



# Marked by the Mountain Man (Mountain Man Summer #14)

**Author:** *Engrid Eaves*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** My first look at Hadleigh becomes my last surrender if I can save her before time runs out.

Hudson

Love at first sight sucker punches me.

I dont have time to second-guess it fight it or fear it.

Its palpable, visceral, an immediate obsession, an inescapable addiction.

But it comes with a desperate realization.

If I dont act unhesitatingly, embarking on a high-stakes rescue of a virtual stranger with no margin for error, Ill lose the curvy woman who's stolen my heart forever ... and shell lose everything.

Standalone. HEA guaranteed. No cliffhangers—just searing chemistry, page-turning action, and one unforgettable mountain man rescue.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:40 am*

## Chapter One

### HUDSON

Love sucker punches me.

But what do you expect when an angel's headed straight for the door of your tattoo parlor?

I watch her float through the parking lot, wearing a slinky, black, knee-length dress with long sleeves and a V-neck that hugs her abundant curves.

Curves for fucking days. And a thick head of platinum blonde hair that reaches well past her shoulders, the curled ends caressing her décolletage and turning my insides out.

She's stunning. Perfection.

Her ivory legs are thick and shapely, round calves inviting me to palm her flesh, feather her body in a thousand whispered kisses. Tiny feet squeezed into black stiletto heels, she looks good enough to eat.

I shake my head, trying to clear the delectable thought from my mind as I stand at the window, licking my lips. My heart hammers against my ribs. In forty-two years on this planet, I've never felt anything this overpowering.

"Motherfucker." Drew frowns next to me.

“What?” I grumble, barely listening to the asshole.

“What in the fuck is Hadleigh doing here?”

“Wait, you know her?” I ask, instantly jealous.

Drew’s a piece of fucking shit. Deceitful, manipulative, and weaselly. He should not know this woman. They shouldn’t even exist on the same plane. I may not know a thing about her, but I can already tell she’s too good for him.

But then again, I have a serious axe to grind with Drew. He’s the reason I should never take pity on fellow addicts not committed to change. Because nine times out of ten, they’re not ready to do the hard work that I did to make something of myself. To come back after getting strung out on opioids.

The VA handed scripts out to me like candy ... along with anti-depressants, sleeping aids. Shit that had me messed up as fuck until I found a new reason to live and move forward, thanks to my buddy, Roscoe Vaughn.

He owns a massive, off-grid property in the mountains above New Brunswick, which he has transformed into a community for veterans and wounded warriors.

I fit into both categories and have made nature my solace ever since.

Replacing the drive for a quick fix or emotional and physical numbing with outdoor living and a business and lifestyle I can be proud of.

“She’s my little sister,” Drew grumbles. “A little goody two-shoes who does no wrong. A mama’s girl. I can only imagine what she’s here for.”

Mentally, I slam him against the wall and shove a finger in his face, warning him

never to say another off-color word about this breathtaking woman.

But the last thing I need is a bad first impression with her, especially since I doubt she knows the kind of mad shit her brother talks behind her back. He's two-faced like that.

Head spinning and too overwhelmed by the crazy feelings still gripping me, I shift my weight, glued to the spot. I let out a deep warning growl that Drew won't get. He has the social know-how of a puddle of mud.

Last minute, the woman veers, shuffling quickly toward a black Lincoln Corsair parked near the back of the lot. She greets two men who hop out, popping the hands-free tailgate.

Drew scowls. "See? She's always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong."

"One more word out of you," I grumble, stroking my beard and despising the sight of her talking to other men. "Who the fuck are they?"

He shrugs, face bitter. "The wrong crowd," he says, using his fingers to make air quotes, his voice disparaging.

"What's wrong with you?" I scold, glaring at him.

Drew shrugs. "She won't let me lead my own life. Always has to mess in my business. Usually on Mom's behalf."

"You should be happy you have a mother and sister who care at all," I reply, frowning.

"And she knows those guys, too?" I ask, my gut twisting.

Something's off about this situation ... from Hadleigh's body language to how the guys eye her.

I beeline for the door, Marine instincts kicking in. "Answer me, Drew," I bark.

"Just associates?—"

The man to Hadleigh's left shoves her into the back of the Lincoln, slamming the tailgate. I burst through the door, roaring as their tires squeal and peel out of the parking lot.

My feet hammer on the pavement, eyes straining to read the California license plate. My stomach knots as Hadleigh lifts her head, palms pressed on the glass of the back window. Her eyes catch mine for a split second that feels haunting, timeless. I have to save her, no matter what.

Drew stands next to me, hands on his head. His face looks anguished. "Shit. I told her not to get involved?—"

The last thread of patience breaks, and I grab him by the scruff of his collar, shoving him backwards against the front of the tattoo parlor's brick facade. "Who the fuck are they?" I scream.

Drew shakes his head. I slam him against the front of the building again. "Who?" My heart races, mind spinning. I need to follow them. But I have to question Drew. Figure out how big a gun to bring to whatever fucking fight this is.

"People I owe money to," he screams, sniveling as snot runs down his nose.

"For drugs?"

He nods.

“Dammit!” I scream, sprinting for my bike. “Pick up my phone if I call you. Or you’re worse than dead, motherfucker!” I grab my helmet, shoving it on and ripping out of the parking lot on my Harley in hot pursuit of Hadleigh and the men in the black SUV.

“Call sheriff’s department,” I order into my headset as I drive.

After a few rings, a watery voice answers. “Sheriff’s Department, how may I help you?”

“Steph, Hudson Adair. In pursuit of two men in a black Lincoln Corsair who just abducted a woman from the parking lot of my tattoo shop.”

I start to give her the address, but Steph cuts me off. “Already have it.”

I search for signs of the car or Hadleigh. It’s as though they disappeared in the moments it took me to question Drew and get on my ride. “California license plate starting with an eight and ending in an S, though I didn’t get the rest.”

“Did you say in pursuit?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know if the men are armed?”

Drew needed to fess this shit up when I banged him into the wall, not answer me with obtuse fucking statements. I assume the worst, since they’re already abductors. “Yes.”

“Do not engage.”

“Roger that.” In truth, I’ll do whatever the fuck it takes to save Hadleigh, already internally kicking myself for precious minutes wasted on questioning her brother. The fucker doesn’t care about anybody but himself.

“Andrew Bardot, who works at my tattoo parlor, just stood in the parking lot admitting to me that they deal him drugs. And he’s behind on cash.

Send a deputy to the shop for questioning to get it straight from the horse’s mouth.

My guess is that’s why they’ve abducted her, but I don’t know for sure.

I’ll keep eyes on the vehicle, if I can, stay in touch with the department until help arrives. ”

“And the description of the men and the woman?”

“Six foot two, six foot three for each man. Mid to late thirties. The driver wore black with a buzz cut, clean-shaven, and tattoos on his face. The passenger, who shoved the girl in the back of the SUV, has short, curly black hair, dark eyes, an olive complexion, and neck tattoos. Not sure about the face. Dark clothes, too. Slim builds and poor posture, definitely not military men. As for the woman ...”

God, how do I describe that stunning angel?

“Name’s Hadleigh Bardot, Drew’s little sister. Five foot five or six with a curvy body, long platinum blonde hair, and a heart-shaped face and cleft chin. Early to mid-twenties, wearing a little black dress with long sleeves, black heels, and a matching black bag.”

Ahead of me, about a hundred yards, the car comes into sight.

Thank God! Weaving through traffic and giving it more throttle, I push through the intersection, nearly colliding head-on with a semi-truck to catch up with the vehicle.

My death won't do Hadleigh any good, I remind myself, dialing it back slightly as I continue slithering through noon traffic.

"I have eyes on the vehicle again," I say, narrowing my gaze. "License plate eight seven five POS." POS is right. The irony of the plate would make me laugh under any other circumstances. Instead, my heart races, my breath quickening as I strategize next moves.

"We're tracking your cell signal, but there could be a slight lag time, especially with the storm front moving in?—"

"I'm northbound on I-8, heading towards the preserve.

"The preserve's a local hangout for birdwatchers and nature lovers, twenty miles out of town.

It connects with a series of trailheads that disappear into the deep woods.

Although two gangsters in a Lincoln don't strike me as the type to vanish into the wilderness, I put nothing past anyone up here.

"We have officers en route. Please update us if anything changes. Stay frosty, soldier, and keep your head on a swivel."

"Will do." I know Steph, the dispatcher, because shit tends to happen in front of tattoo parlors. Especially with employees like douchebag attracting trouble like flies.



So she knows I'm a former Marine and loves saying shit like this.

Closing the distance, I whiz through traffic like my ass is on fire.

Construction in the area means delays and a line of bumper-to-bumper cars.

It's not usual in Alpha Ridge Creek, and the timing couldn't be worse.

Accelerating, I catch sight of Hadleigh's face through the back window, round eyes panic-stricken.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Gunfire pierces the air. Neck tats leans out the window, sights on me.

His aim proves more inadequate than his judgment, his fate already sealed.

I duck low on my ride. Clearly, these are rinky-dink criminals, probably high as fucking kites.

My stomach roils, my angel at their mercy. She ducks, and I lose sight of her.

Maneuvering the motorcycle evasively, I long for my pickup.

It would provide a whole helluva lot more cover.

I could ram the SUV with it if I had to.

My hand aches for my shoulder-holstered firearm to engage these motherfuckers.

But I can't get a clean shot off with Hadleigh's whereabouts in the vehicle unknown.

Two sheriff's deputies buzz past to the ear-splitting wheeze of sirens. The black vehicle surges, law enforcement in hot pursuit. Bile rises in my throat. If anything happens to that curvy beauty, I'll burn this goddamned town to the ground, starting with her miscreant brother.

As for Hadleigh's abductors? They're already six feet under. I swear internally to make that transition as excruciating as fucking possible.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:40 am*

### Chapter Two

#### HADLEIGH

“O h shit!” the man in the passenger seat with elaborate neck tattoos curses, eyeing the sheriff’s deputies behind us.

I watch as the motorcycle rider disappears into the distance. Nameless, faceless, but clearly a hero. He pursued us from Andrew’s workplace, and I imagine he’s also why deputies tail us.

“What do we do?” the driver with ample face ink panics, flooring it and swerving dangerously down the two-lane road.

“Kill the girl?” the passenger asks, eyeing me wildly.

What a fucking idiot. Nothing like compounding your problems with murder. I press my lips into a thin line, listening to my abductors argue the merits of holding me hostage or throwing me out of the moving vehicle to slow the pursuing cops.

Biting my bottom lip and taking advantage of the distraction, I crawl quietly into the backseat, clicking a seatbelt into place. Verdant terrain rushes by in a blur.

We’re going to crash; the men are too busy arguing to pay attention to the curves in the road.

I pray under my breath, weighing the odds of surviving if we go over one of the many

cliffs to our right.

Sickening drops greet us, though it's hard to judge their depths in the thick cover of Northern Idaho forests.

Mom's warning races through my head. "Don't let Andy drag you into any more of his trouble." Andy is my older brother's childhood nickname, although in recent years, he has insisted on going by Drew, as if a name change could fool anyone who knows him well.

I gasp as the nose of the SUV misses a turn, barreling through the guardrail and over the edge. Time freezes, caught in freefall for what feels like sickening minutes before sound and gravity crash into us.

Two male voices wail. My whispered prayers ascend.

Thud.

Pop.

Crash.

Crack.

We hit the trees, torpedoing through them as a thousand sickening sounds fill the car.

Twisting metal, breaking glass, guttural howls and screams, and the most massive crash I've ever heard.

So deep, so broad, so percussive that I hold my breath, hanging mid-air as inertia slams into us with a sudden, painful stop.

Only my two captors don't stop. They crash headlong through the windshield, vanishing into dizzying gray and white rapids below. I hang precariously a good forty or fifty feet off the ground. My stomach churns as I stare into the violent roar of an angry river. I whimper, breathing shallowly.

Don't move. Don't breathe. Don't ? —

The madcap descent begins again. I'm too scared to scream, heart stuck in my throat as I land with a violent crack atop a jutting projection of granite less than a foot from my face and body.

Air flows in and out of my mouth in spasms as I stare at the rock, head spinning. A thunderous roar envelopes me as swirls of cold air and water lick my flesh. Water weighs down the car as it twists sideways, metal groaning and glass popping.

I only have a moment to react, hands shaking as I reach for the seatbelt. Unbuckling myself, I use my hands to navigate the massive boulder. Frigid depths swirl around me. The car twists and shudders against the sweeping currents.

I have no sense of direction, up or down, struggling against the onslaught of water. The vehicle twists and scrapes, fighting to break free of the massive boulder locking it in place.

I take a deep breath, sinking beneath the water, frantically searching for a way out. The passenger and driver side windows are rolled down, and the front windshield destroyed.

Half-swimming, half-dragged by the current, I slide through the broken windshield, snagging my leg against gnarled metal.

Pushing off the roof, I clear the vehicle, enveloped in twisting, swirling aquatic

chaos.

Shuttling past rocks and debris, trying frantically to hold onto anything, the rapids work me into frigid disorientation.

Each time I surface, I gasp for air, staring at the darkening, storming sky.

Desperate to get my bearings, I tremble uncontrollably from the cold.

The experience reminds me of longboard surfing in the Pacific and waves closing me out.

Only instead of frantically working to un-velcro the leash dragging me deeper, I dodge tree branches, boulders, and debris.

I take another frantic breath, a current sweeping me beneath the surface of the water for what feels like excruciating minutes. My lungs ache and beg for air. I press my lips tightly together, heart thudding.

Suddenly, the freight train roaring around me slows, and my head pops above the water. I gasp greedily, thanking God for this respite.

Violent tremors rock my core, though I'm so numb I barely feel anything. In the distance, the river chokes itself off again, tightening and accelerating. I must push to the opposite bank now, or I'm done for.

My dad's voice fills my ears. "You've got this, Sunshine. Just keep putting one hand in front of the other." I feel his strong, calming presence, urging me toward the bank.

Coughing and sputtering, I swim harder, concentrating every ounce of strength and focus on reaching the shore. I have to. The water picks up speed again, my one shot

slipping through my fingers.

No, I can't do this to Mom. I can't go like this ... like Dad.

I cling to the first branch I grasp, praising God as my body stops in the water.

But it loosens under my weight as I dip lower in the current, waving like a dry leaf on a dead branch.

Digging deep, to the bottom of my being, I crawl up the debris, grasping a nearby boulder and rough roots as the wood gives way, floating past.

Chattering teeth. Raw fingers. Sheer exhaustion. An unintelligible blur follows, black threatening to overtake my vision.

