



Wandering Curves

Author: *Brynn Hale*

Category: Romance, Action

Description: The men of Scarlet Springs Police, Fire, & Rescue are ready to lay down their lives to protect the people in their town. But how closely will they guard their own hearts?

Elijah

I take my job seriously, being a deputy in Scarlet Springs can be a matter of life or death. So when the sheriff gives us a chance to relax out at Bunker Lodge I get there as fast as my squad car will take me. But when I arrive, there's something disturbing the peace of the great outdoors.

And when I investigate, I'm not prepared for who I see.

Without any warning, the one who got away is back and she needs me to save her.

I'll stop at nothing to keep her safe. Penelope was the love of my life. Now the only thing I'm afraid of is losing her again.

Nestled deep into the Sierra Nevada is a quaint tourist town beside a breathtaking lake. Scarlet Springs Police, Fire, & Rescue is a group of chivalrous, brave, protective men dedicated to keeping it safe. But being married to the badge doesn't leave much time for finding love. Good thing love is about to find them.

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CHAPTER1

ELIJAH

“Wow! This place is even better looking in person, ain’t it?” My boss claps me on the back.

I inhale the scent of pine and leather as I step into the lobby of the lodge. “Yeah, the website really didn’t do it justice, Sheriff.”

Steve Moss is grinning ear to ear as he looks the place up and down. Bunker Lodge is a modern yet rustic hotel in a forested section of Scarlet Springs County. The picture windows offer an incredible view of both the lake and the mountains. It’s no wonder this place is a hot spot for tourists and locals alike.

I’ve run a few calls up here over the years. Nothing major, tourists that wander off the paths, drunk guests passing out by the fire pits... things that you expect as a deputy in this town. But being here as a guest is different. There’s a calm to the open mountain air that I could get used to.

Steve, known simply as Sheriff to all us deputies, planned this weekend retreat for what he’s been calling team-building. Personally, I think he just needed a vacation. But when you’re a workaholic as we all tend to be at Scarlet Springs Police, Fire and Rescue, this is as close as you come.

It’s strange really, if you had told me that I’d end up thirty-four and chronically single, I’d have never believed you. I always thought I’d have a family by now. I

imagined myself with a wife, a few kids, and a house outside of the city. I'm the relationship type, always have been. But for me, that's meant causing more than a few heartbreaks over the years.

I just haven't met the right person. Truthfully, there was one girl who I would've married in an instant. But I can't kid myself, she and I were only ever friends. She was way out of my league back then.

"I hope you guys are ready for a weekend of adventure." Sheriff breaks through my thoughts. "We've got stuff planned every single day. Hiking, water skiing, mountain biking, fishing. You name it, they've got it nearby."

"What about relaxing?" One of our other deputies calls out.

A wave of snorts and chuckles ripples through the group. The sound echoes off the high ceilings.

"Hey, that's what days off at home are for. This is a weekend where we separate the boys from the men. We're here forteambuilding, gentlemen. This is a chance to grow," Sheriff says.

Some of the guys groan quietly, but I'm thrilled. We only get to go on these weekend excursions together every other year or so, and I had to sit the last one out. After all, there have to be some deputies left back at the station to handle things in town when the tourists inevitably run a muck. But it's my turn and I'm happy to take the time for myself. If I'm not careful, I'd work my life away.

We make our way toward the front desk. The white noise of the group fades as I take a look around. The place is stunning. Dark unfinished wood beams are highlighted by massive windows that offer a view of the greenery outside. It's breathtaking. It's the kind of place that makes you wonder why you would ever want to leave. I make a

commitment to myself to take more time off and explore all the wonders Bunker Lodge has to offer, even if I have to come alone.

A calm washes over me, but when my eyes land on the woman behind the front desk, my heart nearly stops altogether. I rub my eyes to make sure I'm not daydreaming. It's been years, but I'd recognize that smile anywhere.

Penelope Blake, my old friend. The one who got away. The girl who set the bar for everyone else I've ever fallen for. The woman who has always been just outside of my grasp is suddenly standing in front of me and she's more beautiful than ever. I've loved her all my life, but always from afar. This might just be my chance to change all that.

I walk toward her on auto-pilot, pulled by an invisible magnet. "Penelope." Her name leaves my lips before I can think it through.

She turns at the sound of her name. Her long, silky hair cascades down her back and her eyes brighten when they land on my face. "Elijah West, is that really you? How long has it been?"

"Too long." I flash her a smile and notice the way her cheeks flush with color. I

"Too long is right." Her full lips pull into a smirk.

I hear the rumbling of gossip from the guys behind me, but I block it out. I wasn't sure I'd ever see her again. Now that she's standing in front of me, nothing else matters. I won't let her get away this time.

"I had no idea you were back in town. You work here, I take it?"

"Yeah, just started not too long ago," she says. "I'm the manager, actually. Got my

own place and finished my business degree. Yeah, this is where the world led me, I guess. No place like home, isn't that what they say?" She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

"You, uh, live alone?" I know I shouldn't ask, but I can't help myself.

"Yes, alone." She presses her full, pink lips into a tight line and she doesn't elaborate.

Alone. Without Conrad. Aren't they together anymore? My heart pounds in my chest.

Penelope's long-time Conrad Swinder isn't a good person. I would know, we used to be friends. That is until one summer when he did some work with me at my Grandma's house. When he left, her life's savings disappeared along with him. Tens of thousands of dollars tucked in a box under the floorboards of her house, vanished without a trace.

I never told Penelope about it back when we were all friends. She knew I liked her and I was worried it'd come off as some sort of jealous ploy to win her over. In fact, I never told anyone. My grandma trusted Conrad and I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth about him. Instead, I used every penny I earned working construction in the summers to pay it back before I joined the police academy.

Eventually, Conrad came clean with me. Not that I gave him much of a choice. And even then he didn't have the decency to say it to my face. Instead, he wrote me a flimsy letter of apology. It said he used the money to invest in his real estate business. Despite the pressure I put on him, he never repaid a single penny. But that's Conrad for you.

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Why a woman as incredible as Penelope would settle for someone so unsavory as Conrad Swinder is beyond me. But she did. She fell for him hook line and sinker. She's a free spirit and he's a wrecking ball. I'm something more like an anchor, steady and grounded. I tried to warn her without getting into the details, but she couldn't hear it. The more I tried to explain, the more she pulled away from me and into his arms until I lost her friendship completely.

