



# Protected By the Ranger (Mountain Men Chronicles #1)

**Author:** Kira Knight

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** I fled to the mountains to escape my stalker, only to be captivated by the fiery, irresistible mountain man I found there.

After discovering crumpled rose petals and a threatening note on her doorstep, Ariel flees to the safety of her family's cabin in Haven Valley, Montana. Instead of finding solitude, she encounters a sinfully sexy mountain man who claims to be the new owner of the cabin.

Gideon Blackthorn, a rugged army veteran with smoldering green eyes, sees right through Ariel and takes her in. Injured and snowed in, Ariel realizes she's in trouble when his touch ignites an all-consuming fire within her, leaving her breathless and begging for more.

But as they give in to their desires, her obsessed stalker finds her, threatening to tear them apart.

Will their blazing connection survive the looming danger, or will the inferno of Ariel's past consume them both?

If you love close proximity, small-town romance and dirty-talking mountain men who know how to get rough, meet Gideon. This book is a wild ride that promises no cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed HEA!

**Total Pages (Source):** 6

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:40 am*

I juggle the grocery bags and purse, my heels clacking loudly in the dimly lit hallway of my apartment building. The flickering lights add a touch of eeriness to the usual gloom of the fourth floor. I make a mental note to mention the broken lights to the super again.

My phone rings, cutting through the silence, and I smile when I see Sam's name. Before I can speak, her voice bursts through the speaker. "So? So? So? "

I laugh at her enthusiasm, shifting the bags in my hands. "The meeting was a breeze, Sammy. They're thrilled with the mock-ups, especially for the new fantasy series."

"I knew they would. That's not my question," she retorts. Chuckling to myself, I say the words that would make her day. The contract is mine! I'll be illustrating the limited edition covers and the map for the entire series!"

Sam's squeal of delight makes me laugh. "I knew it!" she exclaims. "You've put in so many late nights on this project. It's your time to shine!" Her faith in me makes my throat tighten. I miss her like a phantom limb. A small part of me resents Greg for whisking her away to Toronto.

"I'm hopeful, finally," I say with a sigh. Lord knows it has been a tough couple of months trying to figure out corners to cut.

"See, like I always say, sometimes you need to take that leap of faith instead of playing it safe." She reiterates the words she's been telling me since we were in pigtails. I can almost always see them coming now.

“I think—” My words falter as my gaze shifts to the white envelope lying on my pink welcome mat.

“That’s strange,” I mutter. A chill runs through me, turning my palms cold. I scan the dark hallway, searching for a reason behind the sudden sense of dread.

“What is?” Sam’s voice crackles through the phone.

“There is an envelope on my doorstep.” I reply, crouching to pick it up.

“So?”

“Why is it left here instead of in the mailbox?” I wonder aloud. Maybe it was full.

“Who sent it?” Sam asks.

I flip the envelope over, examining it from every angle. There are no stamps, no return address.

“It’s blank,” I say, my voice tinged with unease.

“We won’t know until you open it. Do it—I’m curious now.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my shaking hands. Sliding a finger under the flap, I tear the envelope open. A sweet, floral scent wafts out before crimson rose petals spill onto the doormat. My heart skips as memories of roses on my windshield flash through my mind.

I can faintly hear Sam ask me something, but I’m too frozen to respond. I focus on the note in my hand. “It’s time we meet, don’t you think?” it reads. My mind races as I recognize the photos that follow, all from this past week.

The first is of me and Grace at the Neo Publishers Convention from two days ago. The next shows me leaving the yoga studio, mat in hand. The close-up shots of my slightly uncovered cleavage and my ass clad in tights make me gulp in fear. I feel violated.

The final picture makes me gasp. I know exactly where it was taken. The realization that someone was there with me sends a cold wave of terror through me.

Panic grips me tightly, my throat constricting as I confess what's been gnawing at me for days. "Sam, someone has been stalking me."

I look around the hallway, half-expecting someone to leap from the shadows. My heart pounds as I fumble with my keys. The key slips from my grasp, jangling loudly against the floor.

"What the fuck? What do you mean?" All humor is gone from Sam's voice.

"There are pictures of me in the envelope, taken all over the city," I sob, my voice breaking. I bend to pick up the keys, but Sam's urgent whisper halts me. "Wait! The envelope might be a trap."

"Sam..." I whisper, fear engulfing all my senses, making black spots dance before my eyes.

Her words slice through the terror, echoing in my ears. "You said the envelope is blank, which means someone must have hand-delivered it. What if that person is inside your apartment?"

As the implication sinks in, I start inching away from the door, my mind racing. My sweat-soaked satin blouse clings to me, heavy with dread. I need to stay calm. Taking a deep breath, I ball my trembling fingers into a fist.

Heart pounding in my chest, I kick off my heels because I know I can't run far in them. Shoving the envelope into my purse, I hold the phone close to my mouth and whisper, "I am getting out of here." I disconnect the call, my pulse racing as I move silently towards the stairs.

I clutch my phone like a lifeline as I sprint toward the elevator. My naked feet don't make a sound, but to my ears, each step announces my escape like drums. Glancing over my shoulder, I jab at the elevator button with frantic urgency.

The ding of the elevator doors opening feels like a cruel twist of fate. I hold my breath as I rush inside and jab the close button, knowing that the emergency bell is useless.

Just before the metal doors close, I catch a fleeting glimpse of a man emerging from my apartment, his shadowy form sending ice through my veins.

The elevator descends slowly, each second feeling like an eternity. The knowledge that he might be pursuing me makes my heart race faster. Who is he? Why is he following me? Shaking my head, I remind myself that I just need to focus on getting out of here right now.

When the elevator finally reaches the ground floor, I burst into the lobby. I fumble with my car keys, finally unlocking the door and sliding into the driver's seat. As I throw the car into reverse, my phone rings, but I don't take my eyes off the road.

When my phone rings incessantly, I answer it. "Ariel? Are you okay, babe? Talk to me!" Sam asks frantically.

"I'm here. I'm okay. Sam, I saw someone coming out of my apartment," I tell her, my voice on the edge of sobbing. Adrenaline is fading, and my hand on the wheel shakes uncontrollably, but I keep driving.

“What the hell is going on, Ari?”

I choke out the words, “Weird things have been happening all week. I thought I was just paranoid, but someone’s been following me.”

“Damn it! Why didn’t you tell me this?” Her voice carries a hurt edge, and it twists my heart.

“You just had Hughie a month ago. I didn’t want to burden you,” I explain, trying to sound reasonable, but the lie is clear even to me. Maybe I was afraid to admit it, to make it real.

“You are my trouble. Don’t you dare forget that, you idiot! Whatever’s going on, you call me first. Got it?” she says. Her command leaves no room for argument.

“Yes, I will.”

“Where are you going now?” Sam’s voice trembles with concern.

I steady myself, trying to think clearly. “I need to be unpredictable. The man seems to know everywhere I go. I’ve got my essentials—cash, cards, laptop.”

“Go to your mother’s place.”

I flinch at the mention of her. “She hasn’t spoken to me in a year. I’ll just be an imposition for her.”

I force myself to ignore the sting. My gaze flicks to the rearview mirror, checking for any sign of pursuit.

“Come here, please,” Sam pleads.

Chuckling bitterly, I say, “My passport is back at home, and I hardly think going to Canada is a solution.”

“Then go to your grandad’s cabin. It’s a few hours away, and if this stalker’s been after you for a week, he won’t know about it. You haven’t been there in years.”

The Haven cabin? Yes! That could work. My heart lightens at the thought. I mentally list what I’ll need—gas, supplies. The idea of returning to my childhood sanctuary soothes the tight knot of fear in my chest.

“You can recuperate there and make a plan,” Sam says firmly. “If you need me, I’ll come down too. For now, just get to a safe place.”

I nod to myself. The secluded cabin is in an area I know well. It’s the perfect place to hide out until I can figure out what to do next.

“You’re right,” I agree. “I’ll head to the cabin. I know Ken keeps it stocked for winter.”

“Good. I know the reception can be spotty, so call me when you can, but keep texting. If you make me lose what little sleep I get, I will kill you, Ariel!” Sam’s tough love is evident; even a deaf person could hear the worry in her voice.

I assure Sam I’ll follow her orders and fill up on gas. Despite my better judgment, I call my mother, but it goes straight to voicemail, as usual. I keep a nervous eye on my surroundings and then head for Haven Valley, Montana.

The landscape shifts when I reach the town. Snow-covered trees and houses flank on either side of the road. It reminds me of building snowmen and cozy evenings with hot chocolate and campfire stories at the cabin.

A sudden jerk of the car snaps me back to reality. I didn't notice that the snowfall has turned into a blizzard. I grip the steering wheel tightly as the car's tires struggle for traction on the slick road.

Through the blur, I spot the "Lake Up Ahead" sign and know I'm close. As the cabin comes into view, I exhale in relief.

I pull into the driveway, the snow crunching under the tires. Shivering, I turn off the engine and sit for a moment, the biting cold making my breath fog up the window.

My bare feet are numb, so I look for something to shield them from the snow. I smile when I find my old Tweety slippers tucked under a bag. They won't offer much warmth, but they'll do. I text Sam to let her know I've arrived, grab my bag, and step out. The snow wraps around me, but the familiar scent of pine lets me know I'm home.

I dash to the front door and immediately jam the key in the lock, jimmying it to open in a hurry. Despite my best efforts, the lock won't budge.

"Come on," I mutter under my breath. Frustration mingles with the bitter cold as I try to pull out the key, only to find the lock completely jammed.

Recalling the back window I used to climb through as a child, I head to the rear of the cabin. Snowflakes sting my skin like icy needles. I grab a rock and hurl it at the window, silently apologizing to Grandpa.

The glass shatters with a loud crash, and I wince at the echo. I pull out the broken shards and, gripping the wooden frame, jump through the window. As I land, a sharp, searing pain shoots through my heel.

I look down to see a glistening shard of glass embedded in the flesh, having gone



through the thin slipper. Blood begins trickling from the cut.

“Fuck me!” I curse, the agony nearly making me collapse.

“Gladly, but how about introductions first?” a commanding voice booms in the room.

The kitchen lights flicker and my heart skips a beat. A tall, rugged man stands in the doorway, gun aimed at me. I gasp, taking in the outline of a chiseled body under his black t-shirt. His shaggy brown hair is tousled, and his square jaw is hidden under a peppery beard. His piercing green eyes, full of curiosity and concern, draw me in despite the danger.

My vision blurs, and my legs feel like jelly. I struggle to stay upright. His eyes widen as he takes in my disheveled state. He eases off the trigger, lowers the gun, and steps towards me.

My body trembles violently, my vision closing in and darkening at the edges. I collapse onto the freezing floor. The last thing I see is the man’s worried face before everything goes black.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:40 am*

I wake up cocooned in heavy blankets, their warmth comforting my chilled skin. Morning light filters through the curtains. As I shift, a sharp pine in my right foot makes me flinch. I ease it out and see it's bandaged.

I vaguely recall yesterday and realize I'm at Grandpa's cabin. I rub my eyes and see I'm still in old clothes, now layered with oversized sweaters.

As I look around, I see that my parents' bedroom has changed. The thick bed frame with white drapes and handmade quilt on the rocking chair all feel far from my mother's sense of décor. The room has a distinctly masculine simplicity.

As I struggle to recall a fuzzy memory, footsteps catch my attention. The man from last night enters, wearing a worn blue plaid shirt and jeans, moving with quiet confidence.

His emerald gaze holds mine as he greets me with a, "Good morning." His voice is deep and rough, sending an unexpected shiver down my body.

I nod back. "Good morning. Where is Ken?" My voice sounds hoarse and weak, and I try to clear it.

"Ken?" the man asks, confusion lacing his tone.

"The caretaker of this cabin."

"I am the caretaker of this cabin."

“Oh, did Ken finally decide to retire? About time. First lesson on the new job—don’t aim a gun at the owner.”

He crinkles his brow in doubt, but then a smirk plays at his lips as he shrugs, “I heard glass shattering in the middle of a blizzard and found a stranger breaking into my home. I was a ranger. I call it instinct.”

“What do you mean that this is your home? This is my grandfather’s cabin.” I try to reason, my voice rising with anxiety.

“Maybe it used to be, but since I bought it two months ago, this has been my home.”

I sit up straight now, and the conclusion that I barged into a stranger’s house punches me in the gut. I feel an irrational urge to run out of here.

“Wait a second, bought it from whom?” I stare at him, dreading his answer.

“The process went through an agent, but the listed owner was Sarah King.”

I close my eyes as the ache in my heart overwhelms me. Mom sold the cabin. She’d been saying it for years, but I never believed she would actually sell it. Maybe I had been running from the truth.

“Let’s start with introductions. I’m Gideon Blackthorn,” he says, a deep baritone rumbling in his chest.

I open my eyes and look up at him. He has moved closer, leaning on the cupboard next to the bed. With his hands folded against his chest, his shirt stretches out across his broad shoulders and bulging forearms. He’s very tall, and his snug black jeans cling to his muscular thighs. I meet his gaze and find it focused on me. My cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“I’m very sorry,” I say, feeling a mix of shame and regret. “I thought the cabin still belonged to my family.”

