine. Mine.

"You feel so good," I growl against her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin below her ear. "So perfect. So tight around me."

She moans in response, legs wrapping around my waist, changing the angle and taking me deeper. I increase the pace, unable to maintain the gentle rhythm as my control slips. She doesn't seem to mind, meeting me thrust for thrust, her nails raking down my back in a way that makes me hiss with pleasure-pain.

I reach between us, finding the sensitive bundle of nerves at her center, circling it with my thumb in time with my thrusts. Her inner muscles clench around me, her breathing turning to short, sharp pants.

"That's it," I encourage her, voice rough with exertion and need. "Come for me again, little dove. Let me feel you."

She does, her climax washing over her in a wave I can feel rippling through her body. She cries out my name, back arching, and the sight of her coming undone is enough to send me over the edge with her. I bury myself deep one last time and let go, my

release tearing through me with an intensity that leaves me shaking.

In the aftermath, I gather her close, pulling the quilt over our cooling bodies. She curls against me, head on my chest, one leg thrown over mine. I stroke her hair, marveling at the silky texture, the way it slides through my fingers like water.

"Are you okay?" I ask, voice gentle in the quiet cabin.

She nods against my chest, then tilts her face up to mine. Her eyes are sleepy, satisfied, but also wondering. "I've never felt anything like that before."

Pride surges through me, fierce and primitive. "Good."

She studies my face, her fingers tracing the line of my jaw. "You called me yours," she says softly. "While we were... you said I was yours."

Did I say it aloud? I must have, in the heat of the moment. I consider lying, downplaying it. But the truth is etched too deeply in me now to deny.

"You are," I say simply. "From the moment I found you, you've been mine. I just didn't want to scare you with how quickly I knew it."

Instead of pulling away, she smiles—a small, secret curve of her lips that makes my heart stutter. "I think I might be," she whispers, and presses those smiling lips to my chest, right over my thundering heart.

five

Lila

I wakeup sore in places I've never been sore before, my body a map of sweet aches

and tender spots. Beau's arm is heavy across my waist, his chest a furnace against my back. His breath stirs the hair at my nape, sending tiny shivers down my spine. I should feel trapped, pinned beneath the weight of him, but instead, I feel... anchored. Like I've been adrift my entire life, and his body is the first solid thing I've found to hold onto.

Light filters through the cabin's small windows, gray and dim—morning, but the storm still rages. The wind howls around the eaves, rain lashing against the glass, but in here, it's warm. Safe. I shift slightly, testing the various aches that pulse through my body. Between my thighs, there's a delicious soreness that makes heat bloom in my cheeks when I remember how it got there.

Last night. God, last night.

I've spent my whole life being careful. Sensible. The good girl who never took risks, who always colored inside the lines. Twenty-three years of measured steps and responsible choices. Then one storm, one cabin, one man with wild blue eyes, and suddenly I'm giving my virginity to a stranger who looks at me like he wants to consume me whole.

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And I loved it.

That's the part that shocks me most. Not that I slept with him—that seems almost inevitable now, looking back. But how completely I surrendered to him. How I reveled in his size, his strength, the way he held me down and took what he wanted while somehow giving me everything I needed. The roughness of his hands, the gentleness in his eyes, the growl in his voice when he called me his.

His. The word should terrify me. Instead, it sends a tremor of pleasure through my core.

Behind me, Beau stirs. His arm tightens around my waist, pulling me closer. I feel him harden against the curve of my backside, a reflexive morning response, but it makes my breath catch nonetheless.

"You're thinking too loud," he murmurs, voice sleep-rough and impossibly deep. "I can practically hear the wheels turning."

I smile despite myself. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

He nuzzles my neck, his beard scratching deliciously against my tender skin. "Mmmm. Best way to wake up."

His hand slides up from my waist to cup my breast, thumb brushing over my nipple in a casual caress that's somehow more intimate than anything we did last night. His touch is possessive but gentle, like I'm something precious he's allowed to handle.

I turn in his arms to face him, needing to see his expression. In the gray morning light, his eyes are more slate than blue, heavy-lidded and soft with sleep. His hair is a mess, sticking up where I ran my fingers through it. There's a mark on his neck—a bruise I left with my mouth at some point in the night. The sight of it sends a thrill through me that's almost primitive.

"Hi," I whisper, suddenly shy despite everything we've done.

His mouth quirks up at one corner. "Hi yourself, little dove."

He leans in, pressing his lips to mine in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly deepens. His hand slides into my hair, cradling my skull as his tongue strokes against mine. I melt into him, my body responding instantly, as if it's already learned that his touch means pleasure.

When we part, I'm breathless. "The storm's still going."

"Good." His thumb traces my lower lip, eyes following the movement. It means I can't leave yet.

But eventually, the storm will break, and I'll have to decide whether to go back to my life or...what? Stay here with a man I've known for days? Abandon everything for someone who lives completely off the grid?

It seems insane when I frame it that way. And yet, the thought of leaving fills me with a hollow ache I can't explain.

"What are you thinking about now?" he asks, studying my face with those too-perceptive eyes.

I consider lying, but something about him makes me want to be honest. "About

leaving. When the storm breaks."

His expression darkens, a shadow passing over his features. His hand tightens in my hair, not painfully, but enough to show his displeasure at the thought.

"Don't," he says, voice low and rough. "Don't think about leaving. Just be here, with me, now."

Before I can respond, he's kissing me again, harder this time, his body rolling over mine to pin me to the mattress. The weight of him should be suffocating, but it's not. It's grounding. Real in a way few things in my life have ever been.

His knee pushes between my thighs, spreading them to make room for his hips. Despite my soreness, I open for him eagerly, a whimper escaping me as he presses against my center. He's fully hard now, the ridge of his erection rubbing against me through the thin barrier of the sheet.

"Tell me if I'm hurting you," he murmurs against my throat, where he's trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses. "You'll be tender after last night."

The concern in his voice touches something in me, makes my chest tight. "I'm okay," I whisper, arching up against him. "Don't stop."

He groans, the sound vibrating against my skin. Then he's moving down my body, pushing the sheet aside, settling between my thighs. I know what he's about to do, but I'm still unprepared for the first touch of his tongue against my most sensitive flesh.

"Beau!" I gasp, hips jerking.

He chuckles, the vibration sending sparks through me. His large hands grip my thighs, holding me open and in place as he devours me with single-minded focus. It's

overwhelming—the heat of his mouth, the rasp of his beard against my inner thighs, the intensity in his eyes as he watches my reactions.

I come apart embarrassingly quickly, my release crashing over me in waves that leave me trembling and breathless. He works me through it, gentling his touch as I become too sensitive, placing soft kisses on my thighs as I recover.

When he moves back up my body, his expression is one of pure male satisfaction. "Beautiful," he murmurs, brushing hair from my face. "You're so goddamn beautiful when you come."

Heat floods my cheeks, but I don't look away. Instead, I reach between us, wrapping my fingers around his length. His breath hisses through his teeth, eyes darkening. I stroke him tentatively, learning the feel of him, the way the skin slides over rigid hardness.

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"Like this?" I ask, genuinely wanting to learn what pleases him.

"Christ, Lila," he groans, eyes closing briefly. "Just like that. But—" He catches my wrist, stilling my movement. "I want to be inside you."

I nod, spreading my thighs wider in invitation. He positions himself at my entrance, pressing forward slowly, watching my face for any sign of discomfort. There's some, a stretching burn that makes me wince slightly, but it's overshadowed by the pleasure of taking him deep.