Penelope is special. She's always been this bright light. Every guy in Scarlett Springs was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. But she only had eyes for Conrad. Though, something about the way she's looking up at me right now makes me hope that maybe everything is different now.

She continues, "You're staying for the weekend then?"

"That's right," Sheriff pipes up from over my shoulder and I resist the urge to shoo him away. "We're having a team-building weekend."

I wish I had a dollar for every time he said team-building.

"Right. In that case, I'd like to personally show you to your rooms," Penelope replies. "We have a wonderful porter who will help with your bags." She pauses, a slight smile lingering on her lips as she looks at me.

"Thank you, I'll take a walk with you anywhere—" Sheriff's voice is low and it sends a pang of jealousy whipping through me.

"That's good." I cut him off, narrowing my eyebrows and training my stare on him.

Penelope comes around the counter with keys in hand and puts a hand on my forearm. The heat that crackles between us sends a jolt of electricity down my spine. “And Elijah, I hope you and I will have a chance to catch up. If you find yourself with some downtime.” She winks. “I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

But she’s already in so much trouble.

CHAPTER2

PENELOPE

The hallway is unusually quiet. Bunker Lodge is generally bustling, but the evening felt uneventful and tame, at least until Elijah showed up that is. I got the other officers tucked away in their rooms as quickly as possible. Now it's just Elijah and me. I like the feeling of being by his side.

He's definitely put on some muscle since the last time we saw each other. Elijah was always athletic but in a cross-country team sort of way. Nothing like the bag of muscles beside me. I can't take my eyes off of him.

The Elijah standing in front of me now is a full-fledged man, with arms thicker than my thighs and pecs I'd happily waste every afternoon staring at. I've always liked him. He's dependably sweet, loyal, and kind almost to a fault. But this new Elijah is something else entirely. He's confident, self-assured, and sexy as hell.

I smile to myself, silently praying my face isn't giving away all my thoughts. Elijah and I grew up together and were always good friends. From the beginning of middle school, right through high school, and part of college, we were inseparable. He and I took turns having harmless crushes on each other, I think... just never at the same time.

Then I started dating Conrad and life moved on as it tends to do. I hate to think about the way we grew apart. My course load was heavy. My boyfriend was wildly possessive. The time between my calls with Elijah stretched from days to weeks to

months. Add in a move out of the city and... poof. Elijah dropped out of my life completely.

I never meant for it to happen. Seeing him again brings back every happy memory of our friendship. And deep in my stomach, a spark of hope for something more. When we get to the doorway of his room, I turn to face him.

“It’s really great seeing you again, Penelope. Truly,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts and breaking the silence. “I feel so lucky. I mean, if I had a nickel for every time I thought about you, I’d be a rich man.”

“It’s great seeing you too,” I say, biting my lip. “I’ve missed you.” I turn to walk away but something stops me. I don’t want to leave the elephant in the room left unsaid. I clear my throat. “Hey, Elijah, I wanted to apologize.”

The way his eyebrows lift only makes him more handsome. “What? Why?”

“I feel like it’s my fault that we grew apart in college. I was just so busy with school and then there was the whole crazy boyfriend thing. I let it all get in the way and I know you tried for a long time to keep our friendship alive. But I didn’t return that effort and I’m sorry. It wasn’t intentional.” I don’t mean to, but I glance down at his hand and notice there’s no wedding band on his ring finger. I can’t see a guy as handsome as him still being single after all these years, but it’s possible that this is might be my lucky day.

Even as I think it, the concept sounds foreign to my ears. Me. Lucky in love. Finally. Can this be real?

“It’s okay. We were kids and just figuring out life.” He takes a step forward and narrows the gap between us. He smells heavenly, with a cologne that has subtle hints of smoky spices. It makes me want to be closer to him. “I’m just happy to have found

you, right back home too. I never thought I'd see the day. I figured you'd be out chasing down a million dreams all over the world by now."

"As it turns out, my biggest dream was to be back here in Scarlet Springs. It just took me a while to figure that out I guess. Not all of us can be as focused as you." I poke a finger at the deep-set dimple on his cheek and it makes his mouth turn up at the corners.

"Oh stop it. Focused or boring... who's to say? But I do have to ask, what happened to good old Conrad?" Elijah folds his massive arms across his chest.

It's a fair question, but it makes my stomach lurch nonetheless. I take a deep inhale through my nose and try to put into words the years of mental anguish that man has caused me. But before I can say anything, my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Buzz. Buzz.

I pull it out to find another blocked number illuminating my screen. I clear the call. "Ugh, speak of the devil. That's probably him now. He and I didn't work out. Conrad wasn't the man I thought he was. Looking back I feel stupid. So many people tried to warn me, you tried to warn me. But I couldn't see it. I was completely dependent on him before I started to see the cracks in the facade. I wanted to break away but I was so deep in his manipulation and isolated from everyone I loved." I let out a breath and the heavy weight that has been sitting on my chest lightens just a little. "If I could go back, I would have listened to you from the start."

"Hey, you can't beat yourself up over it. You broke up with him and you're starting a new life. That's what matters. I'm proud of you, that isn't an easy thing to do." Elijah puts a hand on my forearm and it sends a jolt of electricity whipping up and down my body. "Now, what's this business of him calling you repeatedly?" Elijah's forehead pinches into tight lines.

“Well, you know how he is. Conrad wasn’t exactly happy about my decision to leave him. I disappeared in the middle of the night and left everything I own. So he likes to call me from every random, blocked number under the sun. If I answer by chance, he likes to alternate between two narratives. The first is a furious, sarcastic reminder that I’m nothing without him. The second is a sobbing guilt trip about how much he needs me. It’s toxic. I’ve changed my number twice, but he keeps finding ways around it. So for now, I just keep clearing the calls.”

Elijah’s eyes widen and I see the muscles in his throat clench. “I can put a stop to that today.”

“No, don’t worry about it. He’s gone a little psycho on me, but I’m safe here. I’m back home and I’m way out in the woods. Even if he wanted to find me, I don’t think he can. I’ve all but vanished from social media.”

“You shouldn’t have to hide. Dammit, this is just like him.” Elijah balls his fist. “Let me talk to him next time he calls. I’m sure I can fix this for you.”

