



Wild Daddy

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Description: What do you get when you combine a weekend survival adventure, one sleeping bag, and a mountain man who loves to make the rules? A five-star Daddy experience.

I'm in town for a wedding. Heels, champagne, and a final thesis on wilderness survival.

He's the Boone brother who gets paid to keep people like me from dying out here. The one who swore off women a decade ago.

I'm too soft. Too mouthy. I don't listen.

Now I'm tripping over roots and testing his patience.

And learning things they definitely don't teach in grad school.

I came for extra credit.

He came to show me it's okay to let go.

When I leave the mountain to finish my degree, he does the one thing I never saw coming.

He puts on a suit.

Because Daddy won't ever let me walk away.

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One

Marley

Two glasses of champagne is my limit.

Should have been, at least.

But three gave me enough courage to sit at the head table with a sea of eyes on me.

Four is why I'm currently clutching a bouquet of white roses while the wedding reception spins around me like a glittering kaleidoscope.

"You okay, honey?" My best friend Sarah's aunt touches my elbow, her voice cutting through the blur of laughter and clinking glasses as I rub the painful spot on my forehead where the base of the bouquet made its landing. "You look a little unsteady."

I force a smile and hold up the bouquet that nearly concussed me. "Just surprised I caught this thing. Sarah's got quite an arm."

The older woman chuckles and moves on, everyone watching having a good laugh at the meme-worthy sight of me receiving the bouquet between the eyes only to have it fall like a baby into my outstretched hands.

The champagne, lack of nutrition because I can't stand eating in front of anyone let alone a room full of strangers, combined with a floral blow to the head have left me

swaying beside the towering wedding cake with its ombre icing and personalized cake topper with the bride and groom imagined as their D & D characters.

This entire wedding and reception here at Wildfire Mountain Lodge has been a full-on Pinterest board.

Fairy lights hang from everything that will stand still, flowers that look rustic yet elegant are on every surface, guests dancing to a live bluegrass band, and enough champagne flowing to float a tugboat. I've driven six hours from Ann Arbor talking myself out of a panic attack the entire way, , my little Honda packed with bridesmaid duties and thesis stress.

When Sarah sprung the whole wedding plan on me three months ago, my throat closed up as she laid out all the duties and time involved in being a bridesmaid. As well as all the interacting with people I didn't know I would need to do.

Then, a month ago when my advisor told me I needed a last immersive experience to complete my final thesis paper, I saw the silver lining in this trip to the Wildfire Lodge in Upper Michigan.

After doing a full investigation of the area, turns out wilderness survival outings around here are a thing. So tomorrow morning, instead of suffering through the bridesmaid's breakfast, I'm heading over to Boone's Outdoor Gear, where I'll be getting my first taste of what it would be like to live after the apocalypse.

It all worked out, so I should be happy. Iamhappy. Insofar as I feel happiness. Being a spectrum girl, I'm aware my emotional receptors are not calibrated like the majority of humans. Being touched makes me grit my teeth. Hugs are not calming or comforting. More like straining to open a pickle jar. Friends have never been a priority for me. Being at the top of my class since my parents had me reading and writing at the age of three has been the pinpoint focus of my life.

Still, Sarah, who answered my parents' ad for a roommate for me freshman year, turned out to be the sister and friend I never saw coming. Being sixteen when I started at U of M, I couldn't stay in the dorm. So, Mom and Dad advertised for someone to sort of babysit me in exchange for a zero-rent opportunity at the loft apartment they rented just off campus. Sarah answered the ad, and turned out she had a neurodivergent younger brother, so instead of seeing me as a socially inept and annoying adolescent prodigy, she took me under her wing as a pseudo-sister.

I'd do anything for her. Including wear this ridiculous pink nightmare of lace and ruffles that makes my butt itch and has large dark circles growing on the chiffon under my arms.

Being the youngest person at most of my peer group's social gatherings is nothing new. I've been catching up socially my entire life. But watching Sarah's other friends dance and laugh, all of them seeming so naturally confident in ways I've never quite mastered, makes the champagne feel like a necessary social lubricant rather than a celebration.

As the band does a blues version of the Chicken Dance, my focus is on being alone in the Michigan wilderness with some gruff outdoorsman who probably thinks journalism majors are as useful as chocolate tampons. Something to push my limits my advisor said. A chance to write about survival from the inside out. Feels like more of a nightmare to a girl that only goes outside to get from one class to another and thinks grass is itchy and roughing it is sleeping on less than 100% Egyptian cotton sheets, but here I am, committed to the madness because it's the last check mark I need on my degree, and there's no way I'm not acing this thesis.

"Another glass, miss?" A smiling blond male server close to my age appears with a tray of golden bubbles. He would be considered good looking I'm sure, but I don't have those kinds of feelings. I've never had a crush or swooned over a rock star or taken the time to figure out if my body is compatible with sexual pleasure.

It all seems like a time-wasting distraction and whether that's from how I was raised or how my brain is wired, it doesn't change the fact that my focus remains on my studies and soon, the first of what will more than likely be several advanced degrees.

I stare at the champagne flutes, the ascending bubbles catching the fairy lights as couples on the dancefloor embrace and a flicker of unusual sadness settles on my shoulders. . Another glass would not be smart. Nineteen years of playing it safe, following the rules, taking twice as many classes as everyone else, never taking summers off and being exactly what everyone expects is who I am.

I might be quirky, but I'm a reliable kind of quirky.

"You know what?" I pluck a glass from the tray tipping it in his direction, my decision crystallizing with alcohol-fueled clarity. "I've spent my entire life being sensible. Tonight, I'm drunk enough to be stupid."

The server looks puzzled, but I'm already moving, champagne in one hand, bouquet in the other, weaving through the dancing couples toward the lodge's back corridor. I don't know where I'm going, but the noise and people are making me twitchy not to mention the constant looping thoughts about the inevitable humiliation I am about to endure on an adventure outing that will surely have my paid guide ready to throw me off Wildfire Mountain by the end of day one.

The hallway is blissfully quiet, the music fading to a distant hum. I find the ladies' room at the end of the corridor and stumble inside, grateful for the silence. Setting my glass and bouquet on the marble countertop, I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

My dark hair has escaped its careful updo, wisps framing my flushed face. The champagne has made my eyelids droop a bit. I'm smiling back at myself with an air of confidence I don't remember having before. I look I look like someone who might actually survive in the mountains instead of becoming bear food on day one.

"Okay, Marley," I tell my reflection, straightening my shoulders, tugging at the dress where the size zipper irritates my skin. "You've got this. It's just camping. With a professional. How hard can it be?"

I retrieve the glass of champagne, hold it up toasting the new Marley I see in the mirror, press the cool glass to my lips and...the bathroom door swings open, the sounds of the wedding echoing off the gleaming tile walls as I spin on my toe, preparing for an awkward interaction with a fellow female inside the small space of the bathroom.

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Instead, I find myself staring at a wall of man that seems to fill the entire doorframe.

He's massive. At least six-foot-four, with shoulders that could probably bench press a small car. Waves of dark hair that looks like he's been running his hands through it are thick, and a scruffy beard that belongs in a cologne commercial for men who chop their own firewood. But it's his eyes that stop my champagne-addled brain in its tracks—glacier blue and sharp enough to cut glass, currently fixed on me with an expression of barely contained amusement as a glass of amber liquid sits almost forgotten in the palm of one massive hand.

"Wrong door?" I squeak, my voice climbing an octave before cracking, reminding me that adolescence wasn't that long ago. I manage to find the countertop with the base of the champagne glass, swallowing through the sudden dryness of my mouth, the glass scraping over the marble as I leave it untouched.

This flannel and denim clad genetically privileged man leans against the doorframe, and I catch the faint scent of pine and smoke. "Nope." He cocks his head to the side. "Sign says ladies' room. You're a lady. I'd say you're exactly where you're supposed to be."

Heat floods my cheeks is this guy thick or what? "I meant for you. This is the women's bathroom. Although, it seems a little behind the times there's no gender-neutral option."

"True, but there's nothing gender-neutral about you." His voice is like whiskey poured over gravel, with the hint of an accent I can't place.

“Really? And what exactly is gender-neutral supposed to look like?”

He doesn't flinch. Just watches me with that steady, unreadable gaze. “That's up to the person. Watched you come in here, felt like you might need something.”

I close my eyes for a second, sure when I open them, he will be gone, trying to process this situation through what is likely a .02 blood alcohol content. But when I open my eyes, he's just there, taking a sip of what looks like whiskey from a crystal glass. "I'm pretty sure there are rules about a man entering a lady's room without a janitor's cart or a wrench to fix a leaking commode. You should find your way back to wherever it is you came from before I scream."

The corner of his mouth quirks up and instead of fear, I feel...something I can't quite place. It's fluttery and tense in an area of my lower body that suddenly feels awake. "That's cute. I bet you're beautiful when you scream. His smirk is infuriatingly attractive. He takes another slow sip of his drink, taking a step forward. “Just making sure you're not in here all alone having a breakdown.”

"I don't have breakdowns." The protest comes out sharper than intended. "I'm just... processing."

"Uh-huh." He shoves one hand down into his front pocket, and I try not to stare at the area that my reptile brain suddenly feels is very important. "What are you processing?"

Maybe it's the champagne, or maybe it's the way he looks at me—not like I'm some fragile academic who'll break if the wind blows too hard, or like the kid who never quite fit in, but like I'm genuinely interesting to him. .

"Tomorrow, I start a wilderness survival assignment that's going to prove I'm completely incompetent at anything that doesn't involve a computer and a well-

stocked library," I blurt out, my barely-there filter completely annihilated by the alcohol. "I'm going to spend three days making a fool of myself in front of some mountain man who probably thinks nineteen-year-old journalism majors are a waste of oxygen."

His eyes sharpen and I think he's the biggest man I've ever seen. "Mountain man, huh?"

"That's what I'm picturing. Overalls, condescending, probably hasn't seen soap in a week." The words tumble out faster now, fueled by liquid courage and pent-up anxiety. "He'll take one look at me and know I can't tell north from south without a GPS. He will immediately be counting the minutes until our paid adventure is over."

"You've got a lot going on in that beautiful head. A little chaotic in there isn't it?" he asks like he can see inside my brain.

He has a kind of stillness that few humans have, as though he doesn't rush to do anything or get anywhere. Like he doesn't need to prove anything to anybody and I bet he doesn't care about grades. . I bet the flannel and denim he's wearing are all 100% cotton. He looks ridiculously comfortable. Like he belongs everywhere without needing permission—ballrooms, boardrooms, or the wilderness I'm so afraid of.

"You don't know me," I blurt out sounding like a toddler.

"I know you caught that bouquet clean in the face and didn't cry." He nods toward the roses I've abandoned on the counter. "You're tough."

The compliment hits me square in the chest, unexpected and warming. When's the last time someone called me tough? When's the last time anyone looked past my academic credentials to see something else?

Maybe it's the champagne. Maybe it's the way the harsh fluorescent light hits the tiled walls, somehow turning this lodge inspired bathroom with its faint disinfectant smell into something almost intimate. Maybe it's nineteen years of being the good girl finally catching up with me.

Or maybe it's the way this dark-haired stranger with the right-angled jaw and slightly crooked nose sees through the noise in my head and makes me feel, for the first time in a long time, like I'm not too much.

Like I might actually beenough. Just right.

The buzzing in my ears and a little voice in my head urge me forward, close enough to see the faint lines around his eyes, close enough to catch that intoxicating scent of pine and danger fueling the wild idea forming in my head. "You want to know what I've never done?"

His eyebrows rise as his fingers shift slightly around the glass in his hand. "What's that?"

"Kissed a stranger."

It's bold and reckless and completely unlike anything I've ever said before. His eyes go dark, pupils dilating as he looks down at me.

"That a fact?" His voice has dropped to a rumble that I feel in my chest. "You've kissed non-strangers?"

His jaw muscle hardens as the cords in his neck stand out.

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"No actually. I've done neither. Nineteen years of playing it safe," I whisper, my heart hammering against my ribs. "Always doing what's expected, what's smart. Calculating, assessing, making safe choices based on data or what my parents tell me to do." I rise up on my toes, my nose barely to his chin. "Tonight, I want to do something stupid."

For a moment, he doesn't move. Just studies my face like he's memorizing it, his breathing picking up speed. Then, without breaking eye contact, he lifts the glass of whiskey to his tipping it back, his throat moving in a way that makes me feel weak.

His eyes stay pinned on mine as he sets it down on a table against the wall with a quiet click, and then his hands are on me—one cupping my cheek, the other sliding around to the small of my back. A rough thumb rasps over my lower lip.

"Little girl looking for trouble all dressed up in pink with a little champagne courage?"

The endearment should offend me. Instead, it sends heat spiraling through my belly and the tendons around my knees seem to soften into overcooked noodles. I nod, not trusting my voice. My calves start to cramp from being on my toes but I don't want to lower myself. I don't want to retreat.

He clicks his tongue on his top teeth as his brow furrows, nostrils flare. "Then let me do this right."

I am going to ask what that means, but before the full thought can form, his mouth is on mine, and the world explodes into a cacophony of sensations I am woefully

unprepared for. This isn't the tentative, fumbling kiss I expected. This is a master class in kissing. His lips are firm and warm, moving against mine with a confidence that turns my windpipe into a pinprick.

By the time his tongue sweeps across my lower lip, I'm ready. His tongue pushes deeper as I fist the fabric of his shirt in my hands to keep from toppling over backwards.

There's a slight sting from the whiskey left in his mouth, like everything dangerous and forbidden I've ever been warned away from. His beard scrapes against my skin, leaving a pleasant burn that will probably show tomorrow, and I don't care. I want the mark, want proof this moment really happened.

When he finally pulls back, I'm breathing hard, my lips tingling. His hand moves to the back of my neck, hard and steady as my heels come back down to earth.

He's just staring at me with those wild blue eyes, and I see something shift in his expression. As though he's processing as well.

He clears his throat, "That was..." He trails off on a long exhale through his nose.

"A mistake," I finish, my fingers flying up to press on my still warm lips, reality crashing back in with sobering force. Oh God, I've just thrown myself at a complete stranger in a bathroom. In a ruffled pink dress like a horrible 80's movie. So many germs, so many ways this could go dangerously wrong. "Stranger danger." I mumbles as I stumble back, the edge of the sink counter biting through the layers of chiffon into my butt.

I grab my bouquet and champagne glass, backing around him in a wide circle my heart lodged in my throat. "Thank you for the...experience... but I really should get back to the reception."

He straightens slowly, watching me retreat with an unreadable expression. "Hmm. Didn't like the kiss? I thought it was pretty damn good but you're running away, so maybe I'm not reading the room very well."

"I'm not running. I'm making a strategic retreat before I do something even more embarrassing." I fumble for the doorhandle behind me. "Like offer to have your babies or ask for your number or something equally mortifying."

That earns me a low chuckle that does absolutely nothing to help my composure. "Sweetheart, that would be the best offer I've ever had."

I yank the door open, desperate for escape. "Good night, stranger. Thank you for... for being my first stupid decision."

I flee down the hallway without looking back, the swish swish of my dress mixing with the thumping of my pulse against my ear drums.

The wide-open doors to the reception hall are steps away where I can blend in and crawl under a skirted table until tomorrow morning. Just as I'm stepping back in the annoying noise and chaos of the party, the gravelly voice of the sexiest man on the planet knots its self around my middle.

"See you soon, little girl. No where you can run I won't find you," but that's impossible.

I'm never going to see him again. He doesn't fit into anything in my well-planned world and I've done something crazy for once. That's enough to last me a decade.

Or two.

Two

Cade

Her flavor is still on my lips, and I know I'm completely fucked.

Not the good kind of fucked—though watching that sweet little journalism student fall apart under my hands definitely qualifies. No, this is a "the universe has a sick sense of humor" kind of fucked.

The man who never finished high school, who swore off ever setting foot in another academic building the rest of his life, just had a life-changing moment with a girl who seems to have more book smarts than I've had nights spent outdoors and I'm about to spend three days in the wilderness with her.

I should have left the Wildfire Mountain Lodge reception the second I dropped off business cards with Martha. Should have taken my free whiskey and headed home.

Martha called me at the shop this afternoon about a big city crowd from Ann Arbor that would be at the lodge. Translation: rich kids who think nature is an Instagram opportunity and have daddy's credit card to prove it. Easy money, if I can stomach listening to them explain how their weekend hiking in Traverse City totally prepares them for "real wilderness."

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She also wanted a case of my syrup for the tourist shop. Started as a hobby but who the fuck knew, people will pay a hundred dollars a bottle for Boone's Wildfire maple flavor.

It was a simple plan. Grab a drink, drop off cards and the syrup, maybe charm a few guests, and head home before anyone notices the guy in flannel smelling like creek water and pine tar doesn't belong with this crowd.

I left a batch of syrup straining when I left and my worn copy of Call of the Wild sitting on the coffee table. Pretty much a perfect evening for me but instead, I followed the call of potentially new customers here to the lodge and now my dick is hard and I'm seeing everything through a veil of pink.

I followed my dick when it pointed toward that little dark-haired dash of a girl heading for the bathroom outside the wedding reception where people spend more than most people make in a year to have their rustic dreams come true.

Now, here I am, back at the bar nodding for a refill with the scent of vanilla perfume clinging to my shirt and the memory of those soft little sounds she was making echoing in my head wondering how the fuck I'm not going to nail her against every bolder on the fucking mountain.

She took off like her dress was on fire, leaving me feeling the weight in my balls like never before and a growing tension in my chest wondering if she's okay.

Christ.

I scrub a hand over my face, trying to get my bearings back. The smart thing would be to drive back to my cabin like none of this happened. Forget about soft curves and wide brown eyes and the way she whispers "nineteen years of playing it safe" like it's a fucking personal challenge for me.

The problem is, I've never been accused of being particularly smart. I conveniently lost most of my report cards before I could show my mom but she never cared. She always told me smart isn't what shows up on a piece of paper and having a good heart and a strong work ethic would take me as far as any diploma.

She loved me and my brothers in a way that I know now is rare and without her, we would all probably be in prison or dead. I hated school and it hated me. I spent more time in detention or the principal's office than I did in class. The only thing about my education I'm thankful for is learning to read. I hate television and reading takes me out of my head and to places I'll never go.

But, the only place I want to be right now is wherever she is so with a little whiskey fire burning in my belly, I stomp into the reception, passing a few twenty-something females with glazed eyes and offers of room keys but I'm on the hunt for something they don't have.

I find my prey, half hidden by the stacks of silver wrapped boxes on the gift table as I ease into a shadowed corner in the massive banquet hall. She looks confused and out of place which does absolutely nothing to cool the fire she's started in my gut. There a flush on her cheeks I like to think I put there and I get a odd warmth in in my chest at the way she keeps touching her lips.

I press my back against the wall, watching as the bride comes her way, grabs her hands and pulls her into some kind of excited conversation. I hang back, nursing my second whiskey and memorizing every curve and detail of this girl who's just turned my world upside down with one reckless kiss.

She's too young. Too soft. Too educated for a man like me who lives in the woods and makes his living keeping city people alive in places that could kill them. Everything about her screams complications I don't need.

But when Sarah says something that makes her laugh, she throws her head back with this forced sounding cackle that's just a beat too loud, a second too long. As though she's thinking of how to react instead of just reacting.

The other bridesmaids standing around roll their eyes in that way people do when someone doesn't follow the script. The bride doesn't though. She pulls her closer giving the other pink clad women a sneer, and something primitive and protective stirs in my chest.

I'm still watching when my phone buzzes. I release a long exhale, cell phones are a necessary evil but one I could just as easily live without. I draw it from my back pocket, check the screen and see it's a text from my brother Jack.

Jack: How's the wedding? Any city girls need some specialized training from the grumpy local adventure guide?

I stare at the message, then follow the dark-haired beauty who's now moved to the head table and is stacking plates like she's getting paid for it. A young server slides up next to her, his hand brushing hers as he takes the dishes away with some bullshit smile.

She goes pink smiling back in that forced way she has, while my hands clench around my phone hard enough to crack the screen, because I'm not close enough to wring his fucking neck. The little shit is taking his time about it too, leaning in closer than necessary to whisper something that makes her duck her head.

Me: Something like that.

Jack: Jesus Christ. You're actually serious? You didn't get kicked out for picking a fight with some guy whose only crime is wearing a suit?

I growl.

Me: Fuck off, Jack. You're hardly Mr. Civilized.

Jack: Bring her to dinner Sunday. You'll be back from your booking, right?

I nearly choke on my whiskey. The only time we bring anyone else to our Sunday dinner's is if we are one foot down the aisle with them. Jack was the first to bring a woman to our weekly festival of food and ball busting and he's as whipped as a man can get but also as happy.

Me: Yeah, I'll be back, now go fuck off.

Jack: Fine, but bring a couple bottles of syrup on Sunday. Delaney's fucking addicted to your hundred dollar a bottle maple sugar concoction.

Me: Got it. Gotta go.

I answer then shove the phone back in my pocket.

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But as I watch her flush and fumble with the server's attention, I find myself wondering what she'd think of my brothers. What they'd think of her.

