



Her Protector (Ember Heart Ridge Search and Rescue #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: My brother's best friend thinks I'm in danger. And he's determined to protect me, whatever it takes

Inheriting my grandpa's old cabin means a return to Ember Heart. And legends of hidden gold in the mountains. What I didn't expect was Marcus Blake. My brother's nerdy best friend turned smokin' hot computer expert. Mr. Organized meets my chaotic energy, and sparks fly immediately.

He thinks I'm up to something. He's not wrong.

But when danger finds us both on the mountain, this protective alpha steps up. Hard muscles. Heated glances. One scorching kiss that changes everything between us. Now he's determined to keep me safe.

Even if it means keeping me close. Very close.

Welcome to Ember Heart Ridge Search and Rescue. These big, burly mountain men face danger every day, but

nothing can prepare them for the thrill of meeting the curvy girls of their dreams. Short, steamy reads set in a

cozy small town, with a guaranteed HEA every time.

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Chapter One

ABBY

The key sticks in the lock. I jiggle it, curse, and finally resort to my universal fix-it method, also known as giving the door a good, solid kick. It swings open with a reproachful creak, and I step into Grandpa Jasper's cabin.

The air smells like dust, old wood, and a hint of that herb tea Grandpa loved.

Afternoon sunlight streams through the windows, illuminating floating particles that dance in the light.

Everything's exactly how it should be; the big stone fireplace dominating one wall, the scrubbed kitchen table where Grandpa used to spread out his maps while telling me stories about the old days, the bookshelf crammed with geology texts and adventure novels.

I miss him.

I drop my bag and survey my new temporary home. The lawyer said the place had been empty since Grandpa died suddenly six months ago, and it shows. Cobwebs drape the corners like Halloween decorations, and there's a fine layer of dust on everything.

But beneath the neglect, it's still the same magical place from my childhood summers. The cabin where Grandpa would ruffle my hair and spin wild tales about gold hidden

in the mountains while Mom rolled her eyes. She thought it was all nonsense.

I pull the letter from my back pocket, the paper crackling as I unfold the familiar handwriting one more time:

My dearest Abby,

If you're reading this, then I'm off on my greatest adventure yet. Don't mourn this old prospector too long. You know I've lived exactly the life I wanted.

The cabin is yours now, along with everything in it. But more importantly, I'm leaving you the greatest treasure of all: the truth. Look where the heart of the mountain beats strongest. The old stories aren't just stories, Abby Bear.

All my love, Grandpa

P.S. Check behind the loose stone in the fireplace. Third row from the bottom, four stones from the left. You always were too curious for your own good. Now it's time to put that curiosity to work.

I fold the letter and shove it back in my pocket. I've read it a hundred times since the lawyer handed it to me three weeks ago.

Grandpa believed in the Ember Heart treasure. For him it was fact, not legend.

I cross to the fireplace, running my fingers along the third row of stones. The fourth one from the left shifts slightly under pressure. I work at it with my fingernails until it comes loose, revealing a hollow space behind it. Inside is a small, tarnished metal box.

I hold my breath as I carefully lift it out. It's heavier than expected, and when I shake

it gently, something slides around inside. The latch is stiff, but after some coaxing, it finally gives. The box contains a folded piece of oilcloth, which I unwrap carefully,

It's a map. Hand-drawn, detailed, with elevations marked and geographical features I recognize from childhood hikes. But what makes me dizzy with excitement are the X's marked at five points, connected by a dotted line that leads deep into the mountain.

At the bottom, in Grandpa's careful script: Path to the Ember Heart - J. Brooks, 1987.

Holy shit.

There are other things in the box. A small journal with entries dating back decades, documenting Grandpa's research and theories. Photocopies of an old mining claim. A small piece of greenish rock with flecks of a glittery substance embedded in it.

I'm so absorbed in examining everything that I don't hear the footsteps on the porch until there's a brisk knock on the door.

I scramble to shove everything back in the box, my heart hammering. "Just a minute!"

"Abby? It's Marcus. I need to speak with you."

Marcus? Marcus Frickin' Blake?

I hide the box behind a couch cushion and smooth my hair down, trying to look calm and unbothered. But when I open the door, my breath catches.

Gone are the thick glasses and perpetually messy hair.

The man standing on my porch is tall and broad-shouldered, wearing dark jeans and a button-down shirt that does absolutely sinful things for his chest. His hair is still dark brown, almost black, but now it's styled in a way that probably requires actual effort.

And the glasses... Jesus, the glasses are now trendy black frames that make his green eyes look even more intense.

He was always cute. But when did Marcus Blake get this hot?

“Hey, Marcus.” I lean against the doorframe, hoping I look casual and not like someone who just found a treasure map. “Long time, no see...”

He pulls out a tablet and swipes to an official-looking document. “I’m here in my capacity as Deputy Emergency Coordinator for Ember Heart Search and Rescue to conduct a mandatory safety inspection of this property.”

I blink. “I’m sorry, what now?”

“Due to the cabin's proximity to known geological hazards and its extended period of vacancy, all returning residents are required to have their property assessed for potential safety risks.” He delivers this with such bureaucratic seriousness that I almost believe him.

Almost.

“That's the biggest load of bull I've heard since Josh tried to convince me that doing his chores would make my wishes come true.” I cross my arms, which makes his gaze flicker briefly to my chest before snapping back to my face.

“There's no such thing as mandatory safety inspections for private property, and you know it.”

A muscle in his jaw ticks. “The regulations...”

“Were made up five seconds ago in your head.” I step back and motion for him to come inside. “But come on in anyway. I’m curious to find out what you’re really here for.”

He hesitates for just a moment before stepping across the threshold.

Damn. He smells good. Fresh air and pine trees, mingled with a hint of spicy cologne.

The cabin immediately feels smaller with him in it, his presence filling every inch of the space in a way that makes me hyper aware of every breath.

“Nice to see you too, by the way,” I add, closing the door behind him. “It’s only been seven years.”

“Seven years, three months, and twelve days,” he says automatically, then looks like he wants to take the words back.

“But who’s counting?” I tease, and he blinks twice.

God, he’s gorgeous. He always was, even back when we were kids and he’d get all bright-eyed trying to explain some complicated scientific concept to me. Some things never change.

I sit on the couch and pat the cushion beside me. “Okay. What do you really want to know?”

He stays standing, tablet clutched in front of him like a shield. “My brother Hunter mentioned you’ve been asking questions around town. About mining claims and geological surveys.”

“And?”

“And I want to know why.”

I shrug. “Maybe I'm thinking of starting a rock collection.”

His eyes narrow. “Abby...”

The way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine. It's the same tone he used when we were fifteen and I'd talked him into climbing the old oak tree behind the school, or at seventeen when I'd convinced him to sneak out to Miller's Pond for midnight swimming.

Back when we were inseparable. Before everything went wrong.

“Look. I inherited this place. I'm just trying to understand what Grandpa left me. Is that a crime?”

“That depends on what he left you.”

Direct hit. I keep my expression neutral, but my face must give me away because Marcus sets down his tablet and takes a step closer.

“What did you find, Abby?”

The question hovers in the air between us. Part of me wants to tell him everything. But the other part, the part that still stings from being abandoned without explanation, keeps my mouth shut.

“Nothing that concerns you.”

“If it involves the mountain, it concerns me. This is my job, Abby. Keeping people safe.”

“Since when do you care about keeping me safe?”

The words slip out before I can stop them. Marcus goes very still, and for a moment we just stare at each other across the dusty cabin.

He opens his mouth like he's going to answer, then stops. Instead, he picks up his tablet again, all business.

“Just... be careful up there, okay? The mountain can be dangerous if you don't know what you're doing.”

“I don't need a lecture. I know what I'm doing.”

“Do you?” He heads for the door, then pauses with his hand on the knob. “Because the Abby I remember had a talent for getting in over her head.”

“The Abby you remember grew up. Maybe you should, too.” I regret the words the instant they come out of my mouth.

His jaw tightens, and there's a flash of heat in his eyes. It makes my pulse skip and my skin flush warm.

Then he's gone. I wait until his truck disappears down the mountain road before pulling out the treasure map again.

Marcus Blake thinks I'm going to get in over my head?

Well, he's probably right. But that's never stopped me before.

And if he wants to know what I'm really up to, he's going to have to work a lot harder than a fake safety inspection.

Game on, Marcus.

Game on.

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Chapter Two

MARCUS

I'm halfway down the mountain before I acknowledge the truth. The interaction with Abby had all the success rate of a real-world cold fusion experiment.

