



Bear Trapped (Bear Creek Grizzlies #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Falsely accused, Lauren hides from a troubled past in the woods, searching for Bigfoot and dodging bounty hunters. When she finds a handsome man caught in a bear trap, she rescues him even though he might try to drag her to jail.

Bear shifter Finn wants to complete one last job to close the book on his past, but hunting down drug runners takes longer than he thought. When a beautiful, wide-eyed woman saves him from a miserable death in a bear trap, hes ready to take her home and make her his mate if she doesnt bolt the second he confesses hes a bear.

Theyre both hiding secrets as a blizzard starts and isolates them in a tumble-down cabin, but trouble still brews in the forest. Can they trust each other enough to survive when the whole world is looking for them?

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FINN

“ A nd then Courtney said she wasn’t going to invite Stacy P. to her birthday party, even though Stacy P. invited Courtney to her sleepover just two weeks ago, so Amelia said she wasn’t going to even talk to Courtney until...”

Finn listened with only half his attention as Francine, an adopted daughter for the whole bear clan, rambled on about the latest middle school drama that occupied most of her brain most of the time. He didn’t have sisters and had never spent much time around girls that age since he was that age. And since he’d been an awkward little shit until he was in his mid-twenties, he’d never figured out how to talk to girls. Or women. He rested his elbows on the fender of the old truck he’d inherited after Cooper and his mate, Francine’s cousin Jada, flew off on an extended holiday to Europe. The starter was acting up and no amount of tinkering so far had made a difference.

He glanced over as Franny took a deep breath to continue on the saga of Courtney and Stacy P., and wiped his hands on a rag as he stretched his back. “Did you finish your math homework already?”

She made a face and, and an aggravated noise at the same time. “I was going to FaceTime with Stacy to do our algebra but she’s too upset by what Courtney said and won’t answer my messages, and since I forgot my book, I can’t...”

The story went on and Finn nodded along, though he couldn’t hold back a tiny smile. His bear, an unruly Kodiak who felt more at home in the woods than he’d ever been under a roof, stayed quiet and fascinated when the young ones were around, although

anytime they were upset or scared, he about lost his mind. Francine talked a mile a minute and had crazy mood swings, but he could usually distract her with one of the kittens congregating around the house or chocolate or Noah, since Franny adored the other bear. Usually Franny followed Noah around with stars in her eyes and practically ignored everyone else. But since Noah was off leading a backcountry tour for a bunch of adventure hikers and free climbers, Franny put up with Finn as her next best bear to hang out with.

He grumbled and ducked under the hood once more. “Hand me the wrench, will you?”

She scampered up and pulled the tools out of the box on the porch, still detailing what sounded like a very dramatic morning at the local school, and handed them over while peering up at him. Finn frowned at the engine and wondered if maybe the truck had finally given up the ghost. His bear started to get nervous about being tied to one place, not having an easy way to escape, and disappearing into the mountains for the rest of the winter seemed like a great idea.

His dreams bothered him more and more the longer he stayed at the Lodge, where Bear Country Tours was headquartered and the rest of his clan lived. It wasn’t anything to do with the other bears or their mates or how blissfully happy they all were. No, not that. His mouth twisted with irritation as he leaned down to check a belt. The walls were too close in and the memories clawed at him every second, and he didn’t want to flip the fuck out in the middle of Zoe’s nice living room.

Or, worse, scare the shit out of the kids if he woke up out of a nightmare as a bear and flew into a little rampage.

Finn knew his life would end pretty damn quickly in the mama bear’s claws if he scared her baby even a bit, and she’d be right to do it. Some days, Finn wished one of them would get it over with and send him on his way. He rubbed his shoulder as an

old wound ached, and he checked the sky for clouds. That usually meant a storm rolling in.

It took a second to realize that he heard birds chirping. Finn looked around for Francine, suddenly terrified she'd been stolen or hurt, but she still leaned on the truck right next to him. He nudged her shoulder. "Well? What happened with Amelia?"

Francine shrugged, taken with a sudden quiet that reminded Finn she hadn't had an easy start in life, and he probably should have paid more attention to the torrent of words. She and Jada had both been raised in what sounded like a fucked-up cult, and though Francine most of the time sounded like every kid he saw on television, she definitely wasn't. She was also a leopard shifter, so that didn't help with her trying to sort out her place in the world, particularly in a house full of bears. Especially since her cousin, the only other leopard shifter, was off with Cooper and wouldn't be back for a month or so.

Finn shooed her toward the cab. "Jump up and start her for me, will you? Don't forget the clutch."

Her expression brightened and she scrambled to get into the driver's seat. Just before she tried the key, his cell phone rang. Finn glanced at the screen, meaning to ignore it and get on with fixing the truck or calling the real mechanic, but hesitated when he saw the number. Shotgun wouldn't call unless it was serious business.

Finn held up a hand to tell Franny to wait so he could answer the phone, but turned away so she wouldn't see his face in case there was real bad news. She still got jumpy when any of the men snarled a bit too loud or started to scowl, and he didn't want to be the asshole who ruined her night. "Shotgun. What's up?"

The DEA agent's rusty voice carried a New York accent, punctuated with cursing, that would have been a bit much even for a stereotypical mob movie flunkie. Finn

hadn't asked, but he kind of assumed that was where Shotgun got his start, and the cushy job out on the West coast was a retirement gig or some kind of witness protection deal. Either way, the man sucked at blending in or keeping his head down. "Finnegan, you little shit. I called you six times already and you never fuckin' answer."

"Funny, my phone's been silent since the last time you called me out of the blue," Finn said. His bear didn't like anyone trying to push him around, even when it meant getting a job and probably heading into the kind of danger that still got his adrenaline going. "So you must be thinking of someone else."

The DEA agent blustered and muttered, then finally came around to the actual business at hand. "I got a job but not an official job, you hear? Just need some information and none of the fuckers on my payroll can do this without looking like a bunch of heehaw lumbersexuals."

"Lumbersexual?" Finn scratched his beard. "What the fuck is that?"

He winced as Francine whispered, "Ooooooh, I'm going to tell Zoe you said a bad word," and shot her a mock dirty look. The mama bear was adamant that everyone cleaned up their language around the kids, even though Zoe was usually the worst perpetrator of them all. Somehow she got away with breaking her own rules, but woe betide any male who pointed it out. Ethan had learned that lesson pretty damn quick.

Shotgun launched into a tirade about the young agents working for him and their unique fashion sense, coupled with their inability to even walk in the woods without looking like a "bunch of FBI cocksuckers following a capo to a strip club," but eventually paused to inhale.

Much like Francine and her Courtney-Stacy-Amelia story. So Finn inserted himself into the conversation once more. "That's good to know. What's the job?"

“We’ve got a new kind of meth popping up all over the coast and it’s coming from inland, probably your neck of the woods. We can’t figure out how they’re moving it and so far no one’s rolled on the suppliers or the mules.”

Finn made a face. He really hated tracking methheads. They smelled terrible and the bear didn’t like the way they tasted, either, when he had to bite them. Give him some run-of-the-mill heroin junkies or even party girls on E and he could make things work, but meth... It was nasty business all around, and ruining communities all across Oregon. So far, it hadn’t reached Bear Creek, the closest town to the Lodge, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t close.

“We heard a rumor ,” Shotgun went on, emphasizing the word enough that Finn read the less-than-subtle hint. “Rumor” would mean he got it from an off-the-books informant, probably someone so unsavory Shotgun would never call him to the witness stand or document paying the bastard. Finn’s bear growled a bit with irritation, since he didn’t trust information from that type of guy after one too many double crosses.

The DEA agent didn’t hear it, or he didn’t care, as he continued. “They’re using the parks to move the shit. Through-hiking or some nature bullshit. Maybe disguising themselves as rangers or hunters, so they can carry weapons.”

“That’s a really inefficient way to move the amount you’re talking about,” Finn said slowly, gazing out at the forest that encroached around the Lodge. “Especially trying to get over the mountains.”

“Maybe they’re using the rivers, how the fuck do I know?” Shotgun exhaled in irritation and cursed for another minute before he drew his attention back to the drugs. “That’s what I need you for, asshole. I can’t send my guys out until we know more, since those park service pricks are asking too many questions about evidence. Maybe you go for one of those goddamn hiking trips you love so much and you

stumble across a bunch of assholes with big packs and rifles and who look like methheads. You let me know and then we deal with it.”

Finn pinched the bridge of his nose. Not exactly the kind of job he looked forward to in the very early stages of fall, when snow and sleet threatened daily, since fishing expeditions were more Simon’s thing. “You got a place for me to start looking?”

“Of course I do,” Shotgun muttered. “I’ll send you what I got. What’s it going to cost me?”

He smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. It always pissed Shotgun off that he couldn’t just order Finn to go run his errands and kick up evidence for an investigation, but Finn appreciated the freedom of being able to tell the man to fuck off if he didn’t like the terms. “We’ll start with what covered the last thing, up in Walla Walla, and double it. If it takes more than a week or I get shot at, double it again.”

Shotgun started shouting and making a big show of being pissed off, but Finn knew he’d pay. He didn’t have anything else to hold over Finn’s head to make him cooperate, so he’d pay. He might haggle a bit but eventually he paid. Shotgun didn’t call Finn unless it was already a last resort, which gave Finn a hell of a lot of flexibility in negotiating.

Eventually Shotgun started to breathe instead of shout incoherently, and growled in irritation. “That’s highway robbery, you scumbag. I don’t have to pay you that much, you’ll do it for the same as I paid in Walla Walla.”

“My schedule’s pretty full,” Finn said, trading a look with Franny where she still sat behind the wheel of the stubborn truck. “Don’t know if I can fit you in, but I’ll let you know once I do.”

“You bastard,” Shotgun muttered. “Fine. One of these days you’re gonna need a favor from me , and see if I help you out. Prick.”

“Great,” Finn said. He’d worked with the shittiest characters in the world while traveling with the Legion, most of them across the table with their “partners” and the rest the odd ducks who turned up to join the Legion itself. Shotgun didn’t even make his Top Ten list for stressful encounters. “Send me the information you’ve got and I’ll see what I can find.”

There was a lot of grumbling and muttering from the other side before the call ended, but Finn took it in stride. Shotgun had so far been a lot of bluster and not much follow-through, but that was mostly because Finn didn’t give him a reason to follow through on his threats.

Finn tucked his phone away and tried to focus on the truck and Francine as he waited for more information on where the DEA agent needed him to go. His bear finally settled down with the thought of getting back into the wilderness and away from the walls and constraints of the Lodge. Maybe he’d take longer than a couple weeks. Maybe he’d disappear for a month, wait until the deep snows came and the rest of the bears hibernated before he returned.

He exhaled tension he hadn’t known gathered in his shoulders and started making mental lists of what needed to be done before he left. Which started with fixing the damn truck. “Okay, start ’er up, Franny.”

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LAUREN

Lauren crouched in the muddy stream, peering into the foliage and undergrowth to check whether anything had disturbed the camera blind she'd set up a week or so ago. She'd spent at least a month studying the forest all around the mostly-abandoned cabin where she was hiding out to find the narrow paths and streams where a Sasquatch was most likely to be. It had to be exactly right to stand the best chance of getting photographic evidence.

She held her breath and checked up and downstream for anything else that might have been moving through the area. As fall turned quickly into winter, there were more bears around than Sasquatches, and she didn't want to be caught unawares. Even with an airhorn and bear mace and bells to ring to scare them off.

But nothing else lingered in the trees, and the birds still sang and rustled around. She got up and brushed a few leaves off her already dirty pants and clambered up the bank to the small crossroads where several deer tracks and predator paths converged. It was near a source of fresh water, ran eventually into a meadow with good grass, had blackberry brambles along the paths, and provided plenty of concealment as the animals moved through the area. It was the perfect spot to catch a Sasquatch.

It was also one of the very, very few places with any cell phone reception.

Not that she was holding her breath for a phone call. It was the last thing she wanted, since that meant there was bad news. Ginger left groceries out for her at the meeting spot only two days ago, so Lauren didn't expect to have another message. Still, they'd made a deal that Lauren would check for messages at least every three days.

Just in case.

She exhaled in frustration to see that the small snare near the camera was undisturbed, so there wasn't likely to be anything on the memory card. Unless Sasquatch had gotten good at resetting the fiddly snare.

She checked her phone and breathed easier when no messages awaited. Of course, that didn't mean she was completely off the hook. After all, it was possible Ginger had been arrested and wasn't able to send her a message. No one else in the cryptid community around Bear Creek knew where Lauren hid out, since it was safer that way.

Lauren straightened up and headed down the trail toward the meadow. Maybe one of the muddy areas captured footprints as the ground started to freeze. She almost missed having snow to help visualize animals passing through. The Sasquatch's stride and feet were so distinctive there wasn't any mistaking them for something else.

She tried to only think about the tasks in front of her: check the rest of the snares and spots where evidence might hide, get fresh water for the cabin, pick some berries if there were any left, and chop some firewood before the sun set. A full day all around. It was easier to ignore being a fugitive when busy and exhausted. Chopping wood and hauling water definitely got the job done.

Lauren set a small solar panel, hooked to a battery pack, out in the meadow before she began her search, since the cabin didn't get enough sunshine to keep things charged. Then it was back to the methodical search for footprints, tufts of hair, scat, bones or half-eaten meals, or even scratches or broken branches a Sasquatch might use to signal others of its kind.

She'd never imagined being a fugitive at her age, and for something like attempted murder. It wasn't her fault that the oil company wanted to run a huge pipeline through

one of the few habitats where Sasquatch had actually been sighted. It hadn't been the best idea to go protest a bunch with the rest of her cryptid-seeking friends, or to sneak onto the construction site where they'd been surveying for the pipeline. Lauren only meant to take pictures of all the damage the oil company had already done, then pass it off to local reporters to name and shame the company, maybe get them to stop drilling and exploring. At worst, they planned to pour sugar in the gas tanks of the mining equipment.

It was her own stupid fault for not being a hundred percent clear on what everyone else thought was going on. Because all it took was one guy with a Molotov cocktail, a leaky propane tank, and a bit too much liquid courage, and half the damn yard exploded. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage, according to the news and the oil company's fancy New York lawyers, and at least one security guard permanently disabled.

That would have been bad enough, but since Lauren had stupidly gone back to help Ginger after she twisted her ankle, Lauren was the only one who ended up visible on the security cameras.

It still stung. She was the only one the cops identified as responsible for the mess, even though there had been a dozen other people and the idiot with the Molotov cocktail. She went back to help someone else when the rest of the so-called activists fled and scattered into the woods and back to their cars—leaving her and Ginger behind to limp along to somewhere they could call for help. And yet she was the one with the warrant and skipped bail, hiding out in a rotting cabin with winter coming on and planning to sneak into Canada if Ginger figured out where to get a fake passport. Jumping bail hadn't been the best idea, but she'd panicked after looking up the jail sentences for the charges on the arrest warrant.

Lauren swallowed a groan and tried to focus on the task at hand. At least she had uninterrupted time to search for Sasquatch. Not that she'd be able to publish her

findings without being grabbed by the cops and thrown back in jail. Maybe she needed a pseudonym or activist name. Sunshine Blackberry. Meadow von Grizzly. Mudpuddle Moon.

She froze as something popped loudly in the distance, like a big limb breaking or a tree trunk splitting. Strange. The temperature had not dropped enough for sap to freeze and cause the wood to explode. Maybe something large ran into a tree or fell into a pile of branches. Or maybe it was nothing. She shook herself and checked her phone one more time as the hair on the back of her neck stood up.

There had been occasional boot prints on some of the larger trails, like more hikers started to move through the land adjacent to the national park. She could have reported them for trespassing on private land, but it wasn't worth risking the attention. Mr. Hanover used to let Lauren and her mom hang out at the cabin whenever they got kicked out of a hotel or lost their trailer to the repo men. Lauren had great memories of the cabin, although she didn't remember it being quite so shabby or leaky, and pretty good memories of being on the road with her mom. It was only looking back that she realized what a nightmare it must have been in reality.

She finished one more circuit of the meadow and retrieved the solar panels before picking up a few dead branches to haul back to the cabin for firewood. Lauren didn't know how much longer she could hide out at the cabin before winter came through and froze her out. She'd never survive in deep snow, and it was already a fight to keep enough firewood stocked to cook. She couldn't imagine having to heat the cabin and melt water and cook and... If Ginger stopped helping her, Lauren wouldn't have any real food showing up, either. She would starve to death if she didn't sneak back into town to steal out of dumpsters, running the risk of getting picked up and eventually tossed in jail as a bail jumper.

She clenched her jaw and hiked faster as another loud bang sounded far away. She'd wait another two or three days, then signal Ginger that she needed to find somewhere

else to hide. Lauren definitely didn't want to go to jail, since that was where both of her parents ended up, but it was better than freezing to death—even if she wouldn't getting out again for a long, long time.

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FINN

In the end, he didn't get the truck fixed. So Simon drove him through the old dirt roads through all the land the alpha bear and his mate purchased the year before. They'd bought it up from neighbors who wanted to retire or inherited and didn't know what to do with the vast tracts of mountainous terrain and forests and bear-riddled trails. Most of it abutted the national park, and Simon wanted to keep as much of it free and accessible as possible. Which meant helping out local and federal law enforcement when they uncovered bad actors using the land for shady business.

Simon hadn't been happy that Finn agreed to go looking for drug smugglers, particularly since they had a few large tours to wrap up before winter set in, but he couldn't argue. The alpha bear used the long, quiet drive as an opportunity to tell Finn how worried all the bears were for him, that Finn looked more and more like he was listening to his bear side too much, that he'd lost weight and started looking haunted, that he had nightmares and they'd all heard him shouting.

Finn hated every second of it and scowled out of the window like some emo teenager being lectured about staying past curfew. It wasn't anyone else's business if he didn't sleep well or couldn't eat or stayed out in the woods as much as possible. He was still on his best behavior around the females and children, which was all they should have asked of him.

When he told Simon as much, the alpha bear shot him a dark look. "You're my teammate, dick. I won't forget that, and I'm not about to leave a team-mate behind. So pull your head out of your ass. When you finish this job up, we'll come up with a plan to get things straightened out."

So he'd jumped out of the truck the second it rolled to a stop, waving away Simon as the other man stepped out to yell something at him, and hiked as fast as possible to pretend he didn't hear. There wasn't any reason the other bears needed to worry about him. He'd never been like them, he'd always been closer to a bear than a man. He'd just gotten better at hiding it from everyone, so they never knew how close to the edge he balanced every day. They never would have trusted him in battle or around their families if they'd known. Now that they knew... maybe it was time to leave. Leaving was preferable to being told to go.

Finn shook his head as he hiked faster, clenching his jaw against the awkwardness of Simon's lecture. Finn didn't want anyone else worrying about him. He didn't need big brothers or a father figure or a mama bear studying him and making sure he drank his milk and cut his steak into little bites so he didn't choke. If he wanted to go lose himself in the woods, he'd fucking do it and there wasn't anything anyone could say to change his mind.

He hadn't bothered to ask Simon what kind of plan the alpha bear thought would be needed. Finn just wanted to get out of the truck and away from the touchy-feely bullshit conversation, so he agreed to whatever Simon wanted and got the fuck out of there. He moved so fast he almost forgot his rifle and the sat phone, and pretended he didn't hear Simon when he shouted about leaving it behind.

Finn hiked his pack up on his shoulders to stretch his back, adjusting the straps and checking his rifle. That had been three days ago, and his mind was only just starting to settle. The bear remained agitated, though the quiet trails and opportunity to run around as a bear as much as he liked helped a great deal. There was something about the smell of the forest—faint pine, mulchy dirt, squirrels, clean air—that helped him remember where he was. When he woke up in a sweat, panicking because he couldn't find his helmet or kevlar or most of his weapons, it was scent alone that kept him from losing his mind.

He grumbled and checked the map one more time. He'd been crisscrossing the area that Shotgun outlined as likely to be used by the smugglers, but very little had turned up. A few boot prints, the occasional hint of human scent on the air or trapped in some vegetation, and once a firepit with warm, soggy ashes. Not enough to say what people were doing out there, and certainly not enough to hand to Shotgun as proof of smuggling.

He'd been close to finding something for the last day, once he'd finally made camp the night before. He'd stowed his gear and food before dusk settled in the trees, then shifted to his bear shape to hunt and explore. It was much easier to feed himself as a bear, flipping fish out of the rivers until his belly was full. He moved faster as a Kodiak, that was for damn sure, and didn't care about staying quiet or not leaving traces of his passage. The smugglers would be looking for evidence of rangers or hunters, not for big fucking bears who didn't belong in the mountains of Oregon.

Not that he expected drug smugglers to recognize the differences between a normal brown bear and the Alaskan brown bear.

Finn stretched up to rake his claws down the length of a massive pine tree, leaving clear signs to humans and other animals that an apex predator was stalking the woods and they needed to beware. It felt good to finally roam in his bear form and not worry about making it home for dinner or before Zoe started to worry, or not worrying about whether his roar would startle the baby or scare the tourists.

He scratched his back on the tree trunk, groaning, before dropping to all fours and continuing his trek until he reached a river teeming with fish.

Finn roamed for most of the night, searching for hints of interlopers, but eventually circled back to where he'd left his gear for a few hours' sleep. Once he lay down under the stars, though, his thoughts wouldn't settle to let him rest. He'd at least excluded some of the wilder parts of the search box that Shotgun laid out, since there

was no way that anyone was smuggling a large volume of drugs through the wildest parts of the mountains. There just wasn't enough room or the paths to support humans moving things around.

Which left him with a small problem. He wasn't going to get paid for not finding anything. Shotgun might or might not believe him that Finn came up empty-handed. The suspicious son of a bitch would probably send out two or three other rangers or city boys to try and confirm what Finn had already told him. He waited until false dawn to pack up his stuff and start moving again. Maybe if he got in a fight or forced march all day, he would be tired enough to sleep later.

He scratched his beard as he trudged along, thoughts drifting to the latest problems. Not that Finn minded staying out and wandering through all corners of the park until he narrowed down where the smugglers were.

There was enough that didn't feel right on Simon's land that Finn figured he should stay until he unraveled exactly what had gone wrong. Maybe it wasn't drug smugglers. Maybe it was illegal hunters taking bears and elk out of season. Maybe there were hikers going off the trails and destroying the rivers or leaving trash and shit all over the place. It could have been more illegal gold prospectors, tearing up rivers and valleys to search for a few measly ounces of shiny metal. He frowned and slowed down as distant sounds reached him through the trees.

It sounded like voices, or at least bird calls he hadn't heard before. His head tilted back as he took a deep breath, tasting the air, and searched for a hint of what might have caused the noise.

His skin prickled at a metallic scent, completely out of place in the mountains, and a hint of unwashed bodies. There it was. Just a few days' hike out the other side of the wide swath of land that Simon owned, and dangerously close to the protected area of the national park. Finn growled under his breath and moved faster, searching for a

good place to stash his gear. He vaguely remembered a dilapidated cabin nearby, but he didn't want to waste time searching for it.

He shoved his pack into the hollow trunk of a dead tree and stripped down to shift into his bear form. If he was seriously outnumbered, the smugglers might be inclined to just shoot a man and leave his body to rot. Hopefully they'd respect a bear enough to leave it the fuck alone as long as he didn't charge them. All Shotgun wanted was for Finn to mark the location and get a good count of how many guys worked the operation. He wasn't going to be a hero or some bullshit like that. Still, at least in his bear form he was so much bigger and covered in fluffy fur.

Or he'd be able to absorb the bullets and heal faster anyway. It had been a while since he had a good fight as the Kodiak.

The bright flash of pain cleared his head when he shifted. He grumbled in agitation as the bear's senses picked up on even more details of the trouble brewing down the slope, but he kept his silence and lumbered through the trees. He would have smiled. Time to ruin someone's day.

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LAUREN

Lauren was minding her own business, chopping wood, when a series of sharp retorts echoed through the air. She froze and stared in the general direction. Gunshots. Definitely gunshots. High powered rifles with measured, deliberate shots. It didn't sound like anything she'd heard in the two months since she'd been at the cabin. Something roared and all the small animals disappeared. Not even the birds moved.

Was it hunters illegally shooting elk or deer out of season? Or was it cops searching for her who'd run across some other kind of illegal activity? Surely there were other felons or fugitives hiding out in the wilderness.

She held her breath, axe in hand, and waited for something else to happen: someone running up the trail toward her, more howling or the sound of a dying elk, more gunshots, things breaking. Anything except the eerie quiet that followed.

She swallowed hard and glanced back at the cabin. She hadn't expected anyone else to be close enough for her to hear gunshots, and since she hadn't seen many traces of rangers or anyone else in the vicinity... What if bounty hunters searched for her and tried to scare her into running so they caught her away from the cabin? They could have run across a wolf or a bear or something and wanted to scare it off, too, or maybe... maybe they found something even more intimidating: Sasquatch.

Something big moved nearby and made a low, keening noise. Her heart jumped to her throat. What was that? Injured animals were incredibly dangerous, and she only had an old shotgun for self-defense. And the axe. The shotgun was more likely to explode in her hands if she actually tried to fire it, so... She hefted it. Not that she wanted to

get close enough to an injured bear or wolf or elk that an axe would make the difference, since if that happened, something else had gone horribly wrong.

And what if it was a Sasquatch, injured and alone? Maybe dying? Could she really leave it there, suffering alone? Or leave any animal to suffer until it died from blood loss or was killed by some other predator?

Lauren tried to ignore it. She retreated to the cabin and stared at the door, wishing for the first time for some kind of cell phone reception, just in case she needed to... The thought set her back a second. Who would she call? It wasn't like the police or paramedics would be able to respond fast enough to help her, if something went wrong, and they'd for sure arrest her regardless of what happened.

She started to investigate at least half a dozen times before turning back around and pacing through the falling-apart cabin again. A Sasquatch could be out there and she was missing her opportunity to document and help it. Maybe save its life. She would be known as the person who saved the Sasquatch from vicious hunters, and maybe that would...

Well, the bail bondsman wouldn't give a shit if she saved a Sasquatch, he'd still want his money back and she'd still end up in jail. And Lauren was pretty sure folks in the county jail wouldn't be impressed by that sort of thing, either. It might help fundraising for a better defense attorney than the public defender she'd been assigned initially.

She finally couldn't take it, though, and strode toward where she thought she'd heard the sounds. She brought the machete she'd found in the cabin and the old shotgun, more for intimidation than because she expected the weapons to help her out. She definitely didn't have the stomach to shoot a person, and she seriously doubted she could shoot a Sasquatch. Hunting small animals and the occasional deer was one thing, but having to make the choice to confront a human or cryptid...

She shivered and slowed her pace, straining to hear anything through the trees and the slowly-returning bird calls. At least there hadn't been any more gunshots for quite a while, and no one shouted or threatened. No one screamed, either. A good sign, maybe. It didn't keep her heart from pounding against her ribs and trying to break out of her chest entirely. She'd never been brave. Ever.

The first thing she heard was breathing—deep, heavy breathing, more like panting. Stressed. Pained.

Lauren crept closer to a huge, dark bulk half hidden in brush off the tiny deer track she'd used to get closer. It didn't move until a twig broke under her foot, and then the breathing silenced and the forest stilled.

Her hands shook and she almost dropped the shotgun. She wet her lips and tried to edge closer as the giant thing didn't move. It was certainly big enough to be Sasquatch, and it definitely... smelled like it could have been a wildman. Or a bear. Something really terrifying...

But at least it wasn't a regular man: dark, thick fur covered what she spotted through the leaves and dim shadows.

Her heart jumped to her throat as it groaned and moved, pulling against something, and the massive brown bulk strained. Sasquatch. She'd found him. Dear God, she'd found him. She started shaking. And she didn't... She didn't have her camera. Or even her phone. Nothing. Stupid Lauren! What was wrong with her? Lauren shook her head over and over, desperate. Maybe she could run back to the cabin to grab her phone, at least to get some evidence. But what if the Sasquatch left? Or died? Oh no. Oh no. Why wasn't there anyone else with her?

Lauren stumbled back so quickly she tripped and landed hard on her ass as it flopped over and she saw the ears. A bear. A huge brown bear, larger than any she'd seen in

the park, even at a distance. Holy shit. Holy shit .

Even as her guts clenched to see a bear that close, her heart dropped to know she hadn't found a Sasquatch. Another disappointment in a very long life of disappointments. Lauren shook her head and tried to focus. She'd mourn that later. Now... Now she had a giant damn bear looking at her from a couple feet away.

The shotgun wouldn't make a difference against an animal that large, especially if it was hurt or enraged. Her mouth dried out and her vision blurred. It was a thousand times more terrifying than even being in court and facing years in jail. She wouldn't have minded if a whole slew of bounty hunters popped up out of nowhere to drag her away to safety.

But the bear didn't swipe or charge toward her. Its massive head lifted and swung in her direction, the broad snout snuffling and sniffing the air, though it remained prone in the dirt. Lauren frowned as the terror started to clear from her thoughts as the animal didn't move. That wasn't a comfortable position, certainly, even for a grizzly bear.

She eased back to her feet, clutching the shotgun, and worked at breathing normally. "Hi, bear."

It tensed but didn't react except to look at her with surprisingly clear honey-brown eyes. She couldn't look away as it watched her. Lauren had never seen knowledge and pain like that in an animal's eyes. It took her breath away again, and she braced against a nearby tree so she didn't pass right out. She almost believed it would answer her, if she just asked the right question.

She swallowed hard. "Are you hurt, bear?"

She must have lost her mind. She stayed and talked to the injured bear instead of

running away like a sane person would. He could charge and kill her at any moment. But her chest hurt at just the thought of leaving him there to die alone or to suffer until something else came along and killed him. Or the hunters tracked him down and finished him off.

The bear didn't respond, of course, but kept watching her. It turned slightly and a huffy groan escaped, and the clink-clank of metal on metal made Lauren blink. She searched for what caused the noise, since she didn't think bears typically walked around with metal on them, and swallowed a curse when she saw what kept the bear from really moving: a massive trap clamped high on its back right leg.

Lauren whispered, "Oh damn," and sank to sit on her heels. "That's a kick in the balls."

It must have been her imagination, but it seemed like the bear huffed an amused snort and tried to turn more toward her, though it did so gingerly to avoid moving its leg.

She rubbed her temples and tried to figure out what the hell to do. She couldn't free the bear from the trap without getting close enough for the bear to tear her apart with its claws and teeth. But she couldn't shoot it to put it out of its misery, since he would survive the bear trap injury if he just escaped, and she didn't want to murder such a magnificent animal.

Because he was damn impressive—sleek with rich brown fur, round tufted ears, terrifying claws easily longer than her fingers, and teeth that glinted white as he grumbled and watched her closely. And those brown eyes, like melted milk chocolate now instead of honey, that watched her like he knew she wanted to help.

He didn't act like he wanted to eat her, even as he tracked her every movement. He didn't threaten or bluster or even stretch, almost as if he didn't want to scare her off, and continued breathing in that uneven, half-growling sound.

Lauren swallowed the knot in her throat and sat heavily in the dirt as her legs gave out, and she finally uncurled her hands from where they'd kept a death grip on the shotgun. "I'm sorry, bear. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help you. I wish there was a way... I don't have any tranquilizers so I can get rid of that trap without you trying to eat me. Not that I think I'm strong enough to get you out of that."

He didn't respond, of course, though he rested his head on his front paws to watch her. Almost like he tried to make himself look smaller and less intimidating to encourage her to get closer. And damn her if she wasn't tempted to edge over to see whether he reacted. The trap had to be chained to something, so it wasn't like the bear would chase her that far.

Not that she thought she could actually run, with her legs wobbling like Jell-O. Lauren worked her aching fingers and wrists. She'd held on to the machete and shotgun so hard everything hurt and her fingers didn't want to straighten out. The chill in the air definitely didn't help. It worked into her bones as she sat on the ground, since she'd forgotten her jacket before storming out of the cabin like an idiot. Her vision blurred as she stared at the bear as it stared at her.

She'd always been a screwup, but she'd never screwed up this badly. She couldn't do anything right. She tried to protest to protect the environment and Sasquatches, and ended up arrested for someone else's crime. She ran away to hide from the trial she knew she'd lose, and was barely surviving. She couldn't even remember to put a jacket on in the late fall. She was actually considering getting closer to an injured bear because it hurt its paw and she felt sorry for it.

Her breath caught. God, what was she going to do? She was only twenty-two and already her life was over. She couldn't move forward but she couldn't go back. She had nothing, no safety net or way to get her feet under her. No family to help her, no friends who wanted to take in a fugitive. She couldn't go to jail. She couldn't.

Lauren pulled her knees up to her chest and hid her face, even though it was stupid to take the risk less than five feet away from an injured grizzly bear. The tears were coming and she didn't want even the beast to see. If she could have stood up, she would have run the hell away to hide in the cabin. She sniffled and tried to smother the miserable sounds. She didn't want the bear to figure out she'd be easy prey. Well, easier prey than she already was.

She'd begun to wallow when a strange tearing sound filled the air around her and someone groaned. A real groan, not the bear equivalent. Lauren tensed, not daring to look up. She didn't think she wanted to see whatever had just happened.

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FINN

It was a rookie mistake. He'd been so focused on counting the drug smugglers and their weapons that he hadn't paid as much attention to where he placed his paws. Finn headed back toward his pack to write it all down and managed to step on a damn bear trap. Illegal as hell and so rusty he couldn't pry it apart with even his Kodiak strength. He just didn't have the dexterity to work the springs to open it with paws and legs stubbier than needed.

He'd resigned himself to taking a bit of a rest to clear his thoughts, then shifting to human to crawl to his pack for some tools or find a branch to use as leverage to work his leg out of the trap. It hurt like a son of a bitch and he nearly lost his mind when it first snapped shut and the steel tore into his muscles. An unhealthy fire ignited in his blood and flesh, seeping into his veins and circulating until he couldn't concentrate on anything and the bear took over.

He'd never unwillingly surrendered control to his Kodiak side. This time there was no real choice. The man sank weak and ineffective into the background, unable to really do anything, while the bear could fight the metal. Finn knew it didn't make sense but he was powerless to change it. The bear groaned and grumbled and fought the chains, but the trap dug deeper with every movement and deepened the misery. Finn faded into madness, drifting into the worst memories in Africa when they'd been pinned down and injured in a jungle and he'd been so torn up that the guys gave him last rites, just in case, and pumped him full of morphine to make it easier. It dragged him down the same in that forest, even with the scent of pine instead of tropical flowers, as he waited for the bear to fight them into a bloody, miserable end.

And then...a whisper of movement in the air. A hint of scent. Human. Getting closer. Female. Young and female. Breeding age.

The bear stilled. Normally the bear ignored females unless it was to protect them from an immediate threat, then moved on. He was too fucked up in his own head to be around human females. He'd end up hurting them by accident, and he wouldn't tolerate that in himself. Finn stayed still and silent so she would move by him. Probably a hiker or hunter. She didn't smell like the drugs the smugglers moved, but there was a faint metallic thread: some kind of weapon. So, a hunter.

She didn't move like it, though. Hesitant, soft, reluctant. Not comfortable in the forest. Not there by choice, maybe. Finn stayed still. No reason to think she was there for him. She would move past him on the little deer track, past the hollowed-out tree with his stuff in it, and go on her way.

Right into the hands of the smugglers.

The thought left all of him even colder than the pain alone.

He gathered his strength to shift back, fighting the bear for control, but hadn't won enough by the time the female's scent grew stronger and she came into view. Her wide eyes found him and stuck, and her lips parted in surprise. Finn froze. The bear lingered in control but studied the girl with a degree of fascination they'd never experienced. She was tall and curvy through her hips and thighs, though something in her face made him think she was underfed. Well, he would fix that.

Long brown hair escaped from an intricate braid that he didn't have words for except that it probably would have been strong enough for a gun sling or cargo net. Rich dark eyes met his and those plump pink lips parted and she spoke.

His brain shorted out and her words moved past without sticking. She said something

else and her face flushed a charming red. She sat down heavily, dropping a shotgun awkwardly enough that he flinched, expecting the damn thing to go off and finish him. Or blow off his arm. The first thing they'd talk about was how to safely handle a gun like that.

She rocked with her arms around her knees, holding her legs to her chest, and she cried. She cried . Finn tried to keep up as he struggled to stay conscious. What made her sad? Why did she sit down next to an injured bear and cry?

He didn't have much experience with crying women, except for the other bears' mates and particularly the pregnant ones, but his strategy was usually to go outside and stay there until the tears dried up. With this female... He didn't know what to do. But the bear knew that he couldn't comfort her as a bear. He'd scare her half to death.

Finn's thoughts drifted until he latched onto the idea that he didn't have to stay a bear. He could become a man again. A man would be able to help her, to find out what was wrong, to fix it for her. He could do that.

It wasn't until he'd changed forms and saw the blood drain out of her face that it occurred to him that watching someone change their shape on its own would distress her. The girl stared at him and blinked, wiping her eyes. A shaky hand moved toward the shotgun.

Finn clenched his jaw against a fresh explosion of pain in his leg as the bear trap clamped harder around his smaller human calf. He barely swallowed the curses that would have made him feel a little better, and instead held a hand out to keep her from picking up the gun and killing him on accident. "Don't. Just wait a second."

The rest of the color left her face and she whispered under her breath.

He struggled to breathe through the agony in his leg. He had to get the trap off. He'd

lost too much blood and his strength waned. The longer they sat there on a damn trail, the higher the likelihood that some of those smugglers would come by. And they weren't the kind of guys who left witnesses alive.

Finn groaned and pushed up on one elbow, trying to reach her foot to touch her boot. Create a connection so she wouldn't feel as inclined to killing him. She wasn't a hunter in any form, it was easy enough to see she didn't even want to put an injured animal out of its misery. The sweetness of her character wedged into the cracks in his heart. He'd never spent much time around people who were that kind, that gentle. The bear wanted that to be in his den. The bear wanted her in his den.

He pushed the thought aside. He couldn't think that. They were in danger and he couldn't let lust distract him. He was naked and caught in a bear trap, and had revealed that shapeshifters existed to a complete stranger. Who did not look in any way prepared to deal with that sort of information.

"Breathe in through your nose," he said, squeezing his eyes shut against his own pain. "It's okay. Out through your mouth. Put your arms over your head. That's good."

She obeyed without question, which he should have appreciated but he knew it was a bad sign. She had to be in shock. It probably took a lot of courage for her to leave the safety of her shelter to look for him, and even more to sit there next to an injured bear. And to then see an unnatural change... He would have embraced her if he could have gotten close enough.

His voice came out rocky from the landslide of fire and pain working its way up his leg. Lightning bolts hot through his muscles and into his spine, the static chasing into his brain and wreaking havoc with his ability to think and speak. Nerve damage, probably. And it wouldn't heal until he got the damn trap off.

Finn took several deep breaths and braced himself to speak again, forming each word

deliberately and carefully, keeping his voice soothing and calm and in control despite wanting to scream and roar. “I need you to help me out of this trap. Can you do that?”

Her eyes grew huge as she looked up at him. Her arms still balanced on top of her head, making her look silly enough to distract him from the steel chewing into his leg. Her voice escaped in a whisper. “I don’t know how.”

“I’ll tell you,” Finn said. His fingers dug into the dirt to anchor against the radiating misery. The sooner she got the trap off, the better. “We’ll take it slow. Can you see a sturdy branch around? One longer than your arm, as big around as your wrist.”

She wiped her cheeks resolutely and wobbled to her feet. “I just dragged firewood away from this part of the forest so I don’t know...”

The girl moved down the trail and started crashing through the undergrowth, and Finn swallowed a laugh and a groan. Definitely had no idea what she was doing in the woods. Absolutely no woodcraft or skills in the wild. He meant to call her back but realized he hadn’t asked her name. He knew her by scent and that was all the bear cared about. He would recognize her anywhere in the world, no matter what she wore or called herself.

She returned carrying a long branch, probably too thin to part the trap’s jaws for very long, and with a dubious expression on her face. Finn nodded and tried to look more confident. “Between that and you stepping on the spring, we can probably do it. What’s your name?”

The braid slid over her shoulder and distracted him as she inched closer and crouched to examine the trap. “Lauren.”

He sensed a slight hesitation before she admitted her name, and filed that away to examine later. “I’m Finn.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said automatically, then huffed a small laugh under her breath. “How’s your day going, Finn?”

He smiled a little at the absurdity, though his surprises were relatively minor compared to hers. Finn pushed the bear still further back, not wanting to roar or growl and frighten her. He closed his eyes briefly as he inhaled near her, memorizing her scent in more detail. Lavender and a hint of rose, bergamot. A bit of citrus, maybe grapefruit with a touch of sweetness. It fit her. Made his mouth water.

“Are you okay?” she whispered, and a soft hand touched his cheek.

Finn’s eyes snapped open to find her nose a few inches from him. She looked terrified as her fingers grazed against his wild beard, made wilder with shifting and being in the woods for a couple of weeks. He couldn’t breathe, the pain fading away, as their eyes met. He wondered suddenly how he’d ever lived without her.

“Yeah,” he murmured. He reached for her face, needing to touch her skin. Wanting to know every inch of her. Mesmerized and enchanted. Almost drunk on possibilities.

Lauren fell back, though, and almost landed on his leg. The moment their eye contact broke, the pain roared back and Finn grimaced against the tidal wave that threatened to drag him into madness.

She froze. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he gritted out. He wanted to scream but didn’t dare, didn’t want to frighten her. Definitely didn’t want to send her running. Not until he knew more about her, knew where to find her. His thoughts splintered. “Just—hurts. Need to move quickly.”

“Right, right.” Lauren looked around wildly, as if searching for where they would move, and Finn smiled even as he squeezed his eyes shut and nearly broke his jaw

from clenching it. She patted his chest. “Yeah. Need to do this. You’re—very naked and I’m sure you’re cold and obviously your leg hurts a lot and you’re bleeding and?—”

“Breathe,” he said again. Finn covered her hand with his, keeping her palm against his skin. “Slow is smooth, smooth is fast.”

Silence. He cracked one eye open to make sure she hadn’t passed out, and found her nose wrinkled in confusion. Lauren peered at him. “What does that even mean?”

He wheezed a laugh and wrapped his fingers around hers. “Sorry. Military saying. If you want to do something fast, you gotta do it smoothly, naturally. And in order to do something smoothly, you gotta do it slowly. Deliberately. That’s all.”

“Right. Well, not too slowly.” She turned green when her eyes strayed to the torn meat of his leg.

He bit the inside of his cheek. Definitely not a hunter. Possibly even a vegetarian with the way her lips pinched together. Even with the agony of his leg, he didn’t want her to get sick. Maybe she could brace the stick between the jaws, and he could use the leverage to free himself. “Don’t worry. Just—slide the branch between the teeth, near the corner. There’s the flat bit to stand on to work the spring, but you don’t have to do that. Put the stick in and then let me take it.”

She gave him a sideways look. “What are you going to do with it?”

Finn took a deep breath and sat up, a groan catching in his teeth as the movement jostled his leg against the steel teeth still more. The world spun around him and darkness crowded the edge of his consciousness. He struggled to remain awake, if not alert, and listened to his heart thunder against his ribs.