“Did no one tell you that it’s been sold?” Gideon asks, his gravelly voice betraying his pity.”

I just shake my head. Mom sends a birthday card each year—that’s the extent of her contact. I never expected her to be sentimental about the cabin, but I hoped she’d honor our deal. I sacrificed vacations and lived frugally to buy it from her, but she sold it to a stranger she never even met. Why am I surprised?

My heart feels heavy with misery and I can’t meet his eyes. Words catch in my throat, but I manage to mumble, “I apologize for troubling you so much. I will pay for the damages I caused and get out of your hair.” A sharp pain shoots through my right leg, and my knees buckle under the weight.

Before I can fall, Gideon catches me by the waist, pulling me against his solid chest. I gasp and instinctively wrap my arms around his neck. The pain pulses through me, but his brawny arm holds me steady, bringing us dangerously close.

“Easy there,” he murmurs, his voice a rumble that I feel vibrating in my chest. Our breaths mingle, and I smell a hint of coffee on him. The height difference between us becomes palpable when even pressed against him, my head barely reaches his shoulders. The sensation is heady, strumming a hint of desire deep within me.

“I should leave,” I whisper, my voice shaky.

His emerald green eyes seem to see right through me. He shakes his head slowly, his expression unyielding. “You’re not going anywhere,” he says. His tone leaves no room for argument.

My breath hitches at his commanding demeanor. It is infuriating and yet... intoxicating. His tone and words affect me more than I care to admit. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest and wonder if he can feel it too. "You need to rest," he continues, his voice softening slightly but still laced with authority. "You're hurt, and I'm not letting you make it worse."

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. His words are reasonable, but the way he looks at me makes it hard to think straight. The scent of his aftershave, fresh and spicy, mingles with the natural scents of the cabin.

His hand moves to the small of my back, steadying me, and his fingers graze against my back where the sweater has ridden up. My skin tingles at his touch, sending a jolt of electricity through me.

"Listen, I..." I begin to protest, but the words trail off when his gaze falls on my lips. The proximity and the intimacy of our position make it difficult to form coherent thoughts.

He leans in closer, his lips brushing against my ear. "Trust me," he whispers, his voice husky with assurance. The heat of his breath and the promise in his voice make me want to trust him with a lot more than I should.

I close my eyes, trying to steady my breathing. The rise and fall of his chest against mine is a grounding rhythm, and I find myself leaning into his embrace despite my better judgment.

"Why do you want me to stay?" I ask, confusion peeking through the rush of heat and desire within me.

"I know you are in trouble."

“Who said I’m in trouble?” I ask, gulping in fear. Oh, I am in so much trouble.

“A woman doesn’t break into a secluded cabin late at night during a snowstorm—in a pantsuit and Tweety slippers with no luggage—unless she is in trouble,” he answers, his eyes brimming with concern.

His words hit too close to home, and I feel the walls closing in. The memory of my apartment, the lurking dark shadow, and the feeling of being watched wash over me. I shudder involuntarily.

“Are you not?” he asks, his tone soft but insistent, his palm stroking my back.

Turning away, I shake my head, unable to say it. Gideon holds my chin firmly in his grasp, forcing me to meet his intense gaze. His touch is unyielding, his fingers gently grazing the curve of my jaw. His eyes bore into mine with a raw intensity that leaves me breathless, vulnerable.

Gideon’s expression hardens slightly. He bends closer, his breath warm against my skin. “Tell me,” he urges, his voice a seductive whisper yet carrying a subtle command. His proximity, the heat of his body, and the intensity of his gaze all make me want to spill my secrets. That scares me almost as much as the danger from which I am running.

But I can’t. The fear is too raw, too real. “Will you let it go, please?” I breathe, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He studies me for a long moment, his eyes searching mine. “Fine,” he says finally, a note of reluctance in his voice. “But you have to stay until your wound heals. The snowstorm has everything shut down. You can’t go anywhere right now, anyway.”

I nod reluctantly. I know I have no choice but to agree. Even if I come up with a

place to go to, the howling storm that's making the cabin creak is unforgiving, and my wound will make driving impossible. Gideon's expression softens slightly, a mix of relief and resolve.

"Good," he murmurs, lifting me effortlessly into his arms and gently placing me back on the bed. His touch lingers, each brush of his fingers sending a jolt of electricity through me. I bite my lip, trying to suppress the shiver that reveals how deeply he affects me.

He asks, "Are you hungry?"

I laugh nervously. How do I tell him that I am ravenous... but not for food?

But my stomach answers by growling loudly, breaking the tension. "I guess I am a little hungry."

"Just a little?" he says suggestively, bending to tuck a part of the blanket under my arm. His firm grasp on my arm makes me breathe deeply. Clearing my throat, I mumble a thanks, averting my eyes away from him before he can see the blush creeping up my cheeks. He chuckles to himself as he walks out of the room, making me think my effort went in vain.

The aroma of a hearty stew mingling with the woodsy scent of the cabin reaches me. The last meal I remember eating was lunch yesterday. I deliberately try to not think of everything that happened after that. Instead, I choose to focus on my breathing.

"I am here. I am safe. He can't find me here," I repeat to myself.

"Who can't find you here?" Gideon asks, returning with two steaming bowls. His tone is relaxed, but I can tell that he is waiting intently for my answer.

Clearing my throat, I mutter, “No one.”

Gideon gives me a look, but doesn’t challenge me. Sitting down on the rocking chair next to my bed, he hands me a bowl and says, “I’m not a wonderful cook, but this will warm you up.”

“I really appreciate your kindness.” I tell him, taking the bowl from him. Our fingers touch briefly, but I ignore the sensation. I remind myself that I have a tough situation waiting for me back home, and I need to gather the strength and wits to deal with it. I definitely won’t find the solution in Gideon’s arms. Or maybe you will, my mind whispers to me. I suppress that voice deep down.

“Eat before it goes cold,” he says, his voice kind but authoritative.

He doesn’t need to tell me twice. The aroma makes my mouth water. I take a spoonful of the stew, moaning in relief as earthy flavors burst into my mouth. I turn to praise his cooking, only to find Gideon staring at me. His intense gaze ignites every fiber of my being. I hold my breath, unsure if it’s from dread or anticipation.

Gideon holds my gaze as he tastes the stew, his tongue flicking the spoon. My mouth goes dry. “You like it,” he says with a hint of a smile.

I don’t know what he is referring to and I don’t think I can handle the answer, so I just say, “This is really good. You are a splendid cook.”

Amusement plays on his lips as he nods. “It’s my aunt’s recipe.”

Hunger takes over then, and I focus only on the hearty stew for the next few minutes. I don’t leave a drop of food in the bowl. If it was acceptable, I would lick it clean. When I hand over the empty bowl to Gideon, I receive a reassuring smile that makes my heart flutter.



“Thank you,” I tell him.

Shrugging it off, he brings his hand to my face and caresses my cheek with his thumb. The feel of his rough skin rubbing against me sends a shiver down my spine. “Tell me your name,” he breathes. My eyes widen in realization. I damage his property and eat his food, yet I haven’t told him my name. Magnificent display of your manners, you idiot!

“I’m sorry. Hi, I am Ariel King. It’s nice to meet you,” I offer with a shy smile.

“Ariel,” he breathes my name so sensually that I press my thighs together. The unbidden image of him thrusting in my pussy as he chants my name pushes its way into my mind. My lips part in response as I exhale harshly.

Gripping my chin, he holds my gaze as he purrs, “It’s my pleasure to meet you, Ariel.”

Smiling mischievously, he suggests I rest before leaving with the empty bowls. I stay put, still reeling from his intense presence. Why does his rugged touch affect me like that?

I lie down on the comfortable bed, fighting the urge to slip my fingers into my panties. The thought that he might hear me only makes me crazier. Slapping myself on the head, I remind myself that he is essentially a stranger and I don’t jump in bed with just anyone.

What’s happening to me? Maybe I hit my head when I fell last night. I chuckle bitterly, my senses attuned to him even through the walls. His touch, especially when he held my face with such strength, keeps replaying in my mind.

The wind bangs against the window, and despite the sweater and blankets, I shiver

occasionally. The pain in my foot is dull, so I try not to move it. As thoughts of Gideon crowd my mind, I count backwards from one hundred. Eventually, the familiar routine pulls me under and I drift off to sleep.

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The sound of hammering wakes me up. I sit up, stretching slightly. The snow is piling up against the bedroom window, partially blocking the view, but I can see that it is still dark. Even though the storm rages outside, the cabin feels like a warm haven.

The noise resumes, and I try to locate its source. It's coming from the living room, but I can't walk on my injured foot yet. I stay put, knowing Gideon will come in when he's done. The thought of seeing him again makes me restless.

I glance at the rocking chair and see a blanket draped over it. The bed beside me is untouched—Gideon must have slept in the chair to keep an eye on me. It's easy to ignore the simmering tension between us during the day, but what about tonight? Will he stay close, watching me with those intense eyes?

I know he'd respect a request to sleep in the next room. Nothing he's done so far has made me uncomfortable, but the real question is whether I want him near or away. I wish there was a simple answer.

Just then, Gideon walks into the room. A few snowflakes are stuck in his trimmed beard. When he shakes the snow out of his hair, his arm muscles flex in tandem, somehow increasing the temperature of the room.

He catches me watching him and halts his actions. It seems like he's going to say something, but then he looks away and the spell breaks.

“Sorry if I woke you up, but I had to hammer shut the window. The temperature

would have plummeted during the night,” he explains, shrugging out of his puffy winter jacket. I see the toned muscles of his abdomen when he pulls off the sweater underneath the jacket and gulp. My mouth has suddenly watered.

“Mh-hm,” is all the answer I can manage to mumble.

“Listen,” Gideon begins, running his hand through his hair. He looks lost in thought. “The storm is getting worse. There is a strong possibility it might knock out the power. I have a backup generator, but I prefer to keep it for emergencies since the roads are not accessible at the moment. I only have one emergency heater which I will keep in this room. In my opinion, hypothermia symptoms had already set in when you came here. You need to stay warm.”

He walked to the bed and sat on the edge near my feet. If I lean forward, I can touch him. I crush the thought immediately and push my hands under my thighs.

“I can sleep in the living room, but I am a sound sleeper and if you need me for anything, I might not hear it. So if it’s alright with you, I would like to spend the night in the chair near you.” He points to the rocking chair and watches me closely.

Despite my best efforts to resist it, I feel the strange need to stay close to him. Maybe it’s the thought of sleeping alone that scares me, but I know I will feel a lot safer with him in the room.

“Of course. It’s your home, Gideon. I am the unwanted visitor. Please don’t put yourself in an uncomfortable position for my sake—” Before I can finish, Gideon clasps my hand between his and says, “You are anything but unwanted. Do not say such things about yourself, Ariel. Do you understand?”

His words halt my thought and all I can do is nod in response. The heat of his hands seeps into mine, making my body bask in its warmth.

Indicating that my response isn't enough with a frown, he orders, "Answer me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I croak the word out of my dry throat. His thumb is caressing the back of my hand. The sensation is overwhelming enough that I almost miss his next words. "Don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

For some reason, I know it's true with every fiber of my being. The knowledge envelops me in a loving cocoon. All he has done since I stumbled into his home is take care of me. I wonder how I can repay him for his kindness. There are many ways, I think, but then order my brain to shush.

He nods to himself, helps me out of bed, and carries me to the living room. The fireplace roars with fire, painting a warm glow in the room. We eat dinner in comfortable silence, the occasional popping of the wood the only sound in the room.

As I eat, steal glances at Gideon. He has changed into comfortable pants and a sweatshirt. I feel the absurd urge to trace his bulging veins with my tongue. Shaking my head, I force myself to focus on the grilled chicken.

But then I look up and nearly choke. Gideon, sitting on the other end of the sofa, licks his fingers clean. The thought of him doing that to me makes my palm clammy. When he catches me staring, I quickly look away, telling myself I must be going insane from the head injury.

"Do you want some?" he asks, offering the salad, but his tone is so sinful that I almost blurt out yes please .

"Nuh-uh, I am done," I answer, keeping my eyes fixed on the plate.

"Are you sure?" he prompts, waiting for my reply as he stands up. Not meeting his

eyes, I bob my head as a yes. The floral pattern on the plate is fascinating.

Gideon takes the empty plate from my hand and keeps it on the coffee table. Then, he bends and pushes his hands under my waist and thighs, picking me up. I feel a difference in his demeanor. He holds me a little tighter, a little closer. Being this close to him, it's impossible to ignore how he makes me feel. His firm hands under me press against my waist, and I let out a gasp.

I feel his chest rumbling from laughter under my palm, and I resist the impulse to hit him and tell him to knock it off. How can he look at me like that, say all those things, and then laugh at my reaction?

As Gideon lays me down on the bed, he hovers over me, his knee resting on the edge, effectively caging me under him. Despite his imposing presence, his touch is unexpectedly gentle as he tucks the blanket around me, cocooning me in warmth.

When I think he's about to move away, he leans in closer, his face inches from mine. My heart pounds erratically in my chest. He brushes a stray hair behind my ear, his fingers tracing a path to my throat. His dark, intense eyes follow his fingers, filled with an unreadable emotion.