That’s just like Elijah, he’s always wanted to swoop in and save the day. But I’m not the girl I used to be and I don’t need protection. I can stand on my own two feet. I shake my head and bite back a smile.

“You’ve always been my hero. But I’m okay now. I’m not hiding, I’m living for the first time in a long time.” I try to sound confident, but I admit if only to myself that I’m still shaken by the reach of Conrad’s anger. Just this morning I was sure I saw his truck parked out in the woods. But by the time I made my way out there, the vehicle was nowhere to be seen. I know it was my mind playing tricks on me again.

I clear my throat. I have Elijah standing in front of me for the first time in years. The absolute last thing I want to talk about is Conrad. In fact, right now, there’s only one thing on my mind.

My eyes sweep his left hand. “I’ve noticed you don’t have a wedding band on. You’re not still single, are you? It’s impossible. I’d have guessed that you have two kids and a white picket fence just outside of town by now. Isn’t that the path you were on?”

He lets out a deep, hearty chuckle, scratching his sandy-blond hair. “Yeah, actually. Funny story, I almost tied the knot last year, but things ended up falling apart a couple of months before the wedding. I was, as it turns out... too boring.” He runs a hand across the back of his neck, rolling it from side to side. “What can you do? I’m an old soul.”

“Well, she must be crazy. Losing a man like you is the mistake of a lifetime. Take it from someone who's done it.” I swallow hard and clear my throat fighting back the nerves fluttering in my stomach. “I’m sorry to hear that, it must have been hard.”

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“Oh come on, don’t be. She and I weren’t meant to be. As far as I’m concerned I totally dodged a bullet and now I get to stand here with you.” He flashes me a dazzling smile. Elijah’s charm sucks up all the air in the hall and for a moment, I forget where I am.

Elijah, my friend, my on-again-off-again crush. The man who stood by me through hobbies, jobs, and boyfriends who were never meant for me. Elijah West is standing in front of me and quite literally taking my breath away. My heart pounds in my chest.

Creak.

A door opening down the hall jolts me back to reality. “I uh, I should go. I am still at work after all.” I let out an exhale and try to get ahold of myself as I turn to head down the hall.

Elijah grabs me by the wrist and tugs me back toward him. “Let me take you to dinner.” It isn’t a question and his words stop me in my tracks.

My face flushes with heat. The thought of a date with Elijah sends goosebumps rippling down my arms. My voice catches in my throat. “I’d love to.”

He gives me a slight nod. “Come up as soon as you get off tonight. I can hardly wait to see you.”

CHAPTER3

ELIJAH

Tap.Tap. Tap.

Three hours later, I hear a soft knock on my door. My heart races. Sheriff and the guys are all downstairs at the lodge's bar having drinks and a bite to eat. They gave me a hard time for not joining them, but all I could do was laugh. I love those guys, but there isn't anything that can keep me from reconnecting with the girl of my dreams.

My heart lurches to a stop as I open the door. My eyes wander down her body and my jaw falls open. "You are stunning."

And she is. Every one of her curves is tightly hugged by the dark jeans she has on. Her emerald green eyes glow under a curtain of pitch-black bangs. There's a smile on her cheeks that sends a warm tingle shooting through my core. Penelope was always pretty. But somehow, she's only grown more beautiful in the years we've been apart. I won't let her slip away this time.

"Thanks. It's strange to have you here looking at me like that." A brilliant pink crawls from her neckline and down the front of her shirt. I can't help but wonder where the color ends. "But I kind of like it." Her nose scrunches adorably in the center.

"Get used to it because I'm not planning on looking away from you any time soon. I

like the view too much. Do you always have clothes stashed for after-work dates?"

She giggles. "No, I actually went home for a few minutes after my shift. My cabin isn't too far from here. Just a short walk through the forest. I thought it was creepy when I first moved in. But now I think it's kind of nice. It's peaceful and green. I've come to look forward to the walk, even at night."

The thought of the Penelope I used to know walking through the woods for any reason is laughable, let alone the thought of her living out there. "Cabin? You said you had your own place, but I never took you for a cabin-life kind of girl."

"Yeah." She smiles. "I guess people change. Bunker Lodge lets all of us managers have the option of living here out in the back forty of the property. There are a few cottages with acreage around them. It isn't anything fancy, just a humble one bedroom, but it's perfect for me."

"Wow. Just when I thought I couldn't fall any harder for you." I run my hand along the taut muscles on the back of my neck and lean against the doorframe. "Are you gonna come in or what?"

"Oh, I want to. Actually, there's nothing I want more. But I'm trying to be more cautious these days and I probably shouldn't be seen sneaking into the guest rooms."

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. What happened to my fearless friend? What the hell did she go through in the years since I've seen her?

A chuckle slips from my lips. "But it's okay to go on a date with guests? You have weird rules in this place. I think we should break them." I tug her in toward me, wrap my arms around her, and pull her into my room. Then I close the door behind us.

When I have her in my arms, Penelope looks up at me. She shakes her head biting

back a giggle. Penelope leans in close, craning her neck up until our faces are mere inches apart.

I feel the warm breath of her exhale on my lips. I steady my own breathing and revel in the way her skin feels pressed against mine. I run a hand across the top of her hair smoothing it back. I notice the way my hand fits perfectly on the round curve of her thick hip. I notice the way her hair smells like flowers. She's perfection. She always has been.

I lean in toward her, cupping her chin with my hand and turning her face up to mine. I close my eyes, more than ready to know the feel of her lips on mine after all these years.

But before we connect, everything goes dark.

CHAPTER4

PENELOPE

“What the hell?”Elijah’s body goes rigid and he opens the curtains to peer out.

But it seems the only light anywhere is from the moon. My skin prickles and a cold chill runs down my spine the way it does when anything is out of place. I take a step toward the door and grab the handle. Before I can turn the knob, Elijah pulls me back.

“Stay behind me,” he says, a hand resting on the gun on his hip.

“No way, it’s just a power outage. I’m fine.” Ever since Conrad shook my sense of self, I’ve been forcing myself to do things even when they are scary. And this is just a simple power outage. I can handle this. I crack the door open despite Elijah’s protest and look into the hall. All I find are tiny white dots in my vision as my eyes try to adjust to the sudden blackness, and the creaking sound of other doors opening.