Gripping the steering wheel harder than necessary, I replay every moment of the conversation.

The way Abby looked when she opened the door, all wild hair and challenging eyes.

Beautiful. How she saw right through my bullshit excuse without breaking a sweat.

That perfect, rosy flush that crept up her neck when I stepped into the cabin.

Seven years, three months, and twelve days. For the love of Kepler, I actually said that out loud.

I pull over at the scenic overlook and cut the engine.

The valley spreads out below, Ember Heart nestled between the peaks, but I'm not appreciating the view.

All I can see is the face of the girl who used to be my best friend, now a beautiful, confident woman who clearly wants nothing to do with me.

And she's hiding a secret. A big secret.

The scientific part of my brain catalogs the evidence. One, her nervous energy when I knocked. Two, the way she positioned herself to block my view of the living room. Three, that split second of panic before she covered it with attitude.

She found something in that cabin. Something related to the treasure.

My phone buzzes with a text from my twin.

Hunter: How'd the 'safety inspection' go?

Marcus: About as well as you'd expect.

Hunter: That bad? Want to grab a beer and talk about it?

Marcus: Can't. Have work to do.

I start the truck and head back down to town. If Abby's planning to go treasure hunting, she's going to need more than whatever Jasper left her. She'll need geological surveys, topographical maps, maybe even ground-penetrating radar data.

And I have access to all of it.

The Ember Heart Search and Rescue headquarters doubles as one of the county's geological monitoring stations. We track seismic activity, landslide risks, and weather patterns. But the real treasure trove is in the basement: decades of mining surveys, historical records, and geological assessments that most people aren't even aware exist.

I've been through it all. Every map, every report, every theory about where the

legendary treasure might be hidden. The irony isn't lost on me. The woman I've been trying to forget is now chasing the same mystery I've been obsessing over for years.

I park behind the SAR building and let myself in. The basement is cool and quiet, filled with filing cabinets and computer servers that hum softly in the darkness. I flip on the lights and head straight for the geological archives.

Abby's grandfather's research takes up an entire drawer.

The old man was thorough, I'll give him that.

Purchase orders for mining equipment, correspondence with geological survey teams, and even receipts for dynamite.

Most of it I've seen before, but I spread it out on the work table anyway, looking for clues I might have missed.

A pattern starts to emerge. Jasper wasn't just interested in the treasure legend. He was tracking something specific. Mineral compositions, water table fluctuations, electromagnetic anomalies. The kind of data that suggests he knew exactly what he was looking for.

Caves. Or mine shafts.

I lean back in my chair, pieces clicking into place. Jasper wasn't chasing a legend. He was following real geological evidence. And now his granddaughter has inherited not just his property, but his research.

My phone rings. Troy's name flashes on the screen and I pick up.

"You still at the office?" he asks.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Logan wants to talk about the new data system.”

“Okay... and?”

“ And I hear Abby Brooks is back in town.”

I grunt.

Silence on the other end. “You remember, Marcus. Josh's sister? Red hair, freckles? Broken wrist from falling out of the oak tree, stitches in her forehead from the camping trip, burns from the campfire incident... the one you used to follow around when we were kids?”

I roll my eyes. My brother's memories always have a medical flavor. “I never followed her around.”

“ Right . And I never had to patch you both up after she talked you into jumping off Miller's Bridge.” Troy chuckles. “So what's the plan?”

The question catches me off guard. “Plan?”

“Marcus. We all know you've been carrying a torch for that girl since high school. She's back in town and you're sitting in that damn basement instead of doing something about it.”

“She doesn't want to see me.”

Troy's voice softens. “Why?”

The memory hits me hard. Abby and I back in Ember Heart at the same time, seven years ago, after I'd completed my Master's in Geological Engineering.

Getting closer, until Josh abruptly told me he'd seen the way I looked at Abby.

Warning me that she had big dreams, a job offer in the city, a whole life waiting for her.

That she didn't need me holding her back. That he couldn't be my best friend if I dated his sister.

"There are complicating factors. Numerous variables."

"Look, I'm not saying you should storm up there and demand she kiss you. But maybe you could try being her friend."

After he hangs up, I gather Jasper's files and lock them in my desk drawer. Whatever Abby found in that cabin, whatever she's planning, I'm going to figure it out. Not so I can stop her, but so I can help her do it safely.

Even if she doesn't want my help. Even if she never forgives me for walking away.

I lock up the building and head home, but my mind is already working on the problem. Abby's going to start her treasure hunt soon. Probably tomorrow, knowing her impatience. She'll head up the northeast ridge, following whatever clues Jasper left her.

And when she does, I'll be there. Not watching from a distance, but close enough to help if she needs it.

Close enough to finally tell her the truth about why I've been protecting her all these

years.

Even when she didn't know I was doing it.

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Chapter Three

ABBY

I'm up early. Grandpa's map is spread across the kitchen table next to a thermos of coffee and a backpack full of supplies. The treasure hunt officially begins today, and I'm practically vibrating with excitement.

According to Grandpa's notes, the first marker should be about two miles up the northeast ridge, near what he called 'the heart's first beat.' His handwriting gets more cryptic the deeper into the mountains the trail goes, but I've always been good at puzzles.

What I'm not good at is being followed.

I spot the truck about half a mile up the mountain road. It keeps a careful distance, pulling over when I slow down, resuming when I speed up. Either Marcus Blake thinks he's much more subtle than he actually is, or he wants me to know he's there.

Probably the latter. He was always too smart for his own good.

I park at the trailhead and take my time shouldering my pack, giving him plenty of opportunity to reveal himself. When he doesn't, I head into the woods, following the trail that winds up toward the ridge.

The morning air is crisp and clean, scented with the faint mineral aroma of mountain streams. This is where I belong, where I've always belonged. Not in some stuffy

office building in the city, filing reports and attending meetings about quarterly projections.

The trail splits about a mile in, and I check Grandpa's map before taking the narrower path that leads northeast. This part of the mountain is less traveled, the trees denser, and the footing more treacherous. Perfect for hiding buried treasure.

I'm so focused on reading the terrain that I don't notice the footsteps behind me.

"You're going the wrong way."

I spin around to find Marcus emerging from behind a massive pine tree, looking annoyingly fresh despite the early hour and the steep climb.

He's traded yesterday's button-down for hiking gear that does absolutely sinful things to his body.

The fitted technical shirt clings to his chest and shoulders in ways that make my mouth go dry, and when he moves, his big muscles flex beneath the fabric.

"Are you seriously following me?"

"I'm not following you. I'm hiking." He gestures to his own backpack, which is significantly more professional than mine.

"Uh-huh. And you just happened to be hiking in the exact same direction I am?"

"I happen to know these trails better than you do." He moves past me to examine the fork in the path. "That way leads to a dead end. Unless you're planning to do some technical rock climbing, which I'm guessing you're not equipped for."

I check the map again. Damn. He's right. The trail I was about to take petered out at a cliff face. The correct path heads more directly north.

“Fine. Thanks for the navigation tip.” I adjust my pack straps and head for the correct trail. “Feel free to continue your totally coincidental hike in whatever direction you prefer.”

“Abby.”

When I turn back, he's looking at me with an expression I can't quite read. Serious, but not angry.

“I know you don't want me here. But that mountain gets dangerous fast, especially the old mining areas. If something happens to you up there...”

“Nothing's going to happen to me.”

“You don't know that.”

I face him fully, putting my hands on my hips. “You don't know what I'm capable of. I'm not the same girl who used to need rescuing from trees.”

“No. You're not.”

The way he looks at me when he says it makes heat pool low in my belly. His gaze drops briefly to my mouth before returning to my eyes, making my pulse stutter.

I turn back to the trail. “Well. Good talk.”

I make it maybe fifty yards before his footsteps crunch on the path behind me again.

Marcus clears his throat. “For the record, Abby. I'm not following you. I'm going to the same place you are.”

That stops me cold. “What's that supposed to mean?”

He catches up to me in a few long strides. “It means I've been researching the Ember Heart treasure for years. Call it my special interest. It also means I know where your grandfather was looking, and I know you found his research.”

“You've been researching the treasure? Why?”

“Because people keep getting lost or hurt trying to find it. SAR, remember? And... I've always wondered if the old stories might be true.”

Marcus, for all his brain power, has never been a good liar. His tells are the same as they were when we were kids: the slight tension around his eyes, the way he presses his lips together when he's holding something back.