I don't want him to stop there. I wildly wish for him to hold my throat, even choke me, but I force the thought away. Gideon meets my gaze, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Sleep well, Ariel," he murmurs, his voice low and seductive. I can hardly sleep, my mind racing and body thrumming with desire.

Gideon settles into the chair next to the bed, propping his feet up and covering himself with a blanket. His presence is a constant, magnetic force. I try to calm my thoughts, but his proximity—so close yet out of reach—drives me mad. Each rustle of his clothes sends waves of awareness through me.

With his eyes closed, I take the chance to study his features in the soft warm light. His jaw is firm and set, his lips slightly parted as he relaxes. He looks peaceful, yet there's an undercurrent of raw power and control. I imagine the intensity of his full attention as I explore every inch of him.

"Go to sleep, you" he mumbles, his voice drowsy but with a teasing smile. Embarrassed at being caught, I mumble a quick "good night" and turn my back on the tempting man. Exhaustion eventually overcomes me, and I drift off, my thoughts a tangled mix of desire, fear, and longing.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:40 am*

Fear grips me, freezing my feet outside my apartment door. Sweat drips down my spine, and my hands shake. The door swings open, a shadowy figure emerging from my home and I come face to face with my stalker.

Panic jolts me into action. I sprint down the dim corridor of my apartment building, my heart pounding against my chest. The exit light ahead seems so close, but this time I'm not fast enough. A hand grabs my wrist, yanking me back into the ghastly darkness of my apartment. I scream and struggle, but the iron grip keeps me trapped.

The stalker's hot breath scorches my neck, his grip tightening painfully as he drags me closer. His sinister laughter echoes, and the fear wraps around my chest, squeezing tighter until I can barely breathe.

Suddenly, a firm hand shakes my shoulder, yanking me from the nightmare. I jolt awake, gasping for air, lost in panic.

"Listen to me. Focus on my voice," a commanding tone cuts through the fog. I am not scared of that voice, I tell myself but fear overwhelms me.

"Let me go!" I cry out. The grip around my wrist is gentle, but the confusion invokes deep and gnawing fear. "Please, let me go," my voice trembles.

"Ariel, it's Gideon. You're safe with me," his voice sounds muffled to my ears.

I keep struggling, panic blinding me. My fists pound weakly against his chest, driven by a desperate need to escape. My injured leg jerks, sending a sharp pain through me like a white-hot poker. I scream, the sound raw and primal.

Instantly, Gideon pins my hands above my head, his body pressing down to stop my movements. “Look into my eyes, Ariel. You’re hurting yourself. Remember where you are. Remember who I am,” he commands, his voice strict but concerned.

His eyes lock onto mine, holding me captive. I continue to writhe for a moment, but his words cut through my panic.

“Gideon?” I whisper, my voice trembling, as if trying to remember a forgotten name.

“Yes, it’s me,” he responds, his grip firm but gentle.

I blink, tears streaming down my face. I feel his strength, his all-consuming presence, and it pulls me back to safety.

I clutch his shirt, its rough fabric grounding me. Panic surges back as I gasp, “I need to leave.” I try to push him away but he pins me securely to the bed.

“Look at me, Ariel,” Gideon commands, gripping my chin firmly to force our eyes to meet. “You’re not going anywhere.”

I protest, my voice rising, “You don’t understand. I’m in danger. He could have followed me here. I’m putting your life in danger too.”

The fierce determination in his eyes is undeniable, “Nothing will make me let you go. I’ll protect you with my life.”

“You can’t make me stay here against my will!” I snap, my voice a mix of defiance and worry.

Gideon chuckles softly, a low, rumbling sound that sends a shiver down my spine. “Oh, so you are not willing to stay? Not even when I do this?”



He presses his thumb against my mouth, tracing it along my lower lip. The touch is electrifying and my breath catches in my throat. I'm suddenly acutely aware of how close he is. I part my lips, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

His stormy blue eyes darken with desire, and his gaze make my words falter. "Or this?" His hand moves lower, exploring the soft curve of my neck with the back of his fingers, making me shiver. He gently traces the line of my collarbone before sliding down to my waist. His calloused hand grips me hard and I gasp.

Gideon lowers his head, whispers "Or this?" before pressing a hot, lingering kiss on my cheek. The contact is electrifying, a heady mix of pleasure and anticipation. I try to hold it back but a soft hiss escapes and seems to echo in the quiet room.

When he traces his lips against my jaw, the fear in my body slowly dissolves and my resolve to leave wavers. I clutch at his shirt, fighting the urge to pull him closer. "You're not playing fair," I manage to say, out of breath.

"No," he agrees, his words a sinful whisper. "I'm playing dirty, and with a prize this tempting, I can only play dirty." His words send a thrill through me, and need rises within me despite my better judgment. His touch lights my skin on fire.

Gideon licks the sensitive spot under my earlobe, driving his point home. A flood of emotion and desire rushes through me and I pull him closer. He presses his hard body against me in a way that makes my pulse quicken.

"Gideon," I begin, trying to maintain some semblance of control and sanity. "I really don't think I should stay here."

He smiles against my skin. A wicked, knowing smile. "I guess I'll have to keep you from thinking then." Before I can respond, his lips capture mine in a searing, possessive kiss.

The kiss consumes me, a slow burn that builds and builds, leaving me breathless. His mouth moves against mine with a controlled intensity, teasing and coaxing a response from me that I can't refute. I feel the terror in my body melt away, replaced by a fiery need that ignites every nerve.

Our lips move together in a dance as old as time, our bodies fused together in need. His hands slide down my body, exploring with a deliberate slowness that drives me insane. He touches me as if he's mapping every inch of me, learning what makes me gasp, what makes me shiver. His tongue licks my lower lip and the tingly feeling makes me gasp. He takes the opportunity to deepen the kiss, his tongue exploring mine with hunger.

The feel of his rough hands on my skin consumes me. I try to resist—to cling to the remnants of my caution and sanity—but it's a losing battle. I surrender to him, my resistance crumbling as desire takes over.

His lips leave mine to trail down my neck. I tilt my head back, giving him better access. He nips at my skin, his stubble a delicious friction. His lips close around the sensitive spot on my neck and he sucks on it, hard. I gasp from the pain mixing with pleasure, a heady combination.

He licks the mark he left on me. Out of breath, he vows, "You have to stop me Ariel, because I won't be able to, not when you feel this heavenly."

His words ignite something deep within me, a primal need to be taken by him. I pull him up and kiss him with blinding fervor. I whimper, my hands threading in his hair as I urge him on. I don't want him to stop—ever. He responds with a low growl, giving me goosebumps and making my pulse race.

Gideon moves his hand to the hem of my shirt, his fingers burning me as he explores the sensitive skin beneath. When he reaches my breast, I hold my breath, but he

merely caresses around the curve of it, not touching it directly.

“Tell me you want this, Ariel,” he murmurs, as if his life depends on my answer. His other hand traces the edge of my sweater, slipping beneath the fabric just enough to drive me insane with yearning.

“I...” my voice falters, caught between the fear still lingering in the corners of my mind and the burning desire that his touch ignites. His thumb brushes over my nipple, making it ache. The sensation sends a jolt of lust straight to my pussy.

“Say it. Tell me what you want,” he urges, his breath hot against my ear.

“I want this. I want you, Gideon,” I gasp, unable to hold back any longer, throwing all caution in the wind. Sam was right. I have always played it safe in my life. Tonight, just for tonight, I want to risk it all. My body, my heart. I know I need to leave soon, but if I do it without exploring this connection between us, I will regret it. If tonight is all I’ve got, I want to burn. And I want Gideon more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

A growl rumbles in his chest at my whispered confession. He pulls off my sweater and blouse, his hands and lips exploring every inch of my now exposed skin. Without warning, Gideon cups my breast and my nipple disappears in his mouth. He sucks it like a hungry, ravenous man. With his other hand, he pinches my nipple before pulling on it gently. The sensation is so intoxicating that I cry his name as I throw my head back and revel in it.

He circles his hot tongue around my bud, pops it out of his mouth and blows on it. Goosebumps break out all over my body, my hands tangled in his hair, pulling him back. He latches onto my breast again, but this time, he takes my nipples in between his teeth and bites softly on them. I can feel my pussy getting drenched, badly craving some attention.

I try to press my thighs together to relieve some of the building pressure, but Gideon easily pushes them apart and fits himself between my legs. The move pushes his hard cock flush against my throbbing pussy, and lost in desire, I wrap my legs around his waist.

Pushing his hands under me, he grabs on to my ass with one hand and fists my hair with the other, pulling it hard. "Look at me, Ariel," he demands. I comply, shivering under his predatory gaze. Grinding his cock against my throbbing pussy in a maddening rhythm, he purrs, "Feel me. Feel how hard you make me. How crazy you drive me." His sinful claim with his intense grinding almost makes me cry.

He takes my lips captive in another burning kiss. His hand moves lower, slipping beneath the waistband of my tracks, finding me already wet. He groans against my mouth, his fingers sliding through my slick folds and finding my clit. The contact is electric and I cry out in pleasure. My hips arch against his hand and my hands grip his shoulder. His fingers circle my swollen clit with a deliberate slowness that drives me wild, teasing me to the brink of madness. The pressure builds and builds, and my nails dig into his shoulders as I ride the wave of sensation.

Gideon teases my entrance and I unabashedly wrap my legs around his waist to urge him on. Sucking hard on my nipple, his finger slides deep inside my cunt. Gideon lets go of my breast with a loud pop and purrs against my skin. "Your cunt is so fucking wet. Who is it dripping for, Ariel?"

His words send a thrill through me, and I feel my walls clenching around his fingers. "You, Gideon. I am wet for you," I moan, unable to hold back my confession.

"Good girl," he whispers, rewarding me by sliding another finger deep in me. He finds the perfect rhythm to bring me to the edge. The tension inside me coils tighter and tighter with each stroke of his fingers.

His fingers fuck me at an agonizingly slow pace, curling inside me and hitting the spot that makes me see stars. His touch is a masterful blend of firm and gentle. I'm unable to control the whimpers escaping my lips, each one a testament to the power he holds over me.

Just when I think I can't take it anymore, he withdraws his hand. "Gideon," I plead, my voice raw with need. I can feel his lips curve into a smile against mine. His fingers find my clit again and slowly tease me. He edges me closer and closer to the brink without letting me tumble over. I shake with need, driven out of my mind.

"Gideon, please," I cry out in desperation when he stops again. He chuckles and then increases the pace, his fingers stroking in and out faster. I pant as I feel the pressure build. His thumb rubs my clit with a skill that leaves me breathless. Every nerve in my body is on fire, and I dig my nails into his back as I brazenly ride his hand like a bitch in heat.

The pleasure is so powerful that it's almost painful. With a final, powerful stroke, the tension snaps and I'm tumbling over the edge into ecstasy. My body convulses with pleasure around his fingers. I cry out his name, my voice hoarse and broken, as the orgasm crashes over me.

Gideon's steady touch never falters, guiding me through the waves of pleasure. He murmurs soothing words against my skin, his lips trailing soft kisses along my jaw and neck. I cling to him, my body trembling with the aftershocks of my release.

"Hey," Gideon's voice breaks the silence, and I look up to meet his gaze. His eyes are dark, filled with a mixture of concern and passion.

He kisses my forehead, a tender gesture that sends a warm glow through my chest. "Are you okay?" he asks, his chest vibrating against my palm.

I nod, unable to find the words to express what I'm feeling.

With a predatory grin, he claims my lips in another maddening kiss. His hands roam over my body with a renewed intensity. The desire that was momentarily sated roars back to life.

This time, I explore his marvelous body. The vein in his neck beats intensely under my fingers as I tug at his shirt. Gideon swiftly pulls it off. The sight of him, bare and beautiful in the dim light, steals my breath away. He pulls me close, his naked body warm and solid against mine. My hands roam over his body, feeling the chiseled ridge of muscles on his back. If I could move, I would lick it, but Gideon has me caged and under his mercy.

The need to be taken by him—claimed by him—rules my actions. The maddening desire to drive him crazy makes me reach out and bite him on his shoulder, hard. Growling in response, he pulls my hair, baring my neck, and wraps his hand around my throat. He gently squeezes, holding his lips inches away from me.

“I’m trying to be gentle with you, Ariel. Don’t tempt me,” he says, struggle clear in his molten dark eyes. I don’t care anymore. I want to give in to every fantasy about Gideon that has been ruling my mind.

Reaching down, I cup his cock over his sweats and say, “Maybe, I don’t want you to be gentle.”

Acting on impulse and need, he groans and chokes me harder. He begins rubbing himself against my hand. Needing more—needing skin-on-skin contact—I slide my hand in and wrap my fingers around his throbbing cock. His breath catches in his throat and he whispers my name.

I stroke him, drawing out my movements into slow thrusting. I want to tease him,

bring him to the edge over and over. But his thrusts prove to be a double-edged sword, igniting a fire deep in my core that needs to feel him inside me.

“Please, Gideon,” I sob, my voice breaking with desperation. “I need you. I need to feel you inside me.”

