



Found by the Mountain Man (Darkmore Mountain Search and Rescue #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I never would have guessed that the woman I pulled from the freezing creek is the one who would thaw my heart.

Mavis, the headstrong photographer with more courage than sense, fell through the ice documenting climate change. Pulling her unconscious body from the freezing water should have been routine—until a massive storm traps us in my cabin and nothing feels routine anymore.

Shes too young, too idealistic, and too beautiful for a damaged man like me. My remote mountain sanctuary was meant to keep people out, but she slips past every defense like she was born to be here.

Will she stay when the storm passes, or will she take my heart back to the city with her?

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one

Mavis

The sunlight filters through my viewfinder like liquid gold, but it's not enough. Nothing's ever enough anymore.

I lower my camera and stare at the images on the LCD screen—another batch of "pretty" shots that will make editors smile and completely miss the point.

Pristine mountain lakes reflecting perfect blue skies.

Untouched powder snow gleaming like diamonds.

The kind of nature photography that sells calendars and makes people feel good about a world that's rapidly disappearing.

"Shit," I mutter, scrolling through the shots. Every single one is gorgeous. Every single one is a lie.

Where are the retreating glaciers? The shortened ice seasons? The forests struggling against longer droughts and hotter summers? That's the story I came here to tell, but apparently "climate change documentation" doesn't test well with focus groups.

I shove the camera back into my pack and adjust the straps, feeling the familiar weight settle against my shoulders. The gear is getting heavier each year, or maybe I'm just getting more tired of carrying the burden of trying to make people care.

I've been hiking for two hours already through ankle-deep snow, leaving the Darkmore Lodge before the sun even thought about rising. This light—this perfect, golden hour light—won't wait for anyone.

My breath forms thick clouds in the frigid air as I make my way upstream from the town, following the creek toward the ice formations I scouted yesterday.

Darkmore Peak looms above me in the darkness, its imposing silhouette dusted with fresh snow even though it's supposed to be spring.

If I'm lucky, really lucky, I might catch something that shows the reality of what's happening here.

The ice that should be thick and stable by now, but isn't. The formations that used to last through April, but now barely make it to March.

Focus on the story, Mavis, I tell myself, repeating the mantra that's gotten me through five years of trying to document what we're losing. Grandma always said the truth was worth the risk.

I was twenty-two when she died, just as my career was finally taking off. Now, four years later, I'm still trying to live up to her legacy, still fighting the same battles she fought as one of the first Latina photojournalists to break into the boys' club of wilderness photography.

The creek bends ahead, and I can see them—the ice formations I've been chasing. They're smaller than they should be for this time of year, more fragile-looking despite the overnight freeze. Perfect.

I set up my tripod on the snowy bank, hands working automatically despite the cold that's already making my fingers stiff even through my winter gloves. The water

rushing beneath the ice creates a natural soundtrack as I frame the shot, looking for the angle that will tell the story I need to tell.

Through the viewfinder, I spot something extraordinary.

Where the creek makes a sharp turn, the ice has formed into delicate, crystalline shelves that seem to defy gravity.

They're beautiful, yes, but they're also clearly unstable—too thin, too warm-weather fragile despite the sub-freezing temperatures.

This could be the shot that finally makes editors understand what's happening here.

The only problem is getting close enough.

I study the terrain, calculating risk versus reward. The ice formations are about twenty feet from the bank, accessible only by crossing the creek itself. The water's moving fast beneath the ice, but the frozen surface looks solid enough. If I'm careful, if I watch for stable footing...

My phone buzzes with a text from my editor in San Francisco: Need those Darkmore shots by Friday. Client wants "inspiring wilderness, not doom and gloom." Remember the brief.

I delete the message without responding.

This is exactly what Grandma warned me about.

The pressure to make everything palatable, to sand down the rough edges of truth until it's smooth enough for mass consumption.

She never compromised, not once, and look what she accomplished.

Her photographs of industrial pollution in the Rio Grande Valley helped change federal policy.

Her documentation of drought conditions in South Texas became the backbone of agricultural reform legislation.

I won't compromise either.

Grandma always said the best shots require risk.

I secure my pack straps, double-check that my camera is properly attached to its safety line, and step onto the ice.

The surface holds, but I can feel it flex slightly under my weight. I move carefully, testing each step, working my way toward the formations. The ice creaks ominously beneath my boots, but it's holding.

I take three careful steps closer, wanting to capture the formations from directly below. The perspective will be dramatic, emphasizing their precarious beauty.

That's when I hear it.

A sound like the world cracking open. Sharp and sudden and wrong.

I look up just as a section of ice the size of a dining room table breaks free from the formation above me. Time slows as my mind processes what's happening—the massive sheet of ice tilting, separating, beginning its inevitable fall toward the creek.

Toward me.

I have maybe two seconds to react. My feet are planted on ice that suddenly feels paper-thin, my camera hanging around my neck like an anchor, my pack throwing off my balance as I try to scramble backward.

The ice hits the frozen surface with a crash that reverberates through the canyon.

The impact shatters the creek's icy shell, sending up a wall of freezing spray that soaks me instantly.

But that's not the worst part. The worst part is the way the entire ice sheet beneath me gives way, plunging me into the shocking cold of the rushing water below.

The last thing I remember thinking, as the icy water closes over my head and the current grabs me, is that Grandma would be proud that I got the shot.

Even if it kills me.

The water is like liquid fire—so cold it burns. Every nerve in my body screams as the creek tumbles me like laundry in a washing machine. My heavy camera and pack, which felt manageable on dry land, now drag me down like stones tied to a drowning woman.

I fight to the surface, but the current is relentless. It slams me into rocks, spins me around, keeps me disoriented and desperate. My lungs are starting to burn, demanding oxygen I can't give them.

This is how it ends, I think with startling clarity. This is how Elena Aldana's granddaughter dies—chasing the same impossible shot she would have chased.

But even as the thought crosses my mind, another part of me refuses to accept it. I didn't survive foster care, build a career from nothing, and spend five years fighting

to tell important stories just to give up now.

I manage to get my head above water for a split second, long enough to gasp in a precious breath before the current pulls me under again. Through the chaos, I glimpse the creek bank. It's closer than I expected, but still impossibly far when you're fighting for your life.

My pack snags on something and for a terrifying moment I'm held underwater, trapped by the very gear I need to survive. Panic floods through me as I struggle with the straps, my numb fingers fumbling with buckles I can't see.

Finally, blessedly, something gives way and I'm free, shooting to the surface with such force that I nearly launch myself out of the water entirely. But the victory is short-lived. Without my pack, I have no survival gear, no emergency beacon, no way to signal for help.

I'm hypothermic, lost, and completely alone in the wilderness surrounding Darkmore Mountain.

The current carries me around another bend, and I catch sight of a fallen tree stretching partway across the creek. It's my only chance. I angle my body toward it, using what little strength I have left to fight the flow.

My fingers close around a branch just as my consciousness starts to fade. The bark is slippery with ice, but I hold on with everything I have, using the tree as an anchor to pull myself toward the bank.

Inch by agonizing inch, I drag myself out of the water.

My camera, miraculously, is still around my neck, though I can't feel my hands well enough to know if it survived the dunking.

Everything else—my pack, my emergency gear, my warm clothes—is somewhere downstream, probably never to be seen again.

I collapse on the snowy bank, shivering so violently that my teeth chatter like castanets.

The sun that seemed so warm and golden an hour ago now feels useless against the wet cold that's seeping into my bones.

Snow continues to fall around me, each flake a tiny reminder of how far the temperature has already dropped.

I try to stand, to look for better cover, but my legs buckle immediately. The effort sends me sprawling face-first into the muddy ground, tasting earth and despair in equal measure.

My vision starts to tunnel, darkness creeping in from the edges. Somewhere in the distance, I think I hear an eagle calling, but it might just be my oxygen-starved brain creating phantom sounds.

Then everything goes black, and the truth becomes something I might never live to tell.

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two

Connor

The tourists are getting softer every year.

"My boots are rubbing," whines the investment banker from Calgary, stopping for the third time in twenty minutes to adjust his brand-new hiking gear. "And this pack weighs a ton."

I bite back my first response, which would involve telling him exactly what I think about someone who buys a thousand dollars worth of equipment but can't be bothered to break it in properly.

Instead, I turn to face the group of eight weekend warriors I'm supposedly teaching "basic winter mountain survival. "

The snow crunches under my boots as I demonstrate proper pack adjustment for the third time today. At least the fresh powder makes for good learning conditions—nothing teaches respect for the mountains like hiking through knee-deep snow in sub-freezing temperatures.

"Weight distribution," I say, my voice carrying the authority that comes from fifteen years of pulling people out of situations their overconfidence got them into. "Your pack should feel balanced, not like it's dragging you backward. Who remembers what I said about adjusting the hip belt?"

A few hands go up halfheartedly. Most of them are too busy taking selfies with Darkmore Peak's snow-covered slopes in the background to pay attention to anything that might actually keep them alive.

"The hip belt carries the weight," I continue, demonstrating on my own pack. "Your shoulders are just for stability. Get it wrong, and you'll be exhausted in an hour instead of able to hike all day."

The yoga instructor from Vancouver—who introduced herself as "Amber with an A"—raises her mittened hand. "But what if it makes us look bulky in photos?"

Jesus Christ.

"Ma'am, if you're more worried about how you look than how you survive, maybe you should stick to the resort spa," I say, earning a few snickers from the group and a wounded expression from Amber.

"Alright, let's wrap this up," I announce, shouldering my pack. "We'll head back via the south trail. Remember what we discussed about reading weather signs and always having an exit strategy."

We make good time on the descent, and I'm actually starting to think we'll get back to base without incident when my radio crackles again.

"Connor, priority call. You need to respond."