“You think it's real.”

“I think your grandfather was onto something. The geological data supports the possibility of significant mineral deposits in this area. Whether that translates to actual treasure...” He shrugs.

We stare at each other for a long moment. The smart thing would be to send him away, to insist on doing this alone. But the truth is, I could use the help. And despite everything that went wrong between us, Marcus Blake is probably the most capable person I know.

“I'll be honest with you. Our SAR is running low on funding after the government canceled the grant program. Finding some buried treasure would definitely help.

Partners?” he asks, extending his hand. There's a vulnerability to his expression, a hopefulness he's trying to hide.

“Partners,” I agree, and shake his hand.

The contact sends electricity shooting up my arm. His palm is warm and calloused, his grip firm, and I have the sudden, inappropriate urge to trace those calluses with my fingertips. When he releases my hand, I have to curl my fingers into a fist to stop the tingling his touch left behind.

We hike for the next hour, falling into an easy rhythm despite the years apart. Marcus points out geological formations, warns me about unstable footing, and somehow manages to do it all without making me feel like he's treating me like a child.

It's nice. More than nice. It reminds me why we used to be such good friends. And why I should probably stop staring at his perfect ass in those hiking pants.

The trail gets steeper as we climb, and rockier. By the time we reach the area marked on Grandpa's map, I'm breathing hard and grateful for the water break Marcus suggests.

I point to a cluster of boulders that match the first ‘X’ on the map. “That should be the first marker.”

We spend twenty minutes searching around the rocks before Marcus calls out from behind a fallen log. “Trouble, over here.”

His old nickname for me makes me smile. I scramble over to where he's kneeling next to a pile of stones. They're arranged deliberately, forming an arrow that points further up the ridge.

“Grandpa's breadcrumbs,” I breathe.

Marcus stands and brushes dirt off his knees. “Smart man. Subtle enough that casual hikers would miss it, but clear enough for someone who knows what to look for. Does your map show where the next marker should be?”

“About half a mile northeast. Near something called ‘the heart's second chamber.’”

“I know where that is. An old mining shaft, from the 1890s. It's been sealed for decades, but the entrance is still visible.”

We set off again, but the terrain gets significantly more challenging.

The trail almost disappears, replaced by loose rock and steep inclines that require us to use our hands as much as our feet.

More than once, Marcus reaches back to steady me when my footing slips, and I try not to notice how solid and reassuring his grip feels.

Or how the flex of his shoulders and back muscles as he climbs ahead of me makes heat coil tight in my belly.

I'm so distracted by the view that I almost miss the sound when it comes.

Marcus hears it too. He holds up a hand, signaling for silence, and we both freeze in place.

“...up here somewhere,” a man's voice carries on the wind. “Abby Brooks is back in town and she'll be treasure-hunting.”

“You sure she's got the old man's research?” Another voice, rougher than the first.

“Has to. Why else would she come back after all these years? Brooks must have given it to her to take care of. Now he’s dead, she's come to find the gold.”

“Not if we find her first.”

Marcus and I exchange a look. His jaw is tight, and there's something dangerous in his eyes that I've never seen before. Without a word, he gestures for us to move further up the ridge, away from the voices.

We climb in tense silence until the voices fade completely. Only then does Marcus speak, his voice low and urgent.

“We need to turn back.”

I shake my head. “No way. We're so close to the next marker.”

“Abby, those men are looking for you specifically. They know about your grandfather's research, and they're willing to come all the way up here to get it. And they don’t exactly sound friendly.”

“All the more reason for us to find the gold first.”

“All the more reason to get you somewhere safe.” His hand lands on my arm, warm and steady. “Please. We can come back tomorrow.”

I want to argue, but the concern in his voice stops me. This isn't about him thinking I can't handle myself. This is about him genuinely worried for my safety.

“Okay. But we're coming back. First thing.”

“Deal.”

We start the climb down, moving more quickly now. But the loose rock that was manageable on the way up becomes treacherous on the descent. I'm navigating a particularly steep section when my foot slips on a patch of wet stone.

I tumble hard, pain shooting through my knee as I hit the ground. My pack slides off one shoulder, throwing me further off balance.

Marcus is beside me in seconds, his hands gentle as he helps me sit up. "Are you hurt?"

I try to stand and immediately suck in my breath. My knee throbs, blood seeping through a rip in my jeans.

"Let me see."

His hands are careful as he examines the damage, rolling up the torn fabric to reveal a nasty scrape that's bleeding more than it should.

His touch is professional, but I can't ignore the way my skin burns everywhere he makes contact.

When his thumb accidentally brushes against the sensitive skin of my inner thigh while adjusting the bandage, I have to bite down hard on my lip to keep from making a sound that would be completely inappropriate given the circumstances.

"It needs to be cleaned. And you shouldn't put weight on it until we can get a better look."

"Marcus, I'm fine. It's just a scrape."

He scoops me into his arms before I can protest. "Trust me. It's faster this way."

Each point of contact is electric; tiny jolts of pure want that I can't ignore. The solid warmth of his body pressed against me makes me hyper-aware of every breath, every heartbeat, every flex of muscle as he supports my weight.

By the time we reach our vehicles, my knee is throbbing, my body is humming with awareness, and I'm in serious danger of doing something stupid like pulling him down for a kiss.

"I'm driving you home," he says, not asking.

"My car..."

"I'll come back for it later." He's already opening the passenger door of his truck, his tone brooking no argument.

When we reach the cabin, he insists on helping me inside, his arm around my waist again as I hop on one foot to the couch.

"You need to keep it elevated."

Marcus moves around my kitchen as if he belongs there, filling a bag with ice and wrapping it in a dish towel. When he comes back, he lifts my leg carefully and positions the ice pack against my knee.

"Better?"

"Much. Thank you."

His expression shifts. "You don't have to thank me for keeping you safe, Abby. I'll always do that."

Marcus's head snaps toward the window, his entire body tense. The sound of an engine approaching makes me suck in my breath.

“Expecting someone?”

I shake my head. The engine cuts off outside, followed by the slam of a truck door and heavy footsteps on the porch.

“Abby? You in there?” My brother’s voice makes me relax.

Marcus relaxes a little, but he's still alert as I call out, “Come in, it's open!”

The door swings open.

“What happened?” Josh demands, his gaze zeroing in on my bandaged knee before moving to Marcus.

“I took a tumble on the mountain. Marcus patched me up.”

“How bad is it?”

“Just a scrape. Nothing dramatic.”

“Uh-huh.” Josh glances between Marcus and me, clearly picking up on the undercurrents in the room. “And what exactly were you two doing on the mountain?”

“Hiking. Showing Marcus some of the places Grandpa used to take me.”

Josh doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't push the issue. “Thanks, dude. I appreciate you looking out for my sister. But I’ll take it from here.”

The dismissal is polite but unmistakable. Josh has always been a little over-protective. Marcus gets the message.

“Of course,” he says, gathering his pack. “I should get going. If you throw me your keys, I’ll hike up and drive your car back down.”

"Want to tell me what that was really about?" Josh asks the moment the door closes.

I adjust the ice pack on my knee and settle back against the couch cushions. “Marcus was just being helpful.”

He looks like he wants to say something else, but then his expression grows serious. “I got a call from Mom's doctor today.”

My stomach drops. “What did he say?”

Josh runs a hand through his hair. “The treatment isn't working as well as they hoped. He wants to try a new immunotherapy protocol. Problem is, insurance won't cover it. They're calling it experimental.”

“How much?”

“Two hundred thousand. Maybe more, depending on how many rounds she needs.”

“We'll figure it out,” I say automatically.

Josh's voice is tired. “I'm coming up empty. The house is already mortgaged to the hilt for her first round of treatments.”

I think about Grandpa's map, about the promise of treasure hidden somewhere in these mountains. About the piece of green rock in his collection box.

“Maybe Grandpa left us more than just the cabin,” I say carefully.

Josh's eyes narrow. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just... he always said this mountain held treasures. Maybe it wasn't all stories.”

My brother's voice carries a warning. “Abby. Tell me you're not planning to go treasure hunting while Mom is fighting for her life.”

“What if I could find something that would help? What if Grandpa really did discover?—”

“And what if you get yourself killed chasing fairy tales?” Josh stands abruptly, pacing to the window.

The frustration in his tone makes my chest ache. He's scared.

I want to tell him about the map, about the research, about the fact that Marcus believes there might be something real up there. But I can see the worry etched in every line of his face, and I can't add to it. Not yet.

