



Daddy of the Mountain

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: He's the gruff mountain man who saved her life.

She's the city girl stranded in his world.

Neither planned on the storm pulling them closer.

Alana's escape to Snowview was supposed to be a reset—a chance to breathe, away from the relentless chaos of city life. But when a hike goes disastrously wrong, she finds herself buried in snow and on the edge of survival—until Silas, a rugged recluse with a past as wild as the mountains, rescues her.

Recovering in his remote cabin, Alana quickly learns two things: Silas runs his life—and hers—with a firm hand, and his gruff exterior hides a side of him she never expected. His quiet dominance unsettles her as much as it draws her in, leaving her questioning everything she thought she knew about herself.

As the snow keeps falling, so do their walls. But Silas has secrets, and Alana has a life waiting back in the city. Can they weather the storm brewing between them, or will it tear them apart before they ever have a chance?

He's her only lifeline. She's his unexpected temptation. And neither is ready for what the storm will uncover.

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I arrived in Snowview just as dusk thickened the shadows between the trees. The cold hit me first—sharp, clean, and more honest than anything I’d felt in months. It clawed through my coat like it wanted to strip away every piece of the city still clinging to me. Good, I thought, let it.

The cottage was small, almost too quaint, but I barely dropped my bags inside before stepping back out. Sitting still wasn’t an option, not with this kind of energy crackling under my skin. Eighty-hour weeks and constant phone pings had left me hollowed out and buzzing all at once. My therapist said something about grounding exercises—"reconnect with nature" or whatever—but all I knew was I needed to move.

It wasn’t like she’d prescribed this trip for me, not exactly. She just strongly suggested Snowview as a place that I might like to visit.

“Sometimes,” she’d said, rolling her pen between fingertips, “we just need a reset. Something to shock our brain out of the usual patterns of anxiety and panic. A little time to remind you that you don’t need to be on the edge all the time.”

I’d scoffed, but when I’d googled the place, something about it called to me. A chance to explore. A chance to be completely out of my comfort zone. A chance to just be.

I took it.

At the edge of the property, a trail snaked up into the woods, disappearing between the firs like a dare. I decided I’d have a quick look. I’d walk the trail for half an hour,

then head back down, grab some dinner from a diner, and hit the hay. I was here to explore, and there was no time like the present.

I didn't bother taking my pack off. I'd packed lightly – a few changes of clothes, and my toiletries. I figured it would be good exercise to take it up the mountain with me. Burn some calories with the extra weight.

My boots crunched over old snow as I started climbing. The air burned my lungs, sharp and alive, and for once, I didn't hate the feeling. No emails here. No honking cars or fluorescent lights. Just me, the mountains, and the sound of my own breathing.

I tried that stupid breathing exercise she suggested: five counts in, hold, exhale slow. I could still hear my heartbeat pounding too fast, but at least it wasn't panic. Not this time. This was different. It felt . . . good, almost. Like my body remembered how to function without a dozen fires to put out.

The path narrowed as I went higher, pine needles brushing my sleeves. The scent hit me—crisp and green, with that faint bite of sap. I hadn't smelled anything like it in years. Maybe ever.

"Yeah," I muttered under my breath, "this is good."

The trail was barely a trail now, just a thin line of packed snow snaking between trees that seemed to crowd closer the farther I went. Fir branches hung low, heavy with frost, brushing my arms like they were trying to hold me back. The silence wrapped around me—no cars, no voices, no hum of streetlights. Just me. My boots crunching. My breath puffing out in little clouds.

I stopped and tugged at my scarf, fingers stiff with cold. Had it been this freezing when I started? I didn't think so. The kind of cold that settled into your bones had crept in while I wasn't paying attention. I glanced behind me, half expecting the

cottage lights to be there as a reassurance, but there was nothing. Just shadows swallowing the trail.

"Okay, Ally," I muttered under my breath, trying to sound casual, steady. "You've done hikes before. This is nothing."

But then the sky shifted. Clouds rolled in fast, thick and gray, blotting out what little light was left. One second, I could see the outline of the peaks above me; the next, they were gone. It was like someone had flipped a switch. I stared up, heart kicking against my ribs.

"Don't freak out," I whispered. My voice sounded stupid against the quiet. Weak.

Still, something about the way those clouds swallowed the sky made my stomach twist. Like I'd overstayed my welcome. Like the mountain wanted me gone.

I turned back toward the way I came—but paused. The air pressed down on me, heavy. Loaded. Maybe it was the sudden dark or the bite of the wind slicing through my jacket, but unease clawed its way up my spine. I couldn't shake it.

"Come on, it's just weather," I told myself. "Nothing's gonna—"

Snowflakes. Big, lazy ones drifting down at first, soft and harmless. Then more. Thicker. Faster. Within seconds, the trail blurred beneath the fresh layer. I pulled my jacket tighter and picked up my pace.

"Alright," I said, louder this time, as if hearing my own voice might help. It didn't. "I just need to head back."

The snow coated my sleeves, clung to my hair. My boots slipped on the hidden ice beneath the drifts, and I stumbled, catching myself on a tree trunk. The bark was

rough against my glove, grounding me for just a moment. Long enough to glance up and realize I couldn't tell where the hell I was anymore.

"Shit," I hissed, spinning in place. Which way had I come from? Every tree looked the same now—tall, straight, and endless. The narrow path I'd followed was buried under fresh snow.

I sucked in a breath, counting to five like the therapist taught me. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. But my lungs felt too small, my chest too tight. My heartbeat drowned out everything else, thudding in time with the panic rising in my throat.

The wind picked up, sharp and biting. Snow whipped sideways, obscuring everything in stinging white. Ice crystals pricked my face, slipping past the edges of my scarf. My feet trudged forward, aimless now. No landmarks, no direction—just the desperate hope that putting one foot in front of the other would lead me somewhere safe. Somewhere familiar.

"Get a grip," I rasped, but it came out as a wheeze. My breathing was shallow, each inhale catching like a hiccup. I tried again—five counts in, hold, exhale slow—but the rhythm slipped away, lost in the howl of the wind.

"Not now," I begged, clutching at my chest as the pressure built. My legs shook, exhaustion and panic teaming up to drag me down. My throat constricted, a vice squeezing tighter with every step.

This was so desperately, achingly unfair.

Ahead, the world dissolved into a swirling void of white. I stumbled again, knees buckling, and landed hard on one hand. Pain shot up my wrist, sharp and angry, but I barely noticed. I couldn't stop shaking. Couldn't catch my breath.

"Focus," I choked out, but my voice was barely audible over the storm.

The snow kept falling.

Then, things got a lot worse.

It was subtle at first—a low vibration, like the earth clearing its throat. Then it turned violent, a deep, guttural roar ripping through the forest. I froze, my breath catching mid-gasp as the sound grew louder, closer. The trees quivered and groaned all around me, snow slipping from their branches in thick sheets. For one wild second, I thought it might be an earthquake.

Then I saw it.

A wall of white thundered down the mountain, massive and unrelenting. It devoured everything in its path—trees, rocks, the very trail I'd been following moments ago. My legs moved before my brain caught up, scrambling aside, away from the crushing wave of snow. My boots slipped on the icy ground, panic clawing at my throat.

"Move! God, move!" The words ripped out of me, but the roar drowned them out.

I made it three frantic steps before my foot snagged on something buried beneath the drifts. A jagged rock. Pain shot up my leg, sharp and blinding, and I crumpled forward with a yelp. My hands dug into the snow, fingers clawing for purchase, but it was no use. The avalanche hit like a freight train.

The force slammed me sideways, stealing the air from my lungs. Snow poured over me, around me, a freezing, suffocating weight. My body tumbled like a rag doll, flipping and twisting until I didn't know which way was up. My ankle screamed in protest as I collided with something hard—a tree, maybe—but there was no time to process the pain. The cold was everywhere, pressing in, crushing, relentless.

"Help!" I tried to scream, but snow filled my mouth, choking me. My arms flailed uselessly, searching for anything solid to grab onto, but everything was soft and shifting and endless. White consumed me—blinding, smothering, numbing.

The world slowed. The roar dulled to a distant hum. My chest burned, begging for air that wouldn't come. Pressure built behind my eyes, and then... nothing.

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I woke gasping, but no air came. My lashes stuck together, frozen stiff. I could barely blink. Snow packed tight against my body, pinning me in place. My chest heaved, trying to expand against the crushing weight. Panic surged, hot and electric, making my heart jackhammer in my ears.

"Stay calm," I whispered, though the words were just a thread of thought. My lips wouldn't move. My tongue felt swollen, useless. I couldn't tell if I was speaking or dreaming.

My right foot throbbed, sharp and insistent. I tried to shift it, just a little, but the motion sent another jolt of pain screaming up my leg. Tears stung my eyes, but they felt wrong—too cold, freezing before they could fall. My head swam, the edges of my vision blurring.

This is it, I thought. This is how it ends. Buried alive in some godforsaken snowbank within two hours of arriving for a vacation that was meant to fix my brain.

Something shifted above me.

A shadow fell across my face, dimming the faint light filtering through the snow. My heart lurched, hope flaring weak and desperate. Was it real? Or just my oxygen-starved brain conjuring miracles?

A bear?

The shadow moved again, clearer now. Closer. A hand—rough, dirt-caked, strong—broke through the barrier of snow above me. I blinked, trying to focus, but my eyelashes were clumped with frost. The hand dug purposefully, pulling chunks of snow away with a quiet efficiency that felt almost surreal.

"Hold on," a voice grunted, low and gravelly, barely audible over the blood pounding in my ears.

Wait, bears don't talk.

The man's face came into view next—bearded, rugged, harsh lines softened only by the intensity in his eyes. They locked onto mine, sharp and unwavering. For a moment, I forgot the cold, the pain, everything. He looked like he belonged here, like he'd stepped straight out of the mountain itself. Real or imagined, he was my only chance.

"Please," I croaked, though I wasn't sure if the word made it past my lips.

He didn't respond, didn't hesitate. His hands started to work, digging me free with a strength and determination that left no room for doubt. Snow gave way under his grip, and suddenly, my chest could expand. I sucked in a lungful of air so sharp and icy it hurt, but it was the sweetest pain I'd ever felt.

"Stay still," he ordered, his tone rough but steady. Not unkind. Just firm.

I wanted to ask him who he was, how he'd found me, but the effort was too much. My eyelids drooped, heavy and uncooperative. I couldn't stop shivering now, trembling so violently it felt like my bones might rattle apart.

"Don't pass out." His voice cut through the haze. "You hear me? Stay awake."

Easier said than done. The darkness tugged at me, promising warmth, oblivion. But his hands were there, grounding me, pulling me back. Strong hands. Sure hands. Hands that promised safety, even here, buried in chaos.

"Almost got you," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

And then, just as quickly as he'd appeared, the weight of the snow disappeared. My body sagged, limp and useless, as he hoisted me out of the icy tomb. Warmth radiated from him, even through layers of snow-dampened wool. Against the biting cold, it felt like salvation.

The world swayed as he lifted me, my body limp and useless in his arms. I felt the jolt of movement, the shift from cold, unyielding snow to something solid—him. Coarse wool scratched against my cheek, carrying a faint scent of pine and smoke. My head lolled against his chest, and through the thick layers, I could hear it: the steady thump of his heartbeat. Alive. Warm. Real.

I tried to speak, to ask him who he was or how he'd found me, but my throat was raw, my lips frozen shut. A weak rasp was all I managed. He didn't answer—not a word or even a glance down at me. Instead, he adjusted his grip, one arm bracing under my knees, the other around my back. He carried me like I weighed nothing, like it wasn't a struggle at all.

The panic still gnawed at the edges of my mind, but relief started to seep in, slow and tentative. Someone had found me. I wasn't alone anymore.

The wind howled around us, angry and relentless. Snow lashed at my face, sharp and stinging. Branches scraped across his shoulders as we moved, the sound rough and hollow, like brittle bones snapping. I squinted against the storm, trying to make sense

of where we were going, but everything blurred together—white, gray, black. His steps were sure, deliberate, even as the ground tilted beneath us. I couldn't understand how he seemed so unaffected by the chaos raging around us.

My foot throbbed in time with my heartbeat, every pulse sharp and searing. The pain dragged me back into my body, made the cold feel sharper, the air thinner. I opened my mouth again, desperate to say something. Thank you. My name is Alana. Where are we going? But no words came out. Just a low, pitiful moan that made me cringe inwardly.

His arm tightened slightly, pulling me closer to his chest. It wasn't much, just a small gesture, but it silenced the panic clawing at my ribs. He knew. Somehow, in his silence, he knew. Whether it was fear or gratitude twisting inside me, he didn't let go. He kept walking, step after step, pushing through the storm like it was nothing more than an inconvenience.

"Stay awake," I thought I heard him mutter, his voice low and gruff, barely audible over the wind. Or maybe I imagined it. All I could do was press my face into his chest, breathing in the scent of damp wool and sweat, and hope he wouldn't let me slip away.

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The door banged shut behind us, cutting off the storm like a slammed book. The sudden quiet rang in my ears. I blinked, disoriented by the dim light from a single lantern swinging on a hook near the wall. The air inside was warmer—barely—but it carried the sharp, earthy scent of woodsmoke and something faintly metallic. My head swam.

He didn't pause. He ducked low, his broad shoulders brushing the edges of the doorway, then crossed to the fire in long, deliberate strides. I caught flashes of the

room: a roughly made table, a row of wooden hooks holding coats and gear, a stack of firewood that looked like it had been chopped by someone who didn't shy away from hard work. Everything felt raw, utilitarian. No wasted space. No frills.

"Down," he said, his voice gruff but steady.

Before I could process the word, he shifted me in his arms, crouching to lay me down on a bundle of blankets near the fire. The movement sent a fresh jolt of pain shooting through my ankle. I sucked in a sharp breath and bit down on a cry, but it forced its way out anyway—a hiss, shaky and involuntary. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

"Easy," he muttered, not looking at me. His hands were already moving, pulling another blanket over my legs like it was second nature. Like this wasn't the first time he'd hauled someone half-dead into this cabin.

"Wait—" I croaked, my voice barely above a whisper. "What—"

"Quiet." It wasn't harsh, exactly, but there was no wiggle room in that tone. His focus had already shifted. He crouched beside me, one knee planted on the floorboards, and reached for my injured foot.

"Hey—" My protest died as soon as his hands touched me. Gentle. Firm. Too warm against the freezing ache of my skin. He worked quickly, fingers untying the laces of my boot with practiced precision. I flinched when the boot slid free, the motion sending another spark of agony up my leg.

"Broken?" he asked, mostly to himself, his brow furrowed as he studied the swelling. His hands hovered for a moment, then pressed lightly along the bone. I gasped before I could stop myself.

"Sorry," he grunted. Not much sympathy in the word. Just acknowledgment. But his touch softened, thumb trailing just above the worst of the swelling like he could assess the damage without making it worse. His fingers were rough, calloused, but steady. No hesitation. Like he did this all the time. Like he knew exactly how much pressure I could take before it pushed me past the breaking point.

"Who—" I tried again, my voice cracking. "Who are you?"

"Don't move," he said instead. Again, no wiggle room. He stripped off his gloves, tucking them into his belt, and tore a strip of cloth from somewhere—I couldn't see where, my vision blurring from the pain.

"Hey," I managed, forcing the word out between shallow breaths. "You could—you could explain what's going on."

"Later." That one came with a glance. Brief but sharp. His eyes locked on mine, and for a second, the air shifted. Dark. Intense. Like he was sizing me up, deciding if I was worth answering or just another problem to fix. Then his focus snapped back to my foot.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, mostly to myself. But he heard. One corner of his mouth twitched—maybe amusement, maybe irritation. Hard to tell. He wrapped the cloth around my ankle, tight enough to make me wince but not so tight I couldn't breathe through it.

"Too swollen to splint for now," he said under his breath. His words were clipped, efficient, like narrating the situation helped him stay grounded. Or maybe it was for my benefit. Hard to say.

"Are you a doctor or . . . ?" The question trailed off, half-swallowed by the crackling fire and the tension knotting my chest.

"Not even close." This time, there was a trace of humor in his voice. Dry. Barely there. His hands lingered for half a second longer than necessary, cradling my foot like it might shatter under too much weight. Then he pulled back, sitting back on his heels, eyes still on me. Still assessing.

"That'll hold for now," he said. And just like that, he stood, towering over me again, his shadow flickering against the walls.

I wanted to sit up, to demand answers, to push back against the quiet control radiating off him like heat from the fire. But my body wouldn't cooperate. My ankle throbbed in time with my heartbeat, and my chest felt tight—like the panic from earlier was still lurking, waiting for its chance to pounce.

"Thank you," I said finally, the words barely audible.

He didn't respond. Didn't nod, didn't grunt. Just moved toward the fire, his back to me now, shoulders stiff and hulking in the lantern light.

He crouched in front of the stove, the scrape of metal on metal sharp as he swung open the iron door. The firelight spilled over his hands—big, rough, calloused—and up those forearms corded with muscle. He tossed in a log, and sparks leapt like startled fireflies. The cabin brightened instantly, shadows dancing across the walls.

I could see him better now. Really see him. Broad shoulders that stretched the seams of his flannel shirt. Hair that looked like it hadn't met a comb in years, tangled and wild, just like the scruff covering his face. Not a beard, exactly. More like a whole forest growing there, untamed. His profile was hard angles, his nose straight but a little too sharp, his jaw set like he'd never once smiled in his life.

He stoked the fire, and the heat pushed against my skin, almost too much but not quite. Outside, the snow hissed softly against the cabin walls. It sounded lonely.

Trapped. I shivered, the chill clinging to me from before. Or maybe it wasn't just the cold.

"Thanks again," I said, my voice small, unsure. It hung there in the room, unanswered. He didn't even glance back. Just closed the stove door with a solid thunk and stood, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"Right," I muttered under my breath. Still no reaction. Okay then.

Testing my weight, I shifted, trying to sit up straighter. Pain shot through my ankle, sharp enough to make me suck in a breath. But I couldn't stay here. Couldn't just... let him take care of everything like I was some helpless lump.