The urgency in Jake's voice stops me cold. Priority calls mean someone's in trouble. Real trouble.

"Copy, Jake. What's the situation?"

"Solo photographer, overdue check-in. The last known position was Black Creek, upstream from the lodge."

I check my watch. Two hours overdue isn't necessarily cause for panic, but Black Creek has been running high and fast under the ice with the early melt. Not a place you want to be alone if something goes wrong, especially in these temperatures.

"Description?"

"Female, mid-twenties, dark hair. Professional photographer, so she's carrying heavy gear. Name's Mavis Aldana."

Of course. Another city professional who thinks wilderness photography is the same as taking pictures in Central Park, even in winter conditions.

"I can be at Black Creek in twenty minutes," I tell Jake, already calculating the fastest route. "Send backup to the usual access points."

"Roger. Be careful, man. Weather's deteriorating faster than predicted. Temperature's dropping fast."

I turn to my group, who are watching this exchange with the fascination of people who've never seen an actual emergency unfold.

"Change of plans," I announce. "We're cutting the lesson short. I need to get you back to base immediately."

Twenty-five minutes later, the temperature has dropped another five degrees in the past hour, and the wind has that sharp edge that means serious snow. The clouds have thickened into a gray ceiling that seems to be pressing down on Darkmore Peak.

If this photographer is injured or lost, we don't have much time before weather becomes a factor for the rescuers too.

I jog toward the Black Creek trailhead, my boots finding good purchase in the packed snow, my mind already shifting into SAR mode.

Think like the victim. Professional photographer, probably focused on getting the perfect shot.

Willing to take risks for her art. Where would she go that seemed manageable but could turn dangerous quickly?

The ice formations. That's where every photographer goes this time of year, trying to capture the "pristine wilderness" shots that sell to magazines. The problem is, the formations are unstable right now, affected by the warming and cooling cycles we've been having.

I reach Black Creek and immediately see signs of her passage—disturbed snow along the bank, a clear boot print in the powder. She headed upstream, just like I thought.

Following her trail, I move quickly but carefully, reading the story written in snow and bent grass. She was methodical, stopping frequently, probably to evaluate shots. Good. Methodical people don't usually do anything catastrophically stupid.

Then I reach the bend where the creek cuts through the rocks, and I see the disaster site.

Ice chunks scattered in the water. A gaping hole where the creek's frozen surface has given way. Fresh scrape marks on the rocks. Disturbed snow where something, or someone, was dragged from the creek.

And there, caught on a branch jutting from the bank, a camera strap.

Professional grade, expensive equipment. The kind someone would risk their life to protect.

"Jake, I've got evidence of an incident at the ice formations," I radio. "Looks like she went through the ice, possibly swept downstream."

"Copy. You see any sign of her?"

I'm already moving downstream, following the creek's flow, looking for more evidence. Boot prints in the snow, disturbed vegetation, anything that might tell me which way she went.

"Not yet, but I'm tracking downstream. If she went in the water here, the current would have carried her—"

I stop mid-sentence.

There, about fifty yards downstream, something dark against the white snow of the bank. Too regularly shaped to be natural. Too still to be alive.

I break into a run, my SAR training warring with a growing dread. Fifty yards feels like fifty miles when you're racing to reach someone who might already be beyond help.

As I get closer, I can make out details. A woman, dark hair just like Jake described, lying motionless on the snowy bank. Her clothes are soaked and already starting to freeze, her skin pale with cold. A camera hangs around her neck.

I drop my pack and kneel beside her, immediately checking for vitals. Pulse: weak

but present. Breathing: shallow and slow. Core temperature: dangerously low.

"Jake, I found her," I radio while simultaneously stripping off my jacket. "Alive but hypothermic. Black Creek, about half a klick downstream from the formations. I need that backup now."

"Copy. ETA fifteen minutes for the team. How bad?"

I wrap my jacket around her and start the process of getting her out of wet clothes—a delicate balance between preserving modesty and preventing death.

"Bad. She's been in the water, probably for at least an hour. I need to get her core temperature up immediately or we're going to lose her."

Her eyelids flutter as I work, a good sign. Consciousness means her body is still fighting.

"Ma'am? Can you hear me?" I ask, checking her pupils with my flashlight. "My name's Connor. I'm with Search and Rescue. You're going to be okay."

She mumbles something I can't make out, her voice slurred with cold.

"What's your name?" I ask, continuing to work. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Z-Mavis," she manages, the word barely recognizable through her chattering teeth. "C-cold."

"I know you're cold, Mavis. I'm going to warm you up, okay? But I need you to stay awake for me. Can you do that?"

She nods weakly, and I see her trying to focus on my face. Her eyes are dark brown,

almost black, and despite her condition there's intelligence there. Fight.

I get my emergency bivy sack unrolled and start the process of transferring her into it—a temporary shelter that will help trap body heat and block the wind that's starting to pick up.

"The camera," she whispers, her hand moving weakly toward the equipment around her neck. "Did I get it?"

"Don't worry about the camera right now," I tell her, though I'm impressed that she's coherent enough to think about her gear. "Let's focus on getting you warm."

The housing looks intact, which means there's a good chance her photos survived. "It's okay," I tell her. "Camera looks fine."

Relief flickers across her features, and I realize this isn't just expensive equipment to her. This is her livelihood, her art, maybe her life's work.

My radio crackles. "Connor, backup is trapped in the storm. How's our victim?"

"Responsive but critical. I've got her stabilized, but she needs medical attention fast. And Jake? Be advised, the weather's deteriorating rapidly up here. We need to move quickly."

As if to emphasize my point, the snowfall intensifies. Big, fat flakes that stick to everything and reduce visibility to maybe thirty yards.

Mavis's eyes widen as she sees the snow. "Storm," she whispers.

"Yeah, there's a storm coming. But don't worry about that. My job is to get you somewhere safe and warm, and I'm very good at my job."

"Thank you," she says, her voice barely audible but unmistakably sincere.

"Don't thank me yet," I reply, checking her pulse again. Still weak, but steady.

"Thank me when you're drinking hot coffee back at base."

The back-up team will take too long to get here. She'll die before they cut through the snow. I need to get her somewhere warm and fast.

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three

Mavis

I wake to the sound of crackling wood and the scent of pine smoke.

For a blissful moment, I think I'm back in my grandmother's cabin in the Hill Country, where she used to take me during summer breaks from the chaos of foster care.

Then the pain hits—a symphony of aches that tells the story of my near-death experience in vivid, throbbing detail.

My shoulder screams when I try to move. My throat feels raw from swallowing creek water. Every muscle in my body feels like I've been hit by a truck, then dragged behind it for good measure.

"Easy there." The voice is deep, calm, authoritative. "You've been through hell."

I force my eyes open and find myself staring up at a rustic log ceiling.

Warm light flickers across the beams—firelight, not electric.

I'm lying on a comfortable couch, stripped down, dressed in someone else's shirt, and buried under what feels like every blanket in existence.

The air smells like wood smoke and something cooking that makes my empty

stomach clench with hunger.

"Where?" My voice comes out as a croak. I clear my throat and try again. "Where am I?"

"My cabin." The man moves into my field of vision, and my breath catches despite my condition. This is my rescuer. Connor, he'd said his name was. In the crisis by the creek, I'd registered capable hands and a reassuring voice. Now I can actually see him.

He's tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair and eyes the color of winter sky. His face is weathered by sun and wind, with lines around his eyes that speak of someone who spends his time outdoors.

He's also ridiculously attractive in that rugged, mountain-man way that shouldn't do things to my pulse but absolutely does.

"How long was I out?" I ask, trying to sit up. The movement sends the room spinning, and I immediately lie back down.

"About four hours." He crouches beside the couch. "You were hypothermic. I had to get your core temperature back up."

"The storm?"

"Hit about an hour after we found you. Roads are blocked solid. We're stuck here until it blows over."

I process this information. The cabin is small but well-built, with honey-colored log walls and simple, sturdy furniture.

A fire crackles in a stone fireplace that dominates one wall.

Through the windows, I can see nothing but swirling snow—the kind of Alberta blizzard that can trap people for days.

"My camera!" I start to sit up again, panic overriding the dizziness.

"Right here." Connor reaches behind the couch and produces my camera, checking it over with surprising gentleness for hands that look like they could crush rocks.

"Housing held. Your photos should be fine."

Relief floods through me so strongly it's almost as debilitating as the hypothermia.

"Thank God. I thought—when I went through the ice—"

"You got some incredible shots before that happened." He sets the camera on the coffee table within my reach. "I checked to make sure the memory card wasn't damaged. Hope you don't mind."

"You looked at my photos?" There's something oddly intimate about that, like he's seen into my soul without permission.

"Just enough to confirm they survived." His expression grows serious. "Those ice formations, you documented the exact moment they became unstable. That's not just photography. That's evidence."

I study his face, surprised by his understanding. Most people see my climate work as doom and gloom, just like my editor. But Connor gets it. He understands the importance of bearing witness, of creating a visual record of what we're losing.

"That's what I was hoping for," I admit. "Though I didn't plan on nearly dying for it."

"The ice was more unstable than it appeared. Even experienced mountaineers would have had trouble reading those conditions." He moves to tend the fire, adding another log. "You couldn't have known."

"You would have known."

He glances back at me. "I've lived in these mountains for fifteen years. They're my job."

"What exactly is your job? Besides rescuing photographers who make stupid decisions?"

A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Search and Rescue specialist. EMT training. I also teach survival courses to tourists who think they can conquer the wilderness in a weekend."

"Ah. The weekend warriors."

"You met some of them?"

"No, but I've photographed them." I shift slightly, testing my range of motion. "Though I guess I'm not much better. I'm just a different kind of unprepared."