“Okay.”

It's not exactly a lie. I'm just not telling him about tomorrow.

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Chapter Four

MARCUS

I'm at Abby's cabin bright and early the next morning. Josh's truck is gone. I need to keep things light, even if every instinct in my body is telling me to whisk her away from potential danger.

She's in the kitchen, dressed in hiking shorts that highlight her curvy hips. It sends a bolt of heat to my cock and I stand still, staring at her like an idiot. When she looks up at me, her gorgeous smile is bright enough to make my chest tight.

"You're early. And who's this cute big guy?" She stretches out her arms and the dog bounds joyfully up to greet her. Abby always loved animals.

"This is Risky. Mom's latest rescue dog. We all take turns looking after him. He's good on the mountain."

"I bet he is. He looks strong."

"Smart, too. He has a thing for riding in helicopters. Hasn't learned to fly one yet, though."

Abby laughs and I hold up the cups. "Coffee? How's the knee?"

"Much better." She does a little demonstration walk that draws my attention to the sway of her hips. When she catches me looking, her cheeks flush pink, but she

doesn't look away.

“Let’s take it slowly to start. You ready to find some treasure, Trouble?”

Risky barks. Abby laughs again and traces a finger along the route marked on Jasper's map. “The next marker should be near that old mining shaft.”

I lean over her shoulder to look, and immediately regret the decision. This close, I can smell her lemon-scented shampoo, can feel the warmth radiating from her body. When she tilts her head to look at me, our faces are inches apart.

She clears her throat and steps back. “Um...we should get going.”

“I did some research. The voices we heard? I’m guessing one of them is Darrell Varjek. He's a professional treasure hunter, and not the respectable kind. This guy is dangerous.”

Her smile disappears. “Then we'd better find it first.”

Guilt twists in my stomach. I know a lot more about this than I’m telling her. I've been keeping Varjek away from the mountain by feeding him false leads. But somehow he's figured out my misdirection and gotten closer to the truth than I ever wanted him to.

“Is there a ticking clock I need to be aware of?” I ask.

She shakes her head, then wraps her arms around her body and averts her gaze.

“Trouble, what aren't you telling me?”

Her shoulders sag. “My mom. She got sick just after Grandpa died. She needs an

experimental treatment that insurance won't cover. Two hundred thousand dollars, maybe more. Josh and I... we don't have that kind of money.”

Abby’s words make my gut clench. No wonder she's desperate.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Because I didn't need to. Josh told me he’d spoken to the doctor yesterday. It just makes finding the treasure even more important. And I didn’t want you to think I was being reckless.”

“Aren't you?”

She meets my eyes, steel in her gaze. “Maybe. But what's the alternative? Watch her die while I play it safe?”

I step closer. “Okay, if the treasure exists, we’ll find it. But we do it the smart way. If I say we need to get out, we get out. Your mom needs you alive more than she needs the money.”

She nods. “I promise.”

The hike to the mining shaft takes two hours. Risky bounds ahead. The woods are quiet except for birdsong and the rushing water from the stream.

“There,” Abby says, pointing to a dark opening in the rock face, partially hidden by brush.

We find the second marker after ten minutes of searching; stones arranged in an arrow pointing deeper into the forest.

“Your grandfather was thorough,” I observe.

“The next marker is close.”

We follow a faint deer trail through ancient pines. The canopy is so thick that the forest floor is carpeted in perpetual twilight.

“Can I ask you a question?” Abby says.

“Shoot.”

“Why didn't you ask me to prom?”

I suck in my breath. “What?”

“Senior year. I waited until the last minute... and you never did. I thought we were friends.”

My throat feels tight. “I was going to. But I saw you talking to Danny Morrison by your locker. You were laughing, and I convinced myself you were laughing about me. About the idea of going to prom with the nerdy Blake twin.”

She stops walking and turns to face me, expression stunned. “You thought I was laughing at you ?”

I nod.

Abby takes a step closer. “I had my dress picked out and everything. Purple, because I knew it was your favorite color.”

“It still is.”

We're standing way too close to each other.

“Marcus,” she whispers.

I reach up to touch her face, my thumb tracing her cheekbone. “I should have asked you. I should have been brave enough to take the chance.”

“You're being brave now.”

“I think you're dangerous,” I admit, my voice rough. “For my sanity. For my self-control.”

Her breath catches and for a moment, we stand gazing into each other's eyes. My heart hammers in my chest. Then I incline my head and press my lips on hers.

Her lips are soft and warm. I pull her closer, one hand tangling in her hair, the other at the small of her back. She makes a soft sound against my mouth and I deepen the kiss. Her curves press against the hard lines of my body, my cock straining against my zipper.

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

“I've wanted that for so long...” She smiles, and I'm about to kiss her again when the sound of voices echoes through the trees. Male voices, getting closer.

We spring apart, reaching for our packs.

“How many?” Abby whispers. I motion to Risky not to bark as I listen.

“At least two, maybe three. Following the same route we are. They might just be following the trail, or they might be following us.”

We gather our gear and set off through the trees. For the next hour, we play cat and mouse through the forest. Every time we think we've lost them, we hear voices again.

The trail leads us to the mouth of a cave.

Abby pulls out a flashlight. "Can we hide in here?"

"It might lead to a dead end. There was a big storm earlier this year that caused a landslide in this area."

She looks at me with determined eyes. "Risk the cave, or risk the men with guns?"

"Cave it is. But I'll go first."

The passage is narrow and low, forcing us to duck. After a few minutes, it opens into a larger chamber. I sweep my flashlight around the space.

There, carved into the far wall, is a symbol from Jasper's journal: a heart with an arrow through it, pointing down at the floor of the cave.

Abby gasps. "The third marker! We found it."

But voices echo faintly from the entrance.

"We need to find another way out. Now!"

Abby points to a narrow opening near the floor. "There."

The new passage is even smaller as we crawl toward a faint glow ahead.

The tunnel emerges onto a narrow ledge high up on the mountain face. Below us,

forest stretches out, an endless carpet of green.

“We made it.” she says, sitting to catch her breath.

I sit beside her. Despite our situation, I notice how perfectly she fits against my shoulder when she leans into me.

“Marcus?” she says softly.

“Yeah?”

“If we don't make it out of this, I want you to know that I'm glad you're here with me.”

“Abby,” I start, then stop. Risky barks, then growls and rushes back down the narrow passage.

“Risky, no!” I shout.

“Marcus, look!” Abby points at the side of the ledge. Blending seamlessly into the mountain, invisible at first glance, are carved steps leading down from the ledge.

I've got to get her out of here before Varjek and his men arrive. But what about Risky?

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Chapter Five

ABBY

The carved steps are narrow and worn smooth by decades of mountain weather, but they're solid.

“Careful,” Marcus says behind me, his hand hovering near my back as we descend. “Some of these look loose.”

I'm halfway down when I hear the most beautiful sound in the world: Risky's excited barking echoing from above. Within minutes, he comes bounding down the carved steps like he's done this a thousand times, his tail wagging furiously.

“You’re a brave boy,” I pat his head when he reaches us. “Do you think he scared those men off?”

Marcus leans down and scratches Risky’s ears. “This boy can be plenty fierce when he wants to be. Hopefully he’s given us some time to get out of here without them following.”

He woofs, looking proud of himself.

The steps lead to a hidden trail that winds down through dense forest. We arrive at a clearing, where we find the fourth marker. My heart falls. It’s pointing in the direction of a valley which is completely blocked by fallen rocks.

Marcus takes my hand. “We can’t go that way. Come on, we’ll come up with a new plan.”

He leads us back onto the trail, which eventually connects to the main path we took this morning. By the time we reach his truck, my legs are shaking from adrenaline and exhaustion, and the sun is getting low in the sky.

“We were so close. What if those men find the marker?” I can’t keep the despair from my voice.

Marcus reaches over and takes my hand, sending a wave of warmth up my arm.

“They won’t. The landslide makes it impossible. Anyway, they’d need the map to know what they’re looking for. And they’d need you to give it to them first.”

“I’m not doing that.” I cross my arms.

“We’re going back to the cabin. I want to check that nobody’s been there while we’ve been gone. I’m not leaving you, Abby.” His commanding tone makes heat pool low in my belly.

The drive back passes in charged silence. At the cabin, Marcus insists on checking every room and window before he’ll let me enter. Watching him move through my space with that quiet, protective competence does things to my insides.

