



Curves for the Mountain Man (Whispered Echoes #5)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Worlds collide, hearts ignite, and a rescue fraught with peril forces a wounded, ex-military, mountain man to envision a life beyond his reclusive existence...

I have nothing to give the irresistibly curvy woman who crosses my path and invades my heart and soul.

I'm a shell of a man...

Racked by PTSD and debilitating injuries that run far deeper than the scars visible on my body.

It's why I retreated into the woods in the first place...to spare those around me the pain of my broken existence.

But the deliciously sensual, surprisingly innocent teacher I rescue from a violent fate has other plans...plans that include lessons about love and forgiveness that I'll never forget. The question is: Can I put these lessons into practice to keep the woman who's stolen my heart before it's too late?

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Chapter

One

GINGER

C lick.

A car door opens. My heart slams against my ribs.

One imperative throbs through my brain, one obsession steels my focus...

Survive.

Last night and today blur together. So do life and death. Only before and after remain, fracturing the timeline of my life...

Before a clammy, large hand gripped my mouth, stifling my screams as I frantically awoke from sleep. Before a violent male arm locked around my waist, yanking me, kicking and screaming from my bed, silencing the few cries I managed with a smack of duct tape. Before I stared into the inky, evil eyes of a masked assailant as he hauled me by my long hair through the house, glancing at the lifeless bodies of my two roommates on the kitchen's ancient linoleum.

Before my sight disappeared beneath an opaque blindfold, and the intruder bound my hands and feet in the back of a vehicle, hog-tying me so that I can't sit up. I envision myself in the trunk of an SUV or similar vehicle, though this is only a guess.

The trunk latch closed, and “after” began... The interminable drive as I counted the seconds, hoping for some indication of how far we traveled. After, with ears straining and senses honed for any clue, any hint at our final destination. After the car stopped moving, the engine cut, and the door opened.

How long have I been missing? Why am I still alive?

Hours ago, I quit fixating on the most obvious question: Why me?

What did I do to deserve this? Ginger Harper—the good girl, the rule follower, the virgin, the goody two-shoes. The one who focused on her studies and her career and doing everything right ... by the book and with superstitious precision, mistakenly assuming it guaranteed a safe, vanilla future.

If I knew then what I know now, how brutally short my life would be, I’d have done things radically different. Taken chances. Fallen in love. Gotten my heart broken a time or two. Bent rules and lived brazenly on my own terms instead of the world’s.

Because all of the rule-following, all of the cautious decision-making, all of the doing things by the book ... coloring inside the lines have still culminated in this present horror.

I stopped feeling my hands a while ago, the rope digging into my wrists and cutting off the blood supply, so they got grainy and fell asleep. I would give anything—maybe even my soul—to move them again. Or to have even one drop of water on my tongue.

One drop.

A luxury beyond imagining.

I would cry if I had tears left. Instead, I pray for mercy, the kind that brings swift death.

Minutes pass. I hear vague noises. The rustling of fabric. Heavy footfalls. Heavier breathing. Metal hitting metal.

The wind blows in great gusts outside, and the car shudders. A winter storm warning is predicted for this evening. I made a point yesterday to get extra groceries, some candles in case the lights went out, hot cocoa, and a few logs for the fire. I even added new romances to my Kindle, fully ready to enjoy the blizzard...

The blood roars through my veins, my pulse fluttering, and I feel lightheaded. I remember a white-crowned sparrow my childhood cat, Macy, caught. It trembled and died between her paws from a heart attack long before the calico sunk her teeth into its fragile neck. "Please, God, show me mercy. Let me die of fright."

The trunk latch sounds, and I hear whistling. "Yellow" by Coldplay. Skin, bones... The lyrics wash over me, terror rushing behind them.

The kidnapper tugs on the bindings around my ankles, his clammy hands grazing over my flesh. I grimace, registering every movement with startling clarity as time crawls to a stop.

He frees the bindings around my wrists, and I tentatively move my arms, deep aches shooting through the fronts of both shoulder joints.

The blindfold flies away, and I squint in the harsh light of early afternoon that pierces the shrouded forest canopy. My eyes narrow on his maskless face—revulsion, anger, and terror twisting me.

Asher Scofield.

A mass of thick hazelnut curls crown his head, and his black eyes scrutinize me, oozing frigid superiority. His thick eyebrows form an unkempt unibrow, and his cheeks bear days worth of stubble. An acquaintance of my roommates, we attended the University of New Brunswick together before my graduation last year.

Asher always creeped me out. He told sick stories, stories that made me wonder if the biology grad student perceived fellow humans as individuals or test subjects. He spoke cruelly of animals, nauseating me on several occasions with depraved jokes about experiments he ran. His presence raised the hairs on the back of my neck and twisted my stomach. I did everything in my power to avoid him.

But as the wealthy, well-connected son of one of our senators, knowing him came with certain perks and access to a societal rung my roommates, Crystal and Tiff, thirsted for. I don't care about stuff like that, determined to make my own way and control my own destiny. Crystal and Tiff thought differently...

"Here, I've known you all this time, and still, I have to ask: Do you like hiking?" He laughs. "Duct tape's got your tongue. My bad." With one merciless tear, he rips the adhesive from my face. I wonder how much of my cheeks and lips he took. But when I lick them, I only taste a little blood and register a slight sting. "Well?" He repeats in mocking tones, "Are you a fan of hiking?"

I raise my chin defiantly, refusing to answer him. He probably wants me to beg. But I refuse to play his games. Fuck him!

Whack! His hand collides with my face, knocking me back into the trunk of a Jeep. I can tell by how the trunk door swings out and the telltale boxiness of the windows as I lie back dazed.

"I asked you a question, you fucking bitch!"

My cheek burns, and my head spins as I regard his menacing face, fury and fright tussling internally for dominance. What a coward! Preying on women in the dead of night. Asher sneers, and dejectedly, I realize I can't spit at him. Dehydration has robbed me of excess saliva.

“Answer my fucking question!”

“Why Crystal and Tiff?” I whimper, barely able to produce audible sound due to dry vocal cords.

He laughs darkly, running his hand through his hair. “They were useful idiots. It's you I've been after this whole time.”

Asher examines me as he delivers the words, a clinical voyeurism marking his features. I strain to keep my face stony and my words few, robbing the sadistic man of his delight in my suffering.

But as things escalate, how long will I be able to maintain the facade of composure?

Disappointment or maybe curiosity flashes across his glacial expression. “Get your fat ass out of the car. Time to hike.”

Just one drop of water. Something to put spit back in my mouth .

I stumble forward on legs stiff from inactivity, scanning my surroundings wildly for locational clues or anything that might help me escape and survive.

In all directions, a verdant, menacing forest greets me. It stretches into infinity, mocking the hope flickering inside. We're deep in the Idaho backcountry. Or maybe the forests of Eastern Washington. It's not nearly misty enough for a Western coastal location. Even if I could escape this madman, my chances of wilderness survival look

bleak, especially in a freak April blizzard.

My feet are bare except for the fluffy pale pink socks I wore to bed. Every stone, every stick, dry pine needles, and pinecones stab into my tender soles as we move at the frenetic pace of his long strides.

I search out potential landmarks, noting broken tree branches, large boulders, streams, a river, mountains, and the slant of the light. Anything that might help me survive or find my way back ... if I can escape.

But escape to where? His Jeep? It's my only anchor to civilization. I have to try. Nothing left to lose.

Flurries and flutters of snow descend, and the sky darkens ominously. Our march takes on the quality of a funeral dirge, accompanied by my ragged breathing. On and on, we trudge.

I strain to capture snowflakes in my mouth, ravenous for a drop of water. They dance near my face and lips, evading me like hope. But I manage to gobble a few, savoring their fleeting moisture on my tongue.

My kidnapper stops abruptly. I dig my heels into the pine needles on the forest floor to avoid slamming into him. Narrowing his eyes, he observes the sky, rubbing his hand over his chin. "This weather's the last thing we need. It'll spoil all the fun."

My throat fills with bile as menacing clouds engulf us, treading the thin line from stratus to fog as they sink. Fun . The word pounds panic through my veins.

Ahhhhhhhh! A deep, male scream pierces the quiet of the woods, echoing through the valley, his words distant and unintelligible. My heart thrills as my captor turns on his heels, stalking toward me. I try to swallow, wet my mouth enough to respond. But

only a squeak emerges as Asher slams his soft, clammy hand over my face. His other arm encircles me, pinning me against him.

I fight to break his steel-band grip as he listens intently to the still forest. I could almost second-guess myself, believe I didn't hear the scream at all, except for the rapt attention Asher gives it.

Minutes pass in tense silence. Finally, my kidnapper hisses against my ear, "One sound. One noise, and you're dead."

"I'm already dead," I spit, glaring at the coward. He raises his hand to backhand me but hesitates.

A jolt of hope runs the length of my spine. Perhaps the male voice we heard is already protecting me, restraining Asher with fear I'll make a sound loud enough to get his attention. After an interminable pause, he loosens his hold on me, and I struggle to swallow the bile rising in my throat.

"Hurry up!" he orders, blazing ahead on the game trail.

As each step takes us further from the scream, my mind spirals. I slacken my pace despite repeated threats, hoping a sliver of distance will help me sprint from Asher toward the scream. Or a cliff or the muffled rush of water I hear to the right of us. All are better than my current trajectory.

Fatigue, thirst, and hunger lodge in every cell of my body. Dragging my feet, I upset nearby bushes and break twigs, leaving a trail.

But who will follow it and when? The man who screamed? Search and rescue officials once my missing status becomes official? Law enforcement with cadaver dogs many months from now?

When I judge the distance from my captor the greatest I can exploit, I swallow hard, having collected as much spit in my mouth as possible with the help of the bigger, faster-falling snowflakes the storm now blows in. Gusts of frigid wind whip my long, loose hair around my shoulders and face, and my cheeks burn from the cold.

I sprint from the game trail we follow, letting out the most bloodcurdling scream I can manage. My weak legs carry me into thick, nearly impassable underbrush.

Barreling towards the sound of rushing water and the man's voice, I'm unsure of my course in the cover of the emerald-hued woods, guided solely by one imperative...

Survive .

Behind me, a gunshot pierces the air, weakening my knees as I stumble forward, desperately begging the forest to swallow me.

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Chapter

Two

ROSCOE

C lick.

My heart races at the sound of the empty chamber.

Lucky bastard.

I scrub my face with my hand, leaning back against the rough tree bark of the massive lodgepole pine I sit under. On the march to the tree, I emptied my revolver, five bullets falling consecutively into the thick brush of the forest floor as I walked, heedless of their final destination. Spinning the cylinder and locking it into place without looking, I took my seat, commencing the grim game of Russian Roulette.

One click...

And my hands tremble. A single tear slides down my cheek. Everything would be so much easier if I hadn't lived.

If I hadn't been the lone survivor...

Today marks the sixth anniversary of the roadside bombing and ambush that killed my comrades and left me with more than forty percent of my body severely burned. I

spent months in the hospital for skin grafts, ruminating over how fate fucked us.

Lone survivor...

Those words come with a heaviness I can't carry, a weight I haven't been able to bear since returning home from overseas deployment after endless months in hospitals getting pieced back together.

I can't tell anyone what actually happened to my squad. Not even my comrades' wives because they don't have the clearance for that. And they don't really want to know.

I should get this over with. Be done for good, but some part of me clings to hope and finding meaning in my life. My poor mother's words fill my head, "Time heals all wounds." She's getting older these days, looking for the comfort of family close to care for her. Fortunately, she has my three younger sisters.

"God, why have you done this to me?" I scream into the void.

Silence greets me. The kind of fucking silence that makes my brain grind out what needs to happen.

The lone survivor needs to not survive...

And yet, I sit with my back pressed in the rough bark of the tree, unmoving like a fucking coward ... unable to act, incapable of getting my mind off the action I should take. Two hot rivers deluge my cheeks, escaping from the permanent fissures in my soul.

The men I served with had families. They had every reason to live. Unlike me. I've made a shitty mess of my post-deployment existence, hiding from the world in

Northern Idaho's wildest woods. My only companions are grizzlies and bull moose that do everything except what the fuck they should do when they cross my path—finish me off.

“What do you want from me, God? Why keep me here in this unending torture?” I shake my head, fully aware of how insane I sound, ranting to the wind. But I have no one else to talk to. I've made it that way to protect those I love most from the pain I cause. Monumental amounts of pain because I can't move on. What happened in the AOR haunts every inch of my existence. Ironically, the most healed part of me is my IED-scarred and savaged back and legs.

But even that's not a part of the official narrative because we weren't where we were “supposed” to be, carrying out orders never “officially” given. The blood and guts and sacrifice were as fucking official as it gets, though ... from the smell of burning flesh to the death rattle in my comrades' throats and their glassy-eyed stares.

At least I lived long enough and made enough proper financial decisions to provide for the immediate families of the eight comrades in my squad. I've done so for the past four years, supplementing the death benefits they receive with additional funds to make their existences more livable. I have arrangements in my will for continued support as long as the lucky investments fueling them hold out.

Long after I'm gone...

My eyes fixate on the ATV I drove, headed in the most remote, isolated direction I know until it ran out of gas. The only trace of humanity is an old forest service road that's been in disuse for years.

I wipe the back of my hand over my wet cheeks, remembering photos of the flag-draped line of my comrades' coffins. I should have attended their funerals. Instead, I lay face down in a hospital bed, enduring excruciating surgeries and unraveling

mentally.

Hours pass, and early afternoon sets in. I haven't moved an inch since my first and only piss-poor attempt. Maybe I don't want to off myself after all. But I don't know what to live for, either. A frigid April breeze blasts my face, announcing a coming blizzard.

Screaming at the sky, I challenge, "If you want me to live so badly, give me a fucking reason!"

I swallow loudly, simultaneously waiting for something epic and fully convinced miracles and divine interventions don't happen to men like me.

"Fucking silence," I rant, shaking my head and looking at my shaking hands some more. "Fucking silence." I laugh into that silence, sounding like a madman.

Suddenly, a high-pitched cry, throbbing with urgency, shatters the atmosphere, arresting my attention ... too clear and distinct to deny. A female scream.

What the fuck?

Jumping to my feet, I crouch by the tree, straining my ears until I hear it again, louder and headed in my direction...a visceral howl of terror.

Boom! A gunshot shatters the fragile quiet of the woods, bouncing off large boulders and tree trunks and reflecting back in increasingly faint echoes. The crack of an AR-15. Without thinking, I flip the cylinder of my revolver open, index the sole bullet, close it, and cock my gun. As I retread my earlier path, my eyes rove toward the bushes where I scattered the remaining rounds, finding one, which I load. Another scream compels me forward, unwilling to waste another second.

As I approach silently, the soundscape tells a story of fright and desperation—heavy breathing, whimpers, cries, breaking twigs, and thudding footfalls. I have the advantage, stealthy in my approach. Behind the cover of trees, I scan the valley, spotting a curly-haired man dressed in black and carrying the AR-15. Well ahead of him, I spy shimmers of blonde hair in the threading strands of afternoon sunlight yet to be gobbled by dark storm clouds.

A woman sprints into the water, evading the man hunting her. Immediately, the current sweeps her off her feet, steamrolling her downriver. Unseasonably warm temperatures and snow melt prior to today's blizzard mean the river is swollen and deadly. If she can survive the initial ride and the frigid temperature, however, the extra water's cushion may save her in a tumble over the falls. After that, there's nothing but hell to pay...

The man raises his weapon as the current drags her under. Each time her head bobs up, enveloped in a swirl of whitewater, he struggles for a clean shot. His actions tell me everything I need to know about this lowlife.

I line him up in my sight, my finger tightens on the trigger, and my forearm flexes. But at the last second, he disappears behind a thicket of trees. And urgent, new priorities steer my course away from this game of cat and mouse.

The woman.

I race the river toward the falls, the golden-haired woman's final destination, relying on agility I've honed through years of freerunning and forest parkour. Her odds of surviving a drop over Breakneck Falls are forty-sixty, thanks to current water levels. She may get lucky. Either way, I'll be there when she bubbles back to the surface.

Fighting to catch my breath and surveying the angry water in the pool beneath the chutes, I wait, taut for action. Suddenly, a golden head bobs above the swirl,

accompanied by skin as white as the snow falling around me.

Seizing a large branch, I skim the surface of the water, giving her something to hold onto. Weak from fighting the river and the intense cold of the water, she struggles against the twisting currents. I'm tempted to follow her into the rapids.

But I must maintain my body temperature to warm her up if this rescue proves successful. Her body slams into the branch as she twists and twirls in the torrent, her arms tangling with the lifeline. She flutters, like laundry on the line, caught in the ferocity of a tornado, as I pull the branch towards me.

"Don't let go!" I scream, inching her closer and closer until I seize slick, icy fingers and a handful of wet clothing, heaving against the current. But her grasp has no strength, and the mossy, slippery rock I balance on denies me grip and stability. Pulling her towards me, I lose my balance, dragged into the swirl of ferocious white. Heart-stopping cold greets me, numbing my limbs and making my lungs strain for air. I fight to keep my mouth above water as she slides back into the river's chaos.

Motherfucker!

Gripping her around her shoulders, I struggle against the current siphoning us towards the rapids of the pool. Each stroke and kick drags us back further, the maelstrom greedy for two victims.

Digging deep, I surge forward with a great burst of energy, kicking us free. Edging out of the current, I navigate towards calmer waters, but the respite remains fleeting. She gasps and chokes as I fight toward the riverbank.

Suddenly, the water hastens. Is this struggle all in vain? The thought crests in my mind as we slam sickeningly against a large, root-encrusted boulder. My legs tangle in roots beneath the water's surface, the current racing so fast that I could end up with

broken legs if I'm not careful.

Leveraging my legs and summoning brute force, I shove the woman halfway up onto the boulder above us. She feebly grasps at the slippery surface, her strength waning. From the waist down, she remains precariously caught in the torrential water.

Resolve slams into me hard. This woman will survive...no matter what it fucking takes. I dig deep, summoning intestinal fortitude.

"Don't let go!" I command between chattering teeth and fast-paced breathing.