"I should go." The words stumbled out before I could catch them. "Back down the mountain. To my place."

His head turned, slow and deliberate, and those eyes—dark, unreadable—landed on me. They pinned me right where I sat, like he could see through every excuse I was about to throw at him.

"Storm's still going," he said, his voice low and rough, like gravel, wood-chip, the slow burn of coal .

"Yeah, I mean, I figured," I said quickly, feeling the heat crawl into my cheeks. "But it's not that far, right? My cottage's just . . ." I waved vaguely, though I had no clue which direction anything was anymore.

He shook his head. One firm motion. Final.

"No."

That was it. Just one word, clipped and absolute, like he was laying down some kind of law. My mouth opened, then shut again. What was I supposed to say to that?

"Look," I tried, softer this time, trying to keep the wobble out of my voice. "I just—I don't want to be a burden or anything. I can—"

"You're not movin'," he cut in, arms crossing over his chest. The movement made him seem even bigger somehow, like the whole cabin might shrink around him.

"Okay, but—"

"Don't argue."

The words weren't loud, but they didn't need to be. They landed heavy, final, punching all the air out of my lungs.

My cheeks burned hotter. Not just from embarrassment, though that was definitely part of it. There was something about the way he said it, the way he looked at me, that tangled me up inside. Like he wasn't just refusing—he was protecting . And dammit if that didn't do something to me.

"Fine," I snapped, because what else was I supposed to say?

"Good. Snow makes the trail impassable. Trees mean rescue choppers can't land. Your phone still working?"

I nodded.

"Tell your friends and family where you are. Afraid your stuck with me till things improve."

And just like that, he turned away, moving toward the cabinet like the conversation was already done. I glared at his back, my hands curling into fists in the blanket pooled around me. Part of me wanted to yell, to demand answers, to push back against that quiet authority rolling off him in waves.

But another part—the part still aching, shivering, and alive only because of him—stayed silent.

He moved before I could say anything else, pulling a thick woolen blanket from the back of an armchair near the fire. It was coarse and scratchy where it brushed my chin, but the weight of it settled over me like a promise. My body gave in immediately, muscles loosening without my permission.

"Stay put," he muttered. "Don't make your leg worse." He didn't even glance at me as he strode toward the cabinet by the far wall.

I thought about arguing, maybe throwing out some sarcastic quip to break the tension that seemed carved into this cabin like the grooves in the floorboards. But my throat felt tight, words stuck somewhere behind the lump of panic lingering there. Instead, I watched him move. His shoulders shifted under worn flannel as he rummaged through shelves, pulling out a tin and something metal. The clink of a pot on the stove followed.

The scent hit me first—sharp and herbal, earthy in a way that felt foreign and familiar all at once. Tea, maybe? My stomach growled faintly in response, though I wasn't sure if it wanted food or just the warmth of whatever he was making.

When he turned back, his hands were steady, one holding a steaming mug. He didn't hesitate, crossing the room in a few long strides and crouching to press it into my hands. His fingers brushed mine briefly—rough, calloused. I flinched, not because it hurt, but because I hadn't expected it.

"Drink," he said simply. That single word left no room for argument.

The heat seeped into my palms through the ceramic, chasing away the chill that refused to leave my bones. I brought it to my lips cautiously, the steam warming my face. The first sip burned a little, but the taste was surprisingly smooth, with hints of pine and something floral I couldn't name.

"Thanks," I mumbled, my voice barely audible even to myself. "What is this, herbal?"

He nodded. "Flowers. Herbs from near the cabin. Foraged in spring."

Spring was a while ago. So did he live here all the time? Alone?

I stared at him over the rim of the mug, trying to piece him together in my head. This man who had pulled me out of the snow like it was nothing. Who now hovered in his silent, gruff way, making sure I didn't keel over or freeze to death.

"Who are you?" The question formed in my throat but never made it out. My tongue betrayed me, tied up in knots of fear and exhaustion.

Instead, I kept staring. Watching the way his hands worked—efficient, deliberate. The way he didn't fidget or hesitate, every movement purposeful. There was something calming about it, even if he still scared the hell out of me. Not in a danger kind of way, though. More like . . . like standing too close to the edge of a cliff and knowing the drop might be breathtaking if you weren't so afraid of falling.

"How's your foot?" he asked suddenly, breaking the silence without turning around.

"Still attached," I said, hoping humor might mask how unsteady I sounded. It didn't.

"Good." He glanced over his shoulder then, just briefly, his gaze sharp and assessing. It pinned me in place more effectively than any avalanche could have. "Keep it that way."

"Wasn't planning on losing it," I muttered, but he'd already turned back, busying himself with another log for the fire.

"My name's Silas," he said, all of a sudden, as though he hadn't really meant to say it.

"Silas. I'm Alana."

He didn't reply.

The flames roared to life as he fed them, their glow painting his features in sharper relief.

I took another sip of the tea, the warmth spreading deeper now, dulling the ache in my chest. For the first time since the snow swallowed me whole, the panic coiled inside started to loosen. Just a little. Enough to let my shoulders sink into the blankets, enough to let my breath even out.

"Rest," he said, his voice softer this time, almost gentle.

"Bossy," I murmured, but the fight in me was gone. The mug slipped from my hands, and I barely registered him catching it before it fell.

My eyes drifted shut, the edges of the room blurring. I thought I saw him stand there for a moment, watching me, but maybe I imagined it. Maybe it was the firelight or the exhaustion playing tricks on me.

Either way, I felt it—the quiet, steady presence of him. Like a wall between me and everything I feared.

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The nightmare was always the same. I'd been having the same one every night for the past five years. The details were different, but the story was basically the same.

I was chased through a mirror maze by a monster I never saw. I could smell it, sense it, hear it, but every time it was about to catch me, I woke with a start.

This morning, waking was like swimming up from the bottom of a deep pool. It took me a moment for the adrenaline to wash away before I could where I was—and what had happened.

Then it all came rushing back. The snow. The avalanche. The man who I'd thought was a bear.

The fire was nothing more than glowing embers now, the kind that looked hot but gave off no real heat. The cabin was quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet that creeps under your skin. I shifted under the blanket, and cold air rushed in at the edges, biting at me. My ankle throbbed, a low, steady ache that matched the beat of my pulse.

I stretched a little, testing the stiffness in my body, and then it hit me—Silas. He wasn't there. No shadow by the stove, no low grumble of his voice bossing me around, telling me to stay put or rest. Just empty space. The whistle of wind snuck through the cracks in the cabin walls, thin as a well-sharpened knife.

"Silas?" My voice sounded small, tinny against the heavy wood of the place. It barely carried past the bed.

Nothing.

"Silas!" I tried again, louder this time, but it still didn't feel loud enough. The empty room swallowed the sound whole.

No creak of boots. No scrape of furniture. No answer.

I sat up a little, propping myself on my elbows. The blanket pooled in my lap, and the chill wasted no time sinking its claws into my skin. My heart picked up speed—not panic exactly, but something close. Nervous energy.

He'd told me to stay put. Ordered it, really. But what was I supposed to do? Lie here like some damsel in distress and wait for him to come back? That wasn't me. In the city, you couldn't just sit still. Sitting still meant falling behind, losing your edge.

I shoved the blankets off and swung my legs over the edge of the bed. The cold air bit at me immediately, sharp and unforgiving against my skin. My toes curled on instinct, searching for warmth that wasn't there.

"Okay," I muttered under my breath, bracing myself.

The first touch of weight sent a sharp lance of pain up my leg. White-hot and insistent. I sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. It wasn't unbearable, though. Not enough to stop me. Slowly, carefully, I shifted more weight onto my good foot, testing how much this busted ankle could take. Each step was a gamble—pain arcing with every move—but I didn't care. Lying there doing nothing? That wasn't an option.

"One step," I said softly, like giving myself instructions would keep me grounded. "Then another."

I hobbled forward, gripping the edge of the bed until I couldn't anymore. The room swayed slightly as I let go, but I stayed upright. Barely. My breaths came shallow

now, each one measured, deliberate. I'd been through worse. A breakup, a job layoff, my car breaking down during rush hour. This was just physical pain. Manageable.

The cabin opened up in front of me as I moved, piece by piece, like a puzzle fitting itself together. Tools hung neatly on wooden racks across one wall—a heavy axe, coiled ropes, fishing lines. Everything had a place, every item purposeful. Nothing like the cluttered chaos of my apartment back home. There wasn't a single thing out of order here, except my pack. I was glad he'd brought that with me. It meant I'd have a few changes of clothes at least.

I reached the table in the center of the room, my hand gripping the edge for balance. The wood was rough under my palm, but solid. Reliable. I leaned into it, letting some of the weight off my throbbing ankle. My eyes roamed again.

A wool coat hung near the door. Big. Definitely his. It looked heavier than anything I owned, built for weather that could kill you if you weren't prepared. Next to it, snowshoes leaned against the wall, their frames dusted with dried mud.

I could picture him out there now, trudging through the snow, face set like stone. Checking traps, maybe. Or scouting the storm's damage. He seemed like the type who didn't sit still, who thrived in this wilderness that had almost killed me.

My fingers tightened on the table. The ache in my ankle pulsed harder, matching the beat of my heart. But I stood there anyway, steadying myself, taking it all in. This place was raw. Practical. Every inch of it screamed survival.

Just then, I heard something. Faint, uneven, like static whispering through the cabin. I turned my head, careful not to jolt my throbbing ankle, and spotted it in the corner—a radio. Old-school, with big dials and a scratched-up speaker. Above it, taped to the wall, was a scrap of paper covered in blocky handwriting.

"Snowview Rescue," it read. Below that: "Deputy Archer—Local Law" and a few other scrawls that looked like frequency numbers.

I hobbled closer, every step a test of how much pain I could bite back. The ache flared sharp and hot, but curiosity won out. I leaned on the edge of the table near the radio for support, my fingers brushing against the cold metal surface.

It was weirdly comforting, this little piece of civilization in the middle of all this rugged isolation. A lifeline buried in static and snow. If I wanted to, I could use it. Call for help. Tell someone where I was. Maybe even get a ride out of here.

I straightened up slowly, the movement making me wince. My coat hung on the back of a chair nearby, slumped and still damp from yesterday. I reached for it, fumbling through the pockets until my fingers closed around the familiar rectangle of my phone.

The screen lit up, faint but functional. One bar of service. Barely there, but enough. Silas had said I should let people know where I was. It was a good idea. My bestie, Pam, would definitely want to know what was going on.

I tapped out a message with clumsy thumbs, my hands shaking slightly from the effort of standing and the lingering adrenaline buzzing under my skin.

"Caught in a storm. Rescued by a hot mountain man. Safe but stuck. Will explain later."

Pam would freak, but she needed to know I wasn't dead.

The reply came almost instantly. My phone buzzed hard enough to make me jump, and then her name flashed on the screen. Before I could blink, the ringtone followed, shrill and loud in the cabin's quiet.

Of course she was calling.

"Jesus, Pam," I hissed, fumbling to answer. "Hello?"

"Ally!" Her voice hit my ear like a fire alarm. High-pitched, frantic, pure Pam energy. "Oh my God, are you okay?! What happened? Are you hurt? Where are you?"

"Slow down," I said, leaning heavily on the table. My ankle throbbed harder now, but I ignored it. "I'm fine. Mostly. Just . . . stranded."

"Stranded where?!"

"Some cabin," I said. "Middle of nowhere. Got caught in a storm, twisted my ankle. This guy found me, carried me here. He's . . ." I hesitated, glancing at the door like he might barge in any second. "He's taking care of me. I think."

Pam went quiet for half a beat. Then her voice dropped into something suspiciously close to a purr.

"Taking care of you, huh?"

"Not like that!" I snapped, heat rushing to my face. "He's just—"

"Uh-huh," she cut in, clearly not buying it. "Let me guess. Tall? Broody? Built like a damn lumberjack?"

"Pam . . ."

"Don't you 'Pam' me! You're living my dream right now, Ally. Snowstorm, mysterious mountain man? Come on, tell me he's hot."

"Goodbye, Pam," I said, ready to hang up then and there.

"Wait, wait, wait!" she squealed. "Okay, fine, I'll stop. But seriously, are you sure you're okay? Do I need to call someone?"

I glanced at the radio again, its dials catching the dim light. Silas's coat hung heavy near the door, a quiet reminder of the man who owned it.

"I'm fine," I said softly. "Really. I think I'm gonna be okay. I've got two weeks off work. I'm hoping I'll be able to have at least a little vacation time while I'm here. At least it's peaceful."

"And this guy . . . what are we working with here? Details, Ally. Height? Beard? Chest situation?"

"Pam," I warned, though I felt heat rising to my cheeks as I pictured him again. "He's tall. Like, really tall. Dangerous-looking. Built like he chops trees for fun."

"Jesus Christ, girl. Are you sure this isn't a fever dream?" She laughed, this high-pitched squeal that made me want to hang up right there.

"I mean, yeah, he's good-looking, but he's also bossy as hell."

"Good-looking and bossy? God, you're killing me." Pam's voice dropped into something teasing, almost conspiratorial. "Total mountain Daddy energy, or am I reading too much into this?"

"Pam!" My face burned hotter, and I suddenly wished I could crawl under the table. "Can you not?"

"Why not? You're stuck in a snowstorm with a hot lumberjack who sounds like he'd

spank you for misbehaving. If that's not fate, I don't know what is."

"Goodbye." I reached for the phone, ready to end the call then and there.

"All right," Pam relented, though she still sounded skeptical. "But promise me you'll call if you need me."

"Promise."

I hung up, and tucked my phone into my pocket.

My attention drifted to a journal, resting on a desk by the window. My fingers brushed the leather cover. It was rough, like it had seen years of use. I flipped it open, my curiosity outweighing my better judgment.

The handwriting inside was sharp and angular, each stroke deliberate. No wasted space, no messy scribbles. The first few pages were filled with numbers and dates—weather patterns, snowfall measurements, things I couldn't make sense of. I turned another page and froze.

"February 3rd. Found three hikers near Bear Claw Ridge. Hypothermia was setting in. Got them to the ranger station before nightfall."

Another entry. Another rescue. This one detailed pulling a woman out of a ravine after she slipped on ice. Each story was written like a report: matter-of-fact, no embellishments. Just the facts.

So Silas had done this before. Saved people. Over and over again. My chest tightened as I ran my fingers over the ink, feeling the weight of every word. This wasn't a hobby for him. This was his life.

I leaned forward, scanning the next page. Something about snares—sketches of loops and knots, instructions on which trees were best for setting them. Then a page covered edge to edge with narrow sketches of animal tracks, their shapes labeled in neat block letters. Deer, rabbit, fox. There were notes on herbs too—"good for fever" next to one plant, "poison" scrawled under another.

My mind wandered to my cubicle back home. Beige walls, fluorescent lights. The only mountain there was the mountain of emails I couldn't care less about. I'd spent so much time chasing promotions, deadlines, numbers on a spreadsheet that would all blur together in a year. Meaningless. Compared to this—a life carved out of raw wilderness—it all seemed so small.

A slip of paper caught my eye as I turned the page. Not paper, I realized. Thicker than that. A photograph, folded neatly in half and tucked between two entries.

I hesitated, swallowing hard. This felt different. More personal. But my hand moved on its own, pulling it free.

The fold came undone easily, the creases worn soft with time.

A young woman smiled up at me from the photo. She was beautiful—bright eyes, wild hair tumbling over her shoulders, her face glowing with something I couldn't quite name. Joy, maybe. Or freedom. She stood against a backdrop of jagged peaks that looked eerily familiar.

But it wasn't her that made my breath catch.

It was him.

Silas.

Younger, lighter somehow. Not just in years, but in the way he carried himself. His face was softer, his smile easy and open. Like the weight he wore now hadn't yet settled onto his broad shoulders. He stood beside the woman, his arm slung around her waist, his expression practically radiating warmth.

I couldn't tear my eyes away. This wasn't the man who barked orders at me by the fire or loomed silently over the stove. This was someone else entirely, someone who knew how to laugh, how to love.

Before I could fold it back into place, the cabin door rattled hard in its frame, the wind howling against the seams. My head snapped up, heart lurching to my throat.

Then it slammed open.

Silas filled the doorway like a storm himself, broad shoulders dusted with fresh snow and cold air curling around him. His eyes cut through the room, sharp and dark, locking on me instantly.

Panic shot through me.

"Shit," I hissed under my breath.

My fingers fumbled with the journal, clumsy and frantic, trying to shove the photo back where it belonged. My hands shook too much, and the journal flopped shut, the edges of the picture sticking out in betrayal.

"Silas," I stammered, his name thick in my throat. My legs instinctively tried to backpedal, but my injured ankle screamed in protest.

The next second hit like slow motion.

My foot slipped, sending a bolt of pain up my leg, and I went down hard. The journal tumbled out of my grasp, the photo fluttering free as I hit the floor with a yelp.

Silas was on me before I could even attempt to scramble up. One second, the journal and photo were splayed out like damning evidence on the floor in front of me; the next, his hands were under my arms, hauling me upright like I weighed nothing.

"I told you to stay put." His voice was low, rough, but not loud. He didn't need volume to make me feel small.

I opened my mouth to explain, but his eyes pinned me in place. Dark, unyielding, and sharp enough to slice through whatever excuse I thought about offering. My stomach dropped. "I—"

"Save it." His tone left no room for argument as he lifted me off the ground in one smooth motion, his arms locking around me like steel.

"Wait!" I squirmed, heat rushing to my face. Being cradled like a child wasn't doing my pride any favors. "I was just—"

"Just what?" His brow furrowed, his jaw tight. He glanced down at the journal lying on the floor, the photo sticking out like a scarlet letter. Something flickered in his eyes—something raw and closed-off—and then vanished as quickly as it came. "You went diggin' where you shouldn't."

I winced. "Okay, yeah, but I wasn't—"

"Not a word," he growled, cutting me off again as he carried me back toward the bed. The muscles in his arms flexed under my weight, his strength so effortless it made me shiver.

"Silas, I'm fine. Put me down." I hated how breathless I sounded.