“All clear,” he says, finally settling onto the couch beside me. “But I’m calling Logan.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. It’s time they know about Darrell Varjek.” Marcus pulls out his phone, his

expression grim.

He makes the call, giving Logan a concise rundown of the day's events. Professional, calm, thorough. But when he gets to the part about Varjek tracking us through the forest, his jaw tightens and his free hand clenches into a fist.

“Yeah, I'll stay with her tonight,” he says into the phone, and my heart flutters in my chest. “We'll figure out next steps in the morning.”

When he hangs up, I'm staring at him. “You'll stay with me tonight?”

“If that's okay. Varjek probably knows where you live, and he doesn't seem the type to give up easily.” Marcus runs a hand through his hair, and I can see the tension in every line of his body. “There's something else I need to tell you. About Varjek, about the treasure, about... everything.”

“Okay.” I curl up on the couch facing him, tucking my legs underneath me. “Tell me.”

He's quiet for a long moment, like he's trying to figure out where to start. “I've been protecting your family for years, Abby. Protecting your grandfather's research, keeping treasure hunters away from him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I've been actively misdirecting people like Varjek. Creating false geological surveys, planting fake leads online, sending them to the wrong parts of the mountain.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Your grandfather never knew. I made sure of that.”

“Why?”

“Because Jasper Brooks spent his whole life looking for that treasure.

Because it meant everything to him, and I couldn't stand the thought of some asshole with a metal detector and no respect for the mountain taking that away from him.” Marcus's voice gets rough.

“And after he died, because I was protecting you, too.”

My throat is tight. “Marcus...”

“I've been tracking Darrell Varjek specifically for years. He's gotten close before, but I've always managed to throw him off the scent. This time...” He shakes his head. “This time he figured out my interference. Somehow he got hold of real information, and now he's here.”

I stare at him, trying to process what he's telling me. All those years I thought Grandpa was just lucky that no one else was interested in the treasure. All those years I assumed the legends had died out, that modern treasure hunters had moved on to other mountains, other mysteries.

Marcus was protecting us the whole time.

“You've been my guardian angel.”

“I've been in love with you,” he says. “For a long, long time.” His voice drops, becomes rougher.

“Since high school. I was going to say something when we were both back in town.

And I've been hating myself for years for letting you go. For listening to Josh when he told me to stay away from you, for thinking he was right that you deserved better

than small-town life with me.”

“Wait... my brother told you to stay away from me ?”

“He said we couldn’t be friends if I had feelings for you.

That you had big dreams, a future waiting for you in the city.

That you were destined for bigger things than Ember Heart.

When you got that job offer from the magazine, I thought it was a sign.

That Josh was right. So I encouraged you to take it, even though every fiber of my being wanted to beg you to stay. ”

“I would have turned down the job if you'd just told me how you felt.”

He shakes his head. “Back then I thought I was doing the right thing. For you. For Josh. For everyone except myself.”

I can barely breathe. He's looking at me like he's waiting for me to run, like he expects me to tell him he's crazy for carrying a torch for someone who left town without saying goodbye.

Instead, I move across the couch and kiss him.

This time, there's no hesitation, no holding back. He responds immediately, his arms coming around me and pulling me closer until I'm practically in his lap.

“Abby,” he murmurs against my lips.

His hands tangle in my hair, and there's desperation in his touch, like he's afraid I might disappear if he lets go. I move closer, straddling his thighs, and the sound he makes when my hips settle against his is pure need.

"Are you sure?" he asks, his voice rough.

I frame his face with my hands. "I want you, Marcus. I want this."

He kisses me again, deeper this time, his hands roaming over my back and sides like he's memorizing every curve. When he stands, lifting me with him, I wrap my legs around his waist and let him carry me to the bedroom.

The late afternoon light filters through the windows, casting everything in gold. Marcus sets me down on the bed, his hands gentle as he carefully undoes the buttons of my shirt.

"Beautiful," he murmurs as the fabric falls away, his eyes drinking in the sight of my lace bra.

I reach for his shirt in return, my fingers fumbling with the buttons.

He helps me, and when his chest is finally bare, I run my hands over the hard planes of muscle, marveling at how broad and strong he's become.

"I want you." I say, pressing kisses to his collarbone. "I've wanted this for so long..."

"So have I." His hands find the clasp of my bra, and as my breasts fall free, he cups them in his big hands. "God, you're perfect."

His thumbs brush over my nipples, and I arch into his touch with a gasp. The sensation shoots straight through me, pooling wet heat between my thighs.

I moan as he trails hot kisses down my throat. When his lips close around one nipple, I cry out, my hands fisting in his hair. He licks and sucks each nipple in turn, rolling his tongue over each peak until I'm trembling with need, then slowly kisses his way down my stomach.

His hands make quick work of my hiking shorts and panties, and when I'm finally naked beneath him, he sits back on his heels to look at me.

“You're so gorgeous,” he growls. “I want to taste every inch of you.”

I smile. “Every square inch?”

Marcus arches a dark eyebrow. “I’m well known for being thorough in my research.”

He starts with my ankles, pressing soft kisses to each one before working his way up my calves, my thighs. When he reaches the top of my legs, my pussy is slick with wetness.

“Please,” I beg and he doesn't make me wait.

The first touch of his tongue against my clit has me arching off the bed with a cry. He takes his time, learning what makes me gasp and moan, what makes my thighs tremble around his head. When he slides one finger inside me, then two, I'm lost.

“That's it,” he murmurs against my sensitive flesh. “Make all the noise you want. Let me hear you, Trouble.”

The combination of his mouth and fingers drives me higher and higher until I'm sobbing his name, every muscle in my body tight. When I come, it crashes over me like a wave and I see stars behind my closed eyelids.

He works me through it with gentle strokes, then kisses his way back up my body while I try to remember how to breathe.

“My turn,” I say when I can finally speak, and I push him onto his back.

I take my time removing his remaining clothes, pressing kisses to each new expanse of skin I reveal.

When his jeans and boxers finally hit the floor, I take a moment to appreciate the sight of him.

He's magnificent; all hard muscle and golden skin, his cock thick and ready for me, pre-cum leaking from the tip .

He groans when I wrap my hand around him, stroking slowly from base to tip.

“I want to taste you too,” I murmur, and the sound he makes when I take him into my mouth is pure heaven. I use my tongue and lips to drive him to the edge, loving the way his hands tangle in my hair, the way his hips buck beneath me. When he tries to pull me away, I resist.

“I'm going to come if you keep doing that,” he warns.

“Good,” I say against his skin, and his laugh turns into a groan.

But he's stronger than me, and he pulls me up for a kiss that tastes like both of us. “I want to be inside you when I come.”

When he settles between my thighs, the tip of him pressing against my entrance, we both go still. He's pushing inside me, slow and careful, filling me up completely.

We both groan. He's big, stretching me in the most perfect way. He starts to move, slow and deep, each thrust hitting something inside me that makes me see stars again. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, and we find a rhythm that's been years in the making.

“Harder,” I pant, and he responds immediately. The sound of skin against skin fills the room, punctuated by our breathless moans. Another orgasm builds inside me, even stronger than the first, and I cling to his shoulders as he drives me toward it.

His groans push me over the edge, and I cry out his name as waves of pleasure crash over me. My pussy clenches around him, and with a final deep thrust, he follows me over, his body shuddering as he comes inside me.

We collapse together, breathing hard, our bodies hot. Afterwards, we lie tangled together in the growing darkness, my head on his chest and his fingers trailing lazy patterns on my back. His heartbeat is steady and strong.

I smile against his chest, then frown. I start worrying about Mom's medical bills and the treasure and all the reasons this should be complicated. But lying here in Marcus's arms, it all feels far away.

“Go to sleep. I’m here to protect you.”

“I like the sound of that,” I say.

“Good. Because I'm never letting you go again.”

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Chapter Six

MARCUS

I wake to Abby's soft, warm body pressed against mine, her head on my chest and her hair tickling my shoulder. For a moment, I just lie there in the early morning light, hardly believing this is real.

She stirs against me, making a soft sound that goes straight to my cock. I'm already half-hard from having her naked body draped over mine, and when she moves, her thigh brushes against my growing hard-on.

"Morning," she murmurs, her voice husky with sleep as she lifts her head to look at me.

"Good morning, Trouble." I brush a strand of hair away from her face, marveling at how beautiful she looks in the sunlight streaming through the cabin windows.

"Mmm." She stretches against me, and the movement presses her breasts against my chest. "I think I like waking up like this."