"You're nothing like them." The certainty in his voice surprises me. "They're looking for Instagram moments. You were documenting something that matters."

The validation hits me unexpectedly hard. When was the last time someone understood what I was trying to do without me having to explain it?

My stomach chooses that moment to announce its emptiness with a growl that could wake the dead.

Connor's smile becomes more pronounced. "When did you eat last?"

I try to remember. "Yesterday morning, I think? I was so focused on getting to the formations before the light changed."

He shakes his head and moves toward what I assume is the kitchen area. "Can't save the world on an empty stomach. How do you feel about soup?"

"Like it might be the most beautiful word in the English language."

A few minutes later, he brings me the soup, and I struggle to sit up enough to eat without spilling it all over his blankets. Without a word, he arranges pillows behind me, supporting me with surprising gentleness.

"Thank you." I take a spoonful of the soup and nearly moan with pleasure. It's rich and hearty, with chunks of meat and vegetables. "I like your cabin. It's peaceful." I take another spoonful, feeling strength returning with each bite. "Very different from my world."

"Which is?"

"Chaos, mostly. Constant travel, impossible deadlines, clients who want to save the planet but only if it looks pretty and doesn't make anyone uncomfortable." I realize how bitter I sound and try to moderate my tone. "Sorry. It's been a frustrating few months."

"The climate work isn't going well?"

I'm surprised by his genuine interest. Most people's eyes glaze over when I talk about environmental photography.

"It's going exactly as well as you'd expect when you're trying to convince people to care about something that's inconvenient to acknowledge.

" I set down my spoon, the familiar weight of disappointment settling on my shoulders.

"Editors want 'inspiring' shots of pristine wilderness.

They don't want to see the reality of what's happening to that wilderness. "

"But you keep trying."

"My grandmother was a photojournalist. She taught me that the camera doesn't lie, even when people want it to.

" I pick up my spoon again, needing something to do with my hands.

"She documented pollution in the Rio Grande Valley back in the seventies.

Made people so uncomfortable that they actually changed federal policy. "

"That's incredible."

"She was incredible. I'm just..." I shrug, immediately regretting the movement when my shoulder protests. "I'm just trying to follow in her footsteps, even if it feels impossible sometimes."

He just nods, but I feel understood. Silence stretches between us for a few minutes before he speaks again. "Storm's supposed to blow through by tomorrow afternoon. Roads might be clear by evening, depending on how much snow we get."

Tomorrow evening. That means at least twenty-four hours alone in this cabin with a man who makes my pulse race just by existing in the same space.

Not that anything could happen. I'm injured, exhausted, and probably look like something the cat dragged in. Plus, he's a professional who risked his life to save mine. The last thing he needs is some grateful photographer developing an inappropriate crush on her rescuer.

Even if he does have the most gorgeous eyes I've ever seen.

Even if his hands were surprisingly gentle when he helped me sit up.

Even if there's something about the way he looks at me that makes me feel like he sees more than just another tourist who got in over her head.

"You should rest," he says, as if reading my thoughts. "Your body's been through trauma. Sleep is the best thing for recovery."

I nod, though I'm not sure sleep will come easily. There's something about being here, in this warm, quiet space with this capable, attractive man, that has my nerve endings humming with awareness despite my exhaustion.

Then he turns away, busying himself with the dishes. "Get some sleep, Mavis. We'll figure out the rest tomorrow."

I settle back into the pillows, pulling the blankets up to my chin. Outside, the wind howls around the cabin, but inside it's warm and safe. I watch Connor move around the kitchen, efficient and sure, and feel something unfamiliar settling in my chest.

For the first time in months, maybe years, I feel completely safe. Not just physically, but in some deeper way I can't quite name.

It should be unsettling, this instant trust in a stranger. Instead, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

My eyes grow heavy, lulled by the warmth of the fire and the quiet sounds of Connor cleaning up. Just before I drift off, I hear him settle into the chair across from me, as if he's planning to keep watch through the night.

The last thing I see before sleep claims me is Connor's silhouette against the firelight, solid and reassuring, like a guardian standing between me and the storm raging outside.

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four

Connor

I should be sleeping. Instead, I'm sitting in my chair like some kind of sentinel, watching Mavis breathe by the light of the dying fire.

She's been out for three hours now, her body finally surrendering to the exhaustion of trauma and recovery. The color has returned to her cheeks, and her breathing is deep and steady. Every few minutes, she makes a small sound in her sleep—not distress, just the quiet murmur of dreams.

I tell myself I'm monitoring her condition. Making sure her core temperature stays stable. Watching for signs of delayed hypothermia complications.

All of which is bullshit.

The truth is, I can't stop looking at her.

Mavis Aldana is beautiful in a way that hits you like a sucker punch.

She's also young. Mid-twenties, which makes her nearly twenty years younger than my forty-three years. Old enough to be a grown woman with her own career and convictions, but young enough that I should know better than to be sitting here thinking about the way her lips curved when she smiled at me.

I should definitely know better than to be thinking about how those lips might feel

under mine.

Get it together, I tell myself. She's a rescue victim, not a potential date.

But that's the problem. She's not just a rescue victim anymore. She's Mavis, who risks her life to document environmental collapse. Who talks about her grandmother with such love and determination.

The wind picks up outside, rattling the windows and reminding me that we're completely cut off from the outside world.

The storm isn't supposed to let up until tomorrow afternoon, which means another eighteen hours minimum of being alone with a woman who makes me feel things I haven't felt in years.

Things I shouldn't be feeling.

I add another log to the fire, trying to stay quiet. The flames catch, sending new shadows dancing across the walls. In the improved light, I can see more details, like the way her hair falls across the pillow, the gentle curve of her neck, the rise and fall of her chest under the blankets.

My radio crackles softly from the kitchen counter, and I move quickly to answer it before it can wake Mavis.

"Connor here," I whisper into the handset.

"Hey, man. How's our photographer doing?" Jake's voice is barely audible through the static.

"Stable. Sleeping. Core temp is back to normal."

"Good to hear. Listen, this storm is worse than predicted. We've got three feet of new snow already and it's still coming down hard. Road crews can't even get out to start clearing until it stops completely."

I glance toward the windows, where the snow is indeed coming down in thick, heavy curtains. "How long are we looking at?"

"Best case? Tomorrow night. More likely, the day after tomorrow morning."

Two more days. Forty-eight more hours alone with Mavis in this cabin that suddenly feels both too big and too small.

"Copy that," I manage. "We're well supplied here. No concerns about food or heat."

"Roger that. Stay safe up there."

I sign off and set the radio down.

I move back to my chair, unable to stay away. In sleep, Mavis looks even younger, more vulnerable. The professional photographer who impressed me with her knowledge and determination is replaced by someone who could be a decade younger than her actual age, all soft curves and peaceful breathing.

The age difference should bother me more than it does. Should be a clear signal to keep my distance, maintain professional boundaries, get her back to town as soon as possible and forget this ever happened.

Instead, all I can think about is the way she looked at me when I brought her soup. Like I was more than just a rescue technician doing his job. Like I was a man worth knowing.

When was the last time someone looked at me like that?

A log shifts in the fireplace, sending up a shower of sparks. Mavis stirs at the sound, her eyelids fluttering. For a moment, I think she's going to wake up, but she just turns slightly, burrowing deeper into the blankets.

The movement causes the blanket to slip, revealing the curve of her shoulder in the t-shirt I'd given her to replace her wet clothes.

My throat goes dry as I remember the clinical necessity of getting her out of those soaked garments, the way I'd tried to maintain professional detachment while noting that she was even more beautiful than I'd initially realized.

I had no business noticing any of that. I'm a trained EMT, for Christ's sake. I've treated hundreds of patients without letting personal attraction cloud my judgment.

But none of those patients were Mavis Aldana.

None of them had looked at me with those dark eyes full of intelligence and gratitude and something that might have been interest, if I wasn't imagining things.

None of them had made me want to throw away fifteen years of professional ethics for the chance to find out what it would feel like to touch them when it wasn't about medical necessity.

I scrub my hands over my face, trying to reset my thinking. This is exactly the kind of situation that gets rescue personnel in trouble. Vulnerable victim, isolated setting, heightened emotions from a life-threatening situation. Textbook case for inappropriate attachment and poor decision-making.

A particularly strong gust of wind shakes the cabin, and Mavis's eyes snap open. She

looks around, momentarily confused, before her gaze settles on me.

"Connor?" Her voice is soft, still heavy with sleep. "Everything okay?"

"Storm's getting worse," I explain, trying to sound casual. "Didn't mean to wake you."

She sits up slowly, wincing slightly. The movement causes her hair to fall in waves around her shoulders, and I have to grip the arms of my chair to keep from reaching out to touch it.

"How long was I asleep?"

"About three hours. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Still sore, but more human." She looks toward the windows, where snow continues to pile against the glass. "We're really snowed in, aren't we?"

"Looks that way. Jake radioed—we might be here until the day after tomorrow."

I watch her process this information, looking for signs of panic or distress. Instead, she just nods thoughtfully.

"I should probably call my editor. Let her know I'm safe but might be delayed getting the photos to her."

"Phone won't work until the storm passes," I tell her. "Satellite reception is down."

"So we're completely cut off."

"Yeah. Are you okay with that?" I ask, though I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

She looks at me for a long moment, and I see something shift in her expression. A decision being made.

"Yeah," she says softly. "I think I am."

I should look away. Should suggest she get more sleep, or offer to make more soup, or find some other way to defuse this moment before it becomes something we can't take back.

Instead, I find myself leaning forward slightly, drawn by something I can't name and shouldn't want.

"Mavis," I say.

"Connor," she responds, and there's something in her voice that makes my blood heat.

Something that's going to test every bit of self-control I thought I had.