Her eyes look wide and wild, the direness of the moment etched in them. One wrong move, one misplaced grip, and we'll both be swept to our deaths. Because I refuse to live without saving her.

Her arms tremble, her grip weak. She's past chattering teeth, her body sinking into hypothermia. Tangling my legs more tightly in the roots, I grunt, shoving her ass up onto the rocks where she lies on her belly, quivering and sputtering.

I will myself out of the water onto the rock next to her, our faces two inches apart. I register with dull horror her glassy, unblinking stare, ivory skin, and powder-blue lips. But the faint warmth of her breath hits my icy cheek. There's still hope.

Adrenaline floods me as I drag myself to my knees, grabbing the woman and hoisting her over my shoulder with a loud grunt. She chokes and struggles, a great gulp of cold water escaping her lungs. Summoning the Ranger's relentless drive to survive, I rise to my feet.

This woman must live. Fortunately, I know these woods thoroughly. I've scouted the falls countless times. Balancing over boulders and between tangled brush, I climb towards a clandestine cave behind the water. I found it a few years ago, likely the

only human—perhaps apart from Native Americans—aware of it.

The powerful curtains of the cascade engulf us to the right, the air cool and breezy nearest its edge, as I squint my way into the tall, wide, cavern. Our only illumination is the muted sunlight threading through the translucence of the water. I retreat as far back as we can, away from the dampness of the falls, hunching as the ceiling drops towards the inner wall. Piles of white deer bones glow in one corner. A large predator hunkers down here—likely a mountain lion. I prop the woman seated against a boulder, straining to catch my breath.

Pushing her forward, I slap her back hard a couple of times to stimulate her lungs. The rough handling brings her forward onto her hands, spluttering and hacking to clear her lungs.

“Cough it all out,” I order.

She complies, her whole body trembling until she sits back against the boulder, her head lolling to the side.

The ambient temperature of the cave warms me after the river’s icy depths. In the shimmering sunlight penetrating the cascades, I note her symmetrical, oval face, generous, pale lips, and big, innocent eyes framed by thick, long lashes and well-kept, light brown eyebrows.

“We’ve got to get you out of your wet clothes.” She raises her hands, making the motions, but her fingers don’t work. So, I unceremoniously strip off her sopping black sweatshirt, matching jogging pants, and socks, leaning her back against the boulder in a lacy pale pink camisole and matching panties.

Her eyes widen, horror glazing over as I efficiently undress to my boxer briefs, my teeth chattering. Without hesitation, I sit cross-legged, pulling her into my arms to

straddle my lap. I don't know any better way to deliver my heat to her while simultaneously shielding her body from the cave's stone-cold floor.

"Fuck!" Her icy skin freezes my warming flesh as I press her curvy frame firmly against mine. My mind races. She's so fucking cold. I could end up hypothermic, too.

Survival mode kicks in, and I develop a game plan as the howling wind announces the blizzard, blowing in fast and hard. At least, it should buy us a reprieve from pursuit by the man with the rifle. Relief washes over me as her teeth begin to chatter again, and she shivers uncontrollably in my arms, great tremors gripping her.

I whisper comforting words in her ear to calm her, rocking her in my arms until she relaxes, snuggling tightly against me. My heart leaps into my throat as I nuzzle against her neck, smelling faint traces of a floral scent. Lilacs and roses.

My grandparents had a towering bush next to their rose garden that exploded in purple blooms every spring. I had completely forgotten the memory until this moment. Nostalgia codifies what I feel with this woman in my lap, my arms jealously encircling her. The sense I've come home. What the fuck does it mean?

"You're safe with me," I murmur next to her ear.

She jerkily nods, threading her fingers into my hair and beard and resting her cheek against my chest as her breathing slows. My heart expands at the weak gesture despite internal remonstrances not to feel what I'm feeling for this woman.

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Chapter

Three

GINGER

Circulation returns to my fingers and toes as I warm, pressed firmly against my rescuer. Images flash through my head, and I grip the man fiercely, my heart thudding in my ears and my temples. “Please,” I whisper, digging my nails into his shoulders and neck. “Please don’t leave me.”

“Shh,” he murmurs, holding me firmly in his thick, muscular arms with my breasts pressed tightly to his hard core. I straddle him, drawing warmth from his chest, stomach, and crotch. It’s a dangerously intimate position ... one I can’t imagine being in with a total stranger. Yet, I cling to him mindlessly, drawing every degree I can from his angular, muscular frame, my teeth violently chattering as I rest my chin on his shoulder.

He smells masculine and foresty, his burnished gold beard and untamed long hair smoldering in the beams of sunlight that pierce the waterfall. He’s an angel. He’s perfection with piercing blue eyes that burn into my soul as his body restores my life.

“Try not to move too much. You’ve got to take it easy on your cardiovascular system.” He scolds.

“C-c-cardiovascular system?” Are you a d-d-doctor?” I stammer.

He grunts, looking away. I interpret the sound as a “no” and his body language as dismissive. In a heartbeat, the man transforms from an angel to a grump. But I clutch him anyway, siphoning healing warmth from his core.

The longer we sit and the warmer I get, the less I care about anything. Exhaustion overwhelms me in waves as I nod off, jerking my head up each time it falls towards his chest.

“Quit fighting it,” he grumbles.

“Fighting what?”

“Sleep. You need it.”

Damn, my angel’s bossy...

I awaken with a start, disoriented and frantic. My head bobbing around before my eyes meet my rescuer’s, and I remember everything. Panic seizes my chest as I breathe hard, my hands gripping his shoulders and back. They must’ve drifted there as I slept. In silent shock, I register the thick, lumpy scars beneath my palms and fingers.

He stiffens, and I whisper, “What happened?”

“Work-related injury,” he growls. “Your teeth aren’t chattering anymore. Are you warm enough for me to get us squared away for the night?”

The cave has darkened, sunlight growing thinner as it weaves through the cascades.

The night? We have to stay here?

I tense in his arms. Anger, sorrow, guilt, shame, panic, pain, helplessness, hopelessness ... everything I've felt washing over me in punishing waves. My breathing hastens like I'm hyperventilating. Clinging to his neck, I gasp, "Please don't leave me." My heart is a hummingbird, quivering in my chest.

"Have to," he says sternly. "We need a fire and dry clothes."

"This has to be a nightmare. I have to wake up. Please help me wake up."

"Hey," he croons, his voice softening as his eyes regard me more attentively. "Talk me through what's going on."

"I don't know," I pant, letting out an involuntary whimper, tears pouring down my face as I strain to answer. "My heart won't stop pounding. I feel like it's going to explode." I sob against his soft, furry, blond chest. His hands go from impersonally palming me to stroking my back and shoulders comfortingly. His voice croons as he speaks in low tones, like the ASMR videos I listen to when I need to destress or sleep.

"You're safe with me. I won't let anything happen to you," he whispers. "Tell me your name."

"Ginger."

"I'm Roscoe."

"Roscoe." My voice trembles, his name a lifeline.

"How old are you?" he asks, regarding me somberly.

"Twenty-three. And you?"

“Thirty-five.” Older, stronger, wilderness-ready. He’s the answer to my desperate prayers.

His hands roam into my hair, stroking my locks and massaging my scalp down to my neck as he rests his forehead on mine. “Breathe with me,” he coaches in reassuring tones, demonstrating a long inhale and exhale, his mouth inches from mine. “Breathe, Ginger.”

I nod slightly, my whole body trembling as I try to follow suit. But my diaphragm won’t cooperate. Fear possesses my body down to the individual cells, driving panic. “Why is this happening to me?”

“Shh...” he encourages. “Don’t worry about any of that. There’s no cave, there’s no forest. There’s no you or me. There’s just the breath. Breathe with me.”

I struggle to match his inhales and exhales, my mind racing and spinning as the events of the day rage inside. So many images of horror, so many moments of distilled anguish. My heart skitters rebelliously, sprinting mercilessly behind my ribs.

“Breathe, Ginger,” he commands more firmly, massaging my neck and shoulders. His touch grows more insistent as it pushes panic to the edges of my body, where it floats away.

I focus on my respiration and the feel of his fingers dancing over my naked flesh and digging into my straining muscles. His hands move up, clasping the back of my neck as his fingers tackle the throbbing, aching muscles that join my skull to my spine.

“Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Five...” He counts to ten, his eyes closing and encouraging me to do the same. “Exhale. One. Two. Three. Four...” He talks me through it methodically and calmly as though he’s done this a thousand times.

My hands gravitate towards his beard. I don't know why, but there's something soothing about the tactile experience of running my fingers through the surprisingly silky, damp facial hair. He swallows hard, whispering gentle words of comfort as his fingertips graze up and down my arms, trailing the goosebumps lining my flesh and centering my body again. My muscles release, the flight and fight dissipating, as he cradles me firmly in his robust arms.

"Better?" he asks quietly.

"How did you know to do that?" I ask, warmth flooding my core as I stare into his impossibly blue eyes.

"PTSD," he says quietly. "It's what would help me... I think."

"You don't know?" My eyes round.

He shrugs. "I'm a bit of a loner." Despondency pours from the sentence. "Like right now," he clears his throat, making a sudden effort to sound more upbeat. "The way you're playing with my beard feels nice. Relaxing."

"It relaxes you, too?" I ask, guilty at how I've used this stranger's body for survival, warmth, and comfort since the first moment we met without one thought for his feelings or needs.

He nods. "It makes my mind quit wandering. Ties me to the present."

Understanding sparks in my eyes. He gets it. He gets me. "Roscoe, I don't know how to thank you. I don't even know how to begin." My voice quivers.

"Shh... You don't have to, Ginger," he reassures, stroking my cheek softly. "I'm glad you feel better."

I scrutinize his rugged, square-cut face, tanned, chiseled physique, and mane of thick hair. He's an untamed version of Charlie Hunnam ... fucking gorgeous. My roommates would jump this man's bones in a heartbeat.

They're dead, Ginger...

My stomach lurches.

As if somehow reading my mind, he asks, "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I pause, uncertain of what I feel or how to answer his question. I squeak, "But don't you have to get firewood?"

"I do," he says, glancing past me at the waterfall. "But I need to make sure you're okay first."

I shake my head. "My roommates..."

He nods, urging me on.

"I saw them dead on the kitchen floor as Asher dragged me from the house." Memories wash over me, the adrenaline rush of my escape giving way to pure, hellish horror. "He told me Crystal and Tiff were useful idiots ... to get to me. But why?"

"Is Asher who took you?" He runs his fingertips comfortingly up and down the sides of my neck and shoulders, his whisper-soft touch trailing tiny sparks across my flesh. The gesture keeps me aware enough of the present to avoid slipping too deeply into memories.

I nod. "Asher Scofield. A biology grad student at the University of New Brunswick with me, Crystal, and Tiff."

“Crystal and Tiff were your roommates?”

“Yes, and he was their friend, not mine. I avoided him as much as possible, but they said I was too judgmental. They liked partying with him because of who he knew.”

“And who was that?”

“Rich people. The upper crust. He’s the son of a senator.”

Roscoe gives me his complete focus as if memorizing every word I say, every breath I take, and the expressions I make. It’s wonderfully intense, anchoring me to him and making me feel heard for the first time in my life.

“How did you end up in the Jeep with him?”

My voice quakes. “Crystal and Tiff went out partying last night. I remember they came home around one in the morning, so loud, they woke me. I heard male voices, too, although I didn’t recognize Asher’s. I fell back asleep. A little while later...” I pause, trying to keep my composure. “I...uh...I awoke to a hand over my mouth...”

Anger flashes across the man’s face ... deadly and dangerous as he scrutinizes me. His jaw tenses, the muscles jumping beneath his thick beard, his far-too-kissable lips pressing into a firm line. His hand comes up, palming my cheek with a feather-light touch. “And what happened here?”

My mind swirls, and it takes me a moment to remember. “He backhanded me in the Jeep because I refused to answer him.”

Roscoe’s eyes narrow, and his face tightens. “Did he hurt you in any other ways?”

I shake my head, and he exhales slowly.

I can hear his teeth grinding together as he says in a deadly calm whisper, “He will never touch you again.” The words have a finality to them I don’t question. Maybe it should trouble me, but it doesn’t.

Taking a shallow breath, I tell Roscoe more, describing how Asher duct-taped and bound me and the drive in the Jeep. I tell him about my thoughts as we traveled and the fears that raged inside as we hiked. And I tell him about the unadulterated hope that blossomed with his scream, distant but present in the woods. He listens calmly, nodding empathetically and absorbing my experiences as I absorb his heat.

In dark tones, he promises, “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe and get you home.”

I believe him with every cell in my body, down to the marrow of my bones. My hands slide over his scarred back again, needing to know and feel this man, though I can’t explain why. I guess I need a hero... Instead of tensing at my touch this time, he patiently lets me explore the topography of pain carved into him, eyeing my blank face curiously.

“You’re not afraid of my scars,” he observes flatly.

“Afraid of them? No, they’re a part of who you are. What you’ve been through.”

He nods, a strange look in his eyes. “Most people don’t want to go near them. They don’t want a reminder of the unpleasant, ugly parts of life.”

“Is that why, do you think?” I ask, our eyes searing into each other. “I think they don’t want to be confronted with the sacrifices that have been made on their behalf.”

“You may be right, but not in my case. I don’t know who the fuck I made this sacrifice for, to be honest. Not good people, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story I’m not at liberty to tell. Suffice it to say, at the intersection of power, politics, and money, the unspeakable can happen.”

Questions race through my head. “Did this happen in the military? Or doing something else?”

“Black ops. Military contracting. Where things go from black and white to the murkiest gray.”

“I understand,” I say, pursing my lips.

“If anybody else on the face of this Earth said that to me, apart from someone I served with, I’d know they were bullshitting me. But clearly, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” I say quietly. “My dad’s involved in stuff like that. His favorite saying is, ‘That’s on a need-to-know basis, and you don’t need to know.’”

He nods.

Our eyes lock, and time stands still.

Suddenly, Roscoe rasps, “I better get on building that fire. Are you okay now?”

My insides quiver, but I take a deep, cleansing breath, remembering how he calmed me. “Yes, thank you.”

He nods, grim determination written in his eyes.

“Can I help?” I ask, trying not to sound clingy but desperate to stay near him.

“I need you to stay warm, Ginger. I’ll be back before you know it. Remember to use the breathing that I showed you if you need it.”

I nod, trying to smile as he exits the cave. I wrap my arms around my shins, resting my chest on my knees to conserve body heat. Despite my best efforts, fluttering thoughts invade my mind.

What if my rescuer doesn’t come back? Or he gets hurt, lost, or killed?

Improbable imaginings flood my chest and stomach with black dread. My pulse accelerates, leaving me light-headed. My survival is tied to a virtual stranger...

After a moment’s panic, I breathe deeply, soaking in the gratitude of my rescue. Mere hours ago, death was my only hope. Now, I have Roscoe.

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Chapter

Four

ROSCOE

My head spins, and my heart races as I work against time to give Ginger the best chance of survival. We have a decent shelter against the blizzard dropping fat snowflakes. But we need a fire to stay warm and ward off whatever uses this spot as a den.

The need in Ginger's eyes animates me, transforming me from a man ready to end it all to one hellbent on survival. It's the strangest shift in consciousness I've ever experienced. But knowing there's another living, breathing human depending on me changes everything.

The cold bites my naked skin and damp boxers as I gather boughs to lay on the ground for a bed and more to pile on top of us. It takes several trips, struggling against the snowy squall, as I leave everything near the hidden passageway to the cave so that I can minimize the back and forth in case anybody's watching.

I don't sense anyone or anything, a heartening sign. Thanks to special forces training and hunting, I've honed the ability to feel the energy of those watching me, whether animal or human. I rely on this skill now to reassure myself that we've slipped the kidnapper's noose. Besides, he'd have to be crazy to continue searching in this weather.

More than thoughts of the perp, however, my mind gravitates to Ginger. The forced intimacy of our meeting means I already know her with four of my five senses. The sight of her makes my breath catch in my throat, and my chest aches with an acute yearning I haven't felt in years. And never so strong.

The feel of her, from her impossibly soft skin to her silky hair, has my insides tied in knots. Her soft, seductive voice ... the faint smell of lilacs and roses still lingering at the pulse point of her neck. It's all too much. The only thing I haven't indulged in is her taste. Fuck, my cock firms at the realization.

I don't want to be attracted to her, but she sets my blood on fire. Though I continuously remind myself these thoughts are inappropriate under the circumstances, I can't deny the chemistry shuttling back and forth between us.

Or the sense that somehow, on some other plane, we've done this before. Imbuing the intimacy of the cave with the sense we've returned to a state we once inhabited together rather than a new experience. It makes no sense. It sounds woo-woo as shit. But I can't deny the nudge of my soul.

However, I can deny my right to touch her any further. She's a woman who needs to get home, not get caught up with a rootless wild man like me. I have nothing to give her. I'm a shell of my former self, wracked by PTSD and thoughts of self-harm.

I gather kindling and logs for a fire, working hard to banish the curvy woman from my mind. I fail miserably. Instead, I focus on all the reasons I have to stop feeling what I feel.

Unlike me, she's young and innocent. She's got the whole world at her feet, the potential of life laid out before her. She isn't jaded or damaged by fate. If I have any say in the matter, for the brief time I'm with her, I aim to keep her that way. Which includes shielding her from me.

Hauling branches and kindling warms me, and I wonder with a pang of yearning how she fares in the cave. I could keep her warm, safe, and secure, snuggled against my core. But once the fire starts, there's no need for that.

"You will not touch her again," I grumble to myself. After all, I may be a lonely mountain man who can't remember the last time I was with a woman. But I'm no fucking caveman. Despite the monologue, however, my rebellious heart races as I enter the cave, straining to make out the delectable curvy woman's form in the obscurity of twilight.

"Thank God, you're back!" she whimpers. For a moment, she looks torn. Like she's about to cover the distance between us. But I frown, shaking my head. Instead, she continues hugging her shins and resting her chin on her knees.

"Can I help?" she squeaks.

"I've got this. Focus on staying warm."