And then he heard a soft voice, “Please don’t pass out. Please please please don’t. I don’t think I can do this by myself.”

“I’m okay,” he said. His hand moved, searching for her, and her soft fingers moved into his and the pain retreated. “Just need...”

He didn’t know what he needed. Well, he needed her curled up next to him somewhere warm and safe. He needed to make sure she was fed and rested. Needed to get his leg wrapped up and eat his weight in protein so he healed up enough to protect her.

Finn struggled to make sense of what they should do next. He swallowed the knot in his throat. He wanted to scream and beat his fists on the ground until something else hurt a fraction of what radiated from his leg. But Lauren was there. She was afraid and uncertain. He couldn’t have that.

He remained sitting up and forced his eyes open. “Down the trail behind me. Hollowed out oak. I put my pack and rifle there. Can you get them? There’s a first aid kit.”

She nodded and shoved to her feet, leaving the stick next to his leg, and headed down the trail. Finn breathed hard and found a smaller stick to clench between his teeth. He had a few moments before she returned, since the tree was farther down the trail than she would expect, to deal with the trap on his own. He would have had to do it anyway, and he didn’t want Lauren to have the memory of prying his bloody mangled leg out of a bear trap.

And he didn’t want her to see him pass out, either.

Finn bit down on the stick before he maneuvered the branch between the jaws of the trap and searched for the right kind of leverage. Every bump and jostle sparked new

agony, building layers of it until he couldn't remember what it was like to not be in pain. He thought he had it and took a moment to center himself and reassure the bear they had to get it right on the first try, and they couldn't shift forms again because it would terrify Lauren.

He adjusted his grip on the long branch, braced his good foot against a stump, and closed his eyes. One try. Open the jaws, haul his leg out no matter how much it hurt, and then pass out. Good enough.

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast," he muttered. He gritted his teeth and forced the end of the branch up until the steel creaked. Finn kept his attention on the trap to tell the very first moment he could move. His shoulders ached and his arms shook.

When the branch resisted and the trap whined more, he took a deep breath and braced himself. One chance. Just do it. Just fucking do it.

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LAUREN

Her heart thundered against her ribs and she sweated absolutely everywhere as she raced down the trail, searching for a hollowed-out tree. She found it and started fishing the pack out when a muffled groan-yelp caused the birds to flee the trees once more. Lauren stared down the trail. Had something happened to Finn?

She couldn't quite tell how she felt about everything that had happened so far. She must have hallucinated the bear, or maybe been dreaming about a bear, and saw him in a coat or covered with dirt and just imagined a bear. Obviously people didn't turn into bears and back again. Obviously. She wasn't crazy, regardless of what the oil company's lawyers said.

Lauren slung his pack on her back and staggered under the weight, almost pitching over sideways as her balance shifted and she stepped into a divot in the trail. Good thing she hadn't picked up the rifle, otherwise she probably would have tumbled ass over teakettle all the way down the slope and maybe shot herself in the process. She gritted her teeth and hiked up the straps and waist belt, and braced against the tree to scoop up the clothes, boots, and rifle hidden behind the bulky pack.

She didn't have quite enough energy to jog down the trail, not with a ridiculously heavy pack on her back and carrying an armful of clothes and a big scary gun, but she moved as fast as her legs would carry her. Even though she dreaded seeing what happened to Finn. She wasn't looking forward to having to touch the bear trap around his leg and seeing what the steel teeth had done to human flesh. Cold rushed through her when she found Finn in a different position, the stick broken in half in the bear trap, and blood everywhere.

Bright red had started flowing from his leg again, though dark red and black coated the trap. Which he'd escaped.

Lauren shook her head and swallowed the immediate urge to vomit when she saw his leg. She wanted to hit him. Stupid man. He probably did a crap-load of damage to his leg by doing it himself. And now he was completely unconscious and far too big for her to move on her own. It wasn't like slinging him over her shoulders and carrying him back to the cabin was an option. The temperature kept dropping and she didn't like the look of what she saw of the sky through the trees. A storm could move in so fast they'd be caught out and frozen solid before they knew it.

She patted his cheek to try and wake him, but Finn didn't do more than make a face. Lauren looked around, suddenly nervous in the silence. What if whoever set the trap heard him yell and decided to investigate? She dropped his pack and fished around for the first aid kit. Sweat trickled down her back as she searched and her fingers didn't work right and she couldn't focus on anything. She couldn't do anything right. If he was still conscious, Lauren had no doubt that they'd already be on their way to the cabin. Finn was the kind of guy who always had a solution.

The stray thought stopped her cold, and she stared down at the unconscious man. She had no idea who he was or where he'd come from. There was no way she could start thinking of him as someone to rely on. That gruff capability made him even more dangerous, since it hinted at a background in law enforcement. He'd said something about the military. Maybe he'd feel obligated to turn her in once he found out why she stayed in a cabin without food or real electricity or heat. Lauren swallowed the knot in her throat. It was bad enough he was dead sexy and completely naked and the kind of handsome that made her hands shake. He was muscles everywhere, not an ounce of fat on him.

She looked around for something to use as a sledge. She could probably drag him. The only other option was to run back to the cabin to get the half-broken

wheelbarrow and then try to haul Finn's dead weight into it. Lauren shook her head. He had to wake up. Right? Didn't people wake up out of a faint if it was from pain? How the hell long could he sleep?

At least he had a tangle of compression straps and carabiners and rope stuffed or hooked on every free part of the pack. So something went her way for a change. Or he was just a prepared kind of guy.

Lauren muttered under her breath as she dragged a long and somewhat gnarly branch from out of the undergrowth, and hunted for one at least close to the same size. "You know, this is when it would be really nice to have some friends. Someone to actually rely on instead of just pointing out everything I did wrong. And bringing up every time I fucked up and should have done something differently. I'm sure you'd be able to tell me exactly how I'm doing the opposite of the smart thing. Because that's probably what I'm doing. That never fails. Lauren the screw up."

Her voice trailed off and she had to close her eyes as more tears threatened. She couldn't stop shaking. "Except I'm doing my best. I promise. I'm trying to do everything right, as much as I can, and I don't mean to be so much trouble. I just need a little help. A little tiny dab of understanding or encouragement or just...tolerance. If you could just tolerate me when you wake up, that would be great."

It wasn't really him she talked to, so maybe that was what made her brave enough to say it out loud. That and he was unconscious and didn't actually hear her. Lauren dragged the other branch over and laid it next to the first, frowning. And now she had to figure out how the hell to construct it. Right under Finn seemed like the best option, so she could just pick him up.

She snorted. Like it would really be that easy. She was out of her damn mind.

First she wrapped his leg up in a sweatshirt she found in his pack, since the first aid

kit didn't have nearly enough bandages, and made sure it wasn't broken. It turned her stomach but nothing felt weird or wobbly when she picked up his ankle. His whole face screwed up and he bared his teeth in warning, so Lauren left it alone. Message received.

"I'm trying to help, jerk," she said under her breath.

She arranged the straps on the ground and shoved them as far under him as possible before putting him on his side and pulling the straps through. And she also got an eyeful of the absolute work of art that was his ass and the muscles in his back. Her mouth got all dry and cottony as she stared at him for far too long to be decent. Especially since he was unconscious and couldn't object to her ogling his unbelievable body. He must have lived at the gym or do hard labor every minute of the day to get muscles like that.

Lauren shook herself out of the completely inappropriate thoughts and put him on his back. And she threw most of his clothes over top of him to keep him warm, and to free up the shoulder straps and belt on his pack to help drag his ass along. At least the path to the cabin was mostly even with just one small uphill stretch. She could do it.

She strapped the long branches to the backpack and threaded them through to hold the ends. She left her shotgun and his rifle on the sledge next to him, in case he woke up and wanted to shoot something, and made sure everything was as secure as she could make it. She glanced back after wiggling into the backpack's frame and straps, and took a couple of deep breaths. "It's not far from here. We don't have to go far. Just—hold on. Don't go crazy. I don't think I can do this a second time."

He didn't answer, which was both good and bad. But Lauren decided to take it as good. She bent her knees and lifted the branches, settled them into the straps, and put her head down to drag his weight forward, one step at a time.

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FINN

Fire consumed him from the toes up. His eyes didn't open but he knew he moved. Bumping along, dragged. One lurch at a time. He groaned and lifted his head. What the fuck happened? Where was he? The last thing he remembered... the drug smugglers. A dozen guys hiking massive packs of meth through the trees. Turning away to make it to his phone to signal Shotgun. Stepping into a hole and then...

The snap of the trap closing around his leg echoed in his mind. Finn struggled to breathe. That was it. He'd been caught and the steel tore into his leg and he would always be in pain. He lifted his head and struggled to see through a haze of pain and disorientation. He gripped what felt like straps underneath him, and arched his back against the agony flaring through his nerves as another lurch jostled his leg.

"Don't move," a panicked voice said. "Please don't move, I can't do it if things change. We're almost there."

Finn struggled to identify the strange but semi-familiar tone. Who the fuck was that? Young and female, uncertain, strained. In pain, too. He didn't like that. The bear definitely didn't like that. Her scent, made stronger from physical exertion, tangled in his brain and ran through him like morphine.

Lauren.

What the hell was she doing? He forced his eyes open to take in the situation. On the narrow trail, heading up a gentle incline. A branch to each side, straps underneath him, a rifle and shotgun cradled in his arm. Lauren's voice came from behind him,

huffing and puffing. She dragged him? She'd made a litter and dragged him away from the trap. Clever, clever girl.

His chest tightened with the kind of affection he hadn't felt in years. She was an unbelievable gift. "Okay."

She exhaled in relief. "Oh my God, you're still alive. I didn't know... I mean, of course you are. You're going to be fine. You shouldn't have done it on your own, though. I could have helped you open that trap. You didn't need to..."

"Lauren," he said, his voice rough with pain.

"Yeah?"

"Breathe."

She laughed, though it sounded watery and barely on the safe side of hysterical. Definitely on the edge, but not pushed past her limits just yet. "I'm trying. I'm trying. It's just I didn't know what to do and I still don't know what we're going to do, because the cabin definitely isn't where someone with that kind of injury should go. I don't have real first aid supplies, I don't think, although there might be some at the cabin, and we definitely can't call an ambulance this far from town or..."

"Breathe," he repeated. Finn squeezed his eyes shut against the white-hot fire eating up his leg. He'd never felt anything like it before. "We'll figure it out."

He loved that he could say "we" and mean it. He wanted to have her and him become "we." He hardly remembered her face or any details about her physical appearance, but he knew her scent and her voice and that was more than enough for him and the bear to know she was right. She was worth everything. He didn't know why they couldn't call an ambulance, even though he had no intention of going to a hospital

and letting a doc take blood samples and figure out he wasn't a typical human. But if she didn't want to call an ambulance, they wouldn't. If she did...well, he could find a way to deal with it.

Finn hated that he lay help less , that she struggled to drag him along an uneven trail. He should have been the one carrying her to safety. But even with the bear's powerful urge to pick her up and take her somewhere nice and warm, the man knew his leg wouldn't support his own weight, much less hers and the pack and the weapons. He forced himself to remain still, even as he wanted to roll off the sledge and crawl to their destination instead of making her bear his weight.

One of the branches caught in a dip and wrenched to the side, almost pitching him off the straps. Finn groaned and held tightly to the weapons so they didn't fall. Lauren lurched to a halt. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't see it, are you..."

"I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth. Bright lights sparked behind his eyes. He couldn't yell at her. Couldn't risk scaring her. It wasn't her fault, and he was grateful she still wanted to help him instead of dropping the branches and walking away. "Just ignore me. You're doing a great job."

She snorted and huffed at the same time, and Finn smothered a smile in case she saw it and took offense. But she might as well have been hauling around a box of rocks for all the notice she took. Lauren shook her head and took another step, pausing immediately to groan and adjust the shoulder straps. Finn braced for disaster as the branches underneath him rocked and he anticipated getting dumped down the slope to his left. That kind of fall might finish him off, and he tensed in case he needed to catch himself.

But Lauren settled and restarted her slow trudge. Finn closed his eyes but remained conscious. He had to stay conscious. He got the sense Lauren reached the edge of her control, and with the physical strain of dragging him along, she could break. Finn

cleared his throat. Maybe he could distract her from the hardship and misery of dragging him along. “Where are we going?”

“Cabin,” she said, panting. Two more plodding steps, then she paused to breathe. “Small and dilapidated. But at least it’s shelter.”

Smart girl. “Have you stayed there before?”

“I live there,” she said, then groaned. “No, that’s not what I meant. Obviously I can’t live there. It’s falling down and no reasonable person would stay there with winter approaching. I just meant—I’ve stayed there before. I know the owner so when I needed a place to hi—a place to hang out in peace, he let me stay.”

She knew the owner? How did she know Simon?

But a lightning bolt of pain lanced through him and disintegrated that line of questioning as Lauren took a few more reluctant steps. Finn clenched his jaw. Something definitely wasn’t right. His leg should have been completely healed. Could there have been something on the steel that prevented the wound from closing? He squeezed his eyes shut. If they didn’t get to the cabin, there weren’t other options. It wasn’t like they could show up at a hotel looking like bears had been gnawing on his leg without drawing too much attention. He’d have to call Simon or Ethan, and one of those colossal asses would lecture him the entire drive back to the Lodge. Several hours of hearing about all the ways he’d fucked up and all the ways they dreamed about improving his behavior. Lectures. Lectures upon lectures.

He didn’t care how dilapidated the cabin was. It would be a haven compared to calling in the rest of the bears. Finn knew he’d have to contact them eventually, but at least for a couple of weeks he could enjoy Lauren’s company all alone. He would hunt or fish to feed them, and... He frowned as another thought stuck through the pain. She’d seen him change from his bear form and yet hadn’t said a word about it.

She acted like it hadn't happened.

Another bump distracted him and he groaned in a low, drawn-out protest that sounded absurd. Lauren whispered something, then exhaled and collapsed. The resulting drop rattled the Finn's teeth and lit his entire body on fire in a deep, enduring throbbing that worsened instead of getting better. The yelp that escaped was undignified but he couldn't swallow it back. Burning tears coated his eyelashes, but he clenched his fists and retained control by the barest thread.

"I'm sorry," Lauren panted. She groaned, too, and the sledge jostled as she untangled herself from the harness. "But we're here. I just need to...rest for a second. Just a second. That was a longer hike than I remembered. But we can rest and then I'll get you inside. It's not far. Just a little...just a few steps."

He could imagine how exhausted she felt. She probably hadn't had to drag a full-grown man any distance before. Finn steeled himself and managed to slowly sit up, a few inches at a time, though his head swam and nausea brewed in his guts. He broke out in a cold sweat and had to hold on to the branches as he hovered at the edge of passing out again. He grew overheated and uncomfortable, despite still being naked and outside as the fall air grew crisper with night's approach. Clouds gathered and far away; thunder rumbled and the wind picked up.

It was probably shock or something getting close. Which meant he'd soon become a dead weight for her again. He needed to deal with his leg and get inside, and at least show her the satellite phone to call friends or whoever let her stay out there. Surely she didn't really know Simon. It had to be a misunderstanding.

She'd emptied most of his pack's contents onto his chest to wrangle the frame into a harness to tow the sledge, which he appreciated from a practical standpoint. He moved most of the clothes and gear off to the side until he found the first aid kit. Finn clenched his jaw. His numb fingers struggled with the heavy-duty zipper on the black

bag. He was half a second from ripping the bag apart with his teeth when the damn thing finally opened. His hands shook as he fumbled the nonstick wound covers and the stretchy bandages. Clean it. Cover it. Get inside.

Finn concentrated on one step at a time, relying on the medical training they'd received in the Legion. It wasn't an ideal situation by any means, but you seldom had the luxury of the exact tool you needed when you needed it. The water bottle had enough left that it cleaned some of the blood out of the wound and took bit of debris with it, but he knew he couldn't delay a more thorough cleaning without risking a serious infection. But he damn well wasn't going to crawl through the dirt to a ratty, falling-down cabin with an open wound.

The world darkened around the edges as sweat trickled down his back and his vision blurred. He was too focused on one task, knew he'd gotten tunnel vision to the exclusion of everything else, but there wasn't anything to do about it. He had to bandage the wound. He didn't want Lauren to see the ugly red flaps of torn muscle and broken skin, the hint of yellow-white bone shards mixed in. Finn clenched his jaw and figured he could fumble with stitches and butterfly closures later. First he needed to deal with the mess, get Lauren inside, and get some food.

He breathed through his nose as his shaking hands drew everything out twice as long as it normally took, but eventually he secured the sticky, stretchy wound wrap around his leg from ankle to knee, and exhaled in relief. It still hurt like a son of a bitch, but at least he didn't have to look at it for a while. He helped himself to some of the morphine injectables and thanked Ethan with every cell in his body that the medic managed to keep a fresh stock of painkillers in every first aid kit. Just one didn't help much but a second definitely took the edge off.

The trees and dirt and rapidly darkening sky tilted a bit more than normal as he unclipped the straps on one of the branches and used the gnarled wood to haul himself to his feet. Finn fixed his attention on the dark rectangle of the cabin's door.

Just needed to get inside. Just a short hop.

Lauren gasped. “You’re—you shouldn’t be walking, you’re going to...”

“Get the rifle and shotgun,” he managed to say. “Whatever other supplies you can bring in. It’s getting cold and we need to build up a fire.”

She blinked those wide, beautiful eyes at him in alarm, but she didn’t move to gather up the belongings strewn across the dirt. She hovered near him, like she meant to catch him if he fell, and Finn wanted to snap at her to back off. It was the bear, hurting and frustrated and unforgivably weak. He swallowed it all back save the growl as he braced against the side of the cabin. Every inch of his body throbbed but the morphine made things slower and softer. Not quite easy, but getting there.

“I’m okay, Lauren,” he managed in an almost gentle tone. It took all his strength and left him light-headed with the effort, but he damn well wasn’t going to snap at her. “I’ll make it inside. It’s a good idea for you to get as much of our stuff inside as you can before that storm rolls in.”

He made it inside before she finally rushed to grab up the bits and pieces that had fallen out of his pack, and she even dragged the branches inside before shutting and locking the broken door. Optimistic of her, to think that locking it would make a difference when there were holes in the ceiling. Finn looked at the structure, unimpressed. It was even worse than he remembered.

The front of the cabin was a kitchen and dining room connected to a living room with fireplace, with more rooms in the back behind a wall. The front room was all open, drafty to start with and made draftier by the cracks between the logs of the external walls. They had lost all the insulation packed between them, and the roof had thin spots and holes that let in even more cold air. She’d set up camp near the fireplace, a dragged in front of it, and a duffel bag with clothes and a few crates of food made up

the rest of her nest.

Finn frowned as he surveyed the slim pickings. Something else was going on. Surely a girl like Lauren wouldn't be living in squalor in a shitty cabin as fall turned to winter. Nothing good that would drive her out of even a small town to the edge of downright wild and dangerous land filled with bears and drug smugglers. She didn't have enough supplies to mean it was a planned, long-term stay, but she had too much to account for just a short hiking trip with an opportunity for better shelter than a tent. Something else was definitely going on with her. Secrets. On the run from something.

As he studied the various piles of things in front of him, Lauren mumbled under her breath and rushed around him to start shoveling clothes into the duffel and straightening the sleeping bag and sheets that made up the bed. Finn wanted to laugh. She couldn't actually be self-conscious about the state of a cabin that was falling down about their ears.

Her cheeks flushed as she put a hand to her forehead. "You should lie down. You should really lie down, but I don't have clean sheets and I would hate for you to..."

"Looks like heaven," he muttered. Finn hobbled one step, then two, until he almost reached the mattress. "If you don't mind sharing."

Her jaw dropped at she stared at him, and her expression revealed the thought of sharing hadn't even occurred to her. He started laughing and lost his balance. He fell toward the mattress but the morphine caught him and dropped him straight down through the floor and into the dirt far below.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:43 am

LAUREN

She'd never been so exhausted and weak and afraid, even after being arrested for a crime she didn't commit. Lauren still didn't know how she managed to get the semi-conscious man up the hill to the cabin. Well, to the cleared area in front of the cabin. One knee gave out and she fell. Her thighs trembled and she planned to crawl inside. Except for...

When she turned back, she found Finn had managed to bandage his leg and clamber to his feet. She could only stare at him. Maybe his leg hadn't been as badly injured as she'd thought? But no, that wasn't possible. And wasn't true, based on the blood seeping into the bandages wrapped around his calf. He looked unsteady and incredibly focused at the same time, marching into the cabin and saying something about getting the supplies.

Lauren knew better than to take her eyes off someone that injured when they were up and moving around. She remembered that much from when Mom and her various boyfriends were high or drunk or had just beaten each other into semi-consciousness. There was no calculating how much damage one impaired person could do to themselves—and everything around them—while unsupervised. She meant to tell him to sit down before he fell down, but Finn started laughing at something she said and abruptly passed out face-first into the mattress.

Which gave her another marvelous view of his tight, perfectly-formed ass. Unbelievable. He looked more like one of those Greek statues she'd seen in books before she left school than any regular man. Lauren shook her head and managed to roll him onto his side so he wouldn't choke in case he vomited, then built up some of

his clothes to support his damaged leg. She vaguely remembered something about needing to elevate injuries like that, though she could have misremembered entirely. She hesitated. Maybe she should leave him as he was...

Lauren covered him up with one of those flashy silver emergency blankets from his pack so he'd have some kind of warmth until she found a sleeping bag or more of his clothes. She spent the next hour dragging shit into the cabin, hauling in firewood, and struggling to keep her composure. She found a satellite phone, camera equipment, and small laptop in his bag, along with food and clothes and even a book. A history book, it looked like. Something to do with salt. Another sleeping bag and inflatable mat, neither of which looked used. Which was strange. He must have been out in the forest for some time, since he'd been coming the opposite way as the town, and his ridiculously bushy beard and wild hair spoke to no running water or razors for weeks. She didn't remember there being many other towns or launch points in the other direction. What had he done at night if not sleep in his bag?

Maybe he found a den to curl up in. A bear wouldn't need a sleeping bag.

She pushed the thought aside. Ridiculous. Completely absurd. Maybe he had a big, fluffy brown dog that followed him around and cuddled up to him at night. Maybe the dog had been protecting him while Finn was injured and trapped, and it ran away when Lauren approached. That had to be it. Of course. A large dog could definitely look like a bear, and it explained the growling she'd heard.

Once she'd brought everything inside, Lauren stood in the middle of the living room and looked around, at a loss for what to do. Finn remained unconscious and naked and injured, and his bandages had soaked all the way through with dark red. How could his leg still be bleeding? He had to need stitches or staples or whatever, or at least tighter bandages.

She steeled her courage. First thing first. Boil water. Find food to eat for both of

them. Then figure out how to make more first aid supplies from the random bits and pieces that remained in the cabin. She hadn't searched the back rooms thoroughly, and there was a shed out back that could contain any number of things.

Even though all she wanted to do was curl up and sleep, Lauren got to work. Build up the fire. Check the water supply. Boil some water. Put cans of chili and beans near the fire to heat up. Take stock of the rest of his first aid kit. Search for more in the cabin. Grab sheets from the wardrobe in the smaller bedroom. Wrap up in a few more layers as a chill worked through the cabin.

Her energy faded and she knew she couldn't keep moving much longer. Every inch of her ached. She used her headlamp to study Finn's leg. He hadn't really stirred except when she draped a heavier blanket over him. He'd only opened his eyes and muttered something about keeping the rifle close. Then he passed out again.

She sighed and carefully cut the gross bandages off his leg, and turned away before she barfed all over the nasty hamburger in front of her. She didn't know how to do stitches, but there was a massive orange box of first aid bits and pieces in the back room that at least gave her a handful of those butterfly closures.

She found a mask and a menthol antibiotic cream to dab under her nose so she didn't smell the yucky bits, and took a deep breath before she sat down on the mattress next to him. Okay. She just needed to treat it like dissecting a frog in eighth grade. Gross but necessary. Infection would set in and turn deadly, and she'd definitely have to call for park rangers or paramedics.

She braced herself and dipped out the still-hot water she'd boiled to start the painstaking process of cleaning the blood away to really see what they had to deal with. Every new visible inch made it clear it was going to take an eternity.

SCENE brEAK

Lauren's hands shook so much she had to take a break. When she checked her phone, she realized it had been over an hour spent cleaning out the wound with no end in sight, and about twelve hours since she'd eaten breakfast. Her vision blurred from staring into the nasty cuts, searching for pieces of bark and dirt and bone, maneuvering things out with the long tweezers from the medic case. She got up to stretch her back and legs, even though her thighs protested and every other muscle had seized in place from hunching over his leg for so long.

She scrubbed her hands again and retrieved the can of chili from the fire. She struggled to keep her eyes open as she gulped it down as quickly as possible without burning her mouth, but she knew she couldn't sleep yet. When Lauren returned to his side, she found Finn's face flushed and sweaty. Feverish.

Her heart sank. Oh man. She definitely couldn't handle a fever and a torn-up leg. He really would need a hospital before an infection set in. Lauren squeezed her eyes shut and struggled for calm. She couldn't abandon him, that was for damn sure, but that didn't mean she had any idea of what to do next. She was a screw-up, a disaster. No matter what she decided to do, it would be the wrong thing. Stupid, ditzy Lauren. She'd heard it her whole life.

She sat on the edge of the mattress next to his shoulder, her back to him, and stared into the fire as it crackled and consumed what little firewood she'd managed to gather. Maybe feeding the drag-pole branches to the flames would be enough for warmth through the night. It wasn't good for feverish people to be cold. Or was it? Did that help keep a fever down? How the hell would she survive the night without the fire?

Lauren took a shaky breath. And what if he died? It wasn't like calling the police to take him away was an option. They'd find her, an accused arsonist and attempted murderer, and a dead body, and then she'd be charged with actual murder, too. Even if Finn looked like he'd been mauled by a bear. No one would believe her. No one

ever believed her.

“Hey,” a rusty voice said, and something touched the small of her back.

Lauren jumped, her heart plummeting, and almost fell into the fire. She probably would have if Finn hadn’t caught a handful of her shirt and hauled her back. She fell back against his chest, terrified of hurting him, and froze. He grumbled but it didn’t sound pained. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe normally. It probably wasn’t a good idea for the injured guy to find out that she’d been planning what to do in case he died. It didn’t show a lot of confidence in his recovery. “How do—how do you feel?”

“Terrible,” he said. Finn’s eyes were only half open but she saw gold through the dark lashes. His arm looped around her waist and kept her tight to his side. “Need water.”

“Of course,” she said. She leaned to stand up, but his arm only flexed like a massive, muscular seatbelt. Lauren laughed breathlessly, a little nervous to actually feel how strong he was, and patted his bare shoulder. “Gotta let me go, big guy.”

He grumbled again and adjusted his arm. His broad hand settled against her hip with a gentle squeeze. “You stay.”

“I need to get the water,” she said. Lauren’s heart tripped and stuttered. Holy crap he was strong. Her fingers didn’t even meet around his wrist as she tried to pry his hand away. “And you need to eat.”

“Better with you here.” He turned his head toward her, distressingly close to her ass, and sighed. “Much better.”

Lauren’s vision blurred in a surge of emotion. What the hell was going on? How

could he possibly feel better with her around? And why did he feel strongly enough about it to try to embrace her with his leg half-cleaned and gory, feverish and flushed, and naked on a mattress in a shitty cabin? The knot in her throat stuck no matter how hard she swallowed. She slid her fingers through his wild hair, suddenly adrift and afraid but also...affectionate. "You don't even know me."

"I do," he murmured. He made a face as he moved to his side, and slid his other arm around her as well. "I've been looking for you."

Every inch of her went cold. He'd been looking for her? He was a bounty hunter? Her heart crashed to her feet and the cabin blurred around her. Obviously he was in that part of the forest for a reason, and it wasn't to admire the wildlife or search for a Sasquatch. She pressed her hands to her face. Stupid Lauren. Yet again she'd screwed up. "How did you find me?"

"Luck."

Of course. Her bad luck and his good luck. Well, if his good luck was getting caught in a bear trap, she didn't want to be around when he ran into bad luck. She tried to wall her heart off. Just as well. She would make sure that his leg was as good as she could make it, then she'd leave the satellite phone near him to call for backup or whatever, and she'd get the hell out of there before he woke up again.

Where she'd go, she had no idea. She cleared her throat and hauled at his arms. "Let me go, Finn."

He growled in annoyance but his hold loosened. She wriggled free and ignored how the firelight made him look like some kind of nude old timey painting. He had no right to be so good-looking and built and...perfect. She struggled to breathe evenly as she retrieved cool water to drink, and put the cup to his lips without getting quite close enough for him to catch again. His arm definitely moved like he meant to pull

her close. But Lauren skirted the attempt and spent time on the other side of the cabin like a damn coward, hoping he would pass out again.

Instead, Finn pushed upright and shook himself like a wet dog. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes had returned to that smooth milk chocolate. Lauren gnawed on her lip as she struggled with how to answer. He had to be fishing for more evidence, some kind of admission. He’d already said he’d been looking for her. What more did he want her to say? “Nothing in particular.”

The light from her headlamp moved over his face and his eyes reflected it back to her like a cat’s. Lauren’s head tilted as she studied him. That was odd.

He squinted. “Come back, Lauren.”

“I have to get you water. And...and food,” she whispered, except the food was near the fire. She hoped he didn’t realize it. Maybe there were more pain killers in his first aid kit, and she could knock him out. Keep him unconscious until she knew what to do. It was a shitty thing to do, and probably dangerous, but her thoughts scattered and splintered until she didn’t even remember how to move her feet.

Finn flopped to his back, groaning, then gestured at the remains of his pack. “Protein bars. Just toss me a couple. Two bottles of water. The silver bag.”

Warily, Lauren collected the items he wanted and tossed them onto the mattress next to his left side. Finn studied her with his head tilted, curiosity sparking through him, and he wadded up the blanket covering him under his shoulders so he could watch as she sat near his injured leg again. At least he left the silver emergency blanket in place.

Finn ripped open a protein bar and devoured it in two bites. “You don’t have to do

that. I'll clean it up."

"You shouldn't have to," she said. "And you might get an infection. I didn't know how long you were going to be out so..." She shrugged.

He moderated his tone, his voice turning gentle and quiet. The very opposite of what he appeared to be. He didn't try to touch her again, at least. "You did a great job. Thank you. And you helped get me out of that trap, even when you didn't have to. I can't say how much I appreciate it, Lauren. I owe you my life."

Her cheeks heated and she shrugged again. "I'm sure anyone would have..."

"No," he said. "Not everyone would have done what you did. You must be exhausted."

She was. She really, really was. Not just from the intense physical exertion of that particular day, but from all the emotional and mental exhaustion that hung around her every day. Not knowing when someone would kick in the door to arrest her, not knowing when or if Ginger would bring her food or she'd have to venture into town to beg and steal, not knowing what she would do for the rest of her life. Her fragile control frayed still more. Her vision blurred and she struggled to swallow the knot in her throat.

Finn's expression softened at whatever he saw in her face. He slowly reached for her hand, and Lauren didn't pull away. She should have, maybe, since he was a bounty hunter and everything. And still really naked. But she was too tired to bolt to her feet again, even though she knew she should have and she needed to put more wood on the fire and get her sleeping bag out and figure out where she was going to sleep, since obviously she couldn't...

"Hey," Finn said. His thumb smoothed over the back of her hand. "Come back for a

second.”

“What?” Lauren blinked as she looked at him, puzzled. She couldn’t see as much of his face with the wild beard, and she wondered what he looked like clean-shaven. Probably even more handsome, with her luck.

“You were thinking really hard about something and you went somewhere else,” he said. A hint of a smile crept into the lines around his eyes. “Stay with me for a second.”

She flushed and tried to turn her attention back to his leg. “I should finish this up. Then you can get some rest.”

“I’ll do it,” he said. Finn squeezed her wrist and smiled, a flash of white teeth in the dark beard, and sat up enough he could potentially reach his injuries. “I’ve stitched myself up before. I might need you to hand me a few things, but I don’t want you getting up and moving around so much.”

Her heart sank. No doubt he didn’t want to risk her making a break for it. Any second he would break out the handcuffs and shackle her to the stove or something. Lauren took a shaky breath and pulled away again. “I won’t argue.”

Again, he studied her like a curious puzzle, but didn’t push it. He didn’t threaten her, which was already miles better than any other man she’d been around in a while. That would come later, no doubt. She swallowed the knot in her throat. She just had to get through the night, then in the morning she’d hike to town. He’d be completely fine. He had his phone and all of his painkillers and plenty of food and clothes to stay warm. He could call in his bounty hunter friends and they’d carry him out of the forest. She struggled not to cry. She’d never felt so alone.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:44 am

FINN

Finn woke up and knew something had changed. The air felt different. Lauren acted differently. She was subdued, uneasy. It made the bear tense. Had he said or done something under the morphine or from the pain that offended her? Hurt her? He sorted through the blurry muddle in his mind and remembered a few scraps of conversation, but nothing substantial. Nothing to account for the change.

Maybe she regretted getting him out of the trap and bringing him to her safe haven. He was a stranger, after all, and she was a woman alone. So he eased back and moved slow and calm, wanting her to get comfortable with him again. He couldn't smother the fear out of her, that was for damn sure, even though the bear wanted to drag her into his arms and hold her until she knew she was safe. He inhaled as many protein bars as he could get his hands on, then dumped twice as much protein powder into his water as normal, so he practically had to chew the shake to get it down. Didn't matter. He needed his leg to start healing, and fast.

Which was the other reason he hadn't wanted her cleaning his leg. The presto-change-o healing in a day or so would stand out if she'd been wrist-deep in his calf.

She sat stiff and uncomfortable near his feet as Finn sat up and examined what she'd been doing. It still hurt like a son of a bitch, and some of the digging around had woken him up with the little sparks of agony. But the wound was definitely cleaner. The blood clotted right and though there were some chips in the bones, it didn't burn like it had even a few hours before.

Finn put on some gloves and got to work. Lauren silently handed him gauze and

clean cloths and water, then the butterfly closures. He smiled at her, wanting to put her at ease. “We should save those. Is there a suture kit still in the bag?”

Her eyebrows rose, but she didn’t say anything. Just got up to retrieve the rest of the first aid kit so he could paw through it. Finn hated not knowing what she was thinking. How had she gone from a torrent of words to silence? Something had to have changed. But what?

“Have you ever given anyone stitches?” he asked. It wasn’t the best conversational topic, but he couldn’t think of a better one. He hadn’t seen any movies lately, only liked books that other people found boring, and couldn’t touch the part of his life that included a bear and several other bears. He had no idea what to talk about with a woman. His only recent experience was listening to Franny’s school troubles and avoiding Zoe’s too-real conversations about baby poop and lactation and... Finn pushed away that memory. None of them wanted to remember that particular day.

Her brow furrowed. “No.”

“Now’s as good a time to learn as any,” he said. Finn glanced up, eyebrow arched. “It’s gross, I know. You don’t have to watch over me if you want to go to bed or have something else to do.”

Not that there was much to do in the shitty cabin.

She pointed at her head and the lamp. “You need the light.”

Very practical. He smiled, then jerked his chin at the remains of his pack. “My headlamp should be in the top pack. Yeah, next to the iodine filter.”

He spread lidocaine gel along the sides of the wound so maybe the stitches wouldn’t hurt as badly while he waited, and held his breath as the numbing slowly killed the

tedious ache. The deeper throb remained, in time with his heartbeat, as his nerves tweaked and twinged. Definitely nerve damage.

Lauren hesitated after handing him the lamp, and Finn looked up at her, waiting.

She flushed and abruptly turned away. “I need to—clean up.” And she fled toward the back bedroom like her ass was on fire.

He frowned, puzzled. Maybe the first step to getting her to relax was him putting on some pants. But first...the stitches.

The morphine had completely worn off, and so had the lidocaine, by the time he finished. It was the ugliest set of stitches he’d ever seen, but it held the wound together and could keep dirt and shit out of it. Good enough for wilderness medicine. Finn glanced up to find Lauren watching him from across the room, sitting in a rickety chair he didn’t remember being in the kitchen.

Finn felt suddenly weary. He didn’t have the mental energy to muddle through whatever conversational minefield awaited. He had no idea what time it was or what waited the next morning. He hoped the smugglers didn’t follow him and hadn’t heard him yelling in the trap, and he really hoped that whatever Lauren was hiding didn’t land on their doorstep for at least twenty-four hours.

His stiff fingers fumbled the bottles of pills Ethan had also included in the first aid kit, and he left the morphine in case things got worse before they got better. When he couldn’t manage the lid, Lauren approached to take it from him. Finn took some antibiotics and a middle-of-the-road narcotic that would dull the pain but not incapacitate him. Just in case someone came knocking in the middle of the night.

He took a deep breath and weighed his next words. He wasn’t usually shy about inviting a girl into his bed, but usually they both knew what was going to happen.

Finn stretched to retrieve clean underwear and sweatpants from the pile of his clothes, but hit pause on that until he could cover the stitches with a clean bandage and wrap it up. “I don’t know about you, but I’m wiped out. I’ll get my sleeping bag out and be out of your way in just a second.”

He maneuvered to put the clothes on under the emergency blanket so she didn’t get another eyeful of his junk, concentrating on that instead of Lauren’s wide eyes and the way her pupils dilated. He yawned and moved like he meant to stand or at least crawl, and she jumped forward. “Wait. Don’t—don’t get up. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” he said. “I’ll sleep on the floor. I’ve been camping the last couple of weeks anyway, and at least this floor doesn’t have random rocks in it.” And he smiled, hoping it might thaw through whatever had disturbed her.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” she said. Her expression remained serious, so he didn’t know whether to laugh or not.

Finn kept his smile in place as a way to split the difference. Lauren smiled hesitantly in response, though she gnawed her lip as she debated. She smelled faintly of soap and lotion and toothpaste, so clearly she meant to go to sleep. And she needed it; already her eyes drooped, and she barely stayed on her feet. He couldn’t abide the thought of her sleeping on the floor while he had a mattress, but he wouldn’t forgive himself if she was uncomfortable and miserable all night. Neither of them needed that.

She took a hesitant step closer, then put the last few sticks on the fire. “It’s too cold at night away from the fire. I guess—I guess we can share the mattress. If you don’t...”

“I promise to be a perfect gentleman,” he said. Finn put his hand over his heart and saw her gaze follow, lingering on his bare chest. A slight flush rose up her throat and into her cheeks, and Lauren looked away quickly to stare up at the ceiling and shift

her feet uncomfortably.

He had a hard time swallowing his grin. Maybe she wouldn't have minded a good look at him. Finn stretched and made sure she could see as he picked up his sleeping bag and more layers to put on in case it really got cold. He seldom had to worry about cold; to that point, he'd been sleeping as a bear since it was more insulated. He didn't have that option with her there, but if things got dicey, he could always sleep in the back bedroom and just plan to be awake before her to change back.

Finn unrolled the bag and maneuvered so he was on the side of the mattress away from the fire. When Lauren looked about to protest, he shook his head resolutely. "Absolutely not. You'll sleep closest to the fire so you can stay warm. I'll be fine."

The bear didn't precisely agree, since they wouldn't be fine until she was in his sleeping bag with him. But Finn put that aside. If she'd still been a bit scatterbrained but sweet and open and chatty, he might have tried for a kiss, maybe a make out session. With her as nervous as she was... No way in hell would he risk it.

He folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes, pretending to fall asleep. Lauren hesitated, not moving for several heartbeats, but she took a shaky breath and crept around the mattress to the side closest to the fire. More rustling revealed she moved the blankets and sheets and a pillow around. Her scent washed over him as she curled up, practically on the edge of the mattress, and adjusted the nest she'd made. He worried she would be cold in the night, but mentioning anything while he was supposed to be asleep would probably scare the shit out of her and then neither of them would be able to relax.

The narcotics started to drag him away as everything relaxed and grew fuzzy, and he sighed. She was in reach. He just had to remember, she was safe and within reach if anything happened. Besides, she already saw him change once. If he had to go bear to protect her, he would. He started to turn toward her but the pain lighting up his leg

reminded him to stay where he was. Finn clenched his jaw. Staying away from her would be harder than he'd thought.

LAUREN

She almost lost what remained of her composure when he talked about sleeping on the floor. Even as afraid as she was that he meant to haul her to jail the next day, Lauren still kinda wanted to sleep next to him. Not just because he looked like a furnace—even without the fever that still reddened his cheeks—but because it had been a long, long time since she slept next to anyone.

And stupid her, but when he said he'd be a gentleman, she actually believed him. He hadn't once snapped at her or yelled or called her stupid, even while being terribly injured and in an unbelievable amount of pain. If he had that kind of self-control, he would definitely be able to keep his hands to himself.

Surely there was some kind of professional code where bounty hunters didn't sleep with bail jumpers. He couldn't possibly want to roll around with her, especially with his leg the way it was. Yeah, he'd held her against his side when he was half-conscious from the drugs and pain, and said something about feeling better with her nearby, but that was just the medication talking. He didn't really mean it. Or he meant it in the sense that he'd caught her and he didn't want to chase her more. Of course he'd feel better if he didn't have to work very hard.

Finn agreed to stay on the mattress but moved himself over, and before she even thought to object, he frowned and said very clearly that she would stay near the fire. It sounded sweet in a practical kind of way, until she looked at the arrangement and realized he blocked her from the door. She'd have to climb over him or roll out the foot of the mattress to run, and doubtless he would notice either. Trapped.

Her heart cracked a little more and whatever energy she had left drained away. There wasn't anything to do but put on a few more layers and clamber into bed, acutely aware of his every breath and movement.

She didn't expect to sleep, but the day's exertions left her so tired that the moment her eyes closed, she passed out.

Lauren woke up in the night, tense and afraid that someone had found the cabin and was coming to get her, but someone said gruffly, "You're okay, you're safe."

It took forever for her muddled thoughts to put the pieces together: Finn. He patted her hip with a heavy hand, clearly mostly still asleep himself.

She shivered and curled up. She wasn't okay and she definitely wasn't safe.

But at least she was warmer than she remembered being at night for weeks. Even the persistent breeze from the hole in the roof in the back of the house couldn't reach her. Finn radiated heat like a furnace, more than the fire had ever kicked out even when stacked high.

And that was the last thing she remembered until birds singing forced her to pry her eyes open. Lauren lifted her head, reorienting herself in the light that filled the cabin. She'd never slept so late or so deeply since that awful night at the oil company's offices. Her hands slid through the sheets as she stretched, feeling warm and relaxed and...

Her fingers bumped into a warm mountain next to her. Lauren froze, holding her breath, as the mountain moved. Rolled over until Finn faced her. He grumbled in his sleep, making an uncomfortable noise as his leg moved, and reached for her. Finn pulled her close to spoon and pressed his nose into her hair. His arm draped over her side. It should have felt claustrophobic, to be so completely surrounded and held

tight.

Especially since he was a bounty hunter and meant to truly trap her.