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five

Mavis

The way Connor says my name sends heat racing through my veins. There's something in his voice I've never heard before, something that makes my breath catch and my pulse quicken.

"Connor," I whisper back, and I watch his pupils dilate in the firelight.

We're staring at each other across the small space between couch and chair, the air crackling with tension that has nothing to do with the storm outside. I should be thinking about professional boundaries, about the fact that he saved my life, about the very obvious age difference between us.

Instead, all I can think about is how badly I want him to close that distance.

"I should let you rest," he says, but he doesn't move. His hands are gripping the arms of his chair like he's fighting not to reach for me.

"I'm not tired." It's mostly true. The adrenaline of our charged moment has burned away any lingering drowsiness.

"Mavis." My name again, this time almost pained. "You've been through trauma. Your body needs rest."

"My body needs a lot of things right now," I interrupt, and watch his breathing

change. "Sleep isn't one of them."

The admission hangs between us, bold and unmistakable. Connor's jaw tightens, and I see the exact moment his control starts to fracture.

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I'm twenty-six years old, Connor. I know exactly what I'm saying." I sit up straighter, letting the blanket slip slightly. "The question is whether you're going to keep pretending you don't want the same thing."

His eyes drop to where the blanket has shifted, revealing more of my collarbone, the edge of his borrowed t-shirt. When he looks back at my face, there's fire in his gaze.

"This is a bad idea," he says, but he's already rising from his chair.

"Probably." I shift slightly, making room on the couch. "Do you care?"

Instead of answering, he crosses to me in two long strides. For a moment, he just stands there, looking down at me with an expression that's part desire, part reverence, part disbelief.

"Mavis," he breathes, and then he's sinking onto the couch beside me, his hand coming up to cup my face.

"Finally," I whisper, and rise to meet him.

The first kiss is tentative, questioning. His lips are warm and surprisingly soft, moving against mine with careful restraint. Like he's afraid I might break, or disappear, or change my mind.

I deepen the kiss, threading my fingers through his hair and pulling him closer. He tastes like coffee and something uniquely him, and I want more. I need more.

Connor pulls back slightly, searching my face. "Are you sure about this?"

Instead of answering with words, I slide my hands under his flannel shirt, feeling the solid warmth of his chest, the steady beat of his heart. His intake of breath is sharp, hungry.

"Christ, Mavis." His control is hanging by a thread now. "I've been trying not to think about this since I pulled you out of that creek."

"Then stop trying," I murmur against his mouth. "Stop thinking. Just feel."

That breaks something loose in him. His mouth crashes back to mine, no longer tentative but demanding, consuming. His hands frame my face, then slide into my hair, tilting my head to deepen the kiss.

I melt into him, every nerve ending coming alive under his touch. His beard scrapes against my skin in the most delicious way, and I can't help the small moan that escapes me.

The sound seems to drive him wild. His hands move to my waist, spanning it easily with his large palms, pulling me closer until I'm almost in his lap. I can feel the heat of him through the thin fabric of his t-shirt I'm wearing, and I can feel the evidence of his desire pressing against my hip.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs against my neck, his voice rough with want.

"When I saw you lying there by the creek, so still and cold... I thought I was too late." There's something raw in his voice, something that speaks to how deeply my near-death affected him.

"I'm okay," I whisper, trailing my hands over his shoulders, memorizing the feel of solid muscle under warm skin. "I'm here. I'm alive."

"Because of you," I add, pulling back to look at him. "You saved me."

Something fierce and possessive flickers in his eyes. "I almost lost you before I even found you."

"You didn't lose me," I tell him, then lean in to press a soft kiss to his jaw. "I'm right here."

Connor's hands tighten on my waist, and I feel him tremble slightly. The idea that I can affect this strong, capable man so deeply is intoxicating.

I shift closer, swinging one leg over his lap until I'm straddling him. The position brings us flush together, and we both gasp at the contact. He's hard against me, and the knowledge sends liquid heat pooling low in my belly.

His response is to capture my mouth again, his kiss hungry and desperate. His hands roam my body with increasing boldness—skimming my ribs, tracing the curve of my spine, finally settling on my hips to guide my movements against him.

The friction is perfect, maddening. I can feel myself getting wet, my body responding to his with an intensity that surprises me. I've had relationships before, but nothing that felt like this—like every touch is lighting me on fire from the inside out.

His hands find the hem of the t-shirt, pausing one more time to meet my eyes. When I nod, he lifts it slowly, reverently, as if unwrapping something precious.

The cool air hits my skin, but Connor's gaze is like a physical caress, warming me from the inside out.

I'm not wearing a bra—it was soaked and he'd removed it during my rescue—and I watch his face as he takes in my bare breasts.

His hands come up to cup me, his thumbs brushing over my nipples until they're hard peaks begging for more attention.

"Do you like that?" he asks, pinching them gently. "Do you like having your nipples played with?"

"Yes," I gasp, arching into his touch. "God, yes."

"I want to suck these beautiful tits," he growls, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. "Want to make you come just from playing with your nipples."

He leans forward to take one into his mouth, and I nearly scream at the sensation. His tongue swirls around the sensitive peak while his hand works the other, pinching and rolling until I'm writhing beneath him.

"Connor, please," I moan, my pussy already throbbing with need.

"Please what?" he asks against my breast, his beard scraping deliciously against my skin. "Tell me what you want, baby."

"Connor," I gasp, my hips moving restlessly against him. "I need—"

"Tell me," he demands, pulling back to look at me. "Tell me what you need."

"You," I whisper. "Just you."

Something raw and primitive crosses his features. With careful strength, he lifts me and lays me back on the couch, his body covering mine. The weight of him, the solid

reality of his presence, makes me feel safer than I ever have in my life.

"I want to worship every inch of you," he says, his hands skimming my sides. "Want to taste that sweet pussy until you're screaming my name."

His fingers trace patterns on my skin that make me shiver and arch beneath him. When he finally slips his hand between my thighs, I'm already soaking wet and aching for him.

"Fuck, Mavis," he groans against my mouth as his fingers find me slick and swollen. "Your pussy is dripping for me. I can feel how much you want this."

"Please, Connor," I gasp as he begins to stroke my clit with maddening precision. "I need your mouth on me. I need you to taste me."

"Christ, yes," he growls, kissing his way down my body. "I've been thinking about eating this sweet cunt since I saw you naked."

When his mouth finally reaches my pussy, I cry out at the first swipe of his tongue. He licks me like I'm the most delicious thing he's ever tasted, his tongue working my clit while his fingers slide inside me.

"You taste so fucking good," he murmurs against my wet flesh. "I could eat this pussy for hours."

The combination of his skilled mouth and the filthy words he's growling against me builds the pressure to unbearable levels. When he sucks my clit between his lips, I shatter completely.

"Connor!" I scream his name as the orgasm tears through me, my pussy clenching around his fingers as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me.

He works me through it, his tongue gentling as the spasms subside, pressing soft kisses to my inner thighs as I come back to earth.

"Beautiful," he whispers, moving back up my body. "So damn beautiful when you come."

Then, I work his shirt off, and I spend long minutes exploring the broad expanse of his chest, the ridges of muscle, the fascinating contrast of smooth skin and coarse hair. He's beautiful in a rugged, masculine way that makes my mouth water.

When I finally free him from his jeans, he's hard and heavy in my hands. His cock is impressively thick and long, with a swollen head that's already leaking precum. The size of him makes my pussy clench with anticipation.

"Fuck, Connor," I breathe, stroking him slowly. "Your cock is huge. I want to suck it."

His eyes roll back at my words and touch. "Christ, Mavis. Your hands feel so good."

I lean down and take him into my mouth, loving the way he groans and his hips jerk involuntarily. He tastes clean and masculine, and I moan around him as I take him deeper.

"That's it, baby," he pants, his hand tangling in my hair. "Suck my cock. Take as much as you can."

I work him with my mouth and hands, hollowing my cheeks and using my tongue to drive him wild. When I look up at him through my lashes, his face is a mask of pure lust.

"Stop," he gasps suddenly, pulling me off him. "I need to be inside you. I need to feel

that tight pussy around my cock." He settles between my thighs, breathing hard. "Look at you," he growls, running his fingers through my wetness. "So fucking wet and ready for my cock. Tell me you want it."

"I want it," I gasp, my hips lifting toward him. "I want your big cock inside me. Please, Connor."

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"Beg me for it," he demands, positioning the thick head at my entrance. "Tell me how badly you need to be fucked."

"Please fuck me," I moan, past caring how desperate I sound. "I need your cock so bad. I need you to fill me up and make me come."

The first press of him inside me is exquisite, a burning stretch that borders on too much but feels absolutely right. His cock is so thick that my pussy has to stretch to accommodate him, and we both groan at the sensation.

"Fuck, you're tight," he grits out, his face a mask of concentration and restraint. "Your pussy feels like heaven wrapped around my cock."

"More," I breathe, wrapping my legs around his waist. "Give me all of it. I can take it."

He slides deeper with careful control, his thick length stretching me open until he's fully seated inside me. The sensation of being completely filled by him, completely claimed, is overwhelming in the best possible way.

"Christ, Mavis," he groans, his forehead pressed to mine. "You feel incredible. So tight and wet around my cock."

We stay still for a moment, savoring the connection, the perfect fit of our bodies. Then slowly, carefully, he begins to move, his thick cock sliding in and out of my slick heat.

The rhythm he sets is steady and deep, each thrust calculated to drive me higher. His hands are everywhere, tangled in my hair, cupping my face, gripping my hips—as if he can't get enough of touching me.

"Look at me," he commands when my eyes drift closed. "I want to see your face when I'm fucking you. I want to watch you take my cock."

I meet his gaze, and the intensity there steals my breath. He's watching me like I'm the most fascinating thing he's ever seen, like he's memorizing every expression that crosses my face as he claims me.