I remove the paracord fire starter necklace I wear, relieved that my compulsion for survival continues to outweigh the depression that brought me to sheer hopelessness earlier. Pulling the ferro rod back, I scrape the ceramic striker against it, sending a spark into a nest of kindling that I gently lift in my hands, blowing the glowing seed into blazing life.

Ginger's eyes blossom with admiration, and my heart swells. Dammit, Roscoe, stop this. But fighting the emotions she stirs in me is impossible. Only making them worse, like struggling in quicksand.

Once the fire roars, I lay our clothes out on rocks nearby, where they can soak up the heat and dry. I find a rock with a large concave and set it near the fire ring, retrieving new-fallen snow from the mouth of the cave and piling it high on the rock.

After the first pile melts, the blonde beauty drinks insatiably, sopping up the water from the rock with a delight that makes my insides feel warm and melty. The sight of her curvy, underwear-clad body hunched over the rock is too much, and I look away, ashamed at the way my cock responds to her ample hips and round ass.

Keep it together, Roscoe. Keep it together.

I retrieve more and more snow until she's drunk her fill, and I take her spot, face-down, lapping at the rock. When I glance over my shoulder, I catch her staring at my ass. The sexy blonde doesn't know what she's playing with ... every moment with her becomes increasingly unhinged like the rope of my self-will is fraying and unraveling thread by thread.

I can't do this anymore. Her juicy body, our close proximity, years of denying myself female company. It's all too fucking much. So, I do the only thing I can.

I sit as far away from her as possible while still enjoying waves of heat from the fire. My hair is damp and falls down my back in thick curtains, cooling my neck and shoulders. I lean back against a boulder, closing my eyes and trying to sleep ... before resigning myself to pretend to sleep.

What a fucking coward!

I squeeze my eyes firmly together, determined to keep all future interactions to a minimum. What else can I do? The last thing I need is to get tangled up with another human being when I can barely stand my own company.

A rhythmic chattering arrests my attention. My ears strain towards it. Opening my eyes, I see Ginger still locked in the fetal position on top of the bed of tree boughs, her whole body trembling. Shame grips me.

I thought the warmth of the fire would be enough, but the woman's body strains to regulate itself. I don't know why this should surprise me after all she's endured. I touch her black jogging pants next to me, willing them to be dry.

Not even close.

She glances over her shoulder at me, her skin paper-white, her lips sky-blue. Every part of me longs to hold her, infuse her with more of my warmth. That experience was entirely too intimate, though. It's still fucking with my head, and I fear what a return to that closeness will do. One more look at her goose-bumped skin and shuddering shoulders, however, and my resolve founders.

Frowning, I move toward the fire, crossing my legs and impatiently motioning the gorgeous, curvy girl, clad only in her camisole and panties, back into my lap. The look of relief that washes over her face incriminates me for not acting sooner. Without hesitation, she sits sideways, and I silently thank her for the reprieve. I don't know what I'd do if she straddled me again. No, I know exactly what I'd do. That's the problem.

"You're cold as ice," I scold, enveloping her in my arms. "Why didn't you say anything?"

She snuggles against my chest, stammering, "I didn't w-w-want to b-b-bother you."

I wrap my arms around her more tightly, pressing my palms against her shoulder and side where they fall. She needs to stay close to me tonight. There's no getting around it. And she needs to eat something. Get calories back into her body to help regulate her temperature.

But I have nothing with me, thanks to my macabre plan for the day. Motherfucker! I'll never forgive myself for what this woman's enduring because of my intentional

lack of preparedness.

I rifle through my Carhartt jacket drying nearby, a sudden memory gripping me. Sure enough, in the main right pocket, I find a small leather satchel of homemade elk pemmican from a hunting trip last year. It's soaked through but will do. I pull it out, handing her the small sack with the unappetizing-looking brown mound.

The woman has city girl written all over her, yet she takes a small fingerful, sliding it hesitantly between her lips.

I stroke her arm, my stomach growling as I watch her attempt to satisfy herself with the humble morsel. She only eats half, a tablespoon or so of the meal. I wonder if she saves the rest for me or finds it unpalatable. I can't blame her. Pemmican's an acquired taste.

Stroking her cheek, I ask, "You mentioned the University of New Brunswick earlier. Is New Brunswick where you live?"

She nods, letting her fingertips dance lightly over my pecs. My body awakens at her touch, incinerating flames igniting at every point of contact. I barely know this woman, yet my arms feel like the only place she belongs.

"I graduated from the university last year."

"With a degree in what?"

"Elementary education."

I nod.

"How about you?"

“Former Army Ranger turned wounded warrior turned forest bum.”

Silence settles between us. I stare into the flickering, hypnotic flames of the fire. Realization grips me the longer I hold this woman, savoring her flesh warm and soften as she cuddles against my core. I’m lonely as hell. Beyond lonely, and I have been for years. I need a woman... I need this woman.

I steal a glance at the curvy blonde in my arms, feeling restraint fray, hanging by a handful of threads. The way she looks at me, how she snuggles into me ... all of it has my heart and mind working overtime.

But something’s been bothering me since we met. I can’t take it any longer, asking, “Ginger, you barely know me. How can you be so trusting with me? So sure I won’t hurt you?”

She shrugs, letting her fingers absentmindedly caress my upper arm and shoulder. My initial reaction is to pull away morosely, scolding her for the affectionate action. But the longer I let the delicious feel of her soft fingertips go, the more she gentles me, like a wild horse she’s taming. Keep this up, and instead of allowing her touch, I’ll thirst for it. Maybe I already do.

“Because you’re a good man. Everything about you attests to that,” she says, licking her lower lip and staring at me with her large, expressive gray-blue eyes. They’re clear and pristine as fresh snow-melt in an alpine lake, and they pierce me through and through. “You’re my hero.”

Hero? It’s been a long time since someone called me that. The term fills me with remorse.

“There are no such things as heroes,” I growl. My thoughts flicker to my comrades, and I amend the statement. “At least not above ground.”

“You’re a hero to me,” she says firmly. “No one will convince me otherwise. Not even you.” Ginger’s face relaxes, and she leans up, kissing my cheek.

I startle at the unexpected gesture, asking in grumpy tones, “Why’d you do that?”

Her eyes widen, and she swallows hard, her cheeks flushing. Her doe eyes darken, and she whimpers slightly, the pulse fluttering in her neck. “I don’t know. I wanted to. Was that okay?”

I shrug. “Probably not.”

“Probably not? Do you have a girlfriend or something?”

I eye her quizzically. “Do I look like I have a girlfriend?”

“You look like you could.”

“Do I?” I ask, shaking my head, ticked at the heat I feel on my cheeks. The woman’s got me acting as bashful as a school kid. I don’t get it.

“Girlfriends need more than isolated cabins and headcases.”

“Headcases? What does that mean?”

“PTSD. Depression. Suicidal thoughts. Lone survivor guilt. Those are just a few of the diagnoses shrinks have given me. Honestly, I’ve lost count.”

“Because of your work-related injury?”

I forgot I called it that earlier. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the truth, either. At least not in the way that civilians need me to explain it to them.

Staring at the fire, I confess, “I have to be honest with you. I’m a broken man, Ginger. Today was my last day on Earth. Self-decided. That scream you heard came amid an unsuccessful game of Russian Roulette.”

She scrutinizes my face, empathy flooding hers. “Russian Roulette means you weren’t sure... That you were challenging fate to step in and intervene?”

I shake my head. I haven’t thought about it like that. Instinctively, I pull her more tightly into my arms, saying, “God spared me because I needed to save you.”

She strokes my cheek, and it feels good. I should stop her, act gruff, and push her away. But I can’t help myself. I hunger for her touch.

Tears fill her eyes. “I don’t know what you’ve been through or what brought you to that place. But please promise me you’ll never hurt yourself. This world needs more men like you.” Sincerity swirls in her eyes, and I know she believes everything she says.

I shrug. “It’s hard. So fucking hard,” I confess in raw tones, straining to keep it together. “Today marks the six-year anniversary of being the lone survivor. And it’s the worst fucking feeling because I had to carry my comrades’ memories and final words home. I still have to carry the anguish of their sacrifice. The scars on my body don’t even come close to the scars on my soul.”

Tears roll down her cheeks, and I feel ashamed for inciting them. My hands come up hesitantly, palming her cheeks and using my thumbs to wipe the wet trails away.

Her steel-blue eyes capture mine, overflowing with innocent expectation before dropping to my lips. She wants me to kiss her. It’s awkwardly obvious. But I don’t because she deserves better, even if she refuses to realize it.

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Chapter

Five

ROSCOE

“Tell me about yourself. I want to know everything,” I command.

“About me?” Her bubblegum pink tongue darts out, wetting her lips and setting my heart ablaze. God, I’d give anything to know how she tastes. Everything about her is so sweet and tantalizing, the ultimate torture. “There’s not much to tell. I’m a school teacher.”

“What grade?”

“First.”

I nod.

“Although I graduated last year, I still live near campus...” Her voice cracks, and she breathes hard for a moment. “I just don’t get it. Why Crystal and Tiff? They didn’t do anything to deserve this. They were sweet, happy people. And I spent my whole life following the rules, being the good girl, coloring in the lines, and doing everything right to have a nice, boring, safe life. Why did something so awful happen to us?”

“That’s the thing about bad stuff. What makes it so unjust. It happens to the wrong people. Often, the people least deserving of it. Like the members of my squad. They

were good men with wives and girlfriends and families to come home to. They were honorable men, fierce in the thick of battle, loyal to the last man, disciplined. And while I was all those things, too, I also had plenty of hell-raiser in me. I was reckless, with no one praying for me except my parents. And yet...”

“And yet?”

“I’m the one who lived, and my brothers all died. Eight Rangers.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers, more tears streaking her flushed cheeks. Her fingers thread into my beard, stroking it gently as she touches her lips to mine. The move comes completely off-guard, filling me with a soul-deep yearning.

“Eat your food,” I rasp, looking away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I register the sting of rejection on her face. It pains me, but she has to know we can never happen.

“You need your strength,” I urge.

She hungrily eyes the pemmican in the leather satchel next to us, shaking her head.

“It’s for you,” I insist. “I’m used to going days without grub, but I need you to keep up your strength.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, stroking my cheek. “You’re my hero, so I need you ready to kick ass.”

“Always.”

She takes the bite, and my ravenous stomach lurches, watching her chew. I make an

internal promise that one way or another, we will eat tomorrow. Whether it's edible berries that have somehow managed to winter over, fish from one of the streams, or small game. I won't let this woman go hungry.

What Ginger doesn't know is that I fucked everything up when it came to this moment. If I hadn't given up all hope, I would have a stocked and fueled ATV ready to take us back to my cabin, and I'd have a fully loaded Glock 19, my M4A1 Carbine and XM7 rifles, and my compound bow in case any unlucky game or a certain kidnapper crossed our path. As it stands, my lack of preparedness may not seal our fate, but it sure as hell makes everything painstakingly difficult.

"You're upset. What's wrong?" she asks without even looking at me. I have the strange impression she can read my energy or maybe my mind.

"There's more I have to tell you."

"Okay." She raises her chin, eyeing me as if she's ready to take whatever ugly truth I have to tell defiantly.

"Because I was being a fucking pussy today and almost ended myself, I don't have half the shit I normally would to protect you. I ran my ATV out of gas, determined to make this my last day on Earth, and I didn't bring appropriate provisions or clothes like I usually do. I fucked up, and you're suffering for it."

Her expression freezes as my words settle into her soul. Finally, she says breathlessly, her voice tinged with awe, "So, you're telling me the only reason you ended up where we found each other is because you ran out of gas?"

I nod.

Awe throbs in her voice. "There's no way any of this was a coincidence. You're

going to have me believing in God if you keep this up.”

I wasn’t expecting this reaction or how it makes my heart feel, like the walls I’ve built around it are crumbling. I furrow my brows, observing darkly, “You should be mad at me for my willful lack of preparation.”

The blonde shakes her head, snuggling against my chest. The feel of her flesh on mine...her tiny movements to draw closer are sheer torture. I want her so badly. I’m surprised my heart isn’t beating out the rhythm of her name. Maybe it is.

“As far as I can tell, you’ve spent your whole life preparing for this. You’re a million times more prepared than I could ever be. You’re my miracle, Roscoe. What’s your last name, by the way?” she asks with a little giggle at the end.

“Why the laugh?” I ask in a steely voice.

“Because we’re so close like this, and yet there are so many basic things we don’t know about each other.”

I know more than I need to. Like I want to keep her, claim her as mine. My eyes dig into her, my voice raw. “Vaughn. Roscoe Vaughn. And yours?”

“Harper.”

The cave falls silent apart from the crackling of the fire. Ginger’s fingertips dance over my chest, incinerating the flesh and stoking my yearning. But I’m damaged goods, and she deserves the kind of life I could never give her. Besides, this bubble of intimacy between us has to be an anomaly, something that could never happen in any other place or time. Right?

I have to distract myself. My fucking cock’s beside itself with need, something I’m

afraid she feels firsthand, my rod pressed increasingly hard against her hip. She can't ignore it forever, can she?

Clearing my throat, I say, "Blue."

"Blue, what?"

"My favorite color."

"Me, too. Specifically steel blue, like the Atlantic on a stormy day," she answers.

"Like your eyes."

She nods, smiling more broadly. "You don't miss any details, do you, Roscoe?"

"Eye color is more than a detail. It's the outer vestiges of a person's soul."

"For a mountain man of few words, that was rather poetic," she says, cocking her head to the side.

I shrug, returning to our game, "November 18th."

"So, you're a Scorpio?"

"I guess. I never really paid attention to that stuff. What do you know about the sign?" I grasp at straws, trying desperately to deny the lust coursing through my veins.

"Scorpios are intense and mysterious, compelling and loyal, and easily made jealous. They hold grudges like no other, and..."

“And?”

“They’re supposed to be kind of kinky in the bedroom and very good lovers.” Her silky smooth voice sends throbbing pulses of longing through me.

For fuck’s sake! I’m supposed to be getting my mind off sex, not making it the topic of conversation. Nevertheless, I shrug, none of what she says sounding too far off. “When’s your birthday, Ginger?”

“April 10th.”

“So, that makes you a...?”

“An Aries.”

“Tell me about that sign,” I command, running my hand through my hair. I’ve never been interested in astrology, but the more I learn about Ginger, the more I need to know.

“Aries are supposed to be adventurous and confident, passionate and impulsive. But that’s not me...”

“Because you’ve been too busy doing things right ... trying to follow the rules?”

“Yes, because Aries can also be controlling and perfectionistic...even to themselves.”

“That must be exhausting, fighting against your true nature all the time.”

She nods against my chest. “It has been, and I’m done with it. Playing the good girl has gotten me nowhere. When I was in the Jeep, I had so much time to think about all my regrets. All the things I’ve never experienced. It came with such clarity of

thought, such obvious realizations about the lie I've led my whole life. I don't want to be the nice girl anymore. The sweet, obedient one who never causes any trouble, never rocks the boat. I want to be adventurous and bold and do daring things. Lead a messy life rather than a safe one."

"You're off to a damn good start," I chuckle, wrapping myself more tightly around her. I bite the inside of my cheek, weighing my next words carefully. "You have a fire in your eyes that I catch glimpses of every now and again. It's the wild woman inside you. Maybe you should try letting her out."

Her eyes flicker to mine, and I see it again. It could undo my best-laid plans to keep Ginger at arm's length. But fuck is it mesmerizing.

"Like right now," I rasp, pushing a stray hair off her face. "I see it sparking in your eyes, threatening to incinerate everything in this cave."

"Does it scare you?" she asks breathlessly.

"No, I like playing with fire."

The corners of her mouth turn up, and her nostrils flare. Her eyes drop to my lips again, almost begging me to claim her. Fuck! I'm at my wit's end.

Clearing my throat, I look away, asking, "So, what do you think triggered you to choose the good girl over the wild woman in the first place?"

"Well, for starters, the wild woman's definitely not society-friendly..."

"Fuck society," I grumble with a shrug of my shoulders. "Does the most sophisticated, dynamic city in the world really hold a candle to the forests surrounding us?"

“No,” she says, licking her bottom lip. “But cities don’t scare me like forests, either.”

“The forest scares you because you’re not used to it. But you could adjust, learn the ways of nature, learn your place in it.” Why the fuck am I trying to talk her into liking it?

“I’m not afraid with you here. But if I were alone... God, I can’t even imagine it.”

“The woods alone are no fun,” I concede, feeling the words to the depths of my soul.

“Then, why are you out here all alone?”

“Because I got tired of hurting the people around me.”

“How, Roscoe?”

“By not being able to move on...”

“So, you chose to hurt yourself instead?”

“Acceptable damage,” I say darkly, staring at the fire.

Ginger strokes my beard, making me look at her. “No, it isn’t.”

She’s got me feeling too many fucking things all at once. I can’t take anymore. I need a break from her, from this delicious, terrifying intimacy, half ready to remove her from my lap and storm out into the chill of the blizzard. But my body rebels, refusing my mind’s commands. Desperately, I ask, “What about your home life?” I have to steer our conversation into safer waters.

“My parents divorced when I was eleven. I never saw it coming. In fact, I laughed

when they told me, thinking it was a joke. But laughter turned to tears when I saw Dad's packed suitcases. He never lived with us again, and in many ways, I felt abandoned by him. Especially after he remarried. Like he ran headlong away from trouble, leaving me mired in it. One thought plagued me after that. The thought that if I'd tried harder and been a better girl, my parents would have stayed together. So, I became a perfectionist. Getting straight As, following the rules, and doing everything right. It never reunited my family, but I guess it became a habit, providing a false sense of security against the uncertainties of life ... until the kidnapping."

I can't help myself. Leaning forward, I kiss Ginger's cheek, and her face glows with surprise. Her juicy lips part in a radiant smile, and I fight the urge to taste her mouth, drawn to the fire inside this woman even more than the flames warming the cave.