"So do I... I could get used to this."

"Is that a promise?" she giggles, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"It's whatever you want it to be. I'm here to serve..." I lean down to kiss her, slow and deep.

She responds immediately, her body arching beneath mine. I can feel how wet she already is when I rock my hips against hers, and the knowledge that she wants me just as much makes my head spin.

“I want you,” she whispers against my mouth, her hands roaming over my back and shoulders.

“You have me.” I kiss my way down her throat, pausing to suck gently at the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. “You've always had me.”

I take my time, relearning every curve and hollow, every spot that makes her gasp and arch beneath me. When I close my lips around one taut nipple, she cries out, her hands fisting in my hair.

When I try to work my way lower, she stops me.

“Inside me...” she whispers. “I need to feel you.”

I can't argue with that.

I guide my rock hard cock to her silky wet entrance. When I sink into her, we both moan. She's so warm and tight around me, it feels like she's welcoming me. I give her a moment to adjust, then start to move, slow and deep.

“Oh...yes,” she gasps, her legs wrapping around my waist. “Exactly like that.”

It's different from last night. Less desperate, more unhurried. I want to memorize every little sound she makes, every expression that crosses her face. I want to show her with my body what words can't express; that she's everything to me, that I'll never let her go again.

“You feel so good,” I growl against her ear. She tilts her hips, changing the angle, and I hit that spot inside her that makes her cry out. I file that information away, making sure to hit it with every thrust, quickening my pace.

“Marcus,” she pants, her nails digging into my shoulders. “Don't stop.”

Her perfect pussy is tightening around me, her breathing becoming more erratic. I slide one hand between our bodies, finding her clit and circling it with my thumb.

Her thighs tremble as she comes, crying out my name as she clenches around me.

The sensation pushes me over the edge, and I follow her into pure bliss with a groan that makes my chest rumble.

We lie tangled together afterward, breathing hard, our bodies slick with sweat.

I press kisses to her temple, her cheek, anywhere I can reach.

She turns in my arms to face me, her eyes soft and content. “This feels like a dream.”

“If it is, I don't want to wake up.”

Risky suddenly starts barking from the living room. Not his normal happy bark, but the sharp, warning sound he makes when strangers approach. I'm out of bed and reaching for my clothes before the second bark.

“Stay here,” I tell Abby, but she's already pulling on her shirt.

“Like hell.”

I don't have time to argue. I grab my jeans and pull them on, then move to the

window to peer through the curtains.

Darrell Varjek is standing on the front porch, and he's not alone. Two other men flank him, both looking like the kind of muscle you hire when you want to intimidate people.

“Back door,” I motion to Abby, who's now fully dressed and moving quietly across the room.

But before we can make it to the kitchen, Varjek's voice booms through the cabin.

“Miss Brooks! I know you're in there. We just want to talk.”

Risky's barking gets more aggressive, and one of the men curses. “Stupid dog. That's the one we saw in the cave. I told you...”

“Abby Brooks,” Varjek calls again, his voice taking on a harder edge. “I'm a reasonable man, but my patience has limits. You have something that belongs to me.”

"Like hell I do," Abby mutters, but she follows me toward the back of the cabin. I try to get Risky to follow, but he's growling at the door, the fur on his back bristling.

“Your grandfather made a deal with me years ago,” Varjek continues, clearly trying to bait her into responding. “He promised me a share of whatever he found. Now that he's gone, that debt falls to you.”

He's lying. Jasper Brooks would never have made a deal with a crook like Darrell Varjek. But the fact that Varjek is willing to lie so boldly tells me how desperate he's getting.

We make it to the kitchen, and I'm reaching for the back door when the sound of

splintering wood comes from the front of the cabin. They're breaking down the door.

“Go,” I push Abby toward the door. “Get to the woods. I'll hold them off.”

“I'm not leaving you.”

“Abby, please. If they get their hands on you...”

“Then we go together.” She grabs my hand, pulling me toward the door. “Come on!”

We burst out of the cabin just as Varjek and his men break through the front door. Risky is still barking somewhere inside, and I pray they don't hurt him.

“There!” one of the men shouts, spotting us.

We run for the tree line, Abby's hand in mine. Behind us, I can hear heavy footsteps and Varjek shouting orders. A gunshot rings out, the bullet splintering bark from a tree near my head.

“They're shooting at us,” Abby gasps, her eyes wide.

“Warning shots,” I lie, pulling her deeper in the forest.

I guide Abby toward a deer trail that leads up the ridge.

It's steep and hard to follow, but it'll give us cover.

We climb in silence, both of us breathing hard from the exertion and adrenaline.

Behind us, I can hear the men crashing through the underbrush, but they're moving more slowly, unsure of the terrain.

“Keep going,” I tell Abby, pulling out my phone. “I’m calling for backup.”

Logan answers on the first ring. “Marcus? Where are you?”

“In danger. Varjek. Climbing the trail up from Abby’s cabin. Three men, at least one gun. We’re heading up the northeast ridge.”

“On our way. Ten minutes.”

We keep climbing, but the men behind us are gaining ground. These aren’t amateur treasure hunters; they’re professionals who know how to track people through rough terrain.

“This way.” I pull her off the trail and into denser brush. It’s harder going, but it’ll hide our tracks. We push through thick undergrowth. My phone shows no signal here, so I can’t contact Logan with an update.

“Where are we going?” Abby whispers.

“There’s an old hunting cabin about half a mile from here. We can hole up there until help arrives.”

“What if they find us?”

“Then we’ll deal with them. Logan’s on his way.”

The hunting cabin is exactly where I remembered it, tucked into a grove of pine trees and barely visible unless you know what you’re looking for.

It’s been abandoned for years, but the structure is still sound.

We go inside, and I immediately start checking the windows and the single door.

There's only one way in or out, which could be good or bad depending on how you look at it.

I wrap my arms around Abby as we crouch under the window. We wait in tense silence until a voice outside the cabin makes my heart jump. Is it my brother?

Varjek's nasal tone carries through the thin walls. "I know you're in there. There's nowhere left to run."

I move to the window, peering through the grimy glass. Varjek and his two men have the cabin surrounded. We're trapped.

"What do you want?" Abby calls out.

"I told you. I want what your grandfather promised me. The location of the Ember Heart treasure."

"He never promised you anything, you asshole."

"Didn't he?" Varjek laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Ask your boyfriend about that. Ask him why he was so determined to keep everyone away from your grandfather's research."

My blood runs cold. How does he know about that?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Abby says, but she's looking at me with questions in her eyes.

"Marcus Blake, the great protector," Varjek continues. "Always one step ahead,

always throwing us off the trail. But he made one mistake. He got too good at it. Too consistent. Patterns, Miss Brooks. Everything has a pattern if you know how to look.”

“You figured out it was me,” I say.

“Took me two years, but yes. And once I knew you were protecting the Brooks family, all I had to do was wait for the right moment. Wait for you to lead me right to the prize.”

The bastard. He's been using me, using my feelings for Abby to get what he wants.

“Well, why don't we make this easy? You give me the treasure map, and everyone walks away.”

“And if we don't?” Abby asks.

“Then things get... unpleasant.”

I check my phone. Still no signal, and no sign of Logan and the SAR team. We're on our own.

“Miss Brooks,” Varjek calls again. “My patience is running out.”

That's when I hear it: the distant sound of helicopter rotors.

Logan. Finally.

I squeeze Abby's hand. “SAR team incoming. We just have to hold out a little longer.”

“How?”

Before I can answer, the cabin door explodes inward. Darrell Varjek steps through, a gun in his hand and murder in his eyes.

“Time's up.”

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Chapter Seven

ABBY

Darrell Varjek stands in the doorway of the hunting cabin, his gun trained on Marcus and me. Up close, he's maybe five-eight with thinning hair and cold gray eyes. But the weapon in his hand makes him plenty dangerous.

“Step away from each other,” he orders, his voice calm in a way that's somehow more terrifying than shouting would be.

Marcus moves in front of me, every muscle in his body coiled for action as the helicopter roars overhead.

“Your grandfather was a clever man, Miss Brooks,” Varjek continues, keeping the gun steady. “Forty years of research, forty years of following leads that went nowhere. But he found it, didn't he? The real deposit.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” I try to stop my voice shaking.

“Don't you?” Varjek's finger tightens on the trigger. “Because I think you do. I think you've been following his trail, just like I have. The difference is, you know where it ends. Which suggests you have a map.”

I shake my head.