"You like that?" he growls, angling his hips to hit that perfect spot inside me. "You like having my big cock stretching that tight pussy?"

"Yes," I gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders. "Fuck me harder. Please."

He complies, his pace increasing, driving into me with controlled power that makes me see stars. The sound of our bodies coming together fills the cabin—wet and primal and perfect.

"I'm close," I gasp, my body coiling tighter with each thrust.

"Then come for me," he growls, reaching between us to circle my clit with his thumb. "Come on my cock. I want to feel your pussy squeeze me when you come."

I cry out as the orgasm tears through me, more intense than the first, my pussy clenching rhythmically around his cock.

"Fuck, yes," he groans, his rhythm faltering as my walls milk him. "That's it, baby. Come all over my cock."

The sensation of me coming undone beneath him breaks his control. With a hoarse groan, he buries his face in my neck and follows me over, his cock pulsing as he fills me with his hot cum.

"Take it all," he growls against my throat. "Take every drop of my cum."

We lie there afterward, breathing hard, still intimately connected. Connor's weight is a comfort rather than a burden, and I run my hands over his sweat-dampened back, not wanting this moment to end.

Eventually, he shifts slightly, starting to pull away, but I tighten my legs around him.

"Not yet," I whisper. "Please."

He settles back down, pressing a soft kiss to my temple. "I'm too heavy for you."

"You're perfect," I correct, and feel his smile against my skin.

For a few precious minutes, we just hold each other, the only sounds the crackling fire and our gradually slowing breathing. Outside, the storm continues to rage around Connor's cabin, sealing us away from the world. I feel utterly content, completely satisfied in a way I never have before.

But gradually, I become aware of a subtle shift in Connor's energy. A tension creeping back into his muscles, a careful distance being inserted into what moments before had been complete intimacy.

He pulls back to look at me, and I see the exact moment the doubts crash back in. The professional mask sliding back into place.

"We should..." he starts, then clears his throat. "I should check your temperature."

Make sure the exertion didn't cause any complications from the hypothermia."

The clinical words hit me like a bucket of cold water. Just like that, I'm no longer his lover but his patient again.

I watch him retreat—physically and emotionally—with a growing sense of hurt and confusion. The man who just made love to me with such tenderness and passion has been replaced by the efficient EMT who pulled me from the creek.

"What just happened?" I ask, sitting up and pulling the blanket around myself.

He pauses in pulling on his shirt, his back still to me. "You've been through a traumatic experience. Sometimes the body's response to near-death situations can include heightened emotional and physical reactions. It's completely normal."

His words feel like a slap. "So you think this was just some kind of trauma response? That I only wanted you because you saved my life?"

"I think," he says carefully, finally turning to face me but keeping his distance, "that we should both get some rest. Things will look different in the morning."

The dismissal in his tone cuts deep. Minutes ago, he was inside me, whispering that I was perfect, looking at me like I was the most important thing in his world. Now he's treating me like a confused patient who needs to be managed.

"You're wrong," I say quietly, but with absolute conviction. "This wasn't trauma or gratitude or some kind of rebound reaction. This was real."

"Get some rest, Mavis," he says, then retreats to the kitchen, putting as much physical space between us as the small cabin allows.

I pull his t-shirt back on, the fabric carrying his scent, and lie back down on the couch. But sleep is the furthest thing from my mind.

Because whatever Connor wants to believe about what just happened between us, I know the truth.

In his arms, under his touch, I felt something I'd never experienced before.

Not just physical pleasure, though that had been incredible, but a sense of being completely seen and utterly safe at the same time.

For those precious minutes, I wasn't Mavis the photographer, or Mavis the granddaughter trying to live up to an impossible legacy, or Mavis the woman who'd nearly died pursuing the perfect shot.

I was just Mavis. And somehow, that had been enough. More than enough.

Connor can retreat behind his professional boundaries all he wants, but I know what I felt. And more importantly, I know what he felt too, no matter how hard he's trying to deny it now.

Connor Hayes saved my life today. But somehow, in the process, I think I might have saved his too.

Now I just have to convince him to let me.

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Connor

I wake before dawn, like I have every day for the past fifteen years. What's different this morning is the tight knot of guilt sitting heavy in my chest.

I'm slumped in the kitchen chair where I finally fell asleep sometime after three AM, my neck kinked at an uncomfortable angle.

Across the cabin, Mavis is still curled up on the couch, her dark hair spread across the pillow, one arm trailing off the edge.

She looks peaceful in sleep, younger somehow, and beautiful enough to make my chest ache.

Beautiful enough to make me forget every professional boundary I've ever sworn to uphold.

Christ, what did I do?

The memories come flooding back—her hands on my skin, the taste of her on my tongue, the way she felt wrapped around me, tight and perfect and mine. The way she looked at me afterward, like I'd given her something precious instead of taking advantage of a vulnerable situation.

Because that's what I did, isn't it? Took advantage. She's a rescue victim, twenty

years younger than me, dealing with trauma and hypothermia and God knows what else. And I, the man who was experienced, trained, supposedly responsible, couldn't keep my hands off her.

I scrub my palms over my face, trying to erase the images, but they're burned into my memory. The sound she made when I first touched her. The way her back arched when I used my mouth on her. How she whispered my name like a prayer when she came apart in my arms.

I need coffee. And a cold shower. And possibly a lobotomy to forget how perfect she felt beneath me.

The storm is breaking.

The coffee finishes brewing, and I pour myself a cup, wrapping my hands around the warm ceramic. The heat feels good against my cold palms, grounding me in something other than the chaos in my head.

"Morning."

Her voice, soft and sleep-roughened, makes me stiffen. I don't turn around immediately, needing a moment to compose myself before facing her.

"Morning," I reply, keeping my voice carefully neutral. "Coffee's ready if you want some."

"Thanks."

I hear her moving around behind me—the rustle of blankets, her bare feet on the wooden floor.

When I finally turn, she's standing by the couch wearing my t-shirt and not much else, her hair mussed and her eyes still heavy with sleep.

She looks like a woman who's been thoroughly loved, and the sight of her hits me like a punch to the gut.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, falling back into the safe territory of medical assessment. "Any lingering effects from yesterday?"

"I'm fine. Sore in a few places, but fine."

The double meaning in her words isn't lost on me. She's sore from what we did together, and we both know it. Heat flashes through me at the reminder, followed immediately by another wave of self-recrimination.

"Good," I manage. "That's good."

She moves to the kitchen counter, accepting the cup of coffee I pour for her. "Connor," she starts, her voice gentle but determined. "About last night."

"Last night was a mistake," I cut her off, the words coming out harsher than intended. "You were vulnerable. I took advantage. It won't happen again."

The hurt that flashes across her features is like a knife to the chest, but I force myself to maintain my distance. This is for the best. For both of us.

"A mistake," she repeats quietly, setting down her coffee cup. "Is that really what you think?"

"It's what I know." I turn away from her, unable to keep looking at the pain in her eyes. The pain I put there. "You're dealing with trauma. What happened between us

was a natural response to a life-threatening situation. Nothing more."

"Bullshit."

The quiet vehemence in her voice surprises me. I turn back to find her watching me with those dark eyes, her chin lifted in defiance.

"Excuse me?"

"I said bullshit." She crosses her arms, the movement pulling my t-shirt tight across her breasts. I force myself to look at her face. "Don't you dare minimize what happened between us by calling it some kind of trauma response."

"Mavis."

"No." She steps closer, and I have to fight the urge to back away. "You don't get to make love to me like that, like I'm the most precious thing you've ever touched, and then dismiss it as a mistake in the morning."

I suck in a breath. She's right. It wasn't just sex, not just physical release, but something deeper. Something that scared the hell out of me.

"It doesn't matter," I say finally. "When this storm passes, you'll go back to your life. Your career. Your world. And I'll stay here."

"What if I don't want to go back?"

The quiet question stops me cold. She's looking at me with such honesty, such hope, that I have to look away.

"You will," I tell her. "Trust me. This place, this life—it's not for you."

"How do you know what's for me?" There's a challenge in her voice now, frustration bleeding through. "You've known me for two days."

"I know enough." I move to the window, staring out at the storm.

The snow is definitely lighter now, more manageable.

"I know you're passionate about your work.

I know you have a mission, something important you're trying to accomplish.

I know you're brave enough to risk your life for what you believe in. "

"And?"

"And that kind of passion, that kind of purpose, it belongs out there, in the world. Not hidden away in a cabin in the mountains."

Silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken words. When she finally speaks, her voice is softer, more thoughtful.

"What if you're wrong? What if the world isn't where I belong?"

"Mavis."

"Don't," she interrupts softly. "Don't shut down the conversation before it even starts. Just... consider the possibility that maybe we both found something worth keeping."

It's a dismissal, gentle but firm, and I recognize the tactical retreat. She's giving me space to think, to process, to maybe come to my senses.

The problem is, my senses are exactly what got me into trouble in the first place. Around Mavis Aldana, logic and rationality don't stand a chance against the pull of attraction and something that feels dangerously close to love.

I move to the radio, tuning through static until I find the emergency frequency. Jake's voice comes through clearer than it has since the storm started.

"Visibility improving on the valley floor. Road crews are making progress on the main routes. Connor, if you're monitoring, respond."

I grab the handset. "Connor here, Jake. Go ahead."

"Good to hear from you, man. How are you and our photographer holding up?"

"We're fine," I manage. "Cabin's holding up well. No medical concerns."

"Glad to hear it. Listen, storm's breaking faster than predicted. We should be able to get a team up to you by this afternoon. Probably around three or four, depending on how quickly we can clear the access road."

This afternoon. A few hours from now, this impossible situation will be over. Mavis will be back in town, then on her way back to her real life. And I'll be alone again, like I was before she fell through that ice and turned my world upside down.