"My parents are divorced, too. Only it happened younger for me, a little before my seventh birthday. I was happy to see the bastard—I mean my dad—leave. Mom remarried my stepfather, Steve, and then proceeded to replace me with three younger sisters. Looking back as an adult, I see where I fucked up, too. I treated Steve like a total asshole, but he made me feel tolerated rather than loved. Maybe that's why I gravitated towards the service or being the hero, as you put it. I needed to prove my worth to my parents and Steve. Prove it to the world. But my comrades' death taught me that despite all the fucking heroics in the world, bad shit happens to good people."

Ginger's dainty hand clasps mine, intertwining our fingers. I swallow hard, feeling my whole body ache. "Your heroism changed everything for me," she observes quietly.

My willpower's in imminent danger of evaporating. So, I steer hard towards distraction through conversation. The only way to get my body back under control. "What else do I need to know about Aries?"

I can't help myself. My fingertips slide back and forth over her dainty ones, savoring

the feel of her small hand in mine, where it belongs.

“Umm,” she pauses. “We’re stubborn, and we’re supposed to be the best kissers in the Zodiac.” Her cheeks burn as she eyes me timidly.

Before I can catch myself, I exclaim darkly, “The best ones? Huh.”

Ginger’s eyes dance with seductive energy as I bring my hand up, palming her cheek and savoring its soft warmth with the thumb I stroke over it.

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice trembling, her cheeks glowing.

I can’t take anymore. I need one taste. Just enough to satisfy me for the rest of my life. My head leans towards her, our mouths a hair’s breadth apart as she parts her juicy pink lips.

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Chapter

Six

GINGER

Roscoe pauses, his lips tantalizingly close to mine, his baby blues washing over my face. The air thickens with anticipation, a primal pulse inhabiting the space between us. A sigh parts my lips, and his eyes tick to my mouth, darkening into two depthless pools.

With an anguished groan, he claims my mouth, all semblance of self-control evaporating in the ferocious heat of his demand. Tremors shudder through me, as if the planet has stopped spinning, and time unwound to a standstill. I slip my fingers from his, clinging frenziedly to his neck, every ounce of pent-up yearning animating me. My lips sting, pressing so tightly against his that I draw blood as we tread the line between passion and pain.

A deep, resonant growl rumbles in his chest, and his hands thread into my hair, locking me against him. His hot, velvety tongue swipes into my mouth, sending shivers of want shuttling up and down my spine to the juncture at the top of my legs. I feel a new tightness there, a great aching throb.

His kiss feels desperate, like his scream in the abyss of the afternoon woods. Our teeth clank together as our heads fight for the right angle. Our hands roam frantically over each other's bare flesh, breath rising in impetuous pants. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, biting it and dragging it with him for one tantalizing second.

Ferocious, devouring need consumes me. I chase his lips, and he claims me raucously in return.

Tremors of pleasure run the length of my spine. My pulse pounds cacophonously against my ribs. Animalistic, unthinking, I dissolve into unadulterated appetite.

His beard tickles my cheeks, and his long hair sweeps over my shoulders, veiling me in a world of ravenous intimacy. His stroke deepens, urgent and rhythmic, an unbridled call to deeper, darker pleasures. I'm a live wire, sparking and igniting at every point his flesh touches.

Roscoe's head drops to my neck with a rough grunt, the hard thrill of his teeth against the vulnerable flesh of my throat, ripping a hedonistic moan from my lips. Everything about him is feral, untamed. It fans a primal need in me that no man has ever exposed—voracious and insatiable.

His hands slide the length of my back, pressing my flesh hard, massaging and squeezing me down to my hips, intensifying the ache tearing me apart from the inside out with each caress. Unrepentantly, I twist in his lap, straddling him and feeling the long, hard length of his cock against my inner thigh with satisfaction. No, wicked anticipation.

His rough hands tighten jealously, his fingers digging into my flesh as he drags my pussy over his lap demandingly, drawing shudders of ecstasy from me as his shaft digs into my moist panties. I arch my hips, grinding back and forth over his boxers, stoking his passion and awakening longing I didn't know lay dormant in my soul.

Roscoe brings his free hand to the top of my camisole, ravenously tugging it down to my waist as I wiggle my arms free of the spaghetti straps. His eyes blacken, staring at my ample tits. For the first time in my life, I appreciate my plump figure as lust sparks and flames in his eyes.

Dropping his head, he ravages my breast, swirling the areola with his tongue as my nipple hardens, begging for more. I arch back in surrender as he flicks and plays with my tits, alternating sucking and teasing them into aroused peaks. My hips buck, beseeching him for more.

The breath hisses between his teeth as he bites my nipple, wresting a shocked whimper from me as his hand pinches and plays roughly with the other, alternating nibbling and sucking me. Uncontrollable moans and cries fly from my lips. Mindless words ... begging him not to stop, entreating him for more, pleading for the mountain man to possess me in savage, reckless ways.

His hands delve greedily beneath the waistband of my lacy panties, grabbing my ass cheeks and pressing my pussy tightly against his massive arousal. I amaze at its transformation from the first kiss to now as my pussy throbs, thoroughly drenched.

A throaty groan escapes Roscoe's lips, and he rests his mouth against the pulse point of my neck, panting, "I need you so much, Ginger. You have to stop me."

"No," I whisper, running my fingers through his hair. "Please, don't stop ever."

"Fuck," he grimaces. "But I can't be what you deserve. Everything I touch, I hurt or lose. I can't risk that with you. I can't ... ruin you."

I palm his cheeks, forcing him to look at me. Overwhelming lust pulses between us. Thick tension impregnates the air, making it impossible to breathe. I need everything about this man—the strength, warmth, and safety he embodies.

This Ranger chose to run toward pain and ugliness to save me. Unlike my father, who abandoned me in so many ways after my parents' divorce ... and every other man who disappointed me after that. I need Roscoe, my savior and angel, with every ounce of my being—the man who makes me feel everything all at once.

“You can’t ruin or hurt me, Roscoe. I won’t allow it.” What a lie! The words tumble out of my mouth, spurred by soul-deep craving. “Please. Don’t. Stop.”

His right hand slides inside my panties, his fingers gliding through my drenched folds. I moan, my head falling back as my hips strain toward his seeking fingers. The cave quiets, our fast-paced breathing and the crackling of the fire the only sounds. “You need me, Sweetness. You’re fucking drenched.”

Sweetness. He’s never called me this before, and I love it. My breath catches in my throat as his skilled fingers explore my folds, teasing the top of my mound. Dousing his fingers in my slick arousal, he circles my clit with his thumb, robbing the breath from my lungs.

“Yes, Roscoe. Please,” I pant, my eyes rolling back in my head. So much has happened in less than twenty-four hours. So many dramatic emotions have gripped me. I need to feel alive after being so certain I would die. I need to feel loved and cherished and as wild as the forest caching us. I need this man to invade and claim.

“I’m clean,” he growls, gripping my hip with his free hand.

“Me, too,” I gasp, my heart slamming against my ribs. I’ve never wanted a man so much in my entire life. I feel like I’m walking through a dream, unable to process anything apart from passion of the blackest and most powerful stripe.

“Goddamn, I need you so much. Beyond all reason,” he declares, lifting my hips so that I hover over him, straddling him on my knees as he tugs off his boxer briefs and recrosses his legs. My throat thickens, my heart pounding out my demand. I exhale sharply at the sight of his rock-hard erection. Without hesitation, he grabs my hip with one hand, using his thumb to recklessly push my panties to the side as he runs the tip of his cock through my wet folds, lightly penetrating me. I exhale sharply, shocked by the unaccustomed pressure and stretch.

His eyes flash to mine. “Wait. You’ve done this before, right?”

“Shh,” I urge, past words and reason. Biting my bottom lip, I use gravity to sheath his rod in one brash, downward thrust, the slickness of my pussy seating him completely inside me. I’m still semi-numb from the cold, which deadens some of the pain. But an acute sting stutters my inhale, and fat tears spring to my eyes. I bury my head against his neck, trembling and silently screaming out anguish as my fingernails dig into his muscular, scarred back.

He grimaces, a deep growl rumbling through his chest. “Dammit, Ginger,” he curses, shaking his head and pausing as if he’s weighing his options. “Fuck.”

“Please don’t stop,” I gasp, trying not to sob.

He growls again, low and quiet like a warning. Silence fills the cave, and my heart breaks, tears flooding my cheeks. I can’t meet his gaze, certain I’ve lost him with the move meant to keep him. I swallow hard, shivering in his lap.

“Please don’t stop,” I rasp again, regret seizing me.

Snagging his finger under my chin, he forces me to look at him. A battle between anger and tenderness rages in his face. The corners of his mouth point down. “Why did you do that?”

I shake my head, horrified by my impulsive action. “Because I can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

He takes a few deep breaths, his whole body taut as fear washes over me. Is he about to reject me? Will he hate me for what I’ve done?

After an interminable silence so tense my chest shudders and struggles to breathe, he

runs his hands into my hair, gently massaging my scalp with his fingertips and pressing his forehead to mine with his eyes closed. I immediately relax in his arms, finding my home in the waves of comforting energy flowing from him.

So many acts of compassion have marked my time with Roscoe, but this one wrecks me in the most beautiful way.

Tears pour over my bottom lashes as he urges my head gently toward his, licking the salt from my cheeks before covering my lips with his. Unlike everything we've done so far, animalistic and primal, his lips explore mine tenderly, his tongue sliding gently between my parted lips to kiss me like a lover.

My heart stops in my chest as warm waves of affection wash over me, his mouth moving over mine sensually and slowly like I'm his everything. It cements what I already know in my soul. That I love him, well past logic or moderation, in a reckless, impulsive, hellbent fashion. I don't know how else to do it with him.

His hands caress my flesh, leaving goose-bump trails as a newfound sweetness transforms his movements. It feels like lovemaking, not fucking, his breath warming my cheek.

He showers my face in kisses, inviting me, "Hold onto my neck, Sweetness, and ride me at your own pace. Use my body to make yourself feel good. Take what you need from me. There's nothing I won't give you." He murmurs the last sentence gruffly, his voice tender but controlled.

"I'm sorry," I sob, staring into his cerulean eyes.

Anger and shame vanish as he whispers, feathering my face with his impossibly soft, kissable lips, "People do crazy stuff when they've been through what we've been through ... when they feel what we feel."

Feel what we feel? I part my lips to ask what he means, but before I can, his tongue slides into my mouth again, toppling my ability to communicate or think as he swirls and sweeps me into bliss. I tremble in his arms, heating from the inside out, enveloped in an intimacy so powerful and intense that Roscoe no longer feels like an entity separate from me. His heart is open in ways I've never felt before, his body radiating connection.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he sighs, his voice awe-filled and trembling, his eyes peering so deeply into mine that I feel like our souls weave together. He pushes a stray hair off my face, palming my cheeks and gently wiping the tears from my eyes as I move over him tentatively, my body hesitant after the initial penetration. “Put your hand on my heart,” he commands. “I want you to feel my soul.”

With my palm pressed to his rock-hard chest, I roll my hips over his cock to the boom of his heartbeat. Everything else dies away. Nothing exists except for us, a searing union born of pain and death, desperation and hope, and the refusal to give up even when life looks impossible.

His breathing increases as my confidence grows, and I slide up and down his shaft, experimenting with the angle and depth, my heart fluttering in my chest. He closes his eyes, his face flooded with pleasure. Deep groans of approval resonate from his chest. His heartbeat urges my hips faster, and their thrusts deeper, booming powerfully and resonantly beneath my palm as I take more and more of him, falling in love with his thick, powerful rod. My pussy tightens, so slick I'm certain I'll drench his balls.

“Fuck, yes,” he whispers in reverent tones. “The way you ride me ... the way you grip my cock is every-fucking-thing.”

Our eyes lock, a soul-deep connection palpably forged. I long to put it in words, confess my love for him. Yet, as I stare raptly into his eyes, his soul tells me things

no language could express.

His body tenses as my gushing channel flutters and grips him more tightly, and our fast-paced pants dominate the cave. Suddenly, pressing his big, rough hand over mine where it rests on his chest, he says, “I need you to let me lead now, Ginger. Do you trust me to do that?”

“Yes,” I answer breathily, so in love with him, I can’t utter another word.

“I want to show you how good you make me feel. How good you ride my cock. I want to make you come.”

“So, I’m doing okay?”

Rubbing my cheek, he says so softly I strain to hear him, “Everything you do, everything you are is fucking perfection.”

His hands slide up my back, gripping my shoulders as he changes the angle of his penetration, hitting the bundle of nerves near the front of my pussy that always gets me off when I masturbate. The thrust of his head over my G-spot sends me floating, enveloped in blissful clouds of desire. My unrestrained moans fill the cave.

His breath comes in frantic gulps, and his flesh dampens with beads of sweat as he spits on his thumb, sinking his hand between our bodies and finding my clit. He circles it expertly, the pressure and speed melting me from the inside out as I scream against his shoulder, riding thick waves of pleasure.

“Come for me, Sweetness.”

The cave fills with the musky scents and harried sounds of rutting—fast-paced breaths, naughty wet noises, and flesh smacking flesh, as Roscoe claims me

wantonly. My body flies upward, absorbed in overwrought ecstasy, and I climax hard, trembling and riding his cock as I launch his name lustily into the towering silence of the forest.

He pounds me with his thick rod before burying his head in my hair and sinking his teeth roughly into my shoulder to muffle his scream. Thrusting his hips upwards, he floods my pussy with warm waves of cum as he bruises my hips with his grip. I love the dizzy mixture of desperation and devotion, marked by my mountain man in the most primitive ways.

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Chapter

Seven

GINGER

“Well?” Roscoe asks dazedly as our breathing slows. “Are you ready to punch me yet?”

I laugh, feeling the angry spot on my shoulder where he bit me. “I’m not bleeding, but you are.” My eyes round as I look at the fingertips I raise from his clawed back, guilt seizing me.

“It’s all good, Sweetness,” he intones. “I want you to leave your mark on me. Besides, I made a mess of your pussy.”

I exhale sharply, staring at the cave floor until he commands, “Look at me, Sweetness. We need to talk about what happened.”

Worrying my bottom lip, my eyes meet his.

His face twitches, too many emotions washing over his expression for me to read. His voice comes out like a desperate sigh, throbbing and raw, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew it would make you stop, and I didn’t want you to. I needed this experience with you in a way I can’t explain. Like I’m trying to capture a piece of you to keep with me forever.”

He rubs his hand over his face, sighing loudly. “I would have stopped,” he confesses throatily. “How badly did it hurt?” His voice caresses me, tender and soulful.

I shake my head. “I’m fine,” I answer, only half lying. I still straddle him, the pressure from the stretch of his thick cock numbing my pussy.

“I’m guessing you weren’t on birth control?” he asks, an odd edge to his voice. He clenches his jaw, making his beard twitch.

My cheeks flush as I shake my head. His face grows unreadable and impenetrable. “I’m sorry. I should have been more forthright. But the way you make me feel... My brain quits working, and need takes over.”

“Are you ready to pay for this for the next eighteen years?”

“I would pay for it with the rest of my life,” my voice squeaks.

He growls on an exhale. “You’re too good for me. Too fucking good, but I don’t know...”

“Don’t know what?”

“How the fuck I’ll let you go when the time comes.” His eyes redden, and he looks away, swallowing hard.

“Must you?” I stroke his cheek, my voice trembling.

“The only thing I must do is start over with you. Do things right,” he says, quickly swiping the back of his hand over his cheeks before setting his gaze on me. His lashes are moist, his eyes swirling with a depth of emotion I wish I could unravel. “I need another chance to make you feel good, Ginger. To show you what it’s supposed to be

like between a man and a woman.”

My heart hammers in my chest, my eyes rounding quizzically. “Okay,” I sigh, anticipation lighting up my nerves.

“Let me get you cleaned up, and then we’ll try this again properly. If you still trust me after that botched-up fucking.”

“Botched up?” My bottom lip trembles. “I loved it. It made me feel so many things I’ve never felt before.”

“Pain shouldn’t be one of them.” He frowns, motioning for me to stand.

My cheeks burn. “Don’t look because there could be blood. I don’t want to gross you out.”

The big Ranger shakes his head, nuzzling my neck and massaging my hips with his big hands. “You could never gross me out.”

“But—”

“It’s not possible.”

I run my hands through his long hair, unceasingly fascinated by his flowing locks and soft beard. In this environment, surrounded by everything uncivilized and untamed, he’s gloriously wild, breathtakingly feral.

“Let me do this right for you,” he growls seductively, urging me to stand and follow behind him as he threads his fingers with mine. “Please.”

I nod, desire and curiosity twisting in my mind.

Stripped down to our souls, he cleans me gently with icy water from the falls and then scrubs his chest and cock briskly. A thick knot forms in my throat as I watch the droplets slide down his chiseled pecs and well-defined abs, anticipation building in my chest with the thrum of my heart.

Guiding me back to the bed of boughs, hands-held, fingers-entwined, he encourages me to lie down, his eyes sliding over my naked body as I recline. He follows, wrapping me in his warm, strong arms and pressing our bodies together. Lying flesh-to-flesh like this is deliciously sensual as his hands roam boundless over my body.

His lips cover mine, kissing me gently as my breath hastens. His hands stroke my cheeks and hair, and he makes out with me, our chests pressed together, our hearts happily slamming against each other.

“Damn, you are a good kisser, Aries,” he pants, finally pulling away to catch his breath with a lopsided grin.

My cheeks burn as I flirt, “The question is, are you Scorpio freaky?”

He chuckles, tweaking my nose playfully. “You have to judge for yourself. But I’d love to spend hours learning your body, every inch of it, and what makes you lose your mind. Get the right toys for you and find a million ways to get you off. Make it my li—” His eyes startle, and he amends his words. “Make it my mission to make your legs shake.”

“I want that,” I whimper, wishing he’d spoken his first impulse.

He smiles sadly, stroking my cheek. “Get comfortable,” he orders, moving towards my feet.

“What’s wrong?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing’s wrong, Sweetness. You’re just so fucking gorgeous. I can’t take my eyes off you. And you do fucked up shit to my heart.”

“Fucked up shit?”

“The best kind of fucked up shit,” he answers. “I’m a Ranger, Ginger, not a poet.”

I giggle as he strokes the outsides of my thighs, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “I’m going to eat you out until your pussy grinds into my face drowning me in your sugar-sweet honey.”