But the soft hush of his breathing and the gentle weight of his arm on her side made her all sleepy and content. She felt safe and protected. It was absurd, of course, since he posed more danger to her than almost anything else in the forest, but Lauren knew he'd manage things if anything threatened them. Even with his bum leg.

It didn't seem to pain him as much as he sighed and nuzzled against her shoulder, his lips drifting along her bare skin. It certainly didn't distract him from some randy thoughts in his dreams, since his body reacted to them being all snuggled up, and soon a substantial cock pressed against her butt. Lauren blinked and blushed when she realized what poked her. But she didn't pull away.

She didn't remember the last time she'd slept next to a guy who didn't immediately try to make a move or take advantage of her being asleep. Being poor made finding a safe place to sleep difficult and dangerous. You couldn't trust anyone. And yet she hadn't hesitated to curl up next to Finn. She didn't move away when he held her close. She didn't object or squirm or wake him up when what felt like a baseball bat nudged between her cheeks.

She wanted to arch her back and work her fingers into his hair, pull his strong hand to her breast and encourage him to kiss her. Make her feel good for the first time in years. He could do it, she was damn sure. With as careful as he'd been around her, Lauren had no doubt he would be equally considerate having sex.

As humiliating as fucking a bounty hunter could end up being, she pushed the thought of how their relationship would end away so she lived in the present. So what if those same strong hands put cuffs on her and marched her into jail? So what if the firm, warm lips that drifted to the soft spot behind her ear reported her crimes and

told the guards to take her away? Was it really so bad to just enjoy that moment with him and deal with the consequences later? She could still run away.

Maybe he would fall asleep after a good workout and she could flee then. The afterglow would be a great distraction.

Lauren pressed her lips together to keep from moaning as Finn's hand stroked her stomach, and she pushed her ass back into him in invitation. Maybe if she reached back...

She squeezed her eyes shut as Finn snorted awake and froze. Every muscle in his body tensed. He groaned softly and eased his hand away from where it had been about to quest under her sweatpants. Finn said, "Fuck," under his breath and rolled to his back.

Cool air that moved against her back and side without him to warm it away. A curious sense of loss washed over her along with the chilly morning. For a second, she could have pretended life was normal and she had a strong, handsome boyfriend. Him waking up just made clear those weren't their circumstances at all.

She didn't think there would be another chance to sleep next to him. No doubt he'd want to march them both toward town to get a vehicle and deliver her to jail. Lauren hid her face in the sheets and hoped she could fall asleep and make the illusion last just a little bit longer.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:44 am

FINN

He vaguely remembered waking up in the night a few times, mostly because Lauren tensed or thrashed around in some kind of nightmare. Finn didn't know what the hell to do, so he woke her up each time and told her what he wanted to hear when he woke up from a nightmare: you're okay, you're safe, I've got you.

Finn didn't have any dreams of his own, which was a fucking miracle, until things took a very specific turn and his imagination went wild with the sweet, soft woman in his arms. He never should have slept in the same bed. A true gentleman would have slept on the damn floor instead of pawing at her the moment she fell asleep.

In his dreams, she was his. She was entirely his and knew about his bear side and his past and everything he'd done and she didn't hold it against him. She didn't even care. And then they were in bed and her curvy ass snugged into his groin and lust took over. Finn imagined all the things he wanted to do to her in his half-dream, half-wake state, and it might have also been his imagination that she arched and pushed back to meet him.

But he'd promised to be a gentleman and he damn well wasn't going to treat his mate like a one-night stand or drunk townie by copping a feel in the morning before sending her on her way.

Finn tensed. His mate? Without the pain fogging his thoughts and making the world tilt around him, it was obvious. Of course Lauren was his mate.

He rolled to his back, reluctantly untangling from her, and swore to himself. What a

fucked-up way to start a relationship. He didn't know if she even wanted a relationship. He looked like a wildman and could hardly limp his busted ass around a cabin. Lauren was smart enough to run the other direction, particularly since he'd groped her as she slept. He groaned and covered his face. How had he already fucked up so badly?

"Are you in pain?" Lauren sat up next to him, looking so beautiful it made his chest ache. Her tousled hair fell into her still-sleepy eyes, and she yawned and patted her cheeks as she gingerly moved the blankets and sleeping bags. "Do you need something? Are you hungry? How does your leg feel? Do you think it's..."

"Lauren," he murmured, absently stroking her back. God, he wanted to touch all of her. "Breathe for a second. I'm fine for now. Go back to sleep."

She blinked a few times and looked at the hole in the roof on the other side of the cabin, where the dim light made it look near dawn. "But you've been asleep for so long, the pain meds must have worn off. It's got to be excruciating."

"It's not so bad," he said. The pain disappeared as he gazed at her; she was all he needed. "Probably better to get more rest."

He just wanted her to lay down beside him again so he could daydream that she wanted to stay with him. Lauren hesitated, brushing the hair out of her face as she looked around the cabin, and looked at him dubiously. "But you almost chewed your leg off in that trap. How could it not hurt?"

"As long as I don't move it, I hardly know it's there." It wasn't exactly a lie. The bear would handle any level of pain if him staying still would mean Lauren being more comfortable. He already knew that any real movement from him would send her running. Finn didn't know if she'd noticed him holding her or how much he enjoyed waking up next to her, but he hoped that didn't contribute to her discomfort.

Lauren shivered and drew the blanket closer. “I don’t think we have any more wood for the fire, and it’ll just get colder in here. There’s a lot we need to do and we should look at your leg and make sure...”

“Or,” he said quietly, gently touching her arm to get her attention. “We can relax for a few minutes and enjoy the morning before that list of chores comes to life.”

She looked down at where his fingers rested against her wrist, but she didn’t pull away. She gnawed on her lower lip and glanced at him from under her eyelashes. Finn held his breath.

Lauren squirmed a bit but finally lay back down on her side, facing away from him, and said, “Okay, but we can’t just laze about all day.”

He smiled, studying the tangle of curls and the smooth, tanned skin on her neck and shoulder. “Why not?”

She whipped around and almost cracked his nose with her head. “What do you mean, why not?”

Finn leaned back a touch so they weren’t nose to nose and he wouldn’t be tempted to kiss her. “Don’t you ever just nap all day? Eat a bit, sleep, wander around in your sweatpants, read a book, nap some more?”

“But...” Lauren frowned at him, and her nose scrunched in the most adorable way. He had to clench his fist to keep from capturing her chin to bring to him. “But there are things to do .”

“There are always things to do.” Finn smiled again, loving every minute of being able to look at her from so close up. He couldn’t help it and caressed her cheek. The bear grumbled very softly and imagined pulling her against his chest. “The point is to not

do them, to take a break. Relax. Play hooky and nap. Naps are the best.”

She moved to her back so she didn’t have to crane her neck to look at him. “But you still have to do all those things. All you’ve done is push them back and let other things pile up too. Which means you just have more to do, but in less time.”

God, he loved her already. He could teach her so much about being lazy. The bear wanted to show her exactly how they should spend the next year: sleep, sex, food, sex, sleep, sex, sex, sex... Finn traced his fingertips over her eyebrow and to her temple, exploring the soft swell of her cheek and a slight bump in her nose, a little scar along her jaw near her ear, another mark on her chin. He wanted to know the story behind each mark, though it was odd for a girl her age to have so many scars on her.

Finn played with her hair instead, trying to memorize the feeling of it between his fingers. “What needs to get done will get done. There’s a lot of extra shit that isn’t really necessary but we’re trained to think it is.”

She frowned, starting to look indignant. “Like what?”

“Cleaning dishes, to start.” Finn wondered what she considered necessary. It wasn’t like there was a whole lot to do in that dilapidated cabin, particularly when the world was only half-lit outside. “Gathering firewood. Doing laundry.”

Lauren pushed up on her elbow to look down at him. Definitely indignant. “That is ridiculous. You eat off dirty dishes?”

“Paper plates and chopsticks. Recyclable, saves water. Saves the environment.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So you lay around in dirty clothes? Put on more cologne and hope no one tries to get close?”

No one wanted to get close to him regardless of how he smelled. Finn pushed the thought away and smiled, wanting to tease her. “I’m a bit of a nudist. If you live far enough away from people, no need for clothes.”

Her cheeks flushed as she searched for a response. “Well, that’s completely...um...impractical. And—and—and the firewood. Of course you have to get firewood. We’ll freeze to death.”

“Nah,” Finn said. His heart pounded faster. No telling how she’d react. He just needed to test a bit. Just a tiny bit. He leaned in and her breath caught. He searched her eyes for a hint of what she felt, what she thought. His palm smoothed from her shoulder down to her elbow, moving to rest against the small of her back. “With two of us, there’s plenty of body heat to go around. If you don’t mind a bit of cuddling.”

She stared at him, lips parted, and since she didn’t smack him or roll away in panic, he figured he might as well take a shot. Finn brushed his lips against hers, starting slow, and pulled her closer.

LAUREN

Up until his lips touched hers, Lauren didn't really think Finn would kiss her. Guys like him definitely didn't go for girls like her, particularly when she'd been living in a cabin without running water for a couple of weeks. And especially because he was supposed to take her to jail. Did he expect her to sleep with him so she could maybe change his mind? Would he...trade?

It felt awful to even consider it. She really didn't want to think that Finn would want something like that.

But then his hand slid into her hair and he slanted his mouth against hers and she melted. He didn't demand anything from her. He offered. He coaxed. He teased. Lauren found herself leaning into his chest, closing her eyes and kissing him back. She wanted him. Even if it wasn't for very long.

His tongue slid along the seam of her mouth and she sighed, opening to him. He felt warm and solid and real. Strong. Capable. Like an anchor in the rough seas that swamped her every day practically since she'd been born. Lauren tentatively pressed closer, a fire kindling low in her stomach as his hand slid down to cup her ass.

He made a grumbly, masculine sound and broke the kiss to trail fire across her cheek and down her throat, then back up to the soft spot behind her ear. Lauren leaned back to give him more real estate to work with, and he obliged in the most delicious way. She could lose herself in him. She touched his face and moved her hands through his wild hair.

Finn smiled against her throat, stroking her back under the many shirts she wore. Calluses and hard work left his hands rough, but wonderfully warm. Lauren didn't know whether she wanted to move to her back and drag him on top of her, or push him down so she could straddle him instead. With his leg still messed up, obviously it would be better for her to get on top, but the logistics of removing pants made her hesitate. That and her needing to find the courage to just hop on him and take his...

"Lauren," he murmured, nibbling on her earlobe. "Come back."

"I... I...didn't..." she started, fumbling for sanity as the gentle pressure of his mouth sent shivers of excitement through every inch of her.

Finn grumbled again and bumped his nose to hers. "No need to think. Just feel."

He was right. She did overthink things. Everyone always said she did. But when she acted without thinking and jumped in feet-first...that was how she ended up charged with arson and attempted murder. How the heck did anyone know how much thinking was enough and how much thinking was too much?

His thumb dragged over her nipple and she jumped, gripping his hair.

He smiled lazily. "There we are. What else are you hiding from me?"

And that jerked her back to reality. What else she was hiding from him. He had no idea. Or maybe he did, if he read the charges and saw the pictures after the fire.

Lauren shrank back, suddenly disoriented and panicked. What was she doing? She didn't know this guy at all! He'd been naked in the forest less than a day before and suddenly she ended up in bed with him, kissing and rolling around? And she'd been thinking of actually sleeping with him. Something had gone wrong in her head. The stress of being chased down and found, combined with the exhaustion of hauling him

down the trail, had stolen what remained of her good sense.

Finn stilled but didn't move his hand. "Something wrong?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean, no. I don't know. I should... I need to..."

"Okay," he said. Finn retreated slowly, giving her plenty of space, and him being so considerate made her want to cry. He definitely wasn't like all the other men she'd dated. Why did he have to be a bounty hunter? Why did he have to be the one who would take her to jail? Why couldn't she have found him years ago the normal way, like in a bar?

He stayed on his side to watch her, pale brown eyes concerned. "I'm sorry, Lauren, I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay," she said as brightly as possible. Lauren got to her feet and managed to stay there. Heat flushed through her from embarrassment, then cold followed right after as the breeze whistled through the hole in the roof. She retrieved another shirt to put on, and fumbled with her boots as she hopped over to the kitchen. "Just, uh, adrenaline and morning crazies."

"Morning crazies?"

"What my mom called it when she woke up and didn't have anything to drink or shoot up." Lauren winced as she said it. She hadn't meant to be so honest. And she didn't need him to pity her. Lauren cleared her throat. "I mean, when you wake up out of sorts because you don't remember where you went to sleep or who else...who else was there."

It kept sounding worse and worse. How many normal people woke up without remembering where they were or who else shared the bed? She swallowed a groan

and got close enough to retrieve some of the protein bars from his pack, tossing them onto the mattress next to him. “There you go. I just need to...take a minute,” and she waved in the general direction of the door.

Finn still watched her carefully, tense like he meant to launch after her. “Okay. Just call if you need anything.”

“Right. Of course.” Lauren attempted another smile, knew she failed miserably based on his expression, and slid outside before she lost her mind.

The cold morning air didn’t knock any sense into her and she turned in a circle, searching for a way to escape the intensity of emotion and anxiety inside the cabin. Lauren gulped and squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe if she wished hard enough, everything would be different and she would wake up somewhere else, as someone else. Anyone else. Anyone but Lauren Tucker.

Her chest hurt and she couldn’t take a good breath. The sky remained cloudy and cold, and she thought she saw snowflakes drifting down through the trees. Nothing would get better. If the weather turned, she’d be stuck at the cabin with Finn and she wouldn’t be able to resist him. She’d throw herself at him and be an embarrassing mess.

Lauren covered her face and groaned. She’d rejected him after he kissed her. How the hell would she walk back into the cabin and face him for another moment? Would he even look at her? Men didn’t take rejection well. Even though nothing he’d done seemed to hint he’d take what he wanted whether she offered or not, but...you never knew. She’d been wrong before.

Her heart dropped and she stared at the trees, though she didn’t see them. Yet another thing that Lauren Tucker screwed up. Couldn’t even kiss a willing guy in bed and follow through. She stumbled around to the back of the cabin where she’d made a

deep hole for a bathroom while the weather was tolerable, since the pump toilet in the cabin was a pain in the ass to use and she didn't have the strength of will to actually face Finn.

And then she hunted for firewood as an excuse to not face the good-looking man who probably laughed at her for being a ridiculous loser.

FINN

He'd done something wrong. He knew he'd done something wrong but he had no idea what it was.

Lauren kissed him back. She responded and moved against him and had seemed really into it. Maybe not ready to get naked but at least not repulsed by making out, even with his wild beard. And then something happened after he palmed her breast, and she panicked. Bolted out the door. Paced back and forth and whispered to herself outside before circling around to the back of the cabin.

His superior hearing told him she spoke, but he didn't catch the words themselves. And he didn't want to be caught spying on her from the door if she came back faster than he could hobble away.

Finn growled at himself. Too fast. He'd moved too fast and scared her away.

He pulled the bandages off his leg to check it, then wrapped it back up. It wasn't healing as fast as it should have, but he'd been traveling light and eating lean enough that the lack of calories accounted for the delay. He doubled the protein shake, pounded it, and made another. Lauren moved around outside the cabin, dragging things around after she relieved herself, and Finn started to go out and help her at least half a dozen times. But he'd done enough to make her uncomfortable.

He worked on bending his knees and putting a little weight on his leg. Finn moved through the cabin to stay close to her, and lingered near some of the cracks in the walls when he heard her humming to herself or catch a hint of her smell. He also

surveyed the cabin's structure throughout, making sure it would stay up if snow weighed down the roof, and noted places to patch if they ended up staying longer than just a day or so.

His bear side wanted to renovate the cabin, buy it from Simon, and live there with Lauren forever. He wouldn't have to share her with anyone, and he could protect her from everything out in the forest.

But first he had to get her back inside.

Finn glanced at his watch, though, and smothered a groan. He needed to check in with Shotgun, at least, and let him know that he'd located the smugglers. If Finn was feeling generous, maybe he'd call Simon to check if he actually knew Lauren or if she'd made that up, and then tell the alpha bear that Finn claimed the cabin and intended to stay there with his mate the rest of winter.

He snorted as he retrieved the satellite phone. If Finn said anything about a mate, Simon and Zoe and the rest of the bear clan would descend on the cabin like a plague of locusts to investigate, and they'd definitely scare Lauren off. Better to deal with Shotgun, then figure out how to get Lauren some place safer than a falling-down cabin before the weather turned for good. He didn't mind being snowed in, but he also knew Lauren would need space. Just because Finn knew she was his soul mate didn't mean Lauren was ready to sign up for anything.

Finn rubbed the back of his neck as he limped into the corner to lean back against the wall, letting the chill air wake him up more. He'd kill for some hot coffee. Maybe he could convince Lauren to hike into town with him for a caffeine run.

Shotgun answered after a few rings, without any preamble or niceties. "The fuck you been, you asshole? My dick is flapping in the wind over here, waiting for you to pull your head out of your ass and get the job done."

“Nice to hear from you, too,” Finn said. “I told you I’d call when I had something.”

“So you have something?”

“Yeah. Found ’em yesterday. I’ll send you the location, and then I consider my part of this job done.”

“Not so fast, asshole,” Shotgun said. “I want proof. They’ll be gone by the time we get to the right coords, and I need enough evidence for a warrant. You got photos?”

Finn pinched the bridge of his nose. “Of course I do.” Even though he wasn’t sure where his camera and cell phone ended up after the disaster with the bear trap. Hopefully the camera at least ended up near the cabin, if not inside. “I’ll send them as soon as I can. But you can have the teams move in now. I’ll do another survey before I punch out and confirm the location.”

“No, your ass will sit there and surveil them until my guys are close in enough. You’re on the spot until we confirm we have eyes-on.”

“No way,” Finn said. He wasn’t going to linger in the forest with a dozen armed cartel members, particularly with Lauren nearby, and wait for Shotgun’s dodgy foot-soldiers to show up and start shooting. Shotgun didn’t give a shit about collateral damage, whether it was Finn or an innocent civilian, and there was no way in hell that Finn would risk Lauren’s safety by having her in the same park as those cowboys. “I’m not going to sit here for four days while you get your shit together. You had weeks to get everything in place. I’ve done my part, now it’s on you to seal the deal. I want my money.”

A soft sound outside the cabin made him tense; it sounded like a gasp or a whimper. Finn squinted to look through the cracks between the logs. A flash of color looked like Lauren’s jacket, and the underbrush crackled as if something large ran through it.

Shit.

He straightened and limped toward the door, ignoring that Shotgun still argued with him. Finn snapped, “I don’t have time for this. You’ve got two hours to confirm your guys have it handled, then I’m leaving anyway and you’ll get the bill in the mail.”

He ended the call and tossed the sat phone on the mattress as he struggled to reach the door and get his wounded leg over the threshold. Where was Lauren? Had she overheard his conversation and assumed something? He wracked his brain to remember what he said to Shotgun. Was she afraid of the drug smugglers? Had she seen something?

Shit. Finn cursed under his breath and retrieved the rifle, just in case. If she’d seen something and was hiding from the smugglers, it was equally possible the smugglers had seen her and would hunt her down. And she hid her tracks about as well as a bulldozer, so it was just a matter of time until they found her.

And killed her.

He gritted his teeth against the stabs of pain in his leg, and paused to catch his breath. He had to find Lauren and bring her back to the cabin. Then he would explain what was going on, and promise to protect her from whoever came after them.

LAUREN

Lauren had almost calmed herself down and talked herself into braving the cabin to thaw out her face and hands when dragging firewood brought her near the corner of the cabin. A low voice from inside reached her through the logs, and she paused to breathe and press her fists against the small of her back. Why did wood have to be so damn heavy?

It wasn't until she heard Finn's cold, hard voice that the rest of her froze all the way to the bone. He sounded like a completely different person. Completely different. He didn't like whoever he spoke to, and said he'd done what he'd been hired to do, he'd sent the coordinates for where something could be found, and he was gone in a few hours whether or not the other person's guys were in place.

Her heart sank and her stomach twisted. He was calling in backup and getting out of Dodge before he had to deal with her again. Clearly rejecting him had an impact, and he meant to hand her over to someone else, or a team of someone else's. Shivers wracked her as she stared at the wall, trying to process what she was going to do. At least he'd let her leave, so she wasn't boxed in or trapped in the cabin. He'd probably done it to call his friends without her knowing it, so they would take her by surprise.

Lauren gulped for air around the knot in her throat, and clenched her fists. Well, she wasn't going to sit there and wait for the trap to close around her. No one would be coming to get her out of a trap, unlike Finn.

She retreated, still trying to formulate a plan, when Finn said something sharp and growled with irritation. Then he silenced, and she froze, terrified he'd heard her. It

was too late to go inside and get supplies. All she had was what she carried, and that had to be enough. She could probably make it to town and hide out at the bar where Ginger used to work. Maybe she could find a way to call Ginger and stay in the garage or something until she came up with a better option.

Lauren turned and ran away from the cabin, hating that every step crashed through the brush louder than a gunshot, and heard Finn say something behind her, the door closing hard. At least he couldn't follow her on that busted up leg. It was the only saving grace.

The freezing air made her lungs ache, and pain spiked in her side as she stumbled on a root and tweaked her back. She kept looking back to make sure that Finn hadn't somehow come up with a bicycle to chase her down, even though the only sounds she heard were her heavy breathing and the sticks under her boots.

She stayed close to the track that would eventually connect with a wider trail, and eventually the unpaved road to town. She would probably make it to a place to lay low in an hour or two, with hopefully enough time to avoid whoever Finn had been talking to. She just couldn't slow down, no matter how much her chest hurt and her legs ached. The previous day's exertions caught up with her immediately and created aches and pains in muscles she didn't even know she had.

Finn wouldn't be able to give them precise instructions on where she was, and if she was lucky, the people trying to track her down wouldn't know how to follow a trail through the woods. Of course, with the ways things had been going, they'd have freaking' Davy Crockett on her heels in no time.

Lauren wiped her eyes and tried to move faster despite the way her thighs ached and cramped. She couldn't afford to have a tantrum in the middle of her escape. She could mourn whatever might have been when she finally curled up somewhere safe and had a good cry. It was too bad she'd thought, for just a few seconds, that Finn

might have been that ‘somewhere safe.’

Well, that wasn’t meant to be. She had bigger problems to worry about, like bounty hunters and pending charges and possible hypothermia. Her boots weren’t the greatest and she’d thought there was a hole in them, which was confirmed as she stepped through a patch of snow and her socks went soggy a heartbeat later. Even better.

She stopped in her tracks and covered her face, tilting her head back so she wouldn’t scream in frustration. Someday, her bad luck had to turn around. She didn’t deserve it. She’d been a good kid, she’d helped her mom as much as she could and cleaned up after the drinking binges and called the ambulance when she overdosed. Lauren tried really hard in school and worked part-time jobs since she was thirteen and could get paid under the table. She didn’t deserve to be constantly knocked back, and knocked back, and knocked back.

Lauren took a moment to gather herself and think about how nice dry socks would feel, and started walking again. She just couldn’t make herself jog again for a little while. If she tried, a broken ankle probably waited in her future.

But things wouldn’t get better standing on a trail in the middle of the forest.

She put all her effort into hustling for at least another fifteen minutes before the subtle sounds of birds chirping and other forest noises disappeared. Lauren paused on the trail and held her breath to listen. Usually that kind of change meant a predator in the vicinity. She searched the undergrowth first, followed by the branches above her, in case it was a mountain lion waiting to drop down on top of her.

Nothing. Lauren turned in a slow circle. Nothing else moved in the trees, no other sounds broke the silence. Her skin prickled.

Then, a low voice in the distance. Male, with the hint of an accent she couldn't decipher. Answered by another voice. Boots crunching through the undergrowth.

She held her breath and tried to figure out what to do. If she ran, they would hear her. If she waited where she was, they would see her quickly. And she would be on her way to jail right after. The jig was up.

She was so tired. She wanted to give up. She'd fought for so long and nothing ever went right and...

Lauren took a deep breath. Not yet. She wouldn't forgive herself if she just gave up. She had to at least try to stay free. She needed to know she'd tried everything to save herself. It might be a comfort when she sat in jail for the rest of her life.

She'd managed to go about twenty feet before the trees to her right rustled and two enormous men stepped out onto the trail. Lauren froze, her heart jumping to her throat, and the men did the same. They stared at her.

She backed up a step and attempted a smile. "Are you hikers too? I'm on a thru-hike, just passing through. Looks like the weather is going to turn, don't you think? Clouds. And it's cold. Could be a storm rolling in, so I was just going to head back to town for a good meal."

They didn't move or speak. She tried not to stare at the large packs they carried, the rifles they both had, smaller pistols at their waists, massive machetes, and tattoos. They definitely could have been bounty hunters, but they didn't seem to recognize her. Maybe they weren't looking for her.

But if they weren't bounty hunters, what were they doing out there so heavily-armed?

Not her business. Definitely not her business.

Her cheeks heated. If it wasn't her business, why did she keep staring at them? Lauren smiled brightly and waved, even though they stood six feet away, and got ready to bolt. "Well, enjoy the rest of your hike. Watch out for bears and Bigfoot, there have been sightings in this area and..."

She trailed off as one raised his rifle and pointed it at her. Her mouth dried out and her knees wobbled. Shit.

Lauren cleared her throat. "I don't know why you would..."

"Stop talking," the other one said. His expression hardened and he reached for his pistol. "Who sent you? Who do you work for?"

"N-no one," she said. Lauren struggled to catch up. "I don't... I don't know who you are. I'm just hiking. My f-friends are waiting for me, and..."

The one with the rifle adjusted his grip. The other one, his head shaved, didn't blink. "Who sent you? You'll tell me eventually."

She didn't like the sound of that. Her stomach twisted and suddenly she needed to pee. Like, really needed to pee. And she couldn't swallow or breathe or move. Her hands shook as she stared at the barrel of the rifle pointing at her chest.

Sure, her luck would turn around eventually. But it definitely wasn't today.

FINN

Finn trailed her by some distance, never getting close enough that she would see or hear him. He was downwind, too, so he tracked her mostly by scent. She still smelled afraid and upset, and tired as well. The bear didn't like it, but he also understood she needed time and space. He could explain to her eventually.

Plus his leg hurt like a kick in the nuts. Hiking on it so soon would no doubt fuck it up still more, but he had no other choice. He wasn't going to let Lauren out of his reach for even a second, at least until he knew she was safe somewhere warm and clean. Finn took some pain killers before he chased after her, so at least he didn't feel his leg. He'd pay for it later, he knew that much from experience. But sometimes you had to push through agony to come out the other side for a worthy cause.

Or so he'd always believed. And there was no worthier cause than his mate.

He sensed something amiss about an hour away from the cabin. Lauren moved in fits and starts: sometimes at a near-jog, others at an ambling walk, sometimes at a flat-out run or simply standing in the middle of the trail looking at the sky. He didn't know if distress kept her from acting rationally, if perhaps panic ruled her emotions, or she was simply too tired to be consistent. He'd have a talk with her later about preserving energy and moving steadily, rather than rushing and then slowing to rest.

She paused just as he noticed a shift in the air. Predators close by. He didn't smell them, even being downwind, which meant it wasn't likely to be another bear or even a wolf or mountain lion. Something else. Something that knew to mask its scent. None of the other animals in the forest moved, the birds long since fled, and even the

trees seemed to freeze in anticipation.

His heart beat faster as adrenaline surged and the bear clawed for control of his body. He needed to shift to protect Lauren. She'd already seen him once, obviously she wouldn't mind seeing him as a bear again. And even if whatever stalked her wouldn't flee from a human, they'd damn well retreat when they faced a grizzly.

But his ears caught a few words, the nervous chatter that Lauren generated when she didn't know what to do or where to look, and tangled threads of scent: hers, more afraid and verging on panic, and two unknown males, bitter with metal and chemicals and ammunition. Blood. His hackles rose even in human form. The smugglers. The drug runners. It had to be them or their minions, trying to find the supply chain. Maybe the mules were late and the buyer grew nervous.

Or maybe they were Shotgun's guys, already on the hunt, and the cowboys decided to take advantage of a female alone. Finn wouldn't have put it past some of those men to sideline a mission for the chance to get laid.

He shook himself and checked his rifle, just in case. He'd try to reason with them and send them on their way. If that didn't work, he'd shoot them. It wasn't the first time he'd killed a man, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Finn hoped that Lauren wouldn't be traumatized by seeing it. He'd become so numb to death that it mattered less than how much his leg throbbed as his shifter metabolism chewed through the narcotics.

Finn found his focus and stalked closer, sniffing and listening for clues about who stood where. Who said what. Who posed a threat. Whether Lauren would be caught in the crossfire if he needed to shoot. How much room he'd have to maneuver on the narrow track if the trees grew too close in. Whether Lauren could run and hide once the conflict kicked up.

All of it ran through his mind, almost on autopilot, with each step and new point of data from his senses. The bear wanted to shift and charge down the trail, knocking down anything and anyone who stood between him and Lauren. A simple solution. Not as elegant and clean as a bullet through the chest, but effective nonetheless.

Finn crept off the trail and into the trees to circle around without being seen, and hopefully get ahead of the interlopers before they hurt Lauren. He placed each foot deliberately, even with the spike of pain right through him from the injury, and barely made more than a rustle as he moved. At least all that time doing SERE training had paid off. He didn't have a ghillie suit or any concealment, but at least he didn't sound like a herd of fucking elephants tromping through a field of bubble wrap.

The moment he saw the two men holding guns on Lauren, who trembled in fear, all of his focus shifted. His heartbeat slowed and steadied, and every other thought dropped away, save the information necessary to save her. He assessed the two men as they demanded to know who Lauren worked for and threatened her with dire consequences if she didn't talk. Which she did, at length, but it wasn't the kind of information the bastards wanted. It was just Lauren, trying to explain that she was hiking and didn't mean to disturb them and they really didn't need to take her to jail.

Take her to jail? His head cocked as that little nugget of information broke through his concentration. Why would she be worried about going to jail? Did she think the two men were cops or rangers or something, trying to bust her for trespassing or poaching? Finn shook it off and figured they could sort that shit out later. And they would have a very long discussion about things to do and not do when threatened at gunpoint.

He swallowed a growl as the Napoleon-looking, pistol-toting motherfucker threw her on the ground and put his boot on the back of her neck. Shorty leaned into it, ignoring her pained cry, and growled, "You will wish for death before we're done with you. Lying bitch. Who the fuck are you reporting to? They won't save you. They won't

even care when we fuck you and throw your body into a ravine. The wolves will finish you off, maybe a bear if you're lucky."

The fucker had no idea he'd signed his death warrant and would learn in short order what facing a bear looked like.

Finn couldn't get a clean shot and didn't want to risk one of them getting trigger-happy if bullets started flying, since they both still aimed at Lauren. He reached out and deliberately broke a stick, the crack audible over Lauren's breathless pleading. It broke his heart. The first thing he wanted to say was to reassure her and promise her he'd save her, but he couldn't afford to show weakness in front of Shorty and his sidekick. It would have given them more leverage, and that wouldn't help either of them.

The two men froze, scanning the surroundings for a hint of what made the noise. Finn spoke from the shadows. "Best if you just back up and disappear, friends."

"Who the fuck is that?" the taller one demanded. His rifle swung up and around, searching for a target, but Finn stayed far enough back he wouldn't get a clear shot.

"The girl is mine." Finn added a growl to his voice, so maybe they would take the hint. And Lauren sobbed in despair, like he'd crushed her himself. She couldn't really believe he meant it? His heart sank, but he pushed away the creeping sense of guilt. He would explain to her later. She'd understand. "Get the fuck out of here before we kill you."

"You and what army?" Shorty said. "We've got twenty other guys here, man, and you're all alone."

Finn threw a hefty rock into the trees on his left, up the trail, so it hit a few branches and sounded like someone else in the undergrowth. "You sure about that, champ?"

A tense silence stretched, then Shorty laughed. “Fuck off. If you had enough guys, you wouldn’t be talking right now. So I’m going to take this bitch out of here so we can get some use out of her, and we’ll go ahead and leave her body here when we’re done. You move a muscle and we’ll just shoot her right here.”

“You’re really pissing off my friend,” Finn said. The bear roared to the surface, ready to claw the bastards to pieces, and the man held on to control with his fingertips. The growl bled into his voice until it deepened and roughened into an animalistic snarl. “Back the fuck off right now or you’re going to die.”

Lauren squeezed her eyes shut and whispered to herself, trying to cover her ears to block it all out, and Finn almost rushed out to comfort her, and damn the consequences. But killing the smugglers on the trail would alert the group that they weren’t alone, and set off a manhunt on a quest for vengeance. Leaving them alive and knocked out would give him a chance to lay false trails and confuse the scene, maybe tie one up a fair distance away. It would buy him time to get Lauren back through the forest the way he’d come, and to signal Simon and the rest of the clan to send in reinforcements.

But the sons of bitches left him no choice. Shorty hauled her up by the hair and shook her, pressing the pistol into the back of her neck. “You sure you want to risk it?”

Tears tracked down Lauren’s cheeks.

Something in his mind snapped. The bear broke free and he lost all control. The grizzly launched the ten or so feet down to the trail in one leap and slapped his claws into Shorty’s chest. The pistol flew into the trees, followed by pieces of the man’s body, but the bear didn’t stop moving. He barreled into the taller man as he struggled to swing the rifle. Finn knocked it away but the smuggler managed to squeeze off a round that caught him in the stomach.

The bear took care of that with another swipe of his claws, and the man dropped in a bloody heap, groaning in pain. Shorty, at least, was quiet.

Finn whuffed around them and used his paws to toss aside the weapons they carried, including giant fucking machetes, and to free the packs from their shoulders. Idiots. No wonder they went down so easily: they threw off their center of gravity carrying a heavy load, and thought they could fight effectively without good balance.

He didn't feel as bad about killing them. Neither one would recover from the deep rents in their torsos unless someone carried their asses to a clearing and got a life-flight there in under an hour, but that was not the bear's problem.

Something clicked behind him. Finn's head swung around, prepared to attack if one of their compatriots decided to ambush him, and instead found Lauren holding one of the pistols in shaking hands. All of her had paled, and she sat on her butt and scooted backward toward the trees as she tried to aim.

At least she used both hands in a reasonable grip, instead of trying some ridiculous one-handed action hero nonsense.

She hyperventilated, her eyes wide and pupils huge, and shook her head. "I don't want to shoot you. I don't. I love all animals. Even ones that might e-e-eat me. Just let me leave. I don't know where you came from and that's okay, even though you should probably be hibernating right now or at least...oh God...eating a lot to store up for winter. Just d-d-don't eat me. I don't taste good, I promise, and there's not a lot of meat on the bone, I can promise that too. Those guys look way more ap-ap-appetizing..."

She sucked in huge lungfuls of air but it didn't seem to help.

Finn eased back to sit, hoping that would be less intimidating, but the tall guy

groaned and rolled over. So Finn flicked him out of the way and the body whacked into a tree trunk hard enough that bones crunched. Lauren groaned and leaned over to barf, her grip on the pistol slackening.

He held his breath. He couldn't comfort her—or even speak to her—as a bear, that much was obvious. Having a grizzly a few feet away wasn't helping her nerves. Finn debated what to do as he watched her, but the sound of a radio on one of the bodies made the decision for him.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:44 am

LAUREN POV

It wasn't like she knew what happened in any detail after the first gun pointed at her. Her brain shorted out and she lost control over what she said or where she looked. All she saw was the barrel of the rifle and then the pistol, and all she heard was her breathing and the voice of the man who threatened to kill her if she didn't tell him something she didn't know. Which just made it harder to think and breathe and not pee all over herself.

She definitely thought things couldn't get worse. How could they, with two men threatening to kill her and guns right in her face?

And then Finn started talking from somewhere in the trees, and her heart sank the rest of the way through her feet and into the dirt. Just wonderful. Of course. Her luck struck again. And he sounded pissed. Even worse than when he talked to the guy on the phone and demanded his money.

She'd resigned herself to a really, really awful day when things took yet another turn and the pistol pressed cold and awful against the back of her neck. Lauren barely took a shaky breath before something exploded out of the trees and then the pressure disappeared. She scrambled out of the way as a gun went off, and searched for a place to hide or run or climb.

Her legs gave out when she saw the rich brown fur and massive claws of...a grizzly bear. A real, breathing, furious grizzly bear with blood on his paws and flashing fangs. It killed the guy who'd been threatening her, then tossed around the taller guy like a ragdoll. And it looked at her, a growl slowly dying in its chest.

Lauren's thoughts froze. She stared at it and heard every heartbeat in her ears like a clanging bell. Its eyes were a warm honey and far too intelligent for a ravening beast, and the small ears on its head reminded her of a teddy bear. But that didn't make breathing any easier.

Especially when one of the awful men groaned and moved, and the bear lashed out and threw him into a tree. The dull thunk and snap of breaking bones turned her stomach the rest of the way, and Lauren lost what remained of her control. Bile rose up and she leaned out of the way to empty her already empty stomach. At least not eating a real dinner or breakfast gave her nothing much to yak up.

She expected to die any second when the grizzly decided to eat her, too. Even the pistol she'd managed to pick up from where the short guy dropped it didn't make her feel any more confident. The bear grumbled, sitting back like a giant but friendly dog, and watched her. Waiting.

But waiting for what? For her to make a run for it so the bear could chase her down? For its bear friends to show up and join the picnic?

She squeezed her eyes shut. Oh hell. She was definitely losing her mind. Or at least her composure. She didn't want to face down a grizzly and she sure as hell didn't want to die in one's jaws. She didn't trust her legs to hold her if she tried to stand, and there was no way she could outrun or out-climb a grizzly. Lauren thought you were supposed to play dead around grizzlies, to avoid being attacked, so maybe just sitting there was the right decision. Of course the only good decision she made that day was a complete, freak accident because she was too scared to do anything else except barf.

Maybe she was a coward but she didn't want to see the bear's claws swinging at her head or its teeth getting closer to her throat. The air moved and the earthy smell of a giant wild animal swamped her. Lauren whimpered but it didn't matter: the mouth

got closer, heated breath making her flinch, and the teeth slowly closed around her arm to tug her out of her cowering crouch.

“Please please please,” Lauren whispered. She really didn’t want to be mauled by a grizzly. Was it too much to hope that the darn thing would just eat the two men and be too full to bother with her? “Oh my God, please don’t kill me. Or at least make it quick. I don’t think I can handle the pain for very long, and I’ll just scream a lot and you don’t need that.”

The grizzly made a soft bear sound, adjusted its toothy grip, and tossed her over its shoulder and onto its back. Lauren cracked one eye open. What the what? She sprawled across the broad, warm back as the grizzly lumbered a few steps. She slid down, ready to run, but froze as the bear made another annoyed sound and swung his head around to look back at her. Lauren couldn’t breathe. Okay. Message received.

She held tight to the bear’s fur as it moved into a rolling lope, though his stride hitched occasionally. Lauren didn’t know what the hell was going on. Bears didn’t usually carry live prey around with them, certainly not by having the prey ride on their back, while leaving two reasonably-sized meals behind in the dirt. Every time she started to slide off, whether on purpose or by accident, the grizzly would stop, adjust his stance, and shrug his shoulders around until she was more safely situated.

Lauren had to be hallucinating. She hadn’t eaten any weird mushrooms in the forest but who the hell knew. Maybe there were spores in the air or some kind of ley line or other magic in the trees. She wasn’t really riding a bear. She definitely wasn’t riding a bear and holding on to its fur as it lumbered along a trail.

Or she could have fallen as she ran and whacked her head on a rock, and imagined all of it happening while she lay in the grass and suffered a concussion. She couldn’t decide what was worse.

Or it was reality and she really had been kidnapped by a bear—bearnapped?—and was being taken to some cave to be eaten. Maybe that was the worst.

She tried to look on the bright side, though. She hadn't been raped and murdered by those two dudes with guns, and the bear radiated heat like a furnace. Its fur was coarse on the surface but really soft underneath, and she worked her frozen hands closer to the beast's skin to try and leech heat away.

Lauren even leaned onto his back as exhaustion crushed her down. She buried her face in the bear's rich brown fur and tried not to cry. She didn't look up until the bear's stride slowed to an amble. Her heart thumped oddly. The bear brought her back to the cabin. Right to the front door. He made more of those bear noises and leaned to the side so she slid to her feet.

When her legs, already sore and cramped from trying to hold on to the wide grizzly, wobbled and gave out, the bear caught her before she hit the ground. Lauren clutched the bear's arm and found herself staring into his honey-gold eyes once more. Those familiar, mournful gold eyes, almost like...

Her heart thumped harder against her ribs, almost like she faced that rifle again. Or when she'd found a bear with his leg in a trap and he turned into a man. Into Finn. Lauren shook her head and jumped back, holding up her hands to fend him off even though the bear hadn't moved. "No. No, I think this is too weird for me. I don't think I can handle this. It's just not possible that you might...that you could be... No. Nope. Definitely not. I mean, I believe in Bigfoot because cryptids are totally possible from an evolutionary standpoint. It's perfectly reasonable that early apes diverged from homo sapiens and created a Bigfoot-like creature. Completely plausible. But this...this isn't like..."

Her words trailed off as her mouth dried up and her thoughts derailed. Crazy. She was out of her mind, talking to a bear like it understood. And even worse, she thought

it was Finn in there, behind the fangs and claws. Maybe if she explained it all to the police or the judge or her defense lawyer, they would put her in a psychiatric hospital instead of jail. She needed oodles of therapy, apparently, if she actually believed a bear turned into a man. Or a man turned into a bear. Did it make a difference which way 'round she thought about it? A man in a bear's body seemed infinitely better than a bear in a man's body, but how the heck was she going to tell the difference?

Lauren shook from head to toe so badly she had to lean back against the cabin to keep from falling, and started to slide down to the frozen ground. The sky had darkened overhead as the bear carried her down the trail, and snow fell silently in big, fat flakes. They clung to the bear's fur like frosting. She covered her face. "I can't do this. I really can't do this."

Sure. Snow. Maybe it would be a blizzard and she'd be stuck in the cabin with a real bear—and no food—for a week or so. Why not. If she was dead or frozen, at least she wouldn't have to worry about firewood.

A tearing sound and the sharp scent of blood overwhelmed her, but Lauren kept her eyes covered and closed. Didn't want to see. Didn't want to know. Knowing things just led to trouble.

The bear exhaled in a gust, then a warm hand settled on her forearm. "Come on, now. Let's go inside."

Nope. Definitely wasn't Finn. Definitely wasn't Finn instead of the bear. She cracked an eye open, just to be sure, and confirmed there was no more bear and a very naked Finn kneeling in front of her once again. Which he shouldn't have been able to do on his injured leg, or because it was freakin' freezing out and no one in their right mind would go out without clothes.

"Lauren," he said, voice rusty. Possibly bearlike, if bears could talk. Or would it have

been a snarl with syllables? Maybe bears had accents when they talked, depending on what kind they were. Maybe grizzlies sounded Canadian. ‘Oh hey, Imma eat some salmon now, eh?’ Or something.

Finn squeezed her elbow very gently. “Come back, Lauren.”