Until finally ... finally , I lie in rough-grained sand. I inhale dirt facedown, before gathering enough energy to tilt my head to the side. A great waterlogged mass, I shiver and struggle against receding consciousness, my legs still half-submerged in the water.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:40 am*

### Chapter Three

#### HUDSON

G unfire echoes in my ears as I reach the spot in the guard railing where a great gaping hole announces my worst fear. I run a hand through my hair, staring at the raging rapids below, the Lincoln already down the river so far I can't see it.

"Call search and rescue and the coroner's office," Officer Maywell grumbles to the deputy standing next to him.

Coroner's office? The words slam around in my brain, but I can't grasp them.

"You called in the abduction?" Maywell questions me as I eye the other guy's name badge. Officer Brooks. Both look resigned to some obvious fate I refuse to accept.

"But aren't you going down there? The woman," I scream, shaking my head. I don't know if it's creeping cowardice or abject laziness, but their indifferent faces provide a wordless answer.

Sprinting back towards my motorcycle, I ignore their hollering. "Wait, we need to get your statement."

"I'll come by the office. Steph can vouch for me," I roar, starting the engine and racing off.

I need to get down there as fast as possible, mentally calculating where the car may



have been swept by the river.

A storm's moving in with flash flooding alerts.

The timing couldn't be worse. Yet, I pray that somehow Hadleigh made it out of the car before the falls.

Pulling off at the closest trailhead, providing access to the raging river below, I grab the bugout bag I always keep with me for emergencies. Unrolling and filling it with the provisions from my saddlebags and my firearm, I sprint into the woods.

I clench my teeth as I race to the edge of the gorge, spying fast rapids below. Sheer cliff on both sides greets me as I scan the angry, gray, white-capped water. My stomach drops.

How in the fuck could she possibly survive this?

Ignoring the fatalistic thought, I follow the edge of the steep canyon downhill, scanning the water for signs of the car, the men, or the girl.

Looking back over my shoulder, I visualize where they must've dropped down, smashing onto a bed of giant, jutting rocks before the river seized the Lincoln.

Who am I kidding? Her odds of survival are minuscule.

But I can't stop, driven by the stunning blonde's haunting last look through the back window of the SUV, palms pressed against the glass.

I've only lived in Northern Idaho for the past year, but regular forest parours pays off as I find footing where none appears to exist, dropping into the bottom and coming to a stop a few feet from the rapids.

I immediately regret the loss of my bird's-eye view as the enormity of the untamed landscape crushes me.

Hadleigh's a needle in a vast, unending haystack.

I trek along the riverbank, surveying the surrounding landscape.

I move as fast as I can, well aware that the Corsair likely barreled down this waterway at a breakneck pace, far faster than I travel.

"Come on, Hadleigh. You have to make it. You have to survive."

I'm no nostalgic fool, and I'm the last guy on the planet to believe in love at first sight. Any sentimentality that remained in me after my fucked up childhood was beaten out in the Corps and overseas.

Nevertheless, what I felt the first time I looked at Hadleigh is inexplicable yet tangible. Supernatural and otherworldly. I can't stop until I find her.

The water slows up ahead as the river widens, and the trail I follow vanishes.

I'll have to rock climb to continue following the river, staring at the nauseating precipice in front of me.

If I had the right shoes and gear, I wouldn't hesitate.

But my motorcycle boots, bugout bag, Wranglers, black, pinstriped, button-down shirt, and leather jacket? Everything about this screams disaster.

Surveying the breadth of the water, its deafening roar fills my ears as I weigh my options.

I could wait for search and rescue. But the menacing storm clouds overhead tell me I'm running out of time.

I could scramble back up the trail I just descended for better views of the overall terrain.

But precious minutes would be lost. Or I could find a precarious vantage point to better assess my situation.

Eyeing a sturdy, gnarled tree, clinging to the cliff face, I climb halfway up its twisted length, my eyes settling on a black form and sunny blonde hair on the other side of the bank. Hadleigh lies face down. My heart stops. Is she alive?

I scream, "Hadleigh!" But the roar of the water drowns out my voice.

Fuck! I'm on the wrong side of a raging river out of time.

I notice how one branch of the tree I perch in drops out over the water, almost enough to give me a head start across the river.

If I can make it far enough across the sketchy limb before it breaks, I'll land in the middle of the calm water.

From there, if I swim fast and hard, I can make it to the opposite bank and Hadleigh. At least in theory.

I call the sheriff's department, looping search and rescue into the mix. As dark storm clouds build overhead, the wind picking up, I scream my location, knowing it's now or never if I want to help Hadleigh.

"There's a flash flood alert, and the winds are picking up, so the bird's grounded. Be

prepared to stabilize her and relocate as far from the river as possible.”

“Yep,” I say, my mind a swirl of a thousand contingencies and possibilities. “Will let you know once we’re safe.” If I can stabilize her. If she’s still alive.

I replace my cellphone in an inside pocket of my coat that zips, making sure everything on my bugout bag is secured. Edging out on the limb, I hope for a headstart. But almost immediately, it sways and cracks beneath my weight. Before I can blink, the limb tips, sending me headlong into icy rapids.

Cycling through an Arctic washing machine, I get worked feet over head, swirling and twisting. I struggle to raise my head above water, gasping for air and surveying the messy chaos of the river.

I didn’t go in nearly as far as I hoped. Swimming with the current, I diverge diagonally, using the water to my advantage, fighting and churning through the tumbling rapids to get as close to the far bank as I can when I hit the calmer water.

I’ve got one shot at this.

God, I wish I’d gone to Seal School instead of joining the Corps. The amphibious training really could have helped me out right about now.

I fight the river, taking long strokes and pulling myself through the currents. After what feels like an eternity, I hit the calmer waters, spit out much further from the shore than I originally calculated.

Time to dig deep, power through. I sprint for the distant shore, holding my breath much of the way, using the pull for oxygen to my advantage to reach the water’s edge and Hadleigh.

New, faster currents grab my feet, pulling me under. I fight, coming up for a gulp of air and then another, realizing I'm back in the grip of the rapids, headed for the waterfalls below.

I struggle to surface, sprinting against the current, a bathtub toy in a whirlpool. I crash into a large boulder beneath the water, air bubbling violently from my lungs. But it gives me a moment and the right footing to push back towards the river's bank.

I tangle myself in slower-moving logs and then boulders as I inch and crawl out of the water, dripping, teeth chattering, and sucking oxygen like a caught fish.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am*

### Chapter Four

#### HADLEIGH

“H adleigh!”

A man screams my name from far off. Almost like he’s underwater. My body aches and pulses, shivering in the cool air. My feet remain in the water, bobbing and twirling, trying to drag me back in.

I lie face down in the sandy grit of the bank, coming back to my body slowly.

One calf burns and aches, and there’s a slick warmth to it that I can’t explain.

Memory washes over me. Andy’s tattoo shop.

The two idiots in the parking lot. The SUV and the high-speed chase.

I shake my head, coming back to myself slightly and rolling over. It’s a monumental task.

Roiling storm clouds gather overhead, the air picking up speed, furious and frantic. I force my eyes open, surveying a fast-moving storm pregnant with rain, thunder, and quite possibly lightning. God help me.

Memory washes over me. Earlier, the meteorologist on the radio predicted heavy rainfall, even flash flooding. Talk about the wrong spot at the wrong time.

I scan the calm water in front of me, noticing something out of place. I observe it almost as if I'm outside of myself. A man's head, bobbing every now and again, above the water. Unlucky like me.

I blink hard, propping myself up on my elbows to watch him fight the raging currents.

My eyes narrow, and terror grips me. Please, God, don't let him be one of my abductors.

But the men who took me didn't have beards.

Did they? I watch as he struggles in the white water, head shooting up for an unsatisfactory gulp of air. He's headed for me.

But who in the hell is he, and what is he doing in the water?

I feel a strange ambivalence to his plight as I try to absorb what's going on, my body rejecting the input of my senses. Lightheaded and weak, I stare at the large, deep gash in my right calf, running the full length from knee to ankle and oozing dark blood.

Abrasions and small cuts cover my legs, and my fingertips feel raw from holding onto rough bark and granite rocks. But remarkably, I didn't hit my head, I didn't break a bone, and I didn't pass out ... though I came within inches of unconsciousness.

The current below sweeps up the man; he's done for.

A single tear drips down my cheek. Watching this should bother me more than it does, as the man struggles.

But my senses are fuzzy, my brain foggy.

Life feels like a movie happening on a screen, not real action, in real time, with real consequences.

His head disappears, and I wait, eyes scanning the water. “Come back up. Come back up.” I hear myself whispering the words as though from a distance. My pulse increases as the rawness of what unfolds before my eyes sinks in.

But is the man even real? Or did I dream him up? Is any of this real?

Raising my arm in what feels like an inordinately difficult move, I pinch my other forearm. Cold, numb, dead. But no more awake. My fingernail beds look blue, and I shiver, watching the bearded man drown.

His head pops back up.

“Thank God,” I whisper.

He surges forward, mere feet from the bank. I don’t know who he is. I don’t know if he means good or bad for me. Hell, I don’t even know whether he realizes I’m here.

But I root for him, so close to living and having fought so hard for it. “Come on. You can do this. You’ve got this.”

He crawls from the water, less than half a football field away from me. I watch him gasp for air, closing his eyes, and sinking into the sand. Minutes pass. He lifts his head, surveying the bank, eyes settling on me. I can’t tell from this distance, but I wonder at their color.

I appraise his square-cut, masculine face and thick, full dark blond beard. His longish



hair curls and waves in the air as he gathers his strength.

Should I worry about his presence? Who the hell knows? Instead, I close my eyes, too overwhelmed to move.

My calf. I snagged it on the breached metal of the vehicle as I escaped. Somebody should wash and bandage it. Stop the bleeding. Somebody. But who?

The irony of my current predicament sets in.

My high heels vanished in the water, and my little black dress is around my waist, having scrunched up during the fight with the water.

As a result, all I have on below the waist is a pair of slinky, lacy black panties. Beneath the dress is a matching bra.

Maybe McGyver could survive with underwear and a black dress that fits like a bandage. But me? Not so much. And definitely not with angry, gathering storm clouds overhead and flash flooding on the roster.

Thunder booms in the distance, and lightning illuminates the sky. I pull my feet the rest of the way from the water, not fond of dying from electrocution after everything else I've endured today.

The man crawls to his unsteady feet, moving tenuously in my direction. I watch him with a strange, murky objectivity as if I'm still outside myself. Modesty tells me to pull down my dress. But fuck it.

After the day I've had, I couldn't care less who sees me in my skivvies. Staring at my leg again, I wonder if he can help with the bleeding. It really does need to stop. How much of the red stuff can a body lose before it's a problem?

The man sinks down on his knees next to me in the sand, his eyes filled with the strangest combination of tenderness and desire I've ever seen. He works to keep his gaze on me, though his eyes stray a couple of times to my panties and thighs.

"Hi," he grumbles like he knows me.

Is this some kind of guardian angel? Or maybe a vision produced by my own body to help me survive?

Must be.

Never in my life have I seen a more handsome, rugged, muscular male specimen. From his rugged face to his snapping green eyes, his thick, damp, coppery hair and beard to his large, hard frame, he has to be a figment of my imagination. He's far too good-looking to actually exist.

Realization accepted, I face a new quandary. What does one say to her guardian angel? Or survival vision?

I've always been known for overcomplicating simple matters because I think too much. So, I try to keep it simple.

"Hi."

Uttering the one syllable exhausts me. I pant, trying to recover.

"Hudson," the man says, patting his chest and reclining back on the sandy bank. His head lolls as he continues to catch his breath. Odd behavior for an imaginary man.

"Hadleigh."

“I know,” he says, lifting his head and eyeing me. “I’m here to save you.”

As I appraise Hudson, as spent as myself and in what appears to be nearly the same condition, doubt creeps in. Yes, he may be inordinately handsome and well-built, but he’s flesh and blood. And hardly in a position to save me ...

Laughter bubbles up from my chest. I revel in the irony of the situation.

“What?” he asks somberly.

“ You save me? Start by saving yourself.” I lie back in the sand again, staring up at the churning, gray heavens.

“Your leg,” he says. “You’ve lost a lot of blood.

“Tell me about it,” I chuckle, shaking my head and wishing I could wake up from whatever this nightmare is.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am*

### Chapter Five

#### HUDSON

I explain, “You’re in shock.”

Classic shock.

Hadleigh breathes in quick, shallow bursts, her skin cold and clammy. Nervous laughter shakes her frame until tears spring to her eyes, and she’s disoriented, unaware of the looming dangers pressing down on us.

“Shock is the least of my worries,” she counters, waving her hand in the air. “If you knew even half of what I’ve been through today.”

“Tell me about it,” I order darkly. Better to keep her talking.

But she presses her lips together, silence overtaking us.

I remove my bugout bag, locating the first-aid kit and the sealed package with bandages and disinfectant. “This may hurt, but your leg needs attention.”

“It won’t hurt,” she says flatly. “I’m so cold, I can’t feel anything.” She speaks thick-tongued. Her flesh is covered in a thousand goosebumps, and I work hard to keep my eyes from her panties, pulled up on one side, revealing half of her shaved camel toe.

For God’s sake, I can’t think about carnality with a storm on our asses and the

desperate need to push to higher ground animating my tired body. But neither can I deny her mouthwatering perfection.

“Eat this,” I order, handing her a protein bar. I don’t want her to pass out from blood loss.

“I’m not hungry,” she counters, trying to push it away.

“Eat it,” I repeat more firmly.

Her eyes widen, but she grabs the opened bar from me, shoving the end in her mouth. “This tastes terrible,” she complains, chewing like she has a pack of gum in her mouth.

“It’s not for pleasure. It’s for survival.” I add, “We need to warm you up, too. But first, we need to get to higher ground and find shelter.”

“What are you? Some kind of search and rescue guy?” she lisps, struggling to sit up and hand me back half of the bar. I fold the wrapper over the open end and return it to the sack. At least, she ate something.

“No, I’m Hudson Adair. I own Forever After Tattoo Parlor, the shop you were abducted from today.”

“Wait,” she says, lifting her head and eyeing me unbelievably. She sounds drunk, her words heavy and clumsy, her lips pale blue, and her face icy white. “You’re Andy’s boss?”

“Andy? He goes by Drew at the shop.”

She chuckles. “He thinks a different nickname will garner respect. He doesn’t get the

fact that respect is earned, not given.”

Her voice has a caustic tone. As his employer for the last few months, I can sympathize with how frustrating being related to Drew must be.

“Maybe he’ll figure it out someday,” I grunt, tightly securing the bandage covering her calf to staunch some of the bleeding. She’ll need stitches, but we have far more pressing matters to face.

I eye the churning river, noticing the chop of the water has grown more agitated than before. We have to move to higher ground before the gorge floods and sweeps us over the falls.