My breath catches in my throat.

Running his thumb over my clit again and pulling a deep groan from me, he says, “I like how you’re fully shaven.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, it’s so fucking pretty and pink. Like a flower,” he says, splaying my lips open with his forefinger and thumb as the breath hisses in my throat. “And the way your clit sticks out when I do this ... begging for me to suck it swollen. You turn me on so fucking hard.”

He laps my pearl to punctuate his statement, swirling his tongue around it greedily before sucking the nub gently into his mouth. I whimper, my hips straying towards his face, unable to string two words together. I thought what we did moments earlier was delectably carnal. But this move drives me mindless.

He chuckles. “You want that. Don’t you?”

“I want you, Roscoe, more than anything.” My eyes meet his, and I see tears

swimming above the rim of his lower lashes. He needs to hear these words, so I repeat their sentiment. "I want you, Roscoe, and I need you." My voice trembles at the end.

The corners of his mouth turn up, and he nods. "I need you, too. More than you could ever know."

Before I can say another word, his velvety tongue covers my clit, lapping at me. The pressure is unrepentant and unrelenting as he swirls his tongue, slurping my pearl into his mouth and flicking it between his teeth with his tongue. His unruly beard tickles my inner thighs, the perfect contrast to his riotous tongue.

Stars invade my head, and delectable shivers slide up and down my spine as I relax into his possessive touch. I press my palm against my lips, muffling the primal cries he draws from me.

A deep growl wells up from his chest as he continues stroking and teasing me.

"Yes, baby, that's what I need," I pant, trembling at his passionate touch. "Please make me yours."

He hesitates, and I kick myself for saying it like that. But instead of correcting me, repeating that he's not good enough, he slides his fingers gently through my dripping folds as his tongue explores and tastes me.

"If this hurts at all, or you don't like it, let me know," he murmurs.

Penetrating me, his thick finger finds the rough spot at the front of my pussy that always undoes me when I masturbate. "I will give you everything you need. Everything in my power to give," he promises. Is he talking about an orgasm or something else? The warm tenderness swimming in his eyes confuses and delights

me.

He strokes me slowly and skillfully, his mouth teasing and taking me to ecstatic new heights. He makes me feel like the most desirable woman in the world...and the best tasting.

“God, the way your body responds to me, Sweetness... There are no words. Like it’s already mine. Like it recognizes my touch.”

I stifle a cry of pleasure as his finger and tongue send me soaring higher and higher toward some kind of nirvana. I feel unhinged, torn apart by my need for him, frantic to mate with him again and again. To feel alive and whole and make him mine, but I don’t know how to make him love himself, which must come first.

“I fucking love this pussy,” he says worshipfully, lifting his head to stare at me, his face flooded with warmth and tenderness. Something is happening between us, something so sacred and primitive that it requires few words. But each one is heavy with implication and meaning. It’s as if our souls are somehow already touching and communing with each other.

Desperation grips me. How do I hold onto these emotions? How do I keep this rugged mountain man forever?

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Chapter

Eight

GINGER

“Give me your cock,” I command, out of my mind with lust.

“No, Ginger, this is all about you and your pleasure,” he replies, sinking his head into me with increased fervency.

“Please, Roscoe. I need to taste you, too. The thought of it has me so turned on, I feel like I could explode.”

I’ve only ever heard about sixty-nine from my friends. I don’t even know if I’ll be any good at it. But I can’t think of a position that better embodies the savage feelings welling up all at once for this man. And a deep-seated, indefatigable hope persists that if I can blow his mind, he’ll think twice about letting me go.

“Are you sure?” he grumbles in low, anticipatory tones.

“Yes, I need to taste you like you’re tasting me.”

“Fuck.” He hesitates.

I smile seductively. “Please.”

His eyes search mine until recognition lights in them. “There’s that fire in your eyes again. The fire that lets me know you’re a wild woman.”

“A wild woman. I like the ring of that.” I nod, smiling wickedly. “One who needs a wild man.”

“You’re in luck,” he murmurs in searing tones. “I want you on top so you can straddle my face and suffocate me with your juicy goodness.”

His words make my cheeks burn, and he chuckles at their glow. I sit up, changing places with him on the boughs. My eyes flicker around the room for a moment, my skin confused between goosebumps from the cave’s air and waves of heat pouring from the fire as his huge, erect rod betrays his desire. I sigh hungrily, devouring it with my eyes, trying to fathom how it will fit in my mouth, let alone how it did my pussy.

“Sit on my face, Sweetness.”

Although I’m the one who asked for sixty-nine, I never thought about it involving me sitting on his face. It sounds downright dangerous. And his talk of suffocating? “What if you can’t breathe?”

He laughs throatily, grinning from ear to ear. “That’s a helluva way to go.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I’m serious. My thighs are thicker than most girls.” Shame fills me at pointing this out, even though it’s obvious with me buck naked kneeling next to him, my upper legs spreading over my calves in ways I instantly regret.

He leans forward, wrapping his arms around my legs and showering them in kisses and swipes of his tongue. “Your thighs are fucking perfect. Delicious as fuck, although they’d taste better wrapped around my ears. Trust me.”

“Okay.” I sigh, crawling towards him on the boughs. His greedy eyes sear my flesh, and my pussy throbs with anticipation as I turn, straddling his face.

He grabs my hips roughly, squeezing them and drawing my pussy towards his mouth. “God, I love your hips, so curvy and delectable. And your pussy... Fuck, I could eat you out all night. Maybe I will.” He buries his tongue in my folds, penetrating my slick channel with his thick, wicked tongue. “I want you to fuck the hell out of my face, Ginger. I need you to grind into me and let me make you feel good.”

“Yes!” I whimper, breathing fast as my eyes wander down the tight washboard of his abs, alighting on the trail of coppery blond hair that starts below his navel, cutting a symmetrical line down the sexy inverted triangle of his Adonis Belt and swirling around his massive cock. His dick is thick, straight, and strong, with an angry vein running down the side.

Roscoe’s mouth hungrily devours my pussy as I lick and taste his cock for the first time, nearly coming undone by so many stimuli. A rumble booms from deep in his chest as my tongue circles his head, and I take the tip into my mouth, savoring its smooth heat.

I lap and lick it as he devours me with his fingers and mouth, making me slicker, wetter, and needier than I’ve ever been. Responding to the delectable ways he pleasures me, I suck his cock with enthusiasm, adoring every inch of it with my lips, tongue, and teasing glances of my teeth. I savor the way he growls and moans, vibrations teasing through his body and into mine as we both draw closer to finishing.

Growing more adventurous, I slide him deeper into my mouth, feeling his hips angle incrementally toward me as he groans against my clit, sending waves of rapture to my core. I suck and tease him with my tongue, falling in love with his rod until he rewards me with a few dribbles of pre-cum.

Licking it greedily, I moan at the taste of his salty flavor, sitting back a little more on his face. His tongue fucks me enthusiastically, rewarding me for giving myself so completely to him as I continue to climb higher and higher, an astronaut headed full-tilt to the moon.

Dropping my head over the bottom side of his dick, I trace it from the base to the frenulum, thrumming my tongue back and forth along the shaft as he lets out deep, bliss-filled cries, edging towards abandon. My tongue circles his head again before descending lower to suck his balls one at a time into my mouth.

“Yes, Ginger. Fuck, yes!” he whispers in strained tones as waves of pride fill me. I want to thoroughly please this man, not leave one cord of his need untied. I want to make it impossible for him to let me go, although I’ve heard all the cautions about having sex to jumpstart a relationship. But everything about intimacy with him feels natural, right, even familiar. I can’t describe it.

His mouth migrates sensually back to my clit, twirling and rhythmically sucking me as his finger strokes my G-spot. The heady riot of movements from his velvety tongue feels randomly purposeful.

Between pants, I ask, “What are you doing to me, baby?”

Looking between my legs with a guilty grin, he confesses, “Tracing my name—first, middle, and last.”

Like I’m his . The possessive confession thrills me. “What’s your middle name?”

“Langley, and yours?”

“Louise,” I scream as his finger hits my G-spot again, edging me toward free fall.

My pussy and lower ab muscles tighten, and my legs tremble. Crack! With a teasing glance, he smacks my ass, leaving a slight sting and eliciting a surprised moan of pleasure from me. I like it, wondering if he's just uncovered a kink I didn't know I had.

"Wild woman," he grins encouragingly, reading the lust on my face.

I focus on his gorgeous cock again, sucking him into my mouth and hollowing my cheeks. My left hand strokes and plays with his balls as I take his shaft deeper and deeper. His hips tick upwards, thrusting his cock further into my mouth. I push him past my tonsils, deep-throating his head.

"God!" he screams, his sexy-as-hell voice tinged with satisfaction.

The naughty taboo of pleasuring him this way inches me towards heady oblivion. My pussy trembles as his beard tickles me, and his mouth claims me. I tighten and tighten and tighten until I can't take anymore, soaring over the edge of ecstasy and orgasming so hard my lower ab muscles jump, and fireworks explode in my head.

"Fuck, yes!" he exclaims, doubling his efforts, resulting in greedy wet noises that undo me even more.

His balls jerk up, and I slide my mouth back slightly as waves of salty, metallic-flavored cum fill it. I swallow his warm release as my pussy spasms around his finger. He continues devouring me like a madman, holding my hips as I spasm and fight him, so sensitive that each swipe of his tongue comes with a blissful intensity I can barely handle.

Finally, I collapse next to him, my mind still spinning with the unparalleled deliciousness of it all. Sexually, I couldn't imagine a better match...kink for kink, appetite for appetite, hunger for soul-stirring hunger.

Fast, heavy breathing fills the cave, and I raise my head, glancing at Roscoe. He pants deliriously, satisfaction etched on his handsome face. Equally punch-drunk, I lie next to his legs on the tree branches, wrapped in the cozy fragrance of evergreens. He grabs my feet, kissing the top of each one affectionately as his breathing continues to slow.

As I catch my breath, my pulse slowing, I admire how the firelight flickers and dances over his angular planes and bulging muscles. He's the most gorgeous man I've ever seen, and I could pinch myself to be lying here like this with him, waves of delight still washing over me.

Resting his head in the curve at the front of my ankles where my feet meet my legs and absent-mindedly stroking my calves, he asks with an irrepressible grin, "Did I do better that time?"

"I loved both times," I say, lifting my chin defiantly. My voice quivering at the beautiful memories.

"There's that Aries stubbornness you mentioned earlier."

I shake my head, smiling.

Motioning for me to lie by him, he urges, "We should get some sleep now. Because I literally can't after that fucking blowjob. Damn, Ginger."

"Was it bad?" I ask, self-consciousness gripping me.

"Are you kidding me?" he questions, his cheeks burning and a growl of pleasure filling his throat. "You sucked my soul out of my cock, Sweetness."

The words make my eyes bug out. "Is that a good thing?"

“Fuck, yes,” he chuckles. “Thank you,” he adds with a contented growl and lopsided grin.

He motions for me to lie with him, and I snuggle happily against his furry, blond chest, listening to his booming heart. The comforting sound instantly lulls me towards sleep. Entangling his strong, long legs with mine, he leans up to pile branches over top of us.

Yawning, I whisper, “We don’t need those. It’s hot in the cave. Don’t you think?”

The corners of his mouth turn down. Draping his arm possessively around my shoulders, he observes, “You’re hot, not the cave.”

“It’s your fault, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” he chuckles, a tense edge to his voice as he raises his head, caressing my face. His brows furrow, and he opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

Nestling my head against his chest with a satisfied sigh, I return to our game from earlier as he rests his head back. I ask, “Ice skating or horseback riding?”

“Neither.”

“Agreed.”

“Wait, that was a trick question?” he asks, lazily eyeing me. I nod, and he laughs, caressing my back and shoulders, covering my flesh in happy goosebumps.

“Yoga or pilates?”

“You’re being funny now.”

I cling to him despite the heat pouring from his body. His touch is the antidote to the anxiety triggered by the kidnapping, the only reason I can relax. “For your information, I prefer yoga.”

“Noted.” My heart thrills at the one-word response. It’s the first time he’s made it sound like there might be something beyond the cave for us. “What’s your favorite flower?”

“Daisies.”

He blinks, looking confused. “What do you mean? Like the purple and pink ones you see at Easter? Or the orange and red ones that grow wild?”

I chuckle. “No, plain white ones with yellow centers.”

He snuggles me closer.

“Country or rock?” I yawn.

“Rock, but I’m more of an alternative and indie kind of guy. How about you?”

“An unrepentant fan of emo,” I giggle.

“No wonder you fell for me. I’m dark as hell.”

My consciousness fades away, traveling vast oceans toward sleep. Fighting it, I tease, “What do I have to do to get you to paint your fingernails black and wear eyeliner?”

“Shit, Sweetness, an Army Ranger in eyeliner? Hell, no.”

I purse my lips, drawing my mouth into a pout, even as my mind wanders, lapsing

into delirium. “I can’t believe you said no to me.”

“I can’t, either. But eye?—”

His unfinished sentence is the last thing I remember before thick, heavy blackness consumes me.

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Chapter

Nine

ROSCOE

Ginger fades into sleep as I feel her forehead again, noting the slight increase in temperature. After what we just did, I can't assume it's a fever. I feel fucking on fire. But coupled with all she's been through, I won't be able to rest until she gets medical attention.

The fire wanes, and I morosely watch its flickering flames on the cave wall, mentally lining up next steps. We have to either walk out to civilization or hike to my cabin. Either option is punishing, even for an outdoorsman, let alone a city girl who's been through so much. I can carry her, and I will if it comes to that, but we'll lose precious time.

Midway through the night, I cradle Ginger in my arms, unable to sleep and listening helplessly as her respiration grows increasingly murky and congested. Her flesh heats to the point of burning, and my stomach roils.

I'm inconsolable with regret. Dammit! How could I be so irresponsible this morning? If my ATV had fuel, we'd be at my cabin with a landline and a satellite phone to call paramedics. We'd have full bellies, an endless supply of clean drinking water, an array of over-the-counter medicines, hot water for showers and baths, a cozy bed piled high with blankets, and a roaring fire to warm us.

Hours pass, locked in this internal reflection. There's nothing I won't do for this woman. The problem is I can't do anything until sunrise. Every person I get close to gets hurt or dies. I can't let Ginger fall victim to this pattern.

A high-pitched cry arrests my attention, sending adrenaline coursing through my veins. What the fuck? I strain my ears as minutes pass in silence before it comes again. The haunting, howling scream of a banshee...

A vocalizing mountain lion.

Cursing under my breath, the memory of the deer bones I spied on first entering the cave clobber me over the head. I'd forgotten about them in all the events that ensued.

Dammit!

My whole body tenses as I stir, trying not to rouse Ginger but fully animated by my need to protect her. I've lived four years in these woods without ever hearing this sound. But I recognize the bone-chilling cadence immediately. As if the cry is somehow etched into the most primitive part of my DNA.

Minutes pass, and the call grows closer. Normally, these big cats are elusive, only seen when it's too late for their prey. But this one's trying to scare us off.

"Not tonight, motherfucker," I whisper under my breath.

Ginger stirs next to me, asking groggily, "What's wrong?"

"I'm reviving the fire. Go back to sleep."

Another haunting cry pierces the air. This one much closer. Shit, if that mountain lion isn't making its way to our shelter. I've never seen or heard anything like this. The

boughs next to me rustle as Ginger sits up, her chest rattling and inching towards panic. She coughs uncontrollably for a few painful moments while I continue stirring the fire, encouraging it to devour the fresh branches placed on top.

“Wh-wh-what was that?”

“Mountain lion.” Smoke fills the cave because the wood is still wet. Fortunately, smoke should deter the big cat as well as flames. But I curse myself as it incites a new coughing spell in Ginger.

“Oh my God.” Her voice trembles.

“It’s okay, Sweetness. I’ve got this.”

Blackness and smoke fill the cave, and Ginger hacks and coughs next to me. “Why all the smoke?”

“Wood’s wet. But it’ll still keep the cat away.”

Another cry pierces the night, closer still.

“Get the fuck out of here!” I holler into the unending darkness of night. “Ginger, I need you to make noise, too. We don’t want it thinking it can barge in here to protect its den.”

“We’re in a mountain lion’s den?” she hisses in exasperated tones, but the woman does her best to speak loudly.

“Yeah, it was the best I could do at the time,” I reply, my voice hollow. None of this is even close to the best I could do for her if I hadn’t had my head stuck up my ass earlier. I’ll never forgive myself for this night and what I’ve needlessly put Ginger

through.

“Get the fuck out of here!” I scream again toward the entrance of the cave.

“But what if the man who took me hears us?” Ginger suddenly asks. Her voice has a hysterical strain to it, one I’ve heard before from soldiers dealing with PTSD. One I’ve heard coming from my own mouth. It doesn’t help that her body temperature has spiked from hypothermic to feverish in less than twenty-four hours.

“Even if he’s out here, Ginger, which I highly doubt, he’s not going to stumble into an actively vocalizing mountain lion’s territory unless he’s got a serious death wish.”

“Oh, you mean, like us?” The words come out hurriedly, followed by a long, heavy pause.

She means, like you.

The wet wood smothers the fire out completely now. Not what I was going for. I feel around the cave, working in pitch-black to remove the wettest branches from the rock ring and replace them with drier wood.

I strike another spark into a nest of kindling using my necklace, operating completely in the dark. I work quickly and efficiently, having mastered this aspect of bushcraft with my eyes closed. After all, fire is often most needed when sight can’t be relied on.

After the fourth try, a glowing ember lights in the kindling nest, like a ray of hope in the sudden heaviness of the night. Cradling the nest in my hands, I blow on it, fostering and cultivating it with my breath until flames shoot upwards, licking ravenously past the dried twigs and leaves surrounding it. I place it gently beneath the sloppy tree branch tepee I staked in the dark, watching with satisfaction as the blaze

takes off. The puma's cries fall silent, and the cave fills with an interminable quiet.

We sit in silence, mesmerized by the flames.

After some time, Ginger's voice pierces the quiet. "I'm sorry about what I said."

"Which part?"

"About the death wish."