"Fine? You're on the damn floor, clutchin' your ankle like it's hangin' by a thread," he shot back, not even breaking stride.

"That's dramatic. It's not hanging by a thread."

"Could've fooled me, hobblin' around here like you got somethin' to prove." He stopped short at the edge of the bed, his gaze hard and unreadable. "What part of 'stay put' don't you understand?"

"All of it," I snapped, trying to wriggle free.

Big mistake. Pain lanced up my leg, sharp and unforgiving. I sucked in a hiss of air, too stubborn to cry out.

"Jesus," he muttered, lowering me onto the mattress like I was made of glass. "Look at you. Hurtin' yourself worse just to be contrary."

"Contrary?" I bit out, my face burning with equal parts pain and humiliation. "I'm not some . . . some damsel waiting for rescue, okay? I'm perfectly capable of—"

"Of what? Fallin' on your ass again?" His brows knit together, and for a moment, I couldn't tell if he was angry or amused. "Newsflash: this ain't your office downtown. You can't sweet-talk your way outta gravity."

I bristled. "Hey. You don't know I work in an office!"

"Am I wrong?"

I pouted. "That's not the point."

“Whatever you say, city girl.”

"Don't call me that," I said through gritted teeth, glaring up at him.

"What, city girl?" He smirked faintly, the first crack in his stern facade. "What else should I call you? Reckless? Stubborn? Trouble?"

"Alana works just fine," I shot back, crossing my arms over my chest even though my ankle throbbed like hell.

"Trouble suits you, though," he said, his voice dripping with dry humor. But then his expression sobered, and he crouched down in front of me, his elbows resting on his knees as he met my glare head-on. "Listen close, Alana. You don't gotta like me, but while you're under this roof, you'll do as I say. Clear?"

"Crystal," I spat, even though my blood boiled at the calm authority in his voice.

“You don't want to be here. I don't want you here. Let's get you fit and out of here.”

“Sounds good.”

“So stay put,” he said again, quieter this time but no less firm. And then he walked off, leaving me simmering in a mix of frustration, shame, and something I didn't want to name.

I bit my lip, hard. My chest burned with frustration—at him, at myself, at the mess of feelings I didn't want to unpack. The ache in my ankle throbbed like a warning, but it wasn't enough to stop the heat rising in my cheeks. “I'm sorry,” I muttered, barely audible over the crackle of the dying fire. “I shouldn't have gone through your stuff.”

His eyes shifted toward the journal and the photo still lying on the floor. For a

second, just one, something flickered across his face—something raw and too quick for me to name. Then his gaze sharpened, locking onto me like a hawk sighting prey.

“I oughta tan your hide.” His voice was quiet, low enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It wasn’t just the words—it was the weight behind them, the way they hung in the air like a challenge.

My stomach did this stupid flip, and for reasons I couldn’t explain, my body felt like it was on fire. I should’ve been angry. Offended. Anything but . . . this. But instead, that strange thrill sparked deep in my chest, sending a shiver straight down my spine. I hated it. Hated the way my pulse quickened under his stare. Hated the way something in me whispered, Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad for him to tan your hide .

“You wouldn’t dare,” I said, though my voice came out too soft, almost breathless. Damn it.

His brows lifted, and one corner of his mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but close enough to make me bristle. “Wouldn’t I?” he asked, dragging the question out slow, deliberate. He crouched again, picking up the journal and the photo with the same care you’d use to handle glass. When he stood, his towering frame blocked out everything else, leaving just him and that unbearable tension hanging between us.

For a moment, it looked as though her was going to say something. He sighed.

"Just stay put," he repeated. "I've got logs to split."

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The snow fell so thick it swallowed the world outside. Even through the frost-rimmed window, I couldn't see much past the porch. Just a blur of white and the faint outline of trees hunched against the storm.

Inside, the cabin was quiet except for the scrape of Silas's knife against the whetstone. He sat at the table, head bent low, his dark hair falling forward as he worked. The blade caught the firelight now and then, flashing briefly before settling back to dull steel. His shoulders were broad under that flannel shirt, moving slightly with each stroke, deliberate and steady. Everything about him seemed deliberate. And steady.

I shifted on the bed, the movement sending a dull ache up my leg. My ankle still throbbed, but the sharp edge of the pain had dulled over the last day or two. I could move it now without wanting to scream, though Silas didn't seem eager for me to test it too much. Rest, he'd said when I tried standing yesterday. That one word, spoken in his gruff tone, had been enough to send me back down, biting my tongue.

He didn't talk much—barely more than a grunt here or there—but he moved around the cabin like he'd lived in every corner of it for years. Maybe he had. The way he knew exactly where to find things, how to keep the fire burning just right, even the way he handled the knife—it all felt practiced. Natural. Like the mountains themselves had shaped him.

"You're starin'," he said without looking up.

My face went hot. "I wasn't," I mumbled, glancing away.

"Uh-huh." He set the knife down, the soft clink of metal on wood louder than it should've been in the quiet. "You hungry?"

Before I could answer, he was already moving toward the stove. The heavy boots he wore barely made a sound on the wooden floor, which seemed impossible given his size. He lifted the lid off a pot and stirred whatever was inside with a long-handled spoon. Steam rose, carrying the scent of something earthy and rich that made my stomach growl.

"Rabbit," he said, answering the question I hadn't asked. "And some herbs. Not fancy, but it'll stick to your ribs."

"Sounds good." My voice came out softer than I meant it to, almost shy. I hated that. Hated how small I felt around him sometimes, like I didn't belong in the same space.

He ladled some into a bowl, chipped along the rim, and brought it over to me. His hand brushed mine as I reached for it—not on purpose, just a quick, accidental touch—but it sent a little jolt through me anyway. I kept my eyes on the stew, pretending not to notice.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

"Mm." He grunted, already turning back to the stove.

The first bite was . . . different. Gamey, yes, but not bad. It coated my tongue with warmth that spread down to my stomach, chasing away the last bit of chill in my bones. I ate slowly, trying to make it last.

"You know how to cook," I tried again, aiming for casual.

"Been livin' off this mountain a long time," he said, his voice quieter than usual. For

once, he wasn't brushing me off completely.

"How do you know what's safe to eat?"

He looked at me then, really looked, like he was deciding whether or not to bother answering. Finally, he leaned back against the counter, arms crossed. "Trial and error. You learn quick what works. What doesn't."

"Like those herbs you use?" I pressed.

"Some help with flavor," he admitted. "Others keep you from gettin' sick. Pine needles'll fight off scurvy if you steep 'em right. Birch bark can help with fever."

"Scurvy? What are we, pirates?"

"Could be worse." There was a flicker—just a flicker—of amusement in his eyes. Gone almost as soon as it appeared.

"Still," I said, holding the bowl close to my chest, "it's impressive. Most people wouldn't have a clue."

"Most people don't stick around long enough to learn."

"You know they have a walmart down in the town."

He smirked. "Not really one for . . . talking."

Every few bites, I glanced at him, watching the way he moved. There was something careful about him, even in the smallest gestures. Like he was always holding himself back.

"So, how long have you been up here?" I asked after a while.

"Long enough." He didn't look at me, just added another log to the fire, the sparks flaring briefly before settling again.

"By yourself?"

"Mostly." Short answers, clipped. Like he didn't want me prying too deep.

"Must get lonely," I said, testing the waters.

"Doesn't bother me." He turned then, fixing me with those dark eyes of his. They weren't unkind, exactly, just . . . unreadable. Like the snow outside. "Eat your stew."

I bit my lip, swallowing the retort that bubbled up. Fine. If he wanted silence, he could have it. But that didn't stop the questions buzzing in my head, louder than ever. Who was he? Why did he stay up here, alone and half-wild? And why, despite his gruffness, did I feel so safe with him?

The cabin pressed in on me. Four walls, a low ceiling, and the creak of wood under my restless steps when I dared to stand. Every inch was familiar now—the stack of rough-cut logs by the fireplace, the battered tin kettle on the stove, the single chair that groaned under Silas's weight when he sat. Even the shelves, lined with tools and books too worn to read without squinting, had become part of the scenery.

It had been days now, maybe a week—I wasn't sure anymore. The snow outside fell in relentless waves, soft and steady, muffling everything. Silas moved around me like one of the shadows cast by the firelight, quiet, deliberate. He didn't talk much, and when he did, it was all short answers and gruff instructions. Rest your ankle. Stay put. Let me handle it.

I hated him handling everything.

But I couldn't deny his care. The man had patched me up, fed me, kept me warm. And my ankle? Better every day. Still tender when I pushed too hard, but bearable now. I could stand, even walk a little when he wasn't looking. He didn't have to know.

Outside the window, the storm finally loosened its grip. The snow eased into thin streaks, drifting lazily against the glass. Pale light crept through the trees and spilled over the cabin floorboards.

Silas stepped out again early that morning, muttering about kindling or traps. He never explained much, just grabbed his gear and left. The door had closed behind him with a low thud, leaving me alone.

And this time, something shifted.

I stared at the door for a good five minutes. Maybe more. My breath came quick, chest tight with... I don't know what. Curiosity? Defiance? Both? My pulse thudded hard enough I could feel it in my ankle.

"Just look," I told myself under my breath. "You're not breaking any rules if you just look."

His coat hung by the door, thick wool, worn soft in some places and scratchy in others. It smelled faintly of pine and smoke—his smell. I slipped it off the hook and swung it over my shoulders. It swallowed me whole, the hem brushing my knees, the sleeves dangling past my hands.

"Perfect," I muttered, tugging the collar closer to my face.

The door gave way easily, barely protesting as I eased it open. Cold air rushed in, sharp and biting, cutting through me like a blade. I sucked in a breath, unprepared for how crisp and clean it tasted. It stung my lungs, but in the best way, waking me up better than any coffee ever had.

One step forward. Then another.

The porch creaked under my weight, the sound startling in the quiet. I hesitated, glancing back over my shoulder, half-expecting to see Silas standing there, arms crossed, scowling. But the cabin was still. Empty.

"Get a grip, Ally," I whispered, shaking my head.

Snow spread out in every direction, untouched and glittering like crushed glass. The forest beyond seemed to lean in close, branches heavy with frost.

The valley stretched out below me, endless and quiet, like something from a dream. I hadn't expected it to look like this—so vast, so untouched. It was the kind of beauty that made your chest hurt, like you couldn't take in enough of it no matter how hard you tried. Pines dusted with snow dotted the slopes, their dark green needles poking through the white, and far-off ridges rolled one after another, fading into pale blue shadows.

I pulled Silas's coat tighter around me, the heavy wool swallowing my frame. My ankle throbbed, a dull, nagging ache, but I ignored it. Just a few more steps, I thought, my boots crunching softly against the snow. I needed to see more. To feel more. The porch was too confining, too small. Out here, the air was sharp and bracing, cutting through the fog in my head. I felt alive again, awake in a way I hadn't since before all this started.

Testing my weight carefully, I stepped past the edge of the porch, where the snow

grew thicker. My breath puffed out in front of me in little clouds as I moved forward, slow and deliberate. The slope dipped gently ahead of me, leading toward the treeline. If I could just reach it, I'd have a better view of the valley, maybe even spot a trail or some sign of where we were.

"Almost there," I murmured under my breath, though no one was listening. Another step, then another. The snow crunched differently here, giving slightly underfoot. I winced as my ankle protested, but I didn't stop.

And then, just as I reached the first tree—a towering pine draped in frost—I heard it. A low, steady crunch, deliberate and measured, coming up behind me. My stomach dropped. I froze mid-step, heart hammering as I turned.

Silas stood there, arms full of kindling, his broad shoulders cutting an imposing figure against the stark white backdrop. His face was unreadable at first—eyes fixed on me, mouth set in a hard line. The silence between us stretched, thick and heavy, until the disappointment hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Did I say you could be out here?" His voice was quiet and calm, but there was an edge to it, sharp enough to make me flinch. The steel in his words left no room for argument, no space to wiggle my way out of what I'd done.

"I was just—" The excuses tumbled out before I could stop them. "I wasn't going far. My ankle's fine. I just needed some fresh—"

"Don't." He cut me off without raising his voice. The kindling shifted in his arms as he took another step closer, boots crunching against the snow. His eyes pinned me in place, unblinking, unrelenting.

Heat crawled up my neck, pooling in my cheeks. I wanted to argue, to fire back with something sharp and defiant, but the words died on my tongue. Under that gaze,

every excuse, every justification I'd rehearsed in my head felt flimsy and childish.

"Get back to the cabin," he said finally, voice low but firm. He didn't yell. He didn't need to. The weight of his disapproval hung heavy in the air, pressing down on me harder than any raised voice ever could.

The cabin door groaned on its hinges as I pushed it open, stepping inside and shrugging off his coat. It slipped from my shoulders and landed in a heap by the hearth. I didn't pick it up. My ankle throbbed, sharp and insistent now, but I kept my chin high, refusing to limp no matter how much it hurt.

He came in after, his presence filling the small room like a storm cloud rolling in. The kindling hit the floor by the hearth with a dull clatter, and then he turned to face me.

"You know better." His voice was low, calm, but there was nothing soft about it. Each word landed heavy, clipped, like stones dropping one by one into a quiet pond. "You're hurt. Could've slipped, done more damage. Or the snow gives way beneath you. Or you get turned around. Get disorientated."

I swallowed hard, my mouth dry. Heat prickled the back of my neck as his words sank in. He wasn't yelling—he didn't need to. That steady tone, so matter-of-fact, made it worse somehow. Like I'd failed some unspoken test. Like I'd let him down.

"I wasn't gonna—" I tried, but he cut me off with a look. That sharp, unrelenting gaze pinned me like a butterfly under glass. My stomach twisted.

"Don't start," he said, shaking his head once, slowly. "Not out here. Not when the stakes are this high." There was something in his eyes—something certain, grounded—that made it impossible to argue. He reminded me of a teacher, the kind who didn't lose sleep over whether their students liked them or not. They just did what needed doing.

And yet . . . there was something else, too, underneath the frustration. Something almost tender, though I couldn't quite put my finger on it. That warmth fluttered in my chest again, confusing and unwelcome, making it harder to hold on to my indignation.

"Come on," he said, stepping closer. His hand found my arm—not rough, not gentle either, but firm, steady. The kind of grip that didn't leave room for questions. He guided me across the room, his touch warm even through the fabric of my sweater. I didn't fight him. Couldn't, really. My ankle protested every step, and the heat in my cheeks felt unbearable.

"Sit," he said, nodding toward the chair in the corner.

I stopped short, crossing my arms tight against my chest. "I don't need to—"

"Sit," he repeated, his voice calm but unyielding.

My jaw tightened, and for a moment, I thought about pushing back. About doing exactly the opposite, just because I could. But his gaze never wavered, steady and resolute in a way that made my chest ache. I hated that. Hated how easily he could strip away all my defenses with just a look.

"Fine," I muttered, dropping into the chair with a graceless thud. The wood creaked beneath me, loud enough to make me wince. I crossed my arms tighter, glaring at the floor like it had personally offended me.

He crouched by the hearth, stacking the kindling carefully, piece by piece. His movements were slow and deliberate as always. "No more sneakin' around, no more doin' as you please when you know better. I know you don't want to be here, but I'll be damned if I let you hurt yourself again on my watch."

I rolled my eyes before I could stop myself. It was instinct—one last little rebellion. His lips pressed into a thin line, but he didn't rise to it. Just shook his head slowly, like I'd only proven his point.

"Are we clear?" he asked, his tone steady but firm enough to make my chest tighten.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, fighting back the urge to snap something smart. My pride screamed at me to push him, to remind him I wasn't someone who took orders well. But the weight of his gaze pinned me where I sat, and for reasons I couldn't fully explain, I nodded.

"Good," he said, like that settled it.

It didn't, not for me. My pride was bruised raw, and the quiet between us only made it worse. I shifted in the chair, the wood creaking under me again. Testing him felt inevitable, like poking at a bruise just to see how bad it hurt.

"And . . . what if I don't agree?" I asked, tilting my chin up. The words came out sharper than I intended, but I didn't care.

Silas didn't answer right away. He inhaled slow, deliberate, like he was counting to ten in his head. Then, finally, he let the breath out and met my eyes. "Then you sit there longer," he said simply, like it wasn't even a question.

I glared at him. The nerve. My fingers curled against the arms of the chair, nails biting into the rough wood. He didn't flinch. Didn't budge an inch. Just stood there, solid as the damn mountain itself.

I thought about what he'd said before, back when I was rummaging through his stuff. That threat still lingered in the back of my mind, taunting me. My chest tightened at the memory, heat creeping up my neck. If he wanted to act like the big boss, fine.

Two could play that game.

“What about what you said before?” I asked, my voice dropping lower, testing the waters. “That you oughta spank me for rummaging in your things.”

His eyes narrowed, dark and sharp as a hawk’s. For just a second, a flicker of surprise crossed his face, gone so fast I almost missed it. My heart kicked up, uneven and too loud in the quiet room.

"Don't tempt me," he said, voice low and steady, like a warning bell muffled under snow. His arms folded across his chest, broad and unyielding. There wasn't that dangerous edge I half-expected—not the kind that made you shrink back. No, this was something different. Controlled. Measured. Like he knew exactly how much weight his words carried.

I swallowed hard. My heart hammered anyway, too stubborn to listen to reason. "Why not?" The question slipped out before I could stop it, sharper than I intended. Testing him again. Pushing, just to see if he'd push back.

"Because I don't give spankings for foolishness." He didn't miss a beat, his tone flat and final. "Not like this. Not when you're hurt and just bein' contrary."

The words landed somewhere deeper than I thought they would. My chest tightened against the sting of them. Contrary. Foolish. My throat bobbed as I swallowed the heat rising behind my cheeks, but it wasn't anger this time. It was . . . something else. Something I couldn't name.

"Shame," I muttered, looking away—anywhere but at him. My voice wavered, though I hated it for doing so. "Lesson like that might sink in."