Cade Boone, falling for a girl he met in the bathroom who is young enough to be my daughter. I stand in that dark corner like a stalker until the reception starts to wind down. The bride and groom exit through a tunnel of clapping hands as most of the guests stream out of the doors toward the elevator banks.

She hangs back, sitting where she's been for the last bit with an open book on her lap, her elbows on her knees, holding her chin in her hands reading like she's the only one in the room.

I'm fucking dumbstruck and fascinated by this strange and stunning creature. Finally, one of the guests approaches her, taps her on the shoulder and nods toward the now nearly empty room. She looks around, then closes her book, and stands.

She packs up a little messenger bag with her book and shuffles with a tired look toward the hall alone. I intercept her by the front desk, close enough to smell her vanilla perfume again.

"Calling it a night?" I trail my gaze up and down, the neckline on the dress looks lower than earlier, showing off cleavage that makes my dick weep. Her head snaps my way.

"Oh. You're..." She blinks, those big brown eyes going wide. "I thought you'd left."

"I've been watching you." I step closer, close enough to see the way her pupils dilate

and notice the glint of her white teeth behind pink lips. "I needed to make sure you didn't think you were driving anywhere."

She straightens her shoulders, and I catch a glimpse of the steel beneath all that softness. "I had three glasses of champagne over four hours. I'm perfectly fine. At my weight, I would have metabolized most of the alcohol by now." She hesitates when I raise my eyebrows. "Alright, it was four glasses. I've never had that many drinks before." She reaches up to scratch between the loosened curls on her updo.

"You told me the truth. That's good." I reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, enjoying the way she shivers but doesn't pull back, the way her face turns up to mine, looking for something. "Good girls tell the truth, even when it's hard. Especially then."

Her lips fall open, there's smart defiance in her eyes but she settles backward an inch, enough for me to notice she's waiting. For me. For whatever is coming next.

"And since you were honest," I continue, clicking my teeth together before I finish, "I'll be honest with you." I reach forward, resting my thumb on the corner of her mouth. "That kiss we had? That was just the beginning. You deserve to have the full experience of stranger kissing. As long as I'm the stranger."

She just stares at me, her breathing shallow. Then a flicker of something crosses her face as she glances around the nearly empty then points.

"Coat room. Over there?" She says with the blunt directness of someone who's never learned to be coy. "Like in books, and old movies, right? They're always making out in coat rooms."

I take her hand, and she wraps her cute little fingers into mine in a way that almost makes me cum in my pants.

She wants the fantasy. And shit, if I'm not ready to give in to her every fucking whim.

The coat room is small and dimly lit, lined with a few forgotten jackets and the faint scent of cedar and perfume.

"You sure about this?" I ask, even as every instinct I have screams at me to take what she's offering.

"I've been sure about nothing my entire life," she says, and there's something raw in her voice that makes my chest tight. "Everything's been decided for me since as far back as I remember. What classes to take, what colleges to apply to, what career path would 'optimize my intellectual potential.' But this... this is mine."

The confession hits me harder than it should. She isn't just an intriguing, beautiful young woman that looks out of her depth at her friend's wedding anymore. She's changed before my eyes as I understand a little more about who she is, who she was, who she wants to be. I get a full image of a girl who's been pushed through life at warp speed, always two steps ahead of where she should be, never getting to just be young and reckless and stupid.

"Alright then." I take her bag, dropping it to the floor, then back her against the wall, caging her in with my arms as my dick strains down the leg of my pants. "Lesson one: when a man wants you, really wants you, he takes his time."

I start with her temple, pressing soft kisses along her hairline while she starts to shake. I work my way down to her ear, letting my breath ghost over sensitive skin until she's gripping my shirt.

"Lesson two," I murmur against her throat, "he pays attention. To everything. The parts of you you let the world see and the parts you hide."

I find the spot where her pulse hammers in her neck beneath her earlobe, and suck, drawing her flesh between my teeth. The soft moan she makes goes straight to my balls, as I force slowness into each move. Each breath. She deserves to be savored, not devoured.

At least this time.

"And lesson three?" Her question is sincere even if her voice shakes.

"Lesson three is that he makes sure you're ready for him." I lift my head to look at her, taking in the flush on her cheeks, the way she rubs her lips together. "You're going to ask me nicely, Marley."

Her name has been easy enough to overhear during the reception chatter. But hearing it fall from my lips makes her eyes go wide.

"You know my name."

"I pay attention. I know you're nineteen years old, finishing your Master's degree, and reckless enough to follow strangers into dark rooms." My voice goes hard thinking about all the details on her booking ticket. "What you did tonight was dangerous, little girl. What if I wasn't who you thought I was? What if I was the kind of man to take what he wants without asking?"

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Her chin lifts, a spark of defiance in those brown eyes. "What if that's exactly what I want?"

The breathy response catches me off guard, and sends blood rushing south. She must feel the way my cock responds, pressing her hip like a dog on a scent.

"Naughty girl," I say, my thumb tracing her lower lip. "I like that. But you're mine now, and I don't share. You won't be kissing anyone else, following anyone else into coat rooms, or putting yourself at risk like that again. Understood? No other man will treat you the way I'll treat you. The way you deserve."

"How do I deserve to be treated?" The question is barely a whisper.

"Like you're precious. Beautiful. Perfect. Protected. And like you're mine." I lean down until our lips are almost touching. "You're a daddy's girl, aren't you?"

She whimpers, a tremor shaking her from head to toe. As I pull back to stare into her face, I find her pupils dilated, her lips parted just a little.

I take her mouth like I fucking own it. There's a blip of tension when I touch her. A second where her body stiffens, breathing stops.

"Baby." I hiss between her lips. "I'll give you only what you need."

"I—I'm not good at being touched. Earlier, the champagne helped but it's hard for me. I don't even let my parents hug me." She stops as I withdraw far enough to take in every word with my ears and my eyes. "Not that they ever tried now that I think

about it..."

There's the slightest quiver in her chin as I pinch it, pressing my lips to the top of her head, letting her body soften as I stand steady, not pushing, not retreating, just being there against her.

"You thinking you like this kind of touch now?" I run my fingers through her hair, plucking out the pins that are holding what's left in the contrived updo then untangle it with my fingers keeping my eyes on her face.

"That's not bad." She clears her throat. "Maybe I need to try a little more to be sure."

Brat.

"What I have for you isn't little baby." I snarl, grabbing her by the ass and lifting, spinning her around and shoving her onto the little shelf that runs along the back wall, knocking someone's Detroit Tiger's cap onto the floor. I shove my body between her legs, the crinkling fabric rising above her knees as her calves' drift around my waist hugging me. "That's it, little girl," I lean in and murmur against her lips. "Take what you need."

She's making these soft little sounds that are driving me crazy. I work my way down her throat, finding every sensitive spot while my hands map the curves hidden beneath the layers of fabric covering her. All the years of disinterest in touching a woman roll over me like a bulldozer. She's got to be young enough to be my fucking daughter too. But, Jesus, there's something about this girl that has me breaking down all the fences I've built around myself and inviting her in

"I have no idea know what I'm doing," she confesses, her fingers taking my hair by the root like she's holding on for dear life.

"You know what to do, you just haven't done it before." I catch her earlobe between my teeth, smiling when she yelps. "Your body knows exactly what it wants."

I slip my hand between her thighs, grabbing a handful of the dress with her heat underneath, and she arches against me with a broken moan. Even through the fabric, I know she's fucking wet and I want to shove my face in her cunt and never come up for air.

"Please," she whispers and I finally understand why guys get hard from begging.

"Say please again." I order, digging my fingers into the heat under the dress leaning back to get a better look at the way her tits are straining against the neckline of the dress.

"Pretty please," she says, swallowing hard and I nearly blow when she mouths the words a second time silently.

Pretty. Please.

Fuck.

I shove the silk out of my way and get my hand where it belongs. She's soaked. The sound she makes when I touch her warm, damp little cunt comes down straight from heaven.

"Look at me," I command, and her eyes fly open, dark and dazed. "I want to see your face when you come."

"When I come? I've never—" She shakes her head, dark waves dancing on her cheeks. "I've never even come close."

“Never? No one? Not even for yourself?” The idea creates a storm inside me.

This girl’s pleasure is going to belong to me. Her first, her last and the millions in between.

“I’m not like the other girls.” She says on a smirk.

“That’s for fucking sure.”

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The tops of her tits jiggle as she laughs and I imagine shoving my dick between them then shooting my load right into that pretty little mouth.

She's like a little bird daring to land on a bear's claw. My claw.

"Hmm," I rasp, my thumb tracing the seam of her wetness. She sucks in a breath, eyes locking on mine. All that wide, trusting brown focused on me. I can smell her innocence and it's locking it's claws around my heart.

"What?" she breathes, leaning into me, trusting my touch.

"Soft, wet," I growl, voice rough. "Too soft. Gotta break you in a little."

Her lips curve, challenging. "Is that a thing? Girls need to be broken in?"

Her honesty is an aphrodisiac. No games, she thinks it, she says it. "I don't care about what other girls might need baby. I just care about this sweet, sloppy cunt that's begging for its first time."

I press, gently at first, feeling that tightness that makes my gut twist and my dick throb. A moan escapes her lips. Possessive heat surges through me. She's mine to discover.

"Baby likes that?" I ask, a low growl.

She nods, eyes fluttering closed. "Mm-hmm."

I give her little opening more, to the second knuckle, stretching her. Jesus, this girl is fucking untouched. Tight as a god damn pin prick almost. She whimpers, the sounds turning fragile but a feralness is taking me over. I want to hear her scream. I want to feel her fucking break.

“Tight,” I murmur into her hair. “Perfect.”

I start to stroke, in and out. So small I’m easily working her swollen clit with my thumb as I press my middle finger into the most delicious warmth. Her muscles tighten around the intrusion, pulling on me, holding me.

I pull her closer, burying my face in the curve of her neck, inhaling her scent. My hand works, flexing, teasing, claiming. She’s shaking, fingers digging into my back.

“Tell me,” I demand, rough against her ear. “Tell me you like it.”

“I... I do,” she breathes, shaky.

“Louder. Say ‘I like it.’ Just like that.” I move my hand, palm over her windpipe, tightening my grip, something in me wants to fucking own this girl. I want all her firsts, all her attention, all her sounds.

“I like it.” she chokes out, eyes wide all that honestly pouring out of her into my hand.

“Your pussy agrees.”

I increase the pace, finger sliding in and out, deeper and deeper. Those fluttery soft walls taking what I’m giving.

She bucks against me, subtle, desperate. Her breathing turning ragged and choppy.

Wet heat spills out of her, making me bare my teeth as I hold her throat, forcing her eyes on mine.

“Almost,” I growl, low. “Almost time.”

I squeeze, feeling her muscles clench. She arches, a small groan escaping her lips.

“Two fingers now.” I pull out, pressing my ring finger next to my middle one and pushing against the tightness as she hisses. “I know baby. It’s a lot but you can do it.”

“Ow.” She drops her head back, exposing her throat against my hand.

“You need me to stop?” I give her a second, I already know the answer, but I want her to hear herself say it.

“No, don’t stop.”

“That’s what I fucking thought. Little lacy pink dress, white little panties all covering up a pussy that needs the right kind of attention.” The words come from my chest, something about this girl twisting me into something I’ve denied myself for so fucking long. “You can do it, two fingers now, all the way in.”

I have to stack my fucking fingers because there’s no way I’m tearing her cherry this way. I want the honor of doing that with my dick.

I work in even strokes, her body easing the entry with wet acceptance, pushing the pad of my thumb onto that nub, grinding it down on the bone underneath. Her thighs start to shake.

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“Eyes on me baby.” I adjust my hand on her throat. “Don’t you dare look away.”

Her lips fall open, her breathing stalls. Body tense.

“So responsive. Such a good girl.”

So fucking beautiful. She’s not faking a thing and this fucking girl has me obsessed.

“Give it to me,” I demand, rough with desire. “Now.”

She squeezes her eyes shut, face flushed. Body trembling. And then it happens.

A shudder runs through her, starting deep in her core. Her little fingers tighten on my back, nails digging into the flannel. Muscles squeezing, squeezing, squeezing.

The release washes over her, body convulsing. Hips bucking. Mouth making unintelligible beautiful noises. Her scent does more to make me drunk than the whiskey did.

Pleasure rocks through me, as I bite down, nearly severing my tongue as I battle the orgasm that threatens to create a disaster in my pants.

I work her through the downslope of her pleasure. Her tremors subside. She slumps back against the wall, legs falling. Breath slow and shuddering.

I pull my hand free, holding it up for her to see. “Filled my hand.” I take a long slow lick, cleaning her from my palm and fingers as she watches like a baby deer in the

headlights.

“There,” I rasp, rough with satisfaction. “Feel better? I do.”

She looks up, eyes glazed with pleasure. A small, satisfied smile.

"Holy shit," she breathes when she can speak again.

I chuckle, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. "Language, little girl."

"That was..." She looks up at me with something like wonder. "I had no idea an orgasm would feel like that. No wonder there's so much hype."

Something primitive and possessive roars to life in my chest at the confession. She's mine. This sweet, brilliant little girl who's just trusted me with her first real taste of pleasure is all mine, and always will be.

"Well, now that you know," I say, helping her down from the shelf, adjusting her dress back into place. "Don't settle for anything less."

She stares at me for a long moment, her dress rumpled, hair messed from my hands. "What happens now?"

"Now I take you upstairs and spend the night showing you a whole bunch of other wonders. If you thought my fingers were good, wait until I get my mouth on you."

Her breath catches, pupils dilating at the promise, but before she can respond, the emergency alarm sounds on my phone, filling the small room with the blaring urgent noise.

“What the heck is that?” Her hands fly to her ears. “I hate loud noises.” The moment

is shattered as her face twists, her body goes concave. My heart already hammering against my ribs kicks up a notch. That alarm is for search and rescue emergencies.

I curse through my teeth and pull out the phone, wrapping one arm around her and pulling her into my chest. "Shit." I glance at the screen, "The Sheriff. Also, my brother. He doesn't use that number unless it's urgent." I lean down and kiss her cheek, "I have to take this."

As soon as I hit accept, before I even get the phone to my ear, Colt's voice is coming through.

"We've got a situation. Eight-year-old boy wandered off from the Maple Creek campground around sunset. Parents didn't notice until an hour ago. Temperature's dropping fast and the kid's got no gear. Rain's coming in too."

That chill runs through me when it's a kid. Eight years old in these mountains at night in late fall can turn deadly fast. "I'm twenty minutes out."

"I need you here now. Told the parents we have the best tracker in the state."

I hold the phone against my shoulder, giving her a moment to steady herself. "Sorry baby."

"Go, it's a kid. You gotta go."

I'm already moving toward the door, grabbing the phone in my left hand and her hand in my right. Out in the hall the bright lights make me squint as she tugs away, stepping past me.

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"Wait," I say, grabbing her arm before she can take another step. I want to tell her I'm the one she booked her adventure outing with tomorrow. But, I also think it would be fucking fun to have her show up and see me there, ready to give her the kind of adventure that isn't in the brochure.

She blinks up at me, confusion written on her features, as if... As if she thought I was done with her.

As if I could ever be done with her.

"It's... I'm...It's okay." She stutters giving me this little wave like she's saying goodbye; the orgasm glow still bright on her cheeks.

"Marley!" A chorus of female voices erupts from the reception hall, and she snaps her hand away from mine. Three bridesmaids descend on her like a flock of determined pink birds, apparently not even noticing me or the obvious fluster in their friend's eyes. "There you are! We've been looking everywhere!"

"The photographer needs to take some end of the night pictures of the bridal party in the suite," one of them says, already tugging on her arm. "He's waiting—"

"But I—" Marley looks back at me helplessly as they pull her toward the elevator, and a growl falls from my throat.

I step their way, ready to grab her. Ready to take what's mine and never let it go.

"You still there?" Colt's voice crackles through the phone again. "We're losing time."

An eight-year-old kid lost in the mountains trumps everything else, even the most important thing that's ever happened to me.

"Twenty minutes," I bark into the receiver as the bridesmaids sweep Marley away.
"We'll find him, brother."

She looks over her shoulder, her eyes wide and confused for one last moment as the elevator doors slide closed.

Three

Marley

The hotel room is too bright, too quiet, and completely devoid of the massive mountain man who had his hands all over me in a coat room twelve hours ago. Which is probably for the best, considering I managed to get swept away by my fellow bridesmaids before I could even tell him my last name, like a complete disaster of a human being.

Or find out his name. First, last, middle... I didn't even overhear a damned nickname.

What would I do with that information anyway? Ask him on a date? My life is set. The course already mapped out. Being reckless with a kiss and some finger work is one thing, but getting my heart involved does not fit the planned program of my life.

Still, the faint beard burn along my jawline makes my chest ache. The tension lingering between my legs reminds me of the overwhelming pleasure of what he did to me. That's a high I'll be chasing the rest of my life.

Holy shit.

I throw off the stupid duvet, kicking it off my feet as I pad across the carpet to the bathroom, pressing my palms against the marble countertop and try to get my brain back online. I have approximately one hour before I need to meet my wilderness survival instructor, and instead of preparing mentally for three days of outdoor humiliation, I'm obsessing over a stranger who called me "little girl" and made me like it.

A stranger I'll probably never see again, I remind myself.

He could be married for all I know. Could be a serial killer. Could be literally anyone. But the way he looked at me, like I'm something precious he wanted to keep...

"Stop it." I reach out and flip the lever on the faucet, sending cold water spilling out of the tap. I splash it onto my face and get to work making myself look more like the Marley that I know and less like the girl who popped her orgasm cherry with a stranger in a coat closet wearing a pink dress. "You have bigger problems right now."

My thesis advisor called this assignment "immersive research." I call it three days of proving that skipping two grades might mean I'm academically advanced, but it sure as hell hasn't prepared me for real-world survival skills.

I dress in the gear I literally bought yesterday morning in a panic shopping spree at REI halfway to Traverse City. The hiking boots feel like concrete blocks. The moisture-wicking shirt is stiff and the tag is driving me crazy at the back of my neck. Even my backpack still smells like the store.

Perfect. I look exactly like what I am: a complete amateur.

My phone buzzes with a text and my heart drops sure it's my parents making sure I'm dressed and ready. If I screw this up and don't ace the final part of my first of what will likely be many post-grad degrees, they will take it as a personal affront to to their

parenting and probably die from shame.

But, the text isn't from them.

Sarah: Hope you're not too hungover! Remember to actually eat something before you meet Paul Bunyan today. I'll talk to you when you get back. We're heading to the air port now. Tahiti here we come!

Before I even set the phone down, it dings four more times in quick succession and I already know it's my mom. She can't write more than one sentence per text, instead choosing to blow my phone up with rapid fire messages.

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I sigh as I read but they are all variations on the same theme. Each one some variation on 'I hope you didn't drink last night,' then, 'Keep your nutrition balanced, log your macros, tell that guide your intake requirements,' and 'Take good notes.', 'We expect only the best from you.'

And the most annoying thing is, they're right. Because I actually had forgotten to factor in time this morning for breakfast.

Because nothing says "prepared for wilderness survival" like starting the day with a hangover and an empty stomach.

I grab a granola bar from the lobby and load my suitcase into my Honda. I try to remember the directions to Boone's Outdoor Gear. Main Street, a few blocks down from the lodge. Simple enough, even for someone whose navigational skills max out at using Google Maps to find the nearest Starbucks.

Wildfire is the kind of small town that looks like it's been designed by someone who's read too many romance novels about rugged mountain men and the city girls who love them. Which, considering my current situation, feels like the universe's idea of a joke. Main Street is lined with shops that have names like "Pine & Provisions" and "Mountain View Mercantile." Everything is rustic wood and hunter green paint, like the entire town has agreed to cosplay as a wilderness fantasy.

Boone's Outdoor Gear sits between a coffee shop and a place called "Martha's Kitchen" that already has a line of locals waiting for breakfast. The gear shop looks exactly like what I expected—weathered wood exterior, windows full of camping equipment I can't identify, and a sign that has definitely seen better decades.

A bell chimes when I push through the door, and I'm immediately overwhelmed by the scent of leather and something outdoorsy that reminds me of...

No. Not going there.

The shop is crammed floor to ceiling with equipment that probably has very specific purposes I'll never understand. Tents that look like they could survive a nuclear winter. Backpacks that could carry a small village. Knives that belong in horror movies.

"Be right with you," a gruff voice mutters from somewhere in the back, muffled by distance.

I wander toward the front counter, trying not to touch anything that looks expensive or sharp. There are business cards scattered next to the register—Cade Boone, Wilderness Survival Instruction—and I grab one to study it, remembering the tag line from the website, "Keeping city folks alive since 2015."

Charming.

There are also bottles of something called Wildfire Maple in a display case behind the counter with a sign that says they are a hundred dollars a bottle.

Is it whiskey? Or syrup? Wonder what's in it...

Heavy footsteps break through my syrup thoughts coming from the back room, and I look up with what I hope is a confident smile. Ready to meet my doom. Ready to prove that academic intelligence and real-world competence are two completely different things.

The man who rounds the corner makes the room start to spin.

Massive frame. Dark hair that looks like he's been running his hands through it. Beard that belongs in cologne commercials. And glacier-blue eyes that I've been dreaming about for the past eight hours.

It's him.