His eyes, dark with a scalding desire, lock onto mine and he takes my lips in a hungry kiss. A guttural sound escapes him as he positions himself at my pussy, the velvet skin of him hot against my sensitive flesh.

I hold my breath, anticipation coiling tight within me. But, instead of entering me immediately, he teases me, dragging his cock against my slick folds. The moist tip brushes my weeping clit, making my body jolt with need.

I whimper, my hips instinctively rising to meet him, but he holds back with a dark, knowing smile playing on his lips. Answering my silent plea, Gideon says, “Not yet, Ariel. I want to feel you squirm for me.”

My hands clutch at his shoulders, nails digging in, trying to pull him closer, but he maintains his torment. I can only moan, my body begging for more. The teasing becomes too much, the ache inside me too intense to bear.

“Please, Gideon,” I beg, my voice breaking. “I need you inside me.”

His eyes darken with something primal. He sheathes himself in a condom and with a moan, aligns himself and slowly begins to push inside. The initial stretch is exquisite, a perfect blend of pleasure and pain. I gasp, my body trembling as he fills me inch by inch, the sensation blinding like the sun.

Once he is fully inside me, he pauses, allowing me to adjust. The fullness is almost too much, but it feels so right, so perfect. Gideon starts to move, his thrusts slow and

deliberate, each one sending ripples of pleasure through my body. Every stroke is purposeful as if designed to drive me crazy.

He watches me, his gaze intense, as though he is studying my every reaction—every gasp and moan that escapes my lips. His hands roam my body, pinching my nipples to hard peaks, and then he leans down and begins sucking on them. I can feel the muscles in his back flex under my hands as I hold on to him for dear life.

“Oh my god,” I sob, when he pushes his hand between us and finds my clit. He rubs the nub which makes my walls tighten around his thirsty cock. He makes a tortured sound as he increases his pace, his thrusts becoming deeper and harder, more demanding.

“You are so fucking tight that I can barely move.” His voice is strained.

I can barely form a coherent thought, let alone words. All I can do is feel—feel the exquisite pleasure he’s giving me, the connection that binds us in this moment. My body responds to him instinctively, matching his rhythm, meeting his every thrust.

The tension inside me builds to a breaking point, every nerve ending alight with sensation. I’m so close, teetering on the edge of my climax. He hovers over me, his lips capturing mine in a possessive kiss, his tongue dangling with mine in a dance of raw passion.

Soon, I am clawing at him in my blinding need as I get closer. Gideon shifts his hands below me, grabbing my ass and adjusting me to an angle that makes his cock hit that sweet spot inside me. Pulling my hair harshly as he bites the curve of my neck, Gideon begins thrusting into me like a madman. “Come for me, Ariel. I want to feel you shatter around me,” he commands against my skin.

With those words, I scream his name as the climax rips through me. The coil inside



me snaps and I'm thrown into a sea of bliss. I ride out the orgasm as he keeps up his lazy thrusts. Wave after wave of intense pleasure leaves me panting and trembling.

Gideon captures my moans with his lips as his pace becomes frantic, his control slipping as he chases his own release. His movements become desperate, driven by a need as intense as mine. I moan his name, and with a guttural groan escaping him, he finds his release.

Gideon collapses on top of me, his forehead resting against mine. The world blurs into a haze of pleasure. Our bodies are slick with sweat, our breaths coming in ragged gasps as we come down from the high.

He shifts, rolling us onto our sides, and pulls me into his arms. His fingers trace idle patterns on my back. I nestle against his chest, the fast rhythm of his heartbeat soothing me.

Stroking my hair, Gideon's voice breaks the silence, a soft murmur against my ear, "Ariel?"

"Mm?" I mumble.

"Are you alright?" His voice is a mix of concern and tenderness.

"Mm-hm," I mumble, again. My scattered brain can no longer form sentences but a smile tugs on my lips.

Gideon laughs quietly, his chest gently vibrating against my palm. He pulls me closer, holding me tightly, and lays a soft kiss over my eyes. Snuggled into his embrace, the weight of exhaustion pulls me under. The last thing I hear before drifting off is Gideon murmur, "Sleep well, baby. I'll keep you safe."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:40 am*

The wind howls outside, breaking the quiet morning. Amidst the chaos, a rhythmic thwack cuts through, echoing steadily. I reach for Gideon but find only cool, empty sheets. His absence leaves a chill in the air.

I sit up, my body deliciously sore. The memory of Gideon's intense gaze, the way he held me and ravished me, comes flooding back. Shaking those thoughts away, I take a deep breath to calm the desire simmering within me. My injured foot feels tender but manageable to walk.

I pull on the charcoal sweatshirt, inhaling his woodsy and masculine. My pulse quickens, but doubts creep in. What if he regrets everything that happened last night?

Hiding won't help, I decide. If he regrets it, I'll thank him and leave, though I feel safer here than anywhere else. But who am I kidding? It's Gideon. His arms already feel like home.

With a blanket wrapped around me, I step into the cozy living room and glance at the myriad of wilderness photos on the wall.

The cabin feels different now—more lived-in, more his. A wave of sadness washes over me. I'd always dreamed of retiring here, surrounded by childhood memories. When I leave, I'll lose a part of myself, but knowing it's in Gideon's hands brings comfort.

Wiping a tear from the corner of my eye, I head towards the source of the persistent thwacking sound—the garage. The noise grows louder as I approach, and when I open the door, the sight before me takes my breath away. Gideon stands there in a

black, full-sleeved V-neck t-shirt and pants, chopping wood with powerful, precise swings.

The soft fabric of his clothes cling to his body, accentuating the defined muscles of his arms and chest. The cool wind flows through the slightly ajar garage door, carrying with it the scent of pine and sawdust. Despite the chill in the air, Gideon is sweating, a sheen of moisture glistening on his forehead. The drops catch the dim light and make his skin glow.

I watch him, mesmerized by the hypnotic display of strength and grace. His muscles ripple with each swing, a symphony of power and attention. Each crack of the ax against the wood sends a shiver down my spine, resonating deep in my core.

As I stand there, a flush of heat rises within me, spreading from my cheeks to my neck and down to my chest. I can feel my pulse race, my breath coming a little faster. There's something raw and primal about watching Gideon work. His presence fills the space, commanding attention, and I feel helplessly drawn to him.

"Careful there, you might start drooling," Gideon says, sensing my presence. He turns to face me with a smug smile. He sets the ax down, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Hey," he says, his voice low and slightly husky from exertion. It sends a thrill through me, a tingling sensation that settles low in my belly. I try to respond but my voice catches in my throat. I clear it again, hoping he doesn't notice my flustered state.

"Hi," I croak out. My heart races as he closes the distance between us.

"Did you need something?" he asks. His tone is light but there is an undercurrent of something else.

I struggle to find the right words, my mind a jumble of thoughts and emotions. “I just... heard the noise.”

“Power went out in the middle of the night,” he explains, his eyes never leaving mine. “We’ll need more kindling for the fire.”

The world outside the garage fades away, leaving just the two of us in this quiet, intimate space. The close proximity makes my breath hitch, and I struggle to keep my thoughts from spiraling. Those eyes—deeply emerald and intense—seem to see right through me, piercing my very soul. For a moment, I forget to breathe, caught in the magnetism of his gaze.

Gideon breaks the spell and asks, “So, Ariel, have you chopped wood before?”

I laugh, nostalgia warm in my voice. “No, never. Grandpa wouldn’t even let me near an ax. He’d watch me like a hawk every time I came in the garage, just to stop me from trying to steal it.”

An idea seems to light up his face. He shrugs the blanket off my shoulders, his fingers brushing against my pulse. With a mischievous glint in his eyes, he asks, “How about I show you how to do it?”

My face splits into a big smile and I nod in glee. I feel excited to live my silly childhood dream at last, but truthfully, my heart skips a beat at the prospect of being close to him.

I take his hand, the touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. Gideon leads me to the chopping block set in the middle of the room, his hand lingering on mine a moment longer than necessary. He picks up the ax and hands it to me.

He steps behind me, his body pressing close to me, and places his hands over mine on

the wooden handle. The warmth of his body seeps into me, and I can feel the steady beat of his heart against my shoulder. His breath is heated on my neck, breaking out in goosebumps on my skin.

“First things first, you need to have a good grip on the wood,” he says in his smoky voice. “Firm but not too tight.”

I can't help but wonder if we're still talking about the ax. His chest presses even closer to my back, the heat between us almost unbearable.

“Now, feel the motion,” he murmurs, dipping his head until his nose brushes my hair. Desire ignites in my veins, my knees turning to jelly. His arms tighten around me, and his tongue grazes the outer shell of my ear, sending a shiver through me. A soft gasp slips out before I can stop it.

Guiding my hands, he lifts the ax with me, his movements fluid and deliberate. I can feel every flex of his muscles, every inch of him against me. Together, we bring the ax down in a clean, powerful swing, the wood splitting with a sharp crack.

“Just like that,” he whispers, his breath hot and his lips hovering near my ear.

With each swing, the air practically crackles with the rising tension between us. I feel it in the way his breath catches when I move my ass against him, in the quickening pace of his heartbeat. It's a powerful, undeniable pull.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his voice low and full of praise when his name falls slips through my lips. He rewards me a thrust against my ass and all thoughts fly out of my mind.

Desperate to touch Gideon, I turn too quickly, and a sharp pain shoots through my injured foot. The sudden agony radiates through my leg as I stumble. Gideon's strong

arms wrap around me, dropping the ax. His eyes search mine, worry etched in every line of his face.

“Ariel, are you okay?”

“I put too much pressure on it. I’m fine,” I grit out, as I try to breathe through the pain.

His brow furrows, clearly unconvinced. “You need to rest that foot,” he glances down at my bandaged ankle. “Let’s get you inside. I need to change your dressing.”

Before I can protest, Gideon scoops me up effortlessly, cradling me against his chest. My hand rests over his heart, feeling its rapid, steady beat.

“I can walk, Gideon,” I try to argue, but my arms instinctively wrap around him.

“And deny me this pleasure?” He arches an eyebrow, a devilish grin curling his lips. He carries me inside and sets me down on the sofa’s plush cushions, then gently tucks a thick blanket around me.

Without a word, he moves to the fireplace, arranging kindling and logs with practiced ease. The fire catches quickly, the flames crackling and dancing, chasing away the cold that lingers in the room. Satisfied, Gideon turns back to me, his voice soft. “I’ll grab the medical kit.”

He returns quickly with the kit in hand. Sitting beside me on the sofa, he lifts my leg and places it on his lap. His grip is careful and considerate as he unwraps the old dressing from my foot.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he says softly, glancing up at me with concern.

The dressing comes off with ease, and Gideon studies the wound intently. His brow furrows in concentration. "It's healing well," he notes, cleaning the area with delicate precision. The antiseptic stings, and I flinch, but his touch remains calm, steady. He wraps a fresh bandage around my foot.

"All done." He gives me a teasing smile. "Just be careful next time. I won't always be around to catch you when you fall."

His words hit me harder than I expect. The thought of him not being here knots something inside me. I force a smile, masking the sudden ache in my chest.

Gideon traces gentle circles over the bandage, his gaze fixed on me. "Ariel, last night... you were thrashing in your sleep. I'm relieved you didn't reopen your wound."

The fog of my nightmare floods back, that suffocating fear tightening in my chest again. I nod, embarrassed. "I'm sorry," I whisper, looking away.

He shakes his head, his voice firm but soft. "You don't need to apologize. I was worried." His eyes search mine, steady and concerned. "It's clear to me whatever you're going through is taking a toll on you. I wish you'd let me in."

The words knot in my throat. I take a deep breath, the weight of my secrets pressing down on my chest. "I don't know where to begin," I tell him honestly.

Gideon nods, his attention unwavering. He urges softly, "Why don't you start with the nightmare, if you still remember it?"

The memory clings to me like a shadow, its cold grip tightening as I clutch the blanket in my fists. "It's hard to forget," I murmur. His hand remains on my foot, offering silent support.

I swallow the lump in my throat, my hands trembling. “In the nightmare, someone was chasing me. I kept running, thinking I could get away, but he caught me.”

Gideon shifts closer, threading his fingers through mine, his warmth easing the chill in my bones. “Who was after you?” he asks gently.

I close my eyes, the words catching in my throat. When I meet his gaze, I push out the words, “My stalker.”

His grip tightens on my hand, his eyes darkening with concern. “Go on,” he breathes, his voice laced with anger.

I swallow, my voice shaky as the words claw their way out. “It started with roses on my windshield.” The memory flashes behind my eyes—the sweet, cloying scent of the petals that had seemed innocent.

“Then the calls,” I continue, my pulse quickening. “Every day, multiple times. No one spoke. Just... breathing.” My chest tightens as if I can still hear the incessant ring.

My mind is a whirlwind of thoughts, but when I open my mouth, the words don’t come. Looking around, I ask hesitantly, “Could you hand me my bag?”

Gideon tilts his head, confused, but he doesn’t question it. He retrieves the lavender bag and hands it to me silently. My fingers fumble inside, finding the smooth paper, and I pull out the thick envelope, anxiety prickling under my skin.

“Two days ago, I found this on my doorstep,” my voice wavers as I hand it to him. My heart races, thudding in my ears.