“I don’t want to,” she whispered. “This can’t be happening.”

“It is, babe.” He chafed her upper arm, still moving slow and easy. “But those guys weren’t alone and they fired off a shot before they...were dealt with, so the other folks might be looking for us. I need to clean some things up, and I need to know you’re safe before I can do that.”

She shook her head. “I’ll stay here. Right here. Can’t move.”

Her teeth started to chatter, but she didn’t know if it was fear or cold. Did it really matter, in the end? She hugged her knees to her chest, staring past him at the snow falling more heavily to conceal the trail. What did he think he would clean up? The bodies? She shivered again. Bodies. Dead bodies.

Finn caught her other elbow and tried to make her stand up. “You’re freezing, Lauren. You’ve got to get inside.”

That didn’t seem like a great idea, not when he turned into a bear. What if he did that while they were in the cabin? There wasn’t enough room in there for a person and a grizzly, and there wasn’t anywhere for her to hide in the ramshackle structure, not if an angry bear wanted to eat her. Maybe she could hide in the rafters away from the hole in the roof.

When Lauren refused to stand on her own and Finn’s efforts to jostle her to life didn’t work, he sighed. Finn squeezed her shoulder and bent until he met her gaze. His eyes

still glowed like warm honey. Just like the bear. “I’m going to pick you up and carry you inside so you can get warm. Okay? Don’t flip out on me.”

She managed a watery laugh as tears dripped onto her cheeks. “What am I going to do to you? You’re a b-b-b...”

She gulped for air and refused to say the word. Since it wasn’t possible, since it wasn’t real, there wasn’t any reason to say it out loud. No reason to sound completely unhinged in front of the bounty hunter. She tensed as those broad, strong hands caught her under the armpits to haul upright, then he picked her up like a baby.

Finn shouldered aside the door and grunted as he limped over toward the fireplace and the cold ashes. “Yes, I’m a bear, but I’m a bear who likes you a lot, so there’s no reason to worry.”

Lauren stared at him, flabbergasted. He just...said it. Just said he was a bear. She hiccupped in fear and then she couldn’t seem to draw a good breath or exhale at all. Finn put her down on the mattress and dragged the blankets and sleeping bags over her. “Breathe, Lauren. Just breathe, and I’ll be back. I can explain.”

She stared at him. What was there to explain? They were both certifiably nuts. People didn’t turn into bears. Did. Not. Turn. Into. Bears.

He waited as she struggled, but Lauren couldn’t keep it together. She backed into the corner and braced for the worst, waiting for his golden eyes to turn molten and his fingers to claws. Her heart pounded until she thought her chest would explode. What the hell would he do next?

FINN

He heard her start to spiral into a panic attack and didn't want her to completely lose control outside. Screaming would bring the other smugglers down on top of them faster, and the snowstorm presented a very short-lived opportunity. He could confuse the trail leading away from the bodies before it became covered with snow, and there was a possibility he could completely disguise the bodies and the incident itself in the snow so the smugglers would not find them until spring. There wasn't time to waste.

Already his leg ached and the thought of going back outside into the cold made him want to curl up on the mattress next to Lauren and sleep until the snow stopped falling. It wasn't an option, though. One problem had to be solved at a time, and now that Lauren was safely inside and warm, the next problem was dealing with the possibility of smugglers surrounding the cabin with guns and trying to kill them both.

Lauren cowered near the unlit fire and watched him with wide, unblinking eyes. Finn didn't think his nudity would distract her this time. He stayed crouched down, just out of reach, so as not to loom over her or pressure her. "I'm going to get some wood for the fire, Lauren. I need you to stay here, okay? It's not safe outside."

"There are bears outside," she whispered.

Finn didn't want to laugh and had to bite the inside of his cheek. Lauren still hovered on the verge of a complete breakdown. He nodded, patting her hand where it rested on the mattress. "There are. Will you promise me you'll stay inside? Stay right here under the blankets?"

Lauren blinked at him. Finn debated whether he could actually leave her, and the risk if he didn't. He took a deep breath and handed her a few protein bars, then leaned to kiss her forehead. She pulled back and he stilled, swallowing his disappointment. Sure, she'd just seen him turn back from a bear. Her reaction shouldn't have been a surprise, since she'd already seen him shift forms, but maybe she didn't realize what happened the first time.

Finn struggled. He didn't want to leave her. She looked so adrift and frightened, and to know that he'd contributed to it... His chest ached. How would he make it up to her?

The bear knew the answer: by protecting her, feeding her, keeping her warm.

He nodded, said quietly, "I'll be right back, just stay put," and he pushed to his feet before he lost his nerve and stayed there with her.

Finn waited to shift back to bear form until he was outside and had shut the door, then immediately lumbered into the tree line. He pushed down some of the dead trees standing around the cabin. They needed the firewood, and he could prop the logs up outside the door to make sure no one else bothered her. And to make sure Lauren didn't bolt into the snow and freeze to death.

Then he focused on dealing with the men who might attempt to hunt them down. The snow flew fast and furious and already drifted in places along the narrow trail. His tracks from the flight back had already been buried, so that was good news, at least. He stayed away from the trail and instead made his way through the trees. He moved slowly and strained to hear any hints of other predators moving through the forest—human or animal.

Only a hint of blood remained just off the trail, and snow covered the lumps of the bodies. Finn continued past them a ways, searching for any indication that the rest of

their team searched for them, but it seemed like everyone else had settled in to survive the blizzard that brewed over the mountains. Which was good for him and the nasty business he was about.

It didn't take much effort for a grizzly to drag the bodies toward town and down the hill from where they'd come. He didn't want anyone to realize the sons of bitches made it to the trail and crossed Lauren's path. As he worked, he puzzled over some of the things she'd said. She thought the smugglers were trying to take her to jail. She'd panicked when talking to him or thinking he would take her to town. She'd said something about everything falling apart again, which meant her life must have fallen apart before.

Finn grumbled and stuffed one of the bodies into a narrow crevice, then wedged the other one in. He pushed a couple of massive rocks over the crevice, covered it with some leaves and sticks to conceal any hint of fabric, and got out of the way to let the snow cover the rest. He worked his way back to the trail and took care of a few more lingering clues before turning back to the cabin. He'd crushed the radios they both carried, so at least there wouldn't be sounds coming from the crevice and the bodies.

He wasn't troubled in the slightest about dealing with the smugglers. But he worried about Lauren. What if he'd scared her away forever by manhandling her and dragging her around as a bear? She'd have questions about the smugglers and what he said to them, why they grabbed her out of nowhere, and obviously she'd want to know about the bear thing. His answers would make or break whatever nascent thing remained between them.

Finn waited outside in the trees, halfway between the cabin and where he'd confronted the smugglers, and listened to the soft hiss and crackle of snow piling up all around. It fell faster than he'd seen since the previous Christmas. And his senses told him no end was in sight. The clouds would likely make the sat phone irrelevant until the storm passed, so he couldn't call Simon and the guys for an assist.

He listened for more activity from the rest of the smugglers but the afternoon sun dimmed until it was dark as night and nothing else moved. Finn knew they hadn't escaped all the trouble coming their way, but he'd at least delayed it, hopefully until he called in reinforcements or figured out how to get Lauren out to town safely and unobserved. But first he had to convince her to calm down and accept that he was a shifter. That shifters existed. That someone threatened her and there were bigger dangers than him in the forest.

He stayed off the trail and in the trees as he lumbered in a circuitous route back to the cabin, glad that the cold had numbed most of the pain from his leg, and studied the structure to make sure no one else had arrived while he was gone. No sign of movement disturbed the clean blanket of snow around the building. Of course, enough snow had fallen that it could have easily covered Lauren's prints if she managed to sneak out through one of the holes in the cabin roof or walls.

Which he needed to patch before a whole fucking snow drift formed inside the living room.

But first, firewood. Finn clawed apart the trees he'd felled near the door until most of the logs were small enough to fit through the door and feed into the fireplace. He had to keep Lauren warm, and ideally with a fire rather than making her curl up next to his bear form.

He braced himself for the freezing cold and the shock of pain in his leg as he transformed, but the combination took his breath away until he fell against the rickety cabin door and squeezed his eyes shut to control the misery so he didn't scream. He didn't want to scare Lauren, and he damn well didn't want to give away their location to any other predators in the forest.

He fumbled the door open and fell through, bringing logs and snow with him, and immediately scanned the room for Lauren.

She still huddled on the mattress near the corner, only her eyes visible over the sleeping bag she'd pulled up to hide behind. Finn relaxed for just a heartbeat when he saw her; at least she hadn't run. At least she'd stayed there.

Of course, he'd left two trees across the doorway to discourage her from leaving.

He focused on hauling as much of the trees through the doorway as possible. Stacking it neatly would wait, after he used the pocket saw to cut them into reasonable lengths. When he couldn't tolerate the cold air against his naked skin another second, he shut the door and retrieved more clothes. Finn kept every motion slow and deliberate as he moved through the cabin, knowing that Lauren's gaze followed him everywhere. The tarp he used for a cover while camping sealed off the biggest hole in the roof, supplemented with some of the larger chunks of bark from the logs, and he stuffed more bark into the larger cracks between the logs in the wall.

Lauren's frantic breathing eventually evened out as Finn worked; he kept his ear tuned to her, listening to her breathing and every indication that she shifted her weight or moved around. It wasn't until he'd done as much as he could to repair that side of the cabin that he approached her side. She tensed, but Finn carefully didn't look directly at her as he stacked logs in the fireplace and got it going with all the splinters that clung to his clothes.

He didn't speak until it crackled and popped merrily, the bright flames kicking out enough heat that his face tightened. Finn kept his voice low. "We need to talk about some things, I think."

She sucked in a breath and hugged her knees to her chest. "We don't. It's okay. I think I hallucinated and I'm sorry those g-guys bothered you or tried to take your money, and I won't..."

"Not them," he said. Finn sat on the edge of the mattress, just out of reach, and hoped

she would keep breathing and eventually relax again. “About me.”

Her eyes got bigger. “I’m sorry I ran. I know it wasn’t smart and I knew you’d track me down, but I couldn’t just sit here and wait for them to arrest me again. I didn’t want you to be the one who turned me in, I wanted my memories of you to be...untainted. Whoever is coming to get me, I won’t fight. I promise. Just...don’t let them hurt me, okay?”

Finn frowned, trying to catch up with what the hell Lauren was talking about. But he couldn’t overreact without scaring her. She didn’t want him to arrest her? She feared someone coming to get her, possibly hurting her? The bear knew that shit wasn’t going to happen ever again, but he needed to know what he might face. Was she linked to the smugglers in some way? Did those men actually know her and intend to even a score with her?

He shook his head and took a deep breath. “Back up, babe. I meant we need to talk about how I turned into a bear. What are you talking about? Who is going to turn you in, and for what? Why would someone be coming here to hurt you?”

Her head tilted, but the sleeping bag slipped lower as the air around them warmed. “The bounty.”

As if that explained everything. Finn still couldn’t get over the fact that she hadn’t said anything about the bear. The other issue owned all the real estate in her head, clearly, which made him even more concerned for her. What the hell kind of problems did she face that him turning into a grizzly took second seat?

“What bounty?”

“My...” She paused, then her mouth snapped shut. He watched her trying to reorder the world, maybe search for a trap, but she finally put her face in her hands and

groaned. “I can’t do this. I can’t. My bounty. The bounty you’re here to collect by turning me in.”

“The bounty I’m here to collect,” he repeated slowly. What the hell was she talking about?

“I know,” she wailed. Tears broke free and she dashed at her cheeks. “It’s just not fair. Why did you have to be a bounty hunter? I tried to be good in my life, I really tried to help people and it’s not my fault what happened that night. It’s not my fault. I feel terrible that he almost died but I really wasn’t...”

She hiccupped and kept talking, though he couldn’t understand a damn syllable between the tears and high pitch and increasing tempo. Finn edged closer and held his hands out to get her attention. He wanted to wrap himself around her to smother away the fears and regrets. He would fix everything. He would fix everything for her and they would find a happy place to live together forever. “Hold on, Lauren. I need you to take a deep breath. We can figure it all out, I just need you to start from the beginning. I don’t understand what you’re talking about, darlin’.”

Lauren still snuffled and sniffed, wiping at her cheeks, and looked so miserable he couldn’t help himself. Finn eased to sit next to her and put an arm around her shoulders, holding her close. He waited, breathing deep and even in the hopes she would follow, and waited for her to release some of that fear and tension.

She had a bounty on her, then. Although it could have been a real bounty or something from the smugglers. And for some reason she thought he was there to claim it? He leaned his head back against the wall and half closed his eyes. He only wanted to breathe her in and enjoy being close to her. Maybe exhaustion left her confused, after everything that morning and the day before. They could rest and enjoy the warmth for a little while, before he had to confront reality. Including figuring out who almost died and why Lauren was involved.

LAUREN

It was like an eternity and no time at all had passed after Finn left the cabin to go clean things up, whatever that meant. She didn't really want to know what it meant. It took all of her strength to stay where he'd put her near the fireplace. She should have gotten up and at least tried to light the kindling or collect snow for water.

But her legs didn't work and she couldn't seem to get anything moving in coordination. As soon as a thought settled in her head, something else would occur to her and set everything aflutter again. Loud noises outside kept her huddled in the corner, but she'd just made up her mind to search for the rifle and shotgun to defend herself when the door opened and Finn dragged massive amounts of split logs and sticks inside.

Lauren tried to see what parts of him had been a bear, even though the possibility was ludicrous. No matter what she'd seen, people didn't turn into bears. It kept her off-balance, but at least Finn didn't make any sudden moves or shout at her. He was yet another person, different from the man who'd cuddled with her that morning and more different than the man who'd spoken to the guys who tried to kill her on the trail. Who was the real Finn? How would she know which Finn would respond to her if she asked him a question or woke him up? Would it be the bear or the terrifying man or the man who moved around so efficiently to patch holes and fix the roof, like he'd worked in construction all his life? Or would it be the sweet, soft-spoken man who'd been so considerate and caring?

So she didn't dare lie or refuse to answer his questions when Finn got close and said he wanted to talk. It had to do with the trouble she'd caused by running off and

getting mixed up with those two men, even if he said it had more to do with him turning into a bear. Somehow that felt like the least of her troubles. A bear wouldn't be taking her in to the sheriff's office, that she knew for certain. A bounty hunter guy would.

Even though he looked confused when she pointed out the bounty and the guys who'd tried to come in and take his money, she kept talking because she needed him to understand. No one ever really listened to her. They thought they did and they assumed they knew what she'd say, but usually everyone stopped listening after the first few sentences. So she talked faster and they stopped listening even sooner. She shivered, even with the heat of the fire, and Finn moved to sit next to her and pull her against his side.

His lips drifted across her temple and he murmured, "I need you to slow down and help me understand. What bounty are you talking about?"

"Mine," she said. Maybe he needed to record her admitting it for some reason, or he just wanted to make triple-sure he had the right fugitive. "I skipped bail and I've been hiding out and since you're the bounty hunter, you should already know this."

His dark eyebrows rose. Finn's hand rested warm and gentle on her hip. "Babe, I'm not a bounty hunter."

Lauren had to lean back to frown at him. "Yes you are. You said it. You said you'd been looking for me, and you found me. That it was luck you found me."

"Well, it was luck," he said. Finn still looked at her like they spoke completely different languages, or maybe they had different conversations in the same language. "And...well, yes, I have been looking for you."

She shook her head. "See? Then why did you deny it?"

“I wasn’t looking for you because I’m a bounty hunter, I was looking for you because...” His voice trailed off and Finn’s gaze drifted far away.

Lauren’s stomach clenched with nerves. She didn’t dare speak, hardly breathed.

He took a deep breath. “That part is hard to explain. I’ll give it a shot later, but first I want to understand more about this bounty. I’m not a bounty hunter, Lauren, I swear it to you. I had no idea you had a run-in with the law. What are you doing out here, then? Why did you skip bail?”

Her heart sank. He wasn’t a bounty hunter? Which was great news, except it meant she’d outed herself as a criminal to someone as perfect as Finn for no reason. “You’re not going to take me to jail?”

“No,” he said, a hint of a smile barely touching his mouth before it disappeared. “Darlin’, I will definitely not take you to jail. I’ll do everything in my power to keep you out of jail, in fact. So let’s get to the bottom of this.”

Lauren didn’t want to relax against him, but a wind kicked up outside the cabin and worked its way through the cracks between the logs and reminded her of that awful trek back along the trail as she sat on the bear. The bear who sat beside her and reassured her that he wasn’t a bounty hunter and wouldn’t take her to jail. So she leaned in to him and closed her eyes. “You’ll just hate me for it. It’s better if you don’t know.”

“No use running away from something,” Finn said, and from the resigned tone of his voice, he knew it from personal experience. Lauren didn’t want to know what someone as brave and intimidating as Finn would run from.

She kept her eyes closed as she started to explain, starting with how she’d always studied cryptids and Bigfoot in particular and how it kept her distracted all those

awful times when they were evicted and had to move, or when there wasn't any food and all she read to ignore the stomach cramps. She made friends who were also interested in weird stuff and she drank a little and smoked some weed and found herself starting to go down the same road she'd seen her mother crash along for most of her life. She found the groups where environmentalists and conservationists and cryptozoologists intersected, and made her place among them instead of the astral healers and empaths and survivors of alien abductions. At least it kept her away from the heroin addicts and methheads who'd wanted to be her friend.

Finn listened and didn't comment or even laugh, which was the only reason that Lauren found the bravery to keep talking. "Some of the group felt like we weren't doing enough to protect the environment after the politicians reversed a lot of the laws that kept this part of the state off-limits to drilling and fracking and all...that."

She still didn't entirely understand the specifics, except that everything the oil companies did was dangerous for living things.

Finn turned his head to rub his chin across the top of her head, grumbling deep in his chest. "That's been a problem, you're right."

She breathed him in, wondering how he smelled so good as a man and yet was pretty wild and ripe as a bear. Lauren gnawed her lower lip before going on, staring across the cabin at the gloomy shadows that concealed the kitchen. "They wanted to make a statement when the oil company set up its headquarters over in Red Springs, just outside the wolf refuge. The oil company had all this surveying equipment and big trucks and explosives as they started exploring. I thought... The leader said we were only going in to get the computers out of the trailers, so we could show how corrupt and terrible they are, and to disable the equipment. Like by putting sugar or dirt in the gas tanks, slashing the tires, that sort of things. I didn't sign up for anything else."

The nerves and tension that made her queasy as they snuck through the chain link

fence around the equipment returned, even in the quiet of the cabin with Finn right next to her, and Lauren shivered again. The sinking feeling in her stomach had only increased as the group split up and she and Ginger poured sugar into the gas tanks of the trucks and earth-movers they could reach. The group leaders insisted there wasn't anyone on the property at night, and that they'd disabled the security cameras before anyone else showed up. She'd been stupid to trust them. So stupid.

Finn nuzzled behind her ear, pulling her closer to link both arms around her. "A little protesting can be good."

It only made her feel worse, that he tried to make her feel better about what terrible decisions she'd made. "Some of them had brought Molotov cocktails or something, and started booby trapping the mining explosives and the big equipment. I didn't know it until the security guards showed up and started yelling at everyone, using spotlights to try and disorient us. Ginger and I ran, but then the explosions started and it just... There was so much smoke. We got separated. Someone started screaming and I think there were gunshots, then..."

He abruptly pulled her into his lap and kept her tight to his chest. "It's okay. You don't have to tell me."

She wanted to stop, but once she'd started... the words came from somewhere else and tumbled out, one after another. But at least she curled into him for comfort and knew that what happened was in the past, even if she still dealt with the fallout. "I went back for Ginger when I couldn't find her. She'd fallen and broken her ankle after the explosions happened, and I had to help her get away. We managed to get into the forest, but by then all the lights were on and cops were everywhere and they were able to identify me and Ginger. So the cops charged us with destruction of property and attempted murder and a bunch of other stuff."

Finn took a deep breath. "Someone was injured?"

Her heart cracked even more. She hated to think about any of it, but most of all about the poor security guard. “He was trying to put out the fire from the Molotov cocktail when River and Salem set off the explosives, and it really hurt him. He’s in a wheelchair forever, they told me.”

“And those two—River and Salem—were not caught or identified.”

“No.” Lauren felt like she breathe again. There. She’d told him. He could judge her and run away, or turn her in, or maybe stick around and help her figure out what to do next.

“You didn’t turn them in to save yourself? Why didn’t your friend confirm your story, that you weren’t anywhere near the explosion?”

All reasonable questions, and things she’d debated with herself every night while she sat in jail and hoped that she’d wake up from the nightmare. “I didn’t turn them in. The leader, Aspen, insisted that she’d get me a good lawyer if the movement was able to continue fundraising and doing what they did out in the open, which they couldn’t do if anyone knew they were responsible for the explosions and the man’s death.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t get you a good lawyer.”

“No.” Lauren didn’t even struggle with the disappointment and betrayal anymore. She’d sat with it for so long that it was just as familiar as the inside of the cabin. She really couldn’t trust anyone. Maybe she owed Aspen and River and Salem a thank you for reminding her what her mother spent so long teaching her. No one would look out for you but yourself. Everyone was out for themselves, and didn’t care who got hurt in the process. “I had a public defender. I met with him for about thirty minutes. He didn’t remember my name. It wasn’t his fault,” she added hurriedly, when Finn started to growl. “He was really busy and had a ton of people he had to see and it wasn’t like he had any reason to remember me.”

Finn squeezed her and kissed her forehead. “It was his job to remember you and to defend you, and he didn’t do it. We’ll fix that.”

Lauren eyed him dubiously. She was pretty sure she’d already been charged and all the pretrial stuff had all been taken care of. They’d put in a plea deal but she didn’t know if the lawyer accepted it or not. She hadn’t wanted to say she was guilty, and since there hadn’t been any other options, she’d run.

But Finn took another deep breath. “What about your friend? Did she skip bail, too, or do we need to get her out?”

“Her parents are rich,” Lauren said. “They got her a really good lawyer, so she got community service and had to write an apology to the oil company and the security guard.”

“And it didn’t occur to her to help you with her fancy lawyer?”

She loved him getting so offended on her behalf. “She asked but her parents didn’t want to help. Didn’t want her innocence to be called into question if anyone found out they helped me as well. I guess it didn’t look good to have their daughter associating with trailer trash who believed in Bigfoot.”

His frown deepened. “Don’t call yourself that.”

“It’s okay,” Lauren said, laughing. “I am trailer trash. Sometimes we didn’t even have the trailer and lived in the car, but I guess ‘car trash’ doesn’t have the same kind of ring, you know? Ginger tried to help, and after I skipped bail, she brought me food and supplies and everything, and helped me hide. She got me close to here to lay low in the forest for a while, and she was working on buying me a passport so I can get into Canada.”

It sounded more absurd when she said it aloud, but Lauren couldn't take it back. It was the only set of choices she had left that didn't leave her walking into jail without a fight. Or living in a busted-up cabin for years on end without running water and having to chop firewood every hour of every day, until deforestation gave away her location.

Finn didn't speak for so long that Lauren figured he'd either fallen asleep or struggled to keep from laughing at her, so she didn't push. He kept rubbing his chin against her head, though, until her hair got all snarled and she knew it would take hours to comb out the knots. She didn't mind.

But something else bothered her. She absently touched his chest, tracing the outline of the words on his T-shirt. "Those guys this morning... Weren't they bounty hunters?"

He hesitated and her heart sank. If they weren't bounty hunters, who the hell were they? They'd wanted to kill her, and probably him. What possible reason did they have for being out in this part of the forest? It was private property, and they definitely didn't look like the thru-hikers that occasionally popped up on the trails.

Finn leaned to feed more wood into the fire, buying himself time before he said anything. Lauren braced for a hell of a lie. When he heaved a sigh and went back to nuzzling behind her ear, she tensed. His smooth, calm voice worked like the fancy laughing gas the one time she'd been to the dentist for a cavity, and she relaxed with every word he said. Even though what he said should have scared the bejesus out of her.

"They're drug smugglers," Finn said. "They've been using this part of the state to run meth in from the Dakotas and Montana. No one has been able to find the routes they've been using or the particular groups who are helping them along the way. So I was hired to find them."

She frowned and ran her fingers down his forearm, noticing the array of tattoos had a variety of knives and crests and foreign languages. It made sense, maybe. He definitely looked like he was a cop or at least a soldier at some point. “Why did they hire you?”

“I used to work with cops a lot,” he said after a long pause. Lauren heard a lot of history in that pause, and filed it away for later to dig into. “One of them hired me to do some basic looking around, since he knows I have an affinity for the woods, and I agreed.”

An affinity for the woods. Sure. That was one way to put it. Lauren craned her neck back to look him in the eyes. “Because you’re a bear. You turn into a bear. That’s why you like being out here. Right? Because you’re a bear.”

It felt like if she said it enough times, she might actually be able to believe it. It was entirely possible she’d fallen and hit her head and this was just a really detailed hallucination. It seemed more likely than a man turning into a bear. Even if she’d sat on his back and felt his fur between her fingers and seen him turn inside-out twice.

Finn nodded gravely, no hint of teasing in his eyes. “Yes. I can change my shape, Lauren. I come from a family of bears, and I live with a bunch now. A whole crew of us on the other side of the park, at a place called the Lodge. We run tours for folks all through the park and into this part of the forest—hunting, fishing, hiking, rock climbing, skiing, that sort of thing.”

“Oh,” she said. What else was there to say? Maybe she’d eaten some of those strange red-purple berries at the edge of the field where she’d set up her Bigfoot cameras and she was tripping out of the freakin’ universe. Why wouldn’t a bunch of bears lead camping trips through the woods? Maybe they held picnics, too.

He took a deep breath and moved her to the mattress so she could see him better, and

lay on his side to watch her without looming over her. Lauren appreciated it, although it wasn't like it really mattered: he could catch her before she reached the door even if she tied him to the fireplace and got a running head start. Finn's touched her ankle, a warm, reassuring weight. "I'm sure you've got questions. Is there anything you want to ask me?"

Her heart beat faster. Boy, did he not even realize what he'd offered. Lauren swallowed the knot in her throat, then blurted out, "Why are you still here?"

His eyebrows rose and the silence stretched. Lauren held her breath. Probably not the best question to ask him right off the bat, but at least she would get an answer sooner rather than later.

FINN

His only responsibility was to not frighten her, to not drive her off. No matter what she said or did or asked, his bear side needed her close by. When he felt her on the mattress next to him, he tried to create a little separation and focused on her ankle instead of the sexy curves all over the rest of her. He offered to tell her anything, hoping she would distract him with metaphysical questions about his bear side, but instead she asked the hardest thing to answer.

Why was he still there? Finn could have left. Could have easily disappeared in the snow, maybe left her with the sat phone and some money so she had a fighting chance. He could have sent Shotgun and his guys after the smugglers and everything would have gone back to normal. Finn could have returned to the Lodge and the tedium of regular life surrounded by happy families. And cats. So many cats after Zoe's pregnancy. Cats everywhere. And not a single one of them gave a shit about confronting a bear. He'd surrendered more than one fish to a feline due to Zoe's likely reaction if any of those damn cats had a whisker out of place.

But he couldn't tell Lauren why he stayed. She'd bolt. It was bad enough they were trapped in a cabin in a blizzard and she'd learned he turned into a bear, not to mention the armed drug smugglers searching for the forest, but if he just announced that they were soul mates or meant to meet... What sane woman would stick around for that? She didn't have a choice in that moment, but the second the snow melted, she'd run. Of course she would. She'd already shown a proclivity for dodging problems instead of confronting them. What if he became just another thing for her to flee, like the warrant and bounty and everything else?

His hesitation told too much of a story, though, since her face fell and a guarded expression replaced whatever openness had been there. Finn wasn't good at this kind of stuff. He didn't deal with feelings and shit. He left that up to the other guys, the smarter ones or at least the ones who faked it better. "Well, you saved my life, to start with. I need to repay the favor."

Lauren frowned and shifted around on the mattress, turning onto her side to face him more. The blanket slipped and revealed the smooth, soft spot between her throat and shoulder. "I don't believe you."

She shouldn't have. At least those instincts seemed to be working all right, even if the rest of her wasn't suited to subterfuge. "It's true, it's just not the whole reason."

Her eyebrows rose and she waited.

Finn huffed a laugh and ran his hands through his hair. He was a coward. A damn coward. "Couldn't you ask me something easy, like how I turn into a bear?"

"I already know that," she said.

"You do?" Finn shoved to his feet to pace, despite the overwhelming exhaustion from the day's exertions and the deep twinge of pain in his leg. It was mostly healed but not all the way, and the bone ached every time he moved. He needed more protein and rest before he attempted any more heroics.

"Yeah," Lauren said. She watched him, still wary. "Magic."

He stopped to look at her, hands on his hips, and struggled to come up with a response. He couldn't argue with it. No one really knew how the shift happened, just that it came from genetics, transmitted like a virus in certain circumstances, and happened during extreme emotional events. Sure, it could have been magic.

When he didn't rebut the announcement, Lauren sat all the way up. She winced as she moved but Finn didn't trust himself to get close enough to help her. Not yet. Not when the bear was close to the surface from having to confront their feelings for her. If he was a good guy, he wouldn't have even considered sticking around her. With his luck, Shotgun would jump the gun and come after anything moving in the park, including him, and being close to him would put Lauren in danger. And Finn didn't have his own place, so asking her to stay with him in his buddy's house wasn't exactly going to blow her socks off. What did he have to offer her except his fucked-up bear side and a whole lot of nightmares?

"Sure," he said finally. "Magic. Right."

And he ran out of words.

Lauren took a deep breath. "I know I don't have any right to question you, since you saved my life and so far you're still saving my life right now because I think I'd be frozen right now if it weren't for you, but... I'm tired of not knowing what's going on. I'm tired of feeling out of control and floating along waiting for something else to happen. I want to know why you're still here."

He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. He couldn't say it. If he said it, if he admitted who she was to him, he'd want to kiss her. He'd need to kiss her. And once he started kissing her, how the fuck was he supposed to stop? Even the freezing trickles of air that still leaked into the cabin weren't enough to distract him.

"I want to know why you're looking at me like that," she whispered, her breathing uneven.

"Like what?" He forced the words out even as the bear roared to be let out, to touch her and be next to her. She hadn't run away. She hadn't thrown anything at him or wrapped up in a blanket to hide from him. Maybe she wouldn't flee. Maybe if he took

the next step it wouldn't backfire on him.

"Like you see something no one else does," Lauren said. Her voice trembled like her hands as she picked at loose threads on the blanket.

God, she was going to kill him. He needed to comfort her. He didn't like the uncertainty, the wariness. He didn't like her questioning why he stayed to protect her.

Finn took a deep breath and paced a few more limping steps. Maybe it would be easier to say if he didn't look at her, didn't see her immediate reaction. If she grimaced or flinched when he said it, Finn didn't think he'd recover. But did he want to miss it and chase her, not knowing whether she wanted to be caught? His frustration strangled in his throat and the bear grumbled in annoyance. This was too much thinking. The bear didn't like complex things. The bear liked simple: hungry meant eating, fatigue meant sleeping, lust meant fucking. That was it. Maybe anger meant fighting.

That was definitely it.

Finn cleared his throat several times, hoping inspiration would strike, and finally faced her. "Look, I don't know... I don't know how to...do this. I'm not good at it. I don't know how to say it."

She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them, eyes wide. "Are you going to eat me?"

He jerked back, the question knocking some sense into him. "No, of course not."

"Good." Lauren exhaled. "I thought maybe you needed a meal and stuck around so you'd have a fresh one that couldn't escape."

Finn scrubbed his face so he wouldn't laugh in relief and confusion. "That's what you think of me? That I'd save your life just to eat you for dinner?"

Although he did plan to taste every inch of her.

"I don't know any bears," Lauren said. "How am I supposed to know what they do? I mean, I've studied Bigfoot and Sasquatches and other cryptids, but I can't say that werewolves or...werebears? Is that what you'd be called? They never really came up in any of the groups, you know, because it's ridiculous to think that a person could change all the way into..."

Finn held up his hands to cut off the barrage of words, with his mind already spinning, although the tight anxiety in his chest uncoiled with her back to being more the original variety Lauren he remembered from that trek with the sledge. "Uh, I've never heard 'werebear' but that's a good thought. We use shapeshifter, but not often. We don't talk about it much."

"Smart," she said, nodding. She glanced at him and away again, a flush rising in her cheeks. "People think you're crazy when you talk about cryptids or magic or crystals or anything like that."

God, he loved her. Loved everything about her, including the wonder and wide-eyed earnestness when she talked about cryptids. Finn couldn't swallow the smile, though he hoped his beard concealed most of it. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, and if she thought he laughed at her, she'd be crushed.

"We don't eat people," he said. "Fish, mostly, and deer when we catch them. Beef and pork and chicken when we're in human form. Sometimes fruit and vegetables, though that kind of grazing is more to keep everyone else happy. Unless it's honey. We do love honey."

That got a smile, at least, and she looked around at the dark cabin behind him. “No honey here. Sorry about that.”

He begged to differ. There certainly was honey he wanted to dip into.

Finn shook himself to focus. The bear had to put the libido aside, at least for the rest of the night. He had to wait. Had to give her time to adjust, to get comfortable around him. And he’d damn well have to pack snow down his shorts if they shared the mattress again. Maybe he’d shift and sleep as a bear closer to the door so he wouldn’t be tempted.

“Any other questions?” he asked when the silence stretched. She needed to rest. They both did, really, but her more so than him. Finn would keep one eye open through the night to make sure the smugglers didn’t get close to the cabin and Shotgun didn’t raid the whole fucking park ahead of schedule. “It can wait, too. I’m not going anywhere.”

Her gaze slid away and uncertainty reappeared in the tension through her shoulders. She chewed on her thumbnail and didn’t quite look at him. “You don’t have to stay, you know. You don’t. I understand if you want to go, if you’re better off...”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he repeated. Finn couldn’t take it and eased closer to sit next to her. Even if it was the danger zone, he didn’t want her to feel alone. “It’s dangerous out there, and it’s cold, and there are people out there who want to hurt us. So we have to stick together. I’ll protect you. Of course I’ll protect you.”

There was no question in his mind, or the bear’s, that he would keep her safe.

The nail-chewing intensified. Her foot bounced under the blanket. “They would have killed me, wouldn’t they?”

Finn held his breath, wanting to lie to reassure her the smugglers wouldn’t have done

it. But she'd felt the pistol against her head. She knew. She'd been on the run and hiding for her life. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in a long time, he'd be willing to bet. He held her ankle again, not wanting the agitation to take over and keep her from getting some rest. "They are dangerous and unpredictable. They would try to harm you, but they won't. I won't let them."

Lauren's smile twisted uneasily. "But it's..."

"Lauren," he said, squeezing her foot. He didn't know how to prove it to her. "I won't let them hurt you. I won't let anyone hurt you."

She looked at him, the worry clear, and the entire world slowed down around him. Finn knew it to his bones: he would do anything— anything —to keep her safe. Already his mind spun with possibilities to save her from the bullshit charges, to hide her away somewhere that the rest of the bears could shield her from the law and those stupid fucking hippies who abandoned her, to do whatever it took to ensure the next twenty years of Lauren's life outshone the last twenty like a fucking beacon.

Her lips parted and his focus shifted immediately to her mouth. The soft temptation of her lips and throat and every inch of her hidden by the blankets and the layers of clothes.

Finn debated retrieving a bucket of snow as his body reacted and he faced a long damn night of trying not to show her how much he wanted her.

LAUREN

She wanted to believe him, that he'd protect her. She'd heard it all before, though. She'd heard it from practically every man from as far back as she could remember. Every boyfriend or trick or drug dealer that her mother brought home insisted they were there to help, to keep her mom safe, to put food on the table, whatever. But none of them meant it. Something always went wrong or they stole all the money out of the hiding spot in the wall or they wrecked the car or got them evicted or tried to creep into her room at night when Mom was passed out on the floor.

Lauren swallowed hard. Of course, Finn said he'd protect her after he'd actually done it. He took on men, armed with all kinds of guns, on his own and managed to keep her from getting shot or even hurt. He carried her to safety even after he'd been hurt, and he went back to clean things up. He could have taken the easy road and let those assholes kill her instead of risking his life, or dropped her at the cabin and gone on his way. He'd stayed. For whatever reason, he'd stayed.

But that didn't mean they'd be safe forever. The snow fell outside and would keep on falling, it seemed like, but eventually it would stop. Eventually the bad guys would start looking for them, since Finn messed with their guys, and eventually they'd find the cabin. There weren't a lot of places for people to hide, at least that she'd found, so eventually trouble would land on them. It was just a matter of time.

And when that happened, there was no telling how the cards would fall. It would probably be better for her to run when she could, to take that exit the second it opened up, no matter what Finn promised. He'd come to his senses eventually about not wasting time on her. He was just being kind because they were trapped together and

she'd helped him with his leg and the medical stuff.

Lauren couldn't breathe. She started to say something, to reassure him that he didn't have to stay or do anything to help her, but when she paused, Finn's whole demeanor changed. He tensed and the air crackled between them. He was close but somehow not close enough and too close at the same time. Every cell in her body focused on where he touched her leg.

She thought of that morning, when he held her close. Thought of the way he looked at her, the way his eyes dilated and his breathing deepened. Thought of all the things she'd been missing the last month or so on the run, the security of sleeping next to someone she trusted, someone who could at least wake her up if the cops broke down the door. She wanted to feel safe. She wanted to feel protected and cared for. And she wanted to feel, above everything else, loved.

And for some reason, Finn looked at her like he loved her. Like she was a gift he'd received unexpectedly and couldn't wait to open.

It wasn't like she had anything to lose, after all. What if she just went with it, for once? He was already so close...

Lauren leaned forward, ready for a kiss, and Finn's eyes widened. He froze in place. "Wait..."

Her heart sank at the rejection. She just wanted to feel good before people hunted them down in the morning or she had to run away. She wanted to know what it was like for a guy like Finn to kiss her, to touch her. She wanted to know if he was as generous in bed as he seemed to be out in public.

Finn gulped comically, but he didn't run away. "That...isn't a good idea."

“Are you sure?” she whispered.

“No.” Finn pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, I’m not sure at all.”

Her heart sped up again. So definitely not a rejection. He wanted her. He did. But he probably had the same questions about her that she had about him. Granted, she had some impulse control issues but spending the night together made sense from a strictly survival standpoint, too. It was still cold in the cabin, and they didn’t have much in the way of blankets and sleeping bags, so...

Lauren met his gaze and didn’t dare look away in case she lost her nerve completely and they’d have to spend an awkward as hell night avoiding each other. “Then maybe we should figure it out.”

Finn groaned and caught her face, dragging her mouth to his in a sudden rush. It took her by surprise and for a second she almost panicked, almost resisted and fled. But his hold gentled and the kiss seared her lips until the rest of the world disappeared. She definitely couldn’t breathe or think, lost in the warm strength of his hands. Lauren held on to his wrists as he held her cheeks, and kissed him back as fiercely as he’d reached for her.

He retreated, breathing hard. “I want you, Lauren. I want all of you, right now. Tonight, tomorrow, as long as I can have you. I want to taste every inch of you. And I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop. I need to know what you want—if it’s only making out or something more or...everything. I don’t want to push you. I won’t. But you should know what...what I’m thinking.”

Heat flashed through her. She’d hoped he wouldn’t just steamroll right into taking off her pants and making himself at home, but to hear him hit the brakes on what he wanted to check in on what she felt... Her throat burned as emotion surged, and for a long second, she struggled to keep from throwing her arms around his neck and

declaring that she loved him. No one ever asked her that. No man had ever really cared, they would have taken the kiss and her not smacking them as permission to go all the way to third base.

Lauren swallowed the knot in her throat and nodded. She couldn't breathe. "Yes."

"Yes what?" Finn's thumb brushed her cheek in a gentle caress, at odds with the intense fire in his gaze.

"Yes I want you too," she said. What the hell. "But I need..."

She trailed off, uncertain. But he didn't interrupt her, didn't jump in with a comment or a threat or anything. Finn waited patiently, gazing at her and touching her cheek, like he'd wait there as long as she needed.

She was in way over her head with him. She knew it. She'd never known a man like Finn. Ever.

"Tell me what you need," Finn murmured. He leaned in for a soft kiss, making a grumbly pleased noise that ignited a deep fire in her core, and bumped his nose against hers. "Anything you want, baby. Everything you want. Just say the word."

It was too much. Too much pressure, too much goodness and sweetness. Why wasn't he a regular asshole who just starting groping and demanding? She didn't know how to deal with a considerate guy.

Plus he turned into a bear. She couldn't forget that part, either. The thought slammed the brakes on the urge to push him down on the mattress and ride him like a Harley.

Finn must have sensed her distraction, because he eased back. Disappointment crossed his face but he didn't pout about it. "You're not feeling it, I get it. It's

completely your call, it's been a long day, and I thought..."

"Wait," she said. Lauren caught his shoulders and then couldn't let him go. Finn sat and she didn't let herself think. She didn't hesitate. She swung up to straddle his thighs, facing him, and braced her hands on his chest. His wide eyes would have made her laugh her ass off if she hadn't wanted to immediately grind against the enormous, very hard proof in his lap of how much he wanted her. "I just wasn't... I mean, I wondered whether you would turn into a bear if we...did anything, and obviously I'm not going to sign up for...relations with a freaking bear."

A smile flashed through his beard and his arms circled around her, pinned Lauren to his chest. Finn chuckled and nuzzled behind her ear, his breath tickling the sensitive spot on her throat that made her shiver all over. "We don't do that. I promise. I might want to eat you like honey, but it'll just be the man, not the bear."

Her face flushed. Lauren tilted her head back as his mouth left a heated trail down her throat to her shoulder. He sucked and nibbled and teased, one hand cupping her butt and the other worked into her hair, until Lauren almost lost her mind. She closed her eyes and just enjoyed it, just lived with the feeling of someone doing something for her, someone making her feel good.

His weight shifted and she braced for disappointment but also the anticipation his naked skin finally next to hers. She wanted to sleep with him, wanted to know what he felt like, but she also wondered whether he was the kind of guy who held off on his own enjoyment until after she got hers.

Finn leaned back, shoulders propped on a wadded up sleeping bag. His hands trailed down her sides and then back up, inside her shirt, as the firelight made his eyes flash. He tugged on the end of the sweater, lifting his hips in a slow bump and thrust that made her breath catch, and murmured, "Take what you want, baby. I'm here for you. Use me."

Lauren went light-headed as she looked down at him. Somehow he looked completely relaxed, despite the massive hard-on in his pants, while she was ready to fly apart at the seams. “What...what do you mean?”

He grumbled again and squeezed her waist. “You tell me what you want, when you want it. Clothes on or off, mine or yours. Maybe I can only use my mouth or my hands or just breathe. Maybe I don’t get to touch you at all and you take your time.”

“You want me to tell you what to do?” She hadn’t expected that. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who’d want to be tied up and yelled at. Was that what he expected? Maybe because she was a criminal, he thought...