Holy fucking shit, it's him.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" he says, those eyes locking onto mine with an expression I can't read. "You look different without all the pink."

My mouth opens. Closes. Opens again.

No sound comes out, which is probably for the best because what I want to say is something along the lines of "You're the guy who... in the coat room... with your hands... oh God why am I speaking in fragments?"

I stand there like an idiot, opening and closing my mouth like a fish out of water.

"Uhn," I finally squeak, the involuntary sound strangled, pathetic and more than a little suggestive.

"Uhn? Not sure I know what that means." His eyebrows rise slightly, and there's definitely amusement lurking in those blue depths.

"I... Uhn..." I clear my throat and try to access some part of my brain that isn't currently screaming. "This is awkward."

"Awkward?" He moves around the counter with that same predatory grace I remember, close enough that I catch his scent that makes my body remember things it has no business remembering right now. "Not for me."

"You're Cade Boone." It isn't a question.

"And you are Miss Marley Voss." He leans against the counter, studying me like I'm a particularly interesting specimen. "Nineteen years old, journalism major, no outdoor experience. My booking agent said it should be an easy gig."

The way he says "easy" makes heat pool in my belly, which is completely inappropriate considering we're supposed to have a professional relationship for the next three days.

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“You were at the wedding in jeans and flannel. But you weren’t at the wedding at all, were you? You weren’t a guest?”

He shakes his head. “Naw. Just dropping off business cards when I saw you bolting for the bathroom with a glass of champagne and that bouquet that ‘bout knocked you out. But for the record, even if I was at the wedding, I’d still be in flannel. Nobody puts me in a fucking suit. Not now, not ever. Ties are just another form of noose.”

"This is..." I gesture helplessly between us. "We can't... I mean, after last night..."

"What about last night?" His voice is perfectly casual, but there's something dangerous in his eyes that makes me remember exactly how he commanded me to look at him while he made me come.

"You know what about last night!" The words come out sharper than I intended, fueled by panic and embarrassment and the fact that my body is already responding to his proximity like it has some kind of Pavlovian conditioning.

"I know a lot of things about last night." He straightens up, suddenly towering over me in a way that should be intimidating, but instead makes me want to climb him like a tree. "You'll have to be more specific."

Is he seriously going to make me say it? Out loud? In broad daylight? In his place of business?

"The coat room," I hiss, glancing around to make sure we're alone. "The... the things you did. The things we did."

"Ah." His mouth quirks up in what might be a smile. "You mean when I taught you what a real man feels like? What a real man makes you feel?"

Heat floods my cheeks. "Yes. That."

"What about it?"

I stare at him, completely at a loss. Is he pretending it doesn't matter? Is this some kind of test? Is he planning to act like nothing happened while we spend three days alone in the wilderness?

"We can't just..." I wave my hands around, trying to articulate the problem. "I mean, there are professional boundaries. Ethical considerations. This is completely inappropriate. Besides, what happened to the little boy?"

The reason for the abrupt ending to our little coat room rendezvous dawning on me.

"Found him within an hour. Cold but fine."

I nod. "Good. People die out in the elements all the time, especially kids."

"That is true Marley Voss, but you don't have to worry about that. I will take good care of you." He steps closer, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact.

"Okay, just as long as we keep things professional. I booked this for research, not romance."

"Ah, of course. So, last night you came all over my hand, begging me not to stop. This morning you want to talk about professional boundaries?"

"That was different!"

"How?"

"Because last night I didn't know you were going to be my instructor!" The words burst out of me, way too loud for the small space.

"Because from where I'm standing, the only thing that's changed is now you know my name."

I open my mouth to argue, but he's already moving, walking around the counter to flip the sign on the front door from "Open" to "Back in 15 Minutes. Or an hour. Or tomorrow."

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure we're not interrupted while we sort this out." The lock clicks into place, and suddenly the walls feel like they are pushing inward, and those thoughts about maybe he's a serial killer come flooding back.

"There's nothing to sort out," I say, backing up until I hit a display of hiking boots knocking a pair of black leather boots to the floor with a thud. "This is a professional arrangement. Three days of wilderness instruction. That's it."

"Uh-huh." He stalks toward me with those eyes eating me bite by bite as he approaches. "And you think you can spend three days and two nights alone in the wilderness with me, and keep things professional? Or, maybe I should ask your pussy instead."

The question wiggles down into my belly, loaded with implications that make my pulse hammer against my throat.

"Yes. I can keep things professional," I say, straightening my spine but even I can hear how unconvincing I sound.

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"Liar." He stops directly in front of me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body. "Your pupils are dilated. Your breathing's shallow. And I'd bet money that if I put my hand between your legs right now, you're flowing about as hard as my brother Jack's river during spring thaw."

What did he just say to me?

"That's..." I swallow hard, trying to ignore the fact that his assessment is correct, if not a bit dramatic. "That's completely inappropriate."

My voice is breathy, my lungs burning like I've just run a marathon.

"So is the way you keep looking at my mouth."

Shit. He's right about that too.

"This is insane," I whisper. "It was the champagne's fault. We barely know each other."

"I know plenty." His hand comes up to cup my jaw, thumb brushing across my lower lip in a gesture that's becoming familiar. "I know you're brilliant and brave and completely out of your element. I know you respond to me telling you what to do and when to do it. And I know that what happened between us last night wasn't some champagne-fueled mistake you're going to forget about. Am I right? And, don't lie. I'll know."

"It wasn't," I admit sure he's telling the spot on truth about the lying thing. .

"Good." His thumb presses my lip into my bottom teeth, and I have to fight the urge to suck it into my mouth. "Because I meant what I said. You're mine. Three days in the wilderness is just going to make that more obvious."

"This is crazy," I breathe, but I don't pull away from his touch.

"You said that already and you're probably right." His mouth curves in a smile that's equal parts dangerous and devastating. "You worried you can't handle a little crazy?"

The challenge in his voice sparks something defiant in my chest. I've been handling advanced coursework since I was seven years old. I've been managing academic pressure and social awkwardness and being the youngest person in every room for as long as I can remember.

I can handle one wilderness survival instructor, no matter how he makes me feel.

"I can handle it," I hiss, lifting my chin.

"We'll see." He steps back, putting distance between us that feels both like relief and loss. Then his eyes sharpen. "Speaking of handling things... you put your credit card number down for your deposit."

I blink at the sudden shift. "Yes? Is that a problem?"

"New policy. Cash only. Or the barter system." His voice has gone darker, more dangerous.

"I... Um... I don't have that much cash on me," I say, confused.

"Good girl," he says, the words sending little sparks of pure dopamine flowing through my veins. He moves closer again, backing me against the display until I'm

trapped between hiking boots and his large frame. "Barter it is then."

My breath catches. "I... don't have anything to barter with."

"Oh, baby, you have plenty, trust me. But just for the deposit?" His hand comes up to trace my jawline. "It's between your legs. And I'm going to collect it with my tongue."

"No, wait..." Heat floods through me so fast I actually sway on my feet. "Here? Now?"

My voice sounds a little too eager, even to me. The cascade of pleasure from his fingers last night overriding everything else in my practical decision-making centers.

He grins. "Right here. Right now. Unless your pussy's going to start spitting out hundred-dollar bills. In which case, I'll still be collecting them with my mouth."

I should protest. This is totally inappropriate. Probably sexual harassment. I should pull out my phone and call the cops, call my parents, transfer money, find an ATM... Do anything except stand here with my heart hammering and my muscles clenching wondering how a tongue feels lapping up hundred-dollar bills from between my legs.

"I—I don't think..."

"Good girl, time for you to stop thinking." His hands are already at my waist, pushing me back against a shelf full of folded flannel shirts. "Spread your legs for me, Marley."

"Someone could see," I protest weakly, as I meet each of his forward steps with my backwards ones.

"Door's locked. Sign's flipped. If they see, I'll take their eyes out later. No one gets to see you like this but me." He works at the button of my hiking pants, his movements efficient and sure."And I need my payment. When you come on my mouth, we have a deal. You're gonna pay me with your pleasure, baby."

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His hands are rough and sure as he peels my hiking pants and underwear down my legs, crouching down to lift one of my feet onto his knee, unlacing my boot, then tugging it off, then moving to the other and doing the same. He finishes with pulling my pants and underwear off my feet, leaving me naked from the waist down except my new wood moisture wicking hiking socks.

He then spins me around to face the wall next to the sea of flannel. "Hands flat against the wall, baby girl. Feet apart. It's important when we're on the mountain, you do exactly as I say, when I say. It's life or death out there, baby, so let's practice, see if you can do as you're told."

I press my palms against the cool surface, my heart hammering as heavy hands tug at my hips, arching my back, putting me into position as I ease my feet apart.

"Look at you, such a good girl for Daddy. Little wider," he murmurs, his voice rough as I feel the bump of his boot against the insides of my feet. "There we go, perfect. Now, push that ass to the sky baby, open up, I'm going lick my deposit out of that sweet little cherry pie of yours."

"This is insane," I breathe.

"This is business." I feel him drop to his knees behind me, calloused hands scraping down my outer thighs.

When his mouth makes contact, I bite down on my lip to keep from screaming. He isn't gentle, isn't tentative. He knows exactly what he's doing, and he does it with the same focused intensity he brings to everything else.

"Oh God," I gasp, my back arching against the wall.

"That's right, little girl. Pay up."

He works me with his tongue until I'm shaking, my palms pressed flat against the wall, completely lost to everything except the pleasure he's giving me. When I come, it's with his name on my lips and my legs trembling.

I hear him stand up behind me, as I reach down to pull my pants and underwear back up, his palm comes down in a sharp slap against my pussy.

"Did I tell you to get dressed?"

"Ow, Jesus, that stings."

"It's supposed to. You stand there like that until I tell you otherwise. I like a little eye candy while I finish getting this organized." He lands another hard slap toward the front, sending an explosion of pain outward from my throbbing clit.

"You taking this little girl, Daddy thing a little far." I fuss but my body responds with a new rush of wetness.

"I'll decide what's too far, baby. You just do whatever it takes to be a good girl." His voice is low, but sticky sweet and I hate that I so desperately want to hear him call me that.

"I'll be sure to put that in my thesis." I roll my eyes as I tug back a smile, arching my back and pushing my rear end upward.

"You'll stay good and wet for me all fucking day," he says, his voice rough as his hand lands another swat, harder this time as I draw a sharp breath, working through

how the pain has me on the verge of another orgasm.

My eyes are stinging with unshed tears. I blink them away. "Yes," I agree, wondering why it feels so good to give this almost complete stranger so much control.

I stand with my arms braced on the wall, cool air ticking at my bare flesh as he moves around behind me, going into the back room, then out again, opening a cabinet, stacking things by the front door. After a while, my mind starts to settle. A warm calmness blankets me as I stand there on display, secretly celebrating every time he tells me what a good girl I am for doing as I'm told.

"Consider your deposit paid in full," he finally says, "You can get dressed now."

On a hard swallow, I reach down and pull up my panties and pants, sit down on the floor and put on my boots while he watches, arms crossed, reaching down to adjust what looks like a small baseball bat running down the inside of his thigh. "Now let's talk about those rules."

The sudden shift from intimate to professional should give me whiplash. Instead, it sends a thrill through me that I definitely shouldn't be feeling.

"Rule number one" he continues, turning to grab a large backpack from behind the counter. "You eat what I give you, when I give it to you. Same with drinking. Unless you are allergic to something you didn't put on your medical history form."

"I'm not that small," I protest automatically.

He looks me up and down in a way that makes me feel very aware of exactly how much smaller I am than him. "You're tiny, little girl. And that's not changing in the next three days."

The endearment hits me like a physical touch, and I have to press my thighs together against the sudden ache between them.

"Next rule," he says, either oblivious to my reaction or choosing to ignore it. "You sleep where I tell you. Body heat's not optional at this altitude."

"That sounds like a convenient excuse," I manage.

"Not an excuse, baby. Everything I do for the next three days is about keeping you safe." His eyes meet mine, and there's something in them that makes my breath catch. "Even if you don't understand it at the time."

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He's talking about wilderness survival. I know he's talking about wilderness survival. But the way he says it, the authority in his voice, makes it sound like a promise of something much more personal.

He goes on, stay with me at all times, if you hurt yourself, you tell me no matter how insignificant it may seem, if you see a bear or a snake before I do, tell me, etc.

I'm so not in Kansas anymore.

"Any questions?" he finally asks, cupping my cheeks in his massive palms.

About a thousand, but none I can ask without admitting how much his rules are affecting me.

"Just one," I say. "Are you always this bossy with your clients?"

His smile is slow and predatory. "Sometimes, but it's never been this much fun."

Four

Cade

Watching Marley try to act normal while loading gear into my truck is like watching a baby deer try to tango. She keeps sneaking glances at me when she thinks I'm not looking, her cheeks still flushed from the orgasm she graced me with twenty minutes ago.

Her flavor raced through me like liquid fire.

I want that taste with me every fucking day from now on. She's got me by the balls already and she has no idea what that even means. The sound she made when I slapped her pussy is playing on repeat in my head. And the way she melted against that wall tells me everything I need to know about what this brilliant little girl really needs.

Someone to take control. Someone to make the decisions. Someone to keep her safe while she figures out who she is without the pressure of being the smartest person in every room.

What she doesn't know yet is that I have no intention of letting her go back to her old life when this week is over.

"This truck is huge," she says, running her hand along the side of my F-250 like she's trying to solve a mathematical equation. "What's the fuel efficiency on something this size? It has to be terrible for the environment."

I load the last of the camping gear into the bed and slam the tailgate shut. "It gets me where I need to go."

"But surely there are more sustainable options for—"

"Get in, Marley."

She blinks at the command in my voice, then scrambles to climb into the passenger seat. Even with the running boards, she has to haul herself up, and I can't help but notice how good her round little butt cheeks look in those hiking pants and how much better they'll look someday with my dick inside her ass.

Mine.

The word pounds through my head like a drum beat as I watch her struggle with the seatbelt. She's mine now, whether she understands it or not.

I climb into the driver's seat, reaching over to buckle her in, tugging on the shoulder strap to make sure it's locked in place then start the engine. The truck rumbles to life with a sound that probably violates half a dozen noise ordinances, but I've never been one to be quiet about much of anything.

"Where exactly are we going?" Marley asks, tapping the toes on her boots on the floor mat like an excited little girl. "I have a topographical map, but I don't know our destination so—"

"My mountain." I cut her off, reaching across to settle one hand at the back of her neck, rubbing little circles right over her pulse point.

"Your mountain?" She twists in her seat to look at me. "You don't actually own a mountain, do you?"

"Bought and paid for. Hundred and twenty-three acres of wilderness that hasn't seen civilization since my great-grandfather's time. My brother Jack owns about the same bordering mine. My other brothers have some too."

Her eyes go wide. "Do you have any idea what that kind of land is worth? What are the property taxes on something like that? Do you get an agricultural exemption?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"I'm a journalist. It's what I do." She settles back in her seat, but she's already pulling out her phone, making notes. I can see her academic brain spinning.

It should annoy me. On some level, it does annoy me. Academics are all the same, living in their own world that has nothing to do with the real one. The real one is dangerous and unpredictable, you can't sort it into neat categories, label it and make a plan how to deal with it.

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Survival in the real world is about instinct and experience, and that's something I never would have learned in a classroom. I can't even imagine setting foot in a school building again, and I can't understand anyone that volunteers for more of that when they don't have to.

But Marley...

I don't know, something about Marley makes it seem normal.

It's just that place isn't out here in the wilderness.

"Hope you've got a low-tech option for when the battery on that thing wears out," I give her neck a light squeeze watching as her tits bounce when I hit a pothole on the dirt road up the mountain. "No place to plug in up here."

"I've got a note book," she says distractedly as she taps away. "This is all research for my thesis. I need to understand the socioeconomic factors that drive people to choose isolation over community integration."

Socioeconomic factors. Community integration. Christ.

"And what do you expect?"

"I..." She looks up, confused by the question. "I expect to gather enough data to write a thesis that meets academic standards for publication."

"Wrong." I pull into the two-track road that leads to my basecamp cabin, the truck

bouncing over ruts that would bottom out her little Honda. "You're expecting to hide behind those notes and turn this into homework."

Her jaw lifts in that stubborn way I'm already getting used to. "That's my job. That's why I'm here."

"No, little girl. Your job for the next three days is to do exactly what Daddy tells you. Nothing else matters."

I've only started using that word since she's been around, but the way her breath catches tells me it hits exactly right.

"I can do both," she says, but her voice is shaky now.

"We'll see."

She twists those cute lips together, putting her phone down. "Okay then, tell me why you want to live up here like you do. Is this how you grew up?"

I keep my eyes ahead, continuing the circles on her skin, feeling her pulse kick up.

"Didn't grow up up here so to speak. My grandfather settled here, buying up half the mountain by the time he was forty. Never went to school. Couldn't read or write but he was smarter than any man I've ever met. Took care of my grandmother, was a good dad to my mom. A hero to me."

"Wow. He sounds like a book that should be written."

I nod. "Probably. My mom always told me I took after him. When she married my father, he moved her into town, he thought the mountain was for hillbillies."

“Where is he now? And your mom?”

I still for a second, easing the truck around a tree half blocking the road. “Mom’s been gone about five years. Dad...I don’t know. Don’t care. Me and my brothers ran him off. Life was better without him. He hit my mom. That was the end of that.”

Marley is quiet for a minute and I look over to see her staring out the window, her lips pulled tight.

“Don’t feel sorry for me. I love my life. I love this mountain. It’s exactly where I belong.” She gives me a nod but something is off. “What’s wrong baby?”

She squints, her eyes almost closed before she opens them and blurts out, “My parents wouldn’t like you.”

I snort on a deep laugh. “I’m not here to worry about your parents little girl. I’m here for you.”

I turn the truck down the last short stretch of road, Marley holding on to the door as the truck lurches side to side on the wash outs.

“You’re okay.” I brush my knuckles down her cheek, then park the truck on the patch of flat dirt that is as close to a parking spot as it gets up here.

I get out, walk around and open her door, putting my arms up for her.

She offers this little smile as she half tosses herself forward, an excited squeal rising to the trees as I catch her mid-jump, spinning her around then setting her on the ground.

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I unload the truck, putting the lighter pack on her shoulders. She looks out of place but relaxed as I point up the trail.

“Our hotel for tonight.” My cabin sits in a clearing I carved out myself—one room, wood stove, no electricity, no bullshit. Built with my own hands on land that belongs to me.

“This is where you live?” she asks.

"This is where we're staying tonight. Sort of base camp. Not my home. Tomorrow we head deeper into the mountains."

"Deeper?" Her voice cracks slightly. "This isn't deep enough?"

I look at her, letting a slow smile spread across my face. "Oh, little girl. You have no idea how deep I can go."

The way her pupils dilate tells me she catches my meaning loud and clear.

She hurries to catch up, nearly tripping over a tree root. "Wait... We're not going to be sleeping without central heating though, right? It's October in Michigan."

"Which is why you'll be sleeping in my bag. With me."

That stops her cold. "With you?"

"Body heat's the most efficient way to stay warm. Basic survival 101." I guide her to

the front door, dropping down some of the supplies before turning and bracing my hands on the two wooden pillars that hold up the little overhang where she's standing.

"But..." She's doing that overthinking thing again. "The lines between are really blurry. I am completely out of my element with this. I am not sure we are making wise choices. Like, with what happened back in the shop--"

She tugs her lips side to side and even with her fussing, her nipples are distracting as fuck pushing out on the khaki button up shirt she's wearing.

"What happened was you paying your deposit. That's what it was, don't dissect everything, baby. Just be." I unlock the cabin door. "This is about keeping you alive but it's bigger than that. Truth, I'm a little confused about it too. Like I said, I swore off women ten years ago. Too much drama, I like being alone. Sex is sex, fine but what I could give myself with my fist worked."

"Really? You are honestly telling me that a guy that looks like you, doesn't have a revolving door on his bedroom? I find that hard to believe. You are forearm porn and mountain man romance cover candy."

"Look." I tower over her, drawing a hard breath then exhaling, my breath making a few strands of her loose hair dance on her forehead. "We're both on this adventure. I'm learning too. Learning about how it feels to want someone else to be happy. And safe. The fucking idea of you getting hurt or someone hurting you?" I shake my head, my molars grinding together. "It's like you've awakened something dormant inside me and I'm a man of instincts, not agendas and flow charts. I'm following my gut baby and it's leading me to you at every turn."

Her dark lashes flutter, she's processing and I'll let her, because honestly, this is a lot for me to fucking process as well. Besides, my dick aches like I motherfucker and I need to move around.

“Come on. Let’s get things inside.”

I unlock the door and move the supplies inside as she follows, setting her pack down on the rough wooden floor just inside the door.

Inside, I start getting our gear and supplies organized as she moves to the window looking out the back of the small structure, staring out at endless trees. "I don't think I've ever been anywhere this quiet before."

"Good. Maybe you'll learn to listen to something besides professors for once."

She turns to watch me stack split wood into the cast iron pot belly stove. "You really don't like academics, do you?" She tips her head to the side, waiting as I wad up some newspaper, the crinkling sound filling the small space before I stuff it under the stacked wood.