Eyeing the rocky surface above us, I spy a steep, narrow game trail rising to the top of the cliff face. Thank God. But Hadleigh couldn’t be more ill-equipped for this terrain, barefoot and nearly naked.

Gripping her ample hips, I pull her tight-fitting, damp dress back down to a couple of inches above her knees.

I toy with giving her my jacket. But the bulky, oversized coat could be more of a liability.

The last thing she needs, climbing a sheer rock face, is an oversized garment that will cover her hands or cause her to slip.

“We have to move now, Hadleigh.”

“Move where?”

“Out of this canyon to higher ground, or we’re going to get caught up in the water

again.”

She shakes her head, staring at me. “Sorry, I forgot my hiking boots.”

“I can give you mine, but they’re way too big,” I observe, holding one of her feet. It’s colder than ice. I wonder how she’s still with me.

Moving her in this condition presents its own problems. She’s clearly hypothermic, which means sudden movements could send cold blood to her heart, sending her cardiovascular system into shock. But the roar of the angry water provides no other options.

“Can you hike barefoot, or do you want to try with socks?” I ask. I have an extra wool pair in my sack, but I’m torn about whether to give them to her, certain the grip of bare flesh is superior to slippery wool.

She lifts her head. “You’re serious? Oh, God.”

“Yes, we have to go now.”

I rise, leaning over to take her frigid hand. She stumbles to her feet, grabbing hold of me to stay steady.

“Are you dizzy?” I ask.

She nods, pressing her tits against my chest as she clings to me.

“Hold onto me. Okay? I won’t let anything happen to you.” Her pretty heart-shaped face betrays the same skepticism buried beneath my words. “We’re going to follow that trail up, which means sticking together, leaning into the rock face, and not looking down. Understood?”

Her gaze follows the trail up, her face twisting and eyes rounding. “Oh, God,” she exclaims. “There are only two things I’m afraid of in this world. “Spiders and heights. What are the odds there are tarantulas up there?”

I chuckle, grabbing her hand and starting up the trail. I don’t know if it’s better to have her in front or behind me. All I know is the clock’s ticking. “Focus on the climb, Hadleigh, and don’t look down.”

She swallows loudly, face somehow growing even paler. Her warm brown eyes transfix me. I lean in, kissing her icy lips chastely, desperate for one taste before we fight gravity for our lives.

“What was that for?” her voice croaks.

“Good luck.”

We climb slowly, the roar of the river swelling below us as rain pitter-patters our skin. The path narrows and steepens. Hadleigh gasps, gripping my hand so tightly, her knuckles turn white. Tears squeeze from her eyes. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“You’re stronger than you know, Hadleigh. You’ve got this.”

“Oh God,” she whimpers.

“A couple of hours from now, you’ll look back on this moment and realize how brave you are.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “Nice words for someone who’s supposed to be a total asshole.”



Her words take me aback for a moment until I put two and two together. The corners of my mouth turn down. “Is that what Drew told you about me?”

“Told my mom, who then told me. If it’s any consolation, neither of us believed him. But now I have flesh-and-blood proof.”

Her feet inch forward, her face relaxing slightly as the distraction of the words gets her past freezing on the ledge. I’ve got to talk her through this, but fuck, I’m no conversationalist. As a tattoo artist, I’m used to clients jabbering, not the other way around.

And what the fuck do you say to the woman who’s so fucking hot it makes your palms sweaty, your heart race, and your throat tighten like you’re back in high school? I have no game when it comes to this sexy mama.

Noticing how she knits her brows, I ask, “What’s on your mind, Hadleigh?”

She licks her lips, smiling ruefully. “Your first impression was with my dress around my waist. I can only imagine what you think of me.”

“I swear, I didn’t look,” I chuckle, body tensing at the vision of that sexy woman’s hidden curves.

“Yes, you did.”

“Well, I tried not to.”

“I’ll give you that.” She frowns.

“What else, Hadleigh?”

The trembling blonde shakes her head. “Trying to figure out why you’re here, rescuing me instead of my brother.” She quirks her mouth, and my heart skips a beat as we continue ascending the narrow trail, cold rain pelting our skin.

“Would you rather have Drew here?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, God, no. He would have never survived the river.”

I grumble, “He would have never gone in the river in the first place.”

“Which begs the question. Why did you? We’re total strangers.”

I shrug, incapable of explaining the impulse even to myself. But it started with me staring gobsmacked at her through the parlor window. “Seemed like the right thing to do.”

“That decision could still get you killed, you know,” she observes, voice shaking.

“No way in hell. We’re good, Hadleigh. Already been through the worst. The rest of this is easy-peasy.”

She looks up, scowling at how far we still have to climb.

“Hey, one foot in front of the other. That’s all I’m asking of you,” I encourage in gentle tones. “The river was the hard part. This is just tedious.”

Her hand holds mine so tightly that the blood drains from it. I keep my footing steady, half pulling her up the mountain behind me.

“I’m sorry I’m so heavy,” she apologizes as her foot slips again, and I press her tightly against me.

“You’re light,” I counter. “I could carry you piggyback, but I don’t think you’d like to hang any closer to the edge than you already are.”

“No,” she says, her eyes dropping down before I can say anything. “Oh, God.” Her voice trembles.

“Remember our rule, Hot Stuff? Don’t look down.”

“Hot stuff?” she laughs, panic edging her voice.

“Not a fan of that nickname?” I ask, arching an eyebrow.

She shrugs. “No one’s ever called me that before. I don’t really think of myself as hot.”

I arch an eyebrow, stunned at her words. “Well, you are. Hot as fuck. Of course, that’s just my first impression. I’d like to get to know you better.”

She blinks slowly a few times. “You want to get to know me?”

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

The curvy blonde giggles. “So, what? This is like a first date or something?”

“Why not?” I ask, keeping an eye on the rising rapids below. We need to move faster, but I don’t want to scare her. Or even worse, paralyze her with fright again. “It’s not like we have anything else to do today.”

“You have a point. I guess.” She grins, inhaling sharply as her toes grip another steep portion of the trail, finding what looks like impossible footing.

“Call this The Bachelor meets Survivor ,” I tease, stopping to assess the three yards in front of us—sheer cliff face with no trail.

“Where’s my rose?” she asks, eyes bugging out.

“On the other side of that,” I say with a confident smile.

She shakes her head. “No way.”

“Hadleigh.” I level my gaze on her, trying to reassure her.

She shakes her head again, breath coming faster. “You should go on without me, Hudson. I can’t.”

“We’re in this together,” I reply resolutely, watching agitation streak across her face. “End of story.”

“No, you’ve already done too much for me. Stuck your neck out way farther than you needed to. I feel ashamed for all the trouble my brother and I have caused you.”

The roar of the rising water leaves no time for arguments.

Gruffly, I order, “We’re either going together, or we’re staying here together. You’re not getting rid of me.”

“You are so damn stubborn,” she hisses, her face conflicted.

“Far more stubborn than you. Trust me.”

Her face blanches, taut and fear-stricken. “Okay, but I gave you an out, Hudson. Free and clear.”

“I don’t want an out with you,” I retort, the most honest thing I’ve said since meeting her.

Her brown-sugar eyes tick to mine, narrowing. But we’re out of time for explanations.

“Deep breaths and one foot and handhold at a time. You or me first?” I ask.

“You,” she says breathlessly.

“Quick and confident. Without second-guessing. Okay?”

“Oh, God,” she laments, face twisting.

“Deep breaths.” I inhale and exhale slowly, encouraging her to do the same. “Keep your eyes on me. You’ve got this, Hot Stuff. Okay?”

“Alright, Hudson. Together.”

Words evaporate as we concentrate. Going in front of her, I point out hand and footholds where I can, modeling slow breathing as she begins to cross. Fear animates her face, along with adrenaline, as she hurries so fast behind me that I have to increase my pace.

We reach the other side, breathing hard. Before I can think, Hadleigh clobbers me, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck and leaning up to kiss me. The dizzying heights enveloping us keep it innocent, but I still sense a hunger beyond my own.

“What’s that for?” I growl, looking down to hide the affection swirling in my eyes. I’ve never been good at hiding my emotions, and what I feel for this woman is so intense that I imagine my face reads like a love letter.

“For refusing to give up on me.” Tears fill her eyes, and she bites her full bottom lip, working hard to hold back a sob. “Apart from my dad, no man has ever stuck with me like that.”

I wrap my arms lightly around her, so fucking in love that I don’t know what to do with myself. All I know is she would think I’m some kind of crazy if I admitted these inexplicable emotions to her. Or any of the romantic thoughts thrumming through my head.

Instead, I grunt, nodding up the trail further to our objective.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am*

### Chapter Six

#### HADLEIGH

“How are your feet holding up?” the handsome mountain man asks, entangling his fingers with mine to help me up a steep break in the trail.

Tiny shivers of desire shuttle up and down my arm at his touch, and my lower core tightens. The animal magnetism of this virtual stranger remains undeniable. I want to feel his strong hands other places, everywhere, claiming me as his.

Get your brain on straight and focus, Hadleigh. This man's your rescuer. Quit objectifying and lusting over him.

But the closer we get to the top and safety, the more my body surrenders to unadulterated yearning.

Swallowing loudly and straining to focus, I say, “I'm trying not to think about my feet.

” In truth, every step is another rush of adrenaline until we reach higher ground and safety from the river raging below.

Thunder booms overhead, and lightning cracks. Far too close for comfort. I don't know much about survival in this kind of weather, but hanging from a rocky cliff above fast-flowing water probably isn't a great idea.

“When we find shelter for the night, I’ll clean and massage your feet, bandage them if needed. Okay?”

His words touch me. I didn’t know men like Hudson even existed, apart from my dad.

“Thank you, but you don’t have to.”

“I want to,” he says darkly.

My foot slides off the edge, but Hudson’s right there, protectively holding me against the cliff.

“Steady now,” he growls. “We’re almost there, Hadleigh. Stay with me.”

I whimper, panic washing over me again. I’m learning to sit with it, push through despite my insides crumbling.

Hudson reaches out to push a stray hair from my cheek. My face burns, and I look away, trying to hide the blush.

He encourages. “Almost home free.”

“Okay.”

With a few more steep steps, Hudson pulls me to the top, and we both collapse onto the ground.

The wind swirls around us, and thunder booms. Disappointment rushes me, the distance between us mere feet, yet an impassable gulf.

I long for his arms, wondering if the closest we’re ever going to get was on the cliff when he comforted and talked me through my fear of heights.



A flash of white light fills the darkening sky. “Fuck!” Hudson exclaims. “Come on.”

Jumping to his feet, the air sizzling with electricity, he grabs my hand and pulls me up.

Removing his leather jacket, he wraps it around my shoulders.

The tender move warms and reassures me despite the electricity flashing overhead.

“I would’ve offered this to you earlier, but I was afraid it might make you slip on the climb. ”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He grabs my hand, dragging me into the woods, sprinting against the storm. My stomach knots and twists, thinking about where Hudson and I would be now had he not forced me to take the trail. I owe this man my life multiple times over.

Adrenaline and fear course through my veins, pushing me further than stamina ever has. I wonder if it’s the same for this brute of a man. I can’t imagine it is. He moves through the woods with a robust grace, like it’s second nature.

Another percussive clap shatters the atmosphere, followed by a burst of light. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“See that dip in the terrain?” Hudson points, rushing toward a small grouping of short trees. “Lone trees and tall trees tend to attract most of the action. So, this is where we need to be.”

“What about that overhang?” I ask, eyes straying towards a cluster of rocks with a space beneath.

“No good in lightning. We must spread out, crouch down, and minimize our exposure to the ground. Like this.” He demonstrates, getting as low to the ground as possible on the balls of his feet. “Cover your ears if it helps,” he adds, the creases deepening in his forehead.

Never have I seen a more gorgeous man in my life.

He’s all strength, stamina, and survivalist knowledge, and it’s sexy as fuck.

As a SoCal girl, I never knew I could find a tatted, motorcycle-riding mountain man so attractive.

I crouch a distance from Hudson, mirroring his body positioning, and feeling lonely and vulnerable.

I long to melt into his arms and feel his mouth on mine.

“Once this passes, we’ll find shelter,” he yells.

I nod, eyes squeezed shut. “Remind me to wear something other than a little black dress on our next date,” I tease, covering my ears as thick sheets of rain pelt us, and the sky crackles and crinkles overhead.

“If I do things right, you won’t wear anything at all on our second date,” he replies throatily.

His words stun me, making me do a double-take.

Hudson smiles naughtily, and my insides officially melt into gooey, useless warmth. A good guy with the confidence of a bad boy? Hell, yeah.

Thunder shakes the ground, and lightning fractures the sky.

Fraught minutes pass as I count the time between booms and strikes, realizing the storm is directly overhead.

I tremble and shake violently, trying to hold still and maintain the position Hudson showed me.

I feel naked, laid out, and helpless before nature.

Popping and cracking sounds a distance away. I turn my head, watching an old, rotten widowmaker tree topple in a cloud of splinters.

I look up, my eyes locking with Hudson's snapping green ones. Death and destruction surround us as the gale blows, and the river in the gorge roars. Chaos crashes and smashes overhead. Despite everything, sparks from his gaze simmer, lighting my skin and igniting my need.

"How you can be so goddamned hot crouching on the ground during a lightning storm, I'll never understand," Hudson calls across the distance between us.

My mouth quirks as another boom and crash sound nearby. Over the howling wind, I reply, "I could say the same about you, you know."

He looks genuinely surprised, pleasure written on his face. But the raging storm interrupts the interlude, forcing us both to drop our gazes and turn inward, focusing on survival.

For the second time today, nature crushes me, rendering me tiny, insignificant. My body trembles uncontrollably at the sublime. I focus on individual breaths, completely embodying this breathtaking, terrifying moment. Time stands still.

But then, it begins again. Slowly. The distance between the thunder and lightning increases, and the auditory trauma dissipates.

Hudson drops down onto his knees with a groan. “That’s not a position a forty-two-year-old should hold indefinitely,” he laments, rubbing his knee.

“Forty-two? You seem way younger.” I drop onto all fours, breathing rapidly.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. How old are you?” he asks, scowling.

“Twenty-four.”

He nods. “Am I too old for you?”

Raising my chin defiantly, I add, “Not at all. I’m so done with immature guys closer to my age.”

He chuckles, rising to his feet and stepping towards me, offering a hand. “Good thing because I’m pulling out all the stops on this first date of ours. It’s one near-death experience after the next.”

“Never a dull moment with you.”

“I hope to change that, Hadleigh. Shelter’s up next and hopefully, some peace and quiet.”

“Like a cave or something?”

“Hopefully, better than that.”