“Come back,” he murmured, fingertips ghosting along the waist of her jeans until she shivered and twitched. Finn still smiled, though the intensity in his gaze had her heart racing. “Darlin’, I will absolutely take charge if that’s what you want. But you look real nervous and I’m not going to make you more nervous by asking for something you’re not ready to give. So we’ll start here, okay?”

The warmth building between her thighs from the slight friction every time his body moved grew, building toward a boil. If that was him not even doing anything, she’d never survive the full extent of his attention. She gnawed on her lip. Could she really tell him what to do? The thought alone—the mental image of her telling him to take his pants off and fuck her—almost sent her into hiding. She cleared her throat and touched his chest, warring with herself. “I don’t know how to...”

Another groan, quickly hidden, distracted her. Finn squeezed her waist and held her there as his hips rotated in a lazy motion that had Lauren fisting his shirt. She gasped and moved to meet him, desperately glad he’d started first, and closed her eyes. Thank God they still had their clothes on, otherwise she could have lifted up and let him take over and things would have been over pretty quickly. Maybe Finn would take his time. He hadn’t rushed anything yet.

His hand slid to the small of her back and then down into her pants, squeezing her butt, to help rock her down against him. She groaned softly and held on tighter. He might kill her. He might actually kill her if he kept it up. At least his breathing went deep and heavy in the near-silent cabin, so she wasn't the only one panting.

"Take off your shirt," she blurted out.

She wasn't brave enough to open her eyes to check his reaction, but she squeaked when he moved and she almost pitched to the side, then Finn put her palms on his bare chest with a murmured, "There we go."

Oh Lord. She was in trouble. So much trouble.

FINN

Finn would have already ripped her clothes off if she hadn't hesitated. He knew it the second her thoughts took her somewhere else and she got distracted, and even though he wanted to take it personally—since she was sitting on him and he was obviously ready for some fun—he loved that quirk. Fucking adored it. Because it gave him a chance to tickle her to get her attention back, and she blushed and squirmed, and then keeping himself under control became a problem again.

Her nose wrinkled after he told her to use him, to take what she wanted, and it took a long silence for him to realize that maybe no one had ever given her that control. He hated giving up control of anything, and would have much preferred to take over if it helped her relax. But his instincts told him to wait. If she surrendered, it wasn't because she was feeling it. It was because that's what she was used to.

The bear wanted to search out every asshole who'd crossed her path, so he could fucking murder them all, but Finn kept his focus on Lauren. He could go to the back room and handle his own business later, if it came to it, because he damn well wasn't going to make Lauren uncomfortable or rush her into anything. She was too precious. She was his and he'd damn well take care of her.

Except Shy Lauren made an appearance when she didn't have her distractions, and she stared at him like a bunny surrounded by wolves. Finn figured she needed to move, to get a little distraction from her own thoughts and doubts, and eased into a slow thrust that would probably kill him but she seemed to enjoy.

Then she told him to take off his shirt and he almost crowed with victory.

He'd never taken anything off so fast in his life. He wanted to pull hers off, too, and get his hands on more of her but he couldn't rush it. Didn't want to freak her out. Goosebumps broke out all over him as she murmured and dragged her nails down his bare chest as she rode another slow thrust. She might kill him.

Finn kept the bear at bay and relied on the chill in the air to reinforce his control. The fire burned low and he should have fed more wood to the flames, but he couldn't take his eyes off Lauren. Her lips parted as her head tilted back, her hair falling loose from the ponytail she'd had, and she rocked her hips down against him in a deep grind that almost set him off. He held her waist, helping her along when she lost the rhythm, and adjusted how she settled against him so her core lined up to grind directly against his hard-on. She made a soft, breathy sound and froze up, clutching at his chest.

"Come for me," Finn said. He gripped her thighs as Lauren moved in short jerks, and encouraged her to keep riding him until a flush rose up her throat and suffused her face and she seized up with a silent cry. He growled deep in his chest, leaning up so he could kiss her as she moaned and held on and struggled desperately against him.

Lauren collapsed forward on his chest, panting, and nuzzled her face against his neck. Finn closed his eyes, wrapping his arms around her as she shivered and wiggled and sighed. Yep, he was definitely going to have to visit the back room or go outside to sit in the snow.

Her breath whispered against his cheek as she murmured, "You can do what you want, I'm good."

His eyes narrowed as he stared up at the ceiling. What the fuck did that mean? He stroked her back, pissed off on her behalf. "What are you talking about?"

Lauren stretched out like a starfish, then relaxed again, and rolled to the side to sprawl on her back. She waved at the rest of her body and undid the button on her

jeans. “That was nice. You can do...”

“Don’t say that,” he said, shaking his head. Finn turned toward her, frowning. “I don’t like that. I’m not going to do anything to you.”

She blinked and looked up at him. “It’s okay, I got off. It’s your turn.”

He swallowed a groan as his forehead dropped to rest on her shoulder. They had a lot of work to do. It was too bad he’d have to keep his pants on all night to make sure she knew how being with him would be.

Lauren moved uneasily, her fingers working into his hair. “Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad,” he said. Finn kissed her shoulder, then her throat, then up to her jaw and behind her ear. She smelled wild and natural with none of those awful perfumed soaps and shit. “I could never be mad at you.”

She laughed. “Famous last words. Everyone gets mad at me. Silly, ditzy, flaky Lauren. Careless, clumsy Lauren. Stupid Lauren.”

“Stop,” he said. Finn kissed her to prevent her from saying anything else awful about herself. For fuck’s sake, who’d been beating her down for so long that that was what she thought of herself? How could she laugh while repeating those words? Her lips parted to allow him in and Finn took his time, exploring every part of her mouth until she sighed and lifted her arms around his neck and started to move against him.

He braced his hand on her side and retreated, though he leaned back down for a gentle brush of lips before he spoke. “Don’t say that shit. It’s not true. You’re not those things. You’re energetic.”

She snorted and muttered against his lips. “Now you’re just lying, it’s no...”

“And you’re kind and helpful,” he went on. “You’re brave. You feel things deeply and you’re not afraid to share that.”

She pressed her lips together and her eyes grew shiny. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why?”

“Because guys who say shit like that never mean it and I don’t want to find you that you’re like every other...”

Finn groaned and closed his eyes, resting his forehead against hers as she murmured soft, broken words about the many disappointments in her past. He’d meant to reassure her, to promise her he was different, but the torrent of words started and she didn’t pause for breath. She unburdened herself with all those awful lies and smiling insults, and even though it nearly launched the bear into a murderous rage, Finn listened. He heard and absorbed all that grief and anger. He kissed her occasionally, to distract her when she got too caught up, and nuzzled behind her ear.

He would wait until she fell asleep, then crank one out in the back room, then deal with the fire and curl up with her again to get some rest. He didn’t know what the fuck they were going to do once the blizzard passed. Shotgun might still be barreling toward them without giving a shit about safety, or the drug runners searching for their missing compatriots might stumble across the cabin. It wasn’t exactly hidden, and there weren’t a lot of places the culprits could have gone if they found where he’d killed the two assholes.

Half his mind turned over that problem, debating how best to protect her, while the rest of his attention stayed on Lauren. He’d never been good with emotions or caring about what other people felt and thought, at least until he ended up at the house and little Francine landed in the middle of his life like a frag grenade. She’d taught him about patience and calm, and the difference between hearing something and listening

Lauren gave a watery laugh and slid her arm around his neck to bury her face in his shoulder. "I'm sorry, this isn't what..."

"Don't apologize," he said. His fingers worked through her hair to give her a scalp massage, and she went limp and sighing next to him. "I want to hear every word you've got in that beautiful head of yours."

"You say that now." She laughed again without humor, and stroked the back of his neck. "You'll get tired of it. Of me. You'll tell me to shut up because you want to watch something, or that I'm wrong and shouldn't be talking about shit I don't understand, or..."

"Darlin'," he said. Finn wished he could shake some sense into her. Jesus tap-dancing Christ. He was absolutely going to hire a PI to track down every shitbag she mentioned, even in passing, and then he'd come up with some fake fucking charges so Shotgun would go out and kill them. Neat, easy, and his hands were clean. Vengeance done right. "I mean it. I could listen to you read the phonebook."

She snorted and worked her fingers through his hair, playing and teasing absently as she forgot to be nervous. Finn tilted his head into her caress, wanting her to hit that one spot right near his ear that made him grumble in anticipation. Lauren's thoughts had drifted, though, as she rambled. "You'd be the only one. Even in school the teachers would get mad because I couldn't ever read out loud when they told me but there were other times I just couldn't stop talking, and no one listened and it didn't matter how many times I had the right answer, no one ever paid attention and they said I didn't really know how to do fractions and..."

Finn dropped his head to kiss the side of her neck. "Fractions, hm?"

“Yeah.” She tilted her head to give him better access, or maybe just to stare into the fire, and kept playing with his hair. “You know, three halves times a third. Or something like that.”

“I never liked math,” he said. Finn inhaled her scent and made his way down her throat to her shoulder, down and over to the other side to explore her jaw and earlobe.

“I was good at it,” she said, hauling his head back so he would meet her gaze. Her earnest expression melted his heart. She wanted him to know that she’d been able to do the math problems, no matter what anyone else said or thought. “Really. And the times when I did good on the tests they said I cheated off Jeremy Evers, who sat next to me and tried to touch my butt when I sat down.”

“Jeremy Evers?” A growl snuck into his voice. “I’ll take care of that.”

Lauren’s eyes widened. “What...”

“Don’t worry about it.” He’d deal with that little shit. “What kind of math did you like? Just fractions?”

He touched her waist under her sweater and her ribs expanded against his palm as she breathed. Lauren laughed and squirmed as her back arched. “You really want to talk about math?”

“I want to talk about whatever you want to tell me about,” he murmured. Although Finn thought he’d hated math before, if that was what they ended up talking about instead of getting naked, he’d spend a year burning every fucking textbook he could find. “Fractions. Long division. Tangents. Isosceles triangles.”

Lauren giggled and relaxed more, and actually kissed his cheek on her own. Her breath grew short, a little shallow, and her whole face flushed. “What about limits?”

“Limits?” Finn sucked on her neck to give her a hell of a hickey.

“What if,” she whispered, her hands still. “You take me to my limit?”

His ears rang. Finn lifted his head so he could see her expression. “Are we still talking about math?”

Lauren shook her head. The bear started a very cautious celebration in the back of his head, but Finn wasn’t ready to rip his pants off yet. She’d gotten energized before and then shy again. He needed to pace himself. He kissed her again until they were both breathless, and she clung to him like a barnacle. Right. He’d get to find out his own limits, too.

LAUREN

S omehow she started talking about math class and then Finn said something sweet about long division and she couldn't take it anymore. Even though he didn't try anything, just the heat and comfort of his weight against her, slightly over her but not intimidating, pushed her to the edge of her sanity. Even if she'd never really enjoyed sex, Finn brought a whole new level of excitement with him.

Somewhere she found the courage to whisper about taking her to the limit, not sure that he would understand, but his eyes gleamed and turned gold, and a soft growl rumbled in his chest. Her heart sped up and her stomach fluttered even as her thighs clenched. Sure, she'd enjoyed grinding on him until little ripples of pleasure ran through her, but instead of just feeling relaxed and going to sleep after he did what he wanted, she felt restless and overheated. Her core felt flushed and heavy, ready for something more, and the second he touched her, he'd realize that her panties were absolutely soaked.

Lauren had never been so embarrassed or turned on in her life.

“Well, then it sounds like it's time for an experiment.”

She blinked as he retreated. “Do they do experiments in math? I thought it was just problems. Or proofs? Is that what they're called?”

“A proof, then.” Finn chuckled and rubbed the outside of her thigh as he sat back. “I want to prove something. Have a little bet with myself. Want to help me out?”

Oh Lord. Any time a guy made a bet about her, it ended up with her feelings crushed or the morning after pill. She eyed him. “Maybe. What kind of bet?”

He played with where she’d unbuttoned her jeans, not unzipping them but toying with the waist until goosebumps covered every inch of her. Finn squeezed her hip gently with his free hand, then stroked his fingers between her thighs in a slow, deliberate caress. “Well, I want to know what you taste like.”

Her face burned and words deserted her. “Wh...what?”

“See,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her throat, then between her breasts—even with her shirt still on—and down to her stomach. “Part of me says you’ll taste like honey. The other half thinks...mmm...cream.”

The “mmm” grumble lit her every nerve on fire. She almost climaxed right then just from the look in his eyes. Because it promised a hell of a night and a lot more than she’d hoped for.

But he didn’t yank at the jeans. He didn’t demand or take, even when she obviously didn’t object. He waited.

Lauren swallowed the knot in her throat and tried to breathe normally instead of panting like some kind of porn star. He made her want to moan and thrash around like a dirty movie, but she had to keep her cool. She reached for the zipper herself and lifted her hips to start shimmying the jeans down. “I guess you better check.”

And she almost died of embarrassment for saying something so unbelievable. She braced for him to laugh. Instead, Finn growled more and her jeans disappeared. Somehow her socks were gone and her pants simply evaporated off her legs, and Lauren found herself frowning at where they’d been. Had he disintegrated them with some more of his crazy magic?

Finn moved his hands under her sweater as he adjusted how he lay, and kissed her hip. "I think I should."

She couldn't stop the nervous giggle that escaped. He glanced up at her face, gauging her reaction, and Lauren bit her lip to keep from saying something else stupid and math-related. Those gold eyes weighed and measured, then he lowered his head again, gaze locked with hers, as he placed another very deliberate kiss just above the hem of her panties.

Lauren held her breath. He wasn't really going to...

His finger traced under the leg hem of the thin cotton and her whole body twitched. The corner of his mouth twitched as well, and mischief lit his eyes. She braced herself but still jumped when he did it again, teasing around her other thigh, and squeaked when a glancing touch traveled along the gusset. Lauren couldn't help herself; her hips lifted to seek out that touch, to find a bit more pressure, and her body caught fire as he chuckled.

Finn took his time with touches and teases and occasional kisses or nibbles, all while he worked the panties down her hips so slowly and casually that it was like she blinked and then they were gone and she couldn't have said how long they'd been tossed across the room.

Maybe he was a magician, instead of being magic himself. Could he be both? Her thoughts drifted and then Finn shifted his weight and breathed against her with his mouth...

Lauren snapped back to the present. He moved her thigh so her leg draped over his shoulder and Lauren found herself sprawled in front of him like some kind of naked buffet. Her face radiated heat as Finn saw all of her, up close and personal, and she hadn't even shaved. Oh God. She started to snap her legs together, since it didn't

matter how much a guy claimed to be all about nature and everything, he never wanted to see au naturel . “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to...”

“Hey,” he said. Finn rested his chin on her thigh, watching her, but his shoulders made it impossible for her to actually close up shop and roll away. A hint of curiosity drew his eyebrows together, and his fingers drifted up and down the inside of her thigh as he studied her. “What are you sorry for?”

Maybe she needed to shut her damn mouth and close her eyes and appreciate whatever attention he was willing to give her, for however long it lasted. Lauren cleared her throat and dug deep for some bravery. “It’s not as nice as I would...”

His shoulders moved and Finn pressed his face against her leg, hiding his expression, and Lauren braced for disappointment. She’d given him the opening to walk away, so she couldn’t be mad if he took it. But when he looked up, the man was laughing. Laughing?

Finn blew a raspberry on the inside of her thigh and Lauren jumped. He winked and grabbed her hips to haul her even closer to his face. “Looks perfect from where I’m at.”

She meant to argue. She really did. But the tip of his tongue started doing the most amazing gymnastics in the exact perfect spot and everything else disappeared. Her head fell back and she braced her heels on the mattress, holding on to his hair with both hands as Finn squeezed her ass.

He took his time and paused occasionally to nibble on her thighs or kiss her stomach or knee or whatever other skin he could reach. Lauren couldn’t breathe normally. She meant to just murmur and whisper and sound all dainty and sexy as Finn sucked slowly, strongly, on her clit, but all that disappeared in a moan that worked its way up from her toes. Holy hell. Holy fucking hell.

Maybe he wanted to torture her. That had to be it. There wasn't another explanation for why he would drag her all the way to the precipice of absolute ecstasy and then back off. He grumbled and tilted her hips up to give himself better access. "Come on, baby. Tell me what you like."

She didn't know. What the fuck did she say to that? What if she said something he didn't want to do? What if he thought she was some kind of freak and...

"Come back," he murmured. Finn nuzzled against her leg and waited, then stroked one finger down her slit. "Do you like that?"

Her thighs tensed and relaxed in anticipation. Yes. Oh, she liked that. "Y-yes."

He grumbled with approval and repeated the move, slow and tantalizing, until she rocked back to meet the teasing touch. Finn did the same with his tongue, a little slower and a lot more intense, then paused to ask, "What about that?"

Lauren held on to his head and struggled to breathe and remember what he was even talking about. "Yes. Oh yeah. Just like...oh man."

Finn kept it up, slow and easy with the most indecent things, and kept asking what she liked and whether it was the right spot and how much she wanted. It built and built and built until Lauren hovered on the edge of flying apart, holding on to him as the only anchor to reality, and then the pressure increased and his fingers slid against her and she shattered.

She held tight to his head as her hips bucked, as the moan she unleashed rose until no sound escaped, as pure pleasure raced through her like lightning. He kept moving, kept licking and sucking and nibbling, even though she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel as another crest approached. Another tsunami of need and heated relief raced up and overwhelmed her.

Lauren lost any sense of where she was or what existed in the world around her, other than the warm weight of the man between her legs. She moved against him, thrashed, struggled to stay in control, and eventually just...gave up. She let the tidal wave carry her along and surrendered to the intense throbbing pleasure as her muscles clenched and seized.

The sensations retreated slowly, fading instead of stopping, as Finn eased off. Lauren panted, stars dotting her vision, and struggled to get her shit together. She'd never felt anything like it. She hadn't even imagined, in her wildest dreams, that such a thing was possible. Overwhelming and intense and just...holy shit.

"Well, that's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen in my life," Finn said, chuckling with a warmth that made her skin prickle.

She wanted to stretch and roll around and luxuriate in that sound. She wanted to feel every inch of his skin naked and pressed against hers. Which was tough to achieve when she still wore a sweater and he still had his pants on. Every part of her had relaxed, leaving her not quite sleepy but...languid. Like her brain finally dropped into low gear and almost silence, and she didn't care what else happened.

Finn slid up her body, his hand flat on her stomach, and kissed her shoulder. "Gorgeous."

And he pulled the sleeping bags and blankets up over her. Lauren stared up at the ceiling, puzzled, then turned to look at him. Wasn't he going to...?

She caught his arm before he moved away. "Where are you going?"

He glanced down at the obvious bulge in his jeans. "Uh, was going to take a personal break."

Lauren's cheeks heated. What the hell? She gestured at her naked lady business. "Why?"

"I don't want to pressure you," he said.

Lauren managed to keep her voice steady, even though she wanted to wobble and thank him for being an actual good human being. Even if he turned into a bear. She figured any hint that she questioned him or sleeping together would result in Finn hightailing it to the back of the cabin. So she reached for his jeans, getting distracted by the smattering of dark chest hair that trailed down and disappeared behind the button. "You're not."

He groaned softly and caught her hands, bringing them up to kiss her palms and wrists and fingers. "Babe, I really, really want you. But only if you're sure."

Maybe she'd have to take his pants off all the way and reach in to grab him before he'd take her seriously. Lauren sat up to work the zip, which was easier said than done considering the size of his hard on. "I'm really, really sure."

He sucked in his stomach to help her out and give her more room. Her heart thumped faster when she finally got him mostly undressed, and when she paused, Finn stripped the sweater off her too. She tried not to grin and squirm as he stretched out over her, bumping his nose against hers before kissing her. Finally. It really was a good way to stay warm.

FINN

He deserved a fucking medal for his restraint. Eating her out had been the kind of feast he dreamed of, and watching her in the throes of her orgasm had been fucking glorious. But it hadn't been easy to keep from immediately burying his cock in her. If she'd been anyone else, anyone less important to him, it would have been an easy choice to push for more, to assume he could take the next step. But this was Lauren. She was at the center of his soul; he wanted her questioning his motives for a damn second.

Which meant he faced a very cold wank in the back room after she stretched and murmured and looked like a tasty fucking treat after her third or fourth climax.

Except she looked at him with those wide doe eyes and reached for his jeans and said something about wanting him. Then it was an eternity of holding his breath as she struggled to get his pants off and he finally took that goddamn sweater off her, and the only things between them were his briefs and her bra.

Finn stretched out next to her, stroking her body from hip to breast and back, squeezing and petting and worshiping every inch. He took his time with her breasts, too, once he got that fucking bra out of the way, and could have spent most of the night teasing her nipples and watching her expressions change when he used his teeth.

Lauren's hand slid against his briefs, though, as her back arched and she gasped when his free hand slipped between her thighs. Finn groaned when he found her still wet and needy, and even more when her soft fingers closed around his cock. Fuck him.

He might die. He might actually fucking die if she kept up the tentative, slow stroke.

And he'd fucking die if she stopped, too.

Finn squeezed his eyes shut to focus. He was going to unload all over her hand if he didn't get his shit together. She wasn't practiced at handjobs, that was for sure, but that just made it more difficult to stay in control. The tentative, slightly hesitant stroke, the breathy way she murmured to him, shifting her weight and trying to find a different angle...

He groaned again and eased away so the cool air would knock some sense into him. "Hold on, babe. You're getting me too fired up."

Lauren lay back, the firelight casting shadows and turning her into some kind of moon goddess. His moon goddess. The bear heartily approved. Finn leaned to retrieve a couple of condoms, just to have them close. "You look gorgeous."

"You're too far away," she whispered, and held out her hand.

He was lost. Fucking done for. Stick a fork in him. He'd never put a condom on so fast in his life.

He tried to move to her side, find a position she was comfortable with, but she moved her hips so he lay between her thighs and her knees pulled up against his sides. Breathing grew challenging. Damn near impossible.

Her core radiated heat. His cock slid against her and his fists clenched the mattress by her shoulders. Finn fought the bear for control. He didn't want to unleash the beast and just pound into Lauren like some regular lay. But with her in front of him like that, her legs spread in welcome, her trust in the way she left her throat exposed...

Before he really calmed himself, she reached down and guided his cock to her entrance. His breath hissed in his teeth and he almost kept his shit together except she lifted her hips and then the tip pressed into her soft, welcoming flesh and...

He groaned and thrust hard, deep, all the way to his root until their stomachs met and Lauren made a soft, surprised sound. He would have retreated but she locked her legs around his waist and linked an arm around his neck. She breathed against his ear, "Make me feel good, Finn."

His control shattered. His arms slid under her to grasp her shoulders and hold her in place as he thrust. He'd learned enough to know what sounds she made when she was enjoying something, and when she was really enjoying something, and managed to at least listen for those cues as he moved.

Finn meant to draw things out, meant to ensure she came at least a couple more times before he finished, but the tight clasp of her channel meant control quickly slipped away. Her body clutched at him every time he retreated until he was groaning and panting along with her.

He didn't want or need any acrobatics. He could have moved into a new position or tried something fancy but instead he couldn't stand the thought of losing the connection of seeing her eyes, feeling her breath against his cheek, having her arms and legs wrapped around him. Finn groaned and kissed her deeply as static filled his brain and pressure built in his back before he came.

It severed the connection between his brain and the rest of him, and both the bear and the man couldn't have moved if Shotgun kicked down the door and threatened them both. He came back to himself slowly, in bits and pieces, as Lauren sighed and her thighs slid against his sides in a soft caress that nearly set him off again. Finn rested his forehead against her shoulder, breathing in the scent of her skin and the perspiration that clung to them both.

Her fingers drifted down the back of his neck over and over, like she petted the bear's ears earlier. He should have moved, he knew that, but he couldn't convince himself to lose the soft warmth of her against him. Under him. Her knees drawn up and her heel moving against his calf. He turned toward her neck and nuzzled closer behind her ear, whuffling along like the bear would have.

"Question," she said, still absently stroking his neck and moving her foot against his leg. The girl fidgeted even while half-asleep and obviously sated and well-loved.

He grumbled and kissed her shoulder, pushing up on his elbows to see her clearly. The fact that it also gave him a chance to study her breasts and watch the way her hair tangled against the pillow was just happenstance. "Anything."

He'd expected something about him being a bear, maybe, or the plan for the rest of the night, or something odd about the mechanics of sex. With Lauren, he really didn't know what to expect. It was part of what he loved about her without even thinking, without knowing much more about her than he'd seen in the past two days. She damn well could have said anything.

"Why did you bring condoms on a hike through the woods?"

And she delivered. Finn snorted and rolled to the side, though he took her with him so they stayed pressed together as he hiked her thigh up on his hip and squeezed her ass. Lauren squeaked but stayed burrowed close, her hips rocking in response to his touch. His lust reignited and he normally would have snapped off one condom and gotten a second but he didn't want to pressure her. "Same reason I have tampons in the first aid kit. They can be useful for things other than what they were intended."

"You have tampons in the first aid kit?" She pushed up on an elbow to peer over his side into the darkness of the cabin where the first aid kit spilled its guts onto the floor. Lauren made a thoughtful sound and rested her chin on his shoulder as she surveyed

the interior of the dilapidated building, like somehow more useful items would appear out of nowhere.

Finn didn't bother to hide his smile and instead took the opportunity to kiss her shoulder and along her neck, his palm on her waist so he felt how she breathed. "Yep."

"You're so prepared." Lauren flopped back on her back, arms above her head as she stretched and yawned, and studied him with hazy, half-closed eyes. "And you actually used the condoms for what they were meant for, too. Do you have enough for whatever you were going to use them for, too?"

Finn studied her face, running his fingertips along her eyebrows and cheekbones, then down the line of her jaw and the curve of her lips. God help him, she was so beautiful he wouldn't ever get tired of looking at her. "I use them for waterproofing stuff that I don't want to get wet, and I've got plenty, yes. Even if I didn't, I'd rather use them with you."

And he wagged his eyebrows to make a joke of it, in case she got nervous again. He didn't particularly like tiptoeing around and being so worried about everything he said, but he didn't like her getting uncomfortable a lot more.

She laughed, squirming around a little, and patted his bare chest. "You're probably the first."

Every inch of him went on full alert as alarm shot through him. The first? He was the first for what? Panic brewed. Had she been a virgin, somehow, despite being so fucking sexy and delectable? Finn cleared his throat and leaned back slightly, suddenly worried that he'd been too aggressive even if she'd been into it. "Uh, when you say the first, do you mean..."

Lauren's head tilted as she looked at him, puzzled, then she laughed even more. "No, not the first the first. Just the first who actually wanted to use a condom and didn't have it break or fall off halfway through."

He breathed easier at the same time he wanted to hunt down any dude who'd lied to her or put her in danger for their own selfish fucking reasons. Finn took a deep breath to steady the bear's rage and very carefully kissed her cheek. "Well, safety first, darlin'. Unless you're looking for a baby, we've gotta be careful."

She looked mostly asleep, not really paying attention as she moved to watch the dying flames. "The possibility of a baby never stopped anyone else, they just expected me to deal with it or whatever."

Finn closed his eyes briefly in an effort to control his temper and the urge to race off into the night to hunt down the fuckers who'd touched her. He untangled his limbs and carefully settled the sleeping bags and extra blankets over her to get up and clean off. And go into the back room to growl and break logs with his bare hands in a fury.

He suddenly understood a lot more why Simon and the others went out of their way to keep their mates happy and content; the emotional swings of wanting to correct those wrongs might kill him. He even stuck his head through one of the broken windows so the cold air might shock some sense into him, and breathed in the crisp, woodsy scent of fresh snow. God help him if Shotgun or those smugglers threatened her. They'd need a lot more than God on their side to survive if they did, but he'd need all the morphine in the medic bag to keep him from going on a full fucking rampage. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed. He had to get them out of there, and fast.

LAUREN

Whatever she'd expected, Finn delivered much more. She hadn't known what to expect, particularly after he retrieved protection all on his own, but he exceeded even her wildest dreams. He even managed to top the way she felt earlier when he went down on her. Lauren almost felt bad for not reciprocating the oral sex, but Finn didn't even hint that he expected it. It was like he only cared what she wanted.

She dozed, only half awake, as he got up and rummaged around, and for a second she thought he might be getting more condoms to go again. She wouldn't have minded that a bit, even though she already felt sticky and slightly sore. It had probably been at least a year since she was with anyone, and those muscles hadn't gotten a workout in some time. She smiled to herself as she curled up under the sleeping bags. Not a bad way to spend the evening after all.

Lauren didn't know what the next day would bring, and she didn't want to ask. She had to live in the moment. Trying to plan ahead too far never worked out for her or anyone she knew. She'd been making plans to go to a community college for something when she got mixed up with the protestors and her whole life blew up. Instead of getting ahead, she was out an application fee and the first semester's tuition. She couldn't even apply for a refund because the bounty hunters would be able to find her.

She pushed the thought away and raked the hair out of her face. Something creaked and snapped in the back room, and she glanced back to make sure it was still Finn and not the scary guys with guns. Which would have been terrible, since she was still naked and didn't want to think of what those bastards might try if they walked into

the cabin. Surely with a blizzard going on outside, all the bad guys were hunkered down somewhere else.

She worried her lower lip in her teeth, watching the flames dance and pulse. The air moved and Finn was there again, his knee denting the mattress next to where she lay. Lauren smiled as she looked at him, trailing her fingers down his chest. “Why did you...”

She trailed off when he swiped something across the inside of her thigh, and frowned as she looked down. What the heck was he doing? He’d gotten rid of the condom and was very efficiently cleaning her up, too. She watched in silence, too startled to say anything, and held her breath until he kissed her cheek before moving away again. Lauren hadn’t ever had a boyfriend, even a long-term one who claimed they’d get married and he’d take her away from the trailer park, take care of her like that.

Finn returned, tossing a few sticks onto the fire and sliding into the nest next to her so he was close against her back as they spooned. He reached over her to put a water bottle filled with half-melted snow close enough to the fire so it would melt, and rummaged around for protein bars and a can of chili from her stores. His arm draped over her side and he made rumble noises that sounded like a bear as he kissed her shoulder again. “You should eat something. Stay hydrated. The snow is still falling so there’s no telling how long we’ll be here.”

She didn’t know what to think or where to look or what to do. It was like something out of a reality TV show where a bunch of handsome guys fought each other to impress some lucky woman who did her hair every morning and knew how to do makeup and wore high heels. It didn’t happen to someone like Lauren. She hadn’t had a proper bath for literally weeks, and there Finn was, ready to snuggle up again. She already felt his interest half hard and pressing against her ass, even as he told her to eat and drink and inhaled a few protein bars himself.

Lauren picked at one of the protein bars, making a face at the gross chalkiness and weird texture. “You eat these by choice?”

“They’re light and easy to transport,” he said, sounding amused. “Easier to eat these on the go instead of dealing with making a fire and heating something up.”

She grumbled, wishing he’d brought pasta or dehydrated eggs or something even slightly edible. Not that she should have complained, since it was arguably a good change of pace from the cans of beans and chili she’d been eating. No doubt he didn’t want to share a sleeping bag with a girl after a couple cans of beans. Nothing like a night filled with farts to really kill the mood.

“What would you rather eat?” he asked, chin once more on her shoulder as they both faced the fire. “If you could make anything in the world.”

“Anything?” Lauren frowned as she chewed through another hunk of protein grossness. “I don’t know. I haven’t been able to try much, to be honest. Bar food and fast food and some casseroles that Grandma made before she died. That’s about it. And whatever comes out of a box or a can from the grocery store.”

He grumbled, rubbing his beard against her skin until the tickle sent a shiver all the way down to her toes. She hadn’t thought he’d be so tactile, so touchy-feely, especially after sex. Didn’t guys just roll over and start snoring? Or hand her her clothes and say something about how they had to get up early the next morning. That seemed about right. Not cuddling and bringing her food and cleaning the mess up off her legs.

Finn didn’t say anything and Lauren felt like an idiot. He’d been trying to make conversation, and she’d shut him down with her stupid unthinking brain. Why would she blurt out something like that? A guy like him had probably eaten all the fancy food in the world and knew what fork to use and how to order in other languages. He

could probably say all the words on the taco drive thru menu the right way, too, without saying the double-Ls as actual Ls.

She concentrated on the protein bar piece in her hand. “What about you? What would you eat, if you could make anything in the world?”

He exhaled in a gust, blowing her hair over her shoulder, and she swiped at it without thinking as it made her squirm. He did it again and she gave him a dirty look. Finn smiled and finished his protein bar. “Grandma’s casserole sounds pretty good to me.”

Lauren rolled her eyes and refused to indulge in the few memories she had of her grandmother. Gee-ma had been the one spot of light in her childhood, and losing her had just cemented that the world was an awful place and it didn’t get any better. “Seriously.”

“Seriously?” He made a thoughtful sound and played with her hair. “I don’t know. I remember eating fresh grilled fish on the beach in Somalia that tasted pretty damn good. There’s this stew thing in Yemen that’ll knock your socks off and I could probably eat every week for the rest of my life. And Simon’s mate, Zoe, makes this spaghetti sauce that you can eat by itself with a spoon it’s so good. I don’t know how she does it.”

Lauren’s mouth went dry with regret as she watched the fire slowly consume the sticks he’d thrown in. Somalia? Yemen? He’d traveled more of the world than she could find on a map, even though she’d enjoyed geography in school. And who was Simon and what was a mate? Was that just a fancy bear way of saying wife? Girlfriend? Fuck buddy?

Finn went on, musing about other meals he’d eaten, as Lauren felt worse and worse. How could she ever offer to cook dinner for him when the best she could do was the value pack ramen noodles with a little extra spice on top? He’d been so many places

and seen so many things. How could he possibly want anything to do with a stupid bumpkin like her?

After a while, he trailed off and the only sound was the slow crackle and hiss of the fire. Finn kissed the back of her shoulder. “Did you fall asleep on me? Am I that boring?”

He teased her, she knew it. But she knew the danger was that he would get bored with her. She moved a little uneasily, wondering how long it would take for him to realize what a hopeless moron she was. How could she even get through the next day without outing herself? He insisted he didn’t think she was dumb or annoying, but it was just a matter of time. “No, just thinking.”

“About what?”

She watched the flames, uncertain. What the hell did she say to that? Why did Finn want to talk? Him talking and asking question and sharing things about his past was sweeter than anything else that happened after sex, but for once she just wanted him to sleep so she could get some quiet and figure out what the heck to do next. “Not much.”

He made a grumbly noise but didn’t push her for more. Something else that made her want to cry. She definitely didn’t deserve him. Lauren didn’t dare look at him. Finn got settled and made sure they lay close together under the sleeping bags, then breathed soft and evenly as the night got quiet and slow. She wanted to pretend she’d gone to sleep but her mind raced too much for her to stay still. Her feet moved and she fidgeted with the corner of the blanket they lay on.

“Do you need to get up?” The husky murmur sounded half asleep, and Finn squeezed her hip before he moved his feet to interrupt the way hers moved together.

Lauren flushed and turned rigid so she wouldn't squirm around and flail. It always drove people nuts that she couldn't stop moving, that she twitched and fidgeted even in her sleep. No doubt Finn would flee as soon as he realized. She tried to tamp down the immediate urge to apologize and ignore the anxiety that gripped her. What if she said the wrong thing? "I just...can't sleep."

He made a rough, grumbly sound that made her shiver. Finn wrapped his arms around her and exhaled, kissing the back of her neck again, then worked his feet between hers. "I might be able to help with that."

She laughed, because it was pretty damn obvious how he wanted to help. Lauren held on to his arms where they linked around her middle, and wondered at how muscular his forearms were even while he was relaxed and half asleep. It was like he was made of steel. "I'm tired, I just can't turn my brain off."

He made a thoughtful noise but didn't push for more physically. He just held her close and listened to her. "What's keeping you up?"

She didn't know what to tell him. The truth probably wouldn't go over well, since he didn't like hearing the truth about how hopeless and ridiculous she was. How was she going to talk about the deep uneasiness in her gut if he didn't believe her about how messy and fucked up her life was? Finn didn't know what he was getting into, shacking up with her even for a night. Even if he'd dealt with those mean guys on the trail, he didn't really know what kind of trouble Lauren would bring into his life. "I don't know, I just... I'm wondering what we do next."

Finn made that rumble noise that reminded her of the bear in a sudden flash of reality. He rested his chin on her shoulder, peering over her side at her face like he could see her expression in the firelight. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," she whispered. It was easier than admitting it at full volume, even if

he heard it all the same. “I’ve been stuck for weeks, because I don’t know what to do. I can’t keep doing what I’m doing, since I’m running out of food and it’s just a matter of time until the sheriff finds me or bounty hunters show up at the door, and it’s winter so I definitely won’t be able to keep chopping wood because the ax is getting dull and it takes forever and I don’t know how to sharpen an ax and...”

“Breathe,” he murmured, kissing her cheek and behind her ear. “One problem at a time, darlin’. That’s what I was taught. Work the problem in front of you, then worry about the next one. So the first problem is easy.”

“Oh?” Lauren craned her neck to look at him in disbelief. “What problem are you thinking of, because nothing in front of me looks easy?”

He smiled, barely visible through the beard in the shifting shadows of the firelight. “Well, once we leave this cabin, you’re coming home with me. There’s plenty of food, we won’t need firewood, and I’ll sharpen whatever axes you want me to.”

Another kiss and he patted her stomach. Lauren’s face burned. Did he really want her to go live with him, after knowing her only a day or two? And learning what he had about her? “But I’m a criminal. A wanted criminal. Aren’t you worried about...”

“I believe you’re innocent,” he said. “And we can deal with the charges and bounty and all that. Just a matter of getting the right lawyer and making a deal with the bondsman to start with. We’ll get it sorted out.”

There he went, saying we again. Her feet moved uneasily and bumped his, but Finn’s only response was to adjust how he held her so she had more room to fidget. It was too good to be true. Lauren knew the other shoe would drop eventually. She didn’t dare get her hopes up or let herself believe that Finn would actually follow through on his promises about a lawyer and a safe place to stay. It was just so he could sleep with her again. That had to be it. “I don’t think it’ll be that easy.”

“Well, the other thing I’ve learned is that money fixes a lot of problems,” he said. Finn yawned and she heard his jaw crack. She couldn’t help but yawn as well, and her eyes drooped as he stroked her stomach absently. “I’ve saved a lot over the years and never had anything worthwhile to spend it on. Don’t you worry about a thing, darlin’.”

She didn’t want to believe him, and she didn’t want to rely on charity like that. Lauren had learned the hard way that letting a guy pay her bills usually meant paying him back in ways too costly to tolerate. She didn’t want to think Finn was like that, that he’d hold the money over her head and make her feel bad that he’d wasted money on a lawyer or whatever, but a small part of her knew it was just a matter of time until he woke up to reality. “I don’t know if…”

“Tomorrow morning we can talk about what to do next and who to talk to first,” he murmured. Finn nuzzled behind her ear and patted her hip. “How about I tell you about the beach in Somalia?”

She frowned at the fire. “What?”

Finn started to describe a faraway beach, his husky voice almost hypnotic as he told her about waves and shells and sand. Lauren yawned again and snuggled deeper into the blankets and his arms. Maybe it would all be okay. Her eyes drooped more and she drifted away while he talked about spearfishing and learning to surf. She heard the sound of the waves in her dreams, too.

FINN

His instincts told him something was off even though Lauren eventually relaxed and fell asleep in his arms. The uncertainty in her voice, in the way she searched for excuses on why he wouldn't want her around, made him nervous. Between the bear and the man, there were no doubts that they were meant to be together. Lauren was his, and he was hers, and that was how things were going to be.

He'd expected to need to convince her, but not as much as he apparently would have to. He'd go as slow as necessary to build her confidence in him, even if it drove him crazy that she questioned his intentions and searched for reasons why things wouldn't work out. She definitely searched for the worst-case scenario. He couldn't blame her, not really, based on what he'd heard about her past.

Finn told her about a beach he dreamed about from one of the few quiet times he'd experienced in the Horn of Africa, spearfishing with a few buddies while they waited for a new contract to come through and a helicopter to pick them up. Simon had been there, too, and a couple of other bears. Granted, the bear was fucking miserable in the heat, but Finn could have basked in the sun all day if it wouldn't have burned him to a crisp.

But once she'd fallen asleep, finally quiet and still except for a few mutters and twitches, sleep eluded him. Finn wouldn't ever let her know, but he wasn't entirely confident that all things would be handled as easily as he'd said. Sure, he could afford the best attorneys in the area, and would levy whatever defense needed to keep her from spending a second in jail. But the so-called justice system chewed people up and spit them out, and sometimes the innocent got caught up in it just as much as the

guilty. He could do everything right and it still not work out the way he wanted.

Which meant he needed to stack the deck. He'd bend the rules and break the laws to ensure Lauren didn't pay the price for what those fucking activists did to her, throwing her under the bus. He shoved that fury down deep as his arms tightened around her and she murmured in her sleep. He would deal with those assholes later, after he was sure Lauren was off the hook and everything would be fine.

He rubbed his chin against her shoulder, the bear wanting to scent mark her a little yet again, and worked the problem over in his mind. Simon and Noah were better at this kind of shit. Finn's solution was to grab Lauren and disappear somewhere wild where the bounty hunters and cops wouldn't bother to search for her. Maybe they'd fake her death so they wouldn't come after her at all. Buy her a new identity and leave the country, go on an adventure together through all the wild places he'd been before but hadn't really enjoyed. He'd show Lauren all the finer things, and the less fine things since she didn't seem like the kind of girl who wanted hoity-toity Parisian restaurants. She could rough it in a hut on the beach or a hammock in the jungle or even an igloo in the Arctic.

It didn't sound like she had any family that would have searched for her or bothered to help her out, otherwise she wouldn't have been staying in a dilapidated pile of sticks in the middle of the forest. Maybe her friend, the one whose parents wouldn't help Lauren. He tried to understand where they were coming from, but obviously they'd never met her, because it would have been damn impossible to meet Lauren and not want to help her.

He closed his eyes and tried the falling-asleep trick that Ethan taught him, listening to waves in his mind in the hopes the white noise would relax him and get rid of the troubling thoughts running around in his head. He had the same problem Lauren did, apparently.

It didn't help that the bear wanted to stalk through the woods around the cabin to search for hints of any intruders or Shotgun's guys. Finn had sent the coordinates and the cop could have sent a team in to search out the drug runners at any time. Finn assumed he wouldn't do it in the middle of a blizzard, but the old man had done crazier shit in much worse conditions. He didn't have any reason to search for the cabin or assume that Finn or the smugglers were inside it. Finn hoped that was enough to keep them out of the line of fire until he had a chance to shore up some defensive positions and figure out what the fuck to do.

He needed to call Simon so the bears could meet him and Lauren in the town much closer to the cabin than the way he'd originally trekked in. He could sneak Lauren out without her being seen if Simon brought the trucks right to the cabin, and with all the bears there, he'd have enough firepower to ensure Shotgun didn't get jumpy or sloppy when it came to calling in his dogs. Once they were back at the Lodge and Lauren was for sure safe, he would figure the rest of the shit out.