It's what I want. What needs to happen. Right?

"Copy that, Jake. We'll be ready."

"Sure thing. We'll see you this afternoon. Base out."

I set the radio down and turn to find Mavis watching me from the kitchen, her

expression carefully neutral.

"This afternoon," she says quietly. It's not a question.

"Yeah. Storm's breaking. They can get through to us now." Guilt rolls in my gut.
"Mavis?"

"It's fine," she says without turning around. "I knew this was temporary. We both did."

But it doesn't feel fine. It feels like something precious is about to slip through my fingers, and I'm too much of a coward to reach out and catch it.

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seven

Mavis

The sound of snowmobiles cuts through the afternoon air like chainsaws, growing louder as they approach the cabin. I'm standing at the window, watching three bright orange machines navigate through the snow-covered trees, their riders bundled in official SAR gear.

My rescue party. My ticket back to reality.

I should be relieved. I should be grateful that trained professionals are here to safely transport me back to civilization, back to my rental car and my flight home and my real life waiting in sunny San Francisco.

Instead, all I feel is a hollow ache in my chest that gets worse with every passing second.

"They're here," Connor says unnecessarily from behind me. His voice is carefully neutral, professionally distant.

"I can see that." I don't turn around, can't bear to look at his face and see none of the passion from last night.

The lead snowmobile pulls up in front of the cabin, and I recognize Jake even through his helmet and snow gear. He cuts the engine and waves at the window before dismounting, followed by two other Search and Rescue team members I don't know.

Connor moves to the door, opening it before they can knock. "Jake. Good timing."

"How are our patients?" Jake asks, stomping snow off his boots as he enters. His eyes find me by the window. "Ms. Aldana, how are you feeling?"

"Fine," I answer automatically. "Completely recovered."

"That's what I like to hear." Jake's grin is warm and genuine. "Ready to get back to civilization?"

"More than ready," I lie, forcing a smile I don't feel.

The other two team members introduce themselves—Jace and Tyler, both experienced rescuers who seem competent and friendly. They immediately begin assessing the situation, checking equipment, and discussing the best route back to town.

"Weather's supposed to hold for the next few hours," Jace reports. "Clear skies, minimal wind. Should be an easy ride down."

"How long will it take to get back to town?" I ask, already knowing I won't like the answer.

"About forty-five minutes," Tyler replies. "Hour at most, depending on trail conditions."

Forty-five minutes. Less than an hour, and this strange, intense chapter of my life will be over. I'll be back at the Darkmore Lodge, fielding calls from my editor, preparing to fly home tomorrow morning. Back to being just another photographer who got herself into trouble and needed to be rescued.

Back to pretending that nothing life-changing happened in this cabin.

"I should get my things," I say to no one in particular.

My "things" don't amount to much—my camera equipment, my wet clothes that Connor had hung to dry by the fire, my boots. Everything else was lost to the river, leaving no trace that I was ever here except for the faint lingering scent of my shampoo in his borrowed clothes.

I change back into my own clothes in Connor's bedroom, taking longer than necessary to fold his t-shirt and sweater.

The fabric still smells like him—pine and wood smoke and something uniquely masculine.

I press the shirt to my face for just a moment, breathing him in, before forcing myself to set it on his dresser.

When I emerge from the bedroom, the cabin is full of male voices discussing weather patterns and trail conditions and other practical matters. Connor is in full professional mode, briefing the team on my condition, discussing the rescue protocols, being every inch the competent SAR specialist.

Not once does he look at me.

"Ready?" Jake asks when he sees me with my pack.

"Ready," I confirm, though I've never felt less ready for anything in my life.

The goodbyes are brief and awkward. I thank Jace and Tyler for coming to get me. I shake Jake's hand and tell him how much I appreciate everything the SAR team has

done. Standard rescue victim politeness, all surface level and meaningless.

Connor walks us to the door, still maintaining that careful professional distance. "Take care of yourself," he says to me, like I'm any other rescue victim. "And maybe stick to marked trails from now on."

His tone is light, almost joking, but there's no warmth in his eyes. No acknowledgment of what we shared, what we discovered together in this cabin while the storm raged outside.

"I'll keep that in mind," I reply, matching his casual tone even though my throat feels tight.

I want to say more. Want to tell him that this isn't over, that what happened between us was real and important and worth fighting for. Want to ask him to give us a chance, to not let fear and professional boundaries destroy something beautiful before it has a chance to grow.

But he's already turning away, helping Jace load equipment onto the snowmobiles, acting like I'm already gone.

The ride back to town is exactly as long and cold and miserable as I expected.

I'm seated behind Jake on his snowmobile, holding on tight as we navigate the winding trail down the mountain.

The landscape is stunning—endless expanses of pristine snow, towering pines heavy with powder, the majestic bulk of Darkmore Peak rising behind us—but I can barely appreciate the beauty through the fog of my own misery.

Every mile we travel takes me further from Connor, further from the possibility of

something I never knew I wanted until I found it.

By the time we reach the outskirts of Darkmore, the sun is starting to set, painting the snow in shades of pink and gold. It's the kind of light photographers dream of, the magic hour that makes everything look like a fairy tale.

I should be taking pictures. Should be documenting this stunning Alberta wilderness, adding to my climate change portfolio. Instead, I can't bring myself to reach for my camera.

The SAR station is a modest building on the edge of town's small downtown, buzzing with activity despite the late hour. Jake parks the snowmobile and helps me dismount, my legs shaky after the long ride.

"Let's get you checked over by our medic," he says, leading me toward the building. "Just a precaution."

The next hour passes in a blur of medical assessments and paperwork.

The medic—a competent woman named Dr. Chen—pronounces me fully recovered from my hypothermia ordeal.

I answer questions about my experience, sign forms releasing the SAR team from liability, and provide contact information for follow-up if needed.

All standard procedures. All completely surreal after the intimate intensity of the past few days.

"Your rental car is still at the Black Creek trailhead," Jake informs me as we finish the paperwork. "We can give you a ride out there, or if you prefer, one of our guys can drive it back to town for you."

"I can deal with it," I say automatically, then realize I'm not sure that's true. The thought of getting behind the wheel and driving away from this place feels impossible right now.

"You sure? It's been a tough few days. No shame in accepting help."

I look around the SAR station, taking in the maps on the walls, the rescue equipment neatly organized in bins, the photos of successful operations.

This is Connor's world, his chosen family, his life's work.

A life that apparently has no room for a photographer from San Francisco who was foolish enough to fall for her rescuer.

"Actually," I hear myself saying, "could someone drive it back to the lodge for me? I think I'd rather walk through town, clear my head a bit."

Jake looks surprised but nods. "Sure thing. Tyler can take care of it. The lodge is only about a ten-minute walk from here."

He gives me directions, simple enough since Darkmore's main street runs straight through the small downtown. I thank him again, shoulder my pack, and step out into the crisp evening air.

The town is picture-perfect in the way that only small mountain communities can be.

Historic buildings house local shops and restaurants, their windows glowing warmly in the gathering dusk.

Strings of lights left over from the holidays still twinkle from storefront to storefront, giving everything a cozy, welcoming feel.

I walk slowly, in no hurry to reach the lodge and the inevitable phone calls waiting for me there. My editor will want to know about the photos, my delay, my plans for returning to California. The outside world will want explanations and schedules and a return to normalcy.

But nothing about this feels normal anymore.

The Darkmore Lodge appears ahead, its rustic grandeur lit up against the mountain backdrop. It's beautiful, exactly the kind of place that would normally inspire me to reach for my camera. Instead, I just feel empty.

The lobby is warm and welcoming, with a fire crackling in the massive stone fireplace and the scent of pine and leather in the air.

The elevator ride to the third floor feels endless. My room is exactly as I left it—neat, anonymous, smelling of generic hotel cleaner instead of wood smoke and pine. My laptop sits on the desk, surrounded by notes about the climate change project that brought me here in the first place.

The project that nearly got me killed. The project that led me to Connor.

I drop my pack on the bed and move to the window, looking out at the mountain that looms over the town. Somewhere up there, Connor is probably settling in for another quiet evening alone, feeding his fire, reading a book, pretending that the past few days never happened.

Does he miss me at all? Does he lie awake thinking about the way I felt in his arms, the way we fit together so perfectly? Or has he already compartmentalized the whole experience, filing it away as just another successful rescue with an unfortunate lapse in professional judgment?

My phone buzzes with a text from my editor: Call me ASAP. Client wants status update on Darkmore project. I need photos by tomorrow.

Tomorrow. Twenty-four hours from now, I'm supposed to be on a plane back to San Francisco, leaving this place and Connor behind forever. Back to my apartment, my darkroom, my carefully constructed life that suddenly feels impossibly small.

I sink into the desk chair and open my laptop, scrolling through the photos I took before my accident.

The ice formations are there, crystal clear and hauntingly beautiful, documenting the environmental changes I came here to capture.

They're good photos. Important photos. The kind of work my grandmother would be proud of.

But they feel meaningless now compared to what I found in Connor's cabin. The pictures tell a story about climate change and environmental loss, but they don't tell the story that matters most—the one about finding something precious and unexpected in the last place you'd think to look.

The story about finding home in a stranger's eyes.

My phone rings, loud and insistent in the quiet room. My editor's name flashes on the screen, along with the reality check I've been avoiding.

Time to return to the real world. Time to pretend that the past few days were just an interesting adventure story instead of the most important experience of my life.

Time to figure out how to live with a heart that I accidentally left on a mountain with a man too stubborn or scared to keep it.

I answer the phone, paste on my professional voice, and begin the process of pretending that nothing has changed.

Even though everything has.

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eight

Connor

The cabin feels like a tomb without her.