He moves with careful restraint, each thrust measured and controlled. It's different from last night's passion—slower, more deliberate. His eyes never leave mine, creating an intimacy that's almost unbearable in its intensity. One of his hands cradles my face, thumb stroking my cheekbone as if I'm something precious.

"You're perfect," he whispers, voice strained with the effort of his control. "So perfect around me. Made for me."

His words send a fresh wave of heat through me. I lift my hips to meet his thrusts, wrapping my legs around his waist to take him deeper. The angle changes, and suddenly he's hitting a spot inside me that makes my vision blur.

"There," I gasp, nails digging into his shoulders. "Right there."

He growls his approval, adjusting to maintain the angle, increasing his pace slightly. "Come for me again, little dove. Let me feel you."

It's the endearment that does it—that simple, tender phrase in his rough voice. I shatter, crying out his name as pleasure washes through me. He follows moments later, his release triggering aftershocks of my own.

We lie tangled together afterward, his weight half on me, half on the bed, our breathing gradually slowing. His hand strokes lazy patterns on my hip, and I trace the lines of muscle in his shoulder, marveling at the contrast between us—his size, my smallness; his hardness, my softness.

"Why do you call me that?" I ask after a while. "Little dove."

He's quiet for a moment, thoughtful. When he speaks, his voice is soft, almost vulnerable. "Doves are gentle things. Soft. Beautiful." His fingers brush my cheek. "But they're stronger than they look. Resilient. They find their way home across impossible distances."

"Is that what I am to you? A lost bird?"

His expression turns serious, almost fierce. "No. You're not lost, Lila. You're exactly where you're supposed to be."

The conviction in his voice steals my breath. He believes what he's saying—completely, utterly believes it. And looking into his eyes, feeling the steady beat of his heart against mine, I find myself wanting to believe it too.

Something inside me shifts, melts, rearranges into a new configuration. It's terrifying how quickly it's happening—this falling, this surrender. Four days ago, I didn't know he existed. Now I can't imagine a world without his touch, his voice, his eyes on me.

"Beau," I whisper, not sure what I'm asking for.

He seems to understand anyway, gathering me closer, pressing his lips to my forehead. "I know, little dove. I know."

And maybe he does. Maybe he feels it too—this impossible, irrational certainty that something profound is happening between us. Something neither of us was looking for, but now that we've found it, we can't bear to let go.

Outside, the storm continues to rage. Inside, wrapped in his arms, I find myself hoping it never ends.

six

Beau

The word "leaving" hits me like a physical blow, a knife between my ribs. She's standing by the window, watching the storm that's finally beginning to weaken, talking about "when" not "if" she goes back. My blood turns to ice, then fire. Five years I've been alone, five years of silence and survival, and now she thinks she can walk into my life, make me feel again, and then just leave? My hands clench into fists at my sides, rage and terror mingling into something primal I can't contain. No. She's not leaving. She's mine now.

"I should call my boss once I get back," she says, more to herself than to me. "Explain what happened. And my apartment...God, the plants are probably dead."

Each word is another cut. She's planning her return to a world I can't follow her into. A world that will take her from me.

"The trail should be passable by tomorrow," she continues, fingers tracing patterns in the condensation on the window. "Maybe the day after, if there's flooding. Do you think?—"

"Stop."

My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's a rasp, an animal growl that fills the cabin. She turns, eyes wide with surprise, lips parted on a question she doesn't get to ask.

In three strides, I'm across the room. My hands find her waist, lifting her like she weighs nothing, and I spin, pressing her back against the rough-hewn log wall. Her breath catches, a tiny sound of surprise that feeds the beast clawing at my insides.

"Beau, what?—"

"You're not leaving."

Her pulse jumps in her throat, a frantic flutter beneath delicate skin. I can smell her—the clean scent of her hair, the hint of arousal that blooms even as confusion clouds her eyes.

"I don't understand," she whispers, hands resting lightly on my chest. Not pushing me away, but not pulling me closer either. "I have to go back eventually. My job, my apartment?—"

"No." The word tears from my throat, raw and final. "You're mine now. You don't go back to the world. You stay where you belong—here. With me."

Something shifts in her expression—fear, yes, but something else too. A recognition. A heat that matches the inferno in my blood.

"Beau," she says, my name a plea, though for what, I'm not sure even she knows. "You can't just?—"

"Can't what?" I press closer, pinning her with my body, my hardness evident against her soft belly. "Can't claim what's mine? Can't keep what belongs to me?"

Her pupils dilate, nearly swallowing the hazel of her irises. Her breathing quickens, chest rising and falling rapidly against mine. I take her wrists in one hand, pinning them above her head, watching her reaction.

"Tell me you don't feel it," I demand, voice low and dangerous. "Tell me you don't

know you're meant to be here. That from the moment you stumbled out of that storm, you weren't already mine."

She doesn't answer, can't seem to find words. But her body speaks for her—the subtle arch toward me, the parting of her lips, the flush spreading across her cheeks and down her neck.

My free hand slides up to cup her face, thumb brushing across her bottom lip. The gesture is gentle, a stark contrast to the storm raging inside me. "I won't let you leave me, little dove. I can't."

Something in my voice—the raw honesty, the naked fear beneath the possessiveness—reaches her. Her eyes soften, understanding dawning.

"You're afraid," she whispers, the insight cutting straight to my core. "You're afraid of being alone again."

The truth of it burns worse than any physical pain I've ever endured. But I don't deny it. Can't deny it. Not to her. Not when she sees through me so easily.

"Five years," I say, the words dragged from somewhere deep and wounded. "Five years of nothing but silence and survival. Then you. Your voice. Your touch. Your warmth in my bed." My fingers tighten on her wrists, not painful but firm. "And now you want to walk away? Back to a world that never gave a damn about either of us?"

Her breath catches on a sob, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Beau?—"

I silence her with my mouth, claiming her lips in a kiss that's more possession than affection. She makes a small sound against my lips, body going pliant in my hold. When I pull back, her eyes remain closed for a beat, lips still parted.

"The world out there," I growl, voice rough with emotion, "it'll break you. Use you up and throw you away. Here, you're safe. Here, you're cherished." My hand slides from her cheek to her throat, not squeezing, just resting over her thundering pulse. "Here, you're mine to protect. Mine to please. Mine to worship."

Her eyes open slowly, hazy with desire despite—or perhaps because of—my possessive display. "Show me," she whispers, a challenge and surrender in two simple words.

Something snaps inside me. The last thread of restraint, the final barrier holding back the primal need to claim, to mark, to own. I lift her, hands gripping the backs of her thighs, and she instinctively wraps her legs around my waist. Her arms loop around my neck, clinging as I carry her to the nearest horizontal surface—the kitchen table, solid oak I built with my own hands.

I set her down, stepping between her spread thighs, my hands sliding beneath the oversized sweater she wears. My sweater. On her. Marking her as mine in the most basic way. But it's not enough. Not nearly enough.

"Take it off," I command, voice barely human.

She hesitates only a moment before crossing her arms and pulling the sweater over her head in one fluid motion. She sits before me, naked but for a pair of plain cotton panties—the only underwear that survived her drenching in the storm.

"Beautiful," I murmur, hands spanning her waist, thumbs brushing the undersides of her breasts. "Perfect."

She shivers at my touch, goosebumps rising on her skin that has nothing to do with cold. My mouth finds her neck, teeth scraping along the sensitive curve where it meets her shoulder. She gasps, head falling back, offering herself to me.