“Anything sounds good right now.” I snuggle into his leather jacket, aroused by the

thought that this touches his hot, hard flesh. God, he makes me thirsty. My pussy throbs, nothing rational behind this powerful, undeniable desire.

The burly mountain man beelines for me, and my throat tightens. I swallow loudly, eyes rounding as he stops in front of me, pulling at one side of his jacket.

Is he reading my mind? Ready to dive headlong into passion with me in the wild heart of the deep woods? God, I hope so.

Unzipping the inner pocket, his simmering eyes never leave mine. He pulls out his cellphone, turning it on.

I frown.

Dammit.

“Give me a moment to call the sheriff’s department, and I’ll find out what’s going on, how close we are to rescue, and where we go from here.”

I nod, leaning against a tree, tired beyond all reason, disappointed, and needy as my pussy greedily throbs. What in the hell is wrong with me? I sink slowly to the ground, noticing the pounding ache of my feet as I let off pressure.

I read an article once about how when people go through a life-or-death situation, they often feel an unrestrained urge to fuck. Almost as if celebrating their continued existence.

I don’t know if it explains my current state, but considering I’m a virgin who’s never been especially interested in any man, it’s the only way I can explain the magnetic pull of Hudson. Or how my mind twists and turns, naughty visions filling my head.

I can't stop thinking about his mouth on mine, his fingers in my hair, our bodies tangled and writhing. And his cock buried so deep that it feels like we share the same body.

The pain between my legs feels excruciating, and guilt burns my cheeks as I eye the mountain man a distance away.

Never have I needed anyone so thoroughly.

I lick my bottom lip, heart racing, as I wonder what he tastes like and what his thick, throbbing cock would feel like between my legs and my lips.

But despite the flirty words flowing between us, what's to say the mountain man feels what I do? Maybe he's acting interested to distract and encourage me.

It's not like I'm probably his type, plus-size and soft in every place supermodels are hard and sleek. And I have to remind myself, thanks to the earlier wardrobe malfunction, he's seen it all—thick thighs, rolls, cellulite, dimples, every fleshy bit of me.

Hudson talks to someone, and I draw closer, eavesdropping. “Yeah, Hadleigh Bardot's safe with me. We climbed out of the gorge and are in the wilderness somewhere near the Jumbo Falls Trailhead.”

A long pause follows.

“Understood. But can you do us a solid?” he asks.

I absorb his gorgeous face, guessing what the other half of the conversation sounds like.

“Can you point us to any nearby structures or cabins to shelter in for the night?”

Hudson bandies back and forth about distance and direction from the river and gorge until he ends the call with a satisfied grunt. Turning to me, he says, “We’re within thirty minutes of an old hunting lodge. You think your feet can hold out?”

“Whatever it takes,” I say resolutely. Curving one foot towards myself, I stare at the pulsating, bleeding, dirty sole embedded with little bits of sharp granite.

Hudson eyes the other, grimacing. “You climbed out of the gorge on bloody, cut-up feet? You’re tough as fucking nails.”

“The granite gravel on the trail was sharp. But it had to be done.”

He nods, running his hand over his beard. “I still don’t know how you managed to get to the bank after going over the cliff in the Lincoln. I nearly drowned, and I had a serious headstart and a thorough understanding of the river’s trajectory.

“I used to longboard the Pacific with my dad, which helped. Getting worked by waves, dragged to the bottom by the leash, even cracked on the head by the board taught me a lot about surviving choppy water. Never thought I’d use those skills in Northern Idaho, though.”

“Wait, you surf?”

I nod.

“Me, too. Back in the day, as a Marine stationed in San Diego, that’s all I did in my free time. I’m a shortboard guy, though.”

“I’ll forgive you this once,” I tease.

Kneeling in front of me, he digs a water bottle out of his backpack, gently washing the dirt and granite out of the cuts in my soles.

I hiss and hold my breath, sensation kicking me in the ass with improved circulation.

My throbbing calf joins the plaintive party.

The disinfectant stings, and I bite the knuckle of my pointer finger.

Hudson lets my feet air dry as much as they can, despite the drizzling rain, before bandaging the worst spots.

Then, he removes a pair of wool socks from his bag and puts them on one at a time. “Let’s give this a try. The socks should provide minimal protection. But they’re slippery, so be careful not to twist an ankle. If the pain gets to be too much, don’t grin and bear it in silence.”

“Why not? What can you do about it?”

I catch myself getting lost in the warm, lusty swirls of his green eyes—rugged, virile, and handsome. The juncture between my legs tightens, improved blood flow making me acutely aware of how much my body craves the bearded hunk.

“I’ll carry you,” he says.

I chuckle. Apparently, this guy’s also delusional. “Carry me? I’m no lightweight.”

“I was trained to carry fellow Marines. Leave no man behind. Slinging you over my shoulder would be a piece of cake. My pleasure. Now let’s push through to the cabin before night falls.”



“Is search and rescue coming for us soon?” I ask, pulling my knees against my chest and wrapping my arms around them, reluctant to stand on my aching feet again.

“They’re tied up rescuing people from flash flooding in and around town. So, it’s up to you and me to get through the night.”

“As long as I have you, I’m not worried about anything,” I confess, watching how the words soften his gaze.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am*

### Chapter Seven

#### HUDSON

Darkness shrouds the trail as we approach the hunting cabin, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Despite the leather coat and wool socks, Hadleigh's not properly dressed for dipping temperatures and drizzling rain. Hopefully, the cabin will have some extra clothes she can bum.

I can't find a key, scouring the property. No welcome mat. No fake hollowed-out rock. No place to hide anything. I try to pry up a window to no avail

"Dammit! Looks like we're breaking and entering."

I scan the area for a rock when shattering glass captures my attention. Looking towards the side of the cabin, Hadleigh smiles nervously. "I decided to get proactive."

I nod, stroking my beard. Whereas I wanted to break a top window right next to the lock to unlatch it, she destroyed a bottom portion, vastly increasing the odds of unwanted guests visiting. Too late to do anything about it now, though. So, I save my breath.

Grabbing the rock she still grips in her hand, our fingers brush and electricity shoots up my arm, hot as the lightning storm we just rode out. My breath catches in my throat, my gaze meeting her tender, warm, brown-sugar eyes.

I warn, "Stand back so you don't get cut."

Using the rock to clear hanging portions of the glass, I lean through, unlatching the window and pushing the frame up. “That’s going to be a tight fucking fit for me.” I laugh, eyeing the space.

“Let me go,” Hadleigh volunteers.

I shake my head. “Your feet have already been through enough. Don’t need to add glass to the mix.”

“I’ll use your jacket,” she replies, determination written on her face. “Please let me help.” I can tell she won’t take “no” for an answer, and I don’t want to argue with her.

Instead, I grab the jacket, leaning through and throwing it onto the ground so she won’t cut her feet. Then, grabbing her around the waist, I start to lift her ...

Until our eyes lock. My heart stops, and I can’t take it anymore.

Leaning forward, my lips find hers, sinking into a slow, sensual kiss. To my surprise, her lips move over mine, reciprocating my moves before turning ravenous. My heart throbs behind my ribcage as she clings to my neck, her fingers threading into my hair.

My hands grip her waist more tightly, drawing her hips towards me, grinding her over me, though she’s so much shorter that the juncture between her legs misses my cock by a good six inches. Nothing we can’t fix with some horizontal repositioning.

Pushing up onto her tiptoes, she whimpers as my tongue slides between her lips, circling her for a first taste. She’s warm and inviting, and I need her more than I’ve ever needed any woman, though it makes no sense. And it’s highly inconvenient.

The last loser I want to have any unnecessary ties with is her asshole brother. But all

those cares melt away in the heat of her soft, velvety tongue sliding over mine, creating a rhythm I long to echo across every juncture of her body.

Pulling my head back reluctantly, I stare at her gorgeous face, her mahogany eyes, dark and dilated. Her nostrils flare, and her slightly swollen pink lips part, begging me to take her again. “Seems like we ought to go inside after all the work we’ve put into getting here.”

Her eyes survey the darkening landscape, apprehension gripping her face. “No telling what’s out here.”

I chuckle, fully aware of what’s out here. “Grizzlies, black bears, mountain lions, moose, wolves, elk. I think you’ll like it better inside.”

She nods, and I boost her through the window, watching her ample ass shake behind her and stealing a glance at the silky black panties beneath her dress. Does it make me a creep? I don’t fucking know.

But one thing’s for certain, with survival on the backburner again, it’s impossible to think with anything but my cock. I adjust myself through the pocket of my soaked jeans, striding towards the door where she stands waiting for me.

We need a fire, lighting sorted out, food, and water.

But all I can think about is the sexy sway of her hips and how her dress grips her tits.

I’m certain the nipples are pebbled from the cold, and I hunger for them, desperate to lick and suck her breathless before nibbling on those wet, black, silky panties of hers.

I meet her in the doorway, heart pounding as she grabs the collar of my shirt, pulling me into her for another kiss. “You like playing with fire, don’t you, Hadleigh?” I ask

grumpily, my final warning for this sexy minx.

“And if I do?” she asks. “What happens next?”

My head spins, a thousand basic survival things still needing to be done before we think about anything so pleasurable. But I’m also old enough to know precious questions like this rarely get asked twice. I can’t hesitate simply because I’m multitasking.

“I’m gonna end up even more smitten than I already am, and you’re going to end up a permanent resident of Northern Idaho.”

She chuckles, palming my chest. “Oh yeah? And why is that?”

“Because,” I feather her mouth. “When I want something. Really want it, I take it, and I don’t share. Period.”

“And do I fall into the really want category?” she asks breathlessly.

“I’m ninety-nine percent decided that you do,” I confess, teasing her mouth with the tip of my tongue.

She exhales slowly, savoring every moment of this dangerous game. “And the one percent?”

I frown. “Your relation to Drew. Probably shouldn’t hold that against you, but?—”

“But you’re withholding judgment just in case I’m as batshit as my brother?”

“More or less.”

“I can’t blame you. It’s the same for me with you being his boss. No offense, but who hires a guy like him in the first place?”

“I always give second and sometimes even third chances. It’s a part of who I am. Period.”

“Fair enough.”

“Fair but not smart.” I frown. “I better work on the generator before it gets any darker so we have lighting and maybe heat,” I excuse, heading back through the door.

Outside, I find the ratty-ass generator house, using another rock to break the rusty lock and turn it on.

I keep a mental list of all the property damage to reimburse the cabin owner later.

This property remains a godsend, though, as the icy rain continues to dribble around me.

Without it, Hadleigh and I would face a night from hell rather than the prospect of modern amenities.

Of course, a cozy wilderness getaway presents its own problems. Like deciding how far I want to take things with Hadleigh. If she wants to take things further at all.

I remind myself that she’s Drew’s sister, the last asshole on earth I want to be anymore tied to— love at first sight or not. But the heart doesn’t care about that shit. Who the hell am I fooling? I want her, and I want her bad.

But what twenty-something in the prime of her youth wants to settle down with a forty-two-year-old wounded warrior?

My list of aches and pains is long at times, and I'm at the age where I don't want drama.

Or to fuck around. I want a wife and babies, while I'm still young enough to keep up with them.

Lights shine from the cabin as I trudge back to the front door.

I walk into a cozy room with a roaring fire and pots and pans lining the countertop as Hadleigh stands in her stockinged feet in front of a small pantry, sorting through lines of canned goods.

She holds two in her hands, blowing on the tops to remove a thick layer of dust.

"Some of these are expired by several years. This place doesn't look like it sees much action."

"Nope," I say, running my hand through my hair. "You know how to make a fire." I saunter towards the golden flames in the stone hearth.

"Yes, bonfires on the beach were always my family's thing. Nothing beats roasting marshmallows and listening to the waves. I grew up on Coronado Island, by the way. So, not too far from your neck of the woods as a Marine."

"Had to be an idyllic childhood, I'd imagine. I'm from the Midwest, Kansas born and bred. So, the first chance I had to split, I did. Not much to do there apart from tornado chase and sip iced tea on the porch with old timers."

"The closed-in porch because of all of the mosquitoes," Hadleigh adds with a laugh.

I arch an eyebrow, pulling out a high stool beneath the kitchen island and taking a

seat to watch her work. “Sounds like you know the Midwest?”

She nods. “My mom’s side of the family comes from South Dakota, so we spent lots of time there as kids. Lived there, too, after Dad died.” Her voice trembles, pain close to the surface.

“What happened?” I ask, sitting back on the stool.

She looks down, studying the kitchen counter for a long moment.

“He died surfing Mavericks. I was sixteen at the time. We were a surfing family. Even Mom used to go out, but none of us were anywhere near my Dad’s level.

He had some friends up from Costa Rica, and they all went together right before a big storm.

Waves were supposed to be huge, perfect for a nice long ride.

We stayed home that day because Dad surfing was a weekly, sometimes daily, occurrence.

But then, we got the call that the Coast Guard was looking for him.

” She shakes her head, crumpling in front of me as she sets the cans down, her palms flattening onto the counter to support her.

“What a nightmare,” I say, shaking my head.

“Everything more or less fell apart after that. We moved to South Dakota, which I absolutely hated. My grandparents lived in this small town called Vermillion. It was a really cool and eclectic place, but everyone knew everyone else, and they weren’t



especially welcoming to outsiders.

Maybe if I'd moved there earlier, it would have been different.

But coming in halfway through my Junior year of high school sucked.

So, I made it my goal to get out of South Dakota and back to San Diego as fast as I could. ”

“And what did you do in California?”

“Worked in retail and gave surfing lessons until I got my first supervisor position. I now oversee a Coach handbag store. Maybe that's why I'm so bossy when it comes to Andy's life.

If something needs to be managed, I'm only too willing and capable.

But sometimes I forget that not everyone appreciates that. ”

“I guess while we're on the subject of your older brother, I might as well ask, how did you turn out so okay if he's the way he is?”

She chuckles, shaking her head.

“Sorry if I'm taking that too far. I know he's your brother and all. I'm just frustrated with him.”

“Believe me, I have the same question, even though I love him dearly and know what a fun kid and cool teenager he was. But he didn't handle our father's death well at all.

While it pushed me to be the perfect child so that my mom never had to worry about

anything, Andy went the other way.

He cultivated this rage against the world that, coupled with his naturally rebellious personality, was truly terrifying, especially when he started using drugs.

What he really needs is to hit rock bottom and go into rehab.

Mom knows it. I know it. But seeing him down on his luck and suffering so much ...

God, it's difficult to turn your back on that, which is what brought me to Northern Idaho to try to talk some sense into him before he fucks up another good thing working for you. ”

I cross my arms, looking down and shaking my head.

“I’m not exaggerating when I say I’ve given him every chance to pull it together.

Hell, I even let him live rent-free above the shop.

But instead of being grateful, using this time to pull his shit together and stand on his own two feet, he’s the victim of his circumstances.