He takes it, sliding out a stack of photographs and a note. His jaw tightens



immediately, anger sparking in his eyes. He flips through the pictures, his grip growing white-knuckled. The glossy surfaces crumple under the force of his fingers, but he says nothing, his rage palpable.

I pluck the last photo from his hand, my stomach twisting in dread. “I know he followed me everywhere, but this picture scared me the most.”

It’s a picture of my bedroom, bathed in the soft light of my night lamp, and there’s me sleeping on the bed. The tangled blanket around my legs does nothing to hide my tank-top and panty-clad body. My hair is disheveled and my lips slightly open. The thought of him watching me in such a vulnerable state sends a wave of cold terror through me.

Gideon takes the photo from my frozen fingers and his eyes narrow in unrestrained anger as he studies it. “Fucking bastard,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Do you know who it is?” he asks, his voice tight.

I shake my head, misery wrapping itself around my chest. The haunting image of that shadowy figure framed in the doorway is burned into my mind.

“His face was hidden under a hoodie,” I murmur, helplessness threading through my words. The warmth of the room feels suffocating now.

“He was in my home, Gideon,” my voice trembles, fear cracking it. “I didn’t even know. I’ll never feel safe there again. I’ll always be looking over my shoulder, searching the corners of my bedroom.”

Tears blur my vision, and I swipe them away in frustration. “This cabin was supposed to be my sanctuary. I didn’t think beyond escaping here. And now my mom’s sold it—without even giving me a chance to say goodbye.”

Gideon watches me, his face soft with empathy. “You’re safe here, Ariel,” he says, his deep voice reverberating through me.

But the fear is too close, too sharp. Every creak of the cabin, every gust of wind outside, makes me flinch. The bitter taste of dread won’t leave my mouth.

“I don’t feel safe anywhere. I don’t know what to do,” I confess in a whisper. The crackle of the fire, the scent of pine and smoke, and the warmth of Gideon’s hand—all of it feels distant, overshadowed by the memory of my stalker, and the knowledge that he’s still out there.

Gideon gently strokes his thumb on my knuckles in a soothing rhythm. “I know what that feels like,” he murmurs, his voice carrying a weight of understanding.

I glance up, surprised. “You do?”

He nods, his gaze distant, eyes clouded with old memories. “I served in the army, as a ranger,” he says quietly. He shifts, like the memories physically ache.

“We were on a recon mission, in a remote area. Careful, but not careful enough,” he says, his voice heavy. “Someone compromised our position.” His words falter, and I can feel the anguish as his jaw tightens. “Extremists found us. We fought back, but... they set off explosives.”

I can see the pain glimmering in his eyes, the way his jaw clenches as he relives the moments. “My team... my friends... they got hurt. So did I.”

I gently hold his hand between mine. “What happened?”

Gideon looks down at our intertwined fingers. “I took a bullet to the back,” he says, closing his eyes as if feeling the pain all over again. “Shrapnel tore through my leg.”

He pulls up his pant leg, revealing a jagged scar that snakes from his thigh to his calf. It's ugly and raw, a permanent reminder of what he endured. The sight twists something deep inside me. I move closer, squeezing his hand.

"They sent me back to Philly," he says, voice rough. "But being home didn't stop it. The nightmares, the flashbacks—they followed me. Every loud noise, every shadow... it was like I was still there. My home felt like a war zone. I was always on edge."

His story hits me hard. I can feel the weight of it, the scars he carries. "I'm so sorry, Gideon," I whisper, my voice tight with emotion. "How did you cope?"

He looks at me, something like gratitude softening his eyes. "Liam Gallagher—my old sarge—he's sheriff now. He saved my life that night. When he moved here, some of us from the team followed him."

He glances out the window, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. "Living here helps. It's quiet, slower. But it's not just the place. It's the people. Liam's been a rock for all of us. Derek's a counselor now, and Callum's a medic. We went through hell together, and now we're healing together."

He takes a deep breath. "I still struggle with PTSD, but having people who understand makes a difference."

I squeeze his hand, my heart swelling with empathy and admiration. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Gideon. It means more than you know."

He nods, his expression softening. "I just want you to know, Ariel... you're not alone. Leaning on friends who care helps more than you think. I am here for you, Ariel. You can lean on me." His words soothe the raw edges of my fear, like a balm to my aching heart.

“So, are we friends?” I tease, trying to lighten the mood.

His gaze holds mine, steady and intense. “We can be anything you want us to be,” he tells me, the meaning clear in his eyes.

Gideon breaks eye contact, and I can finally breathe again. His gaze falls on the scattered photographs, his jaw tightening. “We need to talk to the police.”

“I already did,” I say, frustration lacing my words. “They told me roses and blank calls weren’t enough to go on. I don’t think they even believed me.”

The memory of the officer’s dismissive look makes my skin crawl. I had never felt more powerless.

Gideon kneels in front of me, his hands firm on my shoulders. “We’ll figure this out, Ariel. Once we get a signal, I’ll call Liam. We’ve got real evidence now.”

I nod, trying to take comfort in his words, but my eyes are glued to the pictures beside me.

“What if he followed me here?” The thought clutches at my chest, and a shiver runs down my spine.

“Hey, look at me,” he softly commands, brushing away a stray tear on my chin. “No one will touch or harm you around me, I promise you.”

My breath quickens, panic tightening its grip on my throat. “I don’t even know what he looks like. How do I fight something I can’t see?”

Gideon pulls me flush against him, and his hands cradle my face firmly. The heat of his palm seeps into my skin. His rough thumbs brush against the curve of my jaw in a

way that grounds me.

His voice shimmers with harsh fury as he says, “If he dares to come after you, I will hunt him down like an animal. No one will harm you, not while I’m breathing.”

I can feel the raw power radiating off him, a lethal promise etched in every word. It should frighten me how quickly he shifts from calm to wrathful, but it doesn’t. His hands are my anchor, pulling me from the suffocating depths of fear.

His emerald eyes burn with a wild fire. His grip tightens slightly as his hand moves to the back of my neck, fingers threading possessively through my hair. He tilts my head, his voice a low growl, “I’ll tear him apart, limb from limb, if he tries to cause you pain. I’ll protect you with my life, Ariel.”

Gideon is inches away from mine, breath warm and steady against my skin. My heartbeat thunders, rapid and shallow, drowning out all other thoughts. His gaze holds a dangerous edge, igniting a fire low in my belly.

The next moment, his lips crash against mine with an urgent fervor. The kiss is electric, a jolt of heat that pushes away my panic and fear. His lips move roughly against mine, making me whimper. His fingers graze my scalp, gripping my hair tighter. I press my palm against his wiry beard, pulling him closer. His tongue sweeps over mine, minty and intoxicating, flooding my senses.

His palm wraps around my throat, squeezing it gently, and I gasp against his lips, the sound swallowed by the kiss. I can’t help but arch against him when his fingers dig into my waist. I feel his tongue exploring and teasing and I meet him stroke for stroke. The feel of his hand and the taste of his lips consume me.

I wrap my hands around his shoulders, digging my nails in, trying to anchor myself. The heat of his body chases away the lingering chill. His hard chest presses against

my breasts, rubbing my poking nipples and making me shiver in delight.

Gideon breaks the kiss before I can protest and trails a line of wet and open-mouthed kisses along my jaw and down to my neck. I can't help the soft moan that escapes my lips when he bites on the supple skin on my shoulder, and Gideon groans in approval.

Through the heady fog of desire, Gideon's burning gaze meets mine and I see the white-hot desire blazing within them. His hands slowly move to the hem of my sweater, his fingers grazing the curve of my waist and breasts as he peels away the fabric. The sensation is almost torturous as he bares me to his hungry gaze. His eyes roam my body, taking in every curve, every inch of bare skin, making me feel both vulnerable and powerful.

Gideon trails his touch down my arms, leaving a path of goosebumps in their wake. His eyes focus on my neck and he growls with a smirk, "Seeing my mark on your body makes me want to throw you on the floor and bury myself deep inside you." His tongue flicks out to lick the dark hickey and then he closes his lips on it, sucking hard. I tilt my head back, lips parting in a shaky breath.

His hands move to the front clasp of my bra, his fingers deftly undoing it. "I love your gorgeous, gorgeous breasts." With that, he cups my breasts gently, making me arch into his touch. He places a kiss on one nipple, then the other, his tongue darting out to tease and taste.

"I love playing with them, and I love how you respond when I do this," his thumb and forefinger pinches my nipple, rubbing it against his rough skin. I let out a throaty moan, my fingers curling into his hair.

His calloused hands squeeze my breasts hard as he pulls one nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling around the sensitive peak. "Oh, God, yes," I moan, gripping his bulging forearm, the sensation overwhelming me.

When he grazes his teeth on the hard nub and bites on it gently, pleasure shoots through me like lightening. His other hand continues to squeeze and knead my other breast. I cry out his name and my fingers grip his hair, as he pulls my nipple with his teeth.

Gideon roughly grips my thighs, spreading them wide and stepping in between them. His eyes, dark with raw, primal need, lock onto mine as he lowers himself between my legs. I tremble under his touch as his fingers lightly graze from the valley between my breasts, down to my belly.

He presses kisses inside of my thighs, slowly rising higher. The cool air in the room contrasts sharply with his hot breath ghosting over my skin. When he reaches my throbbing cunt, he murmurs, his husky voice dripping with lust. “Look at your cunt, Ariel. I love how needy you are for me.”

His muscular hands spread my legs wider and his stubble rubs on my skin as he blows air on my heated core. I quake under his wandering hands. Every nerve in my body responds to his touch. I can’t help but arch, pushing my hips against him.

Gideon chuckles softly, “Impatient, aren’t we? It’s not just you. I need to taste you so bad that I am losing my mind.”

Before I can respond, beg him to touch me, his tongue flicks out, just barely grazing my clit. My hands clutch at his shoulders as I gasp his name. They instinctively tug at his hair, urging him closer. With the tip of his tongue, he traces the wet folds of my quivering pussy.

“Keep your eyes on me, baby,” saying that, he grips my thighs and pulls them over his shoulders, wrapping them around his back. I nearly jump out of my skin when his mouth descends on me and his lips suck my clit into his mouth.

“Oh, God, Gideon! What are you doing to me?” I moan, throwing my head back against the headrest, the words tumbling from my lips unbidden.

His response is a low growl, “I am fucking your sweet cunt with my tongue and I won’t stop until I make you scream my name so loud it will echo off the mountains.”

Gideon alternates between licking and sucking, his chin rubbing on my wet folds. His tongue dances over my clit, before dipping lower and teasing my pussy hole. Each movement is deliberate, meant to drive me insane. My pussy constricts with emptiness, cramping hard. His hands clasp around my thighs, caging his face between my legs as he torments my heated pussy.

His thumb joins the fray, rubbing my soft swollen nub. The friction of his rough skin against my slick folds makes me pant and I pull his face closer against my pussy. I can feel myself getting closer, the tension rising with each flick of his tongue, each caress on his thumb. Gideon senses it too and picks up the pace.

He pulls my hips up in the air as he fucks my cunt with his tongue like a thirsty madman. My body tenses, and I come apart on his tongue. I scream his name, convulsing under his mouth. The room fills with the sound of my ragged breaths and his satisfied groan. He doesn’t stop, prolonging my orgasm, drawing it out until I am utterly spent.

He places my ass gently on my sofa as he trails soft kisses up my belly. His hands cup my face, thumbs caressing my cheeks and he pulls my lips in a blinding fervent kiss. I am still breathless, but when I taste my salty warmth on his lips, I kiss back with renewed fervor.

Pulling back, he whispers against my lips, “I want you to remember how you came on my tongue. I want you to remember your taste on my lips.”



With that, he captures my lips in another bruising kiss and pulls me onto his lap in one decisive motion. I fall on him, straddling him. I feel his hard cock wedge between my swollen folds and his heat scalds me.

His voice a rough, guttural rasp, Gideon says, "I need to be inside you right now."

"I need all of you, Gideon," my voice trembles with a mix of need and urgency.

He understands what I mean, his strong and possessive hands tighten on my hips. "Are you sure?" he asks, his eyes searching mine for any hint of hesitation. "I'm clean."

"So am I," I tell him, and grind on his throbbing cock. He chokes on air, and with his fingers digging into my flesh, he lifts me up and places his cock against my hole. A loud moan escapes my lips and my thighs quiver as he begins to lower me on his rigid cock.

"Oh, fuck, yes!" I gasp, my nails creating dark half-moons on his body. A stinging mix of pleasure and pain courses runs through my veins as his thick and heavy cock stretches me. I throw my head back and whimper, my long curls tickling my ass, as Gideon begins to thrust up into me.

Gideon's eyes turn dark, almost feral as he wraps his palm around my throat, pulling me closer to him. He commands, his voice wild with lust, "Ride my cock, Ariel. I am dying to feel your thirsty cunt come around me."

I begin to jump on him, my need driving me to lift myself and lower back down onto his hard and strained cock. He meets me thrust for thrust, fucking my cunt deeply over and over. The sopping sound of his cock in my cunt makes me bite my lip to reign in the tumbling moans. It becomes a losing battle however, when his hands move to my breasts, pinching and rolling my nipples. I clench down on his cock and

his breath hitches, pulling harder on my nipples.