"It’s not that. I think there are lots of ways to learn. Some people don’t learn inside four walls from books and lectures and the world seems to put more value on that kind of knowledge and I disagree." I snap a match on the side of the box, the newspaper catching with a crackle, then a whoosh as I open the flue and the hot air finds it’s exit. She’s leaning on the windowsill, arms crossed when I stand and make short work of closing the space between us. “You're nineteen with a master's degree, but you can't start a fire or find your way out of these woods if something happened to me."

Marley lowers her eyes as I spread my feet shoulder width apart, hands moving to her shoulders, making ownership of her and this space. "That's not necessarily true. I could possibly use the location of the sun to figure out" She gives up smart enough to know I’m right.

"When's the last time you did something that wasn't for a grade?" I slide my hands to

her neck, her softness under my rough palms, feeling how small she is when my fingers easily overlap, my thumbs pushing up into that soft space under her chin.
"When's the last time you took a risk that wasn't about being turned into data?"

Her breathing goes shallow. "Last night."

"That's right. And how did that feel?"

"Terrifying."

"And?"

"Amazing."

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"Our time out here on the mountain is going to be more of the same." I lower my face to hers, close enough our breaths mingle. "But you have to choose. Hide behind your notebook, or trust Daddy to show you what you're really capable of."

"I don't understand. I have achieved a lot in my short nineteen years."

I lower my voice, gentler now. "Yes, but out here, in the quiet, maybe you can finally hear your own voice instead of all the other ones in your head telling you who you should be."

The statement hits hard, and I see something crack in her expression. Something lonely she's been hiding behind all that academic achievement.

"What do you want, Marley Voss?" I ask quietly. "Not what your professors want. Not what your parents want. What do you actually want?"

She opens her mouth. Closes it. Nothing comes out.

"You've got a couple days to figure it out." I turn back toward the supplies, needing a distraction before I spread her open and fuck some sense into her. "But tonight, you're mine. And tomorrow, we'll see if you're brave enough to keep choosing you. And hopefully me. I'm your lifeline up here baby. It's you, me and what we can do together."

The pressure is there now. The pressure of being cut off from everything she's used to define herself. Alone with a man who's already proven he can make her forget every rule she's ever lived by.

She's standing on the edge of something wild, and all I can do is give her the space to jump.

Because once she does—there's no going back.

Five

Marley

The silence in the cabin is different from any quiet I've ever experienced. No hum of electricity, no distant traffic, no neighbors in adjacent apartments. Just the crackle of the fire and the sound of Cade moving around the small space with the kind of easy confidence that comes from knowing exactly where everything belongs.

I sit on the edge of his bed—the only place to sit that isn't the floor—and watch him prepare lunch. Everything he does is methodical, purposeful. No wasted movements, no hesitation. It's like watching someone perform a dance they've done a thousand times.

"You're staring," he says without turning around.

Heat floods my cheeks. "I'm observing. For research purposes."

"Uh-huh." He glances over his shoulder with that slight smile I'm beginning to recognize. "What exactly are you researching?"

"The way you move. It's very...efficient." I tuck my legs up under me, trying to get comfortable on the narrow mattress. "From an anthropological perspective, it suggests complete familiarity with your environment, which indicates—"

"Marley."

"What?"

"You're doing that thing again where you turn everything into data instead of just experiencing it. Like how good my ass looks in these jeans."

I open my mouth to argue, then close it. He's right. Even here, in this tiny cabin in the middle of nowhere, I'm defaulting to academic analysis instead of just...being present. Instead of admitting that I've been staring at his ass and wondering what it would feel like under my hands. How it would feel to touch him everywhere.

"I don't know how to analyze things," I admit, squirming on the bed as my body starts that familiar ache that means I'm in trouble. "It's kind of my default setting."

"I've noticed." He turns back to whatever he's cooking, he's chopping and throwing things in a sizzling pan and I catch the scent of something that makes my stomach growl despite my nervousness. And despite the fact that I'm getting wet just watching him move around his space like he owns everything in it. Which he does. Possibly including me. "We'll work on that."

Twenty minutes later, he sets two bowls on the small wooden table near the window and gestures for me to join him on the simple bench he's pulled in from outside. The stew smells amazing, but I find myself staring at it instead of eating.

"Something wrong with the food?" he asks.

"No, it smells really good." I stir the stew with my spoon, buying time. "I'm just not that hungry."

"When's the last time you ate?"

I think about it. "A granola bar this morning?"

"That's not a meal." He shifts on the bench to face me, close enough that our thighs are touching. "Eat."

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"I'm really not—"

"Marley." His voice has gone firmer. "Eat the food."

Something in his tone makes my stomach clench, but not with hunger. With a weird combination of anxiety and discomfort.

"I don't usually eat in front of people," I say quietly.

"Why not?"

The question is simple, but the answer is complicated. "My parents were very...particular about food when I was growing up. About portions, about what I ate, even making sure my food didn't touch. They would never have served stew either. Too many ingredients mixed up. No way to know your macros. They lived by the 'what can be measured can be improved' philosophy."

"Mixing macros sounds fun," Cade says with a smirk, then his eyes darken when I don't muster a smile. "Baby, it's just food. It's not a judgment about who you are. If your parents made you feel this way, even if it was from a misguided place of love, well, let's just say I'm going to have a little heart-to-heart with them soon enough. But right now, stop thinking so fucking much and follow your gut."

Right on que my stomach twists with a groan as I shrug. Programming from as far back as I can remember tightens around my windpipe as I stir the stew again, watching the chunks of meat and vegetables swirl around. "They wanted to make sure I stayed focused on academics instead of getting distracted by typical teenage

concerns like body image and boys.”

"So they controlled what you ate."

It isn't a question, and something in his voice makes me look up. His expression is carefully neutral, but there's a hardness around his eyes that hasn't been there before.

"They were just trying to help me stay on track," I say, the familiar defense rising automatically. "It worked. I graduated early, got into a good graduate program—"

"And now you're nineteen years old and afraid to eat in front of people."

His bluntness doesn't feel judgmental but it still stings. "I'm not afraid. I just prefer to eat alone."

"Bullshit." He takes the bowl from my hands and scoops up a spoonful of the brown mixture. "Open your mouth."

"What? No. I can feed myself."

"Open. Your. Mouth."

The command sends heat spiraling through me that has nothing to do with embarrassment. There's something about his complete certainty, his refusal to accept my protests, that makes part of me want to obey without question.

"This is ridiculous," I whisper, but I open my mouth.

"I'm taking the pressure off," he says quietly. "Not because you can't do it yourself, but because you shouldn't have to right now. Let me take care of you, baby, like I did last night in the coat room. Like I did this morning against my wall. Let me show you

how good it can feel to just receive."

The talk of what we did this morning, and what we did last night, should make me blush. Instead it makes me take stock. He's right, he's taken care of me in ways I didn't even know were possible.

What's one un-tracked meal against all that?

The savory warmth of the food spreads over my tongue, making me moan. It's rich and savory with herbs I can't identify. But more than that, there's something unexpectedly intimate about letting him feed me, about trusting him to decide how much I need.

"Good girl," he murmurs, scooping another spoonful.

"I can do it myself now."

"I know you can." His voice is a softer rumble as he brings the spoon to my lips again. "But for now, I'm doing it. No guilt. No rules. Just me, you, and this moment. Open."

The words make something tight in my chest loosen. When's the last time someone wanted to take care of me? When's the last time I let them?

I open my mouth for the next bite, and the next, letting him feed me until the bowl is empty, and my stomach feels satisfied for the first time in longer than I can remember.

"Better?" he asks.

"Better." I say and he looks so satisfied. Like he just won something big. . "How did

you know to do that?"

"Because it's what you needed. And that's important to me." He sets the empty bowl aside and shifts on the bench so he's facing me fully, dragging his massive hand over his mouth before finishing. "Taking care of you isn't just keeping you safe from bears and hypothermia.."

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"Taking care of me?"

"That's what this is, Marley." He releases a sigh as he leans back against the wooden wall, doing that wide man spread that is so simple, but so sexy I get that shuddering feeling that tracks up from my belly all the way to my chest. "You're valuable, baby, and I take care of what's mine."

He reaches forward, pressing his hand on the side of my head, fingers lightly scratching through the hair and God, why does that feel so good?

The possessive statement should set off alarm bells. Instead, it makes me lean into his touch like a cat seeking warmth.

"I don't understand what's happening to me," I whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what's wrong with me. My parents controlled everything - my food, my classes, my whole life path. I should hate being told what to do. But with you..." I search his face, confused by my own reactions. "I keep wanting you to just...handle things. Tell me what to do. It makes no sense."

"There's a difference between being controlled and being nurtured. Giving me the power is brave, baby. It's the ultimate choice."

"I guess it is. I never gave them the power, they just always had it or took it. It feels like I'm giving it to you. It's different." The honesty feels dangerous, but somehow

necessary. "Maybe because you make me feel safe? Like my achievements aren't some testament to your value?"

"That's part of it." His thumb continues its gentle stroking across my cheek. "What else?"

I think about it, trying to put into words something I barely understand myself. "You see me. Not just the smart girl or the good student or the weird girl who hates itchy tags on her clothes." I reach behind my neck on a grimace and scratch. That one kid in school who never quite fits in. You see...me."

He pulls my hand away from the back of my neck, tugging my shirt collar out and I hear a soft ripping sound. He pats it back in place, reaching over and tossing the tag into the fire.

"I do see you." His voice has gone softer, gentler. "I see how hard you've been working to be perfect for everyone else. I see how tired you are from carrying all that pressure. And I see how much you need someone to tell you it's okay to let go."

The words press against my heart, accurate enough to steal my breath. "Is it? Okay to let go?"

He leans closer, close enough that I can feel his breath against my lips. "I'll always be there to catch you, little girl. I promise."

Before I can second-guess myself, I follow my gut.

I grab the sides of his face, close the bit of distance between us and kiss him so hard, his teeth bite into my lower lip. It's clumsy and inexperienced, but he takes control immediately, one hand fisting in my hair while the other pulls me closer.

When we break apart, I'm breathing hard and probably looking at him like he's just solved every problem I've ever had.

"Can I..." I start, then stop, my cheeks burning. The fire in my belly burns for more of whatever this is.

"Can you what?"

"Can I touch you?" The words come out in a rush. "I've never... I mean, I don't know what I'm doing, but I want to learn. I want to see you."

Something dark and hungry flashes across his face. The shimmer of those silver hairs at his temples reminds me of the many differences between us but something in me wants this nurturing, older man to teach me all the things I've missed. "You want to see me?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"Then see me." He sits back and starts unbuttoning his flannel shirt with deliberate slowness. "But you follow my instructions. You do exactly what I tell you to do. Daddy's in charge always."

"Okay, Daddy," I say, the word unfamiliar on my tongue. Unfamiliar but perfect. It sends a shiver through me, just like it did when he used it before, except now it's my choice.

"That's my girl." He nods and pride fills my chest.

He shrugs out of the shirt, and I have to bite my lip to keep from making an embarrassing sound. I've seen him shirtless this morning, but somehow in the intimate glow of the firelight, he looks even more impressive. Broad shoulders,

defined chest, abs that belong in magazines I'm not supposed to read.

"Take your boots off and follow me," he says, rising and crossing to the bed, sliding upward against the pillows, legs wide, muscles flexing under tan skin. He nods, then pats the space directly in front of him.

I fumble with my laces, slipping the clunky boots off my feet and stand, legs feeling like a newborn foal shuffling over the wood floor, tentatively perching on the bed next to him.

"I said, come here," he growls, pointing between his legs.

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I climb over his legs, scooting closer, until I'm kneeling between his knees.

"Put your hands on my chest."

I place my palms flat against his skin, marveling at how warm he is, how solid.

"You're so...big."

"And you're so small." His hands cover mine, guiding them slowly across his chest.

"Feel that? That's what a man feels like, Marley. That's what you do to me."

Under my palm, his heart is beating fast and hard. The knowledge that I'm affecting him the same way he's affecting me sends a thrill through me that's equal parts terrifying and exhilarating.

"Lower," he says quietly.

He guides my hands down over his ribs, trailing my fingers in the indents of muscles that almost look like feathers, then across his stomach, letting me explore the terrain of his body while he watches my face with an intensity that makes me feel like I'm the most fascinating thing he's ever seen.

"How does it feel?" he asks.

"Amazing. Overwhelming." I look up at him, trying to find words for sensations I've never experienced before. "I didn't know touching someone could feel like this."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm learning a new language. Like every nerve ending in my body is suddenly awake. I've always winced at being touched and would never have wanted to touch someone else. But, with you, it's like breathing. Natural, necessary."

"Good." His hands move to my waist, thumbs tracing small circles through my shirt. "Now I want you to touch me somewhere else."

Heat pools between my legs, unsure but at the same time, hopeful about where this is going. "Where?"

Instead of answering, he takes one of my hands and guides it down to rest over the hard bulge under his jeans. Even through the denim, it's intimate and impressive.

"Holy cow," I breathe.

"You did this to me," he says, his voice rough. "Just by being here, by trusting me, by letting me take care of you."

I press my palm more firmly against him, fascinated by the way his breathing changes, the way his hips move almost involuntarily into my touch.

"I thought men needed lingerie and make up and all the..." I make this weird sort of jazz hands gesture. "You know, sexy stuff."

He mimics my twisting hand gesture then grabs my wrists, his rough grip stealing my breath.

"With you, baby, it's all sexy. I've not touched a woman in ten years. Didn't know my secret kink was little girls with big brains."

I snort as I inspect the lines on his face, letting myself really look at him. Older, yes.

But I don't register the age. I see the man in the blue of his eyes. In the way his forehead comes together when he's waiting for me to speak.

"Nerd kink." I finally say, "It's a thing, I read about—"

He flattens my hand over my mouth, his fingers tight around my wrist. "I'm all for reading. You might not guess it, but I'm on book 88 of the hundred books to read in your lifetime. But it's a balance, baby. Reading and living. Right now, it's about living. Feeling. Experiencing."

I nod, and he releases my hands, the blood warming to my fingertips.

"I want to see," I say, surprising myself with my boldness.

"You want to see my cock?"

The crude word should shock me. Instead, it sends another wave of heat through my body. "Yes, Daddy, I want to see your cock."

He unbuttons his jeans and pulls them down just enough to free himself, and I have to fight the urge to pull my hand away. He's big and hard and completely foreign to anything in my limited experience.

"Touch me," he says.

I wrap my fingers around him tentatively, amazed by the contrast of soft skin over steel-hard muscle. He groans when I touch him, and the sound makes me feel powerful in a way I've never experienced before.

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"Like this?" I ask, moving my hand the way I think he might like.

"Jesus, yes." His head falls back, and I watch his face as I learn what makes him react, what makes his breathing hitch, what makes his hips thrust into my touch.

"You're so responsive," I say with a smirk.

"Smart ass. Only with you." He looks down at me, his eyes dark with want.

"Onlyforyou, little girl."

I continue touching, exploring, learning, until his hand covers mine and stills my movements.

"Stop," he says, his voice strained.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you did everything right. Too right." He tucks himself back into his jeans and pulls me into his lap. "But I think it's time to collect my second payment."

"Second payment?"

"You paid your deposit this morning. But you still owe me for services rendered today." His hands are already working at the button of my pants. "And I think I'll take this one between your legs too."

Before I can respond, he has me on my back on the narrow bed, my pants and

underwear gone, his mouth on me with the same focused intensity he brings to everything else.

This time is different from the hurried encounter in his shop. This time he takes his time, mapping every sensitive spot, learning exactly what makes me gasp and arch and forget my own name. He uses his tongue and his fingers and his teeth, building me up until I'm shaking with need, then backing off until I whimper with frustration.

"Please," I finally gasp. "Please, I need..."

"What do you need, little girl?"

"I need you. I need you inside me. Please."

But instead of giving me what I'm begging for, he sits back and looks down at me with satisfaction and something that might be tenderness.

"Not today."

"What?" I struggle to sit up, confused and frustrated and aching with unfulfilled need.

"But I thought...I want you to..."

"I know what you want." He helps me get my clothes back on with gentle efficiency.

"But you're not ready."

"I am ready. I want this. I want you."

"Wanting isn't the same as being ready." He pulls me against his chest, and despite my frustration, I find myself melting into his warmth. "You've been good tonight. You've learned. And I like you needy."

"That's not fair."

"Fair's got nothing to do with it." His hand strokes through my hair. "Daddy decides when you're ready, little girl. And you're not ready yet."

The certainty in his voice is both maddening and oddly comforting. Part of me wants to argue, to insist that I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions about my body and my readiness. But a larger part—the part that felt so peaceful when he fed me, the part that melted under his authority—trusts that he knows something I don't.

"When will I be ready?" I ask quietly.

"When you stop asking when you'll be ready." He presses a kiss to the top of my head. "When you trust me completely instead of just trusting me with parts of yourself."

The rest of the day is my first introduction to some sort of wilderness survival. Cade shows me how to build up the fire, how to recognize the tracks of game animals and get my bearings from the way moss grows on the trees. It's all too much of a blur for me to remember any of it, but he says it's about experience, and repetition, and trusting him to keep me safe.

I'm still thinking about his words, about trusting not only that he knows what's best but that he can handle the real me, as he gets the sleeping bag ready for the night. He banks the fire, then tucks us both into the narrow space that will keep us warm until morning.

"Cade?" I say into the darkness.

"Yeah?"

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"Thank you. For taking care of me."

"Thank you for letting me." His arm tightens around me. "Now sleep, little girl. Tomorrow we really start your education."

As I drift off in his arms, warm and safe and more satisfied than I've ever been despite not getting everything I wanted, I find myself looking forward to whatever lessons he has planned.

I'm finally starting to understand that maybe the most important things can't be learned from books.

Six

Marley

I wake up with my face pressed against a wall of muscle and the horrifying realization that I'm drooling on my wilderness survival instructor.

Not my finest moment.

Cade is already awake, one arm pinning me against his chest like I'm a teddy bear he's claimed in his sleep. The other hand is doing something that feels suspiciously like petting my hair.

"Morning, little girl."

His voice is rough with sleep and way too satisfied for someone who's spent the night fully clothed in a sleeping bag with a nineteen-year-old academic disaster.

"Did I drool on you?" I mumble into his chest.

"Little bit."

"Oh God." I try to pull away, but his arm tightens around me. "I'm sorry. I don't usually... I mean, I've never shared a bed with anyone before, so I don't know my sleep habits and—"

"Marley."

"What?"

"You're rambling."

"I ramble when I'm embarrassed."

"I noticed." His hand stills in my hair. "You also ramble when you're nervous, when you're thinking too hard, and when you're trying to avoid dealing with how good this feels."

He isn't wrong. Waking up wrapped around him feels ridiculously good in a way that probably violates several sections of my thesis methodology.

"We should get up," I say, making no effort to actually move.

"Probably." He doesn't let go either. "But first, ground rules for today."

"More rules?"

"Different rules. Today we're going deeper into the wilderness. Real survival training." His voice has gone more serious. "Which means when I tell you to do something, you do it immediately. No questions, no analysis, no debate."

I tilt my head back to look at him. "That seems a little extreme."

"This isn't a fucking dorm room, Marley. One wrong step out there, and you could break an ankle, fall off a cliff, or walk into a bear. When I say jump, you don't even say 'how high', you just leap and trust me to be there to catch you."

"But surely there's room for discussion if I don't understand—"

"No." His hand cups my chin, forcing me to maintain eye contact. "No discussion. No questions. No thinking your way through everything. You trust me to keep you alive, and you do exactly what I tell you to do."

The authority in his voice sends that familiar ache through my body that means I'm in trouble again. "What if I disagree with your methods?"

"Then you'll learn what happens when little girls don't listen to their Daddy."

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The way he says it—casual and matter-of-fact—makes my breath catch.

"Also," I say, trying to regain some academic ground, "I'm supposed to check in with my thesis advisor today. Professor Harrison wants a progress report by two o'clock."

"Fine. We'll use the sat phone when we break for lunch." He sits up and starts getting dressed with the same efficient movements I watched the night before. "But that's the only exception. Everything else, you follow my lead."

"Understood."

Famous last words.

Two hours later, I'm standing in a clearing about a mile from his cabin, staring at a pile of branches and sticks and trying to figure out how they're supposed to turn into shelter.

"This is impossible," I say, wiping sweat from my forehead. "The structural integrity is completely compromised by the irregular angles."

"The what now?" Cade looks up from where he's demonstrating knot techniques I apparently can't master.

"The angles are all wrong. Basic physics says this won't hold." I gesture at my sad attempt at a frame. "The load-bearing capacity is insufficient for the distributed weight, and the connection points are fundamentally unstable."

"Jesus Christ." He stands up and walks over to examine my work. "You're building a shelter, not designing a skyscraper."

"But the principles are the same. If you don't account for structural stress and load distribution—"

"Marley."

"What?"

"Shut up and build the fucking shelter."

I blink at him. "That's not very constructive feedback."

"You want constructive feedback? Stop overthinking every goddamn stick and just follow the instructions I gave you twenty minutes ago."

"But your instructions don't account for the fact that this branch is clearly too weak to support—"

"Are you questioning me?"