I don’t pay him enough. I don’t cut him enough slack.

I don’t give him enough recognition, even though he’s more of a glorified receptionist than a tattoo parlor manager.

Recently, I found money missing from the till, and he’s my number one suspect, Hadleigh.

Hate to tell you that. Now, the latest thing is I’ve fucked him over by drug testing him

and refusing to apprentice him as a tattoo artist. But that shit takes talent and dedication.

I would never let him operate a gun in my shop. ”

Hadleigh nods, sadness flooding her eyes. “Wow, I can’t believe all you’ve done for him. Thank you. It’s such a shame that Andy can’t be grateful for any of this.”

“No, what’s a shame is being in the same cozy cabin with the hottest girl I’ve ever met and talking about Drew. No offense, but I’m far more interested in you.”

“Well, at least, ninety-nine percent of me,” she flirts.

“Dunno. The more I learn about you, the closer you inch to one hundred percent. It’s alarming, actually.”

“After everything we’ve been through today? This is what you find alarming?”

I nod, fucking certain I’m even more in love with Hadleigh Bardot now than when I decided to launch my ass into a fast-moving river. Despite my concerns about her family and age. This is not good. What in the hell is this angel doing to me?

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### Chapter Eight

#### HADLEIGH

Hudson's green eyes sear me, and I'm a goner. My body pulses with need, the throb between my legs impossible to ignore.

But do I really want to give my virginity, after all these years, to a bad boy mountain man who's a tattoo artist and Andy's boss?

Chalking these feelings up to some kind of crazy survival hormones, I forbid myself from falling any further for this man. Or continuing to play with the fire of tempting, dark, dirty thoughts. Instead, I dive headlong into distraction.

"After a thorough inspection of the many canned delights in the pantry," I say, turning towards him with a can in each hand. "How about beef stew and brown bread?" I hold up the corresponding cans.

"Sounds delectable," he says sarcastically. "See any wine in there while you were looking around?"

"No, but there's a closet down the hallway. "Maybe check there?"

Hudson stands, sauntering in the direction I nod as I eye his tight ass until smoke comes out of my ears. His wet Wranglers fit like a glove, one I'd love to peel off with my teeth. My cheeks burn as he lets out a long, loud whistle.

“Find something?” I ask guiltily, poking my head around the corner. What happened to no more sexy thoughts, Hadleigh?

“Whiskey, bourbon, brandy, champagne, and red wine. What’s your pleasure?”

“Hmm...” I lick my lips. “What does one drink after a day spent careening off bridges, nearly drowning in rivers, and climbing barefoot up the walls of flash flooding gorges?”

“For the lady with discerning tastes?” he asks in a mock posh voice, holding up a dusty bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

I nod, laughing. “That should taste decent with our canned stew and bread. Have you ever eaten canned bread before?”

“You forget I’m a beach bum Marine bachelor. Canned bread sounds gourmet to me.”

I laugh as he heads back into the kitchen with the bottle.

Hudson opens the drawer next to him as I open one diagonally across the way.

“You looking for a can opener?” he asks.

“Yes, and you’re after a bottle opener?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll keep my eyes out for you.”

“Same.”

We search drawer after drawer, the only sounds the thin whine of the generator outside and the rustling of junk against wood.

Finally, we end up standing in front of the same drawer.

Hudson opens it, and my eyes go to the bottle opener and can opener, lined up next to each other, a hair's breadth of distance between them.

“Well, that was meant to be,” he chuckles, eyeing me as we stand shoulder to shoulder. My hand goes for the can opener and his for the bottle opener, our fingers brushing. Electricity arcs between us, a searing echo of the earlier lightning storm.

There's something I have to get straight with this man. “You followed me from the tattoo shop. One of the last things I remember before the crash was you in fast pursuit, though you were getting shot at.”

He nods slowly.

I arch an eyebrow. “But after that. How did you end up in the river? And why?”

Hudson shrugs. “I came for you.”

“No, you didn't.” My voice trembles, and the backs of my eyes sting dangerously.

“Why is that so hard to believe?” he asks, the creases in his forehead deepening.

“Because apart from my deceased dad, no man has ever cared enough to help me. Let alone risk his neck for me. In fact, my experiences with men have been very much like dealing with Andy, caring for them far more than they care for me. Putting way more into the relationship than they put in.”

“I’m not like other men and certainly not like your brother,” he says, bringing his hand up to push a stray hair from my face. The instant his fingertips brush over the flesh, my cheeks flush, burning. “But I am too old for you, maybe?” He finishes with a frown.

“Do you really think age matters that much?” I ask breathlessly, eyes swimming and dancing with his.

“No, but it’s probably the most compelling reason to stay away from you. I’m running out of other excuses, Hadleigh.”

I chuckle, bringing my hand up to palm his chest. “You had plenty of chances not to follow me today. You just didn’t take them.”

Lips inches from mine, his hot breath warms my cheeks.

I swallow hard, temptation pulsing through me. “You could have left pursuit of my abductors to law enforcement to save your own skin, avoid getting shot at.”

He nods, his hand descending to my neck. His thumb lightly strokes the pulse point until I feel light-headed and needy. The juncture at the top of my legs is tight and sticky, desire wrecking me.

I lick my bottom lip slowly, watching how his eyes darken as they follow my tongue, nostrils flaring. “And you definitely didn’t need to follow me into the water. I mean, that was plain foolhardy.”

“Is foolhardy such a bad thing?” he asks, his lips so close to mine I can taste his words.

“For you, it’s been nothing but bad. Think of how much pain and discomfort you

could've avoided today."

"It's all been worth it to be here with you like this," he whispers darkly.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure as fuck," he answers without hesitation, his other hand coming up to grip my shoulder, his thumb tracing warm circles in the flesh along my collarbone.

"Thank you," I say so quietly, I wonder if he even hears me. My eyes capture his as I add emphatically, "I would be dead right now if it weren't for you."

"And you don't owe me anything. Just knowing you exist is pretty fucking amazing to me."

I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off.

"I'm sorry I'm getting distracted. I need to rebandage your leg and your feet. Stay right where you're at, Hot Stuff."

Quickly and without hesitation, he disappears down the hallway, looking for the bathroom and a first-aid kit. He returns a few minutes later with a large, plastic first-aid kit. Unceremoniously, he wraps his massive hands around my waist, lifting me, and plopping me atop the kitchen counter.

Leaning forward, concentration written on his face, he removes my sopping leg bandages, gently cleaning the ragged, deep laceration as I grimace, watching blood drip from the wound.

"Sorry," he says stony-faced. "You need stitches, Hadleigh. But at least I can keep the wound clean and shut." I watch him work expertly, staunching the wound and



applying butterfly closures until they line my leg, and I look like some kind of Tim Burton creation—a woman stitched back together.

Expertly, he wraps my calf with white bandages before focusing on my feet. Everything throbs.

But all I can think about is my wet, demanding pussy. I need him so much, I can barely breathe. This has never happened to me before, and it scares the hell out of me.

Hudson's big hands come up to my outer thighs, stroking them gently, seductively. "You're tough as fuck, Hadleigh. It's so goddamned sexy, though I hate seeing you in pain."

"Speaking of pain," I pant, trying hard to focus on our conversation and failing miserably, my body lost in every touch of his hot flesh. "Are you going to give me a tattoo later if I ask you for it?"

"Hell, yeah," he says, pressing his lips to my knee.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure than marking you." His voice tantalizes, thick with unspoken promises.

Pulling back slightly, he finishes bandaging a few more places on each of my feet, working gently and gracefully.

His hands may be huge, but they have a hypnotic agility.

"Where might I put a tattoo?" I ask breathily. I should stop now, end this dangerous game, but I want Hudson so much I can barely breathe.

He shrugs. "Wherever you like."

I level my eyes on his. “Where would you put it?”

His face flushes, and he swallows hard. “Here maybe,” he whispers, big, rough hands sliding up the outsides of my legs and coming to rest on my thighs. He squeezes them, his right thumb rubbing tiny circles in the flesh above my knee.

I shudder on my inhale, my pussy clenching so tightly, I wonder if he can smell my arousal. God, temptation has never foundered me like this before.

Hudson leans forward, kissing the spot his thumb rubs and tickling me with his scratchy beard. I want his lips and beard everywhere, on every inch of my body.

The mountain man swallows hard. “Or maybe here,” he murmurs, lips feathering sensually to the inside of my thigh as he pushes my legs up, bending my knees and parting them.

He steps between them, eyes black as sin. “We could try here,” he continues throatily, mouth moving up my inner thigh. My exhale sizzles, my lower core on fire. What in the hell is this man doing to me with his huge, demanding hands and kissable lips?

His fingertips slide higher, and I’m drenched, desperate for his touch. Fuck, I want Hudson Adair. More than food. More than wine. More than the goddamned air in this room.

“God, Hadleigh, I want you so much I can’t even think.” He pronounces each word slowly and seductively, straightening and coming for my mouth.

His lips brush over mine gently at first. My hands slide around his neck, gripping him and communicating my urgency. Crashing into my mouth, his hot, hungry tongue invades me ravenously, lighting my nerves on fire.

My pulse pounds as delicious shivers of need grip my core, his thick beard tickling my cheeks. He claims me unhesitatingly, claiming everything and giving even more until desire hums through my head, my body alive and so needy I don't know how much more I can take.

Teasingly, he traces his lips down my neck, across my shoulders, and tantalizingly close to my tits. My nipples pebble, demanding his mouth. Would it be so bad to pull down my dress and my bra? Let him suck my tits and push me over the edge? Never has yearning felt so all-consuming.

He bites my nipple through the stretchy fabric, and I cry out, pussy throbbing and pulsing for him. His hands cover my body, sliding into the hollow of my lower back and pressing my damp need tightly against his rock-hard arousal.

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A ragged sigh escapes his lips. He grabs my hips demandingly, arching them towards his cock as he continues to play and tease my tits.

I want every stitch of clothes between us gone, flesh on flesh, absorbing and filling each other's desires.

My panties are a mess, the physical manifestation of an animal need that grinds through me.

I wonder if he can smell me, feel my moisture and fire through my panties and his jeans.

My hips buck towards him, betraying my silent demand. He lowers his head between my legs, saying, "I want you to watch me get you off. Let me show you how amazing your fucking body is and how much you need me."

"On the kitchen counter?" I ask, losing the battle with reason.

"On the kitchen counter." His fingertips dig beneath the waistband of my panties, pulling the slippery fabric down my legs. He buries his nose in the drenched silk and lace, smelling my arousal, his eyes nearly black.

"Fuck, you smell like you're mine. All mine." He licks my panties, adding, "These belong to me now."

"A souvenir?" I arch my eyebrow.

“A goddamned shrine to the sacred space I worship.” He pockets them without hesitation, his eyes ravenous, his cock tenting hard against his jeans.

“Don’t you want out of your wet clothes?” I whisper, eyeing his erection and desperate to see more of him.

“Not until after I’m tongue and knuckles deep in your pussy.”

My channel spasms, greedy and needy. I didn’t know a man could make me feel this desperate. He puts one leg over each shoulder.

“Oh, God,” I whimper, still processing that we’re doing this and frantic to ensure we don’t stop.

“Keep your eyes on me. Got it?”

A thousand shivers cover my flesh as his thick, warm tongue slides up my inner thigh, anticipation building. He alternates licking and lapping my flesh with demanding kisses, sucking me into his mouth and claiming me.

“Are you giving me hickeys?” I ask between fast-paced breaths.

“Fuck, yeah. I’m marking you as mine, Hadleigh. And when you see my lovebites on your thighs, I want you so turned on that you have to stroke your kitty in the bathroom, the bedroom, the kitchen ... wherever the fuck you are while you think about me.”

I exhale sharply, head lolling back.

“Eyes on me,” he scolds. “I want you to watch me get you nice and juicy, creamed and ready to take this thick cock.”

“Oh, Hudson,” I whimper, forcing myself to watch even though I want to squeeze my eyes shut and devolve into pure feeling.

“Because I’m big, Hadleigh. And I’m pierced, so I need you wet and messy.”

“God,” I exclaim, cheeks glowing. “And I’m a virgin.”

His eyes dart to mine, incredulous. “A what?”

“A virgin,” I whisper. “Is that a problem?”

“Not for me, but do you really want me to be your first? I don’t want to rush you into?—”

“You wouldn’t be my first, Hudson,” I interrupt. “You would be my only.” I stare at him, waiting for the words to sink in and his countenance to betray alarm. I’ve had this conversation with men before. It never goes well.

But Hudson’s face doesn’t cloud with fear and doubt. His expression doesn’t harden and go cold. Instead, his eyes meet mine, his hand palming my cheek as he says emphatically, “Your first, your last, and your everything in between. That’s what I want, too, Hadleigh.”

I blink slowly. Did I hear him right? Warmth enflames my heart, like my chest is on fire. Never have I wanted another human being more, longing far beyond the mere physical. I need connection with him, profound, unshakeable, soul-binding.

His wicked fingertips slide up and down my outer thighs, leaving fiery trails of desire. “I’m clean. But I don’t have any condoms. I know you’re a virgin. But are you on birth control by chance?”

“No, but I’m clean.”

“I need your total honesty, Hadleigh. If I fuck you and put a baby in your belly, are you going to hate me?” he asks, lips gliding and sliding along my inner thigh. My body hums, my head so foggy I have to concentrate to understand his question.

“Are you going to be my man and take care of your responsibilities?” I ask. I don’t want to break the moment. But I am so over guys who want sex without the commitment, complications, or real potential of a baby.

“In forty-two years, no woman has ever made me feel the way you do. You have me, Hadleigh, for the long haul. I want every fucking thing with you. Waking up next to you in the morning, falling asleep with you at night. Living together, learning you inside and out, making you happier than you’ve ever dreamed of.

Being there for you when you need me ... always .

And never letting you or our children down. ”

“Then, why did you call it fucking?” I ask, knitting my forehead.

He shrugs. “Old habit.”

“Old habits die here,” I say softly.

“You want me to make love to you, Hadleigh? Is that it?” Hudson asks, his voice dark and rich.

“I want you to claim me. Make me yours.”

His face flushes, warmth dancing in his gaze.

“And I don’t want you to be afraid of anything that comes with sex ... even breeding. That’s why I’ve waited to have sex all these years. Because I want a man who can handle me and a family. Not some immature tool who hides behind condoms and runs at the first plus sign on a pregnancy test.”

“So, part of the turn-on of sex for you is breeding?” He growls, licking his lips.

“Some people call it a kink. I call it nature. I want kids, Hudson. I want a family. I don’t have time to fuck around with immature men who aren’t ready for that, no matter how sexy they may look or how well they can get me off.