“I’m so close, Gideon. Please don’t stop,” I half-beg, half-scream at him, my body trembling under the intensity.

“Fuck Ariel, I can’t stop fucking you any more than I can stop breathing,” Gideon wraps his arms around my waist, halting my movements and pinning me in his cage. I see stars as he begins to pound fiercely in my weeping cunt. His thrusts become erratic, the head of his cock hammering on the sensitive spot inside me, and he drives his cock into me with a relentless force.

He fists my hair and pulls hard on it, baring my throat to his lips. I whine at the sharp pain but my pussy walls clamp hard on his cock when he bites on the juncture of my neck. “Come for me, Ariel. Let me feel you come on my cock, baby.”

His words are my undoing. I feel myself spiral out of control and the orgasm explodes in my veins like fireworks. Gideon follows me over the edge with hard thrusts, his grip on me bruising, as he fills my cunt with his cum. Once he has emptied himself deep into me, he gently pulls himself out.

I collapse onto Gideon, feeling limbless. His chest rumbles in laughter as he holds me close, and wrapping my legs around his waist, carries me to the bedroom. He settles me down on the soft sheets and pulls my back against his chest, nestling me in his arms.

“Have I told you how incredible you are?” he murmurs, placing a soft kiss on my temple.

My eyelids feel like they’ve turned to stone, and a yawn muffles my reply. “Ditto.”

I hear his soft laugh against my ear as he cuddles us under the thick and furry blanket.

“I bet you’re going to hog all the blanket again tonight,” he teases.

My eyes close, teetering on the edge of sleep, I pull the blanket tighter around me to prove him right. I smile, “Don’t worry, soon it will be just you and your blankets again.”

Just as I nearly drift off, I feel a lingering kiss on my forehead. I barely hear him whisper, “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:40 am*

A jarring ringtone slices through the silence, jolting me awake. My pulse races as I realize I'm nestled against Gideon, his hand cupping my breast and the other wrapped around my waist. Desire flares but gets immediately doused when the phone rings again.

Gideon stirs, his body tensing. He reaches over me to grab his phone from the nightstand. His eyebrows furrow when he sees the caller ID.

"Hello?" His rough, sleep-laden voice sharpens as he listens. The deep timbre sends a thrill through me.

"Calm down, Mrs. Harris. Tell me what's wrong," he says, stifling a yawn.

I see that I did hog the entire blanket and shift to move away, but Gideon clicks his tongue in denial and pulls me flush against him. I feel his morning wood poking my ass and instinctively rub against it. I stifle a laugh into his arm as his breath catches.

"How is he doing now?" Gideon asks Mrs. Harris, who I pray doesn't hear the simmering lust in his voice. Especially not the moan I can't contain when Gideon begins teasing me back by rubbing his thumb against my clit.

"I'll be right there," saying that, Gideon hangs up, and slips his finger into my throbbing pussy. He adds another finger and begins to pump them in and out of me at a leisurely pace.

"Did you sleep well?" his question gets lost in the kisses he trails from my neck to shoulders.

He expects me to put words together in a sentence when he is fingering me? I laugh at the absurdity of it which quickly turns into a moan when his fingers curl inside me.

His phone rings again, breaking the smell. Reluctantly, Gideon withdraws his hand but kisses loudly on my cheek to soothe the sting.

He sits up and stretches like a panther, muscles clenching in his ripped body. Turning to look at me, he licks his fingers one by one. My insides melt at the fire of his gaze. “Mm, dessert in the morning. It’s going to be a good day.”

I swat at him jokingly and pull up the blanket over my bare body. Gideon chuckles in response and swings his legs out of bed.

“Mrs. Harris’ car won’t start and she needs to take Billy to the vet. I need to go help her,” He informs me, pulling on his jeans, the denim sliding over his strong thighs with a soft rustle.

I sit up, inhaling his woodsy scent on the blanket. Gideon opens the curtains and the glittering sunlight reflects in his emerald eyes. His brown curls gleam like molten chocolate, and shadows define his abs. Thick veins run through his muscular arms, more pronounced around his wrist where he is putting on a black-dial watch.

Chocolate has always been my favorite, but looking at a shirtless Gideon, I realize it no longer holds first place. Last night’s memory of tasting his abs sneaks into my mind, and I lick my bottom lip.

“Ariel, you do that once more and I’ll put that tongue to good use,” he vows with a predatory look.

I shiver at his delicious threat, suddenly desperate to know what he tastes like.

“Then why don’t you?” I ask as I pull my lower lip with my teeth and wiggle my eyebrows.

He groans and mutters something that sounds like “You’re killing me” under his breath. He walks towards me with a lethal grace, leans down and grabs my chin, and pulls me into a scorching hot kiss.

His lips move against me, his tongue darting to lick them. He sucks my lower lip into his mouth, biting firmly, and I melt into his embrace. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb caressing my soft skin. He breaks the kiss and rests his head against my forehead.

Gideon shakes his head, “For the kind of trouble Billy gets into, its good he has nine lives.”

I mockingly pat Gideon on his shoulder, showing my pity, and he nods sadly before moving away. I look out the window and see that a calm and serene morning has replaced the stormy night. Birds chirp, perched on a branch next to the cabin.

Gideon’s expression turns serious. “Once I’m back, I’ll make you blueberry pancakes. And after that, we’ll go meet Liam.”

The dismissive attitude of the last man in uniform I spoke to surfaces in my mind.

“He’s a good man, someone I trust with my life. He will believe you. And I’ll be right there by your side,” he assures me, running his knuckle over my cheek.

I only nod in response, lost in his touch.

Gideon pulls a thick plaid shirt, the fabric rustling softly as he buttons it up and grabs his keys. He turns to leave but I grip his wrist. “Be safe,” I try to sound casual but

can't help the worry that creeps into my voice. The memory of that horrific nightmare still clings to me, making me reluctant to see him go, even for a little while.

He studies my face intently and then presses a quick kiss to my forehead, "I always am." He lingers at my temple, slowly tilts my chin with his finger, and gives me a soft kiss.

His phone rings again, shattering the spell. He pulls back with a frustrated groan and I smile at his exasperation. "Why did the storm have to end?" he jokes, and his eyes light up at my laughter.

"My number is on the counter. Call me if you need anything," he orders me sternly. I put my hands up in surrender.

"Don't worry. It will all be over soon," he says, and with one last lingering look, he walks out of the room. He calls out once more before I hear the front door close behind him.

His words linger, a punch to the gut. Does he mean everything between us too? The thought makes my heart ache. With Gideon gone, the room feels colder. I pull the covers up, inhaling the last traces of his scent.

I get up slowly, feeling sluggish. Outside, the world is fresh and calm after the storm, a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me. The thought of losing Gideon, of everything between us coming to an end, fills me with a deep sorrow.

I walk into the empty living room. The silence amplifies old memories of baking pies with Grandma. After her death, watching Grandpa fade away was heart-wrenching. I miss them so much every day, but I feel closer to them staying here. Their essence still lingers in the corners of this home.

Seeing the flour jar on the counter, I decide to bake Grandma's favorite baguette. I gather the ingredients, preheat the oven, and knead the dough, its cool softness soothing me. The scent of yeast fills the air as I sip coffee by the front door. Tiny snowflakes still fall gently to the ground, leaving it covered in a delicate coat of ice.

I think back to the summer picnics by the lake, filled with sandwiches and stories. My heart heavy with memories, I decide to visit the lake again.

I tuck the freshly baked bread in a box, leaving a note for Gideon, then bundle up in his hoodie and shoes. After locking up with the spare key, I step outside.

The earthy scent of damp soil mingled with the crisp, clean air fills my lungs. I find the trail to the lake through the woods. Each leaf sparkles in the sunlight like tiny emeralds.

The ground is slick, frozen mud and twisted roots forcing me to limp cautiously. My wounded leg throbs, but I press on, half-limping my way around the gnarled roots.

The lake, locally known as the 'mirror of the mountain,' stretches before me, its icy surface cracked and bubbled. The ice, clear in places, shows glimpses of the dark water beneath it.

I look around and find it easily—spot the square rock jutting into the lake. Walking to its far edge, I lean down and spot the initials "AK" I carved long ago.

In the solitude of the moment, my mind wanders to Gideon. Memories of last night with him warm my cheeks despite the cold. The thought of leaving him twists my heart. I pull out my phone, relieved to see a signal.

I call Sam, but when it goes unanswered, I leave a voicemail.



“Sammy, it’s me,” I say, my voice shaky. “No signal out here, or I’d have called sooner. It’s been crazy.”

I tell her about Gideon. “I broke into his house, and instead of kicking me out, he took care of me—in more ways than one.” I chuckle, shaping snow into a ball, my fingers numb.

“You always say I don’t take risks, but I did,” I murmur. “It’s crazy, we barely know each other, but it feels so right with him.” I squeeze the snowball, the cold biting into my skin. My words seem to hang in the crisp air, echoing in the quiet mountains.

“But babe, I’m scared. What if he doesn’t see it the way I do? I’m terrified to ask him but I need to know if it’s real for him too.”

A rustle behind me snaps my attention. My heart pounds as I scan the trees. It could be just a squirrel, I try to convince myself, but a heavy knot of dread settles in my gut.

I remember the ongoing voicemail and quickly finish it. “Anyway, I could use some of your famous wisdom, so call me. Love ya, babe.”

I end the call and slip my phone into my pocket. I rub the back of my neck, feeling a strange prickling on my skin. The cold bites at my skin, stinging my eyes. I close them, drawing in a deep breath, trying to steady the storm swirling inside me.

A deep, angry voice slices through the silence. “So, is he the chosen one now, Ariel?”

Slowly, I turn and see a man standing a few feet away, eyes blazing with fury. I feel numb as I climb off the rock, only one thought looping through my mind—how did he find me?

Then it hits me. The barista from the new cafe around the corner from my apartment. This unhinged man with disheveled hair, shadows under his eyes, and a scruffy beard is a far cry from the friendly man who had smiled warmly at me from behind the counter.

“What about me, huh? You said I was the chosen one!” he shouts, his voice echoing in the stillness.

The accusation hits me like ice shards, and I flinch. My mind races, trying to piece together how a simple encounter over a latte could’ve led to this.

I force myself to speak through the lump in my throat. “Listen, whatever you think I said, I’m sure we can talk it out and clear the misunderstanding,” I keep my voice soft and calm, trying to placate him.

“There is no misunderstanding!” he snaps, his face twisting with confusion. “I know you chose me, but I don’t understand why you ran away.”

The wild look in his eyes, the clenched jaw, and his fists trembling with rage freeze me to the spot.

“I’m giving you one chance to explain,” he growls, stepping closer.

Panic surges, and my voice barely breaks through the fear. “I didn’t mean it like that. I swear.”

His anger churns like a storm, but a fleeting doubt flickers in his eyes. “No! I know you love me. It’s not just in my head, not again!”

“You came up to me at the cafe, radiant in that white dress,” he says, his gaze distant. Keeping my eye focused on him, I slide my frozen feet back one inch at a time, trying

to keep my movement invisible.

“You smiled, and I knew. I was so nervous, trying to muster the courage to ask you out while you finished your doughnut. The frosting on your lips...” His eyes fixate on mine with a lecherous intensity, making me shiver.

“I tried, but I couldn’t speak. Watching you walk away broke my heart,” he continues, his voice thick with frustration. “Then, a miracle. You paused, taken by the mountain picture on the wall. When I told you I took it, you smiled and called me the chosen one.”

His eyes narrow as he accuses, “You saw the emotion behind my pictures. You chose me. And now you have the audacity to say you didn’t mean it? I thought we had something special. I had plans—dreams.”

The sun catches his eyes, revealing the fury and madness boiling in its depth. The framed photograph on the brick wall of the cafe flashes in my mind. It had reminded me of Haven Valley and this very lake.

My hands shake as I try to stay calm. “Please, listen. If I said you’re the chosen one, I meant it about your photography. It’s a precious gift, isn’t it?”

He nods hesitantly, so I press on. “I was praising your skills, not us. I’m sorry if I led you on.”

“Shut up! I courted you, sent roses, followed you like a dog to take your picture, showing my love through your medium. And you? You run, leaving me with a ring and fuck a man you just met!”

My mind scrambles with the need to escape. The path behind me is blocked by the rock, and dense forest flanks us on both sides. I need to get to the cabin and call

Gideon.

Despite the fear gripping me, I snap at the thought of him tainting my home with his sickness, “All you did was scare me to death! I never professed any love to you. I don’t even know your name!”

His face ignites with a dangerous rage. All sanity flies out of his eyes and he turns feral, “How dare you!” His voice crashes like thunder in the forest silence.

“I’m Rick! I spent days and weeks after you. My mind was ruled by the need to make you mine. And you will be mine, no matter what I have to do.” His gaze, twisted with revolting lust, feels like a slimy touch, making me shudder.

“You want to play hard to get, huh? Fine. I didn’t want it to come to this, but bitches have to be taught the hard way not to toy with a man’s heart.” Saying that, he pulls a knife out of his back pocket. My eyes widen in sheer panic as the silver blade gleams ominously in the sunlight.