It wasn't his problem if Shotgun caught the smugglers or not. They wouldn't figure out he killed the missing men, when obviously they'd been torn apart by a bear's claws. Sure, stuffing them in a crevice and hiding them with rocks was a little outside of the typical ursine behavioral patterns, but what the fuck ever. They had it coming. If anyone searched for the drug runners, so be it. He'd deal with the consequences later. There weren't witnesses and there sure as hell wasn't evidence that tied Finn to the deaths. Lauren wasn't about to volunteer information to the police about what happened on the trail. They wouldn't believe her even if she did go tearing off to announce a man turned into a bear and clawed apart a couple of guys who threatened her with guns, and the bear carried her back to a cabin and turned back into a man. He shook his head to himself, not wanting to think about the circumstances where poor Lauren might have had to talk about him changing forms.

Finn didn't sleep much as he turned the problem over and over in his head. Despite what he told Lauren about leaving it for another day, he couldn't get past the

immediate issue of getting out of the forest without getting shot by cowboys with badges or drug smugglers. That was the real problem. He didn't want to highlight that to Lauren, otherwise he'd have to toss her over his shoulder to haul out of the cabin and into the open.

Not that he minded the idea of carrying her around.

She slept hard enough she didn't even stir when he untangled himself and eased out from under the layers of sleeping bags and blankets. He made sure to tuck everything in around her so none of the chilly air drifting in from the holes in the walls disturbed her. He fed a few sticks to the coals and relit it to make sure it caught, then made a lap of the perimeter to ensure they were still safe.

The blizzard had dumped a good three feet of snow outside, though it drifted up against the cabin almost over his head in places. Finn didn't bother opening the front door, since he didn't want to leave an obvious sign to anyone passing by that someone recently entered or exited the building. Plus opening the door would have woken Lauren for sure.

So he opened one of the windows in the back of the cabin, leaning out to sniff the crisp air outside. He inhaled until his whole chest expanded and the air nearly froze his lungs. Nothing but pine and typical forest animals and snow. No metallic scents or humans or drugs or ammunition. None of the smells he would have expected if trouble were about to drop on top of them. The forest was silent in the early dawn.

Too silent.

His nerves prickled and his bear side wanted to prowl through the snow to make sure the rest of the forest knew an apex predator was walking through the trees. It wouldn't make anything better, really, even though it would have placated the bear. And it might end up scaring the shit out of Lauren, if she woke up and found him

missing and then in bear form. Just because she'd kind of accepted it the night before, coming out of a serious shock, didn't mean the cold morning light would show her the same thing.

Which left him with only a few options. Finn closed the window and shook off the snow that had fallen on his head, brushing off his shoulders before returning to the front of the cabin. Lauren still slept, curled up in a little ball with her face buried in his sleeping bag, and he paused to study her, smiling despite himself. He didn't know how it was possible for her to have worked her way into his heart so quickly, but there they were.

He sorted quietly through the supplies scattered on the floor from his pack, taking stock of what kind of food remained and how long it would last them. At least water wouldn't be a problem with all the snow outside. Bathing could take forever or be really fucking cold, and he didn't have that many baby wipes left. His leg still ached and the scars, despite being pink and healed over, remained thin and sensitive. He couldn't stress the wounds too much or he'd end up with another open cut and more gnarly markings. Not that it mattered; he would just get another tattoo to cover it all up. Or he'd live with it, because it reminded him of the best day of his life: when he met Lauren.

Finn rolled his eyes at his own ridiculousness. If Simon or Ethan said anything so fucking sappy, Finn wouldn't have let them live it down, ever. Ever. He could not have imagined feeling that way about anyone or anything. Even if Franny gave him a run for the money. Still, it wasn't even a question of whether his life meant more after meeting Lauren. It just did. Everything before her, before that awful moment being trapped in metal jaws and hearing her whisper not to eat her, felt dull and gray and silent. Lacking any life or passion, any emotion. It was his past and his history, and he'd remember it for the lessons it taught him and the things he'd survived, but what mattered most was what stood in front of him: his future with Lauren. That was important. Everything else...was just bullshit.

He checked the sat phone and scrolled through a couple of messages from Simon and Shotgun. The rest of the world waited to make trouble for him and Lauren both, and it was just a matter of time until the real world intruded on the cabin. The only question was what disturbed them first. Simon and the bears, Shotgun and his cowboys, or a bunch of gun-happy drug smugglers. Maybe even a bounty hunter or two thrown in, if Lauren was right that the bail bondsman might be looking for her. He shook his head and looked around for a way to put together breakfast. They'd eat, then plan. Then they could get on with life together.

LAUREN

She didn't dream, which was a miracle. Ever since being arrested and going on the run, she'd been plagued with nightmares of being pursued and arrested again and ending up in solitary confinement forever. Being alone with just her thoughts would have been the kind of torture that was outlawed under international law.

Lauren woke up and felt almost drunk on being too well-rested. When was the last time that happened? She couldn't remember, even before she'd fallen in with the activists and cryptozoologists. There hadn't really been a time that she slept well, not when she had to worry about whether her mother was overdosing or one of Mom's boyfriends might want to steal something or creep into her room. So she'd learned to only sleep a little at a time, keeping an ear tuned to any unfamiliar noises. She'd barely gotten used to sleeping in the cabin and the noises of the forest when she had to start lighting the fire and barring the door against the strong winds, and other things that kept disturbing her.

She figured with Finn there, breathing and moving and snoring a little, that she wouldn't have slept a wink. It was too strange to have someone on the mattress next to her, and he smelled different, and moved around, and took up more room than anyone she remembered sleeping next to. He should have kept her up and on-edge, waiting for trouble. And yet...he didn't.

Lauren rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and took in the cheerily dancing fire as she tried to put the night back together. Her abs ached pleasantly, and even though chilly air worked its way into the sleep bag to caress her naked skin, she stretched out so she felt every inch of her body moving. Wow.

Finn had been an enormous, warm mountain next to her all night. She vaguely remembered waking up once or twice but always he was there. He'd patted whatever part of her was closest and usually snuggled her tight to his chest with one of those bear-y grumbles and some murmured nonsense. And it worked. Each time, it worked, and she went back to sleep confident that nothing was wrong, everything was okay, and she was safe.

What kind of insanity was that? She'd known him probably three days, and learned he was some kind of half-bear man, and not only did she have sex with him, she was on the verge of following him home and shacking up the rest of their lives. She pushed up on her elbows to peer around the room, searching for a hint of where Finn had gone. The room was too warm for him to have gone out the front door, so he had to still be in the almost-falling-down structure.

Before she wondered more than a second, Finn appeared from the back rooms, arms full of random supplies. He smiled when he saw her awake, and her stomach squirmed with nerves and anticipation. Damn. How could the man affect her so easily, so completely? She wanted to hide under the covers and throw them back so he saw all of her, all at the same time.

His grin didn't slip as he dumped the pile of stuff onto an existing pile of stuff near the little kitchenette, then sauntered over to the mattress like he stalked her through the forest again. She shivered, but not in the same way she had fleeing the day before. Lauren couldn't help but bite her thumb to keep from saying something ridiculous about the way his hips moved or the way his hair was shaggy enough she had something to hold on to when it really mattered. "Good morning."

"Good mornin', sugar," he said, those white teeth flashing as he grinned more. Finn didn't loom over her for long but went to his knee on the mattress and leaned in to brush his lips to hers. "You hungry?"

“Mmm,” was all she managed after being distracted by his mouth and his hand as it wandered to brace against her side.

When Finn finally pulled away, she tried to collect her scattered thoughts and utterly failed because he didn’t go far. His attention landed on her chest and his hand slid up her ribcage until he caressed her breast. Lauren had to bite her lip to keep from moaning as his thumb passed roughly over her nipple, already hard in the cold air, and his mouth descended to explore in a wet heat that shocked her into silence. Finn grumbled as he switched to the other breast and the cold air chilled the first even more, the skin tightening until Lauren shifted and moved around so she touched it.

Which, of course, made Finn light up like a Christmas tree. He kissed the spot between her breasts, then down her stomach, and murmured, “Touch yourself.”

Lauren hadn’t planned on immediately having sex with him this morning, since she figured morning breath and hunger and sleepiness would get in the way, but the growl in his voice and the way he looked at her... She shivered from head to toe and slowly covered her breasts with her hands, watching him the whole time. Finn grinned and rubbed his bearded chin against her stomach, petting her hip and thigh as he watched.

She squeezed her breasts and sighed, half closing her eyes, and imagined the way he’d loved her the night before. Her feet moved together in the tangled blankets, and Finn stroked the inside of her knee. His eyes practically glowed. “I’m a little hungry myself.”

Lauren wanted to laugh but a nervous giggle was all that escaped. She could assume what she wanted, but there wasn’t any guarantee that he actually meant what she hoped he meant.

Finn trailed his fingers down her stomach and around her hips to squeeze her ass. “I’d

really like to cover you in honey and lick it off you, but I don't think I brought enough with me and it would get everything sticky."

"Maybe next time," she managed to whisper, even as her face caught fire and the rest of her followed suit. She didn't need the fire to stay warm anymore, she probably could have melted all the snow outside just by opening the door.

"Definitely next time," he said. His fingers dug in to her butt and she lifted her hips in response, back arching. He nudged her knees apart and nibbled on the inside of her knee before he worked his way closer to the apex of her thighs. "This is way better than the oatmeal I was going to make, though."

Lauren squeaked and smacked his shoulder, twisting away despite that his massive shoulders kept her knees spread and prevented her from escaping. Finn laughed and said, "I'm kidding," and she settled down.

Until he added, "I was going to make pancakes."

She would have objected or at least smacked him, but instead his mouth descended and his tongue swiped across her clit and she forgot everything she meant to say or do.

Lauren lost herself in the unbelievable sensations, the ease of it all. Whatever nerves had plagued her the night before, whatever uncertainty had made her tense up, were gone. Right or wrong, she trusted Finn not to use her for his own selfish needs and then abandon her. At least he'd get her off first.

Her fingers worked into his hair and dug into his scalp as he continued the slow teasing, and he tilted his head so she reached a spot behind his ears. Lauren couldn't swallow a smile. It must have been the bear side of him that wanted his ears scratched. Her back arched and her heels dug into the mattress as she hovered on the

edge of a surprisingly quick climax, one of those shivery ones that snuck up on her and grew into something amazing if she held on and rode through it. Her eyes squeezed shut as she concentrated, breathing deeply and thinking of the night before as they tangled up in front of the fire—skin against skin, the slippery sensation of his body against hers, his mouth on her breasts, his breath in her ear, the way he groaned when he came...

Lauren sucked in a breath, ready to shatter, and a loud, clanging noise filled the cabin. She blinked, grip tightening on his hair, and tried not to lose focus. Finn hesitated but didn't retreat, then the noise repeated. And again. He muttered, shoulders rigid with annoyance, and finally shoved back. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Just...hold on a sec."

She lifted her head to watch as he retrieved a complicated looking phone. He cursed the whole time, the sweatpants slung low on one hip and doing nothing to hide his massive hard-on. At least he definitely was just as turned on as she was, and he wasn't looking for an excuse to break things off early.

Not that it helped her deal with the coitus interruptus.

Finn growled as he answered the phone, running his free hand through his hair, and stalked into the back of the cabin. "What the fuck do you want?"

She sighed and stared up at the ceiling. That didn't sound like anything conducive to more adult fun. Finn hadn't explained a whole lot of detail on why he was out in the woods and how long he'd been hiking, but it had something to do with drug smugglers. It had to be serious business with serious people, the kind of business that left her surrounded by guys with guns and them threatening to kill her. Lauren gnawed on her lip as she debated whether to get up and find some clothes so they could get an actual breakfast cooking, or maybe to linger in bed and finish herself off if Finn took too much longer. Already the warm shivers heralding a wave of ecstasy

retreated and the heady flush of arousal faded until she remembered how freaking cold the room actually was. From the sounds coming from the back room, Finn's conversation would take a while. She sighed again and wiggled her way back under the sleeping bags to stay warm until he came back, and stroked her stomach. Hopefully he wouldn't be too long.

FINN

Finn added something else to the list of reasons why he wanted to kill Shotgun, and being interrupted in the middle of enjoying snacking on Lauren flew to the very top. The fucker had the absolute worst timing. He'd said it before and been wrong, but that time Finn absolutely meant it: he was never working for Shotgun again. It didn't matter how bored Finn might have felt or how much money Shotgun promised, that was fucking it. He was done.

"I sent you all the information you need," Finn snapped. He kept his voice low, though, because he didn't want to worry or distract Lauren too much. Ideally she'd still be primed and ready when he went back. Not that he would have minded starting from zero again; he'd set up camp between her thighs all fucking day if she'd let him.

"Fuck you, you did not." A lot of noise and wind almost hid Shotgun's words, but the bastard was too accustomed to just bellowing everything and managed to get his point across despite the chaos. "Why did you tell me there are twenty-five of these fuckers and I've only got eighteen here? Can't you count, motherfucker?"

Finn frowned at he stared at the partially snow-covered window in the back room. Eighteen? Finn had sent the coordinates and location of twenty-five smugglers, minus the two he'd killed and shoved behind a rock, and expected that to be the end of it, particularly with the blizzard. "I counted twenty-five. Not my fucking problem if you lost them."

"It might be your problem, asshole," Shotgun said. "Since you're the idiot still out there fucking around in the trees. Don't blame me if they knock on your door."

Finn's hair stood on end. Did Shotgun know about the cabin? Why else would he think that Finn had a door? He didn't entirely trust the bastard to have kept Finn's involvement to himself, so maybe it wasn't Shotgun but the man's team who decided to fuck him over? Some of the other freelancers that Shotgun dealt with were probably selling information to the highest bidder, and if the drug dealers had the best money... Finn was fucked.

"Sounds like the price just went up again," Finn said. He fought for calm even though the bear wanted to charge into the snow to find whoever might have threatened his peaceful morning with Lauren. He didn't know whether Shotgun's guys fucked up and missed the other men. Maybe they even knew about Lauren. She'd been at the cabin for a while, and if she'd been out and about doing whatever it was she did looking for Bigfoot, then maybe they saw her. Maybe they knew where she stayed.

"Fuck off," Shotgun said. He cursed more in the background, angry enough that for the first time Finn wondered if the fucker would cut him off before Finn had the chance to get the details out. The cop finally spoke into the phone again. "I don't control where these assholes went, dick, you can't expect me to?—"

"I expect you to cover for cleanup," Finn said. He needed to get control of the conversation again, if he'd ever had it in the first place. But the seed of an idea had planted itself in his brain. Maybe there was a way to kill two birds with one stone. "Especially since I'll need to bring in some help."

"I paid you to?—"

"You paid me to find these guys," Finn said. He breathed as calmly as possible even though his heart thumped against his ribs. He didn't have much time, if there were some of the smugglers on his trail already. Sure, the blizzard that blew through did him a favor and covered up the physical evidence, but he hadn't bothered to search the corpses for any trackers or other locators that the smugglers might have planted

on their guys. Maybe they weren't looking for Finn but thought their own guys had absconded with the merchandise. He wasn't that lucky, but it was nice to think about. "Not to track them down twice because your guys were too slow to apprehend them the first time."

"What are you going to charge this time, an extra million?"

Finn's jaw clenched as he stared at the rotting log in the wall. "No, something a little simpler. The person I need to help clean this up has a few charges I want to go away. That's it."

"Charges," Shotgun repeated. An engine gunned in the background, followed by yelling. "What kind of charges? Give me the name."

"I'll give you the name when everything is taken care of here," Finn said. He didn't trust the bastard with Lauren's name for a second. Only once he knew for sure they were physically safe from the danger of the smugglers and the rest of the bears were on their way as backup would he give Shotgun the first hints of who Lauren was. And then he'd probably be better off calling the Lodge's lawyer first, just to make sure. The deal wasn't exactly the kind of thing a lawyer wanted to know about, but fuck it. Shotgun had a better chance of making the trouble disappear than anyone else.

Shotgun shouted at someone, then moved somewhere with a lot less wind. He even lowered his voice. "Look, shithead. I can't just magic charges away anymore. Some things I can get written off or whatever, maybe commuted to time served, but it's not as easy as it used to be. All these justice projects and bullshit are really fucking up our ability to grease the skids."

"Yeah, justice is a real pain in the ass," Finn said under his breath. God, how the fuck had he ever agreed to work for Shotgun? "You want this issue taken care of, you'll make these charges go away by whatever means necessary. That's the deal."

“Fuck off.” But his heart wasn’t in it. “I’ll do my best, but your fee takes a hit the harder this bullshit gets, you hear? Couple of misdemeanors, fuck it. Drug charges, that’s a little more. Felonies, you cut that shit in half for each one.”

“You’re not negotiating this.” Finn glanced at the door over his shoulder and wondered if Lauren was still naked and ready in the sleeping bag. Maybe they had time for a quickie before he tromped through the snow to find those lost smugglers. “You want to end up on the news for leaving violent criminals in a fucking national park? I have zero problem driving away right now.”

Except he didn’t have a truck and probably couldn’t have navigated the two or three feet of snow outside without a plow on the front, given what he’d seen of the roads. But Shotgun didn’t need to know that.

The cop cursed for so long Finn checked his watch. Maybe he could eat breakfast with Lauren first and then get back to business. He’d burn all the rest of the wood he’d chopped up if it meant keeping the cabin warm enough she didn’t put on her clothes. Another couple of hours chopping logs would be worth every muscle ache.

“I can’t make any promises,” Shotgun finally shouted in the phone, loud enough that Finn pulled the handset away from his ear. “You fucking prick. But I’ll do what I can.”

“If you don’t...” Finn let his voice trail off, hoping the threat made its way through the ether to wherever Shotgun stood.

“We’ll talk about it when I have those sons of bitches in handcuffs or body bags,” the other man said. “And you’re pushing your luck.”

Finn didn’t have time to fuck around. He leaned to glance through the partially snow covered windows in the backroom and grunted. “We’ll see. I’ll call when I’ve got the

missing ones. You pick them up and then I go on my merry way after you make the bank transfer and I've got the signed affidavit that my pal's charges are resolved."

Shotgun said something else under his breath but the phone call ended before Finn could ask what he meant. It was just as well, chances were he didn't actually want to know what the crusty bastard muttered. He turned the sat phone off so he wouldn't get interrupted again and headed back into the front room. Breakfast, then getting sweaty with Lauren, then a quick bucket bath by the fire, some wood splitting, and hunting down the last four or five smugglers. He grinned and took a deep, refreshing breath. Not a bad way to spend the day.

LAUREN

Finn's voice rose and fell in the back of the cabin as he argued, but Lauren didn't even try to eavesdrop. She had enough of her own problems to worry about, she didn't need to borrow any of his. Despite the small part of her that looked forward to a fresh start somewhere safe and new with him, the rest of her knew it wasn't going to last. Good things—things like Finn—didn't happen to Lauren Tucker.

She waited under the sleeping bags, listening to the crackle and pop of the fire, and debating getting up to make breakfast. She needed to use the facilities outside and probably take some kind of bath, then figure out getting back to town on foot through a heck of a lot of snow. Finn brought food with him but it wasn't enough to feed both of them for days on end. Plus the toilet paper supply would give out much sooner, and the condoms way before that with the rate they went through them the night before.

Her cheeks heated and she pulled the sleeping bag over her face. It didn't matter who she was with before, she couldn't help but compare Finn to all those guys who tried to slip the condom off in the middle of business or pretended not to have one at all. Finn had been diligent to say the least, and not for a second did Lauren think he'd let an accident happen. Of course, it might have also been because he didn't want to get stuck with her for eighteen years.

She pushed the thought away and tried to make a plan in her head for how to deal with being a fugitive and still fitting in wherever Finn lived. He said he lived with a bunch of people; were they all bears? Were they all as understanding as he was when it came to having a questionable background? She'd have to be a homebody to avoid

being seen by bounty hunters or cops or any of the old group of environmentalists and cryptozoologists she knew, which was too bad since it sounded like Finn was more used to being out in the world. Even if he preferred the woods, it was different from choosing to be there and having to be there because he had the bad judgment to care about a fugitive.

She pushed up on one elbow as Finn grumbled and returned to the room. “Everything okay?”

He sighed and her heart sank. That didn’t sound good. But Finn knelt down on the mattress next to her, leaning forward to kiss her slowly. By the time they parted, her head spun with hearts and stars and possibilities. His nose bumped against hers. “There’s a small problem I need to address before we can figure out what to do next.”

“Can I help?” She wanted to be useful, to help out. To be part of his life the same way she wanted him to be part of hers, and not just because he sounded more than capable of resolving any problems she ran into. Lauren hadn’t been useful in so long she’d forgotten what it felt like. The last time she actually helped out was probably as a kid washing the dishes and cleaning up after her mother passed out. It was probably the last time anyone told her she’d done something right, and that was only the latest dirtbag boyfriend who stole from her mom’s purse and left before she woke up.

“Nah,” Finn said. He smiled and his teeth looked a little sharper than she remembered. “But first, we have some unfinished business to take care of.”

It took her a second to catch his meaning, then her face heated all over again. “I don’t know if there’s time for that.”

“I can be quick.” Finn grinned and stalked closer, large hands flexing at his sides. “The only question is whether you can be, too.”

She laughed, shivering in anticipation. “It’s hard to say. Depends on if you put your mind to it.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said. She squeaked when he jumped on the air mattress, almost launching her up in the air. Finn caught her quickly and just as fast got rid of the sleeping bag. Lauren had half a second to consider what was happening and then he’d tossed her legs over his shoulders and his head appeared between her thighs once again. “Buckle up.”

She would have laughed again but the slow, flat sweep of his tongue along the whole length of her slit rendered her speechless. Her head dropped back against the tangled mess of sheets and pillows and her hands worked into his hair as she sighed. And when she moaned, just as softly as she sighed, Finn took it slow and rushed at the same time.

How was it possible for a man she’d known for a matter of days to completely destroy her? Lauren hadn’t even known anyone like him before. He was so confident and capable and felt zero need to brag about it or posture or pick fights to prove how tough he was. He just was , in everything. For the first time in her life, she knew with total certainty that if she told a guy she was done and wanted him to back off before he got his own happy ending, that there wouldn’t be questions or pressure. She knew , all the way to her bones, that Finn would walk away, after making sure she was okay and happy, and not complain about it for a fucking minute.

Which made it so much easier to lay back and enjoy the masterful performance. She definitely appreciated his single-minded focus as she reached her peak in record time, and gripped his hair with both hands as she rode out the ripples of ecstasy and chased after every second of pleasure. There was no telling how long she’d actually have Finn to herself, she’d damn well take advantage of it as long as possible.

She sprawled on the air mattress, not even caring that he wiggled upright and then

flopped back down next to her to draw his fingers across her stomach. Lauren should have been a little self-conscious about how much she'd moaned and called his name, or at least about her body, or maybe just for being poor, but it helped to know that Finn didn't give a shit. He very obviously didn't give a shit.

He nuzzled behind her ear and sucked on her neck, chuckling. His palm flattened across her middle in a comforting weight that kept her anchored to Earth when she might have floated away. "What do you want for breakfast? I can make eggs."

She cracked one eye open to look at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Breakfast," he said. His large body half-covered her as he sprawled and pressed his bare skin against her. She felt all of his interest, an iron hard reminder pressing against her hip, but couldn't connect his words to the obvious situation they were in. "I have dehydrated eggs or we can do protein powder until I can hunt up some... What?"

Lauren covered her face, not wanting to laugh in total disbelief. It was too much like the night before when he'd offered to back off and let her be the only one to get an orgasm out of their sweaty naked time. She smiled, running her fingers through his hair to try and comb it back to some kind of order after she'd messed it up. "You're ridiculous."

"So no to the eggs."

She had to remind herself that it was just as ridiculous to fall in love with someone after a day and a half. It was impossible to really love someone so quickly, and yet there wasn't any other word for what she felt when she listened to Finn being so unbelievable. "No eggs right now. There's something else I want."

And she reached down to reacquaint herself with his body.

He blinked, eyebrows arching, then a slow smile spread across his face. “Oh? Is it something I can...give you?”

Lauren laughed, but reveled in the way his expression changed as she stroked his cock in a smooth twist. “Yeah, I think so.”

Finn groaned and his hand slid into her hair, pulling her in for a long, slow kiss that made Lauren’s toes curl. There was something even hotter about making out while she basked in the afterglow and touched him so intimately. Finn finally broke away, breathing raggedly, and caught her hip. “Okay, you’re going to kill me like that.”

She stretched, feeling sexier than she had in years, and slid her hands down her sides as she waited for him to figure out what to do next. She didn’t mind relinquishing control to him. Almost literally anything he wanted, she would give him and knew she’d probably enjoy it more no matter what. He retrieved another condom and his breathing almost returned to normal as he leaned down to kiss her again. “What do you say we try something new?”

Lauren knew how she wanted to feel him and rolled to her stomach, glancing back at him as she arched her back and pushed her ass in the air. “What do you have in mind?”

“You’re so bad.” But he groaned and growled at the same time, and smacked his palm on her ass so it jiggled and made her gasp. Heat surged through her and Lauren gripped double fistfuls of the sheets so she didn’t yelp. Lightning sparked in his suddenly gold eyes, and Finn moved behind her, leaning down close and letting her feel his weight. “Does that mean you need a spanking?”

She almost passed out from trying to act normal. Holy shit. How was that such a turn-on? She pushed her ass back into his body and dropped her forehead to the mattress as she tried to figure out what to say to that. Beg him for more? Beg him not to?

Some kind of dirty talk that made her feel all sex kittenish?

His beard tickled her shoulder as he growled and kissed the back of her neck, then let her feel his teeth in the soft skin where her shoulder met her neck. His arm slid under her and hauled her hips up, wrapped around the top of her thighs so she couldn't pull away, and his cock pressed hard and demanding between her thighs. Finn grumbled as he covered all of her, dominant from weight and position. "We'll save that for a little later, hm?"

Her heart raced at the promise. Anticipation grew as he put her in the right position, gripping her hips as he stroked the head of his cock along her slit. Lauren closed her eyes and put everything out of her mind but the feeling of his heated skin, rougher than hers, and the strength in his grip as he held her tight. As his thighs pressed against the backs of hers. As he leaned forward and the thick cock head pressed sloooowly into her.

She gasped and started to pull away from the slight discomfort of the stretching as he worked himself in deeper. But Finn tsked her and tightened the way his arm wrapped under her hips, keeping her in place as he withdrew and thrust so slowly once again. Lauren shivered and tried to figure out what the hell to do. Had he been that large the night before? How the fuck had she managed to fit that inside her without splitting open?

"You're so sexy. I love hearing the sounds you make," he murmured, free hand sliding down her back in a reassuring caress before he gripped her shoulder. "We're just going to..."

And then he grunted as he thrust forward. Lauren sucked in a breath as his cock plunged deeper, filled her all the way until she wondered how it was possible that both of them hadn't fallen to pieces. Finn panted and put his weight on where his elbow rested on the mattress. He kissed her shoulder. "How's that?"

“Almost perfect.” She struggled not to immediately rock back to press him deeper and encourage him to move.

“Almost?” Finn snorted and his hand slid down her hip and under her stomach to where they joined, and then...

When he teased her clit in time with a slow thrust and retreat, she almost passed out. Her muscles wouldn't hold her up and instead she dropped her forehead to her folded arms to hopefully stifle some of the absolute opera singer-quality hollering she did. It was a damn good thing Finn held her hips up; otherwise she would have been flat on the mattress and totally unable to help either of them get off.

“Still almost?” he asked, sounding a little short of breath himself. His fingers dug into her hip as her body clenched in response to the teasing.

Lauren's thoughts scattered but in the best possible way. “So close.”

“So close,” he echoed, huffing laughter before he dropped down to cover all of her with every inch of his body. “So you want my A game.”

She laughed a little herself but wanted to preen and stretch as his sweaty chest slid against her back. Holy shit. Was sex like this all the time for some people? No wonder everyone wanted it so much. She'd never known it could be so good all the time with someone else. Sure, getting herself off was one thing, but to have a guy as sexy as Finn doing all the work to do the same...

Lauren grabbed onto the sleeping bag so she didn't scream as Finn pushed her over the edge and she came— hard —for like the fifth time. Maybe she wouldn't survive his A game.

FINN

The whole rest of the world disappeared the moment he touched her, and the second she giggled and teased him back, Finn lost the ability to give a shit about anything else. All he cared about was making her sigh and moan and murmur with ecstasy every time he buried himself deeper inside her. It didn't even matter that cold air sneaked through the cracks between the logs and holes in the cabin. He covered her and let the frigid breeze keep him from immediately finishing the first time she teased him about only almost pleasing her. Which he knew was a lie because her muscles tightened around his cock and almost killed him.

She made the sexiest fucking sounds when she came, he didn't even mind the sass and putting off his own orgasm and everything else that he had to do to protect her still that day. Nothing else mattered.

Lauren went limp and languid after a few more orgasms, and Finn took that as permission to finally get his. It didn't take much: dipping his head to smell her skin and kiss her shoulder to taste her, sliding his fingers through the absolute mess he'd made of her pussy, and listening to the sighs and moans that escaped even after she'd shivered through her last climax. The ripples still worked through her channel and he felt it on every damn inch he buried in her. Finn groaned and held her hips tight enough he worried maybe they'd leave bruises, and fucked her harder.

She arched her back and reached up to hold his head, her voice throaty. "I want everything you've got."

He groaned as the husky sound shot through him like lightning and almost pushed the

bear into a frenzy. But it was her permission to unleash the man that did it. Finn lost himself in every sensation, every sound and whisper, the slippery slide of skin against skin. Her body, his body, where they joined, the sound of his meeting her smaller, softer curves...

Static filled his brain and it was like he left his body while enjoying every fucking inch of hers. Her fist tightening in his hair, yanking his head down as she moaned, pushed him over the edge. He thrust hard and his climax roared through him. He grunted so hard it sounded like his soul left his body, and he didn't give a shit, because it mixed with Lauren's breathy moan and made the sweetest music he'd ever heard.

Finn collapsed on her but managed to move to the side so he didn't crush her. For a long time, the only sounds in the cabin were their harsh breathing and the whistle of air through the cracks in the walls. Lauren slowly uncurled her fist and released the hair she'd grabbed, then awkwardly patted the side of his head. "Perfect."

He rested his forehead against her shoulder and laughed, stroking her side but trying not to grope her too much. "Glad you liked it."

"Ditto." She sighed and stretched, legs tangled with his, and relaxed halfway underneath him.

Finn chuckled and nuzzled into the hair that tangled at the back of her neck. God, he was fucking lost. What the hell was wrong with him? How had he existed before meeting her? It was like he looked back and his entire life had been gray and empty.

Which raised the question how the hell he would move forward if she didn't stay with him. He couldn't make her go home with him, and he couldn't make her put up with him tagging along if she wanted to go somewhere else. He didn't want her to feel stuck with him or like she couldn't head out on her own if she didn't want to be with

him. She had a bounty on her head and some legal issues to clean up; what if she thought his help came with strings attached? It would kill him to know that she stayed with him from obligation or fear, instead of wanting to be with him.

Finn pushed away the uncertainty that crept in as her breathing evened out and she dozed. It was early in the morning, sure, but there was a lot to do. First and foremost was getting in touch with Simon to figure out where the fuck he and the other bears were. Second was ensuring none of the drug runners or Shotgun's guys surprised them at the cabin, which meant going on the offensive. He could barricade Lauren in the cabin to keep her safe, then go hunting. He would have preferred to wait for the bears as backup, and having someone else to protect Lauren while he dealt with the threats, but he couldn't risk being surrounded at the cabin and bringing the threat down on her, too. He had to deal with that bullshit aggressively instead of hoping no one bothered them.

Plus he needed more leverage on Shotgun to ensure the bastard actually followed through on the vague promise to help deal with Lauren's charges. Going out and arresting the drug runners on his own, or at least detaining or killing them, meant being able to hold Shotgun's feet to the fire so the fucker had to resolve the bullshit charges. Then Finn just had to pay off the bondsman to ensure Lauren was free and clear of any possible consequences for believing in a bunch of assholes.

He didn't want to leave the warm cocoon of blankets and sleeping bags and Lauren, but he started to untangle himself and did his best not to disturb his very sleepy, sated mate. He could potentially knock out the bigger problem with the drug runners before lunch, return to the cabin for some more snuggling with Lauren, then figure out what to do about Shotgun in the afternoon, followed by more snuggling. And sex. So much sex.

Then it was just waiting for Simon to bring in a couple of trucks so Finn could drive Lauren back to the Lodge until all those charges were dealt with. Maybe they'd stop

on the way to test out a couple of hotels or the back of the truck on the way. If he hadn't wanted to ensure Lauren stayed safe, he might have been tempted to rent a car himself and drive her back. That assumed the town actually had a place to rent cars. Finn stopped the spiral of thoughts that focused on how to rent a car and have sex with Lauren again before they reached the Lodge. She was still in bed next to him and they still had a lot of people to deal with before they could relax.

Finn gathered supplies to clean up and got himself together before he checked back in on a now-snoring Lauren. Okay then. He shook his head, smiling, and retrieved more buckets of snow from the back room to melt near the fire for washing. He built up the fire again and mixed up the last of the dehydrated eggs, throwing in some beans for extra protein. It wasn't gourmet but there was time for that later.

And then he heard something outside. The bear noted it first and told the man to get his mind on fucking business. Finn tensed and stalked to the back of the cabin so he could listen without the distraction of Lauren's snore and the crackling of the fire. Maybe the smugglers or Shotgun or whoever saw the smoke and decided to investigate. He would never have used that much heat if he'd been alone, although it had been necessary to keep Lauren comfortable and alive. No regrets.

Finn needed to get moving, ideally without letting Lauren know that he ran into danger trying to get rid of the threats against her. Better she didn't know that he wanted to confront Shotgun's guys or detain the drug runners. He crouched down next to her and played with her hair. "I left breakfast here for you, and there's water near the fire to clean up. I've got to go outside for just a bit but I'll be back. Wait here for me."

She grumbled something and brushed at his hand, still not bothering to roll over from her stomach.

Finn could have walked away, but a hint of anxiety made him pause. What if

someone found the cabin before he got back? He could definitely track down the drug runners but Shotgun and his guys would come from town, which meant they'd stumble across the cabin immediately. It left Lauren vulnerable, since the bastard and his guys weren't known for restraint.

He fished around in his bags and retrieved the satellite phone. He put it near her hand, already on, and jostled her shoulder a little to make sure she was still awake. "Hey babe. Just in case I take a while, or something...something changes, you can use this phone. Go to the saved contacts. Simon or Ethan. I'm sure it'll be fine, but just in case."

Why the fuck did it feel like tearing off his own skin to leave her? Obviously he had to deal with the bullshit out in the world before they snuggled up and played house.

Lauren pushed up on her elbows, blinking blearily, and picked up the phone. "How long are you planning to be gone?"

"Not long." It wasn't a lie; he didn't plan on being away a second longer than necessary, but if the drug runners got the drop on him and he couldn't return to her... "Give it an hour and if I'm not back, call Simon and explain what happened. He'll help with your charges and everything."

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she looked up at him, and his heart tripped. He knew he couldn't delay much longer or he'd never leave at all. Finn ducked to kiss her again. "I'll be back in just a little bit."

"Promise?"

Fuck him. If anything happened to disappoint her, he'd fucking kill Shotgun and whoever stood in his way. "Promise. Now go back to sleep or eat your breakfast. Maybe pack up all our stuff so we can get out of here."

He left before another soft question convinced him to stay and relied on the freezing air to knock some sense into him. He'd lost his edge completely. It had been dulled by time and inattention, but he needed to be at his sharpest to protect his mate. The fact that she consumed his thoughts might get them both killed. Finn breathed deep and put aside every shred of thought that might have remembered Lauren, and forced himself back into who he was before he met her. The faster he sorted this shit out, the faster they could get back to starting a life together.

LAUREN

She still drifted in a haze after Finn's masterful performance, all her muscles pleasantly sore, and felt like she could have slept all day. It made her wish for a hammock and a nice blanket so she could rock along and forget everything else going on in the world. Sure, hammocks weren't very practical in the snow, but setting it up inside definitely worked in all types of weather.

She would have gone back to sleep after Finn left, but something he said nagged at the back of her mind. Why would he be worried about not coming back in an hour? It sounded like he wasn't going far, although the phone thing and instructions to call his friends hinted maybe he meant to be gone a lot longer.

Lauren sat up in the half-lit cabin, checking her watch. He'd been gone about twenty minutes. Should she be worried, and when? He hadn't said a whole lot about what he was going to do, just that he was going outside. There wasn't anything outside except snow and bears and...the drug smugglers. Maybe other dangerous people. What made him want to confront them right then? Sure, he'd gotten the weird phone call on the fancy phone that morning. Was there some kind of threat out there?

She got up slowly and cleaned up the mess they'd made, the whole time glancing back at the fancy phone and the door and hoping that Finn would reappear, shake the snow off his head, and kiss her again. They'd leave the cabin in a souped-up truck with heated seats and would find someplace safe to live until all that other trouble went away. But that only worked if Finn came back.

By the time an hour had passed since he'd left, Lauren had cleaned up the cabin and

packed all their belongings into her duffel and what remained of his pack. Most of it she didn't want to take with her, like the pretty much destroyed sheets and some of the clothing that she'd worn holes through. But there was no telling how Finn felt about leaving things behind.

It made her worry about him leaving her behind. Maybe he for real got tired of her or looked at all the baggage she brought with her and decided she wasn't worth it. Lauren shook her head and swallowed the knot in her throat. No. No, Finn really cared about her. He'd shown it over the last couple of days. She didn't have that much experience with nice guys or just nice people in general, but he was more like a movie hero than anyone else she ever imagined meeting in real life. He wouldn't have left his phone and gear if he didn't plan to come back.

She paced inside the cabin as her unease grew. Time still ticked by and there was no sign of Finn. She went into the back of the cabin and stuck her head out the broken window, listening and straining to hear any sound that might have been Finn. Lauren waited until her teeth chattered with cold, but still nothing changed. It took her a few minutes inside to realize she hadn't heard anything, not even birds or squirrels or the other critters that rustled around the cabin.

Lauren gnawed the inside of her cheek as she tiptoed through the cabin, almost expecting someone to have sneaked inside the back rooms through the broken windows, but nothing looked amiss. She frowned and picked up the fancy phone Finn left behind, studying the buttons. It probably would have helped if he'd shown her how to use it. It didn't look like any cell phone she'd ever seen.

She still poked at the buttons on the phone when she returned to the main room, shivering as a breeze kicked up through...the open door?

Her heart jumped to her throat and she whipped around. The door had been barricaded and locked, as well as it could be while mostly being in pieces, and yet...

“Finn?” she whispered.

Lauren turned around again, straining to hear anything at all over the whistle of a stiff breeze and the thud of the door against the wall. She fumbled with the phone and managed to pull up a navigation screen and the top contacts as she crept toward the door, looking for the contact Finn mentioned. He’d said Simon or...Ethan? She picked Simon, since she remembered thinking “Simon says give me a call!” when Finn named his friend.

She swallowed the knot in her throat as she finally reached the door and peered out into a snowy, empty forest around the cabin. The only marks in the snow were from Finn walking away, at least according to what she’d learned about while tracking Sasquatches. Her heart still raced and for once she trusted her guts. She could have waited to see if anything actually went wrong, and probably would have done if it was just her life in the crosshairs, but with Finn in danger... She couldn’t shake the feeling he would have done something to let her know what was going on if everything was fine and his hour timeline elapsed.

Lauren dragged the door closed and propped up the pack to block it, then picked out Simon’s number and pressed other buttons until the phone started to do something. She still didn’t know what she was supposed to tell him, other than Finn disappeared and she was some random criminal he’d shackled up with, but if Finn’s friends were anything like him...it had to be okay.

Didn’t it?

FINN

He hiked away from the cabin and Lauren, cursing Shotgun and every motherfucker who ever dealt drugs in the history of the world with every step he took. Finn carried the rifle, having left the shotgun with Lauren for her to use in case anything went really wrong and she needed to defend the cabin, but preferred to just locate the fuckers and then drop a GPS pin for Shotgun to deal with. At least this last favor gave him more leverage on getting Shotgun to get rid of her charges. The cop hadn't minded corruption of every stripe in the past, so his reluctance to help Lauren got under Finn's skin.

The bear didn't like leaving her behind, not while knowing there were drug dealers and Shotgun's cowboys in the vicinity. He didn't know who he trusted less with her safety. Finn paused to listen to the forest around him, certain he'd heard something out of place, then glanced around to see whether the few snowflakes drifting on the breeze revealed anything useful. Nothing. The forest was too quiet, too still. It made his nerves twitch.

He pulled out his cell phone, debating for just a second before he sent a message to the rest of the bears. He could deal with the bullshit later if it turned out not to matter, but he wasn't about to risk Lauren's safety. Ran into trouble. Found my mate. She needs help. The old cabin. Come get her ASAP. Armed trouble in the trees. Be careful. Make sure she's okay.

He made sure it went through and turned the damn thing off so he wouldn't be distracted by or given away by any pings or dings. Plus he didn't want to waste time explaining himself to Simon and Ethan and the rest of the mother hens at the Lodge.

Finn put it out of his mind and instead focused on picking up the scent of the remaining drug runners. He headed toward where he'd hidden the bodies of the fuckers who'd crossed him the day or so before and figured the others would probably surface around the same part of the trail.

Finn adjusted his grip on the rifle and eased off the main trail to move through the trees with some concealment. The bear's agitation increased as they got farther from Lauren with each step, until he almost couldn't hear the world around him. The very distant sound of helicopter rotors distracted him for a heartbeat, and he searched the sky for a sign of whether it was trouble for him or someone else. Sometimes Shotgun called in airborne surveillance, but the trees and clouds made that a little unlikely, at least based on what Finn knew.

He retreated deeper into the trees and breathed deeply, hoping for any hints of those drug dealers so he could get the fuck out of Dodge.

When he finally caught the scent of unwashed men and the metallic undertones of the drugs they smuggled, it came from an unexpected direction: back toward the cabin, down the trail toward where the bear trap first injured him. Where he'd met Lauren the first time. Finn moved faster than was probably wise, given his still-sore leg, but he wasn't going to risk those fuckers moving toward the cabin and eventually finding Lauren. The frigid air burned his lungs as he concentrated on breathing deeply so he arrived in better shape than the probably out-of-shape fuckers who'd been hiking around looking for trouble.

The bear growled in annoyance as they had to bypass the cabin by heading down the slope, trying to pick up the trail with certainty so he didn't have to confront the drug runners before sending evidence to Shotgun for him to handle. Plus he needed to confirm they weren't Shotgun's cops after all.

Finn scowled fiercely as his boots slid in the snow and the steep incline of the hill

dropping away from the trail. Those fuckers would leave him with wet socks and frozen toes, on top of dragging him away from a naked and willing woman. A very excitable, curvy, adorable woman who happened to have the other half of his soul, who responded to every single touch and kiss and word. And she practically melted and caught fire at the same time when he growled a little and playfully smacked her ass.