“I wonder if the guys are back up in their rooms or still downstairs... I can’t believe I don’t even have my flashlight... I’ve got my phone though.” Elijah seems to be talking to himself, then he turns to me. “A power outage. Strange, I would’ve thought a place this far out of town would have a large backup generator.

“We do. I’m not sure why it isn’t kicking on.” I shake off another icy chill and try to keep my tone casual.It’s just a power outage.“But I’m a manager here and this is part of my responsibility. So I will march down there and get to the bottom of this.” But my feet threaten to cement themselves to the floor and I swallow hard.

In the darkness, I feel Elijah step closer to me and take silent comfort in the way his frame towers over mine. He places a hand on my hip and I revel in the warmth. “Hey, don’t worry about it. It’s a power outage and the lodge is filled with cops. We’re fine. I know you’ve got this. But is there anything I can do to help?”

The kindness in his voice threatens to break me. But instead, I pull myself together and exhale. I’m being silly. “That’s really nice of you, Elijah, but I don’t think there’s much you can do. I just don’t understand why—”

As if the building can hear my thoughts, the backup generator kicks in, and the emergency lights come on. I shake my nerves out of my fingertips and blink several times as I look around. The little lights lining the halls still leave us in eerie darkness but the system is working as it should be which means no one has tampered with it.

I take comfort in the knowledge that these things happen. Still the shadows seem to cast off from every direction, and the usual welcoming vibes of the lodge have been replaced by something brooding and ominous.

Or maybe I’m going insane. Definitely one or the other.

Elijah smirks. “Ah, I knew it’d kick on in a place like this. See, we’re all good. But I’m guessing our dinner plans may be delayed a bit. But that’s fine with me. I was in the middle of something. Oh, that’s right, I believe I was about to kiss the most beautiful woman in the world.” He puts his hands on my shoulders.

A rush of butterflies hit me. His flattery is nearly enough to distract me from the issue at hand. But I can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t right. “That sounds intriguing... very intriguing. But I’m thinking I should head down to the lobby and see what the heck is going on. I wonder how long it will take me to get an electrician way out here.”

Between the thought of kissing Elijah and the power outage, my heart has a hard time slowing to a normal pace. Then Elijah wraps his arms around me and I melt into his embrace. His massive arms pin my head to that perfect spot on his chest and all of a sudden there's no way I can think of anything but kissing him.

Everything is okay and I'm not going to let my paranoia ruin a good thing. I'm going to give in to the moment with Elijah. I deserve this.

Our lips meet as he brings his face down to mine, the little bit of stubble on his chin swiping across my cheek as he moves. His scent fills my nostrils as we stand there, and his hand cups the side of my jaw as my lips begin to gently part. I don't know if I ever imagined what kissing Elijah would be like, but I'm certain it wasn't like this. His kiss on my lips is better than anything I could have imagined.

Time stands still for us as his tongue dances with mine. I'm lost in his embrace. His hands tangle in my hair. Electric tingles run up and down my body. Is this how it could have been all along? Was this meeting between us meant to be? Is Elijah home for me? I wish I could take all the years of wandering and dating terrible people and give them to him.

But then, in the silent perfection of the moment, a blood-curdling scream rings out and my heart stops.

CHAPTER5

ELIJAH

I spinto face the sound as the screaming increases in volume. I step into the hall as more voices join the choir of terror. I look at Penelope's face and see her eyes are hollowed out. Her jaw falls open though no sound comes out. Instead, she stands there, swaying, wobbly on her own legs, staring in the direction of the screams.

"Hey, Penelope, listen to me. You're okay. I'm right here." I drape an arm around her neck and use the other hand to free my gun from my hip. "I want you to stay here. Lock yourself in the room."

"No, it's... It's coming from the lobby," she whispers, pointing a hand down the dimly lit hallway. "Should we call the police?"

I tilt my head and stare at her. "You really must be out of your mind babe. We're all here already. Whoever is down there picked the wrong day to cause problems. Stay here, I'll be right back up."

A forced smile pulls at the corner of her mouth. "Right, it might just be people frightened by the power outage. But either way, I have to go check it out. That's a part of my job. It's not as scary as I'm making it sound in my head. It's just that I've been through some things and now I can't always trust my own judgment. But I can do this, I know I can." Her face flushes red and she tucks her hair behind her ears.

My chest fills with fury at whatever Conrad put her through. I feel the anger bubble

and build inside of me until I can hardly stand it. I take her hand in mine. “Fine, if you insist on coming down, stay behind me. You’re safe with me. I’ll always take care of you, I need you to know that. Now come on, let’s go.”

As much as I want to believe the screams are simply a result of the power going out, it doesn’t add up. The screaming didn’t start until several seconds after, and even if people were initially startled, no way would they keep screaming. No. There has to be another reason and I’m sure Penelope is smart enough to have put that together too. My chest tightens.

We make our way down the hallway. I keep her body tucked slightly behind mine. I wish she’d just let me handle this. But I’ve known her long enough to understand that as scared as she might be, there’s no way she’s stepping back. As untimely as it is, I’m happy to see the fight in her return.

We walk toward the lobby for what feels like an eternity. Our feet creep gingerly along the floor and I’m careful not to make a sound. My hands are on my gun and I curse myself again for not having my flashlight and other gear on me. I’m trained to handle every level of emergency and disaster. I know how to keep myself steady. But adding such a fragile heart as Penelope’s into the mix is pushing me to my limits.

As we creep around the hallway’s corner, I make out several shadowy figures crouched behind the lobby’s desk. A couple of them are in uniform, some of the lodge’s staff, but the rest are in civilian clothes.

The question is, what is it they’re all hiding from back there?

My throat runs dry and a heightened sense of awareness takes over. One of the uniformed women looks at me, her wide eyes gleaming in the faint emergency lighting. She presses her finger to her lips, motioning for us to keep quiet. I look over and see Penelope is seeing the same thing, her body stiff as a board next to mine.

“Why do you think they’re all hiding like that?” Her voice is faint but I can hear her fear in each shaky word.

“Shh, just stay behind me.”

My eyes sweep the room until I spot Sheriff. He’s crouched low with his gun drawn. A group of people huddle behind him. When we make eye contact in the darkness, he uses his head to motion toward the front door.

I stretch to follow his gaze. It’s all darkness and fear until my eyes fixate on the one undeniable out-of-place piece of the puzzle. Cold sweat beads on my forehead. I glance over my shoulder and find Penelope's gaze following mine in my peripherals. She sees it too.