Rick lunges, the knife slicing through the air. In a split second, he loses his footing on the icy ridge, crashing onto the melting snow.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I run. Adrenaline kicks in, and I sprint as best as I can on the delicate snow with an injured leg.

Rick lets out an animalistic roar, “You can’t run from me, you bitch!”

The threat stings as sharply as the cold. I push through the pain, each breath ragged and loud. The snow slows me down, every footfall an agony.

Behind me, Rick’s footsteps crunch closer. I can feel him gaining on me. I scream for help, my voice breaking the stillness of the forest. The desperate cry echoes back at

me.

I glance back and see Rick struggling to keep up. His leather shoes slip in the snow. The sight gives me a flicker of hope. Gideon must have custom-made shoes for snow. But the gap is closing. Rick's anger fuels him forward.

The cabin looms ahead, peeking through the dense trees. I push through the pain, each breath a jagged shard of ice in my lungs.

As I near the cabin, my heel slips on a patch of uneven snow. I stumble, pain shooting up my leg. Gritting my teeth, I force myself upright.

Just then, Rick's rough hand clamps down on my arm like a vice. He yanks me back with a force that makes me wince. I try to pull away, but his massive build hulks over my petite body.

He shoves me, and I crash onto the icy ground. Snow floods my mouth and nose, choking off my breath. Desperate, I scramble to move, but Rick's growl pierces the cold air. "Gotcha now!" he snarls.

Terror grips me as I fight against his crushing hold. His fingers dig into my wrist, "This time I won't let you get away. You fucking belong to me!"

"No, I fucking don't!" I scream, but he backhands me, the impact blurring my vision with black spots. His knee presses into my wounded leg, sending sharp pain shooting through me.

"You'll regret playing with my feelings, you dumb bitch," Rick hisses, pinning me down. His hands wrap around my throat, strangling me. I thrash wildly, my vision narrowing as I struggle to breathe.

Just as I'm about to lose consciousness, someone wrenches Rick's crushing weight off me. I cough violently, my lungs burning. Blinking rapidly, I see Gideon wrestling Rick into a chokehold. My injured leg collapses, and I fall back.

Rick kicks viciously at Gideon's knee, trying to break free. Gideon lands a punch on Rick's jaw, but Rick fight back with a frenzied energy.

In the chaos, a flash of light reflects off the knife, blinding Gideon. Seizing the moment, Rick yanks me to his chest, pressing the cold steel of the blade against my throat.

The sharp edge sears into my skin like a branding iron. I feel its stinging pressure lightly dig into the soft flesh of my neck. I try to keep upright on my bleeding leg.

Rick's voice drops to a menacing whisper, his breath hot and stinging with alcohol. "Is this the guy who fucked you, bitch? Don't worry, I'll fuck you better."

"Let us go, you bastard," Rick snarls at Gideon, who watches us with a fierce, lethal focus.

"Why? You want her. I want her too," Gideon taunts, his voice calm but edged with defiance. "Let's settle this man to man. Or are you only man enough when hiding behind a camera?" He steps forward, his movement stealthy, unnoticed by Rick.

Despite his biting words, I can see the worry in his eyes. My heart aches at the sinking realization that this could be the last time I see him. My mind races, searching for a way out, but my strength is fading fast.

Rick laughs mockingly, "I'd love to chop you up in pieces for putting your hands on her, but I am not here to fight you. I am just here to take my girl home." He announces that and wraps his other hand around my waist, pulling me against him.

Gideon looks me up and down, taking in my weak condition. His gaze meet mine and he sees the terror in my eyes.

The sharp command, “Drop your knife, asshole,” slices through the air. Rick’s foul weight is abruptly ripped away from me. I turn to see a man in the sheriff’s uniform, his gun trained on Rick’s temple, his onyx eyes blazing with controlled rage.

Rick’s body goes rigid, and his face contorts into a snarl. He points the knife at the officer, but it’s a terrible mistake.

In a swift, practiced move, Gideon tackles Rick down to the ground. He twists his wrist until the knife slips from his hand.

As the officer pulls Rick away, Gideon envelopes me in his arms. The shift from Rick’s vile grip to Gideon’s warm embrace makes me sob with relief. I bury my face in his chest, inhaling his woody scent.

When I begin to shake uncontrollably, Gideon’s voice is a balm on my nerves, “I’ve got you, baby. I’m here. You’re safe now.” I cling to his promise like a lifeline. Hot tears stream down my face as I grapple with the overwhelming relief of escaping death.

I turn to see the sheriff put Rick in handcuffs. Liam Gallagher, I faintly recall the name Gideon mentioned yesterday. At 6’4, the officer stands taller than Rick, easily fending off his futile struggles.

Putting him in the car, Liam approaches us cautiously. His deep-set black eyes hold a concern that softens his stern demeanor. “You’re going to be okay, Ariel,” he says, his voice a low, soothing rumble.

“Thank you,” I manage to say, my voice shaky but genuine.

Liam's lips curl into a playful smile. "Hey, don't mention it. It's not every day I get to play the hero for such a beautiful woman."

I chuckle at the unexpected compliment, and nod at him once. He looks at Gideon, his voice dropping to a serious note, "I'll take care of him. If you need anything, call me."

The pain from my scrapes and the throbbing in my leg make me sway. Gideon swiftly lifts me up. He cradles me against his chest, pressing a tender kiss to my forehead, and carries me inside.

The earthy scent of yeast fills the air in the warm cabin, pushing away the lingering metallic tang of fear.

Gideon settles me on the sofa. He peels off my dirty clothes with a delicate touch, replacing them with his clean ones. I lay down, my body drained and numb. As I look up, I see Gideon's watchful eyes, and then the adrenaline crash pulls me into a fitful sleep.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:40 am*

I wake up shivering, drenched in cold sweat. The leather sofa is an icebox against my clammy skin. I sit up, trying to shake off the fog in my head. The new bandage feels tight on my foot and I immediately know Gideon didn't redress it.

Butterfly band-aids cover the scrapes on my arms.

The room is bathed in a muted, afternoon light filtering through sheer curtains. Gideon stands by the window, his back rigid, shoulders hunched as if burdened by an invisible weight.

With effort, I manage to get up. The need to comfort him pulls me to him and I limp my way to him. He turns to face me. His eyes meet mine, but his face is etched with a grim agony. Even though he is looking directly at me, his gaze seems to pierce through me, fixated on something I can't see.

I lean in and wrap my arms around his neck, whispering, "I'm here, Gideon. I've got you."

His eyes focus on me and he crushes me to his chest. His grip is bruising and desperate. He buries his face into my neck, and I feel the ragged rise and fall of his breath. His fingers dig into my waist as if afraid I'd vanish into thin air.

"Are you feeling okay?" His voice is muffled by my curls. I nod against his chest. He pulls back, his thumb brushing my jaw.

"I came so close to losing you," he whispers, his voice breaking as if the thought is too much to bear. His gaze drops to my throat, and he gently caresses the spot where

Rick held the knife.

“Hey, look at me...” I demand, my voice trembling as I see the mist in his eyes. “You found me in time. I’m here, and it’s all thanks to you.” The thought of what could have happened if he hadn’t feels mind-numbing.

His voice is tinged with sadness. “As soon as I could, I rushed back home. I thought you’d be waiting for me. But when I got here, the cabin was empty. You’d been talking about leaving and with the roads open, I feared you left without a goodbye.”

I see the anguish in his eyes, as if he’s replaying that moment. “Then I heard your screams,” he says, his voice cracking. “I ran out there and found you held at knifepoint. I saw red. It’s a good thing I asked Liam to meet us here.”

I run my fingers through Gideon’s scruffy beard, “So, what happened to Rick?”

Gideon’s expression darkens. “Liam got his details from the federal database. Turns out, he has a history of stalking. He was released from prison just over a year ago. Liam confronted him with facts and punches, and he confessed.”

I brace myself, feeling the weight of the moment, “What did he say?”

Gideon tenses, as if reluctant to share it with me. His eyes are filled with a mix of sadness and frustration. “He trailed you home that night from the cafe where you met. He placed a GPS tracker on your car. That’s how he followed you everywhere and knew you came here.”

The room feels like it’s closing in on me. My mind races with the realization of how many times Rick was near, how often our paths crossed. How will I exorcise his phantom presence out of my mind?

Gideon’s voice is a soft murmur, “Once you’re feeling better, we’ll go to the

courthouse and get a restraining order. It's over now, Ariel. He's gone and you are safe."

But the fear churns inside me. I clutch his shirt, my knuckles white with the force of my grip. "Gideon," I say, pointing to my temple, "He's not gone, not from here."

He watches me, his expression blank.

I force the words out, feeling exposed and raw. "I still feel trapped in his arms. What if the ghost of his touch, the constant need to look over my shoulder, never goes away?"

Gideon grips my chin and lifts my face, his tender touch a sharp contrast to the violent rage blazing in his eyes. "Ariel, I wanted to rip Rick apart limb from limb for putting his hands on you. I've endured a lot in my life, but seeing Rick threaten you with that knife is what will haunt me forever."

The hunger in his gaze betrays his dirty thoughts as he says continues, "You've carved a space in my heart. I will let no one be a danger to you again, I promise."

Gideon's confession crashes over me like a tidal wave. I feel the weight of his words and the storm of emotions they carry. Tears well up in my eyes, his words cutting deep into my heart. My pulse races, no longer from fear but from the overwhelming realization that I'm dangerously close to falling for him.

That truth echoes through me, and I wrap my arms around Gideon's neck. I crash my lips against his, molding them together in a searing kiss. A burning desire surges through my veins. I can feel the heat radiating from him, his rough hands hold my waist in a bruising hold.

Gideon bites my lower lip and I press myself against his chiseled body. My fingers tangle in his hair as he fists my curls and gently tugs on them. I pull him closer, my

nails digging into his back, demanding more.

When I reluctantly pull back, I smile at the hazy look in Gideon's eyes and feel my heart beating hard and fast as I try to untangle my thoughts from the overwhelming lust.

"I came here with no plan, driven by a desperate need to feel safe. In your arms, I found safety and so much more."

I see Gideon's eyes widen in surprise and I chuckle, nuzzling his neck with my lips. "I've never felt anything like this before. I want to stay in your arms, Gideon, if you'll have me, because you've come to be very important to me too."

Gideon's face splits into a big smile and he responds with his delicious lips moving seductively against mine. But just when I begin to lose myself in the kiss, he pulls back.

"We shouldn't, Ariel. You've been through so much today and you're hurt too," he tells me, his eyes dark with lust but concern shining through. His hands linger on my arms as he slowly withdraws.

I grab at his collar, not letting him move out of my arms. "Rick almost killed me today. Everything that happened today made me see how fragile life is. All I know is I don't want to let another moment slip away."

He grabs my chin and tilts my face up as his other hand nestles in my hair. His touch is no longer gentle.

"Ariel," he says, determination echoing in his voice, "I will touch and lick you, tease and worship this sinful body for days on end, so much so that you will lose track of time."

Gideon pulls me hard against him. His fist in my hair tightens. He leans down to my ear and his breath burns me as he continues, "I will keep you on edge, so fucking close, that all you will know is the desperate need to come around my cock."

His hushed words sound deafening in the quiet room. The feel of his hard cock against my belly leaves me breathless. Before I know it, Gideon flips me around with a sudden, fluid motion, and pushes me hard against the wall. The rough wood is cold against my overheated skin, and Gideon cages me in with his body.

I am breathless, and so is he. I feel like I am going to turn to ash as he traces a finger down my throat. I gasp when he rubs his thumb against my hard nipple poking through the sweatshirt. His eyes darken with a sinful promise as he continues, his voice a seductive rumble. "My every touch, every kiss, every lick of my tongue, every bite, every drop of cum in your tight pussy will banish his every trace."

Gideon leans back and looks right in my eyes as he whispers, "And then, after driving you mad, I will fuck you so hard and make you scream so loud that it will turn his memory into a mere whisper."

I gasp at his filthy promise and he crashes his lips onto mine with a fervor that takes my breath away. His kiss is a potent mix of desperation and need, his tongue and touch demanding. I part my lips and his taste bursts into my mouth as he tangles his tongue with mine. My fingers find their way into his hair, tugging him closer as if I could fuse us together.

His kiss is hot and insistent against my sensitive skin, marking me as his. His ragged breath matches the pounding of my heart. His lips close on the throbbing nerve on my neck and he bites, hard.

An unfamiliar combination of pain and pleasure floods through me, pulling a strangled moan from my throat. His roaming hands move to my ass and he grabs them as he pulls me against his hard cock. My back arches against the wood behind

me, and I anchor myself by tugging at his shirt.

Gideon rips open his shirt that I am wearing. The buttons clatter on the ground. There is a lingering chill in the air but it's his dark eyes that gives me goosebumps. Unable to stay away, he recaptures my lips in a heart-melting kiss as he takes each breast in his hands. I moan into our kiss when he rubs his rough thumbs over my nipples.

Suddenly, I am overcome with a wild urge to drive him crazy, as crazy as he is making me. Drunk on this need, I reach down and cup his hard cock straining against the denim. Gideon freezes and I swallow his groan as I rub, feeling his heat on my palm. He pulls back, and his eyes meet mine, wild and simmering with need.