"Mine," I growl against her skin, one hand sliding up to tangle in her hair, the other moving between her thighs, finding her hot and wet through the thin cotton. "Say it."

Her hips buck against my hand, seeking more pressure. "Yours," she whimpers, the word barely audible.

"Again." I push the fabric aside, fingers finding her slick heat, circling but not entering. "Louder."

"Yours," she gasps, hands clutching at my shoulders. "I'm yours, Beau."

I push two fingers into her, feeling her stretch around me, watching her face contort with pleasure. "And where do you belong?" I demand, curling my fingers to hit the spot that makes her cry out.

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"Here," she moans, rocking against my hand. "With you."

"That's right, little dove." I withdraw my fingers, ignoring her whimper of protest. My hands move to my jeans, unfastening them just enough to free myself. "Right here. With me. Always."

I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock nudging against her. She's so wet, so ready, but I hold back, making her wait, making her want it.

"Please," she whispers, trying to pull me closer with her legs around my waist.

"Please what?" I need to hear it. Need to know she understands.

Her eyes meet mine, clear and certain despite the haze of desire. "Please make me yours. Keep me. Don't let me go."

Something breaks open in my chest, a flood of emotion too complex to name. I thrust forward, burying myself to the hilt in one smooth motion. She cries out, body arching, inner muscles clenching around me like a fist.

"Never," I promise, beginning to move, setting a punishing rhythm that has the table creaking beneath us. "Never letting you go."

I take her hard and fast, all finesse abandoned in favor of raw, animal claiming. Her nails rake down my back, her cries growing louder with each thrust. I mark her with my mouth—her neck, her shoulders, the tops of her breasts. Each mark is a brand, a visual reminder that she belongs to me.

"Everyone will know," I growl against her skin, hips never slowing. "When you wear your hair up, when you bend over, when you stretch—they'll see my marks on you. Know you're taken. Know you're mine."

Instead of frightening her, my words push her closer to the edge. Her inner muscles flutter around me, her breathing turning to short, sharp gasps. She's close. So close.

"Come for me," I command, reaching between us to circle her clit with my thumb. "Come on my cock, little dove. Show me you're mine."

She shatters with a cry that echoes off the cabin walls, her body convulsing around me, pulling me deeper. The sight of her coming undone, the feel of her pulsing around me, the knowledge that I've claimed her so completely—it's too much. I follow her over the edge, burying myself deep and releasing with a guttural groan that comes from somewhere primal and possessive.

In the aftermath, I gather her trembling body against mine, holding her close as our breathing gradually slows. I'm still inside her, neither of us willing to break the connection just yet. Her face is pressed against my neck, tears dampening my skin—from intensity, from release, from emotion, I'm not sure.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, stroking her hair, suddenly aware of how rough I was, how consumed by fear and possessiveness. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She pulls back just enough to look at me, eyes still damp but clear. "You didn't," she says softly. "Not the way you think."

I study her face, searching for any sign of regret or fear. "I meant what I said, Lila. I can't let you go."

Her hand cups my cheek, thumb brushing the corner of my mouth where my scar

twists my lips into a permanent half-snarl. "I know," she whispers. "And that should terrify me. But it doesn't."

"What does it do?" I ask, voice rough with emotion.

A small smile touches her lips, sad and sweet and knowing. "It makes me feel like I've finally found home."

The words hit me like a physical blow, stealing my breath. Home. Yes. That's what she is to me. What I am to her, if she'll let me be.

I press my forehead to hers, breathing her in. "Stay," I whisper, the word more plea than command this time. "Please, little dove. Stay with me."

Her arms tighten around me, her body melting into mine. "Where else would I go?" she murmurs. "You're right. I belong here now."

With her in my arms, marked and claimed and choosing to stay, I finally feel the terror recede, the beast inside me settling. She's mine. She's staying. And I'll spend every day making sure she never regrets that choice.

seven

Lila

I wait until Beau is gone, his broad shoulders disappearing into the treeline, rifle slung across his back. He's hunting, which means I have at least two hours. Two hours of freedom. Two hours to remember who I was before I fell into his arms and his bed. I pull on his spare boots—comically large on my feet but better than my still-damp sneakers—and ease the cabin door open, wincing at the loud creak. The mountain air hits my face, fresh and clean after the storm, carrying the scent of wet earth and pine.

I hesitate, glancing back at the warm safety of the cabin. Am I making a mistake? But my phone weighs heavy in my pocket, calling to me with promises of reconnection. Just one bar. That's all I need.

The storm has passed, leaving behind a transformed landscape. Broken branches litter the clearing, and mud sucks at my oversized boots with each step. The sky above is a perfect, pristine blue that seems to mock the chaos the storm left in its wake. I breathe deeply, savoring the feeling of open space after days confined within the cabin's walls.

Not that the confinement has been unpleasant. Far from it. Every moment with Beau has been intense, consuming—his eyes watching my every move, his hands constantly finding reasons to touch me, his body covering mine at night. The thought sends a shiver through me that has nothing to do with the cool air.

I pull my phone from my pocket, tapping the power button. Miraculously, it still has a sliver of battery left. No signal, of course, not here by the cabin. I cast my eyes toward the slope rising behind Beau's home. Higher ground might offer better chances.

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As I pick my way up the muddy incline, my thoughts tangle and knot. What exactly am I doing? Checking messages? Calling for help? Neither feels quite right. I'm not a prisoner here, despite Beau's possessive declaration yesterday. Yet I'm not entirely free, either. The memory of his words—"You're mine now"—sends another tremor through me, equal parts thrill and unease.

The truth is more complicated than either captivity or freedom. I want...what? To know the option exists? To keep a tether to my old life while I decide about this new one?

Halfway up the slope, I check my phone again. Still nothing. I climb higher, mud clinging to Beau's boots, my breath coming faster with exertion. The higher I get, the more exposed I feel, like a creature that's ventured too far from its burrow. The forest around me is alive with sounds I can't identify, reminding me how foreign this world is to me, how dependent I am on Beau's knowledge and protection.

I stop at a rocky outcropping, checking my phone once more. One bar flickers uncertainly at the top of the screen. My heart leaps. I could call someone. My boss. My neighbor. Anyone.

I stare at the screen, finger hovering over the keypad. Who would I even call? What would I say? "Hi, I'm alive, just shackled up with a mountain man who thinks I belong to him now"?

The absurdity of it hits me, and a nervous laugh bubbles up from my chest. Five days ago, I was drowning in a life that felt meaningless—dead-end job, empty apartment, relationships that never went anywhere. Now I'm on a mountainside, wearing a

stranger's boots, contemplating whether to return to civilization or stay with a man who looks at me like I'm his reason for breathing.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The voice—Beau's voice, rough with fury—slices through my thoughts like a blade. I spin around, nearly losing my footing on the slick rocks. He stands ten feet below me on the slope, eyes flashing dangerously, hands clenched at his sides. No rifle. He must have returned early, found me gone.

My mouth goes dry. "I was just?—"

"Getting signal?" He gestures to the phone still clutched in my hand. "Planning your escape?"

"No! I wasn't?—"

"Bullshit." He climbs toward me, each movement controlled but radiating barely contained rage. "I told you. I fucking told you yesterday. You're not leaving."

"I wasn't planning to leave," I say, standing my ground despite the flutter of fear—and something else, something darker and more primal—in my belly. "I just wanted to check my messages. Let people know I'm okay."

He reaches me, towering over me on the narrow outcropping. His eyes are storm-dark, the blue nearly swallowed by black. "Let people know where you are? So they can come take you away?"