Golden eyes lurch in a dark corner of the lobby, gleaming menacingly in our direction.

CHAPTER6

PENELOPE

I stifled a scream as the massive creature breaks free from the shadows and starts crossing the lobby toward us. In the light of the emergency sconces, I see its face first, quickly followed by its large, hairy body. My breath catches in my throat and nausea swirls in my stomach.

Oh my god, it's a bear.

I slap both hands over my mouth. The thing must have walked right through the automatic lobby doors. I've seen birds and squirrels make their way inside, no doubt looking for food. One time, I even saw a raccoon. But a bear? Bears don't usually wander all the way to the tree line. It's too close to roads and people and noise. Which means it must be hungry.

Stupid cabin-life! Know where bears don't hang out? The city.

My hand aches from how tightly I'm squeezing Elijah's shoulder. No doubt I'm digging my nails into his skin, but maybe he hasn't noticed. I can feel my pulse throbbing in the palm of my hand, but my heart is thumping too loudly in my chest to hear the bear's snarled breath.

"Go away, get on out of here!" A loud voice booms from the darkness.

But the bear only gives an intimidating growl in response and it makes the room fall

pindrop silent.

“What do we do?” I squeak. My voice sounds tiny and distant, nothing like my own.

“Just don’t move,” Elijah replies, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Are you insane? There’s a friggin grizzly bear in the lobby! What do you meannothing to worry about?!” My voice breaks and I think I might be sick.

“Penelope, I need you to stay calm,” he says.

That’s easy for him to say, he’s trained to deal with all kinds of crazy situations. I’m just a regular person trying desperately to live a boring life managing Bunker Lodge. I’m not trained to deal with emergencies beyond someone needing CPR, and I’m certainly not trained as a bear-wrangler. I think back to all my walks through the woods. Here I was worrying about some make-believe truck I thought belonged to my ex when I should have been worrying about being eaten by a bear.

I try to steady my breathing as the animal groans and steps closer, sniffing a potted plant before pointing itself in our direction once more. I don’t know how much longer I can keep standing here. My mind is whispering for me to trust Elijah and wait it out, but my legs are burning with the desire to run. I wonder if I could make it to the storage room before the bear caught up. Even if I could, what about all the other people down here?

“Seriously, Elijah, tell me you have a plan,” I whisper in his ear.

“I do, I just hope it doesn’t come to that.” His voice is barely audible.

“You’re not going to shoot it, are you? Not here in the lobby. Not anywhere, the poor

thing.” Tears well behind my eyes and I swallow hard.

“Stop it, I’m not going to shoot it. This gun wouldn’t do anything other than maybe piss it off anyway. It’s not nearly big enough for that.” He shakes his head.

“Okay, then what the hell are you planning on doing?” I push my body flat against the wall.

“Just stay still and keep quiet. It’s obviously here looking for food. When it realizes there’s none around, it may just head back out the way it came.”

“Cool stay here and be bear bait... got it,” I mumble to myself.

My eyes are locked on the grizzly, but my mind is barely processing everything that’s happening. What are you supposed to do when you see a bear? Run? Freeze? Back away slowly? Dammit. Why didn’t I pay more attention to that training they gave on the first day? Maybe I can reach that drawer behind the register and just offer him a snack. I think there’s a bag of trail mix somewhere. Do bears eat trail mix or is it honey they eat?

I shut my eyes tight for a split second and reopen them only to see that the bear is closer now, only about seven feet away. I gasp, the most noise my body is willing to make. As much as I want to scream, my entire voice seems to have faded away. I’ve had nightmares like this, not about bears, but about being trapped like this. Isolated. Helpless.

“Get behind me.” Elijah’s words are a growl. “Now!”

I hardly have time to process Elijah’s words before the bear brambles up to us, roaring as it stands on its hind legs.

Shit.

CHAPTER7

ELIJAH

My heart thumpshard against my rib cage as I come face to face with the enormous bear. I whip the small canister out of my back pocket. Roaring with my own fury, I scream at the top of my lungs as I shoot the bear spray in the creature's face. It lets out a pained cry as it paws at its eyes, no longer able to see us.

“Run!” I holler at the top of my lungs, trying to sound as big and menacing as possible. I'm no small guy, but I look like an ant standing next to the grizzly. “Everyone out!”

But no one moves as the bear moans and cries as it stumbles backward. The world seems to hang there a while, frozen in time, not a single sound anywhere. No one so much as coughs or sneezes or even rushes for the door. They all sort of freeze. My throat is hoarse and burns from shouting and my heart thuds in my chest. The bear takes off through the door and disappears into the night.

All of my suppressed emotions catch up with me now that the danger has passed and cold sweat drips down my back. Slowly, people start standing up from behind the desk, peeking over its edge and making sure the critter is actually gone for good.

“I don't think it's coming back, everyone,” I say, trying to break the uneasy silence in the room. “You're free to head to your rooms while we get to the bottom of the lights being out.”

A wave of cheering breaks out, catching me off guard. Everyone behind the desk is clapping and hooting and whistling, all eyes focused on me.

Sheriff makes his way through the crowd and claps me on the shoulder. “Nice work son. That was really something. Thought I was gonna have to shoot the dang thing.” He shakes his head.

“Thanks, Sheriff.”

“I’m going to get these people back into their rooms. Meanwhile, why don’t you all figure out what the hell is going on with the lights,” he says.

“Will do.” I give him a nod.

I turn to Penelope but she only stares at the door. Her mouth is slightly open. Her eyes are distant. It’s as though she thinks the bear might burst back in at any second.

I move closer and put a protective arm around her, giving her a gentle squeeze. “We’re okay, he won’t be coming back this way anytime soon.”

“That was insane. I can’t believe it. So much for walking through the woods at night. There are bears. I mean, of course, there are bears but you don’t normally see them. I just can’t believe... I just...” She stops talking and her eyes fixate on the front desk.

“What? Not another bear is it? Because I’m fresh out of the bear spray.” I chuckle, but she doesn’t join in the laughter.

“No, it isn’t that at all. It’s just that I could’ve sworn I locked the door to the back office when I left. Now it’s open. No one else should have a key.” She tilts her head and takes a step toward the backroom.