And yes, I can’t think of anything that gets me hotter or wetter than the thought of you balls-deep breeding the hell out of me. ”

“Oh, fuck,” he chuckles, resting his head against the inside of my thick thigh and catching my gaze with his smoldering eyes. “Did you really just say that?”

I nod, pressing my lips firmly together to suppress the whimper that captures my throat. I want this man with every fiber of my being. But these are non-negotiables for me.

“God, Hadleigh, you were fucking made for me. I’ll try to hold back, play nice the first time.

But after that, all bets are off. I’m pounding that pussy of yours, filling you with my cum, and putting my baby in you.

Because there’s nothing I want more than you.

You . My sexy fucking kryptonite and, yes, babies. Lots of them.”



I moan, my pussy clenching. “God, Hudson. When you talk like that, it makes me so horny,” I confess, biting my lower lip.

“Good. I want you horny for my cum, Hadleigh. I want you to fucking crave it ... be addicted to it and me .” My insides feel like melted wax, my pussy aching and throbbing for him.

His eyes turn adoringly to my pussy. “I love how you keep it shaven. So pretty, pink, and juicy. Perfect for my thick cock.” His hot, velvety tongue on my clit short-circuits all reason.

“Watch me,” he growls, splaying my pussy lips open with his pointer finger and thumb and unhooding my pearl.

His tongue bathes the nub in bliss, teasing it with the tip, dragging it dangerously over his teeth, and sucking it into his mouth with fast-moving, thrumming motions.

My head spins, breath coming in shaky, rapid, corresponding pulses.

“Hudson!” I scream, already wrecked by this man, hips straying greedily towards his mouth.

He blows on my swollen pearl, wresting a surprised gasp from me. “God, Hadleigh, you’re my new favorite fucking flavor. I could spend all night eating you out, and it would never be enough.”

He licks my folds from ass to clit, and I see stars. He buries his tongue in my pussy as I squirm and pant, so close to exploding, I don’t know what to do.

Do I hold back, squeezing my muscles? Should I let go and see what happens?

Returning his attention to my clit, his left-hand finger slides back and forth through my folds, penetrating me a little deeper with each pass until his finger finds the rough spot at the front of my pussy.

“Come for me,” Hudson growls, deciding for me.

I relax into him, melting as he strokes me thoroughly and demandingly. I ride his face and hand unrepentantly, opening up to him, surrendering everything until I drench his beard and palm, and he screams my name, body quaking.

### Chapter Nine

#### HUDSON

Smiling like I won the lottery, I lean forward groaning, “Taste what a naughty girl you are.” My lips capture hers, my beard and tongue still wet with her musky flavor. “You squirted for me, Hadleigh. Fuck, I love it.”

“I what?” she asks, eyes rounding.

“You covered me in your cum. I love it,” I say, pulling back to admire her heart-shaped face with her adorable cleft chin and perfectly chiseled pink lips, so plump and swollen from my kisses.

The blonde shakes her head, caught on the edge of a sob. “I didn’t know sex could be like this, so overwhelming, so all-encompassing.” She covers her face with her hands.

“What’s wrong, Hot Stuff?” I ask, stroking her hair.

Peeking between her fingers, Hadleigh says, “You make me feel completely out of control. Like I can’t stop my body.”

“Good,” I say, leaning down to meet her brown-sugar eyes. “That’s how it’s supposed to be because my body belongs to you now, and yours belongs to me. Believe me, you’ll make me feel just as out of control. But I’ll surrender to you, Hadleigh, because I have to. It’s the only way to be happy.”

Her brows knit. “The only way to be happy ... What do you mean?”

I swallow hard, my breath coming faster. Am I really about to admit this to her? Old enough to know the only real regrets come from missed opportunities, I level my gaze on her.

Stroking her jawline gently, I say, “From the moment I saw you walking through the parking lot of my tattoo parlor, I knew you were mine. I could feel it to the depths of my soul. I don’t know how to explain it, and I don’t know if you’ll ever feel the same way, but yeah.

I have no choice with you. You own me, body and soul. ”

Her eyes sparkle with emotion. She whispers, “It’s the same for me. I need you in places so deep I don’t even know how to describe them.”

“Thank God,” I whisper, capturing her lips. The world could crumble around us, and I couldn’t care less, sucked into this moment with this woman.

“I mean, I told you I want you to breed me. What in the hell is wrong with me?” she says shakily.

“That was the single, hottest fucking confession I’ve ever heard, Hadleigh. You have no idea what those words from your sexy as fuck mouth did to my body. While we’re on the subject of self-control, you want the truth?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

She nods, dropping her hands and staring at me.

“Your fucking pussy in my mouth, your body coming undone around my fingers and my tongue, your breeding confession turning and twisting in my mind, made me come in my goddamn pants. I haven’t done shit like that since high school.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Fuck,” she sighs raggedly. “You out of control for me? It’s so damn hot.”

“You’ve got your wish.” My voice sounds raw as I lay myself before her, vulnerable and unguarded.

Seizing her hips, I slide her wet pussy tightly against my rock-hard ridge, desperate to claim her.

“This has never happened before to me, Hadleigh. Ever. All I know is I need to protect you and make you happy with every cell in my body, every part of my being for the rest of my life. That’s why I followed you into the river. ”

Her hand comes up, stroking my beard. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think a man like you exists ... at least, not for a girl like me.”

“You were made for me.” I rest my forehead on hers, savoring her smell, the feel of her warm flesh on mine, her breath against my cheek.

My big hands massage and squeeze her hips, as need mounts, and my cock begs for her.

“What do you need from me? Food, wine, a massage? A seat on my face? I’m down for whatever makes you feel amazing. ”

“Your cock, Hudson. I need all of you.”

I run a hand over my face, rod straining against my jeans and balls tingling. “Are you

sure, Hot Stuff. It's going to be rough the first time."

"I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

"And this isn't the adrenaline from your rescue? Or some kind of misplaced gratefulness?" I ask firmly.

"No, I don't owe you anything. But I want you desperately. Please."

I straighten, feeling torn inside. As much as I yearn to sink into her slick cunt, another part of me longs to leave things on a high note with her pussy juices in my beard and the orgasm I gave her foremost in her mind.

"Please, Hudson," she says, leaning forward and rubbing her palm hard against my rock-hard fly.

The last thing I want to see is her in pain. But I don't want to say "no" to her, either. Grabbing her around the waist, I lift her into my arms, carrying her towards the fireplace. Her hands cling to my neck, her legs wrapped teasingly around my waist.

Setting her down gently on the couch, I pile blankets and big pillows on the ground, making a cozy spot for us in front of the hearth. The fire crackles, spilling golden light over the mound of pillows and fake fur blankets.

"Get comfortable, Hot Stuff. I'll be right back."

I beeline for the door, leaving my boots and socks there and slipping out of my clothes. I wash my cock under the kitchen sink, toweling it dry. Then, I uncork the wine bottle and find a big tub of coconut oil in the pantry, scooping out a few globs with a tablespoon into a bowl.

Padding into the living room with the booze and the bowl of oil, my breath catches in my throat as I see Hadleigh lying naked with one arm and hand covering her nipples and the other obscuring her pussy.

She looks like a Renaissance painting of Venus.

Alluring curves, ivory skin, and tantalizing fingers.

I kneel down next to her, breathing hard. “Finger yourself for me, Hadleigh,” I say through clenched teeth.

“What?” she asks, doe eyes searching my face.

“Spread your legs and finger yourself for me. I need to see you please yourself.”

“But didn’t you already?”

“Yeah,” I sigh, taking a tug from the wine bottle before handing it to her. “Please, Hot Stuff. Be my naughty girl.”

She swallows a couple of mouthfuls of wine, face burning as she tentatively spreads her legs. I sigh, devouring the sight of her swollen, arousal-shiny pussy.

“You know, a woman can orgasm multiple times when having sex, Hadleigh. I want you to be greedy for that kind of pleasure.”

Her face looks self-conscious as she slides her finger through her juicy folds, and I exhale, neck-deep in longing. Her other hand drops from her tits, holding her pussy lips open as she swipes her finger through her slick folds and then circles her clit.

“Fuck, yeah,” I say, taking another swig of the wine and fisting my cock as I watch.

Her eyes go to my dick, and she stares long and hard, unblinking. “Do you like it?”

“Yes, Hudson. You’re huge, but how are you going to fit?”

“There’s definitely a size difference,” I admit, eyeing her narrow channel, barely able to take one of her dainty cream-slick fingers. “But we’ll work on it together until I’m your new favorite plaything.” I chuckle, half-teasing as her eyes continue to devour my rod and piercing.

Crawling forward, I hover over her sexy body, bathed in the glow of the firelight, the smell of her musky arousal hanging in the air as I seize one of her nipples in my mouth, twirling and twisting it with my tongue as the head of my cock teases her skin.

“Oh,” she exclaims, melting into the blankets and pillows as I suck and lap her, swallowing and licking her ivory flesh and rose-tipped nipples.

“One of these days, when your belly’s full of my seed, I’m going to suck milk from these tits,” I promise, feeling her shudder beneath me. This girl’s as fucked as I am. I can’t get enough of it.

“Yes, Hudson. God, that turns me on,” she says as I glance down at her honeyed finger, seeing the proof in her words.

I grab her hand, licking her finger clean. “My new favorite flavor.”

Another taste of her has my insides in knots. No longer able to hold back, I work myself through it mentally. I need to be gentle and slow, despite embodying the kind of desire that has me bouncing off the walls.

Covering my hand in the coconut oil, already softening and melting thanks to the heat



of the fire, I slide my middle finger into her.

Locking eyes, I watch her devolve into pure lust as I melt into her drenched channel.

Adding my ring finger, I hesitate as she winces, wondering how the fuck we're going to make this work.

But I have to remind myself that nature has this shit figured out.

All I need to do is get her primed and go as far as she wants, ready to stop or hold back when it becomes too much.

Sliding my ring finger more deeply into her, she writhes beneath me, breath catching in her throat. "Relax," I command, stroking her G-spot gently but relentlessly until I feel her pussy grow slicker and wetter, her channel fluttering around me.

"If it's too much, tell me, and I'll stop Hadleigh."

She shakes her head, eyes rolling back in her head. "Hudson, I need you so much. Please give me all of you."

Removing my fingers reluctantly, I slather my cock in some of the coconut oil.

Then, I swipe the head along her folds, covering myself in her honey.

Running the top of my apadravya piercing over her swollen clit, she whimpers and shivers, thighs tensing.

That's my girl, begging me with every part of her body to claim her.

I penetrate her slowly, marveling at how fucking tight she is. Too tight for either of

our pleasures. She inhales sharply as the knobs on either side of my barbell slide into her juicy folds.

“Hudson,” she exclaims, eyes wide.

“We don’t have to go all the way tonight,” I remind.

But the blonde’s eyes shine with determination.

“I want you. All of you,” she says, gripping my ass with her dainty hands and pulling me a little deeper.

We fight for every fucking inch, her eyes watering as I take her nipple in my mouth, hands stroking and caressing her, covering her body in pleasure.

Sliding my hand between us, I swipe through her honey and the coconut oil, getting my thumb juicy.

I circle her nub, teasing and tantalizing it, stroking back and forth, up and down, and then circles clockwise and counterclockwise until she gasps for air.

Her hot pussy clenches me even harder. With each pass of my hips, I thrust a little deeper, feeling her open up as she screams and cries out.

Each time I pull back to assess her face and how she’s doing, she grips my ass tighter, nails digging into my flesh and driving me deeper.

“You okay?” I whisper, sucking her earlobe into my mouth, nibbling and licking it as she pulses and spasms beneath me.

“I’m about to come again,” she hisses, pelvis driving towards me. This is the moment

I'm looking for. I know it, ready to act quickly and decisively if that's what she still wants.

Admiring her face for one breathless moment, stuck between pleasure and drive, I stroke her jawline, kissing the cleft in her chin and asking, "Do you still want all of me? It doesn't have to be right now. And we don't have to fuck around with getting pregnant unless you're ready."

"Yes, Hudson. I want you so much ... and everything that comes with you."

I nod, working her pearl harder, digging deeper into her tight channel as it swells and spasms around me.

She orgasms again, drenching my cock and balls as I grab her hips, thrusting into her decisively, taking her hymen and making space for my cock so that the next time, I can replace her pain with unadulterated bliss.

She wraps her legs around my waist, opening up some more. Tough as nails, brave as fuck, driving me deeper until I come so hard, my head spins.

"Hadleigh!" I scream as my hot release fills her in waves. I shudder over her, riding hot gushes of pleasure until I can no longer tell where she ends and I begin. We feel like one flesh, one soul, and two beating hearts.

"Fuck," I moan, collapsing on top of her, mindful I'm not crushing her but relaxing my flesh into hers. "I'm pretty damn sure we just made a baby." My big, rough hand caresses her round belly, fast-forwarding to all the joy in our future.

She feathers my face in kisses, stroking my beard sensually. "You have no idea how much I love it when you talk that way," she says. "You whispering about filling my pussy with your cum, breeding me, and sucking milk from my tits ... God, the words

alone could make me come.”

My fingers intertwine with hers, making love to her hand as the firelight warms and flickers over our naked skin. I growl, “Good because I want to breed and milk the shit out of you. I can’t tell you what it does to my cock just thinking about it.”

She giggles as I move my rod inside her. “I felt that.” She strokes my beard, searching my eyes. “I was so afraid you were going to be turned off when I started talking about babies,” Hadleigh confesses, cheeks glowing. “Most men hate talk like that, fearing they’ll get trapped. Tied down.”

“I want you to tie me down, Hot Stuff,” I say, grabbing her tit and teasing my thumb over it.

“More than any fucking thing because you—from your dirty mouth and your shaved pussy to your musky flavor, thick thighs, big tits, round ass, and even the sound of your voice—are my fucking kink, my ultimate wet dream.”

Hadleigh smiles softly, tilting her head up to kiss me.

### Chapter Ten

#### HADLEIGH

Hudson's voice sounds raw as he adds, "I have literally done nothing in my sorry-ass life to deserve a woman like you. But I swear I'll make up for it, prove I'm worthy of you and able to give you the life you deserve."

"I don't believe that for one minute," I say in low, sexy tones, running my fingertips through his beard, marveling at how coarse, yet soft, the hair is.

"Not only did you risk your life countless times today to save me, but you were a Marine who sacrificed for our country. It's obvious you're as brave as they come."

"Yeah, but after the service, I was a fucking mess. I'm a wounded warrior, though it's not obvious.

I fucked up my back good in the service," he admits, twisting and guiding my hand to run my fingertips over the rough ridges from scars otherwise concealed by a back full of ink.

His cock slides out of me at the motion, and I already miss it, having grown accustomed to what felt like an impossible stretch less than a half hour ago.