He needed to get the fuck back to the cabin to figure out exactly how much fun they could have with that.

Finn squinted against the glare of sun on the snow covering the trail headed down to the meadow where he'd stashed his pack before hitting the bear trap. Had it really only been three, four days? How the fuck had the world changed so much in less than a week? He shook his head and dragged his attention back to find out where the fucking drug runners hid. They had to be close; he smelled them. It grew stronger every time the breeze shifted or he moved around a tree. The whole world held its breath.

He gripped the rifle and took a GPS coordinate to send to Shotgun. Maybe a starting point was good enough. Not that Finn wanted to endanger getting Lauren's charges magicked away by half-assing what Shotgun would actually want in order to put in the effort to clear her record. He started to climb the hill to the pristine white meadow, certain the drug runners worked their way down the trails to try and find their friends, and hoped Lauren stayed put in the cabin. He probably should have told her two hours instead of one.

LAUREN

Lauren hunkered down near the fire and tried to keep her fingers from freezing solid. The satellite phone hadn't done what she expected and didn't end up connecting to anything, no matter how long she listened, but it wasn't clear whether it was her fault or the satellites were behind clouds or maybe solar flares got in the way. That was a thing, wasn't it? Solar flares affecting GPS?

The longer Finn didn't return, the further and faster her thoughts spiraled. She'd almost gone out to look for him at least half a dozen times, even going so far as to step outside and walk a few feet toward the trails, but inevitably she lost her nerve and retreated to the safety of the cabin. She wasn't brave even on her best day, and if someone like Finn thought he would be back in an hour and wasn't...who the hell was Lauren Tucker to try and show him up?

Still, though. She didn't like it. She'd steeled herself to try the phone again when the damn thing blared an alarm that nearly stopped her heart. She grabbed it up as fast as possible to keep it from making more noise and maybe proving someone occupied the cabin, and dropped it twice as she tried to answer or silence it.

The second she hit a button and the ringing stopped, a gruff voice snapped, "All right, asshole, what the fuck is your problem, sending a message like that? Zoe is out of her fucking mind and that means I am having a shit day, so?—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she blurted out. Lauren gulped for air and retreated away from the blustery corner near the door. She didn't quite whisper but she definitely didn't shout like the man who'd called the phone. "I don't know where

Finn is.”

The other end of the call silenced, not that Lauren could have heard anything over her pounding heart. Her hand shook as she touched her forehead, turning in a circle to see whether Finn had miraculously reappeared. It sounded like he’d reached out to his friends after all. Did that mean he was in trouble? But how had he even messaged them without the phone she held?

“All right, let’s start over.” The man on the phone took a gusty, deep breath that made Lauren feel like he stood right in the room with her. Noise surrounded him, like he stood in the wind, but at least his words came through somewhat calmer than that first opening salvo. “I’m Simon. What’s your name?”

“L-Lauren.” At least he used the name Finn had given her as someone to trust, so she didn’t feel quite as bad about talking to the guy. “Did you hear from Finn?”

“He sent a message but his phone is off now. It’s fine, I’m sure it’s just bad reception.”

Her eyes narrowed as she frowned at the cabin wall and one of the busted-out windows Finn tried to cover with a tarp. Except that Simon guy shouted something about a woman named Zoe being upset by whatever Finn messaged when she first answered the call, so his claim about everything being fine didn’t add up. Of course, Finn also claimed everything was fine when he left, but it didn’t sound like it.

“Where are you now?” he asked, still too loud into the phone. It made her heart jump with every word, too close to being yelled at by her mom and teachers and boyfriends and bus drivers and just everyone in the world who didn’t have time for Lauren being too sensitive.

“The cabin,” she said. She looked around, as if an address would magically appear,

and tried not to cringe. “By the park, near—near the town. There’s a road and it goes into the trees and when it curves, there’s...”

“I know which one,” he said.

Her teeth clicked together and a knot in her throat made it more difficult to breathe. She felt smaller than she had in a long time, since being arrested and marched in front of a judge and a courtroom full of scoffing rich people. Her shoulders hunched forward and she waited for him to just tell her what to do. That was how it usually worked.

Some kind of argument happened in the background, the wind and noise too much for her to pick out individual words, but the end result was a woman speaking into the phone instead. “Hi, honey. My name is Kira. Simon is...having a rough morning. We’re on the way to get you but it might be a little while. Are you safe where you’re at?”

It should have reassured her, except in Lauren’s experience women could be meaner than men. They were just better at hiding it under smiles and fake concern. She wasn’t going to let her guard down. She almost would have preferred the predictable barking and threat of the guy, but at least it was still over the phone and they couldn’t shake her in person. She just had to make sure she left before any of them got there. They’d blame her if anything happened to Finn, and if he wasn’t there...she didn’t have a reason to stay, did she?

“Lauren, honey. I need to know if you’re safe.”

She jerked back to the present, and cleared her throat a few times so it wouldn’t sound like she was about to cry. Other people hated that and she couldn’t ever explain why she wanted to cry, sometimes it just happened. “Yes. I am.”

“Good. We’re very glad to hear that, and we’re all very excited to meet you.” The woman took a deep breath, another conversation happened, then she added, “It’ll take us a bit, but...”

“Why?”

“We’re a little far away, trying to get through the park is a challenge but...”

“No, I meant why are you excited to meet me?” She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong, that maybe it was a trap. No one was excited to meet her. Ever. She was a burden and a distraction at best. The only person who’d ever smiled when she walked in the room was Finn, and Lauren hadn’t managed to keep him around, either. He said he’d come back. Maybe it was all a ruse.

“Why are we...” The woman trailed off and Lauren braced for a withering condemnation or an explanation of how they’d been burdened with the requirement to scoop her up and deliver her to the actual bounty hunters. Then Kira went on without sounding as annoyed as she probably was. “Because Finn is excited for us to meet you, and he wanted to make sure we found you. He likes you a lot, so we like you a lot because we like him a lot. It all works out.”

Did it, though? Lauren wasn’t so sure. But she’d learned not to express those kinds of doubts right to someone’s face. It was better to agree and then leave before they showed up. She’d have a head start, at least. Maybe Lauren could figure out where Finn went, and he could make the decisions so Lauren didn’t have to. “Okay.”

“Okay? You’re okay waiting for us at the cabin? We’ll be there as fast as we can.”

“Sure.” Lauren didn’t know what else to say. Her attention went to the door and the wind whistling outside. Finn was out there somewhere. Maybe he needed her help. She’d helped him before when he hurt his leg, and even though he got out of the trap

on his own, he definitely wouldn't have made it back to the cabin unless she dragged him. She'd done that right, at least. Even Finn admitted it.

A long pause was the first response, then some of the noise diminished and Kira's voice came through much more clearly. "Hon, Finn wants you to stay put until we get there. Okay? There's some other stuff out there that might be dangerous and we..."

"The drug guys," she said. Lauren peered through one of the larger gaps between the logs that made up the walls, and found nothing but snow outside. "We ran into them already."

"You did? Do you know where they are?"

"Finn had an argument with someone about them." Lauren backed away from the cold and scanned the cabin for anything to take with her to find Finn, then to bug out. She obviously couldn't stay at the cabin because very soon Kira and grumpy Simon and God only knew who else would steamroll in and then she wouldn't have much of a say in anything. "First they tried to kill me and Finn stopped them and then...then he had to...get rid of a few of them, and we were back at the cabin for a while but it didn't sound like everything went the way it was supposed to. Some guy called this morning and told Finn he had to do something, I think, because then Finn left and he said he would be back in an hour but it's been more than an hour and..."

"So Finn went to look for the drug runners?" Kira exhaled in annoyance, and Lauren braced for a lecture on decision-making, but instead the woman added, "That absolute shithhead. He knows better than that."

Shithead? Lauren couldn't imagine anyone calling Finn a shithead. He was almost the exact opposite. Obviously he could be stubborn and probably arrogant in some situations, but since he was really capable at everything so far, it wasn't like it was undeserved. She frowned at the wall but spotted the shotgun propped up against the

wall next to the mattress. Finn left it for her, which made her chest tighten with worry. He'd at least taken the rifle with him.

"Lauren," Kira said. "We'll be there in thirty minutes, maybe a little more. Just stay put. I'll call when we're a few minutes out so we don't surprise you, okay? There are a bunch of not-great people out in the forest right now, even more than the drug runners, so it's best for you to stay put."

She'd heard that all her life. Just stay put, don't do anything, don't try to help because you'll fuck it up more. How had that worked out for her so far? She had a bounty on her head, literally, and a very long stay in prison waiting when she got caught. She had no friends, no home, not even a high school diploma. Just trouble. Debts. Bad decisions.

And Finn. Maybe she had Finn, if he was still out there and he still wanted her.

Lauren wasn't going to give him up without a fight. She'd watched everything else go away without much more than a whimper, but for Finn... She wouldn't be able to live with herself, even if that life was in prison, if she didn't at least try to find him, to help him. If he died out there because she was too chicken to leave the cabin, then she deserved to go to prison.

But Kira said, "Lauren, babe, I need you to tell me you're still going to be there when we arrive. Okay? Please. Just promise me you'll be there."

"I'll be here," she said. It didn't sound very convincing, though. Lauren forced herself to smile, even though she was alone in the cabin, because sometimes that helped convince people she meant what she said when she didn't. "I promise. I'll be here."

"Finn will be very, very mad at us if anything happens to you," Kira said. More

shouting in the background sounded like Angry Simon calling Finn names and trying to convince someone else to go faster, but Kira snapped at them and the big scary men went silent. She sounded annoyed, but smoothed her tone over as she went on. “Thirty minutes, okay? Less than that if we can find... It’s fine. Just please stay where you’re at and I’ll come and get you.”

Lauren kept the smile fixed on her face, though it made her cheeks ache. “Sure. I’ll be here.”

Kira didn’t believe her, but she muttered something under her breath instead and the call ended. Lauren frowned at the phone and tried to figure out how to turn it off, so it didn’t ring again and give her away. That would have been terrible, if she managed to sneak up on some drug runners or whoever wanted to hurt Finn and then the phone got them all killed. She shook her head and absently rubbed her cheeks, then started to pack everything up so there wouldn’t be much mess when Kira and Simon and whoever was with them showed up. She didn’t want to get yelled at for that, at least, if for some reason Lauren was still there when they found out. Or maybe it would all be fine and Finn would be back and he wouldn’t let them yell at her.

Lauren shook her head and focused on getting everything together, then pulling on layers of clothes to stay warm. The snow slowed down but still fell, and the wind whistled through the cracks in the logs. The last thing she needed was frostbite and numb fingers leaving her less graceful than normal. She set her jaw and tried to focus.

Finn, I’m coming.

FINN

Finn knew generally where the drug runners would be, based on the wind and a few shots he'd heard earlier. Shotgun gave him a tipper and claimed it was where the fuckers were based, but Finn wasn't about to trust just that. He stashed his clothes after hiking into the trees, and transformed into his bear side to do more scouting. He hated leaving Lauren at the cabin, but the faster he dealt with the drug running assholes and Shotgun's bastards, the faster he could get her somewhere much safer, warmer, and ideally with much better food and a more comfortable bed, so they could stay naked for as long as possible. A hot shower would be nice, also for sharing.

He shook his head and shoved upright to lean on a tree and knock it over, the dead-fall balancing on the top of a steep slide. Finn kept moving through the trees, searching for places to create traps and snares he could drive unsuspecting humans into, and paused occasionally to inhale the air and listen for telltale signs of metal weapons or men. The snow slowed and left the air clear and cold and crisp, the sun watery and pale where it filtered through the trees. He'd expected an immediate ambush, yet nothing moved.

Finn worked his way back through the trees to the trail, uneasiness gripping his stomach as the time ticked away. Lauren was still safe in the cabin, at least, so it didn't really matter how long he spent fucking around trying to find Shotgun and the drug runners. He just had to keep telling himself that. He shifted back to his human form and got dressed, cursing Shotgun under his breath. So much for the emergency that required Finn to go out that minute to find the bastards. The forest was so damn quiet it was like nothing else stirred in a few square miles.

He held his breath for a long moment to listen, then headed along the trail away from the cabin and away from town. He'd headed into the park down the slopes, toward where the drug runners came from when they ambushed Lauren, but maybe they'd found a different angle from where he'd originally hiked in. He made it almost a full mile down the trail before the first sign of trouble showed up.

A large meadow, the snow untouched, opened up along the south side of the trail with a vast white expanse framed by trees. He hesitated before proceeding down the trail next to it, not wanting to expose his dark silhouette against so much fucking white, and listened hard as the wind moved through the bare branches all around. He should have brought Nordic gear that blended in, instead of his typical darker clothes. Stupid.

Finn adjusted his grip on the rifle and started to turn, ready to retreat to the cabin to fetch Lauren. They could come up with a different way to deal with the charges and Shotgun, and with a pissed-off Simon when he landed on their heads. A crack echoed through the trees, sharp enough Finn expected to see an entire tree fall to pieces from the sap exploding, then fire ripped through his arm and an impact sent him back a step.

Fuck . He looked down and found a tear in his jacket from the track a bullet made as it creased his arm. Finn scowled, more pissed off than hurt, and dropped to the ground before whoever shot at him got a better bead. He slid across the trail to press up against a tree, getting some kind of cover. Nothing else stirred once the birds screamed out of the trees, and he breathed as quietly as possible as he strained to hear where the pot-shot came from. The fucker got his right arm, which meant holding the rifle up and steady would be more painful than it needed to be.

He was really starting to hate those assholes. It was becoming personal instead of just business, and the second it crossed over to personal, he'd let the bear out. Maybe literally.

Finn shook off the small pack and freed a mirror from the interior pocket so he could see behind him at the tree line on the other side of the meadow. At least the assholes weren't used to hiding in snow, either, because they stood out just as badly as he did. Four of them, hunkered down and shivering in substandard gear, all held weapons and whispered to each other. Maybe trying to decide if he'd been killed when he dropped to the ground. The wind brought a hint of their voices but not their actual words.

He checked his rifle to make sure snow hadn't obscured the sights and he had all his ammunition ready to go, then used the tree to brace and conceal his movements as he got back to his feet.

It didn't take long for the smugglers to make a mistake: they left the trails to sneak up on him through the brush. They didn't realize they might have worn bells to give away their locations to his sensitive hearing.

More comfortable with the sudden advantage, Finn captured them one by one. It wasn't even that difficult, although he didn't have enough zip-ties to restrain all three and had to use rope on the last one.

The first one put up more of a fight than he'd expected, but seeing their buddy's bloodied face helped settle the next two down real quick. Finn appreciated a sensible adversary.

He signalled Shotgun with his phone, sending the GPS coordinates, and dragged the three cursing, threatening smugglers into one small sheltered clearing adjacent to the big open meadow. Then it was just a matter of waiting for reinforcements to take custody of the bad guys so he could get back to Lauren. His bear side got antsy the longer they were apart, and his skin felt like it would split from all the energy he tried to control.

It would all be over soon. Just a few more minutes, a few more aggravating conversations with Shotgun and his guys, a little bit of hiking and then he'd be with Lauren.

Finn glanced up from where he stooped over the three bodies of the drug runners, hearing boots breaking twigs and radios chirping. "Over here. I've got the?—"

That time, the impact knocked him off his feet entirely and the punch snapped the air out of his lungs. His breathing rasped and he rolled hard, keeping hold of his rifle only from long practice and experience. He landed on his back and swung the rifle up, ready to shoot whoever shot him first, and found himself staring at three of Shotgun's cruelest assholes bearing down on him and armed for war.

LAUREN

She heard the gunshot and a loud grunt, and froze. She'd had enough of guns after having one pressed against the back of her neck by the bad guy Finn killed, and wasn't about to go running out to look for more of them. Even if she still technically carried the shotgun. She wasn't dumb enough to go out into the forest without it, but that didn't mean she liked it.

Lauren swallowed the knot in her throat and strained to hear anything else going on, like maybe Finn cheering his victory of shooting the bad guys and eliminating the threat that kept him away. Or Kira and her pals showing up to cheerfully fix everything so Lauren didn't have to. Loud voices rose up from the far side of the meadow, and if she squinted, she could make out the outlines of big, burly figures in bulky clothes. They could have been bears, maybe.

For a second she had to concentrate to figure out if they were bears after all. Finn turned into a bear. Everyone he lived with was also... Her eyes widened. Was Kira a bear? All those angry people headed her way who were going to find the cabin empty and her not there, like she'd promised, were probably bears. Just wonderful. Just another reason for her to get moving as fast as possible.

Lauren crept closer to the figures, knowing one had to be Finn. There weren't that many people running around in the forest, not right after a blizzard. They all had to be connected. No one was out there just for camping. She froze when one of the voices became distinct, louder and more annoyed and too familiar.

"Why the fuck did you shoot me, Richardson?"

Finn . Her heart jumped to her throat. Finn was shot? One of those terrifyingly huge figures shot him? They stood over him, holding dark sticks that had to be rifles or shotguns. Why would someone he knew decide to shoot him?

The other figure shrugged. “You’re standing over a bunch of dead drug runners handling...yeah, bags of meth. What the fuck was I supposed to do?”

“They’re not dead,” Finn said. He at least sounded irritated instead of in too much pain. “Shotgun is on his way, I’m fucking over this. Get the fuck...”

The dark figure raised his dark stick and fired three times, and Lauren clapped her hands over her mouth to keep from screaming in terror. But he hadn’t shot Finn. He shot right next to Finn, although Finn definitely rolled and covered his own ears. He scrambled out of the way, getting some distance, and shouted a bunch of things that Lauren didn’t hear right. The echoes of the shots reverberated strangely through the meadow and bounced off the trees, leaving her uncertain she’d heard anything right.

“Like I said, dead drug runners.” The big stranger chuckled, too pleased with himself, as he toed what had to be bodies.

Finn breathed hard. “You just fucking murdered them.”

“Nah, pretty sure you shot them.” He swung around to the two other men, standing behind him. “You saw it too, right? Shotgun’ll be damn disappointed. Sad to see someone with such an honorable record as you go down this path. Retribution isn’t a good look.”

Lauren clenched her fist to keep from shrieking in fury. That man murdered three innocent—well, three criminals, but they didn’t deserve to be shot in cold blood—and blamed Finn? No way. No way. She knew what that it felt like to be blamed for something she didn’t do, and she damn well wasn’t going to stand for it happening to

Finn.

Although... They didn't mind killing criminals, so there wasn't any reason to assume they would mind killing witnesses. Lauren swallowed hard. Shit. She wasn't brave or smart enough to figure this out on her own. How could she possibly save him in time? There was no telling when Kira and Scary Simon would show up, and if they took too long, those guys and whoever Shotgun was would take Finn away and then she'd never be able to help him.

She had to be brave. She had to stand up and be brave and just not think about how terrifying all of it was. If they both survived, she was definitely going to hide in a room and not leave it for at least a month or two, just so there was no risk she'd run across anyone half as scary as the big guy who threatened Finn.

Lauren pushed to her feet and held on to the shotgun with one hand as she started toward where the men stood. She was not going to think about the dead and dying men on the ground, or the kind of damage a rifle did at close range. Absolutely not going to look at them. She didn't want to have to see it again in her nightmares later.

She paused only to pull one of the trail cameras out of her pack, clipping it to the shoulder-strap so it would record as she walked up on them. Her heart pounded until she saw spots and everything tilted, and perspiration broke out across every inch of her until even her boobs and knees sweated in the freezing air. She really wasn't brave enough for confronting armed strangers. She wasn't strong enough to stand up to men like that, especially with Finn right there, hurt on the ground, and needing her to be brave. He'd be so disappointed when she couldn't...

But he believed in her. He did. Finn believed her when she talked about school and everything that happened at the construction company, and he wanted to hear her thoughts. He never told her to shut up. He liked her. He told his friends he liked her, and he was excited for them to meet her. She'd never heard that in her life.

Lauren straightened her shoulders. She could be brave. She didn't have a choice. The least she could do was try to save Finn's life, since the scary dude stood over him with that rifle and looked threatening, even if his voice sounded semi-friendly and only slightly overbearing.

She tried not to think about how much she needed to pee and instead strode out of the trees and into the meadow right where they had to see her, and did her best to look like she was relieved to see them and not about to barf from nerves. "Finn? There you are!"

All of the men froze, the ones standing over Finn swinging their guns around like they meant to shoot her on the spot. Lauren ignored them other than a friendly smile and wave—though it took all her strength not to react to the weapons and the shadows that were dead bodies—and kept her focus on Finn. It would have been funny, how stunned he looked, if she hadn't been distracted by a dark, wet spot on his chest that had to be another injury.

She didn't wait for the men to speak and instead relied on her nerves and defective brain to fill the gaps. "I packed everything up but there are still some of the trail cameras out there. We'll have to use the GPS to pick them up before Simon and Kira get here. They said they're about ten minutes out."

He stared at her in silence, for once at a loss, and Lauren really hoped he got it together long enough to save them both.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:44 am

FINN

He'd never liked Richardson or his two cronies, but he never expected the fucker to shoot him and try to plant evidence to frame him for killing the drug runners. There wasn't any reason to kill the criminals; there was overwhelming evidence to get them convicted. It was possible Richardson, and maybe Shotgun, just didn't want to do the paperwork. Maybe the druggies had killed some of their friends and Richardson wanted vengeance. It didn't really matter. They knew Finn well enough to know he wouldn't have put up with that bullshit.

Which left him in a very dangerous position. As the bullet in his shoulder made clear.

He was just getting ready to shift into his bear form, which would require killing the three men to ensure the shapeshifter secret didn't get out, when the voice of an angel said his name.

It was also possible he was in shock from blood loss and getting shot the third or fourth time in as many days.

Finn thought he hallucinated Lauren, but no matter how much he blinked, she was still there, pink-cheeked and cheerful and apparently completely fucking oblivious to the three cops staring at her in shock. She just smiled at them, like they weren't holding rifles on her, and said something to him about trail cams and Simon.

His brain clicked along too slow, which wasn't new when he tried to keep up with her lightning-quick thoughts, but she waited for a response and he had to act before Richardson did something stupid instead. Finn pushed up on one elbow, his fingers

numb and still too far from his rifle he'd dropped trying to avoid Richardson shooting the criminals. She held the shotgun loosely, casually, and wouldn't be able to get the drop on the cops anyway. "Uh, how many of them?"

He didn't even know what he asked. He couldn't fathom what the fuck she was doing out there, confronting the three men. Did she realize what happened? Was she going to see the bodies and flip out? If Richardson tried to hurt her... Finn wasn't going to be responsible for his actions. The fucker would be reduced to pink mist and nothing more.

Lauren beamed at him as she tapped the small black GoPro on her pack, very clearly pointing at the three cops. "I got the six on the trail from that way, and three from there," she gestured vaguely behind him. "But there are still half a dozen in the meadow."

And she very clearly pointed out a few areas where small orange flags made it plausible, in fact, that there were cameras. Cameras that would have conveniently captured Richardson's threats as well as him shooting the drug runners. Finn wanted to kiss her and send her running at the same time. Those guys didn't leave messes behind. Which included witnesses.

Lauren didn't wait for him to react, though, and instead turned that bouncy smile on the stunned, silent cops. "We've been tracking Bigfoot. There are cameras all over the trails through here, but we didn't get much other than some hikers and shadows and stuff, but there are tons of bears and mountain lions. There's so much, in fact, that we have to send that data in real-time to some colleagues who are helping us with the research. It's all stored in a couple of locations, and people are going over everything to identify any...odd activities."

Her tone went kind of flat toward the end and something about it sounded vaguely threatening, which was completely at odds with her cheerful smile. It was the

sweetest, nicest way of threatening someone he'd ever seen, and if he hadn't been in love with her before, that would have sealed the deal. Easily.

Even if he doubted whether Richardson and his cronies were smart enough to pick up on it.

Finn sat up more, despite the pounding pain in his chest and the building pressure that made him question whether one of his lungs was actually punctured. "Good. Help me up, babe."

"Not so fast." Richardson managed to snap out of his surprise, and he glanced between Finn and Lauren as he licked his lips. He adjusted his grip on the rifle, no longer directly aiming at Lauren but still too close for Finn's comfort. "That's all bullshit, and neither of you is going anywhere."

"I don't think you heard me." Lauren practically sang it out like a cartoon princess. Maybe it was her being so friendly and happy that threw the cops off, since Finn himself had trouble reconciling the meaning of her words with the tone. It was a mind-fuck of epic proportions while standing in the snow next to dead bodies. Lauren didn't seem to notice as she turned her attention to Richardson. "Everything you've done since you showed up here is on camera. It's been recorded and sent to two different satellite locations for processing and analysis. I'm sure you don't have very high opinions of cryptid researchers, but I don't think they'll take kindly to video proof of you shooting people in cold blood in the forest where Bigfoot is supposed to be. This kind of disturbance is going to set our research back ages, thank you very much. Your best choice is to get the fuck out of the way and hope I delete the footage before it gets sent anywhere else."

Finn definitely loved her. If she didn't want to marry him, he would just follow her around like a puppy for the rest of his life. It took all of his focus to remember anyone else was in the trees with them, even though the fuckers had guns. He would shift to

his bear form to deal with them, then he and Lauren would find somewhere nice and warm to hibernate for a few months.

He was just about to change forms and throw caution to the wind when the bushes rustled loudly and someone barked, “What the fuck is going on here?” and his heart sank.

Shotgun.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:44 am

LAUREN

She had to focus to keep from doing a pee dance from sheer nerves. She hadn't had to go before she started threatening the scary dudes, and yet the second she had to stand up for herself, all she wanted was to pee all over herself like a nervous puppy. Lauren hoped it didn't show on the outside, otherwise she and Finn were both screwed. The three guys were even scarier up close. She hoped Finn helped her start walking once they left, because she didn't think her knees would work. And it seemed like her boots had frozen to the ground under her no matter how she tried to move them.

Everything was mostly okay until someone else crashed through the undergrowth in the trees and started swearing. He did not look in any way like someone who spent time in the woods or liked hiking, at all. At all. Iron gray hair and masses of tattoos were the most defining features of the rather petite man. He wasn't much more than an inch taller than her, and Lauren wasn't particularly tall for a woman.

He eyed her and leaned to spit something gross off to the side, then sniffed and studied Finn where he lay on the ground. "What the fuck is going on here? Who killed these assholes?" And his boot collided with something next to Finn.

Lauren absolutely did not look. As long as she didn't look, in her mind she saw a fallen log or a pile of leaves or something like that. Definitely not a body.

"Bordelon did," the standing scary guy, Richardson, said. He didn't look away from her, though, like it was supposed to be some kind of threat.

Lauren couldn't keep up with who was going to try to kill whom. It was like she'd fallen into some kind of alternate universe and no one actually made sense.

"Bullshit," Finn said. He scowled fiercely enough she saw hints of the bear, and he swiped up his rifle to use as a stick to stand up. Lauren started to help but froze when the other men tensed. Finn grunted as he straightened, brushing snow off his clothes. "Richardson shot them in cold blood and he's trying to pin it on me. I won't fucking stand for it."

"Sounds like a big misunderstanding," the newcomer said. Shotgun turned narrow eyes on her. "And who is this tasty little treat?"

She recoiled, disgusted and almost ready to do something about it. He sucked on his teeth, practically rocking back on his heels, and smiled like he knew perfectly well how awful he was.

Finn's upper lip curled and if there hadn't been a very clear wound in his shoulder, Lauren figured it might have been all over for Shotgun and his friends. The bear didn't react with uncontrolled rage, though, which made her feel better. "My associate. Mind your manners or she'll fuck you up."

Lauren did her best to look unimpressed and hopefully a little intimidating, although she didn't think it worked from the way the other man snorted and a sneer curled his mouth. Richardson and his two pals at least started to look nervous; they must have expected to blame Finn or kill him before Shotgun arrived. She didn't know enough about the relationships between them all, but none of them seemed particularly trustworthy except Finn.

Shotgun spat again, then glanced down at the ground next to where Finn had been. "So these are the last of 'em. Everything else is accounted for?"

“Near enough,” Finn said after the silence stretched. “Except for the payment.”

“Well, seeing as how Richardson had to handle...”

“You paid me to find them, not arrest them.” Steel filled Finn’s voice and Lauren shivered under her coat. She hadn’t seen that Finn before, not even when he confronted the guys who wanted to hurt her. He didn’t move. “And seeing as how your associate here murdered three detainees in cold blood and I have it on video, you’re better off paying my fee and never contacting me again.”

Shotgun’s eyes narrowed again and he looked over at Richardson, who just shrugged. The shorter man exhaled in annoyance and jerked his chin back the way he’d come. “Get the fuck out of here. Give me fifteen, then send in the team to clean this shit up. I’m fucking tired of your messes, asshole. This is the last time.”

From the way the other three paled, Lauren wondered if maybe an executioner waited for them in the woods, too. She wasn’t able to move her legs as the three briefly hesitated, like they wanted to argue, then retreated. Before they got too far, Finn said, “Leave the rifles. On the ground.”

Smart. He was so smart. She just wanted them gone, but it was a good point—they could shoot them both from a distance if they really wanted to.

Shotgun said, “Do it,” when the three bristled, and in a clatter of metal, the rifles and a few other guns hit the snow.

Then it was just them trudging away through the trees, muttering to each other, and Shotgun watching Finn. The short man waited until the others blended in amongst the shadows, then glanced at Lauren. “Why don’t you take a walk, honey, let us talk business for a minute.”

Even a couple of days earlier, she would have done it. Hell, even a couple of hours earlier, she would have immediately turned and started walking. But with Finn wavering a little on his feet, clearly uncomfortable and in pain, she wasn't going to leave him there with a man who didn't even blink when he learned three of his pals literally killed people in cold blood and tried to blame it on someone else.

"She stays," Finn said. He never took his attention off Shotgun. "Since the payment concerns her, too. Like we talked about on the phone, there are a couple of charges to take care of. I wasn't going to raise my fee, but having the asshole triplets shoot me doesn't leave me very generous."

Lauren braced for a negative reaction or maybe for Shotgun to shoot them both, but he just shrugged. "Gotta be careful in the woods, dick. Your own fault for not staying aware of your surroundings."

"And you wonder why I don't want to ever take a call from you again." Finn shook his head, wincing slightly as he adjusted how he stood. "So here's what's going to happen. There are trail cams all over this place, and we've got it all on video. Lauren will lose that video when you pay my fee and resolve those charges we talked about."

Her heart dropped. Charges? Did he meant her charges? She didn't dare look too closely at Finn, just in case she panicked at him being hurt and made things worse. It was okay. It would all be okay. She just had to be brave a little while longer, maybe help him hike up to the trail. Then...then something good would happen or maybe Kira would show up to help and then she wouldn't have to make any more decisions for a long time.

"I never agreed to deal with the charges, you never told me what they were for." Shotgun lost some of that jovial threat as it faded into real threat. "So start with that and we'll talk."

“Attempted manslaughter,” Finn said calmly. “All a misunderstanding, of course, much like...” and he nodded at the bodies on the ground. Lauren swallowed a taste of bile and carefully adjusted her grip on the shotgun. She couldn’t feel her fingers but that didn’t matter. She just had to keep it together a little longer. “And failure to appear, a couple of other things. Nothing you haven’t dealt with before.”

“Manslaughter?” He turned a jaundiced eye on her. “What the fuck could you possibly have done to catch manslaughter? Did your dolly make you mad? Someone post something mean about you online?”

She really disliked that guy. Lauren wished she thought of something clever, but didn’t want to waste the brain power on it when she needed all her concentration to stay upright and breathing. “Guess you’ll find out.”

He snorted, then glanced at Finn. “Can’t make something like that go away, mate. Not anymore. Prosecutors are up our asses about that nonsense, I’m sure you can bankroll a good defense lawyer with...”

“You’ll fix it, or I’ll call the rat squad,” Finn said. He glanced at his watch, like he was bored with the conversation. “I’m sure they’d appreciate seeing the footage of Richardson shooting three perps already detained. Seems like it wasn’t so long ago you dodged similar rumors, so I’m guessing this one will stick. You’re going to go to the prosecutor and inform them Lauren Tucker was working for you as an informant when the bullshit at the site went down, and she kept her mouth shut about what you tasked her to do even when she should have told the public defender who shit the bed on her case. I don’t care what kind of flex you have to make, you’ll do it. Once you’ve fixed it and she’s clear, we’ll delete the footage.”

Shotgun’s eyes narrowed as he looked between them. “Why should I believe you about the footage? Who the fuck is going to believe either of you?”

Lauren's cheeks felt frozen solid as she forced a smile, then tapped the black square on her shoulder strap. "Bigfoot research requires very small, almost unnoticeable cameras. I'm sure you didn't notice any of them on the hike in, or in the meadow behind, or...here."

The short man lost what was left of his expression, giving her a dead-eyed stare that made her nerves twitch. The silence stretched, broken only by Finn's semi-labored breathing. Lauren's heart sped up. What if Finn keeled over dead right here in the woods?

Finn finally said, "You really want to risk it, man? You really think the rest of your career and the rest of your life in jail is worth it? Blame it on Richardson fucking up the paperwork, make him sit a desk for a couple months to make up for it. Find some other way to make the asshole pay. I don't give a shit. Fix it, send me the paperwork, then lose my number."

Lauren had never heard him talk so much in the entire time she'd known him. Which was, well...two days? Three? It didn't matter, they were really intense days. She couldn't breathe through her nose anymore, not with the cold air and threatening tears and just the overwhelming pressure of pretending to be composed when she wanted to curl up in a ball and wait for someone to rescue her. How did Finn do this all the time? How did he look so casual, even though he was bleeding from a gunshot?

Shotgun leaned to spit again, really slowly, and made a big deal of rubbing his jaw and deliberating. It was all for show. He didn't have a choice. The unknown and possible video footage might have been a bluff—and it was, although Lauren tried not to somehow think that too loudly in case he somehow picked up on it—but it wasn't worth the risk.

The other man finally jerked his chin down in a nod. "Fine. The payment already in your account is the only money I'm sending you. I'll do what I can on the charges."

When Finn started to growl, Shotgun held up his hands. “I can’t just make it go away, dude. You can think I’m bullshitting but this is for real. At the most she’ll get a ticket for lying to a cop or something, have to pay the bail, maybe do some community service. I’m sure you can deal with that.”

And he gave Lauren a hard look that made it easier to believe he really didn’t think he could erase everything with a magic wand. She took a shaky breath, about to accept the deal, when Finn said casually, “One more thing.”

Her heart jumped into her throat to choke her. What else could there possibly be? She could deal with community service, she could live with a ticket or even a misdemeanor charge. It would be an impossible improvement over hiding out in a falling-down shack in the woods. Was he really going to fight for every last thing? She swallowed hard and looked over at him, almost not recognizing him at all.

FINN

He could have accepted the deal. Finn felt Lauren wavering next to him, wanting to be done with it, and he would have reached out to squeeze her hand if he trusted his balance. But he didn't like loose ends, and he didn't want anything out in the universe waiting to spoil their happiness when he finally got her somewhere safe and warm.

"One more thing? Fuck off, dude, my cleaners will be here real soon, so if you're..."

"The thing she got blamed for," Finn said. He didn't look at Lauren as she cringed at the mention of the crime, and he clenched his fist to keep from pulling her in for a hug. Shotgun saw that sort of affection as weakness, and Finn couldn't risk losing the upper hand. "The two who are actually to blame are still running around free, and organizing a fringe domestic terror group. The cops have enough evidence to convict them, just not their identities. I can give you enough to solve that crime for them, maybe get yourself back in everyone's good graces."

Shotgun looked wary. "I'll look into it."

"Good. Lauren is free and clear, nothing—not even a fucking misdemeanor or parking ticket—and you'll get what you need to arrest those assholes. Everything all neat and tidy." Finn heard the beat of blades overhead and glanced up, relieved beyond words to see the Bear Country Tours helicopter swinging around. "And that's our ride. We're going to walk out of here. I'll give you two weeks to clear everything. If I don't hear from you by then, I'll call our friends in the rat squad."

Internal Affairs had always wanted to nail Shotgun for all the questionable things he

did, but the man had never gone as far outside the law as he had that morning, excusing Richardson's murdering suspects. Finn would have been just as happy seeing Shotgun go to jail for covering for the psychopaths working for him, but it was more important to ensure Lauren was safe.

Shotgun's eyes narrowed but he stood back, far enough under the trees no one would see him, as Finn turned to Lauren. Her eyes looked more terrified than he realized when he looked at her up close, and he suddenly wasn't sure she would be able to walk to where the helicopter touched down in the middle of the meadow. Snow kicked up in a white whirl and he carefully nodded toward the open area away from the trees. He totally understood her hesitation, since being out exposed against a white backdrop definitely made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. But there wasn't anything for it.

It also helped that a massive figure jumped down from the helicopter—Simon, undoubtedly—followed by a slightly thinner figure that had to be Ethan, and marched toward them. Although maybe that was why Lauren gulped audibly and shrank down into herself. Finn forgot everyone else existed as he carefully squeezed her arm, leaning closer to murmur, "You did so good, babe. Just be brave a little longer. We can get in the helicopter and get out of here. You're safe. I've got you."

His whole chest warmed up to be able to say that to her. She was safe with him, and with Simon and Ethan and everyone else in the helicopter. Shotgun wasn't dumb enough to try anything with that many witnesses—particularly armed ones—with radios and cameras and everything, so Finn felt a lot more confident about turning his back on the fucker.

Until he took a step and his knee wobbled and he almost fell flat on his face. Right. He'd been shot. His chest and side and shoulder flared with pain, though it wasn't as bad with his shifter healing. He'd still lost a lot of blood. Finn frowned and concentrated on getting his legs to cooperate as he tried to move and still hold the

rifle. He was just about to face-plant into the snow when something warm pressed against his side and Lauren leaned against him.

He glanced down and found her focused on the helicopter, although she'd put her arm around him and didn't seem to mind leaning against his side where the bloody jacket rubbed against hers. Poor thing. He'd have to get her a whole new winter wardrobe. Lots of warm clothes, plenty of layers, all the expensive shit girls liked. His thoughts spiraled out to getting her new fuzzy boots and warm socks, maybe one of those huge shearling coats that were so popular and cost an arm and a leg.

"You've gotta help a little," Lauren whispered. Her arm tightened around his waist and Finn dragged himself back to the present.

He chuckled and put his arm around her shoulders to haul her closer so he could kiss the top of her head, which almost toppled them both over. The pain and cold didn't matter, he just wanted to be close to her. But he did his best to move his feet and walk them both slowly toward where Simon and Ethan approached. Lauren made herself smaller against his side as the two men approached, and Finn's bear side wanted to immediately transform to protect her. She didn't need to fear his friends, but she didn't know that yet, and her fear triggered the need to safeguard her.

So Finn stopped and said, "Don't get closer."

It took Simon a second, but Ethan at least picked up on the issue and caught the alpha's arm when he would have bulldozed on. Ethan's dark eyebrows rose. "There a problem?"

"Send Kira."

The two shared looks, then Simon gestured for Finn to get closer. "Come on, man. It's fine."

“Nope.” Finn shook his head. “Need Kira.”

The alpha bear didn’t like his intentions being questioned, but he also heard whatever it was he needed to hear in Finn’s voice to convince him this wasn’t the time to fuck around. Ethan said something into his radio, and another, smaller figure jumped down from the helicopter to move in their direction.

Good. Kira. Finn took a steadying breath, glad the two men stayed back a reasonable distance. His arm tightened around Lauren. “This is Lauren. She’s my mate and right now she’s scared. She’s had a few rough days, so you gotta take it easy.”

They nodded, though Ethan had an easy smile and Simon still looked pissed. Ethan offered a wave. “Hi Lauren. You okay? Hurt at all?”

She shook her head, then managed to whisper, “No, thank you, I’m fine.”

Finn snorted and kissed the top of her head again, inhaling from her ice-crystal-filled hair. She needed a hat. And better gloves. Jesus. She’d been out in the snow for hours without proper gear. No wonder she shook so much.

When he didn’t speak, she found some bravery and said louder, “Finn was shot. He’s hurt. You need to—he needs help. I’m fine. But he was shot, and his leg was hurt a few days ago but it looks a lot better, but he can’t stand up on his own right now and I think—I think he might fall because I can’t...”

“It’s okay,” he said, squeezing her again. God, he fucking loved her. All the pain floated away in the blissful happiness of having her near. Maybe it was shock or hypothermia.

Ethan wasn’t nearly so pleased, and fixated on Finn. “You got yourself shot? Again? You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

The bear wasn't about to tolerate having raised voices around his shivering mate. He tensed automatically, though that made the pain flare up and agitated the bear more. It was about to fly out of control when Kira marched up, clapping her hands. "Okay, all of you. Settle down."

He breathed a little easier. He trusted her with Lauren. It would all be fine. His legs weakened as he took a step and then he wasn't entirely sure he was still walking and not falling.

LAUREN

She wasn't entirely sure why Finn wanted to stand there talking instead of getting into the helicopter and getting to a hospital to fix the bullet wound, but she wasn't going to object too strongly. He definitely leaned on her to stay upright, and she wondered if he wasn't injured a heck of a lot worse than he pretended. The two enormous guys who appeared out of the helicopter were equally as terrifying as Shotgun, even if they didn't give her the same icky vibes. They just looked enormous enough to snap her in two without really trying.

Lauren didn't know what to do when Finn started to fall, but a woman had appeared from the helicopter and spoke in a semi-familiar voice from the phone call earlier. "Settle down. Finn, why are you—oh, God damn it."

Lauren gulped for air and tried to catch Finn as he went to his knees, not strong enough to keep him upright, and Kira took charge. It was such a relief that Lauren almost passed out next to Finn. Kira started giving orders and the man named Ethan, who'd asked if she was okay, moved forward to help hold Finn up out of the snow. Then Kira linked her arm with Lauren's and said, "They'll carry him out, let's get you warm in the helo. I'm Kira, by the way."

"L-Lauren," she said, teeth already chattering with too many emotions and cold and just...everything. She was really getting in a helicopter? Lauren shook her head, vision blurring. What the hell was happening? She looked back at Finn, heart in her throat. Somehow her voice wouldn't come out loud enough. "He's shot. They sh-shot him, he..."

“It’s okay,” Kira said. She didn’t stop walking or even slow down, despite the knee-deep snow, as they approached the helicopter. At least the blades weren’t rotating anymore, although Lauren ducked out of instinct as they got close. Kira hauled the door open and started to boost Lauren up. “We have plenty of first aid, and Ethan is a doctor. He’ll be fine. Let’s just get you in here and settled in the back, and then we can load Finn up. Okay?”

Lauren didn’t know how to argue with that, since it made sense, even though her heart wanted to stay close to Finn to make sure he was okay. Whoever flew the helicopter stayed up front with the controls and didn’t look back when she clambered into the contraption that was nicer than any bus she’d ever been on. It seated at least ten people, although several areas had seats folded down and stowed to make room for a stretcher.