I've been sitting in my chair for the past two hours, staring at the couch where she slept, where we made love, where she challenged every assumption I've made about my life for the past five years.

The fire is dying, but I can't bring myself to add another log.

Can't bring myself to do anything but sit here and catalogue everything I've lost.

The coffee mug she used is still in the sink. Her scent lingers on the pillow. The impression of her body is still visible in the couch cushions, like a ghost of what could have been.

I'm forty-three years old, and I'm sitting in my cabin mourning a woman I've known for three days like she was the love of my life.

The hell of it is, she might have been.

My radio crackles from the kitchen counter, Jake's voice cutting through the silence.
"Connor, you copy?"

I consider ignoring it. I'm officially off duty until tomorrow, and right now I don't

trust myself to sound professional.

"Connor, come in. We've got a situation."

I grab the radio, forcing my voice to sound normal. "Copy, Jake. What's happening?"

"It's your photographer. She checked out of the lodge about twenty minutes ago, and said she was driving back to Calgary tonight to catch an early flight tomorrow."

My blood runs cold. "In this weather?"

"That's the problem. Weather service just issued another advisory. Snow's moving back in, heavier than predicted. Highway patrol is recommending against non-essential travel."

I'm already moving toward the window, looking out at the sky. Sure enough, the clouds are building again, and I can see the first fat snowflakes starting to fall.

"Where is she now?" I ask, grabbing my keys and jacket.

"Last we heard, she was heading up toward the pass. Connor, if she gets caught in this storm..."

He doesn't need to finish. I know those roads better than anyone. In good weather, they're challenging. In a sudden snowstorm, with a driver unfamiliar with mountain conditions? They're deadly.

"I'm going after her," I say, already heading for the door.

"Connor, wait. Let us coordinate a proper search."

"There's no time," I cut him off. "If she's already on the highway and this storm hits full force, she could end up stuck in a drift or worse. I know the route she'd take. I can find her."

I don't wait for his response. I'm out the door and starting my truck, my mind already calculating routes and timing. If she left twenty minutes ago and is driving carefully, she'd be about fifteen miles up the highway by now. If the storm hits as hard as Jake thinks it will...

I push the truck as hard as I dare on the snow-covered roads, my headlights cutting through the increasing snowfall. This is insane. Driving into a storm to chase after a woman who's probably better off getting as far away from me as possible.

But the thought of her stranded somewhere, cold and alone and possibly hurt, makes my stomach turn. I can survive her leaving. I can't survive losing her to these mountains.

The snow is coming down harder now, thick flakes that stick to my windshield faster than the wipers can clear them. I reach the highway and turn north, following the route toward Calgary, my eyes scanning for any sign of a small rental car.

Ten miles. Fifteen. My radio crackles with weather updates that get progressively worse. Visibility dropping. Roads becoming treacherous. All non-essential travel suspended.

Where the hell is she?

Twenty miles out, I spot taillights ahead, barely visible through the storm. A car pulled over on the shoulder, hazard lights blinking weakly through the snow. As I get closer, I can make out the shape of a small sedan, nearly buried in the rapidly accumulating drifts.

My heart stops. It's her.

I pull over behind her car and grab my emergency kit, fighting through the wind and snow to reach her driver's side window. She's inside, talking on her phone, and when she sees me approaching, her eyes go wide with shock.

She rolls down the window as I reach her. "Connor? What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" I have to shout over the wind. "What the hell are you doing driving in this weather?"

"I checked the forecast," she shouts back. "It was supposed to be clear until midnight."

"Mountain weather changes fast. Didn't anyone tell you that?" I'm angrier than I should be, but it's better than acknowledging the terror that grabbed me when I thought I might lose her.

"I couldn't stay," she says, and even through the storm, I can hear the pain in her voice. "I couldn't pretend that nothing happened between us while you acted like I was just another rescue victim."

The air is pulled from my lungs. "Mavis."

"My car won't start," she continues, talking over me. "The engine turns over but won't catch. I've been sitting here for ten minutes trying to figure out what to do."

"Get your things," I tell her. "You're coming with me."

"Connor, I can't. I have a flight tomorrow morning. My editor is expecting me."

"Your editor can wait. This storm is going to get worse before it gets better. If you stay out here, you're going to end up like you did three days ago, only this time I might not find you in time."

Something in my voice must convince her, because she nods and starts gathering her belongings. I help her transfer her bags to my truck, noting how her hands shake as she locks her rental car.

The drive back is treacherous, with visibility down to maybe twenty feet. I keep one hand on the wheel and one on the radio, coordinating with Jake about road conditions and alternative routes. Beside me, Mavis sits in silence, her arms wrapped around herself.

It takes us an hour to cover the distance that should have been thirty minutes. By the time we reach my turnoff, the snow is coming down so hard I can barely make out my own driveway.

"We're going to my cabin," I tell her as I navigate the final stretch.

"Connor, I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's the only idea. The roads into town are completely blocked now. We're stuck."

I pull up to the cabin and cut the engine. In the sudden silence, with snow pelting the windshield and the wind howling around us, the weight of what just happened settles between us.

"You came after me," she says quietly.

"Of course I came after you."

"Why?"

The simple question hangs in the air, demanding an answer I'm not sure I'm ready to give. But sitting here in the dark, with the storm raging outside and Mavis looking at me with those dark eyes full of hope and hurt, I realize I'm tired of lying to myself.

"Because I couldn't let you go," I admit. "Because the thought of you driving away from here, away from me, felt like dying. Because I've been a coward and an idiot, and I almost lost the best thing that's ever happened to me because I was too scared to admit what I was feeling."

Her intake of breath is sharp, audible even over the storm. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I love you." The words come out rough, like they've been dragged up from somewhere deep inside me.

"I'm saying I've loved you since the moment I pulled you out of that creek, and I've been fighting it because I thought I was too old, too set in my ways, too damaged to deserve someone like you. "

"Connor."

"I'm saying I was wrong." I turn to face her fully, needing her to see the truth in my eyes. "About everything. About us. About what we could have together. You were right when you said this place doesn't have to be empty. It just needed the right person to fill it."

Tears are streaming down her face now, catching the dim light from the dashboard.

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean every word. I love you, Mavis Aldana. I love your passion and your courage

and the way you see the world through that camera. I love how you made my cabin feel like a home just by being in it. I love how you challenge me and push me and make me want to be better than I am."

"I love you too," she whispers, the words barely audible over the storm. "I love you so much it scares me. When you acted like it didn't matter, like I didn't matter, it hurt."

"I'm sorry, Mavis." I lean across the console and kiss her, cutting off her words. She tastes like tears and hope and everything I never knew I needed.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"Come inside," I say against her lips. "Let me show you how much you matter."

We grab her bags and run through the snow to the cabin, laughing despite everything as we fumble with the door and stumble inside, shaking snow from our hair and clothes.

The cabin is cold, the fire having died while I was gone, but I barely notice. All I can see is Mavis, looking at me like I'm everything she's ever wanted.

"Are you sure about this?" she asks, her voice soft but steady. "About us? About me staying?"

Instead of answering with words, I frame her face with my hands and kiss her again, pouring everything I feel into the contact. She melts against me, her arms coming up to circle my neck, and I know this is right. This is what I've been missing, what I've been afraid to want.

"I've never been more sure of anything," I tell her when we break apart. "Stay with

me, Mavis. Not just tonight, but for good. Make this place a home. Make me whole."

"Yes," she breathes against my mouth. "Yes to all of it."

This time when I lift her into my arms, there's no hesitation, no professional boundaries to hide behind. Just love and need and the promise of forever stretching out before us.

I carry her to my bedroom, setting her down beside the bed with gentle hands. The room is cold, but we'll warm it together.

"I love you," I say again, because I can't say it enough as I undress her. "You're perfect," I tell her, running my hands over her bare shoulders, down her arms, memorizing every inch. "So fucking perfect."

"I'm yours," she says simply, and the words go straight to my heart and my cock. "I've been yours since that first night."

I lay her back on the bed, following her down, covering her body with mine. The feel of her beneath me, warm and willing and mine, is almost overwhelming.

"I need you," I growl against her neck, already hard and aching for her. "Need to bury my cock so deep inside you that you'll never forget who you belong to."

"I could never forget," she gasps as I kiss my way down her body, paying attention to all the spots that make her arch and moan. "I'm yours, Connor. Every part of me."

I worship her breasts with my mouth, sucking and biting at her nipples until she's writhing beneath me. "These perfect tits belong to me," I murmur against her skin. "This sweet body belongs to me."

"Yes," she moans, her hands fisting in my hair. "All yours. Everything is yours."

I kiss my way down her stomach, spreading her thighs wide as I settle between them. "And this pussy," I growl, looking up at her as I run my tongue through her slick folds. "This sweet little cunt is mine too."

"Oh God, Connor," she cries out as I feast on her, my tongue circling her clit before diving deep inside her. She tastes like heaven, like home, like everything I've ever wanted.

"So fucking wet for me," I murmur against her flesh. "My woman, so ready for my cock."

I work her with my mouth and fingers until she's trembling on the edge, then pull back, ignoring her whimper of protest.

"Not yet," I tell her, moving back up her body. "When you come, it's going to be with my cock buried deep inside this tight pussy."

I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock sliding through her wetness. "Tell me you're mine," I demand, holding back even though every instinct is screaming at me to claim her.

"I'm yours," she gasps, trying to push down onto me. "Please, Connor. I need your cock inside me. I need you to fuck me."

"Need me to fill this hungry little pussy?" I push just the tip inside her, groaning at the tight heat. "Need me to stretch you open and make you mine?"

"Yes," she sobs with need. "Please, I need all of you. I need you to fuck me hard and deep and never stop."