I follow, shining the light from my phone at the door. When we get closer, I take a quick peek inside the office. The room is vacant and undisturbed. This whole bear thing must really have Penelope spooked.

“See, nothing in here. But I do have a theory. I think you must have been in a hurry to see me and just forgot to close it when you clocked out.” I raise an eyebrow at her then curl my fingers around her wrist and give her a tug toward me in the empty room.

Her face brightens. Her eyebrows lift and her mouth pulls up at the corners in response to my touch. All at once, Penelope looks more like herself. “You were amazing back there. Thank you for saving the day like that. We’re all really lucky you are here. How did you know what to do anyway? Do you always carry bear mace around with you? Why did you have that but not a flashlight? Did they train you for this at the academy?”

“You have to know how to handle wildlife when you're a Deputy in Scarlet Springs County. That bear isn't even top ten of the grizzliest creatures I've come across. You'd be surprised.”

“I already am. Everything about this day, seeing you again, the fact that you've morphed into some superhuman muscle machine... it's all been a surprise. A wonderful, unexpected surprise. And somehow you've managed to show up right on time.”

“You are such a sweetheart.” I pull her in tight. I love the way she feels pressed against my chest. Holding her is somehow even better than I'd imagined it would be.

There are a million things I want to say to her, but nothing that can't wait for later. Right now, there's only one thing I can think about. The previously ominous darkness sets a romantic background for a kiss. I tell her that it hides us from the onlookers still

planted behind the lobby desk. I don't think it's true, I can feel their eyes on us, but I don't care.

I bring my face down and lock my lips on hers. I kiss her with a decade of built-up anticipation and our bodies meld together. The sweet scent of her perfume overtakes me as we stand there, our tongues tangled, making the most of this moment together.

But a buzz and flicker of the emergency lights has her breaking our kiss and pulling out of my embrace. She looks up at me. "I guess I need to call an electrician still. Guess I should probably warn them that there's a bear on the loose too." She shakes her head. "This day is unbelievable."

I chuckle. "I doubt the bear stuck around."

"That's a good thing because I should probably go check the breaker, I suppose. Make sure it's nothing obvious before I call in every electrician in Scarlet Springs in the middle of the night." She pulls her shoulders back and keeps her head high, but the wobble in her voice gives her away.

"Stay here, I'll pop out there and do it." I pull out the flashlight on my phone. "I'll be right back."

"Hey, no. You've done enough saving for one day. I can handle this on my own." Penelope leans away from me and rises slightly up on her tiptoes.

"Don't be ridiculous. A bear just wandered through the front door. Confronting a bear isn't enough for you? You're some sort of adrenaline junkie now? You need to stay inside." I let out a chuckle, but the way Penelope's head snaps over to mine tells me that she doesn't find this funny.

"Elijah, if we're going to do this, you know, me and you... I can't be told what I need

to do.” She crosses her arms.

“What? In this situation? Listen, I’m never going to worry about who you spend time with, what you wear, or what you do. But in this one situation, I’m not letting you outside. It isn’t safe. You’re being unreasonable. I bet you don’t even want to go outside. You’re just proving some kind of weird point.” I move between Penelope and the front door. She isn’t thinking rationally and I’m afraid she might run outside without so much as a flashlight.

“Let me? You’re not going to let me?!” Her voice is shrill and I swallow hard.

“That’s not what I meant, I—”

“Step aside Elijah. I’m going to check the breaker. And please, do not follow me.”

CHAPTER8

PENELOPE

There's no way I'm letting Elijah dictate what I do. I've been down that road once and I'm never going back. It always starts innocently enough. I want to protect you. I want to keep you safe. There might be a bear lurking in the darkness wanting to eat you for dinner. Do I even know where the panel is? Do I need some kind of tool to get the panel open? I like Elijah and I know he is a good man but I need to set clear boundaries up front if this is ever going to work.

So that's what I'm doing.

I cling tight to the wooden logs on the side of the building and feel my way through the darkness. My stomach bubbles with nerves, but not the good kind. The night air is cool and it nearly bowls me over sending a chill up and down my body. When I step on the spongy forest floor a twig snaps under my foot and it has me jumping out of my skin.

Okay, so there's a chance I should've let Elijah come with me at the very least. It's a little creepy out here. But still, no one is going to tell me how to live my life. Never again. And that means doing things that sometimes scare me.

My eyes sweep the black forest for a pair of glowing eyes staring back at me, but all I find is darkness. By the time I come around the corner to the back of the building, my throat is parched.

The night sky seems to take pity on me and when I reach the electrical box, it's illuminated in the white light of the moon. I don't have to worry about opening the panel because the door has been pried open. "Wow. Come on Penelope, keep it together. What in the world? Something definitely got into this or someone..." I run my hands over the bent metal.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

My blood runs cold. I turn with a start at the sharp sound of someone clapping followed by footsteps in the darkness behind me. I press my back against the wall of the lodge while my eyes scan the forest searching for the source of the sound.

"Who's there?" I call out, trying to keep my breath steady.

"Very good, you are smart. Not something but someone indeed." A sarcastic voice with a hollow tone comes from behind the tree line.

A man steps into the moonlight, but I don't need to see his face to know that it's Conrad. Dammit.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I spit my words out through gritted teeth.

"I'm getting your attention. I've called a few times but you were too busy to answer. So I thought I'd find you. Parked my truck back behind your cabin this morning. I was planning on winning you back. But when I popped into your office back behind the front desk, I found that you were gone. And rumor has it, with a cop of all people.... Slumming it aren't you dear? I thought you were better than dating a public servant."

"I knew it. I doubted myself, but I knew it was you. And then when that bear came I thought—" I start, but he cuts me off.

“Ha! Oh yes, the bear. I had no way of knowing that thing would actually follow the scent trail I laid. It was a happy accident. I was hoping to keep you on your toes and shake things up a bit in your new life. But that bear, well, that is more than I could’ve hoped for.” Conrad steps toward me and I can smell the alcohol on his breath. He stares down at me with a menacing grin and everything in me screams for me to run.

I lean away from him without breaking eye contact. “Okay Conrad, you win. You scared me and you’ve got my attention.”

“Good. Now get in my truck, I’m taking you home to the city and out of this god-forsaken place.” He pounds a fist into the wall next to my face and it makes me flinch.

“No.”

“It isn’t a request. I’m taking you with me.” He hisses his threat.