His calmness burned hotter than any anger could've. How did he manage that? To

make me feel reckless and small with nothing more than a steady look and a few clipped words? I'd expected him to puff up, yell, maybe even prove he was the brute I tried to paint him as in my mind. Instead, he stood there like stone, the weight of his presence enough to pin me in place.

"I doubt that," he said, softly.

"Why not?" I shot back, sharper this time. My chin lifted, defiant again. "I can learn."

His shoulders rose with a slow inhale. He shook his head once, then turned toward the stove. The movement dismissed me without saying a word. He crouched by the fire, reaching for the poker to stoke the embers. Metal scraped against metal, loud enough to fill the space between us.

"Because you're not in the right headspace," he said finally, without turning around. The clank of the poker against the iron stove softened his words, but I heard them clear as day. "And I'm not punishin' you for the sake of punishin'. I'm keepin' you safe. That's all."

"Safe," I repeated under my breath, the word sticking to my ribs like honey. It didn't sound real coming from him. Didn't match the picture I'd built of this gruff, untouchable mountain man who lived alone with his ghosts. But there it was, plain as anything. Safe.

"Yeah," he said, standing upright again. He tossed another log into the flames, the wood popping under the heat. "Safe." He turned back to face me, brown eyes darker now in the flickering light. "Not scared. Not humiliated. Safe. Now, let me see that ankle. You're probably fine, you can probably walk on it. But I want to check."

He crouched in front of me, rough hands steady as he unwound the bandage around my ankle. The firelight threw sharp lines across his face, catching on the curve of his

jaw and the furrow of his brow. I wanted to look anywhere else—out the window, at the books stacked against the wall—but his closeness pinned me in place.

"Keep still," he muttered, voice low, like gravel dragging under boots. His fingers brushed my skin, light but deliberate, and I flinched before I could stop myself. He didn't comment, just kept working, peeling back the fabric until my swollen ankle was bare again.

"Doesn't hurt that bad," I said, more out of habit than truth. My ankle throbbed, a deep ache radiating up my leg, but saying it aloud felt like giving him one more thing to hold over me.

"Uh-huh." His grunt didn't even pretend to believe me.

"You call this bedside manner?" I shot back, sharper than I'd intended. His lips twitched, almost a smirk, but it was gone before I could be sure.

"This ain't a hospital, Ally. You want sweet words and hand-holding, you're in the wrong place."

I hated how my stomach flipped when he said my name. "Noted," I said, crossing my arms tighter over my chest. The corner of the chair dug into my back.

He finished tying off the bandage, sitting back on his heels to study his work. For a second, he didn't move, didn't say anything, just stared at my ankle like it held the answer to some question he hadn't asked yet. Then he stood, towering over me again.

"That'll hold," he said. "Long as you don't go sneakin' off again."

"Didn't sneak," I muttered, knowing full well it wasn't true. His eyes narrowed, and I squirmed under the weight of his stare. "I was just looking at the view."

"Don't test me, Ally." His voice dropped, soft but firm. It sent a shiver down my spine.

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled, waving a hand like I couldn't care less. But my pulse jumped when he stepped closer, close enough that I caught the faint scent of pine and smoke clinging to him. My breath hitched, and I hated myself for it.

"Look at me," he said, quiet but commanding.

I dragged my gaze up, slow, defiant, daring him to call me out. His brown eyes locked onto mine, steady as bedrock. No anger there, just . . . intensity. Like he could see straight through all my bravado.

"Next time you pull somethin' like that," he said, voice low enough to make the hair on my arms stand up, "you're gonna regret it. Clear?"

"Crystal," I snapped, trying to sound braver than I felt. His mouth curved again, that almost-smile that wasn't quite kind.

"Good." He turned away, walking back toward the stove with an ease that grated on me.

My cheeks burned hotter than the fire.

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The next day, my ankle definitely felt a little better, and the snow was getting less thick. When I'd first met Silas, I worried that he might be kidnapping me. But the longer I spent with him, the more I felt as though I really could trust him.

"Soon as the weather breaks, and you're back on your feet, we'll get you back down to Snowview," he said. And weirdly, the more he said it, the more I felt as though I was going to miss him.

Today, the cabin smelled like bacon grease and soap. I sat on the stool by the sink, my foot propped up on a stack of towels, swirling a chipped mug through the soapy water. My reflection wobbled in the suds—red hair tied back in a messy knot, cheeks pink from the heat of the fire across the room.

I'd insisted on helping, but that didn't mean that Silas wasn't bossing me around.

"Don't slosh it around too much," Silas said over his shoulder. He was at the stove, spatula in hand, flipping something in a pan. His voice was soft, though still rough as sandpaper.

"Yes, sir," I muttered under my breath, but not quiet enough. He turned his head just slightly, one thick eyebrow lifting, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he exhaled sharply—more huff than sigh—and went back to cooking.

I pressed my lips together to keep from smirking. That little flicker of annoyance felt like a win. I could live with that. Better than the cold silence or barked orders from before.

"Here." I held out the first plate, dripping slightly despite my best efforts. He reached for it, arm brushing mine for half a second. Warmth prickled along my skin, unexpected, and I pulled back too fast, splashing water onto my lap. "Crap," I hissed, grabbing a nearby towel.

"Careful," he said, low and gruff, glancing at me sideways. There was something unreadable in his face, but he turned back to the stove before I could figure it out.

By the time we finished, the space between us felt . . . easier. Not friendly, exactly, but less sharp-edged. The kind of quiet you don't mind sitting in, even if you're not sure why.

"Time to rest your ankle," he said once the dishes were done. He grabbed his knife and a chunk of wood from the windowsill, pulling up a chair by the table. No argument this time—just a quick nod in my direction, like he'd already decided we were done talking for now.

"Bossy," I said lightly, testing the waters.

"Stubborn," he shot back without looking up, his pocketknife flashing silver in the firelight. But there was no bite to it. His lips twitched, almost smiling. Almost.

"You, uh, made a lot of noise in the night."

My cheeks flushed pink. "Yeah, I have nightmares."

"Sound scary."

"Yeah. I always have the same one."

"Every night?"

I nodded.

“That must suck.”

“Yep. Still. Nothing I can do about it.”

I let myself relax against the blankets on the bed, dragging one across my lap for warmth. The fire popped softly, filling the room with a golden glow.

This wasn't exactly how I'd expected to be spending my vacation. Still, I had a feeling that my therapist might approve. I felt more stress-free than I had in years.

My eyes wandered to the shelves above the fireplace—mostly tools and knickknacks, but there were books too. I leaned forward, squinting. One of them had a worn green cover, corners curled like leaves pressed too long in a book.

"Mind if I . . . ?" I asked, pointing at the shelf. He glanced up briefly, then shrugged.

"Knock yourself out."

It wasn't much of an invitation, but I took it anyway. Hobbling over, I pulled the paperback free, dust puffing into the air. It wasn't what I expected. No romance, no thrillers. Just writing about wildlife and mountains—the kind of thing you'd find in a visitor center, probably. Still, it was better than staring at the walls.

"Interesting taste," I said as I settled back down, cracking the spine open. He didn't respond, just kept whittling, curls of wood piling on the table like fallen feathers.

"Alright," I started, clearing my throat. The words felt strange in my mouth—scientific and dry—but they filled the silence. "‘Northern spotted owls tend to roost in old-growth forests, favoring dense canopies and abundant prey.’"

"Mm," came his noncommittal grunt. But his hand paused, knife hovering mid-cut.

My voice softened as I read, falling into the rhythm of it. "'Their feathers provide natural camouflage, allowing them to blend seamlessly into the bark of towering Douglas firs.'"

"True," he murmured, barely audible. His knife moved again, slower this time, deliberate. He wasn't looking at me, but I could feel him listening. Something about it made my chest tighten, like I'd stumbled onto a secret without meaning to.

"Do you see them a lot?" I asked, pretending to skim the next page while watching him out of the corner of my eye. "Owls?"

"Sometimes." His answer was clipped, but not dismissive. His shoulders eased, just slightly, as if the topic itself brought him some kind of peace. "Mostly hear 'em at dusk. They stay quiet otherwise."

"Smart birds. No backchat," I said, flipping to another essay. His lip twitched again, almost a smile. Almost.

Silas stood by the stove, his back to me, shoulders broad and rigid as always. I heard the scrape of a tin on wood, then the soft clink of something stirring.

A delicious smell filled the space. Sweet and spicy and . . . chocolatey.

When he turned, there was a mug in his hand—ceramic, chipped along the rim. Steam curled lazily from its surface, carrying a faint, sweet scent that made my mouth water before I even knew what it was.

"Here," he said, gruff as ever, holding it out.

I blinked. "What's this?"

"Hot cocoa." He hesitated, like the words felt strange in his mouth. "Had some stashed away."

"Seriously?" My voice came out higher-pitched than intended, more surprised than I wanted to admit.

"Just take it," he muttered, eyes darting toward the fire instead of me.

I reached for the mug, careful not to brush his fingers, though they lingered on the handle a second too long. The ceramic was warm against my hands, and the scent hit me full force now—rich and luxurious, with just a hint of something earthy beneath it.

"Thank you," I said softly, suddenly unsure what else to say. He nodded once, already stepping back, but instead of retreating to his usual spot at the table, he sat down on the edge of the bed. Not close enough to crowd me, but closer than ever before. Close enough to feel the weight of him beside me.

I sipped the cocoa. It was imperfect—thin, slightly grainy—but it might as well have been nectar. I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. "This is... really good," I said, glancing at him.

He didn't smile back, but his shoulders dropped a fraction. "Don't get used to it," he said, but his tone lacked bite. "That was the last of my stash."

"Guess I should feel special," I teased lightly, testing the waters.

"Maybe you should," he shot back, deadpan. But there was a flicker of something in his tone—dry humor, almost teasing. Almost.

I laughed softly, more out of surprise than anything else. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Have you seen a lot of animals out here?" I asked after another sip, shifting the focus off us. "Besides the owls, I mean."

"Plenty," he said, his voice low and steady. "Elk pass through every fall. Bobcats sometimes. Bears if you're unlucky."

I raised an eyebrow.

He seemed to read my thoughts. "They're not trouble unless you make 'em trouble."

"That sounds like something someone who's wrestled a bear would say," I joked, half-expecting him to roll his eyes or ignore me.

"Never wrestled one," he said simply, gaze drifting to the fire. "But I've been close enough."

"Close enough" sounded ominous, but he didn't elaborate, and I didn't push. Instead, I leaned back against the folded blankets, watching the way the firelight flickered over his face.

"How do you know so much about them?" I asked, curious now. "The animals, I mean. Tracks, behavior—all of it."

He hesitated. I could see it in the way his jaw tightened, the way his fingers flexed briefly where they rested on his knees. For a moment, I thought he wouldn't answer. Then he exhaled slowly, shoulders slumping just enough to notice.

"As you've probably guessed, I've been here a long time," he said finally, voice

quieter than before. "Long enough that these mountains feel like home. Like old friends."

I glanced at him. His profile was sharp, all hard lines and shadows, but there was a quietness about him now that wasn't there before. Like he was letting himself breathe for once.

My fingertips brushed the edge of his sleeve, barely grazing him. "Thank you," I said, my voice quieter than I meant it to be. "For keeping me safe."

He froze. Not a big movement, just a slight stiffening in his shoulders, enough that I almost pulled my hand back. But then he looked down at where my fingers rested against him, and when his eyes lifted to meet mine, they weren't cold. He looked happy.

I let my hand fall back to my lap, wrapping both palms around the mug again. The fire crackled, small pops breaking the quiet, filling the space where words might've gone. I watched him, wondering how someone so closed-off could still feel so . . . present.

"Silas," I said after a while, my voice low. I hesitated, twisting the hem of my sweater between my fingers. "Why do you stay up here? Alone?"

His shoulders tensed instantly, like I'd hit a nerve. I regretted it immediately. "You don't have to answer," I added quickly, my words tumbling over each other. "If it's too personal, I mean. Forget I asked."

He didn't speak right away. Instead, he let out a slow breath, his head dipping forward slightly. For a second, I thought he wouldn't respond at all, and I was ready to fill the silence with anything—an apology, a bad joke, whatever came to mind. But then he straightened, his face unreadable as he stared into the fire.

"People come here in trouble," he said finally, his tone flat. Matter-of-fact. "And I can help." He paused, his lips pressing into a thin line. "That's reason enough."

I blinked, caught off guard by the simplicity of it. There was no bitterness in his voice, no defensiveness, but there was something else—something heavier.

"You could help from town, though," I said softly, careful not to poke too hard, "join a rescue team or something, right?"

"That's not who I am," he said. "I don't play well with others."

The bed creaked softly beneath his weight. I could feel him, the warmth of him, so close it made my skin tingle. He sat stiff, hands resting on his thighs, fingers flexing once before going still again. I didn't know where to look—at him? The fire? My lap? My pulse thudded in my ears, loud enough I worried he'd hear it.

"Storm's letting up," he said finally, voice low and gravelly.

"Yeah," I murmured. My ankle shifted, brushing against his calf just barely. I froze. So did he. But he didn't move away.

"You'll be able to head off soon."

"Yeah. Feels weird. I've enjoyed my time here."

"Alana," he said, quieter this time, my name rough in his mouth.

"Yeah?"

His eyes flicked to mine then, holding for a beat longer than normal. Long enough that I forgot how to breathe. His gaze dropped—to my lips, just a second, maybe

less—but I caught it. Heat rushed to my face.

"Silas . . ." My voice barely carried, but he heard it. I knew because his shoulders tensed, just slightly.

The room seemed to shrink. The crackle of the fire faded, everything narrowing to the space between us. He leaned in, not much, just enough that I felt the shift, saw the way his jaw tightened. His eyes searched mine, dark and unreadable.

His jaw tightened. I saw his throat move as he swallowed hard. His eyes were locked on mine for a split second before flicking down again, lingering on my mouth like it held some kind of answer he wasn't ready to hear. I could hear his breathing now, uneven and strained, matching the frantic rhythm of my own heart.

I didn't think. Couldn't. The space between us disappeared, inch by inch, until I felt the faintest brush of his forehead against mine. Close enough that his warmth spilled over me, close enough that I could feel the tension radiating off him like static electricity. Every nerve in my body screamed at me to close the gap completely, to bridge whatever fragile thing had been building between us since the moment I'd stumbled into his world.

And then he was gone.

He pulled back so fast it startled me, the sharp intake of his breath breaking the spell. I froze, watching as he squeezed his eyes shut, his hand coming up to rub the back of his neck. His shoulders hunched, every line of his body screaming conflict.

"Silas?" My voice cracked, slipping through the tight knot in my throat. He didn't answer. Didn't look at me. Just pushed himself to his feet, the movement jerky, almost desperate.

"Goddammit," he muttered under his breath, running a hand through his hair. His fingers dug into the dark strands like he could pull whatever war he was fighting straight out of his skull.

"Hey—" I started, but he turned away, pacing toward the door like a caged animal. My chest tightened, confusion and something else—something raw—spreading like wildfire. "What's wrong? Did I—"

"You didn't do anything wrong. It's not you."

"Then what is it?" I asked, shifting to the edge of the bed. My ankle protested the movement, but I ignored it, leaning forward like I could physically reach him if I just tried hard enough. "Because it sure feels like it's something I did."

He shook his head, still facing the door. His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath, but it didn't seem to steady him. If anything, he looked more wound up, his fingers curling into a fist where they rested against the wood.

"Silas." I said his name again, firmer this time. He flinched, just barely, like the sound itself hurt. My pulse hammered, a mix of frustration and worry tangling together in a way that made my voice sharper than I intended. "You don't get to do that—pull away like that—and then leave me hanging. Talk to me."

He turned, and there was something wild in his eyes now, something I didn't recognize but couldn't look away from. "I can't just . . . do this." His hand swept through his hair again, fingers tugging at the strands like they might distract him. "I'm not—" He stopped, exhaled sharply, then looked at me full-on, his gaze pinning me to the spot. "I'm not a casual man."

"Okay," I said slowly, frowning. "I'm not asking you to be casual. I don't—" I cut myself off, unsure how to untangle whatever mess we'd wandered into. "Just tell me

what you mean."

He laughed, but it wasn't amused. It was bitter, low, a sound that scraped over my skin. "You don't get it," he said, pacing again, his footsteps heavier now. "I'm not what you think. I can't be what you're probably used to."

"Then tell me." I stood, testing the weight on my ankle, but I couldn't stay seated anymore. He'd built all this distance between us, and I needed to close it. "Help me understand, Silas. You're making no sense right now."

He stopped pacing so abruptly I thought he might've hurt himself. His back was to me, the broad line of his shoulders rigid as stone. For a second, I thought he wouldn't answer. That he might keep standing there like a statue until I gave up. But then, slowly, he turned.

His face was carved with something I didn't have a name for—uncertainty, maybe? Shame? Longing? All of it swirled together in his dark eyes, and it hit me harder than I expected. "I'm a Daddy Dom," he said, voice low but firm, like he needed to force the words out before they locked up inside him forever.

I blinked. "What?"

"It's . . ." He trailed off, looking down at his hands, like they might explain better than words could. Then he tried again. "It means I care deeply. Protect fiercely. And yeah, sometimes discipline if it's needed." His throat worked, swallowing hard. "Not because I'm cruel, Alana. Because I . . . because I love that way. I trust that way."

"Discipline?" My voice cracked on the word, but he didn't flinch. He just nodded, his jaw tightening like he was bracing for a blow.

"Not in a bad way," he said quickly, his tone quieter now, almost defensive. "It's

about guidance. Nurturing. It's not about age or . . ." He shook his head, running his hand over his face. "It's not about whatever you're thinking. It's about connection. Trust."

I stared, trying to piece it together. Words swirled in my head, but none of them quite fit. He looked away, his hands dropping to his sides, shoulders slumping like he was carrying a weight that had finally crushed him. "I can't just be . . . regular," he murmured, barely above a whisper. "This is who I am."

I stared at him, my breath caught somewhere between my chest and my throat. The room suddenly felt smaller. His words hung in the air like frost, delicate and sharp-edged. Daddy Dom. It sounded foreign, almost absurd, like something out of a conversation I was never meant to overhear.