“Tell me where the main deposit is, and I'll disappear. No one gets hurt.”

“No!” The word comes out stronger than I feel.

“Drop the weapon!” Marcus’s brother Logan appears in the doorway, his scarred face grim. Varjek spins toward the new threat, and in that split second of distraction, Marcus moves. He tackles Varjek around the waist, sending them both crashing to the floor. The gun skitters across the wooden planks.

“Abby, get out!” Marcus yells as he and Varjek struggle for control.

But I'm not leaving him. Instead, I dive for Varjek's gun, my fingers closing around the grip just as he breaks free from Marcus and lunges for it.

“Nobody move!” Logan's voice booms through the small space, his scarred face grim and his own gun drawn, pointed at Varjek’s head.

Everyone freezes. Varjek is on his knees reaching for the gun in my hands, Marcus sprawled on the floor between us, and me holding the weapon like a hot potato.

“Abby,” Logan says calmly, “could you please hand me that gun?”

I gladly give it to him, my hands shaking now that the adrenaline is wearing off. Logan immediately points it at Varjek.

“Darrell Varjek, you're coming with us. Straight to the sheriff’s office.” Logan's voice is all business.

Varjek's two men are led into the cabin moments later by Troy and Hunter. One of them is groaning and holding his leg. Risky trots in after them, looking pleased with himself.

“Everyone okay?” Troy asks, immediately moving to check Marcus and me for

injuries.

“We're fine,” Marcus says, pulling me against his side.

Varjek, still on his knees, looks up at us with pure hatred. “This isn't over. You can run all you want, but I know you have the location. I've been tracking your grandfather's research for fifteen years.”

“Fifteen years?” I stare at him. “You've been after this for fifteen years?”

“Ever since I found his first geological survey from back in the 1980s. The one that showed his suspicion of anomalous mineral readings in the northeast quadrant.” Varjek's mask slips, showing the obsession underneath.

“I've spent my life savings, my marriage, everything chasing that gold. And then your boyfriend here started interfering, sending me on wild goose chases.”

Marcus steps forward. “Because crooks like you don't deserve what Jasper spent his life looking for.”

“Deserve?” He laughs bitterly. “I earned it. Fifteen years of research, of following every lead, of?—”

“Of threatening people and breaking into homes,” Marcus interrupts. “And those gambling debts? The domestic battery charge against your wife? Trying to steal Jasper's research? That's earning it?”

As Logan and Troy lead Varjek and his men outside, Marcus pulls out his phone.

“I need to call someone,” he says, his expression thoughtful.

“Who?”

“Dr. Zhang at the Mayberry School of Mines. He worked with your grandfather years ago.” Marcus is already dialing.

“Your grandfather may have registered what he discovered after his survey about the deposit that Varjek mentioned. And if he did, and if anyone knows the exact location of those deposits, it would be him.”

Twenty minutes later, Dr. Zhang calls back with coordinates that match a location about two miles northeast of where we are now.

According to him, Grandpa had found something unspecified in the early 2000s.

He hadn't extracted it because the environmental impact would have been too severe. He'd asked Zhang not to mention it to anyone and logged his findings using the name A.B. Bear.

Tears flood my eyes. “That’s his nickname for me. Abby Bear. It’s his way of telling me where it is. In case the map didn’t work.”

“He was waiting for technology to catch up,” Marcus explains as we hike toward the coordinates. “Sustainable extraction methods, minimal environmental damage.”

“That sounds like Grandpa. He always said the mountain would provide when the time was right.”

The coordinates lead us to what looks like an unremarkable hillside covered in pine trees and granite outcroppings. But when Marcus starts examining the rock formations, his eyes light up.

“Look,” he says, pointing to a section of rock that looks slightly different from the surrounding stone. “This has been carved. See the straight edges?”

He's right. What I thought was natural weathering is actually careful work, designed to look natural unless you know what you're looking for.

We move several large stones, revealing a small entrance to what looks like a natural cave system. But this isn't like the passages we explored yesterday. This is larger, more stable, and when we shine our flashlights inside, we can see that someone has done extensive work here.

"Grandpa," I breathe.

The cave opens into a large chamber, and it's immediately clear that Jasper spent years preparing this site. There are battery-powered LED lights strung along the walls and basic mining equipment stored in waterproof containers.

Marcus is running his hands along one of the walls as I check the other. His eyes are bright.

“This place is a marvel. Your grandfather was an extraordinary man, Abby.”

I crouch down. The final marker is a heart. My gut tells me we're at the right location, but where is it? I run my hand over the rough wall and my fingers snag against a different texture. I snap on my flashlight and something glitters.

“Marcus!”

He runs over and kneels next to me. There on the wall is a glittering heart, sparkling in the light, directly above a small pile of rocks.

“It looks like diamond dust—”

Marcus leans closer. “You’re right.”

What if the Ember Heart treasure wasn’t gold? I scrabble at the pile of rocks, my heart thumping in my chest. Underneath the rocks is a large metal container. There’s a letter addressed to me.

My dearest Abby Bear,

If you’re reading this, congratulations!

You’ve found the treasure, like I knew you would.

I’ve had to take precautions since there were some very unscrupulous people interested in what I’ve found.

So if your path to the treasure has been arduous, I apologize.

I couldn’t make it easy to find in case someone else stumbled upon it.

Discovering the diamond in this cave was a blessing and a curse. I couldn’t allow the natural beauty of Ember Heart to be destroyed. So I’ve been working on ways to extract what’s here without ruining the landscape.

You’ll find deeds to the land, which I bought years ago, when I thought I was looking for gold, way before I discovered the diamond. I know I can trust you and Josh to do the right thing and follow in my footsteps. Make this discovery count towards the greater good.

I hope to explain this all to you in person, but if I don’t get the chance, know that I

love you and have always been proud of you in every way.

All my love,

Grandpa

Along with the letter, we find detailed extraction plans.

There are legal documents showing that in the year before he died he'd been working with environmental lawyers and mining engineers to develop sustainable extraction methods. There's also a velvet pouch, which I open with trembling hands. Inside is a huge diamond.

By the time we emerge from the cave, the sun is setting over Ember Heart, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson. I hold the diamond up to the sun and it sparkles in the light.

"This will take care of Mom's treatment. But what do we do with the rest of it?" I ask Marcus as we sit on a boulder, watching the valley spread out below us.

"Now we do it right," he says, wrapping his arm around me. "Sustainable extraction, environmental protection, community benefit. All that good stuff. Just like Jasper wanted."

"And Varjek?"

"Goes to federal prison for a very long time. Armed assault, stalking... he's looking at serious time."

I lean into Marcus's warmth.

“You know what the best part is?” I say.

“What?”

“We found it together. All of it. The treasure, each other, our future...”

“Together. I like the sound of that,” Marcus smiles, pressing a kiss to my temple.

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Chapter Eight

MARCUS

The next day, Abby and I are sitting in Logan's office at SAR headquarters. The metal box sits on Logan's desk between stacks of incident reports and evidence forms, looking deceptively ordinary for something worth millions.

“Sheriff wants to interview you both about Varjek,” Logan says, hanging up his phone. “Turns out he's been running scams across three states to finance his treasure hunting. You two might have helped bring down a much bigger operation than we realized.”

“Great,” Abby mutters, signing another form. “More paperwork.”

I reach over and squeeze her hand. She's been quiet since we got back to town, processing everything.

I don't blame her. Finding a diamond mine potentially worth millions of dollars would be overwhelming under the best circumstances.

Adding in armed criminals and family medical crises makes it surreal.

“The good news,” Logan continues, “is that the lawyer confirmed the rights situation. The caves are all yours, Abby.”

Abby smiles. “Some of this goes to Marcus. I wouldn't have found it without him.”

I squeeze her hand again. “This will change everything for SAR. Thank you.”

Logan's expression brightens, although he doesn't allow himself to smile. “Hell, with this kind of discovery, we'll have the best-equipped search and rescue operation in the state.”

Logan's office door opens and Troy walks in, followed by someone I wasn't expecting to see today: Josh.

“Just got back into town. Heard you two had quite the adventure,” Josh says, but his tone is carefully neutral.

Abby jumps up to hug her brother. Josh's eyes find mine over Abby's head, and there's something in his expression I can't quite read.

“Everyone's safe,” Logan says diplomatically. “Varjek is in custody, along with his associates. The treasure is secure, and Abby and Marcus are both unharmed.”

“About that treasure,” Josh says, finally releasing Abby. “We're talking millions of dollars worth of diamonds?”