"No one's taking me anywhere," I snap, irritation cutting through my apprehension. "I'm an adult, Beau. I make my own choices."

"And what choice are you making right now, sneaking behind my back?" His voice drops lower, more dangerous. "Testing me? Seeing how far you can push before I break?"

My heart hammers against my ribs, blood rushing in my ears. "That's not?—"

In one swift motion, he snatches the phone from my hand. Before I can protest, he hurls it into the forest below, sending it arcing through the air until it disappears among the trees and underbrush.

"Beau!" I gasp, shock and anger coursing through me. "What the hell?"

His hand closes around my wrist, not painful but implacable. "We're going back," he says, voice eerily calm now. "And then we're going to address this."

"Address what?" I try to pull away, but his grip is unbreakable. "You don't own me. You can't just?—"

"Can't what?" He leans in, his face inches from mine, his breath warm against my lips. "Can't protect what's mine? Can't keep you safe from your own recklessness?" His other hand cups my face, the gesture at odds with the fury still smoldering in his eyes. "Do you have any idea what could have happened to you out here alone? The predators? The cliffs? The hidden sinkholes after all that rain?"

The genuine fear beneath his anger penetrates my defiance. He wasn't just angry that I might leave—he was terrified for my safety.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, the fight draining out of me. "I didn't think?—"

"No, you didn't." His grip on my wrist gentles, but he doesn't release me. "Come on. Before you catch cold in those wet boots."

The walk back to the cabin is silent, tense with unspoken words and simmering emotions. He keeps hold of me the entire way, as if afraid I'll bolt into the forest if given half a chance.

Inside, the cabin feels different—charged with an energy that makes the hair on my arms stand on end. Beau closes the door behind us, the soft click somehow more ominous than a slam.

"Take the boots off," he says, his back to me as he hangs up his jacket.

I comply, setting them neatly by the door, watching him warily. When he turns, his expression is composed, controlled, but his eyes still burn with that dangerous light.

"You disobeyed me," he says simply. "Endangered yourself. Tried to contact people who would take you from me."

"I wasn't?—"

"Bend over the table, Lila."

The command stops me cold, sends a shock of heat straight to my core. "What?"

"You heard me." His voice is quiet but brooks no argument. "Actions have consequences. Bend over the table."

I should refuse. Should tell him he has no right. Should be outraged at his presumption. Instead, my feet carry me to the table—the same table where he took me so thoroughly just yesterday. My hands brace against the smooth wood, body bending at the waist, heart pounding so hard I'm sure he can hear it.

His footsteps approach slowly, deliberately. I feel him behind me, not touching, just present. Waiting. The anticipation is unbearable, a taut wire of tension stretching between us.

"Why are you doing this?" His voice is closer now, just behind my right ear.

"Because..." I swallow, searching for the answer he wants. The answer that's true.

"Because I disobeyed you. Because I worried you."

His hand settles at the small of my back, warm through the thin fabric of my—his—shirt. "And?"

I close my eyes, surrendering to the truth. "Because I need this. Need you to show me

where the boundaries are."

A sound of approval rumbles from his chest. His hand slides lower, lifting the hem of the shirt, baring me from the waist down. Cool air kisses my skin, raising goosebumps.

"Ten," he says, voice thick with something that isn't just anger now. "Count them."

The first strike comes without warning, his palm connecting with my right cheek in a sharp crack that echoes in the quiet cabin. The sting blooms outward, heat rushing to the surface of my skin.

"One," I gasp, shocked by how the pain transforms almost instantly into pleasure, how my body responds with a rush of wetness between my thighs.

The second lands on my left cheek, harder. "Two."

By five, I'm moaning with each strike, my hips pushing back to meet his hand. By eight, tears stream down my face, not from pain but from the overwhelming intensity of sensation, the release of tension I didn't know I was carrying.

"Nine," I sob, knuckles white where I grip the edge of the table.

The final blow lands across both cheeks, the hardest yet. "Ten!"

I collapse forward, chest heaving, skin burning, mind floating in a strange, peaceful haze. Behind me, Beau's breathing is ragged, uneven. His hand returns, gentler now, caressing the heated flesh he just punished.

"Good girl," he murmurs, voice rough with emotion. "So good for me."

The praise washes over me, sweeter than any I've ever received. I feel his body press against mine, the hard ridge of his arousal evident through his jeans.

"Do you understand now?" he asks, lips brushing my ear. "Do you understand what you mean to me? What I'd do to keep you safe?"

"Yes," I whisper, turning my face to find his lips. "Show me, Beau. Please."

The sound of his zipper is obscenely loud in the quiet room. Then he's there, pushing into me in one long, smooth thrust that tears a cry from my throat. The angle is deep, intense, made more so by the lingering sting of his punishment.

"Mine," he growls, setting a relentless pace that has the table scraping across the floor with each thrust. "Say it, Lila. Tell me you understand."

"Yours," I gasp, tears still flowing freely, release building with each powerful drive of his hips. "I'm yours, Beau. Only yours."

His hand snakes around to find where we're joined, fingers circling the bundle of nerves that sends sparks shooting through my veins. "Come for me," he commands, voice thick with need. "Let me feel you surrender."

The orgasm crashes over me with unexpected force, wringing a sobbing cry from my lips. He follows immediately, his release triggering aftershocks of pleasure that leave me trembling and weak.

In the aftermath, he gathers me into his arms, turning me to face him, cradling me against his chest as if I might break. My tears soak his shirt, emotion pouring out of me in a flood I can't control.

"Shhh, little dove," he murmurs, one hand stroking my hair, the other gently rubbing

the small of my back. "I've got you. You're safe."

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He carries me to the bed, laying me down with a tenderness that belies his earlier ferocity. He strips away his clothes, then joins me, pulling me into the protective circle of his arms. His fingers trace patterns on my back, his lips press soft kisses to my forehead, my temples, the tip of my nose.

"I shouldn't have thrown your phone," he says after a long silence. His voice is quiet, contrite. "I was just...the thought of you contacting someone, someone coming to take you away..."

I place my hand over his heart, feeling its steady rhythm beneath my palm. "No one's taking me anywhere, Beau. Not unless I want to go."

"And do you?" The question costs him, I can tell by the tension in his jaw, the way his arms tighten fractionally around me. "Want to go?"

I consider the question, really consider it. The life I left behind. The unexpected life I've found here. The man holding me as if I'm the most precious thing he's ever touched.

"No," I whisper, and feel him exhale in relief. "But I need you to understand something." I push up on one elbow, looking into his eyes. "I'm choosing this. Choosing you. Not because you're forcing me, but because I want to. That has to mean something."

His hand cups my face, thumb brushing away the remnants of tears. "It means everything," he says, voice rough with emotion. "Everything."

I settle back against his chest, feeling the last of the tension drain from both our bodies. Outside, the forest grows quiet as twilight approaches. Inside, wrapped in Beau's arms, I find a peace I never knew I was missing.

eight

Beau

The ax swings down, splitting the log with a satisfying crack. Sweat trickles down my spine despite the cool morning air. I've been at it for hours, building up the woodpile that will keep us warm through the coming weeks. Us. The word still feels foreign in my mind, a concept I'd abandoned years ago along with any hope of connection. Now she's here, sleeping in my bed, wearing my clothes, filling the silence with her voice, her laughter, her soft sighs of pleasure. I'm still not convinced she's real, that this isn't some elaborate hallucination born from years of isolation. Each morning I expect to wake to empty space beside me, the indentation of her body in the mattress the only proof she existed at all.