I open the fly of his jeans and his cock springs free, making my pussy throb in delight. My fingers glide over the silky skin of his hard length with a slow, deliberate rhythm. I slide my thumb over the sensitive head of his cock, smearing the bead of moisture that's gathered there. His hips jerk involuntarily. The reaction is instant—visceral, and it sends a surge of power through me.

“Ah, fuck,” he hisses when I gently squeeze and move my hand in a twisting motion. His eyes darken, the usual emerald eyes now almost black, pupils blown wide with lust.

I stroke him harder, faster, watching the way his face contorts with pleasure, the way his muscles strain as he fights to keep his control. With tousled hair, unbuttoned shirt, and a wild glint in his eyes, he looks as if he is teetering on the edge but restraining himself. It makes me realize just how much he is holding back, and all I want in this moment is for him to let go.

“Gideon, I want you. I need you. Not to purge Rick's memory, but because when hold me, touch me, nothing else exists. No one else. You're all I want... all I need. Maybe I should show you,” I purr and drop to my knees before him, the icy chill of the floor seeping through my clothes.

I look up at him and his smoldering eyes fuel the fire already burning hot and low in my pussy. I press my thighs together and lick my lips, catching the way his muscles tense beneath his open shirt.

In one smooth motion, I take his cock in my mouth, inch by inch, until the tip of his cock touches the back of my throat. Gideon chokes on air and grabs my hair until my scalp tingles, making my pussy clench.

Gideon jerks his hips, and a deep, guttural groan escapes him as I start to move, sucking him at a lazy pace. I swirl my tongue around the tip of his cock with each bob of my head. His taste explodes in my mouth, salty and musky. I moan around him, the vibration making his cock twitch in my mouth.

I can feel him trying to be gentle but the last string of his control snaps when I take him in deeper, gagging slightly. His cock pulses on my tongue, thick and rigid. I can't help but whimper when he holds me in place with a tight grip on my hair and begins thrusting in my mouth. I breathe in through my nose and dig my nails in his thighs, pulling him deeper.

Gideon watches me with awe and hunger, breathing raggedly, his voice strained, "I have dreamt about fucking your sweet mouth since I tasted these luscious lips."

The sound of his voice vibrates through me, fueling the fire already burning hot and low in my belly. His words spur me on and I hollow my cheeks, taking him in deeper. I suck harder, my hand stroking the base of his cock in rhythm with my mouth.

"Fuck, yes. Take it all in, baby."

The tension in his body builds, a coiled spring ready to snap, but I keep my movements slow, controlled, wanting to savor every second, every drop of pre-cum. I pull back slightly, letting his cock slip out of my mouth with a wet pop and kiss my way down to his tight balls. I take one into my mouth and roll my tongue around it.

“Tease me more and you will find me buried deep in your pussy,” Gideon vows, his voice barely more than a growl.

“Is that a promise?” I ask, my throaty voice drips of anticipation.

“It’s a guarantee,” his thumb caresses my cheek as I watch emotions play hide and seek in his eyes.

“Anticipation is a bitch, isn’t it?” I ask him, a wicked smile plays on my lips as I spread the drop of pre-cum on his cock with my tongue.

“Ariel...” His voice is a low growl, a warning, but there’s no mistaking the hunger in it, the raw, electrifying desire that pulses between us. Gideon goes wild, gathering my messy hair in his hands and shoving his cock back in my mouth. He tilts my throat so that he can thrust in deeper. Tears spring to my eyes but my weeping pussy relishes being at his mercy.

The groan that escapes him is deep and primal, and it reverberates through me. I slide my hand up his thigh, my fingers digging into the firm muscle as I take him as deep as I can, until I can’t breathe, until his hips buck and a string of curses tumble from his lips.

Suddenly, Gideon pulls his wet cock out of my mouth and bends down to kiss me. He sucks my lower lip and the thought that he can taste himself on me gives me a thrill. He pulls back, a playful glint in his eye, and the world tilts as he lifts me effortlessly into his arms.

His massive and muscular build is a perfect counter to my smaller frame and I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist. The move wedges my pussy right on his straining cock and I dig my nails in his shoulders, anchoring myself.

“It’s my time to satiate my thirst,” he nibbles on my earlobe and carries me with ease



to the bedroom. He kicks the door open and crosses the room in a few quick strides before throwing me onto the bed. I bounce on the mattress, a laugh bubbling up in my sore throat which turns into a gasp when Gideon jumps on top of me.

“So what am I to do with you?” he murmurs, hovering over my lips. His emerald eyes have turned onyx with molten lust, his pupils dilated. I hold my breath in anticipation.

“What do you want to do to me?” I ask in a throaty whisper, each word dripping with need.

He chuckles darkly as he trails kisses on my cheek, on my jaw, down my neck. “I can’t even tell you in words what I want to do to you. This is something only my lips can show you when I kiss you.”

He captures my lips and kisses me wildly. Tongue and teeth clatter and fight for control. He wins when I gasp as he pushes my panties aside and thrusts two fingers deep in my throbbing pussy.

The walls clench around his calloused skin and he pumps them in and out of me at a slow pace. “And my hands can show you when they touch you.”

Gideon curls his fingers inside me and my hips buck against him. I let out a shaky breath, my eyes fluttering shut. His teeth dig into the soft flesh of my shoulder, the bite stinging, and my pussy tightens around his magical fingers.

“And my body can show you when my cock is buried deep in your needy and soaking cunt, fucking you hard.”

Yes! A part of my soul screams in my ears. That’s what I need. His fingers move in and out of me at a torturously slow pace, and then his thumb finds my swollen nub. My eyes roll back in bliss when he starts trailing lazy circles around it. I feel like I’m burning from the inside out.

“Then what’s stopping you?” I ask, breathless with the need for him to do just that.

“If you’re asking me what’s stopping me from fucking you? The answer is nothing,” he thrusts his fingers in and out, and when he adds a third finger, my toes curl and my back arches off the bed. The pleasure builds, coiling tighter and tighter until I feel like I might shatter under the weight of it.

“I just intend to make you beg for it. Payback is a bitch, isn’t it?” he smirks and pulls one nipple between his teeth and the other between his fingers, cutting off my laugh. Agony and ecstasy melt together, burning me like molten lava.

“Gideon,” I gasp, his name more of a plea. He hears me, his eyes darkening with a wild hunger.

“Look at me, Ariel,” he murmurs, and it takes everything I have to open my eyes and meet his gaze.

“That’s it,” he says sucking my breast deeper into his mouth as his fingers pick up the pace, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. “Beg me, baby. Tell me what you want.”

The world narrows down to just him, his touch, his voice, and the way he’s watching me like I’m the most important thing in the world. I shut my eyes and beg, “Please, Gideon.”

“Look into my eyes and tell me. Now.”

Gideon’s dark eyes hold me captive as he rubs my clit harder and the pressure inside me boils over. “I fucking need you so bad it burns. Fuck me, Gideon, please!” I cry out, riding his fingers, mindless with desire.

“That’s it, baby, fuck my hand,” he growls, circling my clit faster as he fingers me

fast and hard. “Show me how you are going to milk my cock when I am buried deep in your cunt.”

His words shove me over the edge. My orgasm crashes through me, my muscles clamping down around his fingers. I scream his name, my body convulsing around his fingers. He doesn't stop, his thumb on my clit drawing out every last drop out of me.

I try to catch my breath and Gideon stretches over me, his lips brushing mine in a kiss. The aftermath of my orgasm still pulses through me, but his relentless kisses reignite the fire.

In a swift motion, Gideon flips me onto my stomach, my cheek pressed against the cool sheets. His firm hands grip my hips, pulling me back towards him, as he pushes my legs apart. He positions the tip of his cock against my pussy exactly how he wants, caging me under him.

He tangles his fingers in my hair and pulls them taut. The sharp sting on my scalp makes my pussy drip with need. The head of his cock rubs in between my slick folds, and a low sound escapes him, somewhere between a growl and a sigh.

I push my sopping wet pussy back against him and he presses his weight onto me. His voice, low and rough, vibrates with an intensity that thrills me. “You only belong to me,” he declares, a possessive growl underscoring his words.

He thrusts his thick cock into me with a force that rips a scream from my throat and only stops once he is buried deep in me. He traces the shell of my ear as he whispers the words that claim me, “You're my girl, Ariel. Only mine.”

My body responds to his every word, my pussy walls clenching around his cock, pulling him deeper. When Rick had said those words, my soul had recoiled in revulsion. But hearing them from Gideon as he fucks me feels completely right. He

pulls it all the way out before slamming deep into me again. His massive cock stretches me to the point of pain and it makes me whimper under him. “Oh fuck, yes! Only yours, Gideon.”

Gideon pulls my arm behind my back between us, restricting my movement even more. All I can do is surrender to this wild man, and I love it.

His thumb finds my clit again and makes torturous circles again as he begins thrusting in and out of my soaking cunt. He pants and hides his face in my curls with each thrust.

“I could play with your body until the end of time, Ariel, and still be greedy to touch you, taste you, fuck you.”

My body shakes under his, my hands clutching at the messy sheets under us, and I move my ass in rhythm with his cock. The smooth skin slides easily inside me, the thumping sound echoing in the still room.

I bite my lip and whimper as he rubs his thumb on the hard nub faster, breathing into my ear. “Oh, baby, this need in your voice drives me crazy.”

Each thrust of his cock and his thumb playing with my clit make my cunt constrict against his unrelenting cock and the tension in my body builds again. Gideon wraps one hand around my throat while his fingers press on my clit, pushing me over the peak.

“Come around my cock, Ariel. Let me feel you, baby,” he commands and I shatter under him. My pussy grips him in a chokehold as Gideon rides out my orgasm, and he intakes a sharp breath. The blinding wave of euphoria leaves me trembling and gasping for breath.

Gideon pulls out, flips me around and thrusts into me again before I have a chance to

open my eyes. He pins my hands above my head and I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. His other hand cups the back of my neck, tilting my head to look into my eyes.

He kisses me again, but this time it's different—deeper, more consuming, as if he's trying to pour every ounce of him in me. He fucks me with wild abandon, his thrusts both desperate and demanding. The room is filled with the sound of our ragged breathing, the thumping of our bodies and the creak of the bed beneath us.

Gideon's name escapes my lips in a breathless moan, and he responds with an animalistic growl, his grip on my hips tightening as he pounds his cock harder and faster into me.

Just when I think I can't take it anymore, Gideon pushes his hands under my ass and with an animalistic growl, begins to pound his cock harder and deeper into me. His balls slap against my ass, and the head of his cock hammers on my g-spot again and again. Our climax builds, the tension between us reaching a fever pitch.

The pleasure coiling inside me snaps with a blinding force and I scream, "Gideon, I am going to..."

"Look at me," he orders me. I meet his gaze filled with a primal hunger.

"This time, I want to watch you come apart on my cock," he demands and pins me underneath his heavy body as he drives his cock into me with an unhinged ferocity. My orgasm tears through me, splintering my soul and fusing each piece with Gideon.

Through my blurry vision, I see the last thread of his control snap and his thrusts become erratic, his hips moving in a frantic rhythm. My overstimulated cunt draws him in deeper, milking him and with a loud, guttural groan, Gideon thrusts deeply one last time. His cock pulsates inside me, filling me with his warmth, and his grip tightens on me as if he can't bear to let go.

Gideon collapses on top of me, our hearts pounding in sync. He rolls us both, pulling me above him, his arms a warm embrace. I close my eyes, savoring his steady breath beneath my cheek.

When I open my eyes, I find Gideon watching me with a tender gaze. He caresses my cheek with his thumb and presses a soft kiss on my swollen lips. A magnetic pull draws me to him, and my body feels delightfully sore as I stretch over his firm form. I trace his hard muscles with my fingers.

With a smirk on his face, Gideon asks me, “So?”

Mischief glimmers in his gaze and I know what he means but I play coy, “So, I baked you some bread.”

Gideon laughs, the sound deep and rich. He wraps his arms tightly around my waist and asks, “You baked me bread?”

“You skipped breakfast, so I took matters into my own hands,” I stick my tongue out at him. I push myself up on my wrists and ask him, “Hungry?”

Gideon’s expression shifts, a look of desire darkening his features. “I’m ravenous, baby,” he replies, his voice a deep rumble beneath me, and I feel his cock hardening a little under me.

“But not for bread,” he crushes me to his chest and pulls my lips in a hard kiss as he flips me over, rolling on top of me.

I gasp at the sudden shift and a flutter of excitement stirs low in my belly. “You can’t be serious, Gideon!” I whisper and pull my lower lip with my teeth.

Gideon groans softly as he releases my lip and traces it with his thumb. His eyes darken when I take his thumb in my mouth and bite it. He presses me into the

mattress, his weight a consuming presence over me.

“Baby, I’m insatiable when it comes to you. Let me prove it to you,” he promises and captures my mouth in a fiery kiss, his lips hot and demanding.

And that’s exactly what Gideon does all night. His every kiss reveals the bottomless depth of his desire for me. Our hearts intertwine as resolutely as our bodies, binding us together in a promise of unspoken love.