Kira shooed her toward the bench seat in the back, where blankets were stacked alongside a large duffel bag. Lauren didn’t have to duck too much when she climbed into the helicopter, Kira clearly already focused on other tasks. She pulled another duffel bag from under a seat. “Take off your coat, babe, it’s covered in blood and it looks pretty soggy. You can put this sweatshirt on, there are a bunch of blankets back there to wrap up in. Mittens and hats and things too. Put the shoulder harness and belt on, and there’s a headset right there if you want to listen once we get started up. Just sit tight so we can get Finn in. Okay?”

And then she waited, looking at Lauren. Lauren didn’t know what to do. What was she waiting for? Did she want something? Lauren’s mouth went dry as she stared at the other woman, far too many thoughts swarming through her brain, too busy to let any actual words out. She finally managed to nod, stumbling around the duffel to collapse onto the seat in the back where Kira apparently expected her to sit.

Kira took that as permission to keep moving, maybe, because she returned to being a whirlwind of activity. The two men carried Finn and passed him into the helicopter,

though he was conscious again and complaining about how they bumped him around. There was a lot more good-natured joking than she would have expected for such a serious matter, and she had to hold on to the seams of her jeans to keep from telling them to be serious and focus on saving him. How were they all so relaxed?

She shed her jacket and left it where Kira gestured so the blood wouldn't get onto the seat or other clothes, but its absence left her shaking even more. It didn't matter that she pulled on an oversized sweatshirt a second later, or the mittens and hat and other gear stuffed into the duffel. The shaking came only partly from cold but mostly from seeing Finn lying prone on the stretcher as they hauled off his jacket and shirt and exposed his bare chest to the cold air.

Seeing the angry red wound and blood streaking his skin left her dizzy, disoriented. Oh God. What if he died? How could she go back to living like she had, without him? He loved and trusted her, he believed in her. How could she possibly survive without that kind of support? She'd never had it before, but after knowing how much Finn wanted her to succeed, how much he listened to her and didn't immediately dismiss her thoughts, how...what was there to go back to?

Her vision blurred more and hot tears spilled down her cheeks. She held in a sob. It was too much. It was just too much happening and too many new people and just—everything was too much. She couldn't breathe. The shoulder straps were too restrictive, the closed windows and doors blocking off the air, the disorienting feeling of the helicopter lifting off the ground and leaving her stomach behind, the half-shouting voices as everyone else talked... She clapped her hands over her ears and tried to hunker down in that seat in the back, forgotten again.

Something warm slid around her wrist and she froze, staring at the hand shackling her wrist and forcing her to hear the chaos in the helicopter. She looked up and saw Finn, and her heart cracked. How did she ever think everything would work out?

FINN

He knew it had to be a lot for Lauren to take. Finn had plenty of experience with chaotic environments and being shoved unfamiliar places while others said and did a lot around him. He hadn't even considered what it would be like for her, after hiding in the cabin away from people for God only knew how long. The bear side didn't give a shit about the pain in his shoulder and chest, and the second Ethan confirmed the bullet went straight through and no vital structures were hit, Finn took the hit of morphine and immediately went to Lauren.

Simon started to bark at him and chew his ass for making stupid decisions working with Shotgun, but Finn barely heard him. Barely registered there were others in the helicopter. He took off the headset so he wouldn't be distracted, despite the thumping roar of the rotors almost deafening him, and dragged himself to slide onto the seat next to Lauren.

She had her eyes squeezed shut and her hands over her ears, hunched over to make herself smaller, and tears ran down her cheeks. Finn's heart ached for her, and it wasn't even the bullet wound that gave him pangs. She was more the personification of overwhelmed than he'd ever seen a person be. It took some doing, but he finally tugged on her wrist and got her to look at him.

She wore fresh clothes, at least, instead of the old jacket he'd ruined by leaning on her, and smelled fresh and familiar but still like herself. Lauren stared at him with wide, slightly vacant eyes, and a twinge of concern seized him. He didn't know how to help, so he did what he would have wanted if their positions were reversed: he put his arm around her and leaned back on the bench seat, letting his head rest against the

wall and a little on hers, and breathed deep and even. The morphine definitely helped him relax, and he would have fallen asleep immediately if the bear weren't hypervigilant about protecting Lauren.

It took some time for her to start to relax, although she didn't speak or really even blink much. Finn just breathed and held her, and gradually she leaned against his shoulder. Her hand moved by minuscule little increments until it touched his, and he held on to her cold fingers through the mitten. He smiled to himself, the rest of the tension easing out of his shoulders. They would be okay. Everything would be fine.

Simon told him it would take about an hour to get back to the Lodge by helicopter, and that they were fucking lucky the weather cleared and they still had the aircraft out of the barn for a last-minute winter hunting trip. Otherwise, they never would have reached them in time. Finn figured he and Lauren would have been fine. They would have hiked back to the cabin to hole up until Ethan or whoever drove around to pick them up. It all would have worked out.

Funny how it felt that way with Lauren next to him. Even the added stress of protecting a mate wasn't enough to undermine the confidence that all was right in his world. Finally, all the pieces were there. Something he'd been searching for and didn't even know he needed was with him for the first time, and he could breathe. He held her closer, head turning to breathe her in, and imagined them napping for hours in the warm comfort of his room. He'd barricade the door so no one bothered them, and they could both recover from the stressful events.

He'd eventually talk with Simon's lawyer about the deal with Shotgun and how to make sure it actually worked out and didn't bite Lauren in the ass later. Trading in the fuckers who'd thrown her under the bus had been a last-minute idea, but he figured it didn't hurt to appeal to Shotgun's vanity. Being able to solve a crime no one else had for a year was probably a better way to get him to help Lauren than to threaten the fucker with internal investigations, but both together would definitely get things

done. Although he'd wait until the paperwork was done and the charges against Lauren dropped before he breathed easier. At least he knew she'd have actual representation the next time she had to face a judge, instead of some overworked public defender who didn't remember her name.

She shifted and squirmed next to him, and Finn loosened his embrace where he'd been crushing her closer. He kissed her temple, then murmured in her ear, "Are you okay?"

Maybe she wouldn't hear over the noise in the helicopter and through the headphones. After a hesitation, she nodded. Didn't speak, just leaned into him and squeezed his hand and nodded.

Finn squeezed back and kissed her again, unable to stop himself from nuzzling against her hair and temple under the fuzzy hat. "We'll be there in about an hour. You can sleep if you want to."

He wanted to. He wanted to curl up on the seat and wrap her up in blankets and hold her tight until the rest of the world faded away. Lauren hesitated, clearly thinking about it, then nodded again. Finn damn near jumped up in excitement, but slowly untangled himself to arrange some of the seats into a backward-facing arrangement that was basically a modified lounge-bed. Not super comfortable but better than the stretcher or trying to cuddle sitting up. Lauren watched with her eyebrows drawn together and her forehead wrinkled, so damn adorable he had to stop what he was doing to kiss her again.

Her whole face reddened but he just went back to making her a nest with the blankets and the duffel bag of clothes as a pillow. Finn didn't give a shit that periodically Kira glanced back from where she sat, grinning to herself, and that even Ethan snickered. He couldn't care less. They'd all been idiots when they finally found their mates, and he was damn well going to enjoy every second of finally having Lauren somewhere

safe.

He didn't try to talk over the noise of the rotors, instead gesturing for Lauren to shift over to the wider part of where the seats and bench aligned. Once she'd sat down, he shoved them the rest of the way together, giving her more room, then wrapped her up in more of the blankets as well as another layer of sweats and a jacket, too. Finn didn't breathe easily until he stretched out next to her on his side, facing her so his back protected them from view. His nosy fucking friends wouldn't be deterred from giggling with each other over it, but he didn't give a shit.

Finn nuzzled against Lauren's cheek, breathing her in. "Are you okay? Doing okay?"

Her fingers curled inside his, holding on to him, and she nodded. Her eyes were closed, though her face remained more tense than he wanted.

"I love you," he breathed, sharing a secret. He would shout it to the world the second he could, but he wanted her to be the first one to hear it. "I love you more than anything in the world."

Another nod, another soft squeeze of his fingers.

Finn smiled, the morphine starting to take over a little more when he finally stopped moving around and the rest of him relaxed. "Marry me, Lauren. Be my wife. Be mine forever."

Silence. Stillness. So long he almost woke up all the way, then...a gentle tightening around his hand. A slight nod, her face turned toward his until her forehead tucked against his neck and her breath hushed on his skin. Finn smiled, the bear finally content, and slipped into dreams. Fucking finally.

LAUREN

Lauren still wasn't sure what she'd heard Finn say, other than his tone meant love and caring and that was fine with her. Whatever he wanted would be better than anything she came up with on her own. Especially when he realized how tired she was, just flat-out exhausted, and somehow managed to make the helicopter bend to his will and produce a reasonable bed. She never would have imagined using the seats to make a place to lay down, but it was Finn. She should have expected him to just make things happen.

Being cuddled up against his chest was almost enough for her to forget they were on a helicopter flying to somewhere unknown, and that Finn had been shot, and a bunch of semi-innocent criminals had died, and the guy Shotgun could possibly be making things worse for her or sending marshals to find her wherever Finn lived. Some of that chaos splintered and marched around in her brain, but the concerns diminished since Finn was there and he would know how to fix everything.

She passed out finally, then sort of woke up as the world bumped and moved and got cold again. Lauren tried to get up but found herself being carried, and Finn murmured, "Go back to sleep, we're home."

She should have questioned any number of things, not least of which was how the hell he carried her so soon after being shot and also what the hell did home mean, but instead she just nodded and blacked out again. It had been so long since she could relax, could trust that nothing horrible would happen while she slept. Even before being on the run, she hadn't trusted where she slept for so long Lauren always woke up a lot to make sure no one surprised her.

Lauren woke up again when clouds surrounded her in fluffy warmth and perfection, and then Finn was there too and he sighed. And they both slept, and for once, she didn't dream.

She woke up feeling drunk. Literally drunk from being well-rested and comfortable and just...content. Whatever waited outside didn't matter. What mattered was Finn, still passed out in a huge bed next to her. And the bathroom. She really needed the bathroom.

Lauren only kept one eye open so she could maybe have a chance of falling back asleep after taking care of business, and slowly untangled herself from Finn and the sheets. It was slow going, and he woke up with a snort before she'd even gotten off the mattress. Lauren patted his head, still focused on the increasing emergency in her bladder. "Bathroom."

He grumbled and got up a lot quicker and more gracefully than she'd managed, and padded across the room to open one of half a dozen doors and flicked on a light. "You hungry?"

She shook her head, focused only on the bathroom, but a stray thought jumped to the front of her brain when she saw inside the swanky bathroom. "Shower."

"Perfect." He patted her butt as she walked past, then stood back as she closed the door.

Lauren smiled to herself as she surrendered to the dreamy, half-awake and monosyllabic relationship. It was more comfortable grunting and pointing with Finn than any of the flowery conversations she'd been love-bombed with in the past. When she was done and trying to figure out how to turn on the shower, she opened the door to ask for help and found Finn standing there, completely naked.

She laughed, cheeks heating, and didn't look away to take him in from head to toe. The wounds from earlier were somehow just angry pink and red marks, no longer actual wounds but new scars, and the rest of him was buff and hairy and perfect. An antsy energy built up at the thought that he was all hers. Every inch of him. It didn't matter for how long she got him, but at least he meant what he said about staying with her. He'd whispered something about forever in the helicopter, and that was good enough for her.

Finn stalked toward her, carrying big fluffy towels, and paused only to kiss her, hard enough to make her toes curl, and growled against her mouth. "How come I'm the only one naked?"

"How are you so optimistic?" she whispered, laughing more. "Who said you were invited?"

He snorted and smacked her butt again, hanging the towels up on a fancy metal rack before he leaned into the large shower and somehow turned on half a dozen jets from every level and angle, including a massive rainfall kinda thing in the ceiling. "I figured you wanted me to do the work."

Lauren shivered at his words even with the increasing heat and steam in the bathroom. It had been literally two months, maybe more, since she'd had a hot shower. And she'd never ever seen a shower that nice in real life, only in magazines and in brag rolls on social media. She shimmied out of her clothes, ready to never see the tattered and stained garments again, as she focused on the streams of hot water. No more bucket baths for her, not for a long time.

She wouldn't stop and question why Finn liked her like he did. She wasn't going to invite that doubt into the room or the bedroom or the space between them, not yet. Maybe later, once the newness wore off and he got annoyed with how much she talked, but for that moment...she could just enjoy him.

It helped he started growling in a purely animalistic way the second she started undressing, and by the time she was naked, he sounded like a Harley in every breath. Her stomach squirmed as she had to step past him to get into the shower, and she made sure to let her breasts brush against his chest, and every inch of her lit on fire from the barest contact.

Finn squeezed her ass and pretended to help shoo her under the steamy water, but pure need thrilled through her as his strong hands moved to her waist. There was suddenly an overwhelming number of sensations—the water splashing her skin and head, the hissing sound, his breathing and touching and her own body telling her...everything...

Lauren tilted her head back and closed her eyes under the pounding water, struggling to process everything, and froze when something cool hit her hair.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Finn said, and his enormous hands began to massage her head. Her head? He moved her hair around and the scent of citrus and rosemary filled the ceramic and glass enclosure. “Head back, babe.”

It was a good thing the water splashed across her cheeks, too, because otherwise he would have realized she’d started crying. Why had she expected him to want sex right away? The possibility he might want to wash her hair and help her clean up before doing anything never occurred to her.

And yet that was what he did, without needing to be asked or even getting a hint. He just did it. Her hair was lathered to within an inch of its life, and at least twice Lauren almost collapsed from the absolute heaven of his fingers working out knots in her neck and shoulders. Both times he laughed and caught her, holding her easily as soapy hands went all over each other. She could have stood there forever, even worrying about when the water would cool and leave them hollering to get out.

Then he ducked so she could wash his hair, laughing because he had to hold her waist and distracted himself with her breasts as she tried to focus enough to not get soap and water in his face. Finn nibbled on her stomach, then her nipples, as Lauren worked her fingers through his hair and almost collapsed again. She breathed harder, wanting more, and lathered up his hair while keeping his head close so he kept up that sharp-edged magic with his mouth.

Lauren retreated from the overwhelming spray of water to a small bench inside the shower, breathing hard, and took a moment to admire Finn as he finished rinsing his hair under the big showerhead. He looked like one of those pagan gods, made of muscle and looking real and hardened from a lifetime of work, rising out of the ocean to bring vengeance. Her thighs clenched together at the thought, as well as the vision of his hard-on showing just how much he liked being in there with her. She wanted to touch him, and for him to touch her, but getting from the bench to the next step suddenly seemed really far.

Finn turned to her and chuckled, holding up a washcloth he'd gotten from...somewhere? He rubbed it slowly in his hands and worked up a thick lather, then crooked a finger at her. "I have plans for you, darlin'."

Lauren laughed, a little nervous, and didn't trust her legs to hold her up. Instead, she leaned and slowly wrapped her hand around his cock, drawing him closer so she didn't have to get up. Finn didn't resist, instead groaning as she stroked him slowly, the washcloth dangling from his hand. Lauren's heart beat faster as he got closer, and she wanted to jump up and rub all over him, to feel his arms around her, to feel the way he loved her and put her first. It was his turn. She didn't know how else to thank him for being so careful with her.

She kissed the head of his cock and slowly licked the crown, looking up to watch for his reaction. Her whole body caught fire when she found him watching her, his own eyes burning with desire, and she moaned a little as she took more of him in her

mouth.

Finn's voice went rocky and rough, and one hand stroked her hair. "You don't have to, babe."

She retreated enough to murmur, "I want to," and surprised herself by realizing it was true. It wasn't a chore to pleasure him, it was...a gift? He'd return it, and more, and she wanted him to feel good. She wanted him to enjoy it as much as she knew she'd enjoy being with him.

She ran her nails down his thighs as she took him deeper, and Finn groaned in a guttural sound that almost made her come just sitting there. He dropped the washcloth and his fingers worked against her scalp again, encouraging but not forcing. She hummed, enjoying the taste and sensation of his heavy heat against her tongue. She sucked but he was too large to really take all of him like she wanted. Maybe that was a future goal...

Lauren settled for focusing her attention on the sensitive crown and the underside, using her hand for an extra stroke and twist, and it seemed like he immediately began to move his hips in response. Finn groaned again, whispering to himself and to her, and he held her head gently but with an insistent urgency that left her breathless and touching herself. God, everything he did was sexy. She almost stopped to jump up and wrap her legs around his waist to take him deep, but his grip tightened and he gasped, "Just like that, babe, I'm going to?—"

He finished in her mouth with a long, low groan. His hips jerked three or four times as he still held her head, and Lauren swallowed as fast as she could to keep up a gentle pressure until the breath hissed in his teeth and he eased away. Her heart raced and she squeezed her thighs together to relieve some of the insistent need at her core.

Finn staggered to sit on the bench next to her, his head falling back against the tile

wall. He still panted a little, eyes closed. “That was amazing. Thank you.”

She wanted to laugh, even though she was so overwhelmed she almost cried again. He thanked her? Lauren petted his stomach, already looking forward to what he had planned for that discarded washcloth, and eyed his half-hard cock as it remained within reach. “What do you want to do next?”

A dark chuckle and the mischievous smile on his face, almost hidden by the beard, made her stomach squirm. Maybe she wasn’t ready for the washcloth after all.

FINN

He'd planned everything out in his head while they cuddled in bed, envisioning a chance to get Lauren naked in the fancy shower he'd spent way too much money outfitting, but she surprised him. Again. A blowjob was the last thing he expected, but then she was there and her hand curled around him and her mouth... His entire brain shorted out. Nothing could have distracted him from her perfect attention.

Finn's shoulder and side still ached from being shot, despite his accelerated healing, and the morphine wearing off made reality come screaming back. The shower and Lauren's attention was more than enough to distract him again, even if it somewhat limited how acrobatic he planned to get with her. He wasn't quite ready to hike her up and fuck against the wall, like he'd originally planned, but there was still plenty to do sitting down. Thank fuck he'd invested in that bench and the extra long shower stall, although the fancy jacuzzi tub called out for some attention. If it wouldn't have taken so long to heat up and fill with water, he would have been tempted to drag Lauren over so neither of them had to work very hard.

Her eyes were closed, a slight smile on her face, as she relaxed and breathed and occasionally stroked her stomach as the steam billowed and moved around them. Finn damn near choked up as he looked at her. His mate. His mate. He'd found her, finally, even after giving up. Even after all those years of being bitter and alone and resigned to misery for the rest of his short life, there she was. Right where he'd never expected. Hauling his ass out of a bear trap and to safety, then marching down a lonely winter trail to confront armed cops and drug runners.

She was so brave. So much more than he'd expected to find, or even dreamed of

finding. He hadn't had any frame of reference for Lauren. She skipped into his life and whirled around and brought the good kind of chaos.

Finn reached over and took her hand, his throat clogged with emotion. "Thank you for saving me."

Her smile went a little crooked, and she opened one eye to look at him. "I didn't save you. You saved me."

"That's not how I see it." Finn couldn't take being apart from her and abruptly dragged her into his lap, her back to his chest, to wrap his arms around her and smell her damp hair. He pressed his nose to her shoulder, closing his eyes again. Even her soft, round ass against his thighs wasn't enough to distract him. "You pulled me out of that bear trap and hiked me up the trail to the cabin."

"You got out of the trap on your own," she said, laughing breathlessly and squirming. She felt slippery and slick, exactly perfect conditions to slide his hand along her thigh. "And I'm sure you would have been fine getting to the cabin. I probably did more damage dragging you there in the first place."

Finn snorted and held her tighter, hooking his knees under hers to spread her legs a little more. "And you helped flush out some of the drug runners by heading out on your own when you freaked out on me."

Her squirming turned less playful and more needy, as she undulated and spread her thighs for him. She gasped but managed to string a few words together. "And I almost got us both killed, until you saved me."

"And then," he murmured against her shoulder. He stroked up her thighs, teasing her with glancing touches around her clit and through her folds. Her back arched and her arms went up so her hands slid into his hair, holding on as her hips rocked in response

to his attention. “You walked through the snow and into the unknown to confront three dudes who’d already shot me and four other people. You’re amazing.”

“I’m stupid and I have poor impulse control,” she said. She twisted in his arms, trying to angle her hips, and her ass planted against his already hard cock. He groaned and held her tighter.

But Finn wasn’t about to let that kind of comment pass. He smacked her hip in a light spank, beyond pleased that she moaned and a full-body shiver ran through her at the discipline. “Don’t call yourself stupid or I’ll have to spank you. Got it?”

She went breathless, her hands fisting in his hair. “Promise?”

His brain glitched and he started growling before he figured out what the hell was happening. Lauren managed to lift herself up enough his cock slid into place and almost into her, already slippery and slick from the shower and her excitement. He fully meant to keep telling her how amazing she was, but everything else disappeared. Finn manhandled her a little to make sure everything lined up, then dropped her down on his cock. He held tight to her waist so she wouldn’t flail around and reveled in her tight channel pulsing around him. Lauren gasped and moaned, arching to rise up, but Finn kept her right where she was, ass flush against his thighs.

He palmed her breast and squeezed, kissing the back of her neck, and waited for her to collapse back against him. He chuckled and casually teased her clit, rubbing around it until her body clutched at his cock and he couldn’t wait another second. Finn kept her steady as he thrust slowly, still seated and enjoying the spray of hot water. Lauren held on to him, and he held on to her, and rode the connection into a slowly-building climax that left them both sated and panting in the middle of the steam.

LAUREN

Reality blinked slowly in and out as Lauren sprawled across Finn in the shower. The only realization that stuck with her was how the water stayed so hot for so long. It was like a damn miracle. She couldn't even process the sheer ecstasy of lying there in Finn's arms and letting him pleasure her while she flopped around like a beached fish and made entirely inappropriate noises that echoed in the beautiful bathroom.

It felt like an eternity and just a few minutes at the same time before he reached for the washcloth. Lauren stirred, ready to stand up, but he murmured something and kept her exactly where she was in his lap, their bodies still connected even as he softened. Finn quickly washed her, being careful but also not trying to get her all worked up again, then stood her up and made sure they both rinsed off.

The soap smelled lovely, subtle and spicy and utterly like him, and almost distracted her from how her knees wobbled when he finally got up. Finn turned off the water, careful to keep a hand on her so she wouldn't fall to pieces, and lifted her out of the shower and wrapped her up in a towel from the fancy metal contraption—which was warm. A warm towel. She almost cried, wrapped up in it, and inhaled from the unbelievably soft fluffy terrycloth so she didn't start sobbing like a child.

Everything he did was careful and loving, but natural. He did those things because he wanted to and they made sense to him, not because he expected something in return. Finn thought ahead and put towels on a warmer before the shower, something that wouldn't have even occurred to her as an option, because he wanted her to have warm towels when stepping into the cool air. Lauren shook her head when he glanced at her, a little concern in his eyes, and she managed to smile and go up on her toes to

kiss him. How did she get so lucky?

Finn kissed her again on the forehead, then swooped her up to carry back to the giant bed covered in luxurious sheets and a floofy comforter. No wonder she thought she'd been surrounded by clouds. He put her down and puttered around to find sweatpants and to rub his hair with a towel to dry it a little. Lauren would have done the same but she couldn't get any of her limbs to actually cooperate.

Finn's knee dented the mattress as he knelt on the bed next to her and leaned down to kiss her forehead and cheek and then her mouth. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

Lauren smiled and started to link her arms around his neck. "All I need is you."

"Good," he said, grumbly and growly. Her skin prickled and she stretched, ready to cuddle up and go back to sleep for an age. Finn kissed her, then murmured, "I'll be right back. There's something I want to give you."

Her eyebrows arched as he untangled himself and went to another room, rummaging around loudly enough she sat up and got a little worried. What could he possibly want to show her? They'd only been there a few hours, at least she thought that was how long it had been. Maybe she was supposed to follow him. Lauren had just decided to figure out how to make her legs carry her into the other room when Finn reappeared.

His hair stood up in every direction, as wild as his beard, and he still wore only sweatpants as he hopped back into bed and nearly bounced her off the mattress. He held out a small box, grinning, and waited for her to take it. Lauren's heart beat faster as she studied it. A jewelry box. A ring box? It looked and smelled quite old, definitely not something from the store.

She didn't know what to say and turned it over in her hands for a long moment. What did it mean? He wanted to show it to her. Did he want her to admire it? She couldn't

get over the feeling it meant something more, but she didn't dare jump to conclusions. Even after everything, he definitely felt too good to be true. Just handing her a ring... It was definitely too good to be true.

Lauren finally opened the box, holding her breath, and nearly dropped it. A small ring was inside, like she'd expected, but it took her breath away. It was pale gold with a small setting of stones: rubies forming small petals around a central diamond. It wasn't ostentatious, it wasn't enormous and gaudy enough to be obviously fake. It was small and tasteful and obviously really, really valuable. She swallowed the knot in her throat. "It's beautiful."

"It was my great-grandmother's, and my grandmother's, and my mother's." He watched her, occasionally glancing at the ring box. "I don't have any other family, so it came to me. And I've been holding on to it ever since. Gave up hope I'd have someone to give it to."

His voice got rough with emotion, and Lauren's heart cracked for him. Such a beautiful heirloom. No wonder he wanted her to see it. Obviously it had been loved and handed down, carrying a great deal of commitment and family history. She smiled and offered the box back, too nervous to hold it for long in case she dropped it. "It's very lovely."

His dark eyebrows went up and he didn't take the box. "I thought it could be your wedding ring."

"My what?" She fumbled the box and sucked in a breath as she grabbed it with both hands.

"Your wedding ring. Or engagement ring. I don't know the difference, but I want my wife to wear it."

Lauren shook her head, trying to catch up. “I...what?”

Finn lost a tiny bit of his self-assurance and the casual relaxation as he sprawled on the bed next to her. “Uh...do you not remember me asking you to marry me?”

She sat straight up, not caring that the towel fell away and she didn’t even have sheets to cover her. It didn’t matter, since she could only stare at Finn. “You meant that?”

“Well, yeah.” Finn blinked. “Didn’t you?”

Lauren couldn’t breathe. She’d hallucinated all of those sweet things he’d said in the helicopter, or so she thought. But he actually meant them? That he wanted to marry her and be with her forever? “I just... I didn’t think I heard you right.”

Finn collapsed against the mattress next to her hip, laughing hard enough he actually jostled her too. Lauren watched in confusion as he flopped to his back, still chuckling. He wasn’t mad?

He sat up and then faced her, picking up her left hand as well as the ring box. “Lauren Tucker, you are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ll say it every day until you believe me. Will you marry me?”

Lauren stared at him. For once her brain couldn’t produce a single thought, much less the flurry she was accustomed to. Her mouth worked soundlessly. Her mother would have laughed her ass off to see Lauren so flummoxed, although it would have been laughing at her instead of with her. And Finn’s smile meant he was amused with her, that Lauren wasn’t the joke.

Her vision blurred. “But you—we only met three days ago. You hardly know me.”

“I know what I need to know,” he said, smiling. He reached out and touched her

cheek, and Lauren didn't even jerk away like her instincts usually made her. Finn squeezed her fingers, still relaxed and confident. "I know you probably still have questions, but I have no doubts. None. I was waiting for you. Looking for you. I knew it the second I heard your voice and smelled you and looked in your eyes. You're mine and I'm yours, and we were meant to find each other."

She definitely couldn't breathe. Lauren looked down at the ring and where he held her hand. He sounded so certain. So sure. But how could she be sure of him? He was too perfect. Everything he said and did was exactly right, at least once they got through the whole misunderstanding about whether he was a bounty hunter.

When Lauren just stared at him, still trying to process the slow-bubbling thoughts, Finn's smile didn't slip. "Then how about this. I'll give you this ring, and when you're certain of me, you put it on. Does that work? I'm all-in, darlin'. I know you might need more time to be sure of me. That's fine. I don't want you to feel rushed."

"I can't take this," she whispered, trying to hand it back. "I'll lose it. It's too valuable. I'm not—I shouldn't be trusted with..."

"Didn't I tell you what would happen if you started talking down about yourself?" Finn eyed her, then leaned like he needed to see where her ass ended up in case he needed to spank her.

Lauren shivered, trying not to laugh nervously at how much the thought appealed to her and shot straight to her center with anticipation. She couldn't be distracted from the actual problem in front of them: the fact that she couldn't be trusted with something that valuable. He would be heartbroken if she lost the family heirloom or broke it or forgot it somewhere...

"Babe," he said, and leaned to kiss her. Finn took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her fourth finger, then turned her hand back and forth to see how the gems

sparkled softly in the half-light. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. But wear this for a little while, just so I can see it on you, then we can find something out of a gumball machine if it would make you feel better. I trust you to treasure this ring as much as I treasure you.”

She laughed, a little watery as her vision blurred and more tears escaped. How could he possibly have so much confidence in her, when she hardly believed in herself even a fraction as much? “I’m more worried about someone trying to steal you. Why don’t you have a ring?”

He chuckled and set the box aside, then caught her to pull her close for another kiss. “I’ll wear whatever kind of ring you want me to, babe. There is no one on this planet who could distract me for even a second.”

Lauren stretched out underneath him, enjoying his weight over top of her. Funny how it was a comfort instead of leaving her feeling trapped and suffocated. She combed her fingers through his beard and then down his neck, pretending to measure the thick muscle with her hands. “Maybe a collar with a nice little tag on it. Lauren’s Teddy Bear.”

He inhaled so fast he choked, and for a second Lauren braced for the annoyance, the rolling eyes, the dismissal. Instead, he started shaking with laughter and leaned down to kiss her. He took his time, enjoying every second of it and exploring every part of her mouth, then broke away to murmur, “I’ll wear anything you want me to.”

She laughed breathlessly, stretching out under him and letting her legs fall open. Surely it wasn’t too early to think maybe another round was out of the question? He wore those damn sweatpants, though, so even though she felt how much he’d recovered, there was still a barrier between them. Lauren wrapped her arms around his neck, still a little nervous about the unfamiliar ring on her finger, but she focused on him. He might actually wear a ring for her, instead of insisting it was something

“just for chicks” and it was unreasonable to expect him to have a wedding ring.

“What about not wearing something?” she whispered.

Finn chuckled and groaned, kissing the side of her neck down to her shoulder. He shimmied down until her arms loosened, and then he began to kiss his way to her breasts, then her stomach, then... Her back arched and her head fell back, and she barely managed to hang on to his head as he made himself comfortable between her thighs.

How had she possibly gotten so lucky? He was perfect. Absolutely perfect. After so many years of everything going wrong, maybe the universe decided to make it up to her all at once. She didn't even know where they were, whose house stood around them, what the future held... None of it mattered. Well, it mattered a little. But one thing she didn't worry about was Finn not having a plan. He knew what to do. No matter what, he knew what to do.

She sighed and reveled in the soft sheets and his heated, smooth skin. He'd said she saved him, but that was just plain wrong. She was brave for a few seconds at a time, he was the one who had to carry the heavy burdens. She would help where she could, that was for damn sure, and she wasn't going to let anyone hurt him. But she wasn't really brave. It was okay. She'd never been brave.

And he loved her anyway. He wanted to marry her. Lauren had to bite her lip to keep from laughing hysterically and distracting him from the very, very good job he was doing teasing her to the most delicious orgasm that left her entire brain shorted out and all of her limbs jerking and twitching like she'd been electrocuted.

He would marry her. She would be Lauren...Finn? Her head popped up off the pillow and she looked down her body at where his dark head kissed her thighs and occasionally dipped lower to make her moan. “What's your last name?”

He looked up at her, eyebrow arched. “Bordelon.”

“Oh. Okay.” Lauren lay back against the pillow and exhaled some of that worry. At least she wasn’t going to marry a dude without knowing his last name. “Thanks.”

His shoulders bounced as he chuckled, making her legs spread more, and Finn blew a raspberry against the inside of her thigh as he watched her. “Anything else?”

“I don’t think so.” Her voice went high as his fingers stroked leisurely against her, and she cleared her throat a few times. “You can—can keep... oh .”

“My birthday’s in April.”

She tried to concentrate. April. Right. His birthday. Probably good to know, but... “Oh. Oh. ”

He sounded on the verge of laughing at her again. “Originally from Louisiana, down in the bayou.”

Bayou. They had alligators. Or was it crocodiles? How did you tell? She tried really hard to focus but every time she got even the slightest bit of attention back, Finn did something incredible with his mouth or fingers and she was left completely scattered again. Her fingers worked into his hair and her thighs closed against his ears. “That’s—nice. But what if— oh my God .”

That time he definitely laughed. Lauren didn’t even mind. She sighed and just enjoyed his attention, not even thinking about the long list of shit she should have asked him or even asked herself. She wanted to be there with him, in the moment, feeling and listening and loving and just... being .

He loved her. And she loved him. And that was the only thing that really mattered.

Everything else would work out.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:44 am

She couldn't breathe even after they walked out of the courthouse, uncomfortable in a borrowed skirt suit and other clothes that were probably more expensive than anything she'd ever owned. Lauren concentrated on not toppling over like a baby deer in the high-heeled shoes that apparently went with the suit, and gripped Finn's hand so hard she lost feeling in her fingers.

He squeezed back, apparently undisturbed by her trying to crush his joints, and leaned closer to whisper, "You did good."

The tall, perpetually annoyed-looking lawyer who apparently worked for Grumpy Simon and agreed to represent her against his better judgment grunted. "It's a good outcome. Although next time, you should just disclose your working relationships before you jump bail, Ms. Tucker."

Finn cleared his throat and the lawyer rolled his eyes, pulling a set of papers from his leather case. "My apologies. Mrs. Bordelon. Try not to commit any felonies, either of you."

With that, he turned and strode off, already talking on his cell phone. Lauren would have squealed if she hadn't been too stunned to both walk and process information at the same time. Talking was completely beyond her ability.

Finn looked a little sheepish as he held up the papers. "I had him do the name change, since you said... You did want to change your name, right? I thought that was what you said, but you were hollerin' a lot and you just kept telling me to go back to..."

He laughed when she smacked his shoulder, her face burning with embarrassment as

he came perilously close to just announcing that he liked to ask her random things in the middle of all sorts of sexy activities. Apparently she'd startled him before with questions so he decided turnabout was fair play, and chose the moment right before she came to ask her important things. Especially since she'd agree to anything if it meant he wouldn't stop whatever it was he'd been doing to make her all limp and sweaty in the first place.

She would have given him a piece of her mind— quietly , though, so no one would overhear—when a rough voice said, “Well, aren't you two a sight.”

Lauren froze, every inch of her going cold. Shotgun.

Finn tensed but it didn't show in his face. “Glad to see you filed the right paperwork. Good thing we got all that cleared up.”

The shorter man's lip curled briefly, before going back to smiling benignly. He looked even more out of place than she felt in a suit and tie, although a bulge on one side of his belt made it clear he still carried a firearm. Even more frightening than him on his own. Lauren didn't dare look away, although she definitely didn't want to meet his cruel gaze.

“Yeah. Now hold up your end of the deal.”

Lauren's heart beat faster. Finn had a plan, or at least an idea how to deal with the man he'd known for years, but she didn't trust Shotgun not to have some kind of double cross planned. Like he would give a signal and it would all go away and a bunch of his scary cops would run out to handcuff her and drag her off to jail again for trying to blackmail him. At least the lawyer was confident all the charges against her had actually been dropped, and there wasn't anything irregular that concerned him. It didn't mean Shotgun wouldn't come up with new charges, even though Finn didn't think it was likely.

“...just like I told you.”

Her attention snapped back to reality as Finn squeezed her hand, and she realized he'd been talking the whole time she envisioned a worst-case scenario. Shotgun's eyes narrowed and he folded his arms over his chest, but he didn't shout curses at them. He sucked on his teeth and scowled as he looked away, then back at the two of them. Lauren's hand trembled as she brushed the hair out of her face, and his attention snapped to her fingers.

“You've gotta be shitting me.” Shotgun rolled his eyes as he gestured at Finn's left hand, busy holding hers but still visible. “Fucking married? Jesus Tap-dancing Christ, you're the lamest fucker...”

Finn didn't even release her hand as he drew his right arm back and punched the other man so hard he fell backward like in the cartoons, landing with a thump on the ground. She stared, clapping both hands over her mouth, and whipped around to look at Finn. “You're going to get arrested.”

“No, I'm not,” he said under his breath. He picked Shotgun up by the front of his shirt, setting the other man on his feet and growling some kind of warning so low Lauren couldn't hear. Whatever he said, it left Shotgun pale and apparently not caring about the blood gushing from his nose.

Another dude showed up out of nowhere, walking aggressively like he was going to make a big deal out of it, and Lauren braced for the rest of the day to go to hell. At least she had the lawyer's phone number in the fancy smart phone Finn got her, to call him back to help. He would be able to get there quickly, and apparently Kira and Ethan were having lunch in a cafe nearby, so she could call for their help too, and...

She blinked as Finn said cheerfully, “Go fuck yourself, buddy,” as the new guy helped Shotgun stand up on his own.

Shotgun blew his nose into a handkerchief, leaving a bloody gross mess, and focused on Finn through watery eyes. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

The chain around his neck had slipped from under his shirt, the pendant visible as the sunlight caught it. Lauren’s cheeks burned. Just because she’d made the joke, Finn went all in. But that didn’t mean he’d want anyone else to know what it meant. She wouldn’t take it personally.

“LTB,” Finn said calmly. He even held up the pendant shaped like a bear paw so the other man got a good look.

“What the fuck does that stand for?” The new man didn’t seem even half as friendly as Shotgun, which wasn’t that much to start with. “Loser Tripping Balls?”

“Clever,” Finn said. “But no.”

“My initials,” she blurted out, so at least he wouldn’t have to lie. “Lauren Tucker Bordelon.”

It worked out better than she thought at first.

Shotgun made a fake gagging noise, although it could have been genuine as he dealt with his bloody nose. Finn put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, saying calmly, “Also stands for Lauren’s Teddy Bear. Now fuck off, you jealous assholes.”

“You’re lucky I don’t put your stupid ass in jail,” Shotgun muttered, then turned and stormed off. His little buddy followed on his heels, although he paused long enough to flip them off over his shoulder.

Lauren leaned on Finn, hugging his arm to her chest. “You didn’t have to tell them.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” He glanced down at her, pulling out his phone. “Maybe Kira will bring us some cupcakes to celebrate before we head back to the Lodge.”

She’d also learned he had a hell of a sweet tooth, no matter what time of day it was or what kind of sweet was offered. He literally ate honey out of the jar if there was nothing else around. He texted something to Kira, then started to wander in the direction of where Ethan and Kira were. Lauren kept up without letting go of him, focusing more on not tripping instead of what she said. “Well, isn’t it embarrassing to admit what it actually stands for?”

He stopped in his tracks. “Embarrassing? Why the hell would I be embarrassed to be yours?”

Her face caught fire and she shrank back a little from instinct, even knowing his incredulity wasn’t anger. Lauren cleared her throat and shrugged, not brave enough to look him full in the face. “I don’t know.”

Finn made a rusty sound and caught her face, though he didn’t force her to look at him. “Babe, there is no part of me that would ever be embarrassed to be your teddy bear. I want the world to know.”

“Sure,” she said, not looking at him. Everyone said things like that, but they didn’t mean it. Not really.

He exhaled in a gust, his head tilted back like he was just exhausted , and she braced for more bad news. She loved him, she trusted him, but there was that little seed of doubt... It was too perfect. He was too perfect, everything was going too well. Something would ruin it. It hadn’t been Shotgun or her charges, like she’d feared, but that just meant she’d be disappointed and heartbroken when...

“ I am Lauren’s teddy bear ,” Finn bellowed, loudly enough she jumped back. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted even more. “I love this woman!

She's the best thing that ever happened to me!"

Lauren's whole face burned and she pulled on his arm, wanting to laugh and cry and hide her face when she noticed more than a few people glancing over. A couple smiled, a few shook their heads, but most ignored him. She almost couldn't talk with her heart in her throat. "You're being crazy, come on. Please..."

He turned and hugged her tight, lifting her off her feet. "Listen to me, Lauren. There is nothing in this world that could possibly ever— ever —make me embarrassed to be with you. You could turn into a worm and I would carry you around in my pocket and feed you...whatever worms eat. I would build you a house made of—dirt, I guess, and take care of you forever and tell everyone I met how psyched I am to have a worm as a girlfriend."

For once she couldn't process his logic. How would she turn into a worm? Her face was buried in his shoulder, so her voice came out kind of muffled. "Do people actually turn into worms? Is that possible?"

Finn paused, then said, "I don't think so."

He went silent as they both pondered, and Lauren started to think maybe they were meant for each other after all, if he didn't mind the wild random thoughts that popped up and distracted her.

"How sweet," someone said, laughing, and Lauren looked up to find Kira and Ethan there, carrying coffee and what looked like a pastry box. Ethan rolled his eyes as he sipped his drink, but Kira smiled and handed over another travel cup. "I take it everything went well? No teddy bears were harmed in the course of your court date?"

"Nope," Finn said. He focused on the box instead of the extra drink, and jerked his chin in its direction. "What did you guys get?"

Ethan snorted. “Almond croissants, mille feuille , danishes, couple of other things. Not a single one is for you. All for Lauren, to celebrate her well-deserved freedom.”

Lauren still didn’t know how she’d gotten so lucky to fall in with not just Finn but everyone around him. Despite some of the other guys being a little loud and scary, and the matriarch Zoe being the fierce kind of mama bear that normally made Lauren quake in her tennis shoes, everyone at the Lodge had been warm and welcoming. So welcoming she’d been terrified of putting a foot wrong and ruining everything for her and for Finn.

Ethan kept giving Finn a hard time, holding the pastries out of reach like some kind of jerky older brother, and Finn kept jumping to try and get it like a jerky kid brother, and Kira gave up and linked her arm through Lauren’s. They walked toward the big truck that would carry them a couple hours back to the Lodge, then Finn would no doubt want to do all the things he’d whispered would be good to celebrate both her name change and getting the charges dismissed.

Lauren Tucker Bordelon. She didn’t mind leaving plain old Lauren Tucker in the past. She deserved happiness and a supportive man and a safe home and everything she hadn’t had as a kid. Lauren’s vision blurred as she listened to Finn holler about how Ethan better hand over a fucking croissant right now and she couldn’t help but smile. Even with him turning into a bear and having a shady past, she thanked the universe every day their paths crossed in the forest.

She smiled as the two men got close to actually wrestling, and Finn muttered something about going to the goddamn bakery himself and getting three boxes of sweets. Lauren’s Teddy Bear. The heirloom ring still felt strange on her finger, but grew more and more right every day. He was her teddy bear forever and ever.

She’d gone into the woods looking for Bigfoot and found a teddy bear. Life worked in such mysterious ways. She made a mental note to suggest another Bigfoot expedition with Finn once the weather warmed up. They could fix up the old cabin,

since apparently Simon had bought it and she just never knew, and cuddle up in front of the fire without anyone interrupting them. Even better.

Lauren laughed and rescued the pastry box as the guys wrestled on the way into the truck, and she got ready to chow down in the back seat whether Finn got any treats or not. She didn't know what to do with herself now that her charges were dropped, but the future was wide open. She couldn't wait to see what came next.

Thanks for reading!