I drive into her in one powerful thrust, both of us crying out at the sensation. She's so tight, so perfect around me, like she was made for my cock.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," I groan, starting to move with deep, powerful strokes. "This pussy was made for me, wasn't it? Made to take my cock."

"Yes," she gasps, her legs wrapping around my waist, pulling me deeper. "Made for you. Only you."

I fuck her with everything I have, claiming every inch of her as mine. The headboard slams against the wall with each thrust, the sound mixing with our moans and the wet sounds of our bodies joining.

"You're mine," I growl, reaching between us to rub her clit as I pound into her. "Say it. Tell me who owns this pussy."

"You do," she screams, her back arching off the bed. "You own me, Connor. All of me. I'm yours forever."

"That's right," I grunt, feeling my climax building.

"I'm going to come," she warns, her inner walls starting to flutter around my cock.

"Come for me," I command, pinching her clit as I drive deep. "Come all over my cock like the good girl you are."

She explodes beneath me with a scream that's pure pleasure, her pussy clenching around me so tight I nearly faint from the pleasure. The sensation pushes me over the edge, and I bury myself deep as I fill her with my cum.

"Take it all," I groan against her neck. "Take every drop of my cum. You're mine

now."

We collapse together, breathing hard, our bodies still joined. I've never felt anything like this—this sense of complete possession and belonging.

I pull her up for another kiss, tasting forever on her lips. "I love you, Mavis Aldana."

"I love you too, Connor Hayes. Now and always."

Outside, the storm rages on, but we don't care. We have everything we need right here—each other, and all the time in the world to build something beautiful together.

When morning comes, we'll start planning our future. Tonight, we have love and promises and the rest of our lives stretching out before us like an unbroken trail through pristine snow.

It's more than enough. It's everything.

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One and a Half Years Later...

I stretch lazily in bed, reaching across to find Connor's side empty but still warm. Through the open window, I can hear the sound of his axe splitting wood, the steady rhythm that's become the soundtrack to our mornings.

Our mornings. Our bedroom. Our life.

Even after eighteen months, sometimes I still can't believe this is real.

I slip out of bed and pad to the window, wrapping Connor's discarded flannel shirt around myself. Outside, my husband is working his way through a pile of logs, his movements efficient and powerful despite the early hour. Even after all this time, watching him work still makes my heart skip.

The cabin has changed since I moved in permanently over a year ago.

What was once sparse and purely functional now shows signs of a life shared.

My photography equipment occupies one corner of the main room, organized on shelves Connor built specifically for my cameras and lenses.

Books on environmental science sit next to his survival manuals.

My grandmother's quilt drapes over the back of the couch where Connor proposed to me on a snowy February morning.

"Marry me," he'd said, no ring, no grand gesture, just honesty in those winter-blue eyes. "Marry me because I love you and I want to wake up next to you for the rest of my life."

I'd said yes before he finished the sentence.

My laptop chimes with an email notification, and I move to check it, hoping it's the response I've been waiting for. It is—and it's even better than I expected.

Mavis,

The "Living Glaciers" series is extraordinary.

National Geographic wants to discuss a feature story, potentially with a book deal to follow.

The way you've captured both the beauty and the fragility of these ecosystems is exactly what we need right now—truth without despair, urgency without hopelessness.

Can we schedule a call this week?

I reread the email three times, my heart pounding with excitement.

The "Living Glaciers" project has been my focus for the past eight months—documenting the changing ice fields of the Rockies through all four seasons, showing both their breathtaking beauty and the subtle signs of change that most people miss.

It's the work I was meant to do. The work my grandmother would be proud of.

The front door opens, and Connor steps inside, bringing the scent of pine and summer

air with him. His eyes find mine immediately, the way they always do, and his expression shifts from casual to concerned when he sees my face.

"What's wrong?" he asks, crossing to me in three long strides.

"Nothing's wrong," I say, unable to keep the grin off my face. "Everything's right. Everything's perfect."

I show him the email, watching his expression change from concern to pride to something that looks like awe.

"National Geographic," he says, pulling me into his arms. "That's incredible."

"It's because of this place," I tell him, pressing my face against his chest, breathing in his familiar scent. "Because of you. Because you showed me that I could tell these stories differently. Show the truth without losing the beauty."

"You did that yourself," he says, his voice rough with emotion. "I just gave you a place to do it."

We've had this argument before—Connor crediting me, me crediting him, both of us too stubborn to accept that maybe we just make each other better. It's one of our favorite fights to have.

"We should celebrate," he says, spinning me around the kitchen. "What do you think about a hike today? Perfect weather for it."

"I'd love that," I say, my stomach fluttering with nerves and excitement. This is perfect—better than I could have planned. "Actually, I was thinking we could go to Black Creek. I want to show you something there."

Something in my tone makes him pause, studying my face with those perceptive

eyes. "Show me what?"

"You'll see," I say, trying to keep my voice light. "Trust me."

An hour later, we're hiking the familiar trail that leads to Black Creek, our packs loaded with lunch and my camera equipment.

The summer air is warm and sweet, filled with the scent of wildflowers and pine.

Everything is green and lush, so different from the icy wilderness where we first met, but just as beautiful.

Connor holds my hand as we navigate the rocky sections, his touch sure and steady. He knows these trails better than anyone, could probably walk them blindfolded, but he's still protective, still careful with me. It's one of the thousand small ways he shows his love.

"Remember when you used to think I was reckless?" I tease as we crest a small rise.

"Used to?" He grins at me. "You're still reckless. Just more careful about it now."

When we reach Black Creek, the water is running clear and gentle, so different from the rushing torrent that carried me away eighteen months ago. The ice formations are long gone, replaced by smooth stones and quiet pools that reflect the summer sky.

We find a spot on the bank where the aspens provide shade, and Connor spreads out our blanket. I set up my camera, ostensibly to capture the perfect light filtering through the leaves, but really because my hands need something to do while I work up the courage.

"This is where it all started," I say finally, sitting down beside him on the blanket.

"Where what started?" he asks, though I think he knows.

"Us. This life. Everything." I gesture toward the creek. "If I hadn't been foolish enough to step onto that ice, if you hadn't been skilled enough to find me..."

"You weren't foolish," he says firmly. "You were passionate. There's a difference."

"Passionate enough to nearly die for a photograph."

"Passionate enough to risk everything for something you believed in." He takes my hand, threading our fingers together. "That's not foolish, Mavis. That's brave."

I look at our joined hands, gathering my courage. In my pack, hidden beneath spare camera batteries and energy bars, is the small white stick that I've been carrying around for three days.

"Connor," I say, my heart hammering against my ribs. "I have something to tell you. Something important."

He goes still, his attention focused entirely on me, holding his breath. "What is it?"

I reach into my pack and pull out the pregnancy test, my hands trembling slightly as I place it on the blanket between us.

Connor stares at it for a long second, like his brain is struggling to process what he's seeing. Then his eyes snap to mine, wide with disbelief and hope.

"Are you?" He can't seem to finish the sentence.

"Pregnant," I whisper, nodding as tears start to blur my vision. "About eight weeks, I think. I took four tests to be sure."

The silence stretches between us, filled only by the gentle sound of water over stones and the whisper of wind through the aspens. For a terrifying moment, I wonder if this is too much, too fast. We've been married for only six months, together for eighteen months. Maybe he's not ready for this.

Then Connor's face breaks into the most beautiful smile I've ever seen, and he's reaching for me, pulling me into his arms as I laugh and cry at the same time.

"A baby," he says, his voice thick with emotion. "We're having a baby."

"Are you happy?" I ask, needing to hear him say it.

"Happy?" He frames my face with his hands, his thumbs brushing away my tears. "Mavis, I'm terrified and thrilled and so happy I can't even think straight!"

He shifts so he can place his hands gently on my still-flat stomach. "Hey there, little one," he says softly. "It's your dad. I can't wait to meet you."

The simple words break something open in my chest and love comes pouring out. This man, who thought he was too old and too damaged for love, is going to be the most incredible father.

"I wanted to tell you here," I whisper, threading my fingers through his hair. "Where our story started. Where you saved my life."

"Where you saved mine," he corrects, pressing a gentle kiss to my stomach before looking up at me. "This place brought us together. Now it's going to be part of our child's story too."

We sit there for a long time, his hands on my belly, mine in his hair, both of us overwhelmed by the magnitude of this moment. Around us, the creek flows peacefully, the aspens rustle in the warm breeze, and the mountains stand eternal and

protective, watching over the place where our future began.

"I was thinking," Connor says eventually, "Maybe we should expand the cabin. Add another bedroom, maybe a proper darkroom for you."

"Planning ahead?" I tease, though my heart swells at his immediate acceptance, his instinct to prepare and protect.

"Always," he says, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "Though with you, I've learned to expect the unexpected."

"Good thing," I say, placing my hand over his. "Because I have a feeling this little one is going to keep us on our toes."

In this moment, looking out into the wilderness, I can't help but think about my grandmother. She always said that the best stories find you when you're not looking for them. She was right about that, just like she was right about so many things.

"What are you thinking about?" Connor asks.

"My grandmother," I say honestly. "How she'd love this place. How she'd love you. How she'd love knowing that her legacy is going to continue."

"She'd love that you're telling the stories that matter," he says, his hands warm on my ankles. "That you found a way to show both the beauty and the truth."

"I love you," I whisper against his chest.

Tomorrow, I'll call National Geographic. I'll start planning the new project, mapping out a timeline that accounts for morning sickness and doctor's appointments and all the beautiful complications that come with carrying new life.

Tonight, though, I just want to be here with my husband in the home we've built together, dreaming about the future we're creating.

The story my grandmother started, that I continued, will go on. But now it will have a new voice, a new perspective, a new generation to carry it forward.

And that, I think as Connor's hand traces gentle circles on my belly, is the most beautiful story of all.