I breathe in deep and look him in the eyes. “Not a fucking chance.” Without another thought, I slide under his arm and try to bolt away from him.

But even in his drunken state, Conrad is faster than me. More fit. A fact that he once took pleasure in telling me every time he got the chance. He grabs my arm and gives a sharp tug that has me falling back toward him. Nausea swirls in my stomach as my body flies back toward him like a ragdoll. Reality hits me like a ton of bricks. How did I let this happen again? I’m isolated. I’m trapped.

“Conrad.” Elijah’s voice breaks through the night, a ferocious heavy growl.

Elijah’s single word fills me with hope. Conrad is powerless and this time, I’m not alone. Conrad straightens and the interruption is enough for him to let me go, but still, he doesn’t seem to register the threat.

Instead, Conrad leans back letting out a deep and sinister belly laugh. “Oh, interesting, so you’re the cop. Wow, Elijah. You’ve put on a few pounds don’t you think. Oh, and you’ve got a badge.” He waves his fingers back and forth and his voice drips with sarcasm. “Good for you.”

“You’re done here. You’re leaving, now.” Elijah steps in front of me.

“I don’t know that I am. This is a public establishment. I’ve rented my space here at the lodge like everyone else. Besides, you need to relax more Elijah. I’m just here to check on my girlfriend.” Conrad’s mouth pulls into a smirk.

“Ex-girlfriend,” I say. The thought of being connected to Conrad makes my stomach swirl with nausea.

“Don’t talk to her. Not another word. What did you think? That you would show up here and force her to leave with you?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:42 am

“No. I thought I’d show up here and poke around. Break into the back office and have a chat. But when she wasn’t there, I’d thought maybe I’d cut the lights and draw her out. I lead the bear in just as an added measure of surprise and I can’t believe how well that worked out.” Conrad rubs his palms together and the sight makes me sick.

“You’re an idiot.” Elijah lets out a laugh of his own. “I’m a cop and I have a recorded confession now.” He turns the flashlight off on his phone and replays Conrad’s audio. “I hear breaking and entering, trespassing, threats of kidnapping, endangering—”

“So take me to jail for the night. Ha, take me for a week or make it two.” Conrad’s laugh comes out in a huff. “That’s all they’ll keep me.”

Elijah’s chest swells and he seems somehow larger than before. His skin flushes an angry red and his breath is even and measured. “Oh Conrad, you’re in over your head buddy. Sure they might keep you awhile for tonight’s charges, but it’s the embezzlement that will have you there for the long haul. Don’t think I’ve forgotten. I remember exactly how you got all that precious start-up capital. One phone call Conrad, that’s all it will take.”

This seems to catch Conrad’s attention. He takes a step backward and my heart rate slows in response. “You have no proof.”

“Maybe I’ll just take the letter and hand it over to your investors. Let them see what kind of man they are entrusting with their money.” Elijah puts his hand on his chin as if he’s deep in thought. “You choose? Time in prison or financial ruin of your company? Tough choice isn’t it.”

I narrow my gaze on Conrad and then whip my head back to Elijah. “What are you talking about?”

Elijah doesn’t look at me. Instead, he lowers his voice and inches ever closer to Conrad. “He knows exactly what I’m talking about.”

The two men stare at each other. Frozen. Elijah keeps closing the gap between them. Before I know it, they’re nose to nose. It strikes me how Conrad pales in comparison to Elijah in every way. Whatever passes between them is unspoken, but Conrad seems to get the message loud and clear.

All of a sudden, without a single word, Elijah straightens and turns away from us. He starts walking toward the woods and my heart leaps.

“Elijah, he’s just going to walk away.” My heart drops.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” Elijah whispers.

“No, you don’t understand how he is. You let him go and then tomorrow... He’ll just come back, he—” I stop talking.

A flash of blinding red and blue lights flick on in the thick of the forest. A voice on a loudspeaker calls out. “Conrad Swinder, you’re under arrest on the following charges, stalking, violating a restraining order, trespassing, breaking and entering, theft...” The list goes on.

“Like I said, don’t worry about Conrad.” Elijah winks at me and for the first time in a long time, a sense of calm washes over me. “I’ll always keep you safe.”

Happy tears of relief well behind my eyes and my taut muscles loosen. I look up at Elijah and am overwhelmed with gratitude for all he’s done. “Thank you for being

here and doing all this. I'm sorry I pushed you away. I'm sorry I went out in the stupid forest alone and was so rude about it." I lean my head on his chest. "It might take me some time to get used to... normal."

"Sweetheart, you can take all the time you need. I'll always be here. Never holding you back, but just making sure you get where you want to go." He plants a sweet kiss on the top of my head.

As the police car holding Conrad disappears down the gravel road, I throw my arms around Elijah's neck.

"It's been a long day, let me get you home," he says.

I rock up onto my tiptoes and whisper into his ear. "You saved me twice in one night. You're coming home with me so I can show you how much I appreciate it."

CHAPTER9

PENELOPE

Elijah's lips are on me the second the door shuts, his strong arms pinning me to the wall. There's a hunger in his eyes I can't ignore, and I feel a quiver in my thighs at the insinuation. The way he kisses me makes me ache with need, his tongue exploring every crevice of my mouth as I get lost in the kiss.

Maybe it's the leftover adrenaline from confronting both a grizzly and a crazy ex-boyfriend, but my head is whirling as his lips move down along my neck. His stubble tickles my skin and every inch of me is on fire for him.

I've never wanted anyone so badly. Elijah has the same heart I've always loved. Only now it's in the body of a man I'll never forget. His hands make their way to my hips and slowly slide up my torso, devouring every inch of me. I'm already softly panting by the time he reaches my breasts. He squeezes and caresses me over the fabric of my top, driving me wild with desire and only making me need him more.

"Unzip me," I say, spinning around so my back is to him.

He grabs my zipper and gingerly inches it down my back, licking my neck and shoulder blade as he does. The cool cabin air kisses my skin as I let my top fall to the floor. My pants follow quickly revealing my bare back and my bottom, which is snugly hugged by my lace underwear.

I turn to face him, smiling as his eyes widen at the sight of my breasts. His mouth

doesn't hesitate to explore. He surrounds one of my nipples and sucks gently as his hand massages the other. I let out a soft moan as my hands press against the wall behind me.