Something in his tone makes me pause. "I'm trying to understand the engineering behind—"

"That's questioning me." He moves closer, and I automatically back up until I hit a tree. "What did I tell you about questioning me in the wilderness?"

"You said not to, but that was for when safety is paramount. This is obviously a teaching moment where discussion would be beneficial—"

"Strike two."

"Strike two? This isn't baseball, it's an academic exercise in applied survival methodology—"

"And there goes strike three." His hands settle on either side of my head, caging me against the tree. "Looks like someone needs a reminder about following instructions."

My mouth goes dry. "A reminder?"

"Remember what I told you in the cabin? About doing exactly what I say when I say it because it's dangerous out here?"

I nod.

"And what did you just spend the last hour doing?"

"Learning survival techniques?"

"Try again."

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I think about it. "Questioning your methods based on theoretical applications of structural engineering principles?"

"That's a fancy way of saying you didn't listen to a damn thing I told you." His thumb traces along my jawline. "You know what happens when little girls don't listen to Daddy?"

"They get timeouts?"

He laughs, but it isn't particularly comforting. "Something like that. Turn around."

"Why?"

"Are you trying for four strikes?"

I shake my head and turn around, pressing my palms against the rough bark of the tree. Behind me, I hear him moving around, but I can't see what he's doing.

"Hands flat against the tree." I suddenly feel his hands on my waistband, and a moment later my pants and panties are tugged down, making me gasp as cold air hits my ass. "Don't move."

"Cade, what are you—"

His hand comes down on my ass hard enough to make me gasp and arch against the tree.

"That's one," he says calmly. "Every time you questioned me gets a smack. I counted nineteen."

"Nineteen?" I try to look back at him. "That seems like an excessive tallying system—"

Another sharp slap cuts off my protest.

"Twenty. And that's for arguing with me about the count." His hand settles on my lower back, holding me in place. "Color?"

"What?"

"Green means keep going, yellow means slow down, red means stop. What color are you?"

The fact that he's checking in with me, making sure I'm okay even while disciplining me, sends a burst of heat straight to my pelvis. It takes me a moment to gather enough breath to answer. "Green."

"Good girl."

He continues with methodical precision, each swat perfectly placed to build heat without causing real pain. By the time he reaches ten, I'm breathing hard and fighting the urge to press back against his hand.

"You're not listening to save your life out here," he says, his voice steady while I try to process the strange mix of arousal and shame. "You're listening because I know what I'm doing, and you don't."

Another smack, harder this time.

"You're listening because when you question every instruction, you are setting yourself up for getting hurt."

Three more in quick succession.

"And you're listening because this pretty little ass belongs to me, and I don't like it when what's mine doesn't behave."

The possessive statement sends heat shooting straight between my legs. By the time he finishes, I'm trembling all over and definitely not from fear.

"Turn around."

I push myself away from the tree on shaky legs, my pants and underwear around my ankles, my face burning with embarrassment and arousal and something that feels dangerously close to gratitude.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

I take inventory as I lean my tender ass against the rough bark. It's sore in a way that will remind me of this moment every time I sit down. My breathing is unsteady but my brain feels quiet for the first time in hours.

"Focused," I say, surprising myself.

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"Good. That's what happens when you stop thinking and start trusting." He pulls me against his chest, and I melt into his warmth. "Now, are you ready to build a shelter the way I taught you?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"What do you say?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"That's my good girl. Now pull up your big girl pants and let's get to work."

The second attempt goes much better. Instead of analyzing every piece of wood, I follow his instructions step by step. Instead of questioning his methods, I pay attention to how the materials feel in my hands. Instead of trying to understand the engineering, I focus on the task.

An hour and a half later, with a break for lunch, I have something that actually looks like shelter. It's not as good as the one he's built, that we're apparently going to sleep in tonight, but it looks like I could sleep in it if I absolutely had to, and probably not die.

"Better," Cade says, examining my work. "Much better. Good girl."

Those magic words make my pussy weep. "It's not going to win any design awards."

"It doesn't need to win awards. It needs to keep you alive." He checks his watch.

"Speaking of which, it's almost two. You want to call your professor?"

I had completely forgotten about the check-in, which is probably a first in my academic career. "Oh. Right."

He hands me the satellite phone, and I dial Professor Harrison's direct line.

"Marley!" His voice crackles through the connection. "Right on time. How's the research going?"

"Good. Really good, actually." I glance at Cade, who's pretending not to listen while he organizes gear. "I'm gathering a lot of... hands-on data."

"Excellent. I'm particularly interested in your observations about power dynamics and authority structures in survival situations. Are you documenting the psychological patterns you discussed in your proposal?"

I look at my notebook, "I'm taking a more... experiential approach to the research."

"Experiential?"

"Immersive. Participatory observation rather than detached analysis."

"Hmm." Professor Harrison sounds skeptical. "That's a significant departure from your methodology. Are you maintaining academic objectivity?"

Academic objectivity. Right. The thing I'm supposed to be doing instead of getting spanked by my research subject.

"I'm gathering comprehensive data," I say, which isn't technically a lie.

"Okay, good. I've scheduled your defense for next Friday. That gives you exactly one week to complete your analysis and prepare your presentation."

My stomach drops. "Next Friday?"

"Is that a problem?"

I look at Cade, who's definitely listening now. "No, that's... that's fine."

"Excellent. Don't disappoint me, Marley."

The line goes dead, and I stare at the phone like it just delivered my death sentence.

"Everything okay?" Cade asks.

"My thesis defense is next Friday."

"That's good, right? You'll be done with school." The way he says it, like it's a relief but for me, my life is planned. I only see more school ahead. Then, teaching, then more school more than likely. My parents have seven advanced degrees between them; this is the Voss legacy and I'm the more crystalline example of what they believe is true success.

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"Right. Then I start my PhD program at Harvard in the fall." I hand him back the phone, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach. "My parents applied for me. They want me to go into academia like them."

He goes very still. "That what you want?"

"I wanted to be a journalist. Real journalism, like Christiane Amanpour. Travel, investigate, tell stories that matter." The words tumble out before I can stop them. "But they said journalism was unstable and beneath my intellectual capacity. The industry isn't what it once was. They put me on birth control when I was sixteen to make sure I didn't mess up my future."

The last part slips out without me meaning to say it, and I immediately feel my cheeks burn.

"Not that I had any distractions of that kind. Not until..." I sigh as I look at him.

"Right." He stops packing and turns to face me fully. "I'll deal with that little nugget another time. But, what do you think? You think telling stories that matter is beneath you?"

"No, I—"

"You think Christiane Amanpour is some kind of failure because she chose to inform the world instead of hiding in a classroom?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Then what the hell are you doing letting other people decide what your potential is?" His voice is firm but not harsh. "You're smart enough to do anything you set your mind to, baby. But smart doesn't mean shit if you don't have the guts to actually do something with it."

I stare at him. The words bounce around in my head and I know he's right. These decisions, things that are going to affect the rest of my life, should be mine to make, not anybody else's.

But how do you stop doing exactly what you're told, when that's all you've ever known?

"Come on, I'm going to show you how to track. Put on your warm clothes, but leave your pack here, we'll be back before nightfall."

Seven

Cade

Tracking takes us hours into the woods, following a deer trail that at first Marley swears I'm making up, but then gradually she starts to notice the signs for herself.

In the end, she can point them out before I even have to prompt her. And that's fucking good progress.

The weather changes while we're walking back to camp. What had been clear skies an hour ago is now building into the kind of storm system that can turn deadly fast in these mountains, especially later in the year.

But all I can think about is the look on Marley's face when she talked about her parents crushing her dreams. The way she deflated when she mentioned that PhD

program they've signed her up for like she's a fucking package they're shipping off to Harvard.

And the way she lit up when she said Christiane Amanpour's name. Like just speaking it out loud reminded her that brave women exist in the world.

"Storm's coming," I say, checking the sky. The wind is picking up, and I can smell rain in the air. "It's going to be bad. Real bad. We should probably push back the wilderness camping thing."

"How can you tell?" She looks up at the clouds that are definitely darker than they were twenty minutes ago. "I mean, obviously it's getting cloudy, but how do you know it's going to be bad?"

"Barometric pressure. Wind direction. The way the birds went quiet about ten minutes ago." I adjust my pack and pick up the pace. "Things are changing fast, we're not going to make it back to camp. We need to find shelter."

"But we can't be more than a few miles away, surely?"

"Two and a half miles. That's too far if this hits as hard as I think it's about to." I scan the area, looking for options. "There's an old hunting blind about two hundred yards north. It's not much, but it'll keep us dry and protect us from lightning strikes. Mountain trees are like lightning rods, and they can explode like bombs if they get struck."

Five minutes later, the first drops start falling. By the time we reach the blind—a small lean-to structure that doesn't get much use or maintenance—it's coming down hard enough that we're both soaked.

"This is cozy," Marley says, pressing herself against the back wall of the tiny shelter

once I get her inside, reach into my pack and pull out an electric lantern. It's barely big enough for me. Laying down I'd be wall to wall.

"Cozy's one word for it." I shed my wet jacket and hang it on a nail that's probably older than both of us. "Come here."

"Why?"

"Because you're shivering and your lips are turning blue." I sit down on the old wooden bench that runs along one wall and pat my lap. "Body heat. I told you, it's not a ploy, it's basic survival."

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"I'm fine."

"You're hypothermic." I reach for her, but she steps back.

"I'm not hypothermic. I'm just a little cold."

"Marley." I use the voice that has made grown men follow me up mountains without question. "Come. Here."

She comes, as I sit on the only furniture in the small space a little bench against one wall. She perches herself on the edge of my lap like she's planning to bolt the second the rain stops.

"That's not how this works." I pull her fully against me, arranging her so she's straddling my thighs, chest to chest. "Better."

"This is very..." She swallows hard. "Close."

"That's the idea." I rub my hands up and down her arms, trying to get her circulation going. "Your clothes are soaked. You need to get out of them."

"Absolutely not."

"It's not a request." I'm already reaching for the hem of her shirt. "Wet clothes will kill you faster than no clothes in weather like this."

"I can't just—" She catches my hands. "We're supposed to be maintaining

professional boundaries."

"Professional boundaries?" I look at her like she's lost her mind. "Little girl, I had my tongue in your pussy less than twenty-four hours ago, I spanked your ass out in the woods and you were doing a pretty fucking phenomenal job jacking me off earlier today. What fucking professional boundaries?"

Her cheeks go red, but she doesn't let go of my hands. "That was different."

"How?"

"That was...research." She struggles for words. "Spontaneous. This feels more... deliberate."

"Damn right it's deliberate." I tug her shirt up despite her protests. "I'm deliberately keeping you from dying of exposure."

"I'm not going to die from—"

The shirt comes off, and whatever she's about to say dies on her lips when she sees the way I'm looking at her. Like I want to devour her whole. Her tits are perfection. Tight dark pink nipples pushing out on the wet white fabric.

A masterpiece.

"Fuck," I breathe.

She's perfect. Small and soft and everything I imagined when I had my hands on her in the dark. Her bra is plain white cotton, probably bought for function rather than form, but it doesn't matter. She could be wearing a garbage bag, and I'd still want to fuck her through the Goddamn floor.

"Cade," she whispers.

"I know." I force myself to focus on the practical. "Pants too."

"I can't."

"You can, and you will." I help her stand up on shaky legs and start working at the button of her hiking pants. "Trust me."

"I do trust you. It's just..." She looks down at my hands working at her clothes. "I've never been naked in front of anyone before. Not completely naked."

The confession hits me harder than it should. This brilliant, beautiful girl has never let anyone see her. Never trusted anyone enough to be completely vulnerable.

"Hey." I tilt her chin up so she has to look at me. "You know what I see when I look at you?"

She shakes her head.

"I see someone who's not afraid to take a risk with a man she met in a hotel bathroom." I kiss her softly, gently. "I see the bravest little girl I've ever met. I see someone so fucking beautiful and smart and interesting it makes my chest hurt."

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Her pants are wet enough that they practically peel off her legs. I work her boots off then drag of her socks, then her pants, tossing everything into the corner.

When she's standing in front of me in nothing but cotton underwear, I have to take a deep breath to keep from feeding her every thick inch of me with no prep work which, no bueno. Don't want to tear her in half. At least, not the first time.

"Come back here," I say, pulling her down to straddle me again. "Better?"

"Warmer," she admits.

"Good." I run my hands over her bare skin, mapping the curve of her waist, the soft swell of her breasts. "You're so fucking perfect."

"I'm not—"

"Don't." I silence her with a kiss that's harder than the first one, more demanding letting our tongues talk for a minute before pulling back. "Don't argue with me about how perfect you are."

She melts into me, her body going pliant in a way that tells me she's finally letting go of whatever wall she's been trying to maintain between us.

"Daddy," she whispers against my lips, and the word goes straight to my cock.

"That's right, little girl." I unhook her bra and toss it aside, groaning at the sight of her bare breasts, the little nipples hardening in the cool air, calling out to be sucked, to be

worshipped. "Tell Daddy what you need."

"I need..." She squirms against me, her core pressed right against the hard length of me through my jeans. "I need you to touch me."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

I start with her breasts, taking one perfect nipple into my mouth while I palm the other. She arches into me, her hands fisting in my hair as I lavish attention on each in turn.

"More," she gasps.

"More what?"

"I don't know. I just... I need more."

"I know what you need." I lift her off my lap and lay her down on the bench, positioning myself between her spread thighs. "You need Daddy to take care of you."

I hook my fingers in her panties and pull them down her legs, leaving her completely bare in front of me. She tries to close her legs, but I catch her knees and hold them open.

"Don't hide from me," I say firmly. "Let me see all of you."

She's beautiful everywhere, but especially here, pink and wet and ready for me. She's natural too, and I love every curl. I can't resist leaning down to taste her, to run my tongue through her folds and listen to the broken sound she makes when I find her

clit.

"Oh God," she pants. "Cade, please."

"Please what?"

"Please whatever you do down there with your mouth, do more."

"You're turning into a proper greedy babygirl slut for me." I work her with my mouth until she's writhing and bucking, until her thighs are shaking and she's making sounds that are going to live in my fantasies for the rest of my life. Her body rewards me with mouthfuls of her delicious warmth, and I swallow it down as she calls for Daddy over and over.

"Daddy...", she moans, her hands pulling at my hair hard enough to hurt. I keep going until she stops shaking, then press soft kisses to her thighs while she catches her breath.

"Holy shit," she breathes when she can speak again.

"Language, little girl."

"Sorry, Daddy." She doesn't look sorry. She looks satisfied and sleepy and completely debauched. "That was..."

"That was just the starter." I stand up and start unbuttoning my damp shirt, still licking my lips, savoring the taste of her. "Now it's time for the main course."

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Her eyes go wide as I strip out of my clothes, but she doesn't look away. If anything, she watches with the same focused intensity she brings to everything else, like she's memorizing every detail.

"God, how do you look bigger?" she asks with a mixture of fear and awe when I'm finally naked in front of her.

"And you're so small."

Christ. No condom. Every rational part of my brain is screaming at me to stop, to think this through. But she's nineteen, on the fucking enemy pill her controlling parents put her on to keep her from making any mistakes. And the primitive part of me that has already claimed her as mine wants to mark her completely, to fill her with my seed and make her truly mine.

But looking at her face, so young and trusting, I realize something that cuts through the breeding haze. She isn't ready for that. Not because of her body—her body is perfect and willing—but because she's spent her whole life being someone else's good girl. She needs time to figure out who she is when she doesn't have to be what everyone else expects of her.

She needs to be little first. The breeding rage inside me fights to come forward, but I'll always put her needs first.

"We're going to take this slow."

"I don't want slow."

“I’m very focused on what you want, baby, but sometimes it’s what you need that’s going to be a priority, and fast and hard is not what you need. Trust Daddy on this.”

Color creeps across her cheeks like rising heat. She doesn't object. Just sits there, letting me work, her gaze locked on my mouth. Virgin. That word doesn't even cover it. She's untouched and overthinking it like a final exam. Which, honestly, tracks.

Her skin is cool, soft, and unexpectedly strong beneath my hands. I kneel, bracing myself on either side of her. She isn't built like the women who crowd dive bars for flannel and testosterone in Wildfire looking for a tourist distraction. She’s authentic. Soft and full of youth an old fuck like me doesn’t deserve.

"God," I murmur, eyes dragging down her body. "You're something else."

Her flush deepens. Lips part. "Something else?"

"You’re not just beautiful, you’re young. My youth ran away a long time ago." I run a finger along the line of her thigh.

“I like you just like this.” She reaches up to play with the hair at my temples. “I’ve never been attracted to boys. I guess having daddy issues is a real thing, but because I don’t see age, I just see someone that makes my belly roll and I want to crawl inside you and live sometimes. I know that sounds pathetic and needy, but it’s true. You feel like home.” She grins on a shrug. “A home that has crooked gutters and needs a fresh coat of paint, but still...home.”

“Why does that make my dick even harder?” I shake my head. “You just basically told me I’m half broken down and you still want me. I’m never going to stop fucking you, you know that right? I can’t imagine a day without my dick inside you.”

“Well, wild Daddy, show me what you’re made of.”

I chuckle. "I'm going to fill you with what I'm made of baby." I step forward, my cock right at mouth level with her sitting on the bench, toes turned inward like a cherub waiting. "First, let's put that mouth to work for a bit. Get your head straight. Daddy's cock is always your safe place. Remember that."

She looks up, eyes questioning.

"You want to know what to do with it?"

She shakes her head.

"Here." I guide the tip to her plump little lips. "Like when I fed you remember? You just let me take care of you, but you're also taking care of me."

She swallows hard as I guide her hand to the base. Her touch almost making me blow my load right there.

"It's... throbbing."

"For you. Now open up."

She does, hesitant but brave. Her mouth wraps around the head, and I groan low. She's unpracticed. Wet. Warm. Fantastic.

"Good," I murmur. "Just like that. Let your tongue explore."

She follows directions like she's cramming for finals. Careful flicks. Slow circles. She sucks experimentally and I nearly lose my mind.

"More pressure. A little twist. Yeah, just like that."

She adjusts, brows furrowing in focus. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen. Her mouth around me, her brain catching up to her body, her whole self in the moment. Tits bouncing, toes curled with the effort.

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"Jesus. You're... terrifyingly good at this."

Her lips slide down a little farther. I groan. Guide her by the hair, but not hard. Just enough to say I'm here.

"Gonna stop now. Not 'cause it isn't perfect, but because I need you on my face."

Her head jerks up. "What?"

I take her hand, grab some of the blankets from the shelf and kick them open on the floor, then lay down. "Come here with that sweet pussy." I pat my chest. "Knees on either side. Right now."

She hesitates. "Like... sit on you?"

"Exactly like that. You trust me, right?"

She nods, breath catching. Lowering herself into position, thighs bracketing my face, hesitant until she feels my hands on her hips.

"There you go," I murmur. "Just relax. I'll take care of the rest."

Her weight settles slowly. The scent of her hits me first—warm, sweet, wild. Then the taste. I groan, low and rough, hands tightening just enough to hold her steady. She gasps as my tongue strokes through her, tentative at first. Then deeper.

The thick wool blanket beneath me shifts as she rocks forward, catching under my

elbow and nearly taking my balance. I grunt, adjusting, my spine pressing into the hardwood. Not exactly ideal ergonomics. But the view? Flawless.

Her hands dig into my hair. Her hips shift. She moans, high and breathless.

"You're... really good at this," she says between pants.

I grin into her. "Old dog, old tricks. Out of practice though. Thankful for that. Feels brand new with you baby."

"Like how old?" She asks. "I never asked how old you were?"

"Old enough to know exactly what makes you shake like that. Now shut up and come on Daddy's face."

She whimpers. Her thighs begin to tremble. She rocks forward without thinking, riding each flick of my tongue.

She stiffens above me, her thighs trembling on either side of my face. Then she shatters. A strangled moan rips out of her throat, and I feel the first sudden gush hit my tongue. Her hips kick it up a notch, little girl's getting into it and I'm in pussy heaven.

She floods my face, mouth, down my neck—hot, surprising, uncontrolled. Her whole body locks up, like a live wire, muscles drawn tight with impossible tension.

"Oh my god," she gasps, voice cracking. Another rush follows. Her thighs clamp around my head and she starts to shake, her hips jerking in confused rhythm. "I—I think I just... Cade!"

I don't stop. I slow down, lapping gently, anchoring her as she rides out the flood. My

hands hold her steady as her body loses all grace and control. Liquid slicks down my cheeks, my jaw, soaking me. She's panting like she's been running. Dazed. Unraveled.

"That was... female ejaculation," she breathes, half in shock, half in awe. "I read about it but I thought it was—"

"Rare? Mythical? Fake porn science?" I murmur against her inner thigh. "Nope. Very real. Very hot. And you're fucking magnificent."

She looks down at me, wide-eyed, a little horrified. "I just—got you completely wet. Like. Everything."

"Soak me," I say, licking the last taste of her from my lips. "Every time. I want it messy. I want all of it. That? That was better than any goddamn fantasy I've ever had."

Her breathing is uneven, but she grins. Barely.

"Academically speaking," she mumbles, collapsing forward, "I may require a peer-reviewed follow-up."

"You'll get one," I promise, easing her back down to the blankets. "Every time you ask."