He stood there, shoulders stiff, arms hanging awkwardly at his sides. He didn't look at me now—his gaze fixed somewhere over my shoulder, like he couldn't bear to see whatever reaction might be on my face. I could feel the tension radiating off him, thick as the woodsmoke curling in the corners of the cabin.

"Okay," I said finally, though it wasn't okay, not yet. My voice cracked a little. "So . . . what does that mean? Exactly?"

He shifted his weight, one boot scuffing against the floorboards. "It means I take care of someone. Protect them. Guide them, when they need it. And yeah . . ." His jaw worked, like he hated spitting out the next part. "Sometimes that involves setting boundaries. But it's . . . mutual. Always consensual. Never without trust. Fuck I'm bad at explaining this."

"Boundaries," I repeated, tasting the word. My head spun with half-formed questions, but his tone—it didn't feel threatening. Just...steady. Firm. God, how had I missed this side of him? Or maybe I hadn't. Maybe I'd been feeling it all along, in the way

he carried himself, the way he'd taken charge since the moment I twisted my ankle and landed here.

"Alana," he said, low and careful, like he thought I might bolt. "I don't even know why I'm sharing this with you. You don't want to know."

"I do," I said, without thinking.

That got his attention. His head snapped up, his eyes meeting mine for real this time. Dark, searching, waiting for me to flinch or laugh or storm out. My heartbeat thudded loudly in my ears, and I wondered if he could hear it too.

"Look," I started again, softer this time, because I saw how tightly wound he was. "I'm not pretending to understand everything you just said. Honestly, I'm still trying to catch up. But . . ." I hesitated, then shrugged, as much for myself as for him. "You've been taking care of me since day one. Isn't that . . . part of it?"

His whole body stilled. Like really stilled, the way a deer freezes when it hears a twig snap. His lips parted slightly, but no sound came out. I watched the smallest shift in his face—the tight line of his brow easing, the set of his jaw relaxing just enough to notice. Relief. He wouldn't say it, but I could see it in the way his shoulders dropped, in the faint softening of his expression.

"I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of," I added, because someone needed to say it, and clearly he wasn't going to. "You acted like it was some dirty secret, but—" I looked him straight in the eye, daring him to disagree. "You kept me safe, Silas. That's not wrong. That's just who you are."

For a moment, the only sound in the cabin was the crackle of the fire, the occasional groan of the logs shifting under their own weight. Outside, the wind had quieted, but the snow still whispered against the windows, faint and steady.

This was uncharted territory, and I wasn't sure where the map ended. "Tell me," I said finally, breaking the silence. "Not all at once, but . . . tell me what it means. For you."

His gaze lifted to meet mine, and this time, he didn't hide. Didn't look away. "Only if you're sure," he said, the words slow and deliberate.

"Silas," I replied, matching his tone, "I'm sure."

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"Alright," he said, voice rough. "Guess we need to talk."

"Yeah," I replied quietly. My fingers gripped the edge of the blanket, twisting it just enough to keep my hands busy. I didn't trust them not to fidget otherwise. "We do."

The air between us felt heavier than before, charged with something I couldn't quite name. Maybe it was the way he didn't look at me right away, or how his jaw tightened every few seconds, like the words were fighting him. I waited, giving him space, though my pulse thudded faster with each passing moment. Whatever he was about to say, I knew it would matter.

He cleared his throat once, then again. His gaze finally lifted to meet mine, and something raw glinted there—sharp, unpolished, and strangely vulnerable. "So, this Daddy Dom thing, it's about roles, alright? Dynamics."

"Roles?" I echoed, tilting my head.

"Yeah." He let the word hang for a second, then barreled forward. "One person—me, in this case—takes on a role that's sorta . . . guiding. Protective. Like a caregiver. That's where the 'Daddy' part comes in. But it ain't literal. I'm nobody's father. It's just . . . a state of mind."

I blinked, trying to process.

"The other side," he continued, his tone deliberate now, "is someone who takes on a more carefree role. They lean into trust, vulnerability—lettin' go of responsibilities for a bit. We call that 'being little.' Sometimes people shorten it to DDlg. Stands for

Daddy Dom Little Girl. Although everyone involved is an adult, of course.”

My eyebrows knit together. “So . . . like pretending to be a kid?”

“Not exactly.” His voice firmed, the words coming quicker now, like he wanted to make sure I understood. “It’s not about playin’ house or actin’ like a child. It’s about feelin’ safe enough to let go. To lean on someone. Doesn’t mean you’re weak or anything—it’s just . . . different.”

He paused, letting that sink in. I thought about it, fingers still twisting the fabric of the blanket. The idea felt strange. Foreign, yet oddly . . . familiar? I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that his explanation hadn’t scared me off—not yet, anyway.

“Some people do tap into a child-like feeling. An innocence. Letting go of the adult world. Being free to be themselves.”

It sounded nice. Stress-free.

I shifted on the bed, pulling the blanket tighter around my lap. The lamplight flickered over Silas’s face, catching on the sharp angles of his jaw and the crease between his brows.

“And is it like . . . a sexual thing?” I asked softly, breaking the heavy quiet that hung between us.

“Not always. Sometimes, yeah. But not all the time.” He leaned back slightly, his fingers rubbing at the calloused skin of his palm. “It’s more about connection—emotional intimacy. Comfort. Trust. A physical relationship can grow out of that.”

I nodded slowly, letting his words sink in. They didn’t scare me, not exactly. They

felt . . . different. Unfamiliar, but not unwelcome.

"So . . ." I hesitated, chewing on my bottom lip. "How does it work? What do people . . . do? To get into the child-like headspace?"

His lips twitched, almost forming a smile, but it faded before it fully appeared. "Littlespace, we call it. And it depends on the people," he said simply. Then, after a pause: "For some, it's routines. Coloring or playin' with toys. Things that make 'em feel safe, let their guard down. For others, it's just havin' someone to lean on, someone to guide 'em. Structure, affection. That kinda thing."

"Guidance," I murmured, testing the word on my tongue like I wasn't sure how it fit. "And you like to provide that?"

"Yeah." His voice softened. "That's the idea."

"What do you get out of it?"

He nodded, thoughtfully. "I find it charming. And it gives me pleasure to be in control, to help someone find their way."

"It's easier to help someone else than it is to help yourself?"

He met my gaze.

"Helping someone else is how I help myself."

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. "But . . . it's not just helping? There's discipline too, right? You mentioned that earlier."

"Only if it's wanted, and agreed upon," he said quickly, his tone firm but gentle. Like

he was trying to reassure me without making it seem like he was pushing anything. "And never outta cruelty. It's about care. Always care."

I glanced down at my hands, twisting the edge of the blanket again. The ache in my ankle seemed far away now, drowned out by the weight of everything he was saying. It sounded strange—everything about this dynamic he was describing—but also . . . appealing. The thought of letting go, of handing over control to someone who cared enough to hold it for me, made something deep inside me stir.

"And you've done this before?" I asked quietly, lifting my gaze to meet his.

Sias's shoulders tensed. For a long moment, he didn't answer. Just sat there, staring at the worn planks beneath his boots.

"Yes," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

"With someone else?" I pressed gently.

"Yeah. Not the sort of thing you do alone." He exhaled sharply, running a hand through his dark hair, leaving it messier than before. "A long time ago."

The quiet stretched between us, thick and heavy like the air before a storm. I shifted on the bed, my ankle sending out a dull throb as I adjusted the pillow under it.

"Silas," I said softly, and his eyes jerked back to mine. "Can I ask you something?"

"Course," he replied, voice low, guarded.

"How does..." I fumbled for the words, licking my lips. "How does this DDlg thing fit into BDSM? I mean, I know what BDSM is—" My cheeks flamed, but I pushed through. "I've read about it. A little."

"Well," he started, his voice slower now, thoughtful. "It's part of it, yeah. DDlg is about power exchange, like most of BDSM. But it ain't what most folks think when they hear those letters. It's not all whips and chains or . . . whatever else people picture." He glanced at me, watching my reaction carefully.

"Okay," I said, nodding, encouraging him to keep going.

"DDlg's more about emotional safety than all that flashy stuff," he continued. "Structure. Trust. Littles lean into feelin' vulnerable, carefree. Bigs—Daddies or Mommies—we hold space for them. Protect 'em. Guide 'em."

"That sounds... different," I admitted finally. "In a good way. Maybe even a great way."

He didn't say anything, just waited, letting the silence settle again. I appreciated that about him—how he gave space without pushing. Still, the weight of his attention made my skin prickle, like he could see straight through me.

"If I'm being honest, I've thought about BDSM before," I blurted, surprising both of us. I felt my face heat up, but I kept talking before I lost my nerve. "Not the hardcore stuff, just . . . fantasies, I guess? Being tied up, maybe. Or someone taking control. Nothing serious. It's never gone anywhere." I shrugged, forcing a laugh. "Guess I didn't know what I wanted."

He was so easy to talk to. Not even a hint of judgement or cruelty.

"Maybe you do now," he said quietly.

I swallowed hard, his words hitting deeper than I expected. Did I? My mind raced, trying to make sense of the knot tightening in my chest.

"Maybe," I whispered, almost to myself. I chewed on my bottom lip, staring at the firelight flickering on the cabin walls. "Honestly, though, I'm tired, Silas. Tired of being the one who has to hold everything together all the time. Work deadlines, bills, expectations... it's like—" I broke off, shaking my head. "It's like there's no room left for me, y'know? No space to breathe."

"Yeah," he murmured. His voice was low, steady, grounding. "I get that."

"Do you?" I asked, glancing up at him sharply.

"More than you know," he said, his gaze unwavering.

Something in the way he said it made my chest ache again, but I didn't press. Instead, I took a deep breath, letting it out slow. My fingers tightened around the edge of the blanket draped over my lap.

"Even though I've been keen to get back to my vacation, it's been strangely nice having you look after me. It made me feel safe." My voice cracked slightly on the last word, and I hated how exposed it made me feel. "Do you think . . . do you think this 'little' headspace thing could help?" I asked hesitantly. "Letting go of all the stress, the pressure. Just . . . being taken care of for once."

Silas leaned back in his chair, his broad shoulders relaxing just a fraction. He studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded, once, firm and sure.

"Yeah," he said. "I think it could."

"I think I want to try it."

Silas's eyes snapped to mine, sharp and assessing. His jaw tightened, the muscle there

flexing beneath his beard. “Alana,” he said, low and steady, like he was picking each word carefully from a pile of broken glass. “I need you to be honest with me. Are you just saying all this because you feel bad for me? Or because it sounds . . . nice in theory?”

The weight of his stare pinned me where I sat. My fingers curled around the edge of the blanket again, gripping tight. “What?” My voice came out softer than I intended, barely more than a whisper. “No. No, Silas, that’s not—” I stopped, shaking my head hard enough to make a few fiery strands fall across my face. “That’s not it.”

He didn’t move. Didn’t blink. It was like he was waiting for me to prove it.

“I wouldn’t lie about something like this. I’m not humoring you. I wouldn’t do that. I can’t fake interest in something so personal.”

His brow furrowed as he studied me, his silence stretching long enough to make my chest tighten. Finally, after what felt like forever, he let out a slow breath through his nose. The stiffness in his shoulders eased, just a little.

“Alright,” he said at last, nodding once. “Alright. But understand this, Alana.” His voice softened, but the edge of caution remained. “This only works if it’s real. If you’re truly drawn to it. Not just trying to please me. That’s not how this goes.”

“I know,” I said quickly, maybe too quickly. My hand pressed harder against my chest, like I could somehow anchor myself there. “I know that. It’s not just curiosity—I mean, I am curious, but it’s more than that. I want this, Silas. I want to try. To see where it leads. If . . .” I hesitated, biting my lip. “If it can give us both something we’ve been missing.”

The room fell quiet again, save for the faint crackle of the fire in the hearth. Silas leaned back in his chair, rubbing a hand over his face before dragging it down to rest

against his thigh. He looked tired, but not in the same way as before. This wasn't weariness—it was deliberation.

“Okay,” he said finally, his tone lighter now, less weighted. “We’ll take it one step at a time. Set boundaries. Make sure we’re on the same page before anything else.”

I nodded, relief flooding through me. “Yeah, that makes sense. Boundaries are good.”

“Everything we try is optional,” he continued, leaning forward slightly, elbows resting on his knees. His gaze locked onto mine again, steady and grounding. “You can stop at any point. No questions, no guilt. Same goes for me. This only works if we both feel good about it.”

“Agreed,” I said, my voice firm despite the flutter of nerves in my stomach.

“We’ll use safewords,” he added. “Simple ones. ‘Red’ means stop everything, no exceptions. You say it, we’re done. Got it?”

“Got it,” I echoed, my throat tightening slightly at the gravity behind his words. There was no mistaking how seriously he took this. It wasn't just a game to him—it was trust, laid bare.

He nodded again, satisfied with my answer. “Alright. Let’s talk about what feels okay to start with. Cuddles?” His lips twitched, the faintest hint of a smile breaking through his usual gruffness. “Gentle care? Maybe a bedtime story, if you’re up for it?”

I couldn't help the soft laugh that escaped me, though it sounded shaky even to my own ears. “A bedtime story? What are you, some kind of mountain-man nanny?”

His smirk deepened, just a fraction. “Something like that. Daddy of the mountain,

maybe?”

“Should I call you Daddy?”

“Only if you want to.”

“I think that might be nice, Daddy.”

There was a flush of something in his face. Something like pride?

“That feels nice, you know. It’s been a long time since someone called me that.”

I shifted slightly, adjusting the blanket over my lap as I considered his question. “So, cuddles sound... nice. So does gentle care. Bedtime stories are a maybe. Depends on how ridiculous they are.”

“No promises there,” he said dryly, but there was warmth beneath the humor, a softness I hadn’t expected.

“And discipline?” I asked cautiously, testing the word on my tongue. It felt strange, foreign, but not entirely unwelcome.

Silas’s expression sobered, though not unkindly. “Soft, if it happens at all. Never forced. Always with your consent. Discipline in this context isn’t about punishment—it’s about guidance. Structure. It’s meant to help, not hurt.”

I nodded slowly, letting his words settle over me. “Okay. That . . . makes sense.”

“You good with that?” he asked, his tone gentler now but still laced with that ever-present undercurrent of authority.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I think I am.”

Without a word, he reached out, cupping my cheek in his calloused palm.

My breath caught at the touch, the gesture both tender and grounding, anchoring me in the moment. Silas's thumb brushed gently over my cheekbone, his touch firm yet gentle. I leaned into his hand, a silent plea for comfort she hadn't realized she needed.

"Let me take care of you, Ally," Silas murmured softly, his voice a deep, resonant rumble. It was both a question and a promise, an offer of solace in a world that had felt chaotic and overwhelming.

He hugged me, taking me close. I smelled him. Felt him. Was engulfed in him. I came to rest against his big chest, and felt his heartbeat, so close to mine.

"So. Littlespace," he began, his voice low and deliberate. "It's . . . a mindset. A place you go when you need to let all the adult crap fade out for a while. It's about feeling safe enough to let go. To be vulnerable."

"Like a mental escape?"

"Sort of," he said "It's simpler than that, though. It's more about letting yourself relax into things that feel comforting. Littles might do stuff like color, play with toys, or listen to stories. Things that make 'em feel carefree. Cherished." He paused and I luxuriated in the warmth of him. "It's not about pretending to be a kid. It's about finding peace."

That word—"peace"—hung heavy in the air. I swallowed hard, my chest tightening and loosening all at once. "Peace sounds nice. Honestly, sometimes I just . . . I want to stop being responsible for everything. To stop thinking so much. Is that what it's like? Someone else holding the reins?"

"Yeah," he said simply. His voice softened, losing some of its usual grit. "That's part of it. You let someone guide you. Take care of you. Hold the weight for a while."

"Here," he said after a moment, moving gently away from me. "Have a look at this." He pulled a small wooden box from behind a stack of tools. He blew off a thin layer of dust, flipping the lid open. Inside, nestled against a folded scrap of fabric, was a carved figure. He hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at me before reaching in and lifting it carefully with his calloused fingers.

When he turned, I saw it clearly—a tiny creature, smooth and polished, shaped like something halfway between a bear and a mouse. Its rounded ears and friendly face made me smile without meaning to. Silas stepped closer, holding it out to me as if it were something precious.

"Don't have any soft toys here," he said gruffly, almost apologetic. "But this is all I've got. Made it years ago. Thought maybe . . ." His shoulders lifted in a faint shrug. "Thought you might like it."

I took it from him, my fingertips brushing his palm briefly. The wood was warm and smooth, worn from time and touch. I traced the delicate lines of its shape, the curve of its tiny ears, the gentle slope of its body.

"It's beautiful," I said honestly, looking up at him. There was a flicker of something in his expression—pride, maybe—but it was fleeting.

With the doll resting in my lap, I closed my eyes. The carved wood was smooth under my fingertips, grounding me. My chest rose and fell a little too fast, anticipation curling low in my stomach. I tried to imagine it—letting go, letting everything just... drift. No deadlines, no emails, nothing clawing at the edges of my mind.

"Take your time," Silas said, his voice low, steady. It came from somewhere close,

but not too close. He didn't crowd me, didn't push. "You don't have to force it. Just try."

I nodded, swallowing hard. My pulse thudded in my ears. "Okay," I whispered.

"Would you like a story?" he asked after a beat. His voice dipped lower, quieter, like he was afraid to break whatever fragile spell had settled between us.

A story.

The idea hit me harder than it should've. My hands tightened around the little wooden figure. My chest felt lighter, somehow. I blinked up at him, surprised by how much I wanted it. "Yeah," I said quickly, then cleared my throat. "I mean, yes. Please."

That earned me another small smile. He shifted, leaning slightly toward the shelf across the room, then stopped, looking back at me like he was checking if I was still okay. Still here. Something about that made my shoulders loosen, the tight knot of tension in my spine easing without me realizing it.

I curled my knees up, pulling the blanket tighter around myself. The doll pressed against my palm, its smooth edges soothing. The fire crackled softly, filling the space between us, and I found my gaze drawn to it—the light, the warmth. The way everything outside this moment seemed to fade into the background.