I grunt. Her words remind me of why I can't keep her. I can't force this woman to spend her whole life walking on eggshells because I'm a fucking headcase. It's not fair to her. It isn't what she deserves.

"I shouldn't have said that."

"I know you didn't mean it that way. The only thing that hurt me wasn't something you said at all..." I've never been this open or vulnerable with anyone.

"What was that?" she asks almost inaudibly, her attention still focused on the ambient sounds encircling us...as if her whole body strains in anticipation of another sound from the puma.

Clearing my throat and trying not to sound as butthurt as I feel, I explain, "Now that we've got the fire back up, it won't be back." Unless it's got rabies. I leave the last caveat out because it's highly unlikely, and it's a worry Ginger doesn't need.

"Thank God," she says, relief tinging her voice. After a few moments of silence, she prompts, "You were going to tell me what I did to hurt you..."

I level my gaze on her, delighting in the way the firelight licks and kisses her flesh,

illuminating her in shades of gold and tempting me to kiss every inch of her. But my words feel inordinately heavy as I confess, “You doubted my ability to keep you safe from the mountain lion and that fucking lowlife kidnapper. I know, I know. It’s dumb on my part. The fragile male ego coming out in me, but if there’s one thing I want you to trust about me, it’s my ability to keep you safe. It may be the only thing I can ultimately offer you.”

Her gorgeous blue eyes pierce me as she licks her lower lip, inflaming me some more. She moves closer to the fire, rustling the boughs and filling the air with the scent of evergreens. Every inch of her curvy softness, I devour with my eyes. Will I ever get enough of her?

Raising her chin defiantly, she says, “I don’t doubt for one minute your ability to keep me safe ... when I think about it rationally. But I’m not like you, Roscoe. I’ve spent my whole life trying to do everything right so nothing would ever go wrong.”

“Some things are outside of our control, no matter what we do.” My eyes flicker towards Ginger, annoyed she sits apart from me. I’ve lost my fucking mind. These aren’t rational thoughts.

Awkward silence engulfs us. Minutes tick by. Finally, she asks quietly, “Roscoe, why aren’t you holding me?”

Before I can filter myself, I confess, “Because you chose to sit away from me. But I want to hold you.” What the fuck is happening to me?

Despite her question and my confession, she doesn’t move. The beauty needs me to come to her. I crawl to the spot where she sits, roughly pulling her into my lap. She wraps her arms around my neck, snuggling under my chin into my chest and admitting, “Something’s wrong. I don’t feel right.”

“I know, Sweetness. As soon as dawn breaks, I’ll work on getting you back to civilization.”

She bursts into sobs, and I hold her closer, feeling the warm saltwater drench my chest.

“Why are you crying?”

“Because I’m pretty sure you won’t follow me back to civilization,” she sniffles. “And apart from you, this experience in the woods hasn’t been my favorite. I don’t know if I ever want to come back.” She sobs lustily now.

Her words echo what I already know. “It’s okay,” I whisper, stroking her cheek. But my heart breaks at the imminence of our final goodbye. “Everything will be fine. I promise. I’m sorry I couldn’t get you to my cabin. You would’ve liked it there.”

She says, “Tell me about your cabin. Please.”

“It sits on fifty acres with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. I built it myself from logs I chopped and hewed with the help of some of my neighbors. Other mountain men, wounded warriors like me. We mostly keep to ourselves but come together to help one another.”

Should I tell her I bought the five hundred acres of forest we built our community on or that my own funds helped pay for the homes? It feels like irrelevant information.

Clearing my throat, I continue, “The interior could use some work. Mostly decorating. But it’s got strong hardwood floors, amber-stained log walls, and the bare bones for a cozy existence. The bedroom’s large and overlooks the forest with a California King and a big fireplace made with local rock quarried from the river.” Why do I sound like I’m trying to sell her on the place?

Ginger's breathing relaxes and warms my chest as she nods off again. I touch my hand to her forehead, alarmed by the searing heat. I've got to get her out of here. But how? I pray for guidance, another miracle.

I could hike back to my cabin. Get my sat phone, contact my neighbors and local authorities. But how can I leave her alone with an aggressive mountain lion on the prowl? And Asher Scofield still on the loose? I could spring down the mountain to the first signs of civilization. But it poses the same gambles.

After dawn, golden sunlight pours through the waterfall, illuminating our shelter, and I hear my answer above the water's rush. A vehicle engine, like a deep vibration through the soil. It sticks out above the ambient noises I've grown accustomed to in the cave.

The old service road Scofield used to get here curves towards the falls not far from here. I didn't tell Ginger about this earlier because I didn't want to scare her. I can't be sure as I strain my ears, but the sound could very well come from a Jeep. Nobody uses this road except hunters in the fall. My guess is Ginger's kidnapper has returned, hoping to find evidence of her whereabouts in the freshly fallen snow.

Chapter

Ten

ROSCOE

Pivoting my body, I lay Ginger down on the boughs, covering her gently. She stirs at my movements, asking groggily, “How long have I been out?”

“A while now, Sweetness. I need you to do what I tell you, okay?”

She stretches, opening her big, blue doe eyes and staring up at me.

“I need you to stay here, hunkered down while I’m gone. You promise? Your clothes are dry now, too.”

Her eyes widen questioningly. “Gone? But what about the mountain lion? What about Asher?”

Stroking her perspiring cheek, I reassure her, “The mountain lion won’t come back during the day, especially if you keep the fire stoked. And Scofield? Let me handle him.”

She shakes her head, sticking out her bottom lip as though she’s pouting. It’s the single most adorable move I’ve seen out of her, and I can’t help myself. Leaning down, I kiss her gently.

“I don’t like the way you’re talking, Roscoe.”

“Don’t worry about me, Sweetness. I’ve got this handled.” I feel her forehead for the millionth time. I’ve got to make this plan happen ASAP, or there won’t be a woman to come back to.

“Stay here, and keep the fire stoked,” I command gruffly. “Drink what you can of the water. I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

Jumping to my feet, I dress quickly, preparing for a confrontation with her kidnapper. It’s the only way. We need his Jeep to get her safely back to New Brunswick for medical treatment. And I need to know the motherfucker who hurt my woman is dead.

My woman? Shit, I’ve officially lost my mind.

Retrieving Ginger’s clothes and socks, I kneel next to her, helping her dress. She doesn’t protest the assistance, which tells me yet again how sick she is. I palm her tear-moistened cheek, penetrating her soul with my eyes. “Get dressed, and keep the fire fed. Remember, you’re tough and a survivor, and I’ll be back before you know it.” I hesitate, not wanting to give away my plan and worry her more. But I need confirmation. “Describe Asher’s Jeep for me.”

Her eyes round, panic-stricken.

“Shh, you’re safe, Ginger. I promise.”

“Dark gray,” she croaks. “A Rubicon with a red outline around the lettering. It has an Idaho license plate with a W in it, although I can’t remember the rest.” She massages her fingers into her temples, frustration filling her face.

“And Scofield?” While I saw the perp glancingly through the trees, I would struggle to identify him in a lineup.

She clears her throat, swallowing hard. “Curly brown hair and black, evil eyes with a unibrow. Late twenties or early thirties. Tall and thin but not nearly as tall as you.”

I nod, leaning in to kiss the worried beauty. “I’ll be back. Feed the fire.”

“What are you going to do?” Her voice has a panicked quaver to it.

“What needs to be done to ensure you have a good and happy life.”

Her hand darts out from underneath the boughs, gripping the front of my dark green Henley. “Promise me something.”

“Anything,” I answer breathlessly.

“That you’ll come back to me, and we’ll be together afterward.”

“Of course, I’ll come back for you.” But I hesitate, unable to promise the rest. My nighttime reflections inevitably brought me to the one conclusion I can’t chase from my mind: She can do so much better than me.

“Promise me we’ll be together.”

Swallowing loudly, I say, “Everything will work out the way it’s supposed to. I promise.”

She nods, tears moistening her face. Her breath sounds labored, a realization that terrifies me as I make a silent vow to get her to safety. Whatever it takes.

Emerging from behind a clump of bushes, the frosty air of early morning hits me. Fog lingers in the valley, shrouding the snow-tipped, verdant evergreens in an eerie thickness that fits my task at hand—to kill Asher Scofield. I just hope the vehicle I heard driving earlier is his.

I jog to the service road, reading the fresh impression of thick tire tracks in the new coating of snow. Although I can't be certain, the impressions could be those of a Jeep. Only time will tell, a commodity I'm out of.

Laboring until I sweat and have to peel off my Carhartt, I drag logs into the roadway, wet from snowfall. My hope is to waylay the driver enough to get out and take a look. That's all I need. Of course, the moment the man sees my makeshift barrier, the rubber will meet the road if it's Scofield. If not, I still plan on using the blockade to force whoever's driving to help us...even if it's at gunpoint.

The forest route got washed out at its upper end a couple of years ago thanks to a disastrous mudslide following wildfires and a hefty winter snowpack. So, whoever's taken this road must come back the same way.

I brush away my tracks with tree boughs to avoid revealing my position. Snow continues to fall lightly, further concealing them. As I work, a chain captures my eye in the thick brush. A fucking bear trap. Poachers. My blood chills, thanking God for guiding my steps. Between the potential damage to my leg, including broken bones, and the difficulty of escaping one of these, it could have meant the end for Ginger and me. The weight of keeping her alive weighs heavily on me as I move with more intention, not taking even one step for granted.

I crouch a distance away behind a couple of thick-trunked lodgepole pines and an outcropping of boulders. They should provide decent cover, even from an AR-15. I lie in wait for the vehicle to emerge, all the time praying for Divine intervention. I'm Ginger's only hope. I can't fuck up this opportunity to save her.

I lean against the rough trunk, my mind marveling at the strangeness of the past twenty-four hours and the echo of yesterday's desperation in today's mission. From ruminating over death to fighting with every ounce of my soul to keep Ginger alive.

Hours pass in quiet desperation as I register the sun overhead and then dipping towards the west, drawing closer with every passing hour to sunset. Dammit! Is the vehicle coming back, or did I dream the whole thing? If so, I've wasted precious hours, maybe sealing Ginger's fate.

Shadows grow long across the snowy forest floor, and my heart drops. My mouth feels dry from dehydration, though I wet it occasionally with snow from the ground, melted in my hand. My stomach, past growling with hunger, aches with sickening urgency.

Suddenly, I hear the faint hum of a car engine. Thank God! My ears hone in on the sound, listening with increasing elation as it grows louder. One way or the other, this vehicle means survival for Ginger and me.

I ready myself, my heart pounding in my temples as a dark gray Jeep emerges from the woods. It comes to a hesitant halt in front of the impenetrable pile of logs. A man gets out, tall and lanky, and scratches the brown curls atop his head.

He surveys the barrier for a curious moment before realization hits him, and his black eyes scan the forest frantically. I don't need any other identifying factors or a cleaner shot. Squeezing the trigger slowly, I register the percussive boom. I duck back behind boulders in case my aim is off, but I know it isn't.

Normally, I wouldn't be this cautious with my personal safety. But if I don't live, Ginger doesn't.

After a few moments of silence, I creep my way towards the man on the ground. My

vision of him obscured behind the Jeep. I round the driver's side, and my heart skips a beat. He's disappeared.

The smell of pungent aftershave hits my nose, and I turn. Scofield has his rifle trained on me, almost close enough to attempt to disarm him. Fuck, maybe our luck's finally run out.

Don't let me die, Lord, and fail Ginger for good. Let me live. Let me live for her.

Without a second thought, I rush him, the only advantage left me the element of surprise. Shock crosses his face as he takes one step back, firing. A searing pain grazes my right shoulder, and I hear a man's voice wailing deep-throated anguish of the most bone-chilling kind. Staring at my arm, I see a swipe of burgundy. But the sound isn't coming from me. It's Scofield.

The motherfucker stepped back into the bear trap, the hungry steel claws buried deep in his shattered leg. Thrown off balance in the snow and shocked by the searing pain, he sits on his ass in the brush, the AR-15 in the snow between us, begging for one final fight.

Frenzied groans fill the air as we both lunge for the weapon, reaching it at the same moment. But in a struggle of wills, he's no fucking match. I wrestle it from his hands, using the weapon to press him into the ground and choke him out beneath his neck. He gasps and sputters, and I can see the panic in the whites of his eyes.

"You should have never fucking touched her!" I scream, my face inches from his, smelling desperation and death.

"Please," he begs, gasping for air. "Show mercy."

"Have you ever shown mercy, you motherfucker?" I rage. His eyes fly wide,

attempting to piece together who I am.

Lifting the pressure from his chest and neck, I see hope flicker in his eyes before I slam the butt of the rifle into his face with a sickening crack, knocking him unconscious. Blood spews from his broken skin and skull.

I search him, finding Jeep keys in his right-hand jeans pocket. He wears a bulletproof vest. No wonder the first shot failed. The realization makes me wonder how much more there is to this story and who this guy really knew.

I survey his body with emotionless eyes, confiscating what we may need. His jacket, his boots. It makes me sick to think of Ginger wearing these items. But I'm too big for his clothes, and I have to keep her warm, preparing for all possibilities, including walking out of the forest. I assume, however, that his Jeep has enough gas to get us back to civilization.

Grabbing the AR-15, I leave my revolver next to him with the final bullet. Offing him is too easy. I want him to suffer and die slowly. I want the pain to deconstruct and destroy him before he takes the coward's way out.

The coward's way... I can't believe how close I came to that fate.

My arm aches and burns as I work, but adrenaline keeps most of the pain at bay. Piling everything of possible use from Scofield's body inside the back of the Jeep, I jump in the cab, adjusting the seat to accommodate my height. The gas tank is half full, more than enough to get us into New Brunswick and the hospital. I set off on the road in Ginger's direction, my heart racing.

"Thank you, God," I praise, despite the metallic smell of blood coming from my shoulder.

My stomach knots, reality seeping into the past twenty-four hours. Ginger has been in the most dire of straits since meeting me. Fighting for her life and conditioned to look for a savior. Once she returns to civilization and her friends and family, everything will change. She won't need me anymore, although my need for her will remain immeasurable, unquenchable, unfathomable.

The forest is dense with lots of underbrush, so I can't go far off the roadway, but I get as close as possible to the waterfall and cave. Rounding the vehicle, I open the passenger door, ready to take Ginger, and then I race towards the sound of water, where the most precious person in my world hides, weakening by the minute.

I carry her in my arms through the dense snow, ignoring the acute ache in my shoulder and willing us towards the Jeep. A gunshot pierces the still of the forest.

The motherfucker didn't even try to free himself from the trap or fight through the pain to survive.

Chapter

Eleven

GINGER

B eep. Beep. Beep.

I listen to the high-pitched click of a heart monitor as my mind slowly wanders back to me. The effort feels interminable, like I may never reunite my mind with my physical body. Minutes feel like hours, or maybe hours like minutes. Slowly, the heat of the fire-warmed cave and the masculine deliciousness of Roscoe's mouth fade into a very different reality.

I'm in a hospitable, and the sounds I hear are coming from machines hooked to me. My heart bursts with gratitude yet again. He did it. Roscoe somehow got me to New Brunswick, although the details around it remain fuzzy and far away, like watching a movie backwards through foggy glass.

Snippets of memory tumble around in my head, like mismatched socks in the dryer. My Ranger's rugged face, exuding concern as he carried me through the snowy woods. Carried me where? I strain to remember. His shoulder bled, and he grimaced in pain.

The Jeep. Oh God! Asher's Jeep. But why? My thoughts feel so twisted and turned I can't make sense of them. And the coat I wore and boots—Asher Scofield's coat and boots. The images sit in my mind like still frames, making my brain fester and toil to

piece it all together.

My eyes snap open, taking in the white, impersonal room where my hospital bed sits. A curtain is drawn back, a study in muted shades of pastel, but the bed next to me is empty. So, is the chair by my bed where someone recently sat. I can tell by the depressions in the cushions.

Roscoe. Where's Roscoe?

I close my eyes, nodding off again to the sound of the noisy monitor. The mountain man's arms encircle me, his burnished gold hair between my fingers. His heartbeat calms me as I drift back into a primal world of caves illuminated by fire and love—tender, wild, and unbridled. A place where I feel infinitely safe and cared for despite the horror of everything I've endured.

A hand squeezes mine, and I startle awake.

"Shh," a familiar voice says, and the corners of my mouth turn up.

"Mama?" I ask, slowly opening my eyes to stare at my mother's face. She looks absolutely exhausted. Like she's aged ten years overnight. Guilt grips me. Did I do this to her?

"Yes, baby, it's me. Take it easy. You've been through so much, and you need to rest." Her voice trembles as she squeezes my hand lightly.

"I can't wrap my head around it all," I say drowsily, shaking my head from side to side gently against the pillow. "It comes to me in pieces, but I can't remember it all. How long have I been here?"

She presses her lips firmly together. "About two days now. You came in with

bacterial pneumonia, which turned into sepsis. I lost count of how many different antibiotics doctors tried until they found something your body responded to. Oh, my baby girl, you've been through so much!" Lament fills her voice, and she looks at me with apprehension as though there's so much more she wants to say. I nod, fighting to hold back sobs.

Taking a seat, she adds, "But we'll get everything sorted out. Everything. I promise."

"Where's Roscoe?" I ask quietly, and her face freezes, her mouth motionless. So, I repeat myself, "Where's Roscoe? Roscoe Vaughn?"

She covers her mouth with her hand, staring at me with pitying eyes. "Where he can never hurt you again, baby girl. I promise."

"What?" I ask, furrowing my brows and feeling my heart quiver. Where he can never hurt me again? What does that mean? My mind races to the things he confessed to me ... about wanting to self-delete. If anything has happened to him, I won't be able to go on. Fear grips me along with anger. How could he leave me like this?

But then it hits me. Despite everything that happened in the cave, Roscoe never promised me anything. I bury my head in my hand, trying to make sense of everything.

She continues, "We don't have to talk about this now, Ginger. We can save it for later...when you're stronger. But all you have to know is that he can never hurt you again."

Oh God! My mind spins toward a thousand different conclusions at the finality of her words. "Please tell me he's okay..." I squeak.