I guide her down, kissing the inside of her knee as I shift her to the blankets. Her breathing is shallow, but she's glowing.

"I can read you," I say. "You're ready."

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“Missionary, right?” She asks, eyes glazed. “Research says it’s the easier angle for first time. Less risk of tearing.”

I blink. "Marley. Stop quoting WebMD."

She laughs, then gasps when I run my fingers over her slick heat.

She looks up at me, serious now. "I want it. All of it."

I nod. The warmth of her cunt against my cock is fucking perfect. Damp, pulsing, velvet-soft. I pause.

"You okay?"

She nods, her breath catching. "Yeah. Just... go slow. No, I mean, fast. Like tearing off a Band-Aid. I think fast pain is better than slow. I should have done more research, I’m not sure--"

“Jesus, baby. So sexy. Talk nerdy to me.”

I grit my teeth as I push forward, easing into her by fractions. Her resistance is gone in the first push, making her wince as I pause, more for my own sanity than hers because it feels so fucking good, I’m about to lose my mind.

The first inch nearly undoes me. My jaw locks. Muscles seize along my back. My hands clench into fists, jaw tight as I keep from driving forward. Her gasp rips through the quiet room, sharp and startled, her hands flying to my biceps.

“Open wider” I growl through my teeth. “You’re so fucking small. I need all the room I can get.”

Her legs twitch as she widens her knees. Her back arches under me, and I feel the quiver in her thighs where they tighten against my hips.

The walls creak as the wind howls as I fuck into her. The trees groan around us. Lightning snaps, throwing flickering light over her half lidded eyes. She looks like some wild forest nymph from my dreams.

"You're doing so good," I murmur, the words coming out strangled. My voice is sandpaper. "So tight, baby. Breathe with me."

Her breath stutters. Then steadies.

I move another inch, and the pressure claws down my spine. I fight the full-body urge to take, to pump pump pump.

Sweat beads at the base of my neck. Every muscle in my thighs is drawn taut. I can feel a vein pulsing in my temple. Her walls are slick, clinging, resisting and yielding all at once.

She whimpers but nods again, threading her fingers through my hair. Her nails dig in just slightly. My grip shifts to her hip, grounding myself in the small, living details of her: the tremble of her belly, the sound of her breath, the shocked flicker in her eyes.

I press my forehead to hers. My whole body is shaking with restraint.

"God, Marley. You feel... unreal."

"It's intense," she whispers, voice thin. "Like I'm being changed. A hypothesis being

proven."

I laugh softly—more a rasp than a sound—cupping her cheek. "Best academic metaphor I've ever heard."

She smiles, breath hitching again as I bottom out. My thighs cramp from holding still. My jaw aches from the pressure of keeping everything controlled. She's hot, wet silk around me, and I can feel every inch of her flutter in real time. She gasps again, adjusting to the stretch.

"That's... all of it?" she asks.

"All of me," I manage, my voice nothing but gravel.

She tests a slow, careful roll of her hips. My entire body jerks in response. I bite back a groan that threatens to crack my ribs.

She blinks up at me, astonished. "Good. Really good. Ouch, but still, weird-good."

She's losing her overthinking. Just feeling it as I begin to move. Controlled thrusts, shallow and patient. Her body opens to me inch by inch as the thunder shudders through the earth, learning the shape of me, responding with shivers and gasps.

She wraps her legs around me, pulling me in deeper. The uneven hardwood presses into my kneecaps, but none of it matters. All I can focus on is the way she tightens with every stroke, the way her voice changes when I hit just right.

"We're going to need a better system," she gasps, laughing between moans.

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"Next time," I grunt. "We'll have a mattress. A fire. Maybe soundproofing, too."

Her laughter turns into a sharp cry as I angle my hips. Her body bows under me.

"There," she whispers. "Right there. Again."

I oblige. Again. And again.

My control frays. My pace increases. Her name slips from my lips like a litany. Her breath stutters into full-on sobs of pleasure, her fingers leaving crescents in my back.

She breaks first. Comes hard, full-body, trembling and slick, clinging to me like gravity reversed.

Only then do I let go. I drive in deep, finally giving myself over. My groan is ragged, primal, guttural. I shake against her as I come, the pleasure spiking white-hot through every locked muscle.

We collapse together, panting, the storm still howling outside while everything inside is still.

"That was..." Her voice cracks.

"Yeah. It was baby."

She breathes, smiling against my skin.

We lie there afterward, her curled against my chest while the storm rages outside our tiny shelter. I pull my jacket and another couple blankets I find over both of us, creating a cocoon of warmth in the small space.

"Daddy?" she says after a while and I think my heart is going to burst from my chest.

"Yeah?"

"What happens now?"

It's a good question. What does happen when a mountain man who can't stand even the idea of school falls in love with a brilliant little girl who's supposed to go to Harvard in the fall?

"Now we figure it out," I say, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Together."

Eight

Marley

I wake up to the sound of birds and the realization that I'm completely naked, wrapped around Cade like he's my personal heater. The storm has passed sometime during the night, leaving the air clean and crisp and smelling like pine and rain.

Also, my entire body feels different. Used. Claimed. Like every nerve ending has been rewired to respond to his touch.

"Morning, little girl," he murmurs against my hair.

The endearment sends the same shiver through me it always does, but this time there's something deeper underneath it. Something that makes me want to curl up

smaller and let him take care of everything.

"Morning." I try to sit up, but he tightens his arms around me.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"We should probably get dressed. Head back to camp." I gesture vaguely toward the door of the hunting blind. "The storm's passed."

"The outside world can wait." He rolls us so I'm pinned beneath him, his weight solid and reassuring. "I want to play with my girl first."

"Play?" The word comes out smaller than I intended.

"Play." He brushes a strand of hair away from my face, his touch gentle. "When's the last time you played, Marley?"

I think about it. Really think about it. "I don't know. Maybe when I was six? Before my parents decided I was too smart to waste time on childish things."

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Something dark flashes across his face. "Six years old?"

"They wanted me to focus on developing my intellectual potential instead of—"

"Instead of being a kid." He sits up and pulls me into his lap, arranging me so I'm straddling his thighs. "Well, we're going to fix that."

"I don't know how to play." The confession feels embarrassing. "I don't remember."

"That's okay. Daddy's going to teach you." He reaches for his backpack and pulls out a small object I can't identify. "Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to." His voice has that firm edge that makes my stomach flutter. "Trust me."

I close my eyes, hyperaware of his hands moving around me, the warmth of his body, the way the morning air feels against my bare skin.

"Open your mouth," he says softly.

Something small and sweet touches my tongue. I bite down and taste honey and nuts and dried fruit.

"What is it?" I ask, opening my eyes.

"Trail mix. I make it myself. Even coat it with my own maple syrup." He holds up another piece. "Not because you calculated the optimal protein-to-carb ratio, but because it tastes good. Call it breakfast, until I get us back to camp and cook something more substantial."

"That's silly. You make syrup?"

"It is silly and yes, I do. I'm not just here for looks you know, I have depth." He deadpans as he feeds me another piece, watching my face carefully. "I like putting things I make in your mouth."

Eating without calculating feels revolutionary, like I'm breaking some fundamental rule I've been following my entire life.

"Now what?" I ask.

"Now we see what other rules we can break." He stands up and starts getting dressed, but slowly, like he's in no hurry to rejoin the real world. "Tell me something you always wanted to do but couldn't because it wasn't academic enough."

"I..." I think about it while I pull on my clothes, still damp from yesterday's rain. "I always wanted to learn to skip stones. I saw kids doing it at a lake once and it looked like magic."

"Perfect." He shoulders his pack and holds out his hand. "There's a stream about ten minutes from here."

The stream is clear and shallow, with smooth rocks perfect for skipping scattered along the bank. Cade finds a handful of flat stones and demonstrates the technique—low angle, good spin, follow through.

His first stone skips seven times across the water before disappearing beneath the surface.

"Show off," I mutter, picking up my own stone.

My first attempt plunks straight down into the water with all the grace of a brick.

"Here." He moves behind me, his chest pressed against my back as he adjusts my grip. "Feel the weight of the stone. Don't think about the physics of trajectory and water tension. Just feel it."

"But the physics are important for—"

"Marley." His voice is patient but firm. "No thinking. Just feeling."

I try again, focusing on the sensation of the stone in my hand instead of the calculations running through my head. This time it skips twice before sinking.

"Better," he says. "Again."

We spend an hour by the stream, and with each attempt, I feel something loosening inside me. The need to be perfect, to understand everything, to analyze every action before taking it.

By the time I manage a five-skip throw, I'm laughing like I haven't laughed in years.

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"I did it!" I spin around to face him, and the pride on his face makes something warm bloom in my chest. "Did you see that?"

"I saw." He pulls me against him and kisses me, hard and possessive. "I'm proud of you, my good girl."

The praise hits me harder than it should. When's the last time someone has been proud of me for something that isn't an academic achievement? When's the last time I've felt accomplished for doing something purely for joy?

"Can we do it again?" I ask.

"We can do whatever you want." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "This is your time, Marley. Your time to be young and curious and free."

Something about the way he says it makes my throat tight. "I don't know how to be free."

"I know." His voice is gentle. "That's why Daddy's here to teach you."

The walk back to camp should be awkward—me processing the fact that I've just lost my virginity to a man I've known for three days, him probably wondering what the hell he's gotten himself into with a nineteen-year-old grad student.

Instead, it feels natural. Easy. Like we've been doing this dance for years instead of days.

"Cade?" I say as the camp comes into view.

"Yeah?"

"What we did last night..." I feel my cheeks heat up. "Was it good? I mean, I know I don't have any experience to compare it to, but—"

He stops walking and turns to face me so suddenly I almost run into his chest.

"Look at me," he says, tilting my chin up. "Last night was perfect. You were perfect. And if you ever doubt that again, I'm going to put you over my knee and remind you exactly how good you are."

The threat sends heat spiraling through me. "Promise?"

His eyes darken. "Careful what you ask for, little girl."

Back at the camp, I settle on a log with my notebook while Cade puts everything straight and starts to cook, finally ready to work on the thesis notes I've been scribbling at every turn. But the words that come out aren't the clinical observations Professor Harrison is expecting.

Note: Subject displays remarkable intuitive understanding of environmental factors. More importantly, subject challenges preconceived notions about education vs. experience. Traditional academic metrics fail to capture the depth of knowledge gained through direct application...

I stop writing and stare at the page. This isn't a thesis anymore. This is me trying to justify why everything I've believed about learning and life is wrong.

"How's the writing going?" Cade asks as he pulls cooking gear from his pack.

"Terrible." I close the notebook. "I can't figure out how to turn 'my instructor is teaching me to be human' into academic language."

"Maybe that's the problem." He looks up from his work. "Maybe some things aren't meant to be turned into academic language."

"But I have to. My defense is next Friday, and Professor Harrison expects—"

"What do you expect?" He sets down the cooking gear and gives me his full attention. "Not what Harrison wants, not what your parents want. What do you want to say about what happened here?"

I think about it. Really think about it. "I want to say that I've learned more about myself in three days than I did in two years of graduate school. I want to say that maybe intelligence isn't about how much you know, but about how willing you are to admit you don't know everything."

"So say that."

"I can't. It's not academic enough. It doesn't follow proper research methodology. It's too personal."

"Says who?"

"Says... everyone. The academy. The standards for—"

"Bullshit." He stands up and walks over to where I'm sitting. "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you're scared to write what you really learned because it means admitting that everything you've been taught about success and intelligence is wrong."

The words hit too close to home. "I can't just—"

"Can't what? Can't disappoint them? Can't risk failure? Can't trust yourself to know what's right for your own life?"

"It's not that simple."

"It is that simple." He pulls me to my feet and backs me against the nearest tree, his hands braced on either side of my head. "You want to know what's complicated? Spending the rest of your life doing something that makes you miserable because you're too scared to disappoint people who don't even see who you really are."

"And who am I really?" The question comes out as a whisper, and it's not rhetorical. I want to know. I want him to give me the answer.

"You know the answer to that, just as I do. You're brave. You're curious. You're smart enough to question everything, including the path other people laid out for you." He twirls my hair between his long fingers like it's the most fascinating thing he's ever seen. "You're the kind of woman who kisses strangers at weddings and follows them into the wilderness. You're the kind of woman who learns to skip stones and laughs like she means it. You're the kind of woman who could change the world if you stopped trying to live up to everyone else's expectations."

The words make something crack open in my chest, something that has been locked away for so long I've forgotten it exists.

"I don't know how to be that person," I whisper.

"That's okay." He leans down to kiss me, soft and sweet. "That's what Daddy's for."

When he pulls back, there are tears on my cheeks that I don't remember crying.

"Hey," he says, wiping them away with his thumbs. "What's this about?"

"I just..." I struggle to find words for the feeling overwhelming me. "I never knew I was allowed to want different things. I never knew I was allowed to just... be. I don't know, it feels like I'm spinning and I can't stop it."

"I've got you. You are spinning but it will stop. I'll make sure. You're allowed everything, little girl." He pulls me against his chest, and I bury my face in his flannel shirt. "You're allowed to want things that don't make sense on paper. You're allowed to change your mind. You're allowed to choose a life that makes you happy instead of one that looks good in Christmas letters."

I cry against his chest—ugly, messy tears for the childhood I've never had, for the dreams I've never been allowed to chase, for the person I've never been allowed to be.

And he holds me through all of it, one hand stroking my hair while he murmurs reassurances against the top of my head.

"That's it," he says softly. "Let it out. You're safe. Daddy's got you."

When the tears finally stop, I feel empty and full at the same time. Empty of all the expectations and pressure I've been carrying. Full of possibility I've never allowed

myself to consider.

"Better?" he asks.

"Different." I pull back to look at him. "Like I'm not the same person who drove into Wildfire in her little Honda."."

"You're not." He cups my face in his hands. "The question is, who do you want to be now?"

Nine

Marley

The soreness between my legs reminds me with every step how I asked for Cade to show me as many positions as he could throughout the night.

For research purposes.

We got to ten and I lost count of the orgasms. I ended up passing out and that's when Cade said enough was enough. He hydrated me, put some warm, wet cloths on my battered baby maker, then tucked me in next to him where I slept until I woke up with him squeezing my tits together, spitting on me then shoving that Ever-ready hard-on of his between my tits until he told me to open wide and gave me my morning protein drink.

I'm learning so much about the wilderness. And the wild Daddy that lives in it.

Now, as we walk, Cade teaching me today about what is edible in the forest, which includes grubs apparently. I refused when he pulled a wiggling white worm out of a rotten log, and thank goodness, he didn't do the whole 'I'm going to feed you and

you're going to eat' exercise again.

He's left the poor little grub on the ground, deciding not to indulge in the snack himself, then took my hand and lead me deeper into the woods. The forest feels like a cathedral, golden sunlight filtering through the canopy. My boots crunch on fallen needles and twigs as I follow Cade along what barely qualifies as a trail.

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"Stay close," Cade murmurs, voice low. "Bears don't like surprises. Neither do I."

I nod, trying to focus on his broad shoulders instead of the way his voice makes my stomach flutter. Even tracking wildlife, he manages to make simple instructions sound like promises I want him to keep.

"What exactly are we looking for?" I ask, pulling out my notebook. Though honestly, at this point I'm not sure what my thesis is even about anymore.

"Bear sign. Scat, claw marks, bedding areas." He stops beside a massive pine and points up. "See those scratches? Fresh ones, about eight feet up. Big male marking his territory."

"Sounds familiar," I mutter, then flush when he shoots me an amused look.

I crane my neck back, studying the parallel gouges in the bark. "How can you tell it's recent?"

"Sap's still bleeding. And see how the bark hasn't started to heal over yet?" He reaches up to trace the air near the marks without touching them. "This was made within the last few days. Maybe less."

The academic part of my brain immediately starts cataloging observations, but there's something else happening too. Something about the way Cade reads this forest like it's written in a language I'm only just learning to recognize. It's not book knowledge—it's something deeper, more intuitive.

"Cade?" I say, then catch myself. We're technically working right now, gathering research data. "I mean, what would you do if we actually encountered the bear that made these marks?"

His glacier-blue eyes find mine, serious. "Depends on the situation. Male black bears usually aren't aggressive unless they're protecting food or feel cornered. But the rules are simple: don't run, make yourself look bigger, back away slowly. And if he charges, you get behind me and stay there."

"You'd put yourself between me and a bear?"

"Little girl, I'd put myself between you and anything." Matter-of-fact, but it hits me like a physical touch. "That's what protection means."

I swallow hard, warmth spreading through my chest. "Right. Protection." Though the way he says it makes me think of entirely different kinds of protection. The kind that involves a lot less clothing.

We continue deeper into the forest, and I find myself cataloging everything—not just for my thesis, but because I want to remember this. The way Cade reads this place like it's written in a language I'm only learning to recognize.

"Look here," he says, crouching beside what looks like a pile of dark pellets. "Fresh scat. Still warm."

I kneel beside him, pulling out my phone to take pictures. "Scat? That's a fancy word for poop. Who's the highbrow one now?"

He snorts. "Smart ass."

"How fresh?" I ask, grinning.

"Very." He stands slowly, scanning the area with new alertness. "We should—"

"Oh my God," I breathe, pointing to a set of tracks leading off the main path. "Are those...?"

"Bear tracks. Big ones." His voice has gone tight.

Real bear tracks? This I have to document.

I'm already moving, following the tracks with my phone out, excitement overriding caution. This is exactly what I need for my research—actual evidence of bear activity, documented in real time. Professor Harrison will be so impressed.

"Marley!" Cade's voice cracks like a whip behind me. "Get back here. Now."

"Just a second, I want to get a better angle on these prints—"

I push through a cluster of low pine branches, following the tracks around a massive boulder, and freeze.

Fifty feet away, a black bear the size of a small car is standing on her hind legs, massive head swiveling toward me sniffing the air. And behind her, partially hidden in the brush, I catch a glimpse of movement that makes my blood turn to ice.

Cubs.

The mother bear drops to all fours with a thud that I feel in my bones, and suddenly every wildlife documentary I've ever watched comes flooding back. Mother bears with cubs. The most dangerous situation possible.

She takes a step toward me, huffing, and I realize I can't remember a single thing

Cade taught me about bear safety. My brain has gone completely blank except for one thought cycling on repeat: I'm going to die. I'm going to die because I couldn't follow simple instructions.

"Don't move."

Cade's voice comes from directly behind me, low and steady and absolutely calm. I hear the soft crunch of his boots as he steps around me, placing his massive frame between me and eight hundred pounds of protective mother.

"Stay exactly where you are," he says quietly. "Don't run. Don't make any sudden movements."

The bear huffs again, louder this time, and takes another step forward, pawing the ground and throwing sticks and leaves into the air. Cade spreads his arms wide, making himself look even bigger than he already is.

"HEY!" he shouts, his voice booming through the forest. "HEY BEAR! GET BACK!"

The bear stops, head tilting as she assesses this new threat. For a moment that stretches like eternity, they stare at each other—predator and protector, wilderness and civilization, death and the man standing between it and me.

"HEY!" Cade yells again, taking a deliberate step forward. "GET OUT OF HERE!"

The bear huffs one more time, a sound like a steam engine, then slowly turns and melts back into the forest, her cubs scrambling after her. Within seconds, it's like they were never there at all.

I'm shaking so hard I can barely stand. The phone slips from my nerveless fingers,

clattering onto the forest floor.

"Jesus Christ," I whisper, then louder, "Oh God—"

He spins around, and the look on his face stops my apology cold. It's not anger, exactly, though there's some of that. It's something rawer, more primal. Fear. Pure, undiluted fear.

"Jesus Christ baby..." He doesn't finish the sentence. Instead, he closes the distance between us in two long strides and pulls me against his chest so hard it drives the air from my lungs.

His heart is hammering against my ear, his breathing ragged. I can feel the tension in every muscle of his body, the way his hands shake slightly as they cradle the back of my head.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into his flannel shirt. "I'm so sorry, Daddy. I broke the rules. I didn't listen."

"You scared the shit out of me." His voice is rough. "You don't fucking do that again, you hear me?"

"I know. I got excited about the research and—"

"No." He cups my face, forcing me to look at him. "You didn't think. Out here, not thinking gets you killed."

My eyes burn. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't fix dead." He presses his forehead to mine, breathing slowly. "But you're learning."

I could have died. That bear could have charged, and Cade would have watched me get mauled because I couldn't follow simple instructions.

"I trust you," I whisper. "I do trust you. I just... I don't know why I did that."

"Because you're used to being the smartest person in the room." His thumbs brush away my tears. "Bears don't give a shit about your PhD."

A fat raindrop hits my forehead. Then another. The sky opens up.

"I think that's enough for today." Cade growls, his voice rough, tugging me along as we scramble back down the trail toward the cabin.

By the time we reach the weathered wooden structure, we're both drenched despite the canopy overhead. Cade pushes open the heavy door, ushering me into the dim interior as rain drums against the metal roof.

"Get out of those wet clothes," he says, already stripping off his flannel. "You'll catch pneumonia."

I fumble with buttons, fingers shaking from adrenaline and cold. And maybe a little from watching Cade peel off his shirt like some kind of lumberjack calendar model.