"Go on," I murmured, barely recognizing my own voice. Softer now. Calmer. A little less me, and yet, maybe more me than I'd been in years.

He lowered himself onto the edge of the bed, far enough that I didn't feel crowded, close enough that the warmth from him reached me. A book rested in his lap, its cover cracked and discolored, the title worn to near illegibility. My eyes snagged on

the faint outline of a rabbit, mid-hop, etched in faded gold. Something about it tugged at me—a memory I couldn't quite place.

"Used to read this when I was young," Silas said, flipping it open carefully. The pages were yellowed, edges frayed, but the illustrations inside were surprisingly vivid. "Simple story. Nothing fancy."

"That's okay," I said quickly. My voice sounded different—smaller. I shifted under the blanket, adjusting my ankle and tucking the doll closer, its smooth curves grounding me. "I... I like simple."

His mouth twitched, a flicker of a smile, and then he started reading.

"Once there was a little rabbit," he began, voice quieter now, steady. Each word wrapped around the room like the soft glow of the firelight. "She lived in a big forest, full of places to hide and play."

I stared at the page, the illustration of the rabbit surrounded by towering trees. The lines were bold but soft, childlike in their simplicity. As he read, his tone shifted slightly, dipping into something warmer, gentler. Like he wasn't just telling the story—he was pulling me into it.

"She got lost one day," he continued, turning the page slowly. "The forest was dark, and she couldn't find her way home."

"Did she get scared?" I asked before I could stop myself. My voice sounded strange in my own ears, lighter, curious. I felt my cheeks heat, but Silas didn't so much as glance up at me.

"Maybe a little," he said calmly, pausing to show me the next illustration—a small rabbit with wide eyes standing among shadowy trees. "But she kept going. She knew

someone would help her."

"Someone?"

"Mm-hm." He turned the page again, his movements unhurried. "A fox found her. Not a mean one. A good one. At first, the rabbit was scared. But soon she knew the fox was friendly."

I leaned forward without thinking, drawn to the sketch of a fox with kind eyes guiding the rabbit along a winding path. The fire crackled softly behind me, and the doll felt warm in my hands, like it had absorbed the heat of my body.

"Why'd he help her?" I asked. My voice had softened even more, the question airy, almost dreamy.

"Because she needed him to," Silas replied simply. He glanced at me then, quick but steady, checking in like he always did. "Sometimes folks just need someone else to show 'em the way."

He turned another page, his deep voice weaving through the air, steady and sure. The rabbit followed the fox through the forest, step by step, until—

"Look," he said, tilting the book toward me. His finger tapped the corner of the page, where a tiny cabin sat nestled among the trees. Smoke curled from its chimney, and the rabbit stood just outside, staring up at it. "Home."

My chest tightened, but not in a bad way. I smiled faintly, leaning closer without meaning to. "She made it."

"She did," Silas said, his voice softer now. He paused, letting the moment settle, and I realized how quiet everything had become—the world outside reduced to nothing but

the hum of his words and the crackle of the fire.

"Was she happy?" I asked, barely above a whisper.

"Yeah," he said after a beat. "She was safe. That's what mattered."

Safe. The word echoed in my mind, heavy and light all at once. I hugged the doll tighter, resting my chin on my knees. Safe. That sounded . . . nice.

I felt light, but heavy, too. Like I was drifting into a dream.

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My dreams, that night, were sweet. Rabbits danced through them. The smell of talcum powder and rose water.

It was the first time in five years that I hadn't woken up from a nightmare. I could scarcely believe it.

I hadn't even meant to fall asleep. But it was like something called to me, something told my little brain that it was time to let go, time to heal. So I slept. All the way through the damn night.

My fingers brushed against wood—smooth, carved—the doll Silas had given me last night. It was still there, nestled against my chest like some kind of secret. I held it tighter for a second before setting it aside.

My ankle felt much better. The pain was almost gone. Progress, I thought. The quilt bunched around me shifted as I sat up, wincing when the movement tugged at my injury.

Silas was already up. He crouched near the stove, his broad shoulders blocking most of the light from the small flame he was coaxing alive. His hands moved with quiet precision: feeding the fire, adjusting the kettle perched on top. He didn't look at me right away, but he must've heard the creak of the bed.

"Morning, Daddy," I rasped, my voice scratchy with sleep.

He glanced over his shoulder, brown eyes locking on mine. There was something there—not quite soft, not quite hard. Something that made my chest feel tight. The

kind of look that said he remembered everything about last night too. The story. The doll. The way we'd let our walls drop just enough to touch something real.

"How's the ankle, sweetheart?" His voice was low, rough, like gravel under boots.

My heart pounded. He'd called me sweetheart . "Better," I said quickly, shifting to prop myself up more. "Not great, but better."

His frown deepened. He stood, unfolding to his full height, and crossed the room in three strides. The floor groaned under his weight.

"Don't move it too much," he said, eyeing the offending foot like it might rebel if left unchecked. His hand hovered near my leg, not touching, just . . . there. Close enough to feel the heat of him.

"I won't," I said, trying to sound casual. But his attention made my skin prickle. Not in a bad way.

"Good." He stepped back, arms crossing over his chest. The sternness in his tone softened, just a little. "So. We need to talk. Set some rules for today. If we're going to try this DDlg thing."

"Rules?" My brows shot up.

"Yeah." He gave me that look again. Serious. Heavy. "To keep you safe. And relaxed."

"You're always so serious, Daddy."

Something flickered in his expression—protective, maybe even tender—but it vanished as quickly as it came.

“Not always.”

A plate of eggs and toast sat in front of me, steam curling up in the cool air of the cabin. I poked at it with my fork, more focused on the man across from me than the food. Silas leaned back in his chair, one big hand wrapped around a mug of coffee. His other hand rested on the table, fingers tapping out some muted rhythm against the wood.

"First rule," he said, voice steady, low. "You don't put weight on that ankle. Not unless you absolutely have to."

I nodded, swallowing a bite of toast I could barely taste. "Got it."

"Second." He shifted forward, setting the mug down with a soft clink. Those brown eyes of his pinned me like a hawk sighting prey. "No going outside alone. You hear me? Snow might be slowing, but you're not steady enough to handle it."

"Okay," I murmured, but something in me bristled. My fingers gripped the edge of my plate. He wasn't wrong, not really, but the idea of being confined, relying on him for everything—it made my skin itch.

"Don't just 'okay' me, young lady. This isn't negotiable." His jaw tightened, a muscle ticking beneath the scruff of his beard. "If you need somethin', you call for me. Don't go tryin' to get it yourself."

"Fine," I said a little sharper than I meant. His gaze flicked up, sharp as the edge of a blade, and I softened my tone. "Really. I understand. You're right."

"Good." He leaned back again, arms crossing over his broad chest. The tension eased from his face, just a fraction. "Last one's optional."

"Optional?" That caught my attention. My fork paused halfway to my mouth.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat, looking almost... uncomfortable? "If you feel anxious or restless—or stressed—you let me know and we'll try what worked last night. Littlespace."

Heat rushed to my cheeks, spreading fast and hot. I darted my eyes down to the doll sitting innocently beside my plate, its carved features simple but somehow comforting. "That's . . . Thank you."

"It's just another way to help you relax. If you need it." His words were clipped, but there was no mistaking the care woven into them.

"Okay." My voice came out softer this time. Quiet. I set my fork down, folding my hands in my lap. "I'll try to stick to the rules."

"You will stick to the rules." His voice had a warning edge, but his eyes softened when they locked on mine. "I have some more. Theses are a little more fun."

He handed me a sheet of paper and I read, my heart pitter-pattering excitedly in my chest. He'd outlined a bedtime routine (tooth brushing, washing, story) had said I needed to ask him (Daddy) for permission to use the bathroom or get food. There were rules for manners and self care, and a requirement for honesty and no judgement. And there was one rule that made me squirm.

"You get to choose my panties?"

"Damn straight. If you're okay with it?"

I felt the heat in my cheeks. "I think it could work."

“Good. I appreciate you’re already dressed today. So we’ll start that tomorrow.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

"Good girl." The words slipped out low, almost under his breath, but they hit their mark. My cheeks burned hotter, my pulse skittering like a startled rabbit. He reached for his mug again like nothing had happened, taking a slow sip of coffee. "There's just one more important rule."

"What is it?"

"When you're better and the snow is safe, you head back down the mountain, and you go back to your old life."

My heart pounded. "But what if—"

"No ifs, no buts. This is no life for someone like you. Think of this as a vacation, alright? From real life. But you have to go back."

"Okay, Daddy."

I picked up the doll, turning it over in my hands to avoid meeting his gaze. The rough wood felt grounding, solid beneath my fingertips.

"Now eat your breakfast," he said, tone lighter now, almost teasing. "Can't have you breakin' another rule before we even start the day."

*

After breakfast, I read. Silas though, was busy.

“I’m heading out on a hunt,” he said. He stood by the door, rifle slung over one broad shoulder. He was already bundled in his coat and boots, his dark hair brushing against the fur-lined hood. “I’ll be back in a few hours,” he said, voice low but firm. The kind that didn’t invite argument.

“Do you have to go alone?” I asked before I could stop myself. My fingers gripped the edge of the quilt draped over my lap. “What if something happens?”

“Don’t do anything naughty while I’m gone.” His tone was teasing, but there was steel underneath it. He waited for my reply, standing half in and half out of the doorway.

“I won’t,” I said quickly, trying to sound like I meant it.

He didn’t look convinced, but after a moment, he gave a small grunt, more to himself than to me, and stepped outside. The door shut softly behind him. And then he was gone.

The quiet settled in fast. Too fast. I shifted on the bed, adjusting the quilt around me. For a while, it wasn’t so bad. I poured myself a mug of tea from the kettle Silas had left near the stove, the steam curling up and warming my face. I took slow sips, letting the heat spread through me. The carved doll sat on the table nearby, watching silently as I picked up the old book again.

The story was simple, comforting in its way. I traced the faded illustrations with my fingertips, imagining how many hands had done the same before mine. It should’ve been enough to keep me calm, to pass the time until Silas came back. But it wasn’t.

Restlessness crept in like an itch I couldn’t scratch. My eyes kept drifting to the window, where the snow lay thick and untouched. Somewhere out there, Silas was trudging through it, hunting. Providing. Doing something. Meanwhile, I was stuck

here, useless.

I closed the book and set it down harder than I meant to, the thud breaking the cabin's stillness. My tea had gone lukewarm, forgotten beside me. I stared at the fire instead, watching the flames dance. Every crackle, every shift of the logs seemed louder now, like the cabin itself was mocking me.

"Useless," I muttered under my breath. The word tasted bitter.

I stared at the door. My fingers drummed against the armrest of the chair, restless and impatient. The rules were clear. Stay inside. Rest. Don't put weight on my ankle. I'd nodded, agreed—hell, I'd even promised. But now, with Silas out there, doing everything while I sat here like a useless doll? It gnawed at me.

"Just the porch," I said under my breath, voice barely audible over the crackle of the fire. "That's not breaking the rules." My gaze flicked to the small stack of kindling he'd piled behind the cabin yesterday. A few pieces. Nothing heavy. Just enough to show him I wasn't some helpless burden.

Testing my ankle, I shifted forward in the chair. Almost no pain at all.

I pressed my palms into the chair's arms and pushed myself upright. The first step sent a sharp twinge through my ankle, but I bit down on my lip and took another. Then another. "See," I muttered, testing the words against the pain, "not so bad."

The cold hit me the second I cracked the door open. Pine and frost swept in, biting at my face and bare hands. I hesitated, fingers tightening on the doorframe. The porch steps stretched out before me, dusted with snow that glistened faintly in the morning light. Slippery. Treacherous. But manageable.

"One step at a time," I murmured again, gritting my teeth. The first step creaked

loudly under my weight, the sound magnified in the quiet. My boot slipped slightly, and I grabbed for the railing, heart lurching. For a second, I froze, breath caught in my chest. Then I moved again, slower this time, letting the railing take most of my weight as I hobbled down.

The woodpile loomed just around the corner of the cabin, half-hidden beneath an overhang. I limped toward it, each step dragging a little more than the last. My breath puffed out in short bursts, visible in the icy air. When I reached the pile, I leaned heavily against the wall, catching my breath.

"Just one piece," I whispered. "Maybe two." My fingers brushed over the icy surface of the logs, searching for ones that weren't frozen solid. The cold stung my fingertips, but I ignored it, wrapping them around a smaller stick of wood. I tugged it free, ice cracking as it loosened.

As I bent to grab another, my foot slid. Panic shot through me. My hands scrabbled for the railing, but the slick wood offered no grip. Weight landed squarely on my bad ankle, and a sharp, searing pain shot up my leg. I gasped, the sound swallowed by the empty forest around me.

"Goddammit," I hissed, clutching the railing hard enough that my knuckles turned white. Tears pricked hot at the corners of my eyes, but I blinked them back, refusing to let them fall. Stupid. So stupid.

I hauled myself upright, biting back every curse and cry threatening to spill out. My ankle throbbed with every movement, but I forced myself back toward the cabin. Each step was agony, and by the time I reached the porch, my breaths came in uneven gasps.

Inside, the warmth hit me like a slap. I shut the door fast, leaning against it as my legs trembled beneath me. The wood fell from my hand onto the floor with a dull clatter.

My hands shook as I pressed them to my thighs, trying to steady myself.

"Stupid," I whispered, the word thick with frustration. Tears blurred my vision despite my best effort. I sank down onto the nearest chair, cradling my ankle in both hands. Silas had been right. Of course, he had. And I'd gone and proved it in the dumbest way possible.

*

"You did what?"

Why had I decided to tell him? It was like I had a deathwish.

"I wanted to prove that I was getting better. So I went outside to get some kindling. And I fell."

My ankle throbbed under the makeshift wrap I'd tied around it after my brilliant little adventure earlier.

"Alana." His voice was low, sharp.

I looked up, tried to seem calm, but his eyes went straight to my foot.

"Do you think I make those rules for fun?" His voice was quiet, too quiet, but it carried enough weight to press me back against the headboard. "Why, Alana? Why would you do something so . . . so reckless?"

"I just wanted to help," I managed, my voice cracking halfway through. "It wasn't—it wasn't a big deal. I stayed close to the cabin. I thought—"

"You know what, I'm grateful that you told me."

“You are?”

“Of course. You might have broken the rules, but you didn’t try to keep it from me. That’s very good.”

“I-I couldn’t keep it from you.”

"But even though you’ve told me, I’m afraid there will need to be some discipline. Rules are there for a reason," he said finally, voice rougher now. "And when you break them, there are consequences."

"Consequences?" My stomach twisted, flipping over itself.

"Yeah," he said, his tone flat. "You’re going to learn that today."

I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. My body betrayed me, trembling slightly despite the heat from the fire. But I nodded. I didn’t argue. Didn’t try to talk my way out of it.

Silas’s voice was low but firm. “Come here.”

My legs felt like jelly, but I obeyed. Slowly, I shuffled to where he stood by the chair near the hearth. The fire was little more than embers now, faint warmth licking at the edges of the room. My heart pounded so loud it drowned out everything else.

“Over my knee.”

I swallowed hard and did as he asked. I felt his thick thighs against my stomach. He was like a wall—solid, unyielding. My breath hitched when his hand settled lightly on the small of my back, not rough, but grounding. A pause lingered in the air, thick with tension.

"Hands underneath," he said, his tone brooking no argument.

Heat bloomed across my face, shame curling tight in my chest. I laced my fingers together under his knees. I felt entirely at his mercy.

"Alana," Silas said softly, almost a whisper. "I want you to know that when this is over, you are forgiven. Totally. I don't hold a grudge. Okay?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl. If you relax into it, it won't hurt as much. And remember, if it's too intense, I want you to use your safeword. Red."

"Okay."

Before I could think of anything else to say, his hand came down. Once. Firm, sharp. Not unbearable, but enough to make me inhale sharply through my teeth.

"That's one," he said calmly. No anger in his voice. Just disappointment. That stung worse than anything.

"Silas—" I started, but he cut me off with another swat. Tears welled up in my eyes, part from the sting, part from the weight of his words earlier.

"Two," he announced after the second spank landed on my upturned bottom with equal firmness as the first one had. "We're going slowly here." I heard it then—there was no anger but concern lacing through his stern tone; this was meant as correction rather than punishment alone.

And for me, it wasn't just punishment. It was something else entirely. And with the third strike, it started to feel . . . delicious.

I was so in the moment I hadn't realised that I was breathing heavily. Very heavily. My pussy throbbed. My legs shook.

Each spank was a jolt of electricity coursing through me, making my nipples harden and my core quiver. His hand felt like a brand against my heated skin, each swat more powerful than the last, but not painful—more like a feverish sensation that spread across my entire body. I whimpered as he continued to spank me, each sound escaping in little moans punctuated by silence.

"Are you okay?" Silas' voice was deep and soothing, breaking through the haze in my mind. "You can use your safe word at any time."

I shook my head, unable to form words past the moans escaping from me. This wasn't punishment; it was sensation. It was feeling alive in a way I hadn't felt for years. I needed this release, needed him to take control of me in the way he had promised. Every strike ignited another fire within me until I felt like I might combust from the sheer intensity of it all.

His hand continued its rhythmic pattern, each spank finding my bottom with sharp accuracy. My body arched to meet his hand, each swat sending a shockwave of pleasure-pain coursing through me. I moaned louder now, unable to hold back the sounds that escaped me as each twitch of sensation sent me higher and higher.

It hurt. It never stopped hurting. But it was intensely pleasurable, too.

And it was only when we finished that I realised I'd felt more present during the spanking than at any other time in my life.

By the time he stopped, my shoulders were shaking. I squeezed my eyes shut, tears slipping free despite myself. I expected him to step back, maybe deliver some stern lecture about safety and responsibility. But then I heard it—a ragged, broken sound.

Barely audible, like he was trying to hold it in.

"Silas?" My voice cracked as I turned.