"Shall we move to the bed?" I ask.

He doesn't reply with words. Instead, Elijah trails kisses up my chest and neck until his mouth is back on mine. He lingers there for a moment before taking my hand in his and leading me to the bed, my clothes still a crumpled heap where they fell.

I lay back on the bed and watch as he grabs each button of his shirt ever so slowly, undoing them one by one until it hangs open, offering only a peek of his defined abs and chest. I feel a tingle between my thighs as he slips it off, letting my eyes take in every inch of his muscular form.

The rest of his clothes quickly follow suit, everything falling to a heap on the floor. His rock-hard cock is erect and swollen, a predicament I can't wait to relieve him of. He crawls onto the bed, positioning himself above me. The collision of my past with Elijah and now, the promise of a future with him swirls, mingling in my mind.

Kissing my lips softly, he leans in close to my ear. "I missed you, Penelope."

"I missed you too," I moan, sharply gasping when I feel the tip of his member begin pressing its way inside me. Then, before I can stop myself, I feel another three words slip out. "I love you."

CHAPTER10

ELIJAH

I pause, my cock twitching at her words. “I love you too. I always have.” I grab the sides of her face and kiss her again, this time a little deeper, more fervently. There’s more need to it, more passion. I hardly know how we got here, how this all came to be so quick, but it doesn’t matter.

All that matters is Penelope and me together right here, right now.

She looks so beautiful. Her face contorts with pleasure as I grind my hips against hers. I let my full-length slide in and out of her as she moans and writhes beneath me, precum trickling from me as she does.

Her walls clamp down around my length rhythmically, keeping pace with the way I move against her. I feel my balls clenching with each thrust, the slow build of release already sparking within my pelvis. Her tight cavern, hot and wet, feels like heaven.

“I want to be on top of you.” She moans.

I don’t need to be told twice. I give an enthusiastic nod and pull out of her, laying on the bed beside her. My eyes are fixated on her seductive curves as she swings one leg over and straddles me, lining me up with her sweet spot and slipping me inside.

I groan as she rides me into the mattress. She presses her hips down as far as they’ll go to take all of my length inside her. My hands reach up to her breasts, squeezing

them hard and causing her to squeal softly as she moves her body faster.

She looks magnificent on top of me. It's hard to keep from letting myself go, but I don't want this to end yet. Not until she's soaking wet and moaning my name.

Penelope folds herself down and presses her breasts against my chest, kissing me hard again. I cup her cheeks and pull her onto me a little deeper with every thrust, my balls aching with the need for release. Penelope's moans fill the room as I feel her walls clench around me, her entire body going tense as she freezes on top of me.

She throws her head back. "Elijah," she cries into my neck between stifled breaths, her floral shampoo flooding my nostrils.

I feel the rush of her orgasm seeping out over my cock and pelvis as her walls collapse around me. She spasms and pulsates and the sensation pushes me to my own release. Cupping her ass tighter, I rock her on me through the waves of her orgasm until I'm about to explode.

She arches her back, leaning away from me and giving me a perfect view. "Yes, yes, yes. I want you to fill me."

Her sweet words usher my release, forcing my hot seed into her pump after pump.

It's not until several seconds later that the room begins to come back into focus as we lay there together, a sweaty mess, both panting and trying to catch our breath. I push a few strands of damp hair from her forehead and kiss it. I take in her curves and revel in her afterglow.

"I love you, Penelope. But that's not new, I've loved you all my life. You know that right?"

“I do and I love you too, Elijah.” She buries her face in my chest, a soft smile playing on her lips and I know nothing will ever be the same.

CHAPTER 11

EPILOGUE PENELOPE, TWO MONTHS LATER

I watch Elijah in the mirror as he walks up behind me and plants a soft kiss on my neck. “I’m almost ready to go.” The man looks good in my cabin, it’s like he was always meant to be here. Which is a good thing since he hasn’t left since the day he arrived.

Having him here feels a lot like home. Elijah is my favorite person. But it’s more than just the protection I feel having him this close to me. Elijah brightens my days. He is the string to my balloon anchoring me to all the good things in this world. With him by my side I feel sexy and alive.

“No rush getting ready, we don’t have to get there too early,” he says. “Although, I can’t see what else you need to do. You’re already beautiful even if you just hopped in the car like that. No makeup needed.”

I turn to face him, shooting him a cheeky grin. “You always were the sweetest guy I knew.”

“Happy you still think so... But it makes sense because I’m the luckiest too.” He runs his hand down my arm leaving a trail of goosebumps rippling up in the wake of his touch. “So, how long is the ceremony supposed to be again?”

“Just a couple of hours, I think. I mean, presenting you with a plaque for bravery can’t take that long, and then there’s the full dinner and drinks in Bunker Lodge’s

Beer Gardens. But yeah, can't see it taking too long. Why?"

"Oh, I was just hoping it wouldn't run too late. I want us to have time to come home and celebrate."

I cock my head to the side. "You're getting a celebration and plaque at the lodge, and then you want to come home and celebrate after as well? I don't want to downplay all you did, babe, especially since you saved my life twice. But don't you think that's a bit much?"

"Oh, I don't know," he says coyly, wandering off. "Maybe we'll have more to celebrate."

"Hey," I call after him, following him to the living room. "You can't say stuff like that and then just walk away. What are you talking about?"

I gasp as Elijah spins on one heel and gets down on his knee in front of me, pulling a black velvet box from the pocket of his dress pants. He smiles up at me, his eyes filled with a love I never could have imagined for myself.

"I don't want to celebrate or accept the plaque as anything less than your fiance. I've waited all my life for this moment. I adore you. You're stubborn and sweet. You're sexy as hell. You're the only person I know who would face a bear in order to prove how independent you are. You are my favorite person." His eyes well with tears and butterflies flap wildly in my stomach. "Penelope, will you marry me?"

I cup my hands over my mouth as I fight back tears. "Yes! The easiest yes I've ever said in my life. I can't wait to marry you, Elijah."

He pulls out the diamond ring and slips it onto my finger. Then he gets to his feet, taking me with him. As he holds me, I imagine all that will come for us. Days in the forest, nights in the cabin, pets, babies... it's a dream. There isn't anyone else I want

by my side through all life's adventures.

Sometimes finding yourself means going back where you started. I know without a doubt that Elijah and I are just at the beginning of our happily ever after.