He notices my struggle and helps, his touch gentle as he works me out of the damp fabric.

"Arms up," he murmurs, pulling one of his dry shirts over my head. The flannel swamps me, soft and warm and smelling like him.

"I feel like I'm wearing a tent," I say, but I'm secretly thrilled by how completely his scent surrounds me.

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"My tent," he says, wrapping a wool blanket around us both. "Better." For a long time, we just sit there listening to the storm and our heartbeats gradually slowing.

"Cade?"

"Yeah?"

"I came out here to prove something. To everyone." I trace patterns on his chest through his thermal. "But I don't think I'm the same person who started this research project."

His arm tightens around me. "How so?"

"When I was following those tracks, all I could think about was impressing Professor Harrison. How this would validate my methodology." I pause. "But when that bear looked at me, none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was that I'd put us both in danger because I couldn't follow simple instructions."

"You didn't put me in danger. Protecting you is what I do." His voice rumbles against my ear. "It's also what I like to do."

"But what if you'd gotten hurt because I was being careless?"

"Hey." He tilts my chin up. "I didn't. You didn't. We're both safe."

"This time."

"Every time." Patient, sure. "Because you learned something today. Your safety matters more than any research project. Trust means listening even when you don't understand why. And changing course doesn't make you weak—it makes you smart."

I curl closer to him. "I don't know if this thesis even makes sense anymore. I don't know if I'm cut out for this kind of field work."

"What do you think?"

"I think..." I take a shaky breath. "I think maybe I want to go back to your real cabin today. Take some time to figure out what I actually want instead of what everyone expects me to want. And I could go for a real bed. And I want to see your world. Where you are you."

"You sure?"

"No. But I'm sure I want to figure it out with you." I look up at him. "Is that okay?"

His smile is soft and proud. "That's my brave girl. Smart enough to start something, wise enough to change course when needed."

"Plus, I'm curious about this cabin of yours. Please tell me it has indoor plumbing."

"It has indoor plumbing, smart ass."

"And a real bed?"

"A very real bed." His voice drops an octave. "Very comfortable."

Heat floods my cheeks. "Good. That's... practical information."

Two hours later, we've packed up and driven to Cade's real cabin. His home. As we approach the clearing, I feel my breath catch.

It's beautiful. Not the rustic shack I'd been expecting, but something that belongs in Architectural Digest. Clean lines, natural materials, floor-to-ceiling windows bringing the forest inside.

"Cade," I breathe. "This is incredible."

He shrugs, but I catch his pride. "Built most of it myself. My brother's helped. We all helped each other build our houses. It's kind of a thing. Like our Sunday dinners."

I follow him inside, and my chest tightens. The interior is just as perfect—minimalist, organized, everything in its place. Books line the walls, there's a stone fireplace, handcrafted furniture, and not a single thing suggesting this space could accommodate another person.

Especially not a person from my world.

"It's perfect," I say, voice cracking.

"Marley?" Cade sets down his pack, studying my face. "What's wrong?"

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"Nothing. Everything. I don't know." I sink onto his beautiful handmade couch, feeling lost and small. "This is your world. Really your world. And it's amazing, but..."

"But?"

Tears come without warning. "You hate academia. You hate everything about my world—the pretension, the politics, the way people like my parents think they're better than people like you." I wipe my nose on my hand, destroying any academic sophistication I might have left. "And my world would never accept you. They'd see exactly what they want—some uneducated mountain man who corrupted their precious prodigy."

Cade crosses the room and kneels in front of me, hands gentle on my knees. "Baby, what brought this on?"

"I love you," I say, words torn from my chest. "I love you so much it terrifies me. But I don't see how this works."

"Look at me." His voice goes firm, authoritative. "You think I give a shit what your professors think of me?"

"It's not just that. If I change my thesis, I'll still need to defend it. Present to a committee of academics who think people like you are quaint curiosities to be studied, not equals to be respected. So much has happened in such a short time. My brain is short circuiting."

"So present it. Defend your work. Show them there are different kinds of intelligence." He cups my face, forcing eye contact. "If they don't like it, that's their fucking problem."

"But what about after? When I graduate and start my career? The conferences, the networking events, the politics of academia. You'd hate my world, Cade. You'd be miserable."

"Would I?" His eyebrows rise. "You sure about that?"

"Yes? You said yourself you hated school."

"I hated being told I was stupid because I learned differently. I hated being made to feel less than because I couldn't sit still in a classroom." His thumbs brush my cheekbones. "That doesn't mean I hate learning. It doesn't mean I hate intelligent conversation. It means I hate the bullshit hierarchy that says one way of being smart is better than another."

"But—"

"No buts." His voice goes stern, cutting off my protest. "You're going to write the thesis you want to write. You're going to defend the work that matters to you. And you're not going to worry about whether I can handle your world, because that's my job to figure out, not yours."

"Cade, I can't ask you to—"

"You're not asking. I'm telling you." He stands up, towering over me in that way that makes me feel small and protected and completely owned. "You focus on your work. Let me worry about everything else."

"I don't understand how you can be so calm about this."

"Because I love you, little girl. Because I'd rather spend one day in a world I hate with you than a lifetime in paradise without you." He presses a kiss to the top of my head. "Now, I need to run into town to check on my storefront. You're going to stay here and work on your thesis. The real one, the one that matters to you."

"Cade—"

"No arguments. When I get back, I want to see pages. Real pages, not academic bullshit designed to impress people you don't even like." He grabs his keys. "Can you handle that?"

Despite everything, I nod. "Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl." He pauses at the door, looking back with intensity that steals my breath. "And Marley? Stop trying to protect me from your world. I'm a big boy."

The door closes with a soft click, leaving me alone in his perfect paradise with my laptop and the growing certainty that I have no idea what I'm doing.

Hours later, I'm surrounded by crumpled pages and thesis carnage. Every time I try to write about transformative pedagogical frameworks, the words feel hollow. Academic jargon designed to hide the truth.

The truth is simpler: I fell in love with a man who taught me that intelligence comes in many forms, that trust requires courage, and that the most profound learning happens when you stop trying to prove how smart you are.

But how do you write that for a committee without sounding insane?

I'm contemplating whether to just withdraw from the program entirely when I hear Cade's truck rumbling up the drive. Relief floods through me—I need him to hold me, tell me it's going to be okay, help me figure out what the hell I'm supposed to do with my life.

I abandon my laptop and rush outside, ready to confess that maybe I should give up on the whole thesis idea. Maybe some things can't be translated into academic language. Maybe some experiences are too transformative to be reduced to research methodology.

But when Cade steps out of his truck, words die in my throat.

He's wearing a suit. A perfectly tailored, charcoal gray suit that fits his massive frame like it was made for him. His beard is trimmed, hair combed back, and he looks like he stepped out of a boardroom.

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He looks incredible. Sophisticated. Dangerous in an entirely different way.

He also looks completely wrong.

"What..." I stare at him, mouth opening and closing. "What are you wearing?"

"A suit." He tugs at the tie, clearly uncomfortable but determined. "Went to Henderson's in town. They had to take it in about six inches and let out the shoulders, but Eleanor worked magic with her sewing machine."

"But why?"

He takes a step toward me, and even in expensive clothes, he moves like a predator. Like something wild that's temporarily contained but never truly tamed.

"Because you're worried about me fitting into your world." His voice is calm, matter-of-fact. "Because you think I can't handle faculty dinners and academic conferences and whatever other bullshit comes with being with someone like you."

"Cade, you don't have to—"

"You're right. I don't have to." He closes the distance between us, backing me against the porch railing. "But I want to. Because nothing scares me, Marley. Nothing except losing you."

The suit should make him look civilized, domesticated. Instead, it just makes him more dangerous. Like he could charm my professors and parents and every academic

snob in the world, and they'd never see the predator underneath.

"You bought a suit," I whisper.

"Three suits. And a tuxedo, in case you need a date to fancy academic galas." His hands settle on my waist. "Also dress shoes, which are instruments of torture, and six ties I'll probably never learn to knot properly."

"You hate suits."

"I hate a lot of things. Doesn't mean I won't do them for you." He leans down until our foreheads touch. "I told you, little girl. I'd rather spend one day in a world I hate with you than a lifetime anywhere else without you."

"But this isn't you. This isn't who you are."

"This is me loving you enough to meet you halfway." His voice goes soft. "This is me proving I'm not afraid of your world, your people, your life. This is me showing you we can make this work."

I stare up at him, this mountain man in a three-piece suit who just spent his afternoon getting fitted for formal wear because he thought I needed him to. The gesture is so absurd and perfect and completely unnecessary that I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

"You're ridiculous," I whisper.

"I'm in love." He straightens the tie he clearly has no idea how to wear. "Same thing, really."

And suddenly, everything becomes clear. The thesis, the future, the impossible bridge

between his world and mine. Maybe it's not about choosing one or the other. Maybe it's about creating something new, something that honors both parts of who we are.

Maybe it's about writing the truth, whatever the consequences.

"I love you," I say, reaching up to straighten his tie properly. "Even in this ridiculous suit that makes you look like a very dangerous businessman."

"Dangerous how?"

"Like you could seduce half the faculty wives and terrify their husbands without breaking a sweat." I smooth my hands over his chest, feeling the solid warmth of him beneath expensive fabric. "Like you could own any room you walked into, academic or otherwise."

"Good." His smile is slow and predatory and completely at odds with his civilized appearance. "Because that's exactly what I plan to do."

Ten

Marley

The rest of the day I work. Reworking my thesis. Banging my head against the table, then writing more. Oddly enough, I want this to be my shining achievement. I want me on this paper, not just what I know would be a perfect thesis.

Cade wanders in and out, kissing my head, making me drink water, but leaves me to my task, always close but making sure I focus when I want to be distracted by his mouth or his cock. He's infuriatingly self-controlled.

By late afternoon, I'm feeling good about what I've produced. The sun is out again,

Cade's cabin sort of hugs me with its simplicity and minimalism.

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I stand from the kitchen table and stretch. Watching Cade emerge from the enormous shed where he stores lots of gear and two other vehicles he uses for his excursions.

Just watching him walk makes me hot. He runs his hand through his hair, catching sight of me in the window and smiles with a nod, reaching down to grab himself, then pointing to his mouth, then to me and my pussy responds with a warm rush of heat.

He's demanding and crude and rough. But, he feeds me and brushes my hair and listens when I'm spiraling out of control, then pulls me back to earth with grace and a calmness that transfers to me and the way my brain has adjusted to this new life, has me wondering if I'll ever be able to live inside the world in which I was raised.

Cade bursts through the door, nodding at the table where my notebooks are stacked, laptop closed.

"You done?" The question is sharp as he walks my way, eyes on me, tongue gliding along his lower lip.

I barely nod before he grunts, "Good girl. Time for you to suck some cock."

He's got me on my knees and his cock pushing between my lips with a moan before I can protest.

"That's my girl. Show Daddy how good you can suck."

Pride blooms inside me as he makes these happy sounds. I experiment with my tongue, the pressure, my hands around the base, working the weight of his balls, with

a squeeze and before long, the head of his cock fills my throat, his hands controlling my head like I'm a toy to be used.

"Fuck yeah. That's what that pretty face is for. Getting fucked by Daddy's fat dick. You're such a big girl. Trying so fucking hard. Here comes your reward baby."

I choke as he pushes down my throat, my palms feel the subtle pulsing on the underside of his shaft as tears fall on my cheeks and the first spurt of creamy warmth spreads over my tongue.

He uses me for his pleasure without shame and I can't believe how much purpose it gives me.

When he's finally done, he pulls out, putting himself away without a word, tapping me on the top of my head as cum and spit spill from my open mouth. My hair is a tangled mess, I'm panting and swiping the tears from my cheeks. "Good girl."

He leaves me there, on my knees, moving around the cabin whistling and I don't feel discarded or ignored. I feel, calm. Content. Happy.

"I love you," I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

He goes very still, turning from the kitchen where he's pouring himself a cup of coffee. "What did you say?"

My cheeks burn. "I said I love you. I know it's only been a few days and it's completely insane and you probably think—"

"I think," he says, cutting off my rambling, "that it feels like I've been waiting my whole life to hear those words from you."

"Really?"

"Really." He puts down his coffee mug, coming to me, crouching down, knees wide, cupping my face in his hands. "I love you too, Marley Voss. I love your brilliant brain and your stubborn streak and the way you make everything an adventure."

"I love that you see me," I whisper. "Really see me, not just what everyone expects me to be."

"I see you." He presses his forehead against mine. "And I love every complicated, beautiful, infuriating part of you."

We stay like that, just being like the only two people in the world. Which, for all practical purposes, we are.

"So what happens now?" I ask.

"Now, we take a shower, I eat your pussy, give you a good solid fuck, then we go to Sunday dinner and I introduce you to my brothers as the woman I'm going to marry."

My heart stops. "Marry?"

"Yep." His smile is soft and sure.

He stands on a soft groan. "I'll get the shower warm, and," He shakes his head, running his hand down his chest, "fair warning: my brothers are going to give you the third degree."

"What kind of third degree?"

"The kind that determines whether you're tough enough to be a Boone."

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An hour later, I'm sitting at Colt's dining room table wondering if I've somehow wandered into an alternate universe where mountain men actually do exist outside of romance novels.

All four Boone brothers are massive, but in completely different ways. Jack, the eldest, has the settled look of a man who's found his place in the world. Beau is all easy charm and flirtatious grins that probably get him out of speeding tickets on a regular basis. Colt, the sheriff, has the quiet intensity of someone who sees everything and judges nothing.

And then there's Cade, who keeps one hand on my knee under the table like he's afraid I might bolt.

"So," Beau says, refilling my wine glass with a grin that could probably charm paint off a barn, "journalism, huh? You going to write about our boy here?"

"Maybe," I say, surprising myself with how steady my voice sounds. "Depends on whether he gives me anything worth writing about."

Jack's wife Delaney, laughs. "Oh, I like her already."

"Don't encourage her," Cade mutters, but I can see him fighting a smile.

"What's your beat going to be?" Colt asks, cutting into his steak with surgical precision. "Politics? Crime? Human interest?"

"I'm hoping to do investigative work. Real journalism, not puff pieces." I take a sip of

wine for courage. "I want to tell stories that expose uncomfortable truths."

"Like what?" Delaney leans forward, genuinely interested.

"Like..." I glance at Cade, then decide to test the waters. "Like how our traditional education models are fundamentally flawed. How sometimes the most profound learning happens outside institutional frameworks, through... unconventional teaching relationships."

"Unconventional how?" Jack's eyebrow raises.

"As an example... Authority-based learning, where one person has complete knowledge and control, and the other learns by being guided." I feel heat creeping up my neck but force myself to continue. "Trust dynamics that create deeper transformation than any classroom could achieve."

Cade's hand tightens on my knee, and I can practically feel his amusement radiating through his skin.

"Sounds like you speak from experience," Jack observes, and there's something knowing in his voice that makes me wonder exactly what Cade has told them.

"I do." I feel Cade's thumb stroke across my kneecap, offering silent support. "I was the perfect academic product. Graduated high school at sixteen, started my Master's at eighteen. But I couldn't skip a stone or start a fire or make a decision about what I wanted for lunch without calculating the optimal nutritional outcome."

"And now?" Beau asks, his charm dialed down to something more genuine.

"Now I'm learning that maybe intelligence isn't all about accumulating information, but can also be about having the courage to admit when you don't know anything at

all about a subject, and trust someone else to guide you through it."

The words feel dangerous coming out of my mouth, loaded with implications. But the language is the same as I'm using in my newly written thesis, designed to obfuscate any real truths that aren't meant for anyone but me and Cade.

The table goes quiet for a moment, and I wonder if I've revealed too much. Whether the language needs toning down before my final presentation. Then Jack raises his beer bottle.

"To unconventional education," he says.

"To unconventional education," the others echo, and I feel something warm settle in my chest that has nothing to do with the wine.

"So when's the wedding?" Beau asks, and Cade nearly chokes on his beer.

"Jesus, Beau."

"What? You brought her to Sunday dinner. That's like putting a ring on it in Boone family terms." Beau's grin is unrepentant.

"Time doesn't matter when it's right," Colt says quietly, his sheriff's eyes taking in details I probably don't want him to notice. "What matters is whether you're brave enough to trust it."

"She's brave enough," Cade says, his voice full of quiet certainty. "She just doesn't know it yet."

The conversation moves on to safer topics—Beau's latest motorcycle project, Colt's ongoing battles with drunk tourists, Jack and Delaney's crazy successful nursing

rocking chair business. But I find myself watching the way these men interact with each other, the easy affection and gentle ribbing that speaks of bonds forged in childhood and strengthened by choice.

This is what family looks like when it isn't about competition or performance or maintaining appearances. When it's just about showing up for each other, no questions asked, no conditions attached.

"You're quiet," Cade murmurs in my ear as Delaney and Beau argue about the best fishing spots in the county.

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

"About how different this is from my family dinners." I lean into his warmth, breathing in his familiar scent of pine and something indefinably male. "My parents would spend the whole meal quizzing me about my studies, making me recite quotes from classic literature or discussing my 'trajectory' like I wasn't even there."

"Well, you're here now." He presses a kiss to my temple that feels like a hug. How quickly I've come to rely on his touch for comfort. How I seek it out for pleasure, and purpose and safety. "And we're not going anywhere."

It's such a simple statement, but it hits me harder than any declaration of love. We're not going anywhere. Like permanence is just a given, not something that has to be earned or maintained through perfect behavior.

My phone buzzes in my purse, and I ignore it. Then it buzzes again. And again.

"You should probably check that," Delaney says gently. "Could be important."

I pull out my phone and see three missed calls from Professor Harrison and two from my mother. My stomach drops like a stone. This is it. Crunch time.

"Excuse me," I say, getting up from the table on unsteady legs. "I need to take this."

I step out onto Colt's back porch and call my advisor back, my hands shaking as I

dial.

"Marley!" Professor Harrison's voice is sharp with irritation. "Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for hours."

"I'm sorry, I was at dinner. Reception is spotty here. What's wrong?"

"Your parents called me this afternoon. They're driving up for your defense on Friday."

The world tilts sideways. "They're what?"

"They want to be there to support you, which I think is wonderful. Your mother mentioned that she's looking forward to discussing your Harvard placement with the committee afterward."

My mouth goes dry. "I have someone else coming as well," I say as quickly as I can, ripping off the band-aid.

"Marley. That's not going to happen. Defenses are closed to all but—"

"Then my parents can't be there either, can they?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. Your family includes two distinguished academics who've made significant contributions to the field."

"Either I can bring someone, or defenses are closed, it can't be both."

"Marley, I've never... Fine, bring someone for support." Harrison's tone suggests I'm being unreasonable. "Your father is quite excited to hear about your methodology. He's been telling colleagues about your innovative approach to ethnographic

research."

"Professor Harrison, about my thesis—"

"Yes, I'll need your final draft by Wednesday so I can review it before the defense. I trust you've been working on incorporating the feedback from our last discussion?"

"Actually, I've been taking a different approach—"

"Excellent! Innovation is what sets Michigan apart. Well, I'll let you get back to your work. See you Wednesday with the finished product. I know you'll exceed everyone's expectations as you always do."

The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone like it's a bomb that just went off.

My parents are coming to my defense. My parents, who think they've raised the perfect academic daughter. Who've already told their colleagues about my "innovative methodology." Who are expecting me to present the kind of research that will make them proud and secure my place at Harvard.

I have no idea how they'll react to the thesis I now have planned. It goes against everything they ever taught me. I rebel. I've never rebelled in my life.

"Everything okay?" Cade's voice makes me look up. He's standing in the doorway, concern tightening his brow.

"My parents are coming to my thesis defense."

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"That's... good?"

"No." I stand up on shaky legs. "That's catastrophic."

"Why?"

"Because the thesis I plan to present takes every teaching method they ever used with me and uses it to light a fire. Because when they hear what I say they're going to know I'm not their little girl anymore. That I've chosen to walk a path of my own."

He places his hands on my shoulders, centering me. Then he smiles. "Baby, sometimes you gotta burn things down for new things to grow. You're just blazing your trail for new things and I'm going to stand there right beside you fanning the flames."

Eleven

Marley

The conference room in the Academic Affairs building smells like coffee and fear. My fear, specifically.

I'm sitting at this mahogany table with my thesis bound in pristine white covers, forty-seven pages of academic rebellion that's either going to liberate me or destroy everything my parents have built their lives around. Maybe both. Probably both.

"Experiential Learning Through Authority-Based Educational Frameworks: A

Phenomenological Study of Transformative Pedagogy in Non-Traditional Settings."

Even the title is a masterpiece of academic bullshit designed to hide what I really did.

Professor Harrison shuffles through his notes, clearly uncomfortable with whatever he read in my preliminary draft. Dr. Martinez from sociology looks intrigued. Dr. Chen from education wears her usual expression of scholarly skepticism. And Dr. Brooks, the external examiner from Northwestern's journalism program, sits with the focused attention of someone who recognizes truth when she hears it.

My parents sit in the gallery behind me, my mother's Hermès bag positioned like armor, my father's tenure-track posture radiating confidence in their intellectual investment. Nineteen years of careful cultivation about to be revealed as a beautiful disaster.