His shoulders were trembling. I looked up at him, and saw that his brown eyes were glistening, and a tear tracked its way down his weathered cheek.

"Goddammit," he muttered under his breath, swiping at his face like he could erase the evidence. "I can't ... I can't do this again."

"Hey," I said softly, stepping closer despite the ache in my ankle. He tried to turn away, but I reached out and grabbed his arm. "Don't."

"Alana, let go," he rasped, voice barely above a whisper.

"No," I shot back, surprising even myself. My fingers tightened their grip. "You don't get to bottle this up. Not with me."

His resistance crumbled all at once. For a man who always seemed larger than life, indestructible, seeing him like this—raw, vulnerable—stirred something fierce inside me. I knelt in front of him, ignoring the pull of my leg, and wrapped my arms around his broad frame.

"Shh," I whispered, pressing my cheek against his chest. "It's okay, Silas. I'm okay."

He shook his head, a small, jerky movement. His hands hovered uncertainly before they finally landed on my back, pulling me close. He clung to me like a drowning man grasping at driftwood, his breaths uneven and ragged. His body, usually so steady, trembled beneath my touch.

I stroked his back, murmuring soft nonsense until his breathing began to even out. It

hurt, seeing him like this, but it also made me feel . . . needed. Like maybe I wasn't as much of a burden as I'd thought.

"Why'd you have to scare me like that?" he muttered eventually, his voice muffled against my hair. There was no anger left, only exhaustion.

"I'm sorry," I said, meaning it. "I'll do better. I promise."

"Better," he repeated bitterly, pulling back just enough to look at me. His eyes searched mine, raw and unguarded. "I can't lose you, Alana. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

His breaths hitched against my hair. I kept quiet, holding him steady, even as his body shook like a tree in the wind. The cabin felt too small suddenly, the air heavier than before. Finally, he pulled back just enough, his arms still loose around me, his face streaked with tears he wasn't even trying to hide anymore.

"She was . . . she was like you," he said, voice rough and low, almost lost in the crackle of the fire behind us. His gaze dropped to the floorboards, unable—or unwilling—to meet mine. "My wife."

I blinked, frozen, unsure if I should speak or stay quiet. My fingers grazed his arm, letting him know I was listening. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, then continued.

"She loved this mountain. Loved me." His lips twisted, and for a second, I thought he might laugh, but it came out as a raw, broken sound instead. "But I couldn't keep her safe."

"Silas—" I started, but he shook his head sharply, cutting me off.

"Storm came in faster than I could've guessed. She didn't have a chance." His jaw clenched, and his hands curled into fists at his sides. "Tried everything. But . . ." He trailed off, his words fraying into silence, leaving the rest unsaid.

I didn't need the details. The weight in his voice told me enough. My heart squeezed painfully in my chest, and I reached for him, brushing my thumb over his knuckles until his fingers loosened, uncurling slowly.

"That's why you stayed here," I said softly, piecing it together. "Why you help people. Why you helped me."

"Didn't do it for some noble reason," he muttered bitterly, brown eyes flicking up to mine at last. They were bloodshot, glossy with fresh tears, but still burning, fierce. "I did it 'cause I'm a damn coward. Didn't wanna leave her behind, so I let this place eat me alive instead. Figured if I kept folks from makin' the same mistake, maybe... maybe it'd mean somethin'. Maybe I wouldn't feel like such a failure."

"Stop." My voice startled both of us. It wasn't loud, but it was firm, steadier than I felt. "You're not a failure, Silas. You're human."

He sighed. "I'm broken. That's what I am."

"Promise me," I said, voice trembling but sure. "If nothing else, promise me you'll let me in."

"Only if you promise me somethin' too," he murmured, his tone quieter now, more vulnerable. "No more scarin' me like that. No more riskin' yourself 'cause you think you got somethin' to prove. You come to me. Always."

I nodded, tears stinging my own eyes now. "I promise."

"Good girl," he said, so soft I barely caught it, but it sent warmth curling deep in my chest all the same. His calloused thumb brushed along my cheek, wiping away a tear I hadn't realized had fallen.

And before I could overthink it, before either of us could pull away, I closed the gap between us. Tentative, testing, my lips met his. His breath hitched, and for one agonizing heartbeat, he didn't move. Then, with a groan that sounded half-relief, half-surrender, he kissed me back.

It wasn't rushed or desperate. It was slow, careful, like we were figuring each other out piece by piece. His hand slipped to cradle the back of my neck, anchoring me as the world seemed to tilt sideways. For the first time since I'd stepped into this cabin, I felt grounded. Safe. Seen.

When we finally broke apart, our foreheads rested together, breaths mingling in the quiet space between us. His eyes stayed locked on mine, still full of sorrow, but now there was something else there too. Something softer. Hopeful.

"Guess we're both a little broken," I said softly, a watery smile tugging at my lips.

"Yeah," he agreed, voice rough but warm. "But maybe that's okay."

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A nother night with no nightmares. I could get used to this.

It was the little things that really made me happy. The lack of terrifying nightmares, and the simple pleasure of standing without any pain.

No crutch, no leaning. No nothing. Just me, standing up, hands on hips, ready to take on the world.

"Look at you," Silas said from behind me, his voice low and gravelly. He crossed his thick arms over his chest, watching me like he had all the time in the world. His brown eyes were steady, just shy of proud.

I looked back over my shoulder, the corner of my mouth tugging up. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Pretty good, Little One," he said. "You've been such a good girl, and your patience is paying off."

His approval hit harder than it should've, heat rising to my face.

"Now, let me look at your panties."

I felt a blush spread across my cheeks. "Yes, Daddy."

I hadn't brought anything particularly sexy with me on the trip, but somehow, having Silas pick out the single red lacy pair I'd brought with me made me squirm with delight.

He watched me carefully as I pulled off my pajama bottoms. I felt his eyes on my smooth legs.

"Good girl. Get those new panties on."

"Yes, Daddy," I said again. I kept my eyes on his as I wriggled out my panties and pulled on a fresh pair. I could see the lust in his eyes, and feel it between my legs. He watched me as I changed. I pulled my pajama top off, and saw him eye my breasts with hunger. It felt good—like I had some power over him, over this primal creature I was sharing this space with.

"You're about the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said, slowly.

"Thank you, Daddy."

"You're welcome. Now, let's hit the road."

He'd promised me that if I was feeling up to it, we could go for a tiny walk this morning. I was unreasonably excited.

After I was dressed, and the fire between my legs was slightly cooler, we headed out. When I opened the door, the cold rushed in first, biting the tips of my ears and nose. The world outside looked calm, blanketed in untouched snow. I stepped onto the porch, testing my weight on the ankle. Solid.

Silas followed close behind, his boots heavy on the wooden planks. He reached for my hand without asking, his fingers curling strong and sure around mine.

"Careful," he said quietly, his grip firm but not overbearing.

"Yes, Daddy," I shot back, squeezing his hand once for good measure.

We stood there together for a moment, the mountain stretching wide and quiet before us. The air was sharp enough to sting my lungs, but it felt clean, bracing. I breathed deep, letting it fill me up. A week ago, I'd been trapped—by pain, by fear, by the weight of everything I couldn't change. Now, the weight felt lighter, like I could carry it without breaking.

"Feels different, doesn't it?" Silas asked, his voice cutting through the silence.

"Yeah," I said, my gaze sweeping over the endless white. "It does."

"That's what happens when you stop fighting so hard," he said, his thumb brushing over the back of my hand.

"Maybe," I admitted, glancing sideways at him. "Or maybe it's just the company."

His lips twitched, almost a smile. Almost.

"Smartass," he muttered, but his hand stayed in mine.

My ankle held steady, no sharp twinge or pull anymore, just a dull echo of what used to be. Silas stood beside me, close enough that I could feel his presence even without looking at him. His hand rested on the curve of my lower back—protective, grounding.

"Thanks for everything, Daddy." The word slipped out soft, almost shy. It was easier now, natural even, but it still carried weight when I said it out loud.

"Good girl," he murmured, eyes fixed on mine like he could see right through me. His voice had that low, gravelly warmth that always made something inside me flutter. He squeezed my hand once and let go, stepping back just enough to give me space.

I looked out over the snow-covered valley below us, trying not to linger too long on the heat rising in my cheeks. Everything felt softer out here—the air, the light, the quiet. Like the mountain itself had decided to loosen its grip for a while.

“Ready for a walk?”

“Uh-uh.”

So we walked. We didn’t head far, just ten minutes or so in a little loop around the mountain.

"Feels like progress, huh?" he asked after a moment, his voice cutting through the stillness.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "It does."

“You’ll, uh, be wanting to head back home soon.”

There it was. Like an unwelcome shadow, the city loomed over me. Deadlines, emails, meetings stacked one after another. My old life waiting for me to pick it back up, whether I wanted to or not.

“I guess.”

"Alana." His tone shifted, pulling me back. I glanced at him, catching the edge of something in his expression—something guarded.

"Yeah?"

"You’re worried."

It wasn't even a question. He just knew.

I sighed, dragging my fingers through my hair. There wasn't any point in pretending. "I can't help it," I said, my voice sharper than I meant it to be. "My job, my apartment, everything piling up—"

"Your deadlines," he cut in, his tone flat.

"Yeah, exactly." I folded my arms across my chest, matching his stance without thinking. "It's my life, Silas. I have to go back to it. I can't just leave it dangling forever. But it's stressful. Being out here, with you, it's so . . . easy."

"I get it."

"Sometimes I wish I could just . . . stay here."

He was silent for a moment. The snow crunched under our feet.

"I can't though. Obviously. Living in a cabin doing nothing doesn't exactly pay the rent."

"Right."

My heart pounded in my chest. "I just wish it didn't stress me out so much."

He stopped, looked at me for a moment. "Come with me," Silas said, his voice low but steady.

I turned, catching the flicker of something unreadable in his eyes.

"Where we goin'?" I asked, my breath puffing out in little clouds.

"Not far. Trust me."

"That's ominous," I muttered.

We kept walking until we were in a small clearing. The air bit at my cheeks, sharp and clean, but it felt good. Bracing. Like it could strip away everything weighing me down, at least for a little while.

"Here," he said finally, stopping in a patch of undisturbed snow. He turned to me, his brow furrowing like he was working through some internal calculation.

"Okay . . ." I glanced around. "What's this about? You planning to bury me out here or somethin'?"

The corner of his mouth twitched—almost a smile, but not quite. "Nope." He crossed his arms over his chest, studying me for a beat. Then: "You been stressin' too much."

"Gee, thanks. Didn't notice."

"Watch your tone or I'll have to tan that hide." His tone was flat, but there was warmth behind it.

"Don't threaten me with a good time, mister."

He took a step closer, close enough that I had to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. "I mean it, Ally. You carry too much. Always tryin' to fix, control, hold it all together."

"Somebody has to," I shot back, folding my arms.

"Not always. Not here." He nodded toward the snow. "We're gonna try somethin'. A trust exercise."

"Like what? Team-building stuff? 'Cause I gotta tell you, I hated those workshops back in the city."

"Not like that." He crouched, brushing his hand over the snow as if testing it—or maybe just clearing space. When he stood, he dusted his palms off and gestured for me to come closer.

"Alright, Daddy," I said, half-joking, but the word came out softer than I meant it to. His lips pressed together, and the look he gave me sent a small shiver—not from the cold—down my spine.

"Stand here," he instructed, pointing to the spot he'd cleared.

"Why do I feel like I'm about to regret this?"

"Because you like fightin' me on everything," he replied smoothly. "Now stop stallin'. Turn around."

"Bossy-boots," I muttered, but I did as he said.

"Good girl," he murmured, almost too quiet to catch.

The heat climbed up the back of my neck. I swallowed hard and focused on the trees ahead, their branches weighed heavy with snow.

"Here's how it works," he said, stepping up behind me. I could feel the weight of him there, solid and unmoving. "You stand still. Close your eyes if you want. And when I say, you let yourself fall. Backward."

"Fall?" My pulse kicked up.

"Yeah. Fall." His voice stayed calm, steady. "And I'll catch you before you disappear into the snow."

"That's it? That's your big plan?" I glanced over my shoulder, arching a brow at him.

"That's it." He met my gaze, unflinching. "Simple, but not easy."

"Well, sure, if you're into trust falls."

"Not about the fall, sweetheart. It's about lettin' go. It's about feeling the fear and doing it anyway. It's about release." His hands rested lightly on my shoulders for a moment before withdrawing. "I won't let you hit the ground. Promise."

I hesitated, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. The wind picked up, tugging at my hair, and for a second, all I could hear was the steady rhythm of my own breathing.

"Ally," he said again, softer this time. "I'm here."

Something in the way he said it settled under my skin, quieting the part of me that wanted to argue. Still, my muscles tensed, every instinct screaming to keep myself upright.

"Alright," I mumbled, exhaling sharply. "Fine. But if you drop me, I swear to God—"

"Not gonna happen," he cut in.

"Better not."

"Ready?"

"Sure." My voice wavered, betraying the lie.

"Then fall."

I crossed my arms over my chest, my back to him, and stared hard at the snow in front of me. My muscles locked up tight, every nerve screaming to stay upright. Falling wasn't natural—not for me, not for anyone who'd spent years catching themselves.

"Anytime today, sweetheart," Silas said behind me, his voice low, steady. A challenge, but not unkind.

"Don't rush me," I shot back, though it came out more breathless than biting.

"Not rushin'." I could hear the shrug in his tone. "But you're burnin' daylight."

"Maybe I like daylight," I muttered, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. My boots crunched faintly in the snow, and the sound felt too loud in the quiet space between us.

"Ally." His voice softened just enough to make my throat tighten again. "Stop thinkin' so much."

"That easy, huh?" I closed my eyes, squeezing them tight. My heart pounded in my ears, drowning out everything else.

"I know that right now, you're worrying about what could go wrong."

He was right. I was thinking he might miss me. That he might trick me. That he could let me fall into the snow and get cold. Maybe he might misjudge how far behind me he was. Or he, himself could fall.

“Yeah well that’s what I do.”

How had he known this would be so damn hard for me?

“You don’t need to. Just close your eyes and enjoy it. Enjoy the worry. It means your alive, and that you’re about to do something exciting.”

"Okay," I whispered, barely audible even to myself. Then I exhaled, slow and shaky, and let gravity take over.

For one wild second, the world tilted. My stomach dropped, adrenaline surging fast and sharp. Air rushed past me—or maybe it was just in my head. Then, solid warmth wrapped around my waist, firm and unyielding.

Fuck. I felt the fear. And it wasn’t so bad.

"Gotcha," Silas murmured, his breath brushing against my ear.

I gasped, my chest heaving as he pulled me upright, steadying me like I weighed nothing. My legs wobbled beneath me, but his hands stayed on my hips, grounding me.

"See?" He stepped back just enough to give me space. "Told ya."

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled, brushing hair out of my face. My pulse still raced, but something loosened in my chest—a knot I hadn’t realized was there.

"Again," he said, already moving into position.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously." He folded his arms, waiting.

"Fine," I huffed, rolling my shoulders. This time, I didn't hesitate as long. Crossing my arms again, I glanced over my shoulder. "Ready?"

"Always."

I fell faster this time, less thought, more instinct. The spike of fear was there, quick and sharp, but it burned out just as fast. His arms caught me, strong and sure, pulling me back to my feet.

This time, when I felt the fear, I kinda enjoyed it.

"Better," he said simply, his hands lingering just a second longer than necessary.

"Better?" I turned to face him, arching a brow.

"Much." There was something in his eyes—something warm, unguarded.

"Alright, mountain man," I said, unable to keep the grin off my face. "One more."

"Good girl," he said softly, and the words sent a shiver down my spine.

I turned away quickly, hoping he didn't see the way my breath hitched. For the third time, I crossed my arms, squared my shoulders, and fell.

My breath caught, but instead of the usual spike of fear, something else surged up—light, electric. Halfway down, a laugh bubbled out of me, loud and startling, like I couldn't keep it in anymore. It echoed off the trees, sharp and bright against the stillness.

His arms closed around me, solid as ever, pulling me upright before my boots could even skim the snow. "You're laughing now?" Silas asked, his voice low, teasing. His brow ticked up, but there was heat in his eyes, the kind that made my stomach flip.

"Guess so," I said, twisting in his grip to face him. The grin on my face felt unstoppable, reckless. "Didn't think you'd catch me that fast."

"Always do," he said simply, his hands firm at my waist. He didn't let go, not right away, and I didn't step back either. There was something different about the way he held me now. Not just steady. Close. My heart thumped hard enough I swore he could hear it.

"Alright," I said, trying to sound casual, even though I wasn't fooling anyone—not him, not myself. "That was fun."

"Fun?" His lips curved slightly, and for once, his face wasn't all stern lines and shadow. That smile—unguarded, almost boyish—hit me harder than I expected.

"Yeah, fun," I shot back, lifting my chin. But the warmth in his eyes made it hard to hold onto the sass. My breath hitched when his thumb traced along my jawline, rough and deliberate. I froze, caught between leaning into him and stepping away.

"Good girl," he murmured, the words slow, deliberate. They hit me deep, warm and sweet, pooling low in my chest.

"Daddy," I said, quieter now, my voice not quite steady. I didn't know if it was a warning or a plea. Maybe both.

The air between us thickened. His hand stayed on my jaw, thumb brushing slow and steady, like he could read every thought racing through my head. Maybe he could. I didn't say a word, didn't trust myself to, not with the way my chest rose and fell too

fast, too shallow.

"Alana," he said, low, nearly a growl. My name sounded different when he said it like that. Rough. Intentional.

I tipped my face up before I could stop myself, instinct pulling me closer. His eyes flicked down to my lips, then back up, catching mine like they'd caught on something they couldn't shake loose. And then his mouth was on mine.

It wasn't soft—not at first. He kissed like he was staking a claim, firm and sure, drawing a small gasp from me before I melted into him. My hands found his coat, fingers curling into the worn fabric as if holding on to him would keep the ground steady under my feet.

His beard scratched against my skin, rough but grounding, and his other hand came up to cradle the back of my head. Warmth spilled through me, starting at the press of his lips and spreading until it burned away the last chill in the mountain air. I forgot everything else—the cabin, the snow, even the ache in my ankle. There was only this, only him.