Her eyes narrow, her face grimacing. "He's in jail."

“But why? And why do you think he would hurt me?”

“You need to rest. We can talk about?—”

“No,” I interrupt, using my arms to sit up and failing miserably. It’s as though all the strength has been drawn from my body. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. Jail?” I bite my lower lip, my head churning with so many disordered memories, all thrumming around in my head like the pieces of a shaken jigsaw puzzle.

“For what he did.”

I stare at her incredulously, my face twisting. My memories may be a jumble, but I know one thing with complete certainty. Taking a deep breath, I declare, “I would have died without Roscoe Vaughn.”

“No, Ginger,” she says flatly. “I don’t know what he tried to make you believe. How he might have gaslighted you after kidnapping you, but?—”

“Gaslighting me? Kidnapping me? Are you out of your mind?” My pulse pounds furiously at the accusations. How can my mother, who was nowhere near the woods where Roscoe found me, try to tell me what happened?

“Police are holding him for the assaults and murders of Tiffany and Crystal and a young man who was a graduate student at the U. I can’t remember his name off the top of my head. A handsome young man with curly brown hair ... a senator’s son.”

How can she have the story so backward? I stare at her in mute horror as she continues, “Police have gathered all the evidence they need in your case, too.”

“My case?”

She looks down at her hands, shame clouding her face.

“What he did to me? I don’t understand.”

Exhaling sharply, she says, “We should leave this for another time.”

“No, I want to know now.”

She swallows loudly. “When you were admitted to the ER, you consented to a sexual assault forensic exam.”

My head spins. I don’t remember any of this. Not even being admitted.

“They found his DNA under your fingernails and a bite mark and bruises. I don’t want you to be scared the first time you look in the mirror. And they found his DNA elsewhere along with recent signs of trauma.”

“God, no,” I mutter, shaking my head.

She squeezes my hand again. “It’s okay, baby. The police have everything they need, and Vaughn explained why you were wearing the young man’s coat and boots.” She leans closer, whispering, “At first, you were under suspicion, too.”

I shake my head, my thoughts reeling. Under suspicion of what?

“Fortunately, we’ve caught everything early. So, if the assault leads to any ... complications, we can terminate it before it becomes a problem.”

“Terminate it? You mean, like if I’m pregnant?” My voice fills the room, bordering on hysterical. “Never. I would never let anyone hurt our baby.”

She massages her temples with her hand. “The psychologist who came in yesterday said you might wake up like this ... confused about everything. She had a name for the syndrome, but I can’t remember it now. Where the victim sympathizes with her assailant. I guess it’s pretty common in kidnappings. Would you like to speak with her? She’s very?—”

“You have it all wrong.” The words pour out of me, sizzling with outrage. I pull my hand from hers, crossing my arms.

“He’s a troubled man, Ginger. Former military, a wounded warrior, diagnosed with depression, severe PTSD, and suicidal ideation. His own family can’t vouch for him, saying he disappeared without a trace four years ago. Based on what detectives have pieced together so far, he kidnapped the young man, murdered him, and stole his Jeep and some clothing. It was that vehicle that he drove you to the hospital in?—”

“He drove me to the hospital,” I cut in, repeating her words with emphasis. “He drove me to the hospital. Do you really think a serial rapist and murderer would drive me to the hospital?”

Shaking her head, she counters, “He was shot and needed medical attention. Law enforcement alleges you lucked out by being with him.”

But her words don’t fit with the snippets of memory that wash over me. Of him holding me in the ER, stroking my face, and whispering reassuring words. Of him protesting when the staff separated us.

“He saved my life, Mama.” I bite my lower lip hard, tasting blood. “And not just once. We’re talking multiple times within my first few hours of knowing him. Without Roscoe, I wouldn’t be alive.”

“But what about the evidence? His skin under your fingernails, the corresponding

scratches he has. The bite mark and bruises.” Her voice trembles.

I level my eyes on her. “He saved me, Mama. I’m sure you can figure out the rest.” This has to be the most embarrassing conversation of my life. But it’s nothing compared to what Roscoe must be enduring. I observe flatly, “The scratch marks weren’t on his face.”

She lets out an uncomfortable sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan. “But you’ve always been such a good girl.” She pauses, twisting her hands in her lap. “I’m getting too old for this... What about your roommates and that poor young man?”

“Poor nothing!” Fury pounds through me, stealing my speech.

Her eyebrows fly up to her hairline.

“Have they found any DNA evidence implicating Roscoe at my house?”

She shakes her head. “Investigators said he used condoms and covered his tracks thoroughly.”

“And then, he decided not to do the same thing with me?”

“Don’t be mad at me, Ginger,” she snuffles. “I’m only telling you what investigators have told me.”

Her words go straight to my heart, and I instantly regret berating her. “I’m sorry, Mama,” I apologize. “I’m just furious about how wrong everyone has this.”

But she’s only half listening as she searches her phone, holding up a picture for me. It’s a mugshot of Roscoe, and it steals the breath from my lungs.

The backs of my eyes smart as I stare at it. His face is wild and unkempt, my handsome, rugged mountain man. Only the media uses this image to frame him as a monster. The headline above the image reads:

Horror in the Woods: Lone, Ex-Military Mountain Man Charged in Triple Homicide, Assaults, & Kidnapping

“They have it all wrong,” I whisper, fighting a sob, and feeling like my head will explode. Seizing the phone from my mother, I stare at Roscoe, indulging in one moment of admiration.

My mother doesn’t miss this, her face shifting from disbelief to curiosity. Clearing her throat, she asks, exasperation edging her voice, “Then, who did this to you, Ginger?”

I flip down through the article until I reach the photos of the victims, tearing up at the sight of my roommates, Crystal and Tiffany. “They didn’t deserve this,” I say quietly, images of them dead in our kitchen flashing through my head. I scroll down further until I reach the picture I need. It causes such a visceral response that I drop the phone in my lap, my hands shaking.

My mother stands, grimacing as she grabs the cell, scrutinizing Asher’s photo.

“That’s who kidnapped me,” I say, my voice trembling uncontrollably.

“The student who was killed?” she asks again, flashing the photo at me.

I nod, tears pouring down my face. “Asher Scofield killed Crystal and Tiffany, and he kidnapped me. If it wasn’t for Roscoe, I’d be dead and buried in an unmarked grave in the woods or worse. And this filthy, horrific, inhumane, fucking piece of trash would still be walking the streets.” Rage fuels my words, and I fight hard not to spit

at the phone.

She exhales loudly. “I need to call the detectives working this case....”

I nod, drawing a deep breath and thinking of Roscoe to steel my nerves and fight the panic that grips me at the sight of my kidnapper.

Knitting her brows and looking conflicted, she asks, “But are you up for this? This is the first time you’ve been truly responsive in two days.”

Her words make me question everything she’s told me so far. If I haven’t been responsive, then why would the hospital do a sexual assault forensic exam on me and say I consented? All I know is nothing matters until I clear Roscoe’s name and see him again. There will be plenty of time for questions later.

“Yes, Mama, I have to do this now before everything blows more out of control. Roscoe Vaughn is a hero, my savior. The world has to know this.”

“Okay.” She exhales, looking wholly unconvinced. Part of me wonders if she’s calling the psychologist she mentioned earlier instead of the police.

After a moment’s thought, I add, “I need to speak to Dad, too. Roscoe needs a lawyer, and I do, too.”

Dad’s remarried with an obscene amount of money for whatever he does that he can’t talk to me about. He lives well, maintains a stellar public reputation, and has ready access to lawyers and any other resources we may need.

He has more than enough money to help me bring a lawsuit against the hospital for an invasive and non-consensual medical procedure and, more importantly, to clear Roscoe of spurious charges. I just wonder how my mountain man savior could

possibly still want me after all I've put him through...

Chapter

Twelve

ROSCOE

“Vaughn. You’ve got a visitor,” one of my Corrections Officers announces, and I sit up on my bunk.

Ginger.

My heart races with the unreasonable hope of seeing her again. Of knowing that she’s okay.

So much has happened since I last saw her at the New Brunswick Hospital ER—her temperature spiking wildly, her cough persistent and progressive, and her mind spinning in and out of consciousness. One minute, holding an intelligible conversation, the next lost in confusion and hallucinations. My heart aches and strains against these memories, hungry for the assurance that she’s okay.

It roils against the police who apprehended me at the hospital, accusing me of all sorts of baseless things, trying to get me to admit to shit I never did and would never do.

Following medical treatment for my arm, I was taken into police custody, last seeing Ginger as hospital staff wheeled her into the ER to sign paperwork and be assigned a bed. I’ve heard nothing about her condition since because everyone thinks I’m her

kidnapper ... and worse.

By now, she should have straightened out the narrative and reached out to me in some way. The air silence has my head spiraling out of control.

But more than all of these worries, my mind ruminates obsessively on the cave and everything that happened between us and what didn't. Everything I should have said but failed to...

I should have told her that she's the best thing that's ever happened to me. That I can't live without her. That I will do whatever it takes to become the man she deserves. But is it too late?

What if everything that happened between us was nothing more than a fever dream for her? A wild and untamed experience never to be revisited? Like a spark that falls short, hitting rocks instead of kindling?

She was in peril the whole time. There's no telling how long she was sick or how the stress of our survival situation fucked with her mind, making her cling to things she normally wouldn't. Making her want things she never would under normal circumstances.

My CO shackles my ankles and wrists. It's a stupid fucking precaution, but thanks to the high-profile media coverage, the nature of my charges, and my military training, I'm considered among the most dangerous criminals in this facility. I face three counts of homicide, three sexual assaults, two kidnappings, car theft...the list goes on and on. How any cop could think Asher's death was anything but suicide, I don't know.

But I do know my rights and haven't spoken to a soul, which likely hasn't helped my situation. Or maybe it's helped more than I know. The public defender they assigned

me is young and inexperienced, and I worry a snow job's in the works. One that could keep me away from Ginger indefinitely. Maybe, in the long run, this outcome is better for her. Because what can I offer the blonde beauty?

Safety, security, strength, wealth, total devotion, adventure...a sex life that'll put what we did in the cave to shame. I do have things to offer her. I've been thinking about that a lot, too.

I enter the private conference room with a single table and two chairs in the center. A clean-shaven man in a well-tailored suit with salt-and-pepper hair and thick black-rimmed glasses frowns at me, standing.

I shuffle in, reaching over the table to shake his hand out of habit. But the CO stops me with one word. "Vaughn."

I let my chained hands drop, already complying with this ridiculous fucking place and its civil-rights-depriving strictures.

I sit down across from the man, eyeing him with puzzlement.

"I'm Alexander Schuster of Dailey and Schuster. I'm here to provide you with legal representation and to stop Senator Scofield's office from using you as a scapegoat in the biggest scandal to hit Northern Idaho."

Talk about a loaded sentence! My brows furrow as I listen, wondering what miracle brought this about. Ever since rescuing Ginger, I've been more open to these inexplicable synchronicities in life.

The man continues, "I've been hired on retainer by Felix Harper to defend you in the legal matter of Vaughn versus the State of Idaho, which means you may dismiss your current public defender."

My mind spins. “Wait, Harper, as in Ginger Harper?” My throat tightens.

He nods firmly. “Mr. Harper is Ginger’s father.”

The backs of my eyes sting as I sit back in the seat, unable to focus on anything else the lawyer continues to say. After a few fraught moments, working to get my emotions under control, I interrupt, asking breathlessly, “How is she?”

The lawyer stops, adjusting his tie and licking his lips. “Doing better. Should be out of the hospital soon. If we play our cards right, you’ll be out even sooner.”

“Seriously?” I ask, leaning forward slightly.

“Yes. Most of what they have on you is circumstantial evidence. And Ms. Harper’s testimony will blow the DA’s case out of the water. And as for prosecuting Scofield’s suicide as a murder? Please. Nevertheless, he did use your gun, and there is the matter of his stolen Jeep and clothing. It doesn’t help that his father is the state’s most powerful senator and desperate to keep his son’s nefarious entanglements out of the public eye, either.” He pulls his laptop from his briefcase.

I nod, clenching my jaw and working hard to keep it together. I need to see Ginger so badly. I expect Schuster to dive into a tirade of questions for me. Instead, he asks, “What do you know about Asher Scofield?”

“Not much. Other than the fact Ginger identified him as her kidnapper and her roommates’ murderer. And he was a fucking, dishonorable, cowardly little bitch.”

He nods, taking notes as I speak.

“He wore a bulletproof vest during our altercation.”

Schuster levels his somber gaze on me, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Did he mention anything to you about human trafficking? Or the videos he supplied victims for?”

“Videos?” My stomach knots.

“Snuff videos. Apparently, those he worked for liked young, plus-sized women, preferably virgins. Ms. Harper regrettably fit his profile to a tee.”

“God,” I hiss, pushing back from the table, certain I’m going to be sick. Breathing hard, I bury my head in my shackled hands for a long moment before asking, “Does law enforcement have a handle on how many other victims there may have been?”

“Based on video evidence recovered from his apartment and a remote hunting cabin at the end of the old fire road, well over twenty.”

I shake my head, my chest constricting at the thought of what he planned for Ginger. If things had gone a little differently that day. If Russian Roulette had worked... Or I had more or less fuel in my ATV, or I hadn’t screamed at the precise moment I screamed...

I raise an eyebrow. “Attorney-client privilege?”

Mr. Schuster nods.

“I should’ve beat the motherfucker to death. Even that would’ve been too good for him.”

“I’m sure the families of those he trafficked would agree. But we’d like to go much further with this. We’re working with a group of private investigators, former military like yourself, to track down others involved in this trafficking ring. It goes all the way

up, through law enforcement and judges to senators and congressmen and women.”

I nod, sitting back in my chair as I consider the magnitude of what he tells me. “I’ll help in any way I can,” I promise, awkwardly bringing my hands up to comb my fingers through my hair.

“Mr. Harper’s counting on that.”

“How’s your arm, by the way?”

I glance at the bandage hidden beneath my shirt, shrugging. “Just a graze.”

Chapter

Thirteen

ROSCOE

Three days later, Mr. Harper posts bail, and I sit quietly in Schuster's car, my hands folded as I contemplate my next move. As if reading my mind, he says, "No offense, Ranger, but you could use new clothes and a barber. If I'm going to successfully defend you, it would help if you quit feeding the media with your unkempt, stereotypical lone-wolf appearance. You look like the Unabomber, for God's sake."

I nod, stroking my beard and ignoring his comment. "Former JAG?" I ask with a grimace.

"How'd you guess?"

"You guys all hold yourselves the same," I reply, and he laughs.

The car trip relaxes as we discuss the various branches of the military and the ins and outs of civilian life. Unlike me, a total failure at reintegration, Schuster's done well for himself. He gives me hope about turning my own life around and doing better, bringing his pep talk to an end at the Hyatt located directly across from the New Brunswick Hospital.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I work hard not to jump out of the car and race inside to find my girl.

The corners of Schuster's mouth turn down. "Do Ginger a favor and get cleaned up first. You'll find a barber shop around the corner, with an appointment booked for you in one hour, and this will come in handy when you visit Ms. Harper."

I look down, shocked, as he places my old military ID and Driver's License in my palm.

"How did you get these?" I ask, inhaling sharply.

"Your mother. She expects a visit tomorrow. She also packed a bag of your old clothes that's in the trunk."

My Carhartt jacket and Henley were entered as exhibits. So, I wear a dirty undershirt and pants, socks, and boots that must smell godawful.

"But will the hospital allow me visit Ginger, considering the charges against me?"

"They can't stop you if she consents, Mr. Vaughn. If you encounter any problems, I'm a phone call away."

I shake my head, reeling at everything the man says. "But why is Mr. Harper doing all of this for me?" After all, the man has to know his daughter and I had sexual relations during our brief time together. It's plastered all over the goddamn news.

Schuster raises an eyebrow. "You'll know in due time. Take good care of Ms. Harper, or you'll hear from him much sooner. Not something I'd recommend." He delivers the last sentence in menacing tones.

"Of course." I shake his hand firmly.

"Call if you need anything, Mr. Vaughn, and keep your nose clean. You're legally far

from out of the woods.”

And neck-deep in debt to Mr. Harper. In fact, it feels oddly like I’ve just sold my soul, something I’d do without hesitation for Ginger.

I nod, my pulse pounding at the realization I’m one short sprint away from Ginger. I only hope her feelings for me didn’t die in the cave with our fire.

“For fuck’s sake!” I exclaim, bobbing my head from side to side as I look in the mirror, my eyes bugging out.

“What? You don’t like it?”

“No, I love it. But I forgot what I look like,” I chuckle, transfixed by my reflection.

“Charlie Hunnam. The girls will be all over you.” Alfonso, the barber, stands next to me, a thirty-something Italian man with the best fade I’ve ever seen, wading through unruly piles of my blond hair. His shoulders bounce with laughter as he enjoys the reaction to my makeover.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

Alfonso blinks, staring at me expectantly for the punchline that never comes. When he realizes I’m not joking, he shakes his head. “You meant it when you said you’ve been living under a rock.”

I nod. Turning my head again, I run my hand over my angular cheeks and jaw. I stare at a ghost, one I haven’t seen since my 75th Batt days.

Besides the missing beard, my hair is perfectly trimmed, though longer on top to avoid looking high and tight. My Ranger days are long gone. No need to keep the

haircut.

My overgrown mugshot has been plastered everywhere over the past five days, to the point where I felt semi-relieved to be in jail. After all, how do you walk down the street when the court of public opinion has already found you guilty of kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder? So, getting cleaned up as Felix Harper suggested and radically altering my appearance is exactly what I need. At least until the media gets wind of the change and starts hounding me again.

I've also had a shower and changed into one of the outfits my mom packed for me. My heart overflows at the kindness and generosity of those around me despite my abrupt disappearance four years ago.

But I mean to make up for it now, and it starts with seeing Ginger and finding out if she still wants me or if the rush of emotions between us in the cave was only temporary. For my part, I'm ready to live and die by the feelings we cultivated together in less than twenty-four hours. An unbelievable, rash, and foolhardy proposition by the standards of the world. But I've never cared what the world thinks. Why start now?