"Do you still have back troubles? Or did the surgery help?"

"Surgeries," he corrects. "They helped a lot, honestly. I'm pretty fucking good now.

Though a bit less flexible in my lower back. But before the surgeries, I could've never handled all that fucking forest parcours you and I did together today."

"Is that what we're calling it?" I giggle, unable to wrap my mind around the past seven hours.

He rests his hand on my hip, stroking my flesh with his thumb, and setting my body on fire all over again. The chemistry between us feels like spontaneous combustion. I expect our flesh to start smoking.

He adds, "After the surgeries, I got addicted to pain meds and sleeping pills. I was a serious mess there for a while. If it weren't for buddies like Roscoe Vaughn, who believed in me even when there was nothing to believe in, who knows what would've happened to me.

He's an Army Ranger who created a community for veterans and wounded warriors.

We each receive fifty acres and assistance from the community, building a cabin and supporting one another, with our buy-in.

So, that's why I've given your brother more chances than he deserves.

Because I'm well aware that without faith from others, I wouldn't be here. "

I eye him gravely, leaning forward to kiss him. In a trembling voice, I say, "Thank God, you're here, Hudson. Not only did you save my life, but I can't imagine living without you, though everything's happening so fast I can't make sense of it all."

"I've quit trying, Hot Stuff," he replies with a lopsided grin. "Instead, I'm enjoying this magical ride and whatever else the Universe wants to bless us with. Let's hope we're done with the fucking rollercoaster and adrenaline rushes, though."

We lie tangled in front of the fire, enjoying the feel of each other and the crackle of the logs. Suddenly, Hudson stirs, and I frown, not ready to move yet.

“We have to clean you up, so you don’t get a bladder infection. You’d kick my ass for that. I may still have a lot to learn about you, but I know you’re a firecracker. Stay here. I’ll be back.”

He returns with a warm washcloth, gently washing me, though I protest at first, not wanting to gross him out if there’s blood.

“Nothing about you could gross me out, Hadleigh. Besides, I’m the one who wrecked your pussy.”

“In a very good way,” I add, opening my arms and welcoming him back into them after he throws the washcloth in the washing machine along with our wet garments.

“We’re going to need clothes at some point,” he says, running his pointer finger along my jawline and snuggling into me. “Now, I want to know everything about you, Hadleigh,” he says, wrapping his big, muscular body around me and nuzzling my neck, his hot breath slowing as he relaxes into me.

My head spins. Where to start? “Well, you know I’m a SoCal longboarder ...”

“How good a longboarder?”

“Decent. I can paddle out and catch waves with the best of them, though I prefer surfing Florida’s Emerald Coast or the Atlantic. As you know, the Pacific’s cold and tough with Great white sharks.”

“Bull sharks off Florida, and Great whites, too. Though the water’s the right temperature,” he grumbles.

“And how good a surfer are you?”

“I could give you a run for your money, I’d like to think. Though we won’t know for sure until we go out together. I’ve surfed longboards, too. But they’re not my fave.”

“Honestly, I don’t know if I would’ve stuck with longboards.

Obviously, Dad surfed shortboards at Mavericks.

But in San Diego, we used the longboards, and I still own the last one my dad bought me.

” My voice catches, and Hudson pulls me closer, pressing his lips reassuringly to the nape of my neck.

“With everything that happened, I refuse to use anything else.”

“I get it,” he says, nodding. “Though for me, it was my uncle that I was close to, growing up. My mom was too busy slumming around with a new guy every week, it seemed. I got fed up, early, dealing with all the douchebags trying to be my ready-made stepdad. So, Rick offered to take me in, and Mom was only too willing to let me go. She didn’t want all the responsibility of a kid anyway. ”

“And is your Uncle Rick still alive?” I ask, tracing my fingertips up and down the swirling lines of the tattoos on his angular, hard shoulder.

“Yep, still tattooing in Kansas. I don’t know what it is about that place that holds him. He’s an old Harley guy, a member of his local VFA that moonlights as an old man’s motorcycle club. You know the type, I’m sure, from living in South Dakota.”

“It’s all about Sturgis,” I chuckle. “So, are you a big motorcycle guy?”



Hudson shrugs. “My Harley’s fun and all, but I like my Chevy dually just as much. I’m not in an MC or anything because I can’t stand the drama. But I do like taking long drives and seeing the country from the back of a bike.”

“It sounds fun,” I say, stretching and cuddling into him some more. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue? And yours?”

“Green. Like your eyes.”

“Talk about cheesy pickup lines,” he mutters, kissing my cheek and jawline, his hands roving over me and sending little sizzles along my naked flesh.

“It’s true,” I counter. “And honestly, I’m a little upset brown isn’t your favorite color like my eyes.”

“Well, it is my favorite eye color,” he replies with a lopsided grin.

I raise my head, arching a skeptical eyebrow.

“At least, now it is. What’s your favorite kind of food?”

“Thai. And yours?”

“Ribbs. I’m a ribs man.”

“I make the best Thai ribs, no freaking joke.”

“No, you don’t,” Hudson says, resting his chin on my shoulder.

“I do. I swear.”

“See,” he says, running his rough thumb over my nipple, and drawing a sigh of pleasure from me. “You were made for me. It’s obvious.”

“Wait until you try the ribs,” I tease.

“How about I try your tits instead?” he growls, stretching until I feel the wet heat of his mouth wrapped around me.

“Mmm,” I moan, dazed with pleasure as his fingers find my pussy, sliding back and forth along the length of my folds. “God, your fingers, Hudson.”

“Only my fingers?” he questions, arching a wicked eyebrow.

“Your tongue, your cock, your everything,” I sigh, wrapping my dainty fingers around his thick, hard rod.

“Your favorite movie?” he grunts as I fist his cock, sliding my hand back and forth.

“Favorite movie?” I giggle. “Is that really the conversation for this moment?”

He moans as my hand slides over his rod again. “Use some of the coconut oil,” he says, and I take his suggestion, loving the way pleasure seizes his features as my hand slides back and forth. “I’m trying to prove this relationship is about more than sex,” he adds breathlessly.

“What was the question again?” I whimper, hips inching towards his expert fingers.

“Favorite movie?”

“Twister,” I say truthfully and wickedly as I twist my hand back and forth, slipping up and down his thick length.

He sighs darkly, fighting for control. “Really?”

“Really. And for you?”

“The Magnificent Seven.”

“New or old?”

“Both.” His rod is like a miracle, growing harder, hotter, and thicker at each stroke. I could spend hours playing with my new favorite toy.

“What do you want from me?” I ask seductively, reversing the tables on my tatted lover.

“Every fucking ounce of pleasure I can squeeze out of you,” he replies thickly, voice straining as I draw him closer.

“I want the same from you,” I whisper, kissing his mouth.

“Ride me, then,” he begs. “I would give pretty much anything, maybe even my fucking life, to see you bobbing on my cock, your tits bouncing in the air.”

“I won’t settle for less than your life,” I tease as he turns so I can slide out from under him. He lies back, fingers still playing with my pussy.

“Good because I’m not giving any less when it comes to you. I’d say to use the lube again, Hadleigh. But fuck, your pussy’s drenched and dripping for me.”

“Yes.” I straddle him, resting my hands on his chest as I lean back to take him. His rod’s so hard and straight he easily slides in, pain diminished and replaced with sloppy, messy satisfaction.

He slurps me happily off his fingers, eyes locking with mine. “You’re still a tight fit, Hot Stuff. But I hope this time you can appreciate my piercing,” he says naughtily, grabbing my hips and angling them so his barbell grazes my G-spot.

“Fuck,” I moan, body pure ecstasy as I repeat the move, lower abs tightening and pussy gripping him.

Hudson smiles a knowing smile. “Use my cock to pleasure yourself,” he urges. “I want to watch you come unglued on top of me.”

“I can do that,” I murmur, focusing on the feel of his pierced head stroking the bundle of nerves and sending me floating towards heaven.

Raising his hand, he spits on it, making my pussy clench tighter. Finding my pearl, he stimulates and plays with me, edging me closer to bliss with each swipe and pass.

“I want to be the man you come to for all your pleasuring, Hadleigh. I want to fulfill every one of your dirty little fantasies. Even the ones you don’t know you have yet.”

“The ones I don’t know I have?” I whisper, cheeks warming.

“Do you read romances? I know a lot of women are into those.”

“You mean smutty books?”

“Sexy ones. Whatever you call them. The ones that let you explore your sexuality and your deepest, darkest desires.”

“But don’t you find that weird?” I ask, a little surprised.

“I don’t find anything weird that brings you pleasure. I’m your lover now, completely committed to making you come again and again. My only ground rule is you and me. Nobody else. Got it?”

I slide up and down his hard rod, playing with the angle and depth as my tits bounce. “Good thing because I could go murderess if another bitch came around you.”

He chuckles, leaning up to pinch and lick my nipples. “Naughty girl. You want me all to yourself. I’m going to ride you hard then. Be forewarned.”

“Yes,” I scream as he thrusts deeper, slapping my ass against his hips. “I can take everything you have to give. I want all of you.”

“On all fours, then, Hadleigh,” he orders, catching me by surprise. “Are you okay with having your ass smacked?”

I worry my bottom lip. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s give it a try, then. If you don’t like it, I’ll stop.”

“And?”

“And?”

“And I get to smack you back?” I ask, filling in what seems obvious.

“Of course,” he chuckles. “Smack me, bite me, claw me. Whatever you need to do to show the world I belong to you.”

I scramble off his lap onto my hands and knees, looking over my shoulder as he comes up behind me, biting my ass cheek teasingly before smacking me.

“That okay?” he asks.

“Fuck. Yes.” I unravel a little at the pleasurable sting.

“Good,” he groans, seizing my hips and eating me out from behind. The move catches me so off guard, all I can do is surrender. Let him demand my pleasure as he fucks me with his fingers and his tongue, lapping and licking me mercilessly.

Transformed into an animal, all feeling and no thought, I grind into his face as he praises, “Good girl. Fuck, yeah, Hadleigh. Just how I want you. Demanding your pleasure.” I moan and scream, orgasming hard against his face, riding his beard, and lost in the stroke of his hand over my clit.

He smacks my ass again, and I melt. Grabbing my hips, he slowly sinks into me, riding me deeper now, frenzied. Pulling out all the way so that I feel him from tip to balls, showing me just how pleasurable and massive he is.

“Your pussy is perfection, Hadleigh. You have no idea how far it pushes me over the edge. So wet and silky. And the way you flutter and suck me in is every-fucking-thing, like you can’t get enough of me.”

“I can’t,” I pant, crumbling around him again. The rapture is almost too much, but I need him to come inside me more than I need to breathe.

His hand finds my tits, alternating rubbing and twisting my nipples until I can’t take anymore, so sensitive and awakened. I’m a throbbing ball of nerves, pleasure unwound around his massive cock.

“Hudson,” I scream, pushing back into him as I come so hard my lower ab muscles jump. My elbows nearly fail me, my arms shaking as hard as my body.

He thrusts into me, flesh smacking and screaming something unintelligible as he floods me with hot waves of cum. I suck in every bit of the bliss he bestows. Waiting to give my virginity to this man is the best decision I’ve ever made.

### Chapter Eleven

#### HUDSON

Breaking glass. Crashing wood. I awaken with a jump. Chaos fills the cabin, the kind of clumsy chaos that only comes from one type of visitor.

“Motherfucker!” I scream, jumping to my feet, eyes narrowing. “Get out of here. Now!”

Hadleigh gasps, covering herself with one of the blankets, still reclining on the floor in front of the fireplace.

“Go!” I holler, sprinting for the lights. I flip the switch, and Hadleigh lets out a bloodcurdling scream.

A fat bear sticks halfway through the broken window, clumsily trying to break and enter and failing miserably. It would almost be cute if my bugout bag and handgun weren’t on the other side of the room. I yell again, but he doesn’t look remotely phased by the noise or the lights.

His eyes are on the leftover stew and brown bread still poised on the table. The midnight snack we devoured after hours spent consuming each other. I should’ve known better than to leave it out, especially with the broken window.

“What do we do?” Hadleigh asks, standing next to me.



“Get in the bedroom. Lock yourself in,” I order, weighing my odds of reaching my bugout bag before he gets me. If I can get off one shot, from the handgun stowed in my pack, it should be enough to deter the bastard.

“No, Hudson,” she says, shaking her head. “I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

“Woman—”

“Don’t you woman me. We face this together, like we did the river, the gorge, and the storm.”

Not ready to fight with her, I scream at the bear. “Get the fuck out of here!”

“Pots and pans?” Hadleigh asks, eyes darting towards the kitchen. It’s closer to the struggling bear than I want either of us to get. But the percussive sounds might work.

I lunge forward, grabbing a couple she set out earlier when rifling through the cabinets.

We beat and bang on them, hollering and raising a ruckus.

The combined metallic sounds finally get his attention.

The large ursine backs out of the opening, scraping down the side of the outer cabin wall with his long claws.

Hadleigh covers her mouth, shaking from head to toe. “Oh my God,” she whimpers, hugging herself.

“The smell of the food,” I explain. “I should’ve known better. We’re in the thick of bear country, both black and grizzly. They will always come looking for food up

here.”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her tightly against me.

She looks up at me, her body shaking. “Was that a black or a grizzly bear?”

I shake my head. “Hard to tell with only half his body through. Grizzlies tend to be bigger with a hump along their shoulder. They’re often a lighter color, though not always.

I didn’t see enough of that one to know for sure, but I’m guessing black bear as they’re less timid about getting into people’s shit. ”

“As fun as this wildlife adventure has been,” Hadleigh says, still trembling. “I’m ready for a nice, hefty dose of civilization. Please tell me you live in Alpha Ridge Creek.”

I open my mouth to answer, but she cuts me off.

“No, that’s right. You said you live in a cabin on fifty acres. God, Hudson, I don’t know if I want to live in a place that remote.”

“If it makes you feel any better, my cabin isn’t getting ransacked by bears at night. Do I need to be careful about trash and stuff like that? Yes, but you’d have to deal with the same shit in Pensacola, Florida, Lake Tahoe, Yosemite, countless places across the U.S.”

“Yeah,” she says, sighing slowly. She runs a hand over her face, still catching her breath. “That scared the shit out of me.”

“Me, too, Hot Stuff. Although I have to say it was sexy as fuck when you wouldn’t

let me make my stand against the bear alone.”

“Hell, no,” she says, stroking my beard. “You’re mine now. That means I’m the only one who gets to eat you, and I won’t share.”

“Eat me,” I say flirtatiously. “I like the sound of that.”

Her cheeks warm as she licks her bottom lip.

“That said, I’m on guard for the rest of the night,” I say, pointing towards the broken window. “So, no distractions. We’ve really fucked up this cabin, haven’t we? I feel bad for whoever owns it.”