I left her curled in our bed, face softened by sleep, one hand stretched across the space I'd vacated as if seeking my warmth. The sight had rooted me in place for several minutes, a tightness in my chest that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

Another log positioned, another swing of the ax. The rhythm is meditative, familiar. My body knows this work, has performed it countless times while my mind wanders. Today it wanders to her—to yesterday's confrontation on the mountainside, the punishment that turned to pleasure, the tears she shed in my arms afterward. Not tears of fear or pain, but of release. Of surrender.

She's still adjusting to this life. To me. My intensity scares her sometimes, though she'd never admit it. I see it in her eyes when I lose control, when the need to possess her overwhelms my better judgment. But she meets me halfway, pushes back when I

push too hard, yields when yielding is what we both need.

I set the ax aside, gathering the split logs in my arms. Time to check the snares at the edge of the clearing, then clear some fallen branches from the path to the stream. The recent storm has left debris everywhere, making the familiar terrain newly treacherous.

The thought has barely formed when I feel it—a sudden, vicious bite of metal into flesh as my foot comes down wrong on ground that gives way beneath me. Pain explodes up my leg, white-hot and blinding. I drop the wood, stumbling forward before falling hard to one knee.

"Fuck!"

The old trap—one I'd set and forgotten years ago, or maybe left by some other hunter who passed through these mountains—has sprung closed around my ankle. Not a bear trap, thank God, or I'd be dealing with a severed foot. But bad enough—a smaller game trap with rusted teeth that have punched through my boot leather and into flesh.

Blood soaks through my pants leg, a spreading dark stain against the faded denim. I reach down, fingers fumbling with the trap's mechanism. It's seized with rust and time, the release lever barely moving when I apply pressure.

"Come on, you son of a bitch," I growl, fighting against the pain that threatens to cloud my vision.

The trap gives slightly, metal groaning in protest, then snaps back tighter when my grip slips. Fresh pain lances up my leg, drawing a harsh curse from my lips. Sweat beads on my forehead, as much from strain as from pain.

I need tools. Need to get back to the cabin. I attempt to stand, putting weight on my good leg and using a nearby tree for support. The trapped foot drags awkwardly, the chain attached to the trap catching on underbrush. Each step sends fresh agony shooting up from the wound.

Halfway to the cabin, the world tilts sideways. I catch myself against a tree, breathing hard, vision swimming. Blood loss? Shock? Either way, I'm in trouble.

"Beau? Beau!"

Her voice cuts through the haze of pain, clear and sharp as the morning air. I look up to see Lila running toward me, her face a mask of concern. She's wearing my flannel shirt and a pair of cotton shorts I found for her, feet bare despite the cool ground.

"Stop," I manage, holding out a hand. "Watch where you step. Traps."

She slows but doesn't stop, eyes scanning the ground with each careful step. When she reaches me, her hands immediately go to my shoulders, steadying me.

"What happened? Oh my God, there's so much blood."

"Old trap," I grit out, nodding toward my foot. "Stepped right into it like a goddamn amateur."

Her eyes widen at the sight of the metal teeth clamped around my ankle, the torn leather of my boot, the blood-soaked denim. But she doesn't panic, doesn't freeze. Instead, her expression hardens with determination.

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"Put your arm around me," she says, moving to my side. "Let me help you back to the cabin."

"I can manage?—"

"Shut up," she cuts me off, voice firm. "Put your arm around me and lean on me, or so help me God, I will leave you out here for the wolves."

Despite the pain, a chuckle escapes me. "Yes, ma'am."

I drape my arm across her shoulders, allowing her to take some of my weight. She's small compared to me, but surprisingly strong, her body rigid with the effort of supporting me. We make our way slowly back to the cabin, my breathing harsh in the quiet morning air, her occasional whispered encouragement the only other sound.

Inside, she helps me to a chair, then kneels to examine the trap.

"We need to get this off," she says, fingers hovering over the mechanism. "And clean the wound before infection sets in."

"There's a toolbox under the sink," I tell her. "Pliers should help with the release lever."

She retrieves the toolbox, then gathers clean cloths, a basin of water, and the bottle of whiskey I keep for medicinal purposes. Her movements are efficient, focused. No wasted motion, no panic. Just calm competence that stirs something warm in my chest.

"This is going to hurt," she warns, positioning the pliers on the trap's lever.

"Already hurts," I grunt. "Just do it."

She nods, then applies steady pressure to the lever. For a moment, nothing happens. Then, with a reluctant groan of metal, the trap begins to open. The release of pressure brings its own unique agony, blood flowing more freely as the teeth withdraw from flesh. I clench my jaw against a shout, sweat dripping into my eyes.

"Almost there," she murmurs, eyes fixed on her task. "Just a little more."

The trap finally springs open with a metallic snap. She carefully lifts it away from my leg, setting it aside with a look of disgust. Then she turns her attention to my boot, easing it off with gentle fingers that nonetheless send shards of pain through my leg.

"The sock too," she says, apologetic. "I need to see how bad it is."

I nod, bracing myself as she peels the blood-soaked fabric away from the wound. Her sharp intake of breath tells me it's not good before I even look down.

"Puncture wounds," she says, examining the damage. "Four of them, pretty deep. They need to be cleaned thoroughly."

She soaks a cloth in water, then begins the careful process of cleaning away the blood and dirt. Her touch is gentle but thorough, her concentration absolute. I watch her face as she works—the furrow between her brows, the way she catches her lower lip between her teeth, the steady resolve in her eyes.

"You're good at this," I observe, trying to distract myself from the pain.

"I worked as a nurse's aide during college," she says, not looking up from her task.

"Just part-time, but I picked up a few things."

Another piece of her past, another facet of her life before me. I store it away, hungry for every detail she offers.

When the wound is clean, she reaches for the whiskey. "This is going to sting like hell," she warns.

"Not my first rodeo," I say, offering a tight smile. "Do what you need to do."

She pours the amber liquid directly onto the punctures. The burn is immediate and intense, drawing a harsh hiss through my clenched teeth. My hands grip the chair arms, knuckles white with strain.

"Sorry, sorry," she murmurs, though we both know it's necessary.

Once the wounds are disinfected, she bandages my ankle with careful precision, wrapping the gauze firmly but not too tight. Her fingers brush against my skin, cool and soothing compared to the fire in my ankle.

"There," she says, sitting back on her heels to survey her work. "Not hospital-quality, but it should hold until it starts to heal. You'll need to keep weight off it for a few days, though."

I nod, oddly touched by her concern, her care. Five years I've lived here, tending my own injuries, relying on no one. Now this slip of a woman is bandaging my wounds, telling me to rest, looking at me with eyes full of worry.

"Thank you," I say, voice rougher than intended.

She looks up, meets my gaze, and something passes between us—something deeper

than desire, more complex than gratitude. Her hand rests on my knee, a simple point of contact that grounds me.

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"What happened to your face?" she asks suddenly, fingers reaching up to trace the scar that bisects my eyebrow, then the one at the corner of my mouth. "These are old."

The question catches me off guard, opens a door I've kept firmly closed. But her hands on me, her care for my wounds, her earnest eyes—they disarm me in a way I never expected.

"My father," I say, the words falling from my lips before I can stop them. "He had a thing for belt buckles. And rings. Anything that would leave a mark, really."

Her eyes widen, fingers stilling against my cheek. "Beau..."

"He was a mean drunk," I continue, unable to stop now that I've started. "And a meaner sober man. My earliest memory is hiding under the bed while he threw my mother against the wall for burning dinner."