And in the very back row, taking up far too much space in the suit I never believed I'd see him wear, sits Cade. Our eyes meet for a moment, and his slight nod gives me all the permission I need.

Time to burn it all down.

"Ms. Voss," Harrison clears his throat, "please present your findings."

I stand, smooth my conservative blouse—the kind of academic uniform I've worn like armor my entire life—and begin the most honest presentation of my career.

"Traditional educational models assume learning occurs through information transfer within formal frameworks. My research challenges this through an intensive case study of alternative pedagogical approaches."

My mother nods approvingly. Maybe a little rebellion is allowed when it includes

innovation?

"I embedded myself in a wilderness survival program led by a subject with extensive environmental education expertise. The methodology involved complete immersion in unfamiliar circumstances, requiring absolute trust in the instructor's authority."

Dr. Chen leans forward. "Okay, I'll bite. What methodology did you actually use here?"

Here we go.

"Participant observation. I documented my responses to teaching techniques, noting the correlation between instructor authority and student transformation." I click to my first slide, my hands shaking slightly. "Initial resistance to non-traditional approaches decreased significantly when the instructor established clear behavioral expectations."

Dr. Martinez raises an eyebrow, looking amused. "Behavioral expectations? Sounds kinky."

Professor Harrison chokes on his coffee.

"Traditional classrooms allow students to make mistakes as part of learning. But in wilderness settings, incorrect behavior can lead to injury or death. The subject employed immediate correction techniques when I deviated from instructions."

My father makes approving notes. He's clearly loving this authority-based framework.

Dr. Brooks clears her throat. "Give me an example. What did these 'correction techniques' look like?"

"Physical restraint," I tell her, watching her eyes widen. "To ensure I was unable to come to harm."

My mother is still nodding. My father is taking notes on what he clearly believes is innovative pedagogical research.

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They have no fucking idea.

My stomach drops as I realize how completely I've fooled them.

Dr. Chen frowns. "Hold up. Physical restraint? What kind of IRB approval did you get for this?"

"None were necessary. My ongoing consent was sought and given." I click to the next slide. "The subject's approach to addressing psychological barriers was remarkably effective. When traditional academic validation proved inadequate, he developed personalized reinforcement strategies."

Dr. Martinez leans back, grinning now. "Oh, this keeps getting better. What kind of reinforcement strategies?"

"Positive affirmation techniques. He would offer praise for following instructions while emphasizing my novice status. The most significant breakthrough occurred when he introduced trust-building exercises involving progressively intimate demonstrations of vulnerability."

Professor Harrison loosens his tie and looks like he needs another coffee. Or maybe something stronger.

"Ms. Voss," Professor Harrison interrupts, looking deeply uncomfortable, "perhaps we could... focus on the actual wilderness survival content?"

I smile. Actually smile.

"Certainly. The subject taught me that intelligence isn't measured by information accumulation but by willingness to acknowledge ignorance and trust guidance from experienced practitioners. He demonstrated that authentic strength comes from vulnerability, that control is most powerful when consciously relinquished."

I click to my final slide. "The transformation was immediate and lasting. Within three days, I progressed from an anxiety-ridden academic automaton to someone capable of autonomous decisions and prioritizing authenticity over approval."

"Three days?" Dr. Chen laughs. "Jesus, what kind of wilderness boot camp was this?"

"The subject's methodology was remarkably efficient. Traditional academic models had failed to achieve comparable results over two years of graduate study." I look directly at my parents. "I learned more about myself in those three days than in my entire formal education combined."

Their faces have fallen. They're starting to understand this isn't just about innovative learning techniques.

"And the subject's name?" Dr. Brooks asks.

"Cade Boone. Wilderness survival instruction business in Wildfire, Michigan." I glance back at him, his proud smile giving me courage. "I should note that our educational relationship has evolved beyond the original study scope. The subject and I are now engaged in ongoing collaborative research."

"Ongoing collaborative research?" My mother's voice cuts through the room.

Cade starts slow clapping from the back as both my parents twist to glare at him.

"We're in love," I say simply. "When someone sees you completely—not just your

achievements, but everything you are and could become—it's transformative in ways no classroom could replicate."

Professor Harrison looks like he's about to have a stroke. My father has gone pale. My mother grips her Hermès bag like it might anchor her to reality.

Cade stops the clapping and makes this gesture of victory, clasping his hands together and rocking them back and forth over his shoulders.

There's a slow ripping sound and Cade turns, trying to look at his own back, but instead revealing to the rest of us he's just split his new suit down the back seam.

I snort. He's my own personal Hulk.

The entire room freezes.

Cade looks down at himself, then shrugs out of the destroyed jacket like it's no big deal. "Fucking told Eleanor the shoulders were too tight."

Dr. Martinez snorts. Dr. Chen covers her mouth. Even Dr. Brooks is trying not to laugh.

"Did you not hear what she just said?" My mother's voice cracks like a whip. "She's in love. This whole thesis is compromised. It's—"

"It's honest," I say quietly. "The most honest thing I've ever written."

"Honesty that will destroy your career," my father snaps, shooting to his feet.

I turn to face them fully, and for the first time in my life, I'm not afraid of their disappointment. "I spent nineteen years being who you needed me to be. Now I'm

going to be who I actually am."

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"And who is that?" my mother demands.

"Someone brave enough to tell the truth. Someone willing to risk everything for authentic connection." I glance back at Cade, standing now, suit pulling tight across his shoulders, watching me with such pride it makes my chest tight. "Someone who knows the difference between being educated and being alive."

My parents gather their things, my mother's movements sharp with betrayal, my father's silence heavy with disappointment. They're almost to the door when Cade's voice cuts across the room.

"That's it?" His voice is low, dangerous. "My girl just gave the most fucking courageous presentation I've ever seen, and you're walking out?"

My father turns, face flushed. "Courageous? She's... this is..." He gestures helplessly at the room. "This isn't what we planned. What we worked for."

"Your girl?" Cade takes a step forward, and even in the suit, he looks like he could snap my father in half. "She was never yours to plan for. You took a brilliant little girl and turned her into a performing monkey."

My mother's voice goes shrill. "We gave her violin lessons, AP classes, SAT tutoring—everything she needed to succeed. Do you have any idea what we sacrificed?"

"You sacrificed her." Cade's voice drops to a growl. "Took everything beautiful about her and made it conditional. Made her think she had to earn love."

"That's not—we love her," my father stammers. "We've always loved her."

"Bullshit." The word cracks like a whip. "You loved the idea of her. The perfect daughter who'd make you look good."

"How dare you judge us," my mother snaps, clutching her bag. "You don't know what it's like raising a gifted child. The responsibility. The pressure to not waste her potential."

"Waste her potential?" Cade laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Lady, your daughter is the smartest, bravest, most incredible woman I've ever met. And she spent nineteen years thinking she wasn't enough for you."

"She had opportunities," my father says weakly. "Structure. Guidance."

"She had a cage." Cade's hands clench into fists, his jaw ticking. "You want to know what she's capable of? She faced down a mother bear to protect research that didn't even matter. She rewrote her entire thesis to tell the truth, knowing it might destroy everything. She chose authenticity over approval. That's your daughter. That's my girl."

He gestures broadly, and I notice his tie has come completely undone and is hanging around his neck like a very expensive noose.

"We wanted what was best—" my mother starts.

"You wanted control."

"Stop." I step between them, my voice shaking, hands trembling. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here."

I turn to my parents, and for the first time in my life, I'm not trying to manage their emotions or make them proud. My chest feels tight, like I can't get enough air. "Cade's right. You did give me advantages. And yes, I did well with my thesis. But you also took my childhood and turned it into a fucking résumé."

"We wanted you to have options," my mother says, voice cracking slightly. "To not be limited like we were."

"I never asked for that kind of pressure, Mom. I wanted to play with LEGOs and watch cartoons and be a normal kid. I want to eat ice cream for breakfast and let my peas touch my carrots and not give a shit about macros."

"You were so smart," my father says quietly. "So much smarter than other kids. We couldn't just... let you waste it watching cartoons."

"Why not? Why couldn't I be smart AND have fun? Why couldn't I fail at something without it being the end of the world?"

"Because the world doesn't work that way," my mother snaps, then catches herself. "Because we knew what you were capable of."

"You knew what you wanted me to be capable of." My voice cracks. "I'm nineteen years old, and I've never had a sleepover. Never been to a school dance. Never made a decision without wondering what you'd think. Well, fuck that. I'm done."

My father's face hardens, reverting to familiar authority. "So you're choosing him over us? Throwing away your education for some... some mountain man?"

"I'm choosing myself!" The words come out as a shout. "I want to spend time in toy aisles and figure out who I am when I'm not performing for anyone. Maybe you don't understand what that means, but I don't care anymore. This is my life, and I'm going

to live it."

"This is ridiculous," my mother says, but her voice wavers. "You'll come to your senses. You'll see."

"And if I don't? If I decide being happy is more important than perfect?"

"Then..." My father looks older suddenly, deflated. "Then I don't know who you are anymore."

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"Good," I say, voice breaking. "Because neither do I. And I'm excited to find out."

The silence stretches between us, heavy with nineteen years of expectations and control.

Finally, my father shakes his head. "We're done here."

The door closes behind them with devastating finality.

For a moment, the only sound is my heart hammering against my ribs, blood rushing in my ears. Then Cade's there, massive hands cupping my face, forcing me to look at him.

"Fuck, baby girl." His voice is rough, shaking. "You were so fucking perfect. So brave."

"I think I just destroyed my entire family," I whisper.

"No." His thumbs brush away tears I didn't know I was crying. "You just saved yourself from people who never deserved you." His forehead presses against mine. "Christ, Marley. Watching you up there, telling the truth, choosing yourself... I've never been so fucking proud of anything in my life."

"They're never going to forgive me."

"Good. Means you did it right." His arms slide around me, pulling me against his chest until I'm surrounded by him. "You don't need their forgiveness, little girl. You

need to live your own fucking life. But, they do love you. I can see it. They'll come around. They have to go loosen up the springs they've got up their asses. It will take time, but it will happen."

"I'm scared," I admit.

"I know you are." His voice drops to that growl that makes my knees weak. "But you're not doing this alone. You're mine now, baby. Mine to protect, mine to take care of, mine to love. And I'm going to spend every day making sure you know you're enough. Just as you are."

"Ms. Voss?" Dr. Brooks approaches, her eyes bright with excitement. "If you're serious about journalism, I have contacts at several publications that would kill for this kind of fearless reporting. The courage to examine your own life this honestly? That's exactly what the field needs. You took a huge risk today. We need more of that."

I look up at her, this stranger who sees something in me. Potential. "Really?"

"Hell yes. You just proved you're willing to blow up your entire life for truth. That's what great journalists do."

As the committee files out, discussing my "unconventional but compelling methodology," I stay wrapped in Cade's arms, processing the magnitude of what just happened.

I just submitted my love story as academic research. I chose authenticity over approval, truth over reputation, love over fear.

And somehow, impossibly, it feels like victory.

"So," Cade says quietly, his voice still rough with emotion, "what happens now? What do you want from your life?"

"Now?" I look up at him, this man who saw my potential when I couldn't see it myself, who loved me into becoming real. "Now I stop apologizing for who I am. Sometime soon I'll make a decision about the future, but not today and not tomorrow. For now, there's only one thing I want."

"Tell me, baby girl."

"Us." I rise up on my toes to kiss him, right here in the academic conference room where I just defended my thesis on falling in love with my wilderness instructor. "I plan to research us very thoroughly. For the rest of my life, actually. And, I'd like to spend some time in the toy aisles at Target. I want to be...frivolous."

His laugh is rich and warm and possessive as hell. "Fuck yes. Whatever you want, little girl. An unlimited budget in the toy aisle. Anything that makes you happy."

"I love you, baby."

"I love you too, Daddy."

The word still sends electricity through both of us, but now it's ours. Our secret language, our private truth, our perfect imperfection.

And for the first time in my life, that's enough.

More than enough.

It's everything.

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Marley

Epilogue ~ 6 Months Later

The new wing Cade built is everything I never knew I wanted. This is mountain cabin perfection, a place for me to study, to think, to read through the romance and fantasy books already starting to fill the shelves that line the walls. It's not luxury. Luxury isn't something either of us would want. But it's mine, and Cade made it just for me, and I love it.

No sticks that look like they shouldn't ever hold together here. Just huge logs made into walls, a thatched roof, and an interior I had a hand in decorating.

Fairy lights, a pastel-blue rug, a chalkboard and a shelf stacked with stuffed animals, all of which have names.

Things I never got to experience growing up, but that now I get to enjoy without feeling judged, without feeling self-conscious.

Oh, and a mini fridge filled with juice boxes, that I get to enjoy "as a treat" so long as I also eat proper meals.

Sarah came to visit with her Derek her husband last week and it was like having family over. Relaxed and fun. I drank wine and Sarah and I did Karaoke on the machine Cade bought for me.

She was so happy for me. Cade promised we would go visit them in their new home

outside of Chicago where Sarah is working as a nurse and Derek owns his own construction company.

I've had little contact with my parents, but I need the time. I need a parental detox and I know they love me and what Cade said that day at the university, they'll come around.

"Journalistic ethics," I repeat again, tapping the ruler against the chalk board. I don't miss the way Cade's gaze dips to my thighs, where the button up he lent me—the only item of clothing I'm currently wearing—lifts as I reach up. "Mr. Boone, can you tell the class the difference between objectivity neutrality?"

He licks his lips as he shifts his weight, the tiny wooden chair creaking in protest as he continues to stare at my ever-so-slightly revealed butt.

As he leans forward over his desk, I sigh. "Mr. Boone?"

"I just tell it like it is, Professor Babygirl."

I fight the urge to smirk. No wonder he didn't like school, I bet he was the naughty boy in every classroom, making wise cracks to get the other kids to laugh.

"Mr. Boone, that's not an acceptable answer," I tell him, trying to sound strict.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Yes." I wait for just a fraction of a second. "If you raise your hand first."

"Oh, you want me to raise my hand?"

"Is that your question?"

“My question is, how far do you think you can run before I catch you, little girl?”

I squeeze my thighs together, trying to keep myself from making any involuntary noises. It's my turn to be in charge for once, and he just has to keep trying his luck, doesn't he?

“Mr. Boone, please stand.”

He smirks, and I swear that mouth has some mystical connection to my pussy, which starts lubricating in expectation. Damn it.

“I said stand up. Don't make me repeat myself.”

He finally does as he's told, still smirking, and without asking he starts toward me at the front of the room. Before I know it, I'm trapped between his arms, his hands planted firmly against the chalk board on either side of my head.

“I thought I was going to be in charge?” I ask.

“Change of plan, little girl. Biology lesson.”

“That's not—”

His hand tangles into my hair, yanking my head back with a delicious sting. “Down on your knees. Now.”

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All I can do is nod as I sink down. His hand doesn't leave my hair, in fact it grips tighter as I kneel, controlling every movement.

“Hand between those legs. I bet you're good and wet for me already, aren't you, teach? Ready for Daddy's big cock.” He watches as I put my hand between my legs, finding myself soaked. “Go ahead, start playing with that tight little girl cunt, that pretty swollen clit.”

He unzips with his free hand as I follow his instructions, and without a word my face is shoved against his dick. I open without question, letting him slide inside my mouth as I masturbate.

“Oh, yeah. Oh, fuck...” He starts to moan as I suck him off, my head dragged back and forth by the hair, the pinprick stings mixing with the throbbing heat of my pussy as I play with myself, surrounded by my toys, by my games, and by my studies.

“Have you made a decision yet, Marley?” he asks as he fucks my face. I nod my head. “Use your words.”

“I'm meant to be out there, telling stories,” I say, though with my mouth full of cock it comes out about as understandable as you'd imagine.

“Good girl,” he praises, the hair pulling turning gentle for a moment, and I feel my body clench. “A decision just for you, made by you. I'm proud of you, baby.”

I smile around his dick, mumbling a thank you that has drool spilling from my mouth.

In some ways, I loved my academic work. Maybe one day I'll go back to it. But right now, I want to follow my heart, and that's leading me into the field. I'm not under any illusions that investigative journalism is going to be easy. There will be difficult days and heartache ahead, but we'll get through it together.

Dr. Brooks introduced me to so many amazing people, people who've encouraged me to follow my own path, and they've given me resources and contacts that would have taken a decade to build on my own.

I'm lucky. I know that. And I'm living my best life.

"Suck harder," Cade says, and I do. At the same time, I start moving my hand faster between my legs, rocking my hips as the end draws near.

When I crash over the edge into an orgasm, Cade spurts right down my throat. What I can't catch in my mouth drips into my palm, and I rub it into my pussy as I continue to suck, taking everything he's got to give. I came off the pill 6 months ago, and I haven't looked back, and we've done enough fucking to put a whole orchestra of babies inside me, but who knows, the cum I'm rubbing into my pussy right now might be the thing that tips the balance.

Because I'm no longer afraid to follow my heart or fight for what I want.

With Daddy by my side, how can I lose?

Thirteen

Marley

Epilogue ~ Two Year Later

"This is insane," I say, checking my equipment for the third time. "This is absolutely insane."

"This is Tuesday," Cade replies calmly, adjusting my harness with the practiced efficiency of someone who's been keeping me alive in ridiculous situations for two years. "You wanted to interview extreme athletes. This is what extreme athletes do."

"I meant rock climbers and base jumpers, not..." I gesture helplessly at the cliff face we're about to rappel down. "Not whatever this is."

"This is a story," he says, that familiar authority creeping into his voice that still makes my knees weak. "The story you've been chasing for six months about illegal cliff diving in remote locations."

"I could have interviewed them from the ground."

"You could have." He checks my rope one more time, then tilts my chin up so I have to look at him. "But that's not who you are anymore, is it, little girl?"

The endearment hits me like it always does, making me remember exactly who I've become in his hands. The journalist who's won three awards in the past year for immersive reporting. The woman who follows stories into war zones and natural disasters and the kinds of places that require wilderness survival skills.

The woman who's brave enough to trust her mountain man to keep her safe while she chases the truth.

"Besides," Cade continues, his grin turning wicked, "I like having you on a rope."

"We are not having this conversation while I'm wearing climbing gear."

"Aren't we?" His hands are already moving to check my harness, but his touch lingers in ways that have nothing to do with safety and everything to do with the fact that he still owns me completely. "Because I'm thinking tonight, after you get your story, I might keep you in this harness for a while."

"Cade." My protest is breathless, needy.

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"Or maybe I'll take it off you very, very slowly. Make you tell me exactly how it felt to trust Daddy to keep you safe while you got the shot nobody else was brave enough to get."

"You're impossible."

"I'm yours." He clips into his own rope, then steps to the edge of the cliff. "You ready to fly, little girl?"

I look down at the crystal-clear lake two hundred feet below, where illegal cliff divers are performing stunts that will either make my career or kill us both. Then I look at Cade, this man who's taught me that the best stories are the ones that scare you, that the only way to really live is to jump and trust that someone will catch you.

"I'm ready," I say.

And I am. The last two years have been adventures for us both. Cade's dialed back on taking tourists on outings because he can't stand to be away from me. His little maple syrup hobby has blossomed into a seven-figure enterprise as well, but he won't let it grow out of control. He's a quality over quantity man and there's only so much maple syrup one man can make.

It's especially yummy when I'm licking it off his dick. Sunday mornings are for maple flavored Daddy dicks and waffles.

"That's my brave girl," he says, and together we step off the edge of the world.

Some lessons, I've learned, are worth repeating.

My phone buzzes as we reach the bottom safely, adrenaline still singing through my veins. A text from Sarah: Saw your story about the illegal diving ring on CNN. You're completely insane, and I'm so proud of you. Mom says hi.

I show Cade the message, and he grins. "Your surrogate mom?"

"The woman who taught me that family isn't always about blood." I tuck the phone away.

Sarah's mom has been more supportive in two years than my parents were in nineteen. My actual parents sent a Christmas card last year. Very formal. I think they're hoping I'll eventually come to my senses and return to academia, but that's not going to happen. I'm happy doing what I'm doing, and eventually they'll come round to that. Or they won't. I'm learning to accept that my happiness is my responsibility, not theirs.

I start pulling off my climbing gear, letting Cade help with the complicated buckles. "Sarah's right. I'm not the same person who needed their approval anymore."

"No," he says, his hands stilling on my harness, eyes going dark with that familiar heat. "You're the person who trusts me to keep you safe while you chase the impossible. The person brave enough to jump off cliffs for a story." His fingers trace the rope marks on my wrists, and I shiver. "My perfect little girl who's conquered the world."

"Daddy," I whisper, the word still electric between us after all this time.

"That's right." He presses me back against the cliff face, his body caging me in. "And tonight, when we get back to that hotel room, I'm going to remind you exactly how proud I am of my brave girl."

"Promise?"

"Promise." He kisses me hard, claiming, his hands already working at the clips that hold me together. "I'm going to unwrap you so slowly you'll forget your own name. Going to make you remember that the only approval that matters is mine."

"I love you," I breathe against his mouth.

"I love you too, little girl. Forever and always." He pulls back just enough to look at me, this man who taught me to fly. "Ready for the next adventure?"

I look into his eyes, this wilderness guide who's become my home, my anchor, my reason for every brave choice I've ever made.

"With you? Always."