"Silas," I whispered against his mouth, not sure if I meant it as a question or a prayer.

"Shh, sweetheart," he murmured, the words brushing against me as softly as the wind. "Just let me."

He kissed me again, slower this time. Like he had all the time in the world. Like he wanted to memorize me. His hand slid to my waist, pulling me closer, fitting us together like we were made for it. Every inch of him was solid, warm, steady, and I leaned into it, into him, more than I realized I needed to.

I shifted, and the snow crunched beneath us, reminding me where we were. But he

didn't seem to care. Neither did I. My fingers slipped higher, finding the collar of his jacket, the heat radiating from his neck, the pulse there strong and steady under my touch.

"Cold?" he asked, voice rougher now, his breath mingling with mine.

"I'm fine," I said, breathless. I was more than fine. My hands moved over him, exploring the hard planes of his chest, the unyielding strength in his shoulders. "You worried about me, Daddy?"

That word—"Daddy"—slipped out naturally now, teasing, testing him. His gaze darkened instantly, and I saw the way his jaw ticked, his grip tightening ever so slightly on my hip. It sent goosebumps skittering down my arms.

"Always," he rumbled, his voice rougher now. He shifted again, the movement deliberate as he slid a hand up my thigh, pushing aside the barrier of fabric. He paused, just for a second, giving me a chance to stop him. But I didn't want to stop. Not now. Not with him.

I wrapped my arms around him and pulling him closer. I wanted to feel every part of him, to drown in this moment before it slipped away.

"Ally," he groaned, his voice hoarse with desire, and I could feel him, hard and thick against my inner thigh. "You sure about this?"

"I've never been surer," I breathed, my heart pounding in my ears, drowning out the world around us. In this moment, it was just the two of us, suspended in time and space, untouchable.

Silas's fingers danced over the fabric of my clothes, teasingly slow, savoring each inch of exposed skin as he traced patterns of heat and want. With a deft touch, he

began to peel away the layers that separated us, revealing the vulnerable flesh beneath. I shivered in anticipation, my pulse thrumming in time with the mounting desire that coiled in my core.

As he bared my skin to his hungry eyes, I felt a rush of vulnerability unlike anything I had experienced before. Yet it was not fear that gripped me but a heady mix of anticipation and surrender.

"You in those red panties," he growled. "You're really something. I'm the luckiest fucking man in the world."

Then, he shook off his clothes.

His body was sensational.

Every line and curve of Silas's body spoke of rugged strength and untamed wilderness. His chest was broad and solid, etched with the sinewy muscles that spoke of endless hours spent among the mountains. Each breath he took seemed to expand his frame, drawing my eyes to the ripple of his abdomen, a landscape of taut muscle beneath the sun-kissed skin.

His arms, corded with power, held me with a gentle firmness that promised both protection and passion. The veins stood out against his bronzed skin as if eager to trace the path of every touch, every caress. I felt his heartbeat thrumming beneath my fingertips as they trailed down his sculpted torso.

As my gaze traveled lower, I couldn't help but admire the lean hips that hinted at grace beneath the raw masculinity. The defined lines of his thighs spoke of endurance and resilience, each muscle honed by the demands of Snowview's harsh terrain. And between them, a fierce hardness pressed against me, a testament to his desire and the primal need that bound us together in this moment of raw, unbridled passion.

Silas's cock stood proudly against my quivering thighs, a thick and pulsing length that demanded attention. Every inch of him was a promise, a declaration of the primal lust that simmered between us. The head glistened with a sheen of need, a bead of moisture at the tip hinting at the fervor that burned within him.

With one hand, he guided me to my knees, the snow cold and crunchy beneath my bare knees. I didn't care. All I could think about was him, the way he looked at me, like I was the only thing that mattered.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this," he said, glancing down at me. "You're going to make a perfect little good girl, aren't you?"

He sounded almost agonized, his voice strained with need. I didn't know how to respond, so I did the only thing I could think of. I leaned forward, my lips brushing against the base of his shaft.

"Ally," he breathed, his hands tangling themselves in my hair, guiding me closer. And then, there was nothing but the two of us, the cold air kissing our heated bodies, and the sound of our ragged breaths mingling with the rustling of the pines.

My lips traveled upwards, my tongue flicking out to lick the head of his cock, tasting him for the first time. He was salty and sweet, a heady combination that made my core ache with need. I wanted more, needed to feel all of him inside of me.

"That's it, baby," he groaned, his fingers tightening in my hair. "You like that, don't you?"

I couldn't answer him—the only response was a muffled moan as I took more of him into my mouth, my tongue dancing over every ridge and vein I could find. It felt so good, so right, like this was where I was always meant to be.

His cock twitched in my mouth, and I knew he was close. I didn't want it to end, but at the same time, I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he came.

With a gentle tug, Silas pulled me off him. I looked up, confused, but the intensity in his eyes stole my breath. "My turn," he said, his voice rough with desire. "You ready to feel something brand new?"

I nodded, "I trust you, Daddy."

He laid me back on the snow, the cold sending pleasure and excitement through me. His fingers found my heat, and I arched into his touch, desperate for more. But he took his time, teasing me until I was writhing beneath him, pleading for release.

And then his mouth was on me, his tongue delving into my folds, lapping at my most sensitive spots. I cried out, my hands fisting in his hair as he devoured me. It was incredible, better than anything I'd ever experienced.

"Daddy, please," I begged, needing to feel him inside me.

He obliged, positioning himself at my entrance. With agonizing slowness, he pushed into me, stretching me, filling me completely. I gasped at the sensation, my nails digging into his back.

He stilled for a moment, allowing me to adjust. Then, he began to move, his thrusts deep and hard, each one hitting that spot within me that made stars explode behind my eyelids. I met him thrust for thrust, our bodies moving in perfect sync.

As he pounded into me, his mouth covered mine, swallowing my moans. His hands were everywhere, sliding over my body, bringing me to the edge of pleasure with every touch.

I was completely lost in the moment, consumed by the heat and intensity between us. I couldn't believe that this was happening, that I was here in the middle of the woods with a man who made me feel more alive than I ever had before.

And then it hit me—the cold air, the snow beneath us, the adrenaline rushing through my veins—it all added to the rawness and primal nature of our coupling. We were two beasts in heat, claiming each other in a desperate frenzy.

In that moment, there was nothing else but us. No society telling us what was right or wrong. No expectations or roles to play. It was just Silas and I, two beings connected on a primal level.

I felt myself getting closer and closer to release as Silas' thrusts became more urgent. And then it happened—my body exploded with pleasure, my back arching off the ground as I cried out his name.

"You're mine," he growled, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. "All mine."

I could only nod, lost in the pleasure, in the feeling of being so utterly cherished and possessed. Together, we chased our release, our moans and gasps echoing through the clearing.

When it hit, it was earth-shattering. I clung to him as wave after wave crashed over me, his name falling from my lips like a prayer. He followed soon after, burying his face in my neck as he pulsed inside me.

Afterward, we lay entwined, our breaths mingling in the cold air. Silas brushed a lock of hair from my face, his eyes soft yet guarded. I could see the pride in his gaze, the satisfaction at how far I'd come, how I'd learned to trust and let go.

The sky was pure blue. My heart was raw.

Was I really going to leave all this?

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:08 am

I had nothing to pack.

Silas had let me with a suitcase while he did some jobs outside, but there was nothing to put in it. My clothes were back in Snowview. All I had now was this empty bag and the sweater on my back—his sweater, really. It still smelled like pine and smoke, faint and comforting, like his arms around me last night.

I sat on the edge of the bed, twisting the edge of the sleeve between my fingers. My chest felt tight, not from fear, but something deeper. Something heavier. The kind of ache that didn't go away with a bandage or time.

Last night kept playing in my head. Every glance, every touch, every whispered word. Silas had held me like I was something precious, guiding me through the storm in my mind with those strong hands and steady eyes. He'd been firm when I needed it, soft when I didn't know I did. And then there was the way we'd come together under that endless sky—raw, unguarded, honest. It wasn't just about passion. It was about trust. About letting go and finding myself again, piece by broken piece.

I swallowed hard, staring at the empty suitcase. The line between who I was when I came up here and who I was now felt so sharp it almost hurt. That anxious, overworked woman who couldn't sit still long enough to breathe? She seemed like someone else entirely. Someone I didn't want to be again.

Today was going to test that.

"Back to the real world," I muttered, voice hollow. But was it? Was the city really my world anymore? I thought about the emails waiting in my inbox, the deadlines, the

noise of it all. Everything that used to feel so important seemed . . . distant. Faded. Like a bad photograph.

"Dammit," I breathed out, dragging both hands down my face. The air in the cabin felt heavy, thick with everything unsaid. My feet stayed planted on the floorboards even as my heartbeat picked up, begging me to move, to do something, anything. But what? What the hell was I supposed to do with this feeling? With him?

I stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the wood. The sound jarred me, grounding me for a second. "You're going back," I told myself, the words coming out flat. "That's the plan."

But plans didn't seem to matter much anymore. Not after him.

My chest tightened as I thought about Silas. His arms around me last night, strong and steady, his voice low and firm when he asked me to trust him. The way he carried me, not just physically but emotionally, wrapping me in a safety I didn't know I craved. That's what I'd be walking away from if I went back. Not just him, but the version of myself I'd found up here.

"Ally," I whispered to myself, my reflection faint in the glass. "What are you doing?"

The question hung in the air, unanswered, until soft footsteps creaked on the porch outside.

I turned, heart thudding hard against my ribs. Silas filled the doorway like he always did, broad shoulders brushing the frame, his dark eyes locking onto mine. He didn't say anything at first, just stood there looking at me, the kind of look that made me feel stripped bare and seen all at once.

"So. Got everything you need?" His voice was calm, same as always. No pleading, no cracks in his tone.

"Yeah," I lied, my voice quieter than I meant it to be.

"Good." He tilted his head slightly toward the trail, his expression unreadable. "You ready to head down the mountain?"

Just an offer. A simple question. Like he wasn't asking me to leave more than just this cabin behind.

My throat tightened, but I nodded anyway. "Yeah. I guess so." For a moment, I thought he might say something else—something that would make this easier or harder, I didn't know which. But he just stepped aside, waiting for me to follow.

And damn it, I wanted so badly to close the distance between us, to press myself against him and beg him to tell me I didn't have to go. But that wasn't who he was. Silas wasn't going to ask me to stay.

That choice was mine.

The air hit sharp and cold as we stepped outside. I pulled my sweater tighter around myself, silencing the urge to ask if we could linger just a little longer. Silas was already moving, his boots crunching over the packed snow with that effortless confidence of his. I followed, my own steps lighter now than they'd been the first time I'd walked this path.

"That there," he said after a while, pointing toward a faint scattering of marks in the snow off the side of the trail, "rabbit tracks. Probably from last night."

"How can you tell?" I asked, not because I particularly cared about rabbit tracks, but because hearing his voice made the knot in my chest loosen, just a little.

"Snow's still clean around 'em," he said, glancing back at me. His expression softened, like he'd caught something in my voice. "Fresh enough to follow, if you

wanted."

"Not sure I've got it in me to chase rabbits today," I joked, though it came out weaker than I meant it to. My gaze dropped to the path ahead, watching our footsteps blend together in the churned snow.

We kept walking. The forest around us was quiet except for the occasional rustle of branches overhead. Every so often, Silas would point out a bird or a tree scarred by old lightning. Simple things. But each word felt deliberate, like he was grounding me here, one observation at a time. Keeping me tethered to this place, to him, even as we moved further down the mountain.

The trail curved, revealing the edge of Snowview below. My breath caught when I saw the rooftops laid out like pieces on a game board, their chimneys trailing thin ribbons of smoke into the crisp sky. It was beautiful, sure, but it didn't feel the same as before.

"Almost there," Silas said, his voice pulling me back to the moment.

"Yeah," I mumbled, though my thoughts were already drifting. Each step took us closer to my rented cottage, closer to whatever came next.

When we reached the door, I stopped for a moment. The cabin looked exactly the same as when I left it—small, neat, unassuming. But I didn't feel the same. Not even close.

"Well," I breathed. My hand hovered over the lock for a second, memories flashing behind my eyes. The panic. The tears. The desperate need to escape. All of it felt so far away now, like it happened to someone else entirely.

"Something wrong?" Silas asked, his voice quiet but firm.

"Just... thinking," I said, turning the key until the latch clicked. The door creaked open, revealing the untouched interior. Everything was just as I'd left it. I'd barely spent any time in here.

"Well," I said. "I guess I need to say thank you."

"Don't mention it."

I paused for a moment.

"Are we seriously not going to talk about what happened last night?"

He sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said, sighing deeply.

"You've turned my life upside down, Silas. You rescue me. Nurture me. Get me to call you Daddy. The we have the best sex of my life and the next day I'm just meant to—"

"Alana," Silas said. His eyes locked on mine, steady as a stone in a rushing river. "I love you."

Three words. They hit so hard my knees almost buckled. I blinked fast, but it didn't stop the sting in my eyes. It wasn't news—I think I'd known for a while now—but hearing it out loud made something inside me crack wide open. Relief poured through me like water breaching a dam, followed by a wild, aching joy.

"Excuse me?" My throat clogged up, useless. My lips trembled around the shape of words I couldn't seem to find.

He stepped closer, his boots scraping against the wooden floor. His hand brushed my

arm, firm and grounding, before falling away again. He drew in a breath, like he was steadying himself, then let it out slow. “I don’t want you to go back,” he said, his voice even but thick with meaning. “Not to your old life. Not to all that noise and rush. I know it’s selfish. I’ve been trying desperately not to say it.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to rob you of your life. Your future. It’s no life for a beautiful, vibrant young woman up here. I don’t want that.”

“Stop telling me what you don’t want. Tell me what you do want.”

My heart thudded hard, each beat louder than the last.

“I want you here, with me,” he continued, gaze never leaving mine. “I want to be your Daddy, always. To make this mountain our home. For both of us. I’ll protect you, guide you . . .” His jaw tightened like he was forcing himself to keep his voice calm. “Give you what you found up there. What we found.”

The air between us buzzed, charged and heavy. My chest rose and fell too quickly, trying to pull in enough oxygen to keep from sinking under the weight of his words. Every part of him, from the way he stood so solidly to the raw conviction in his tone, told me he meant every syllable. This wasn’t some passing whim. This was Silas—grounded, unshakable, offering me everything.

I stared at him, my fingers twitching against the seam of my jeans. My breath hitched. God help me, I trembled like a damn leaf in the wind, no matter how hard I tried to stand steady. His words were still ringing in my ears, echoing louder than they should’ve been, filling up all the empty parts inside me. The mountain. Him. Us.

And then there it was—the city, pushing back into my mind like an unwelcome guest. Emails, meetings, deals that felt like victories but always left me drained. Bills

stacked on my kitchen counter. A fridge with nothing but cold takeout and half-drunk wine.

I imagined what it might be like to leave all that behind. Slow mornings and coffee that tasted like pine smoke. The weight of his hand on the small of my back when I needed grounding. Littlespace. That safe, warm bubble where I didn't have to be anything more than just . . . me.

My chin lifted before I even realized what I was doing. I looked at him—really looked—and found nothing but patience waiting for me. No pressure, no demands, just that endless, unshakable tenderness shining in his eyes. He was offering me everything without asking for a damn thing in return.

"Yes." The word came out thick, almost broken, but it was the truest thing I'd ever said. "I choose you."

His chest rose sharply, but he didn't say anything right away. Didn't try to fill the silence. Instead, he stepped closer, slow enough that I could feel every inch of the space shrinking between us until the air itself seemed to hum.

A tear spilled over my cheek, hot and messy, and before I could swipe it away, his thumb was there. Rough from years of work, gentle as if I might break. He caught it, letting his hand linger just long enough to make my heart stutter.

"I really do love you."

"I love you too, Daddy," I whispered, so soft it was barely there, but he heard it. Oh, he heard it. I saw it in the way his jaw flexed, in the way his eyes darkened like the storm clouds that used to roll over this mountain in late spring.

"Alana," he said, my name a growl, full of things I wasn't sure I'd survive but wanted anyway.

Silas's arms came around me, strong and certain, pulling me into the kind of embrace that felt like it could withstand anything. I let out a shaky breath against his chest, my fingers curling into his flannel shirt like it was the only thing keeping me upright.

I melted. Absolutely, completely melted against him. Like every piece of me had finally found where it belonged. The world outside could do whatever the hell it wanted—turn faster, spiral into chaos—I didn't care. Here, time slowed. Here, it was just us.

His hand slid up my back, palm wide and rough, anchoring me further. I pressed closer, my cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. Strong. Steady. Mine.

"Feels right," I mumbled into the flannel, my voice barely loud enough to hear. But Silas heard it. Of course, he did.

"Yeah, it does," he said simply, his chin grazing the top of my head. No frills, no fuss. Just those three words, solid as the mountain under our feet. That was Silas. That was what I'd chosen.

After a long moment, he shifted, his hands lingering at my shoulders before he pulled back just enough to look down at me. His eyes searched mine, dark and full of quiet determination. "Ready?"

"Yeah," I whispered, though my voice wobbled this time. Not because I doubted. Because I didn't.

His lips twitched, maybe the ghost of a smile, before his hand dropped to mine. His grip was firm but careful, like he knew exactly how much strength to use. Like he always did.

We turned toward the door together. I didn't even glance at the suitcase. What would've been the point? It could sit there and collect dust for all I cared. I laced my

fingers tighter with his as we stepped outside.

We walked.

The path climbed higher, steeper, but I didn't falter. Each step felt like moving closer to something real. Something permanent. My hand stayed in his, our shared grip unbroken. And when I glanced sidelong at him, his profile outlined against the towering pines, I couldn't help but think: This is it. This is where I'm supposed to be.

When we reached the ridge overlooking the cabin, I stopped, my breath catching. There it was, nestled against the mountainside like it had grown from the earth itself. Our beginning. Our home. The place that saved my life.