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, and I see tears gathering in her eyes—tears for me, for a child who learned to fear his own father's footsteps.

I shrug, an attempt at nonchalance that doesn't fool either of us. "Ancient history. He's been dead fifteen years."

"How did he die?" she asks, voice soft but steady.

I meet her gaze, unflinching. "Prison. Shanked in the yard during a fight. He killed a man in a bar brawl, got twenty years. Served three before someone put a sharpened

toothbrush through his eye."

She doesn't recoil from the brutality of it. Doesn't offer platitudes about how awful it must have been, or how I must have felt. Instead, she asks the question that matters.

"Is that why you're here? Why you left the world behind?"

A bitter laugh escapes me. "Partly. But no, that came later." I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of secrets long carried alone. "I was in the military after high school. Special forces. They liked that I could take a beating and keep going. That pain didn't register the same way for me."

Her hand tightens on my knee, an anchor as I drift through memories I've tried to bury.

"I was good at it. Too good. They sent me places... had me do things..." I shake my head, unwilling to burden her with those particular horrors. "When I got out, I couldn't adjust. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't be around people without seeing threats everywhere. One night, I almost killed a man for bumping into me at a bar. Just... snapped. Saw my father in the mirror afterward, blood on my knuckles, that same look in my eyes."

"So you ran," she says softly. Not an accusation. A understanding.

"I disappeared. Bought this land with my military pay. Built this place with my hands. Taught myself to live off the grid, away from people I might hurt." I look around the cabin—the home I've created, the sanctuary that's kept me sane. "Out here, there's no one to trigger those instincts. No crowds, no sudden movements, no threats. Just silence and survival."

"Until me," she says, a question in her voice.

"Until you," I agree, reaching out to touch her cheek. "I don't know why it's different with you. Why I can bear to be touched. Why I crave your closeness instead of fearing it. But from the moment you fell into my arms, something...changed."

Tears spill over, tracking down her cheeks. She turns her face into my palm, pressing a kiss to the center. "You're not your father, Beau. You're not a weapon, either. You're a man who survived. Who built something beautiful out of a lifetime of pain."

Her words crack something open inside me—something I've kept sealed and buried since I first set foot on this mountain. Before I can stop them, tears blur my vision, the first I've shed since I was a boy too small to defend himself.

She rises from her knees, moving to sit in my lap, careful of my injured leg. Her arms go around me, pulling my head to her chest, cradling me like something precious as the dam breaks, years of solitary pain flowing out in silent, shuddering waves.

Her lips press against my forehead, my temples, the scars that map the violence of my past. Each kiss feels like absolution, like acceptance of every broken, jagged piece of me.

"You beautiful, broken man," she murmurs into my hair. "Thank you for letting me see you. All of you."

I clutch her to me, face buried in the curve of her neck, breathing in her scent like it's the only oxygen that can fill my lungs. In this moment of raw vulnerability, of exposed wounds deeper than the ones she just bandaged, a truth crystallizes with perfect clarity.

She holds my heart now. This woman who fell out of a storm and into my life, who sees the monster I could become and the man I'm trying to be, and chooses to stay anyway. Who kisses my scars like they're badges of honor instead of marks of shame.

Who cries for the boy I was and holds the man I've become.

"Lila," I breathe her name like a prayer, like salvation. "My little dove."

"I'm here," she says, fingers combing through my hair, soothing away decades of loneliness with simple touch. "I'm right here, Beau."

And for the first time since I can remember, the silence in my head is peaceful. The demons quiet. The past, if not forgotten, at least temporarily irrelevant in the face of her presence, her acceptance, her care.

I lift my face to hers, needing to see her eyes, to make sure she's real and not some hallucination born of pain and blood loss. What I find there—compassion without pity, strength without hardness, and something else, something warm and growing and profound—steals what little breath I have left.

"Stay with me," I whisper, the words both plea and promise. "Not because I'll keep you here. Not because I need you. But because you choose me, knowing everything."

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Her answer is a kiss, soft and sweet and sure, that tastes of salt and redemption and home.

nine

Lila

His confessions echo in my mind as I watch him sleep. The hardness of his face softens in slumber, years falling away from his features. My fingers hover above the scar that cuts through his eyebrow, not quite touching, afraid to wake him. Beau—my mountain man, my captor, my lover—laid bare his soul to me today, showed me the wounds that run deeper than flesh. The belt buckle that split his brow, the father who taught him violence, the military that weaponized his pain, the fear that drove him to these woods. Now I understand his desperate grip on me, his terror of being alone again. It's not possession; it's survival. He's a drowning man and I'm his air. But tonight I need him to understand something vital: I'm not here because he caught me. I'm here because I choose to be.

The afternoon faded into evening as I tended his injured ankle, replaced the bandages, brought him food and water. He accepted my care with a vulnerability that made my chest ache, his eyes following my every movement as if memorizing me, as if I might vanish the moment he looked away. Now he sleeps, exhausted from pain and emotion, his large body sprawled across the bed we share, one arm stretched into the empty space where I should be.

I slip from the cabin as quietly as I can, retrieving something from the hiding place where I stashed it days ago. A small luxury I've been saving, though for what

occasion, I wasn't sure until now. When I return, the fire has burned low, casting the cabin in a warm, amber glow. I add another log, watching the flames lick at the fresh wood, gathering my courage.

What I'm about to do terrifies me. Not because I doubt my feelings—those have crystallized with surprising clarity—but because I've never been the one to initiate, to take control. I've always followed, reacted, responded. But Beau needs more than my passive acceptance. He needs to know I'm active in this choice. That I see him—all of him—and still want him.

I check his ankle once more, relieved to find the bandages clean, no fresh bleeding. His breath comes deep and even, face relaxed in sleep. My mountain man, vulnerable at last.

The small bathroom off the main room has no door, just a curtain for privacy. I slip behind it, stripping off my clothes—his clothes, really, the oversized flannel and cotton shorts I've been living in. My reflection in the small mirror above the sink shows a woman I barely recognize. My hair falls in loose waves past my shoulders, my skin glows with health despite the fading bruises from the storm, my eyes hold a certainty I've never seen there before.

I open the small packet I retrieved from outside—travel-sized bath products from my backpack, salvaged after the storm. The scent of lavender rises as I quickly wash, a small feminine indulgence in this rugged, masculine space. When I'm done, I don't dress, don't cover myself. Instead, I reach for the single candle on the shelf, lighting it with a match from Beau's supply.

Heart pounding, I step from behind the curtain, naked but for the candlelight dancing on my skin. The cabin is warm from the fire, but goosebumps rise on my flesh anyway—from anticipation, from the boldness of what I'm doing.

I approach the bed slowly, the candle casting enough light to navigate but not enough to wake him immediately. Setting it on the bedside table, I study him one more time—the strong lines of his face, the beard that scratches deliciously against my skin, the breadth of shoulders built from years of physical labor. Mine. As surely as I am his.

I ease onto the bed beside him, the mattress dipping beneath my weight. He stirs, instincts honed by years of solitude bringing him to alertness even in sleep. His eyes open, instantly finding mine in the dim light.

"Lila?" His voice is rough with sleep, concern immediately creasing his brow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I whisper, placing a finger against his lips. "Everything's right."

His gaze drops, registering my nakedness, pupils dilating until only a thin ring of blue remains. His hand lifts as if to touch me, then hesitates, a question in his eyes.

Instead of answering with words, I move to straddle him, the blanket still separating us, my bare skin glowing golden in the candlelight. His breath catches, hands coming to rest instinctively on my hips.