“Do you think someone owns it at all?” Hadleigh asks, eyeing it incredulously. “The cans alone indicate it’s been a while since anyone was up here.”

I shrug. “That’s what the sheriff’s department said. Guess we’ll see when the repair bills start showing up.”

“You want some hot cocoa?” Hadleigh asks, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders and heading for the pantry.

“Sure.” I run my hand through my hair, still trying to wrap my head around this insane day and night. “I’m going to put our clothes in the dryer.”

We spend the rest of the night keeping watch, sipping cocoa, and talking about every possible subject, from our favorite books and writers to our top ten cities, high school memories, beloved bands, and dreams for the future. The level of compatibility makes me want to pinch myself.

It’s fucking insane how right Hadleigh is for me, and I never would’ve met her if it

wasn't for her dumbass brother ... though both of us could've done without the criminal friends who drove her off the cliff.

Hadleigh dozes, pressed against my chest. But I can't sleep, even if I wanted to. The bear turned the switch, reverting me to my old service days and keeping watch.

As the first creeping light of dawn sweeps across the forest floor, my ears catch the distant howl of wolves, the sound deep and melodious. Hadleigh stirs in my arms, her fingertips playing with the hair on my chest.

"It's a beautiful sound from here," she observes. "Though I wouldn't want to be out there with them." Hadleigh shivers in my arms.

I thank our lucky stars for the advent of this cabin, though it's far from bear-proof, because Hadleigh's got a point. It would feel awfully eerie outside, beneath a veil of stars, listening to those lonely canine calls.

"We've talked about so much tonight, Hadleigh. But apart from bear visits, what are your thoughts on Northern Idaho? I wouldn't be surprised if you never want to set foot in this state again after all you've been through."

She snuggles closer, kissing my chest. "I could say the same about you, you know."

"Yeah, but Idaho's my home now. Despite everything."

Her face looks conflicted for a moment, brows knitting in thought. But then her expression relaxes, and she smiles. It's like the sun peeking out from behind dark storm clouds after the rain. "All I know is home no longer feels like a place to me, Hudson. It feels like you."

I exhale the breath I've been holding, relaxing my shoulders. "Thank God, because

I'm willing to negotiate locations with you. But I don't want to do long distance. I crave you to the marrow of my bones. Being apart would feel excruciating."

"Agreed. I don't ever want to spend even one night away from you. Does that make me co-dependent or needy?"

He chuckles. "I want you to be needy as fuck when it comes to me. Like I said before, addicted to me."

"Addicted to you?" she laughs.

"Don't worry. A healthy addiction that comes with plenty of calories burned, endless pleasure, and a man who'll do anything to make you scream his name and claw his back."

She admits contentedly. "I have sore muscles in places I didn't even know I had muscles, thanks to you."

"You're welcome, Hot Stuff," I say, kissing her neck.

We watch the sunrise, its golden light shrouding the forest. Then, we take a hot, steaming shower together, sinking one last time into each other's flesh before dressing.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee fills the cabin as we prepare for what I know is coming anytime now.

The distant buzz of an engine and the arrival of search and rescue.

"Just like clockwork," I say, greeting a tired-looking volunteer wearing the telltale khaki pants and orange jacket with reflective stripes.

“I’m Roger.”

“Hudson, and this is my girl, Hadleigh.”

Roger nods. “Long night, man. How did you two do?” He gladly takes the cup of coffee I hand him.

“You wouldn’t believe it if I told you,” I say, shaking my head.

“Fortunately, you have a witness,” Hadleigh chuckles.

“And a partner in crime,” I add. “While we’re on that subject, the cabin’s a little trashed. Hadleigh and I have been tidying things up, washing blankets and cleaning. But a neighborhood bear decided to pay us a visit in the middle of the night.”

Roger eyes the window, his jaw dropping. “Whoa, did he break the window?”

“No,” Hadleigh pipes up. “That was me.”

I add, “Couldn’t find a key, and that weather last night was shitballs, as you know.

But, yeah, I’m going to owe the owner a new window, a new lock for his generator, and miscellaneous other things, including a bottle of Cab, a can of brown bread, a can of stew, some hot cocoa, and new siding panels. ”

Roger raises his eyebrows.

“The bear scraped the panels with his claws.”

The search and rescue officer shakes his head, resting his hands on his hips. “We’ll get it sorted. Owner’s a local. Old timer who doesn’t use the place much anymore.

So, I doubt it'll be a problem."

"I would like to thank him and make things right. After all, I can't begin to tell you how much this cabin meant to Hadleigh and me."

"That's right," she says, smiling and snuggling against me as I wrap my arm around her.

"So, I'm taking you back to the Sheriff's Department to fill out reports?" Roger asks.

"We need to stop by the hospital first," I say, nodding at Hadleigh. "This one could use stitches and a round of antibiotics."

"Sure thing," the drowsy search and rescue officer says as we head outside, locking up the cabin the best we can. "I'll stop back by later and board up the window, make sure there's nothing too tempting for a return visit from Smoky."

"I can lend a hand if you need it," I offer.

Roger shakes his head. "Sounds like you've got a girl to keep company at the ER, and then I'd imagine you both could use a little R&R. I know I could."

On the way back, Roger fills us in on the crazy flash flooding that ripped down the gorge and all the people who had to be rescued in and around Alpha Ridge Creek. Even the ice rink flooded, which is unheard of around here.

"Do you think the flooding could've affected your cabin?" Hadleigh asks, holding my hand in the backseat of Roger's four-seater Polaris.

"No, my cabin's a couple thousand feet above this location. But the tattoo shop is probably a mess."

“Tattoo shop. My car’s still there, and I still have to talk to Andy. God!” Hadleigh says, her voice quivering. “You know as much as the bear scared me, I’d almost take that over having to deal with my brother.”

“Knowing him, Hadleigh, he’s already skipped town.”

“You’re probably right.” She frowns.

“The first sign of cops and questioning? Yeah, I’d bet money he’s long gone.”

“What do I tell Mom?” she asks.

“The truth.”

“I know, but?—”

“There are no buts for him, and he’s out of chances.

If I see him again, I’m turning him in to the sheriff’s department.

Those associates of his abducted and nearly killed you, Hadleigh.

Family or not, I won’t let him or anyone else near you who could hurt you.

You’re my everything, and nothing’s going to change that. ”

“I guess I should start looking for a job up here,” Hadleigh smiles. “Though I won’t be set on your cabin until I see it in person and get a feel for how wild it really is.”

“Whatever you need to feel comfortable with me. Oh, and I know of a tattoo parlor that could use a manager who actually knows what the fuck she’s doing,” I add.



She smiles.

“As for my cabin and community? I think you’ll love it,” I say, bringing her hand to my mouth and kissing her fingertips one by one.

Already falling back under the hypnotic need for my blonde beauty.

“Roscoe’s married to a girl about your age, Ginger.

She’s an elementary school teacher, and Bodie and Fawn recently joined our community from a couple of mountains over.

Fawn’s about your age, too. She’s pretty shy, but once she gets to know you, she warms up. ”

Hadleigh watches me kiss her fingers, a naughty look filling her eyes. Leaning in, she whispers in my ear, “Do I really have to go to the hospital? I’m not sure I can wait that long for ... you know .”

I growl deep in my chest, running my fingers into her silky, long, golden locks. “The longer you wait, the longer I’m going to spend on teasing and pleasing you. I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that.” She palms my cheeks, staring into my eyes. “It may not have been love at first sight for me, but it was pretty damn close.”

“You can say that all you want, Hot Stuff,” I tease. “But it took some pretty impressive maneuvers on my part to keep you entertained on our first date.”

“You have a point.”

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her tightly against me. “You think you can be happy so far from SoCal and surfing?”

She nods. “I probably go surfing twice a year. You know, because ‘life,’ and I’ve always had trouble finding the right surfing partner?—”

“Until now.”

She beams at me.

I add, “I can hang ten with the best of them. But nothing too big or scary. You’re more important to me than the adrenaline from any wave.” Her eyes warm, and her face relaxes. After everything she’s been through, she needs to hear this.

Hadleigh snickers, arching an eyebrow. “Hang ten? I’ll have to see that to believe it.”

“Is that a challenge, Hot Stuff?”

“You bet your ass it is, hortboarder.”

HADLEIGH

ONE MONTH LATER

“Shop is cleaned, and books are closed out for the day. I’ve got everyone scheduled for the rest of the week. Now, what do you say we head home?” I ask seductively, eyeing my gorgeous tattooed mountain man.

“Oh, yeah?” Hudson grumbles, closing the distance between us and wrapping his arms around me. His large hands go to my hips, squeezing and grinding me against him.

“Is that a ‘yes?’” I tease, licking my bottom lip slowly and watching it undo him. His eyes dilate, and he growls deep in his throat, leaning in for a kiss.

“First, I need help with that tattoo I mentioned earlier,” he murmurs, grabbing my hand and turning down the hallway, dragging me along behind.

“Help with a tattoo?” I scrunch my face. He mentioned this hours ago, when I was distracted with customers and some of the artists working for him. I thought I heard him wrong, but now I shake my head mystified.

Hudson always surprises or teases me in some way. Sometimes, it’s a practical joke, like jump scaring me, or setting up the coyote call in the bathroom and letting it howl when least expected.

Of course, there are also the sweet surprises, like the time he covered my car in Post-

its that, when put together and decoded, clued me in on a concert he's taking me to at the Vegas Sphere to see My Chemical Romance.

Or when he left two tickets to Hawaii inside the bathing suit drawer of my dresser, letting me know we're going on a surfing vacation this fall.

But helping him with a tattoo? I can't imagine what he's thinking. "I'm not like my silly brother," I grumble, frowning. "Which means I absolutely don't want to learn how to tattoo. Especially not you."

I replace "dumbass" with "silly," reminding myself I shouldn't talk so disparagingly about Andy anymore.

After all, he's been in rehab for a month now, scared sober when he saw me abducted by his associates.

Their bodies were both recovered after the flash flood, along with the crushed, waterlogged SUV.

My brother's trying to turn his life around and do better. And while I'm not holding my breath, having been through this with him too many times to count, I also want to be supportive and help him succeed.

"Especially not me?" Hudson questions, wheeling back around. "Now, you're breaking my heart, Hadleigh. Are there other men you want to tattoo?" The wicked glint in his eyes confirms he's up to something.

"You are incorrigible," I scold, swatting playfully at his shoulder.

"I can't reach it. So, I need you to finish it for me."

"Finish a tattoo for you? I can barely write legibly, and you know how awful I am at

drawing. No way.”

“Well, can’t you at least manage a straight line or a circle?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I am absolutely not using a tattoo gun on you.”

“But you’ve made me use it on you, Cub,” he counters, his hand sliding beneath the denim knee-length skirt I wear. His fingers run playfully over the bear he tattooed on my upper thigh to commemorate the craziest first and last date of my entire life and my new nickname.

“Not fair,” I moan, hungry for his hands, tongue, and cock. “It’s been a long day, Boss Daddy. I need you buried balls-deep, railing me and making me forget my own name.”

“Fuck,” he whispers, nostrils dilating and lips parting hungrily. “You know what I want, Hot Stuff?”

“What?” I pant.

“I want ... no, I need, like I need air to breathe, your pussy on my tongue. Right now. But first”—he levels his gaze on me—“I require your steady hand.”

I shake my head.

“Please, Cub.”

“Oh, alright, I know you’re teasing me. Show me whatever it is you’re trying to practical joke me into.”

“A new tattoo,” he says, unbuttoning his shirt and pointing. “I need you to finish it.”

My hands go to my mouth, tears filling my eyes as I gasp. I can't believe my eyes:

Hadleigh Marie Bardot, do you believe in love at first sight? The kind that never fails, never lets you down, and never hesitates? If so, will you marry me?

Yes or No

His eyes redden as he appraises my reaction, big splashy tears flowing over my eyelashes. "Yes, Hudson, with every part of my being, yes!"

He pulls me into his arms, lips devouring mine passionately. "Good," he says between kisses. "Because I haven't been able to imagine living without you since before I even knew what living with you was like. From the moment I laid eyes on you through the tattoo parlor window. "

"You've never changed your story," I laugh breathlessly. "Always maintained it was love at first sight."

"And I will until the day I die, Cub. Maybe I don't know how to explain it. But it's not every day a man flings himself off a cliff for the girl of his dreams."

"No, it's not," I whisper, kissing him tenderly, my heart overflowing with love.

"I think we can both agree I went outside of my comfort zone for you?—"

"Oh, no, Boss Daddy, I know where you're headed with this, and absolutely not. I won't fuck up your skin or that beautiful tattoo."

His emerald eyes plead with me. I know exactly what he's doing, and I'm having no part of it. I shake my head.

"But, Hadleigh, how will I know what your answer is if you don't mark it?"

“What am I going to do with you?”

“I’ll let you practice on another part of me, if that helps?”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“The moment I met you, Hadleigh. Come on, Cub. You can keep a steady hand that long.”

“Alright,” I giggle, shaking my head. “But you owe me after this.”

“Owe you how?” he asks, licking his lips.

“The best head of my life.”

“Done,” he chuckles. “I’ve spoiled you rotten. Haven’t I? Now, you’re entitled, thinking you get this thick, long tongue daily.”

“And other things,” I purr. “It’s only going to get worse, so much worse, once I’m Mrs. Adair.”

“You’d change your last name for me?” he asks, his voice raw.

“Of course. Because I want to belong to you and be yours always.”

“Fuck, I love you.”

“And I love you,” I whisper.

Hudson wipes down the tattoo chair with disinfectant, encouraging me to sit on it, my feet hanging over the edge. He takes the rolling stool, holding himself steady as he talks me through it, and I manage to create a thin, delicate circle around the “Yes.” I

admire my work as he gazes down on it.

Fumbling with his pocket, he pulls something out, handing it to me with a big grin.

“Oh my God, Hudson, it’s gorgeous.” I hold a diamond solitaire on a white gold band. It sparkles in the shop’s light, stunningly clear and large.

“Did I do okay?”

“Better than okay. It’s breathtaking.”

“No, you’re breathtaking,” he corrects, helping me slide it on my ring finger.

“I love it,” I whisper, more tears pouring down my cheeks. He wipes them away with his rough, work-hardened thumb. Suddenly, seizing my hips with a dark chuckle, thick and rich like molasses, he pulls me towards him on the tattoo chair, hiking up my skirt.

“What are you doing?” I gasp.

“Giving you the best head of your life,” he says

“In the tattoo parlor?”

“Yes, Hadleigh. Because I’m a man of my word, and when it comes to you, my stunning, breathtaking wife, I never hesitate,” he growls, burying his head in my silky panties with a ravenous chuckle.