During the cut, Alfonso noticed the thick scars running down the back of my neck and beneath my shirt, asking what happened to me. I shook my head, initially refusing to say more. But instead, I gave him the basics, realizing each retelling of the story not only heals a small piece of me but allows me to remember and commemorate my fallen comrades.

Now, he shakes his head and whistles in disbelief. "I should've taken before and after pictures. The transformation is wild."

"Yeah, I don't fucking recognize myself."

“You’re getting lucky tonight, brah. Your girl’s gonna be all over you.”

This comment is my own damn fault. I couldn’t stop talking about Ginger throughout the appointment, although I was careful to avoid using her name. But I spoke about her incessantly, so much so that I half-expected Alfonso to drown in my verbal deluge.

“Well, like I said, she’s in the hospital, so that won’t be happening. But I am curious to see what she thinks.”

“Luckily, if she doesn’t like your ugly mug, you can always grow back the beard. Well, maybe grow back thirty percent of it. I’m going to fill whole trash bins with everything you’re leaving behind today.”

I chuckle, glancing at the ground. “Are you sure you don’t need a hand cleaning up?”

“Please consider leaving a generous tip,” he says with a wink.

“Done.”

He rests his hands on his hips, standing behind me and staring into the mirror in front of us. “Shampoo? Conditioner? Pomade? Gel? Are there any products I can get you before you leave?”

I shake my head, not knowing how to answer his questions. It’s been way too fucking long since I dealt with this many people and a city, although New Brunswick is anything but large. Still, I find myself moving slower than most people, taking my time answering questions, and remaining quiet more often than I speak.

“No, but can you direct me to a flower shop and a nice jewelry store nearby?”

He rubs his goatee, grimacing deep in thought.

“Yeah, I’ll write the addresses on the back of one of my business cards. Remember, we do facial hair trims, too. So, even if your old lady wants you to grow the beard back, you’re always welcome here.”

“Thank you,” I say with a polite nod. “Hopefully, she won’t find my bare face too ugly.”

Alfonso laughs, leaving me with a fifty-fifty impression when it comes to his opinion. Charlie Hunnam? Whatever.

After realizing Mr. Harper’s covered the barbershop bill, I drop a one-hundred-dollar bill on the counter, causing Alfonso to run out and hug me as I leave. I nearly put the guy in a headlock, not used to such interactions. Fortunately, we part with smiles and a handshake.

I head out on my shopping odyssey, the thought of seeing Ginger again twisting my insides. So many things remain unsaid and up in the air between us.

The cocky, young Ranger version of me would walk into her room empty-handed and nonchalant. Not pushing for any one outcome but playing it cool. Back then, I was the young buck that women threw themselves at. I’m not that guy anymore, though. Not by a long shot, even if I now resemble an older, wiser version of him.

Fortunately, I’ve lived long enough to know what I feel for Ginger is one-of-a-kind and once-in-a-lifetime. God, I hope she feels the same way.

Considering everything Mr. Harper’s done for me, I have to hope she does. But these might also be the actions of a father trying to repay the man who saved his daughter. Or a man who’s looking to indebt a soldier of fortune to him for God knows what...

Only one thing is clear. I have to do this right with Ginger, prove to her the feelings in the cave don't have to be a one-time thing. They can last forever. The thought puts a tight knot in my throat.

It also cements my resolve to start living again and to let my comrades and what happened in the AOR go. I'll join them soon enough anyway. My time will come. Like everyone else's. No need to hasten the journey. But there is need to live my life the way they would want me to, savoring every moment.

Fortunately, my broker called this morning, finally confirming available funds from my liquidated crypto wallets. I need to show Ginger how special she is to me and that I can actually take care of her—not half-ass survival, unprepared and haphazardly.

My arms ache to hold her again and to see with my own two eyes how she's recovering. But first, I have to ensure our next meeting won't leave her with any doubts about my feelings.

Chapter

Fourteen

GINGER

C lick.

The door to my hospital room opens, and a handsome blond man carrying a bouquet of white daisies stands there, unmoving.

“Oh, thank you.” Flowers have poured in all day from family, friends, and the families of my first graders. I motion for him to put them with the others.

But he doesn’t move.

What is he waiting for?

I glance at him more closely, noting his height and broad chest and shoulders, which remind me of my burly mountain man. He wears olive drab khakis, black combat boots, and a tight-fitting black T-shirt. But I pull my eyes away quickly, refusing to let them linger, loyal to my wrongly imprisoned rescuer.

The deliveryman hesitates awkwardly, and I say, “Daisies are my favorite. Who are they from?”

He shrugs, our eyes locking. I would know those impossibly blue orbs anywhere and

that wicked tongue that darts out to wet his full bottom lip. My breath catches in my throat, and my hands cover my mouth as my heart stops in my chest, hovering and spasming.

“Well? Are you ready to punch me yet?” The grumpy mountain man grumbles, sauntering towards me as my eyes blur with tears.

“But who are you?” My voice trembles as he sits on the edge of my bed, drawing so close to me I’m certain he’s about to kiss me. But he doesn’t. Palming his cheeks, I search the Ranger’s face, hungrily devouring his newfound appearance.

“Your very devoted lover,” he says hesitantly.

My cheeks burn, radiating bashful joy. I smile from ear to ear, unsure of what to do.

Disappointment flickers in his eyes. “You don’t recognize me.”

“It’s a big change.”

“Is that why you’re not kissing me, Ginger?” he asks morosely, his brows furrowing. “In the cave, you stroked and kissed the shit out of my grubby, bearded face?—”

I silence his raw-voiced complaint with my lips, covering the distance between us and sliding my tongue passionately into his mouth. He closes his eyes, exhaling and chuckling deep in his throat. “That’s more like it.”

“And this and this...” I whisper, trailing my lips over his face. “I don’t know what to do without your beard. I liked running my fingers through it and holding onto it.” The last phrase heats my face, the words transporting me back to the cave. By the flush of his face, his mind dances over the same memories.

“So, I’m ugly without it?” he rasps, frowning.

“No, you’re gorgeous. Too gorgeous for me.”

“Never,” he growls, grabbing my chin and squeezing my cheeks as he leans into my mouth. His seeking, sensual tongue slips and slides over mine, covering me in delicious shivers of want from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes.

Between kisses, he confesses, “It’s okay. I still don’t recognize myself.” Setting the daisies on the side table, he stands, heading toward the chair on the other side of my bed.

“If you think you’re sitting there, you have another thing coming, Wild Man.”

He stops, raising his brows quizzically.

“Come lie in bed with me. I need to feel your arms around me.”

Roscoe eyes the space next to me with a lopsided grin. “We can’t both fit on there.”

“Please,” I beg. “Let down the railing, and I’ll scoot as far over as I can.”

“Ever the bossy Aries,” he chuckles as I shoot him a fiery glance. “But I don’t want to fuck up whatever they have going on.” He motions towards the nest of wires connecting me to machines.

“If you lie here, it should be fine,” I answer, patting the empty spot to my left.

He smiles broadly, shaking his head. “Whatever you need, Sweetness.”

“I need you, Roscoe.”

His forehead scrunches. “God, I was hoping you’d say that.” His eyes redden, emotion written on his face. I hold out my arms, frantic for his touch.

Letting down the railing, he climbs up beside me, more perching on the bed's edge than lying in it. He wraps his big, tanned arm around me with a pained groan, nuzzling my neck and kissing my cheek.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just hit where I got grazed. No biggie.”

“You mean, where you were shot? Are you okay?”

He nods, kissing my cheek. “It’s a skin wound, just a little tender.”

“If it hurts to lie like this?—”

“I’m good. Having you in my arms is the best painkiller on the planet, Sweetness.” He chases me further onto the bed, leveraging himself with a leg tangled over mine.

Tenderly, he tastes and teases the shell of my ear, whispering in raw tones, “Now, I finally feel like I’m home.”

“Baby, I’ve missed you so much.”

“And I’ve missed you,” he whispers, kissing my cheek and stroking my tresses. “I’ve been losing my mind without you.”

“So much happened after the fever. I don’t remember most of it.”

“I know,” he croons, kissing my forehead. “By the time I got you here, you were seeing and talking to people who didn’t exist. Your breathing and coughing got so rough, and your forehead burned my hand when I touched you.” He lets out a ragged sigh, squeezing me desperately.

“Mom said I was out for like two days. Bacterial pneumonia caused sepsis.”

“Oh, God,” he exclaims, squeezing me tightly. “I came so close to losing you.”

“You saved me, Roscoe.” I reach back, stroking his freshly shaven cheek and marveling at its softness. “But we’re all good now.”

“We’re all good,” he repeats. “Ginger, if we can make it through this, we can make it through anything.”

My heart overflows at his unexpected and hopeful words. This is what I need to hear from him. That he’s willing to take a chance on me and our feelings. That he’s ready to recommit to life and a future.

Turning, I shower his face in kisses, smiling through tears. “As long as we’re together, nothing can break us.”

“Agreed.” Roscoe threads his fingers through mine, nodding against my hair. “I’ve had a lot of time to think in jail ... about ways to become the man you deserve ... like getting help for my depression and PTSD.”

“You already are the man I deserve,” I whisper. “But I’ll support you in every way that you need.”

“And there’s a trip I want to take with you to Arlington National Cemetery to show you where the rest of my squad is.” His voice strains over the last part, and I bring his hand to my mouth, kissing his fingertips as tears streak my face.

“I would be honored to make that trip with you, Roscoe.”

“I want to do right by you, Ginger. And I don’t want you to ever doubt my commitment to you ... to us.”

“To life.”

He nods.

Silence fills the air, so many unspoken things between us. “I’m sorry,” I finally manage, breaking into an uncontrollable sob.

“What are you sorry for, Ginger? You’ve got no reason to apologize,” he shushes. Whispering comforting words against the shell of my ear, he makes my brain and spine shimmer with relaxation. This man’s presence, his physical touch, and his deep, steady voice are the antidotes to my anxiety.

“They falsely accused you of so much. The moment I woke up and understood what was going on, I called Dad for legal representation. But I can’t make amends for how the media has ruined your reputation or the five days you spent in jail or the charges you still face.”

“None of this is your fault. We’ll get through it together, making the most of our time on this planet and making as many babies as I can talk you into.”

I giggle, downright shocked by his words. “So, you want kids?”

“God, I want like ten of them with you,” he chuckles, covering my cheek in feather-light kisses.

“Ten? Wow!”

“You do want kids, right?”

“Yes, but maybe more like three or four.”

“I can work with that. Whatever makes you happy, Sweetness.”

We lie together for a long time, listening to the beeps of my monitors and relearning each other through sensually innocent touch, the strictures of the hospital room inflaming our need.

“God, when I get out of here,” Roscoe groans, licking my ear and nipping the lobe.

“I need you so much, baby,” I agree, but my voice goes hollow at the end, so much still weighing on me.

“What’s wrong, Sweetness?”

“Something unpleasant you may already know about. Hospital officials said I consented to a sexual assault forensic exam when I was admitted to the hospital. They wanted to use it against you as evidence... But I never consented to it. I don’t even remember being checked into the hospital.”

He growls, anger rising. “Attending staff separated us almost immediately, alerting local law enforcement to take me into custody. I was powerless to stop them. The nurses kept saying you could sign your own paperwork, even though I stated my concerns. Fuck! Did they hurt you, Ginger?”

“I don’t really remember it. But I hate how they tried to use it to frame you.”

“The lone wolf, ex-military assailant. It’s a cliché at this point. I suppose the DA thought he had an open and shut case.”

“Maybe, but I’ll never forgive myself for how rescuing me has hurt you.”

“Rescuing you has saved my life, Sweetness. It’s given me purpose, meaning, love beyond my wildest dreams, and a future I can’t wait to explore with you.”

“Good, because I can’t imagine living without you.” I bite my bottom lip to stifle a

sob.

Roscoe nuzzles my neck, kissing and teasing my décolletage with his wicked, warm tongue until he turns my sobbing into giggling. Ready to lighten the mood, I say, “I’ve been meaning to ask you this. Why do you call me ‘sweetness?’”

His fingertips, still entwined with mine, rise enough to graze over my hospital gown, teasing my nipples hard. I sigh heavily, the throb between my legs insistent.

He answers, “Because you’re the sweetest thing that’s ever happened to me in this lifetime and the thousand before that. But there are some other nicknames I want to run by you, too.”

I arch an eyebrow.

Roscoe whispers in raw tones, “Like husband and wife?”

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut to hold back tears. “I thought you’d be mad at me for all I put you through. I was so afraid you wouldn’t want me anymore ... or that the cave wasn’t as magical for you as it was for me.”

“Shh,” he whispers, stroking my forearm and sending sizzling sparks up and down my arms. “The cave is only the beginning for us, Ginger, because I can’t live without you, either.” He lets go of my hand, fishing something out of his pants pocket, which he holds up for me to examine. A stunningly clear, large, princess-cut diamond solitaire on a shiny gold band embedded with tiny diamonds.

I gasp as he slides it on my ring finger. “Did I do okay for a feral, off-grid mountain man?”

“Yes!” I exclaim. “It’s perfect. Beautiful.”

“No, the only perfect, beautiful thing in this world is you.”

“Oh,” a voice exclaims from the doorway to my hospital room, drawing our attention. My mother excuses, “I’m sorry to interrupt.”

Roscoe stiffens, jumping fluidly to his feet to greet her. “This is my mom, Florence,” I introduce. “Mama, this is Roscoe Vaughn, the man who saved my life and the man I’m going to marry.” I hold up my hand, the big diamond sparkling in the hospital room’s fluorescent lights.

My mother’s jaw hits the floor.

“Mrs. Harper, nice to meet you,” Roscoe greets, offering his hand.

She takes it tentatively, scrutinizing his face. “You look nothing like the pictures plastered online.”

“And I’ve done nothing like what they allege,” he adds with a firm nod.

“Well, then, I’m sorry for thinking the worst about you.”

“No need to apologize, ma’am.”

She shakes her head, covering the hand she still shakes with her other. “No, I have to. Because from what Ginger’s told me...” Her voice quavers. “I owe you a hug and a big thank you for saving my baby girl.” She wraps her arms unhesitatingly around him, and he leans down, gently patting her back.

“I would do it again in a heartbeat, Mrs. Harper,” he says as she lets go of him, and he straightens. “I’ve fallen in love with your daughter, and I plan on marrying her ... with your and Mr. Harper’s blessings.”

She frowns. “You have mine. But that old codger? He wouldn’t know what makes for a good marriage if it bit him in the ass.”

Roscoe stifles a surprised laugh as I shake my head.

Mama shoots me a look that says I have plenty of explaining to do. To Roscoe, she says, “Thank you for saving my daughter. I’m going to leave you two alone because you have lots of catching up to do, and I haven’t slept well in nearly a week.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mama,” I call after her. She nods as Roscoe hugs her goodbye before leaving.

Crawling back onto the bed to spoon me, Roscoe asks, “Now where were we?”

“Husband and wife.”

“And how about Mommy and Daddy?”

“You really do want babies,” I giggle.

He nods, grinning the widest I’ve seen since meeting him.

“And lover, always lover,” I add, snuggling back into him.

His hands drop to my waist, squeezing my hips and pressing my ass hard against his cock, which instantly starts growing. “I’d give my left arm to show you what this Scorpio lover can do. When are they discharging you?”

“Hopefully, tomorrow.”

“Good, because I’ve got a hotel suite next door with a private jacuzzi and lots of champagne that feels downright lonely without you.”

“That sounds heavenly.”

Roscoe frowns. “Although I hate that your dad’s paying for it...”

“Don’t. My dad’s swimming in so much dough, he doesn’t care.”

The Ranger growls, “That’s not how I work, Ginger. I plan on paying him back every cent for my legal fees, lodging, the barber. All of it.”

“No, baby. Everything Dad touches turns to gold.”

Roscoe mumbles, “He and I have that in common.”

“How so?”

He sighs, rubbing his hand over his chin. “I got into Bitcoin and other cryptos early ... way back when I was a grunt. It’s not something I dwell on. Wealth and all that. But it matters now, with a woman and future family to care for.”

“You are full of surprises,” I smile, stroking his cheek.

“Well, don’t you want to know how much I’m worth?”

I shrug. “Thousands?”

He chuckles. “Higher.”

“Hundreds of thousands?”

“Higher.”

I blink hard, shooting him a glance over my shoulder. “Millions?”

“Higher.”

“Hundreds of millions?”

“Something like that. I’m not much of a numbers guy.”

“But wait. If you have money, then why did you settle on a public defender and not post bail right away?”

“It took time to liquidate funds from my crypto wallets, something limited access to phone calls and the internet didn’t help.”

“Wait, you don’t get a certain number of phone calls daily?” I ask, my curiosity piqued. I know nothing about the ins and outs of incarceration.

“I used all my phone calls to contact this damn hospital for word on your condition. They wouldn’t tell me shit, which had me going out of my mind.”

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” I ask quietly, so surrounded by love I feel like I’m in a dream. A fairytale I recently read to my first-graders pops into my head, making me laugh with its relevancy.

“What is it, Sweetness?”

“You know that story, The Princess and the Frog?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re the frog.” I turn in his arms, showering his face in kisses.

He chuckles. “I’m not a fan of the frog reference. But the kisses, I’ll take.”

I giggle, kissing him some more.

Resignedly, he observes, “I guess comparisons to fairytales come with falling for a school teacher...”

“Absolutely.”

Naughtily pressing his firm rod into my ass, he says grumpily, “I’ll deal with it. This frog—or more accurately, horny toad—wants a whole hell of a lot more than kisses from his princess, though.”

“Mmm, like what?” I ask breathily.

“The princess needs to start out on her throne...”

I arch my brow.

“My face. And then I want to see you ride my cock hard while your gorgeous tits bounce, and I chase them with my mouth.”

“Yes,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his ear. “You’re all I want. All I need, Roscoe.”

“Always.” He feathers my face in kisses. “I love you, Ginger Harper.”

My voice catches in my throat as I stroke his cheek, staring into his cerulean eyes.

“And I love you, Roscoe Vaughn, forever .”