"What are you doing, little dove?" he asks, voice deeper now, roughened with desire.

I take his hands in mine, lifting them to my lips, pressing kisses to each scarred knuckle. "Showing you," I murmur against his skin. "Choosing you."

A sound escapes him—part groan, part sigh. "Lila?—"

"No," I interrupt gently. "Let me. Please."

Something in my voice must convince him, because he relaxes back against the pillows, surrendering control to me. The trust in that simple action makes my heart swell.

I lean down, bracing my hands on either side of his head, letting my hair fall around us like a curtain, creating a private world of just the two of us. My lips brush his, a whisper of a kiss that has him straining upward, seeking more.

"I saw you today," I murmur against his mouth. "All of you. The pain. The fear. The strength it took to survive." I kiss the scar at his eyebrow, then the one at the corner of his mouth, just as I did earlier. "And I'm still here."

His hands tighten on my hips, but he doesn't take control, doesn't flip me beneath him as he so easily could. He watches me with an intensity that should be intimidating but instead empowers me.

I sit up, still straddling him, and slowly pull the blanket down, revealing his chest, his stomach, the waistband of the sweatpants he sleeps in. My fingers trace the contours of his muscles, the scattered scars that tell their own stories of his life before me.

"I want you to understand something," I say, voice soft but steady. "I'm not here because you caught me in a storm. I'm not here because you're keeping me from leaving." I lean down again, pressing a kiss to the center of his chest, right over his heart. "I'm here because this is where I want to be. With you. Because I choose you, Beau."

His breathing quickens, his eyes never leaving mine. "Lila," he whispers, my name a prayer on his lips.

I ease back, tugging at his sweatpants. He lifts his hips, mindful of his injured ankle, helping me pull them down and off. Now we're both naked, vulnerable, equal. I settle

back across his thighs, feeling his arousal hard against my belly.

"Let me love you," I whisper. "Let me show you."

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He nods, wordless, something raw and wondering in his expression. I rise up on my knees, positioning myself above him, then slowly sink down, taking him inside me inch by exquisite inch. We both gasp at the connection, the perfect fit of our bodies.

"Christ, Lila," he groans, hands gripping my thighs hard enough to bruise. "You're so beautiful. So perfect."

I begin to move, setting a slow, deliberate pace, my hands braced on his chest for balance. His eyes devour me, taking in every expression that crosses my face, every quiver of pleasure that runs through my body. I've never felt so powerful, so desired, so completely seen.

"This is my choice," I tell him, voice breaking as pleasure builds with each roll of my hips. "You. Us. This life."

His hands slide up my body, cupping my breasts, thumbs brushing across sensitized nipples. The added sensation draws a moan from deep in my throat, my rhythm faltering momentarily.

"Look at me," he commands softly. "Don't close your eyes. I need to see you."

I obey, meeting his gaze as I continue to ride him, our connection deepening with each passing moment. There's something profound in watching his face as I bring him pleasure, in letting him see mine without reservation or shame.

"I never thought—" he begins, then breaks off with a groan as I change the angle slightly. "Never thought I'd have this. You. After everything I've done, everything I

am..."

"You have me," I assure him, leaning down to brush my lips against his, never breaking the rhythm of our bodies. "All of me."

His hands move to my hips, guiding me now, helping me find the perfect angle, the perfect pressure. Heat coils tighter in my core, my movements becoming more desperate, more erratic as I chase release.

"Tell me," he urges, voice strained with the effort of control. "Tell me why you're choosing this. Choosing me."

The words rise to my lips unbidden, truth I've been feeling but haven't named until this moment. "Because I love you," I gasp, the declaration torn from somewhere deep and irrevocable. "I love you, Beau."

His entire body goes rigid beneath me, his eyes widening in shock, in disbelief, in naked hope. Then he's surging upward, sitting up with me still joined to him, arms wrapping around me in a grip that's nearly crushing.

"Say it again," he demands, voice rough with emotion. "Please, little dove. Say it again."

"I love you." This time the words come easier, flowing like a river that's found its path to the sea. "I love your strength. I love your gentleness. I love your pain and your joy and everything that made you who you are."

A sound escapes him—half sob, half groan—and then he's kissing me, deep and desperate and reverent all at once. His hips thrust up into me, taking control of our pace without taking away my power. One hand tangles in my hair, the other at the small of my back, holding me to him as if afraid I might float away.

"Lila," he breathes against my lips, my name a benediction. "My Lila. My heart." His thrusts grow more urgent, more powerful. "Come for me, little dove. Let me feel you. Let me know this is real."

His words, the emotion in his voice, the fullness of him inside me—it's too much. The tension breaks, pleasure crashing through me in waves that leave me shaking and crying out his name. He follows immediately, his release triggering aftershocks of my own, his forehead pressed to mine as he empties himself inside me.

In the aftermath, we cling to each other, breathing heavily, bodies slick with sweat and still joined. His hands tremble slightly where they hold me, or maybe I'm the one trembling. It's hard to tell where I end and he begins.

"Did you mean it?" he asks after a long silence, voice barely above a whisper, almost afraid of the answer.

I pull back just enough to see his face, to cup his cheeks in my hands, to ensure he sees the truth in my eyes. "With every part of me," I tell him. "I love you, Beau. I choose you. I claim you as mine."

Something breaks open in his expression—a vulnerability, a wonder, a joy so pure it hurts to witness. "I love you," he says, the words appearing to surprise him as much as me. "God, Lila, I love you so much it terrifies me. I never thought...never believed I could have this."

"You have it," I assure him, pressing soft kisses to his lips, his cheeks, his brow. "You have me. For as long as you want me."

"Forever," he says instantly, with absolute certainty. "I want you forever."

The word should scare me. Forever is a long time, especially with a man I've known

for less than two weeks. But as I look into his eyes, feel his heart beating against mine, I know with bone-deep certainty that this is right. That I've found where I belong. Who I belong with.

"Forever," I agree, sealing the promise with a kiss that tastes of tears—his or mine, I'm not sure. Maybe both.

His arms tighten around me, holding me to him as if I'm the most precious thing he's ever touched. And in his eyes, I know I am. Just as he is to me.

Outside, the mountain stands guard, the forest whispers secrets, the stars wheel overhead in their ancient patterns. Inside, wrapped in Beau's arms, I am exactly where I'm meant to be. Where I've chosen to be. Home.

epilogue

Six months later

Beau

She's beautiful in the late afternoon light, her belly swollen with our child, her hands gentle as they tend the herbs she's planted beside the cabin. Six months since the storm brought her to me, and still I find myself watching her like this—silent, breath caught in my throat, afraid to blink in case she disappears. Her hair is longer now, falling in waves past her shoulders, catching copper highlights in the sun. She's humming something as she works, a melody I don't recognize but have come to associate with contentment. My pregnant wife—not by any legal document, but by something deeper, more primal, more true. The wooden ring I carved sits on her finger, polished by daily wear, a visible symbol of promises we've made without witnesses. The mountain is enough witness for us.

I lean against the doorframe, content just to observe her. She's wearing one of my old flannel shirts, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, the buttons straining slightly across her growing belly. Beneath it, a pair of leggings we bought during our single trip into town three months back. That day had been a revelation—her hand firm in mine as we navigated the small mountain community, her easy smiles at curious locals, her certainty when she told the shopkeeper she lived "up on the north ridge with my husband."