Abby nods. “Some of it goes to Marcus and SAR. I'd also like to set up a medical fund for families in crisis, and an environmental trust for Ember Heart...”

“Give away a fortune?”

“Well, it's half yours, so I can't stop you doing what you want with your share. And I'm going to sell the diamond to fund Mom's treatment,” Abby says firmly. “But yeah, I'm okay with it. It's what Grandpa would have wanted.”

Josh nods slowly, then turns to me. “Can I have a word? Privately?”

My stomach clenches, but I follow him out of Logan's office and down the hall to an empty conference room. Josh closes the door behind us and leans against it.

“A few years ago,” he says finally, “I told you to stay away from my sister.”

“Josh—”

He holds up a hand. “I told you she had a future ahead of her, that she didn't need small-town complications holding her back. I thought I was protecting her.”

“You were. She did have a future ahead of her. Still does.”

“Yeah, but I was wrong about the holding her back part.” Josh runs a hand through his hair, a gesture that's identical to one Abby makes when she's frustrated.

“She called me from the city a dozen times over the years, asking about you. Wanting to know how you were doing, if you were dating anyone, if you ever asked about her.”

The revelation makes my heart speed up. “She did?”

Josh nods and his expression softens. “Every time, I'd tell her you were fine and change the subject. Because I thought it was better for both of you to move on.”

“Josh...”

“I was wrong, dude.” He shakes his head. “I should have minded my own business.”

“You were looking out for your sister. I can't fault you for that.”

“Maybe. But I cost both of you years of happiness. And I didn't give Abby the

chance to make her own choices about her life.” Josh straightens up, meeting my eyes directly.

“So I'm going to ask you something, and I want a straight answer.”

“Okay.”

“Do you love her?”

“More than anything.”

“Are you going to hurt her?”

“Never. Not if I can help it.”

“Good.” Josh extends his hand. “And I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have interfered.”

When we return to Logan's office, Abby sits up straight.

“All sorted?” she asks.

“All sorted,” Josh confirms. “Now, tell me everything, right from the beginning...”

We spend the next hour going through the whole story, from the first marker to Varjek's arrest. By the time we're finished, it's getting dark outside.

“I should get home,” Abby says, stretching in her chair.

“I'll drive you,” I offer. Risky barks from under Logan’s desk. “I guess he’s coming too.”

Abby's still quiet as we start the drive. I pull over and take her hand. "You okay there, Trouble? Can I get you something? Recite the periodic table in sixty seconds to cheer you up?"

Abby laughs and shakes her head.

"Tell me what you want. My wish is your command."

"You," she says simply. "Us. A future together in Ember Heart."

"Even though it's small-town life? Even though you could go anywhere now, do anything? You're an extremely wealthy lady."

She reaches up to cup my face in her hands. "I spent years chasing a career, and I never felt as much at home as I do right here with you. This is where I want to be."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything." She inclines her head to kiss me, soft and sweet. "I love you. I want to build a life with you. Everything else is just details."

"I love you too." I pull her closer, breathing in her hypnotizing scent. "What kind of life are you thinking?"

"A house big enough for Risky to come stay, and maybe a few more rescues. The kind where we can use Grandpa's fund to help people who need it. The kind where we work together to make Ember Heart an even better place to live."

"Risky approves of that plan," I observe, as he sticks his head over the seats, tail wagging hopefully.

“Of course he does. He's got excellent judgment.” Abby reaches up to scratch his ears. “Don't you, boy?”

Risky barks once in agreement.

As we drive through the quiet streets of Ember Heart, I think about all the twists and turns that brought us to this moment. Seven years of separation, a treasure hunt, armed criminals, and a discovery worth millions.

“You know,” Abby says, breaking into my thoughts, “when I woke up three days ago, the biggest decision I thought I'd have to make was whether to put cream cheese or peanut butter on my bagel.”

“And now?”

“Now I'm trying to figure out how to handle a diamond mine responsibly while not getting slated by environmental agencies or trampled by reporters.” She grins at me. “It's a very specific kind of problem.”

“The kind of problem most people would kill for.”

“The kind of problem that comes with a lot of paperwork,” she corrects. “Logan wasn't kidding about the forms. I think I signed my name more times today than I have in my entire life.”

“My brother's all about the admin. Blame the military.” I laugh, pulling into her driveway. “Well, look at it this way. At least Varjek's in jail, your mom's treatment is covered, and Risky got to be a hero.”

“True. And I got the guy.” She reaches over to squeeze my hand. “Even if he did try to fake-inspect my cabin with made-up safety regulations.”

“That was a very legitimate safety inspection,” I protest. “I was deeply concerned about your... geological stability.”

“My geological stability?”

“Among other things.”

She's laughing now, the sound filling the truck and making my chest warm. “Marcus Blake, you are ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” I lean over to kiss her. “But I'm your ridiculous.”

“Lucky me,” she murmurs against my lips.

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One year later

The sound of laughter carries across the backyard of our new house, mixing with the splash of water and Risky's excited barking. From my spot on the deck, I watch Marcus trying to wrestle the garden hose away from my nephew.

“Uncle Marcus is getting soaked!” Tommy shrieks with delight, aiming the hose with the precision only a kid can manage.

“That's what he gets for challenging you to a water fight,” I call out, taking a sip of my lemonade.

Marcus shoots me a look that promises payback later, his shirt clinging to his chest in ways that make my pulse quicken even after a year of living together. Some things never get old.

“Whose side are you on?” he yells back, finally managing to grab the hose and redirecting it toward the flower beds.

“Mine,” I say sweetly, which earns me a grin that still makes my knees weak.

A year. A whole year has passed since we found the treasure, since Darrell Varjek was arrested, and since our lives changed completely. It feels like yesterday.

Mom's treatment was a success, funded by the sale of the diamond. The leftover money was used to set up the mine according to Grandpa's wishes.

Profits from the mine will be used for the Jasper Brooks Medical Fund, which helps families in need to access treatment not covered by their insurance.

It also secured the future of Ember Heart SAR for the next thirty years.

Later, after Josh picks Tommy up, Marcus and I sit together on the porch swing. Risky's playing with the new rescue pup in the garden as the sun sets over the mountain.

Marcus's phone buzzes with a text. He reads it and then passes it to me.

Troy: Need to see you. I've just met the girl of my dreams and I want some background intel. I've agreed to be her fake fiance. Tell you everything tomorrow.

I shake my head as I pass the phone back. "That does not sound like Doctor Troy."

"You're right. This girl must have seriously disrupted his cool professional demeanor. Fake fiancé?"

"I want to hear all about it!"

"Of course. It's a beautiful evening," Marcus says, but there's something nervous in his voice that makes me look at him more closely.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just..." He runs a hand through his hair, and I recognize the gesture from when he's working up courage for something. "Actually, there's something I want to talk to you about."

My heart starts beating faster. "What is it?"

Marcus stands up suddenly, then kneels down in front of the swing. When he pulls a small velvet box from his pocket, I think my heart might stop altogether.

“Abby Brooks,” he says, his voice soft but steady. “A year ago, you came back to Ember Heart and turned my whole world upside down. Again.”

I can barely breathe as he opens the box, revealing a beautiful heart-shaped ring that catches the last rays of sunlight.

“I’ve been in love with you since we were seventeen years old. I’ve spent so many years regretting that I let you go without telling you how I felt.” His green eyes are intense, focused completely on mine. “I don’t want to waste another day without you knowing exactly how much you mean to me.”

Tears are streaming down my face now, but I can’t make any words come out.

“Will you marry me, Trouble?”

“Yes,” I finally manage to whisper, then louder, “Yes! Of course, yes!”

He slides the ring onto my finger with shaking hands, then stands to kiss me while Risky barks excitedly in the background like he knows something wonderful just happened.

“I love you,” Marcus murmurs against my lips.

“I love you too,” I say back, admiring the way the ring looks on my hand. “Now, how long have you been planning this?”

“Months. Your mom may have helped pick out the ring.”

“She knew?”

“She knew. Josh knew. Logan knew. Pretty much everyone knew except you.” He grins sheepishly. “I’m not as subtle as I thought I was.”

I laugh, wiping tears from my cheeks. “I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Good,” he says, settling back onto the swing and pulling me against his side. “Because I plan on spending the rest of my life making you happy.”

I look out at the mountain where it all started, where we found treasure and each other and our future.

“I’m counting on it,” I tell him, and seal the promise with a kiss.