No hesitation. No longing glances at phones or computers or roads leading back to her old life. When we returned home—her word, not mine—she'd taken a deep breath of mountain air and said, "I missed this place." In that moment, I knew she was truly mine. That the mountain had claimed her as surely as it had claimed me.

The seasons have turned since then, spring blossoming into summer, summer

mellowing into early fall. With each passing month, we've settled deeper into our life together, finding rhythms and routines that feel ancient, as if we've always lived this way. She's transformed the cabin with small touches—curtains sewn from fabric we found in town, wild flowers in jars on the table, herbs hanging to dry from the kitchen rafters. The space that once felt utilitarian, a mere shelter against the elements, now feels like a home.

And me? I've been transformed too. The constant vigilance, the ever-present tension that had been my companion for five years, has eased. I sleep deeper with her beside me. Laugh more easily. Find joy in simple moments—teaching her to split wood, watching her delight when she successfully starts a fire, holding her close under starlit skies.

The biggest changes came when we discovered she was pregnant. Three months after the storm, she'd woken one morning and rushed outside to be sick in the bushes. I'd followed, concerned, only to find her sitting in the dirt afterward, a stunned expression on her face.

"Beau," she'd said, looking up at me with wide eyes. "I think...I think I'm pregnant."

The world had tilted beneath my feet, terror and joy warring in my chest. A child. Our child. A tiny, vulnerable being who would depend on us completely. On me—a man with violence in his blood, with hands that had dealt death, with a father whose legacy was pain and fear.

She'd seen the panic in my eyes, risen to wrap her arms around me, risen to wrap her arms around me, pressing her face to my chest.

"You're not him," she'd whispered fiercely, reading my fears without me voicing them. "You will never be him. This child will know only love from you, Beau. I know it in my soul."

Her faith in me had been staggering, humbling. And as the weeks passed, as her body changed to accommodate our growing child, I found myself believing her. Found myself placing a gentle hand on her belly each night, whispering promises to the tiny life within. Found myself building a cradle from cedar wood, carving small toys from pine, planning expansions to the cabin to make room for three instead of two.

Now I watch as she straightens, one hand pressing against her lower back, the other cradling her belly. She notices me then, turns with a smile that still steals my breath.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asks, brushing dirt from her hands.

"Not long enough," I answer truthfully. "I could watch you forever."

A blush still colors her cheeks when I say things like this, even after all these months. It delights me, this power to affect her with just words.

"Well, come help me up instead of just watching," she says, extending a hand. "Your child is making it difficult to bend these days."

I cross to her in three strides, taking her hand but using my other arm to scoop her up entirely, cradling her against my chest. She laughs, the sound bright and clear in the mountain air.

"I said help me up, not carry me like a princess," she protests, though her arms loop around my neck, belying her words.

"Maybe I like carrying you," I murmur, pressing a kiss to her temple. "Maybe I like feeling your heart beat against mine."

She softens in my arms, her head resting on my shoulder. "You're getting poetic in your old age, mountain man."

"I'm thirty-four," I remind her with a chuckle. "Hardly ancient."

"Mmm, but you're wise," she teases, fingers playing with the hair at the nape of my neck. "Like a mountain sage."

I carry her into the cabin, setting her gently on the new couch we built together from a fallen pine. The main room is warm from the cookstove where dinner simmers—venison stew with vegetables from our garden. Home. So different from the stark shelter it was a year ago.

"How's the ankle today?" she asks, nodding toward my right leg. The trap wound healed months ago, but still aches sometimes before storms.

"Fine," I say, sitting beside her, lifting her feet into my lap to massage them. She sighs with pleasure as my thumbs press into her arches. "How's our baby treating you?"

"Active," she says, a hand resting on her belly. As if on cue, a visible ripple moves across her belly. "See?"

I place my hand over the movement, still awed by the miracle growing beneath her skin. A baby. My baby. Our baby. The thought fills me with equal parts terror and fierce protectiveness.

"I finished the crib today," I tell her, continuing to massage her swollen feet. "Just needs the finish applied."

"Can I see it?" Her eyes light up with excitement.

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"After dinner," I promise. "It's a surprise."

She settles back against the cushions, a contented sigh escaping her. "I love your surprises."

The simple statement warms me from within. This is what still amazes me—how easily happiness comes now, how ordinary moments are transformed into something precious by her presence.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks, studying my face. "You have that look."

"What look?"

"The one where you're wondering if this is all real." Her voice is soft, understanding. "The one where you're afraid to blink in case it all disappears."

She knows me so well, this woman who stormed into my life. Sometimes I think she knows me better than I know myself.

"I was thinking," I say slowly, "about how different everything is. How different I am."

She reaches for my hand, brings it to her lips. "Different how?"

"Whole," I answer simply. "For the first time in my life, I feel whole."

Tears gather in her eyes, pregnancy making her emotions closer to the surface these

days. "Oh, Beau."

"Before you," I continue, needing her to understand, "I was surviving, not living. Just existing in this space, marking time. Now..." I sweep my arm around the cabin, indicating the life we've built together. "Now there's purpose. Meaning."

She struggles to sit up, and I help her, gathering her into my arms so she's cradled against my chest. Her belly presses against me, our child between us.

"I used to think I was lost," she murmurs against my neck. "That night in the storm, I was so sure I was going to die. And then I found your cabin. Found you." She pulls back enough to look into my eyes. "But I wasn't lost at all. I was finding my way home."

"Home," I repeat, the word rich with meaning.

"This mountain," she says, glancing toward the window where the peaks are visible in the distance. "This cabin. You." Her hand cradles her belly. "Our family. That's home."

I capture her lips with mine, a kiss filled with everything I can't quite express—gratitude, wonder, love so fierce it sometimes scares me. She responds in kind, her body melting against mine, familiar and still thrilling after all these months.

When we part, she rests her forehead against mine, eyes closed, a small smile playing at her lips. "I was thinking," she says, voice soft with meaning, "about names."

Names. We've discussed this often as her pregnancy progressed, tossing ideas back and forth. Nothing has felt right yet—too common, too pretentious, too loaded with associations from our past lives.

"What were you thinking?" I ask, one hand stroking her back in lazy circles.

"If it's a boy..." She pauses, eyes opening to gauge my reaction. "What about Wilder?"

"Wilder," I repeat, testing the feel of it. A name that speaks of mountains and forests, of freedom and strength. A name without the weight of the past. "Wilder." I nod slowly, feeling it settle into my heart. "I like it."

Her smile widens, relief and pleasure mingling in her expression. "Wilder for a boy. And for a girl—though I'm almost certain it's a boy—I was thinking Aspen."

"Aspen," I echo, thinking of the trees that shimmer silver and gold on the mountainside in autumn. "Perfect. Either way."

She nestles closer, her body heavy and warm against mine. "Wilder or Aspen. A mountain child, either way."

"Just like their mother," I tease gently. "My wild little dove who flew into a storm and found her way home."

She laughs, the sound still the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. "Not so little anymore," she says, patting her rounded belly.

"No," I agree, covering her hand with mine. "But still mine."

"Always yours," she promises, the words a vow we've repeated countless times. "As you are mine."

Outside, the sun begins its descent behind the mountains, painting the sky in shades of gold and rose. Inside our cabin—our home—the future unfolds before us, as vast and beautiful as the wilderness that surrounds us. Not a future I ever imagined, but one I would die to protect.

My little dove, no longer lost. My child, growing stronger each day. My heart, once a fortress, now a home.

The mountain claimed me long ago, offered me sanctuary when the world became too much. Now it's claimed her too, given us both a place to belong. Together.

Forever.

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