



Protector of Talon Mountain (Men of Talon Mountain #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He's all muscle, mystery, and danger. I should keep my distance.

After barely escaping an abusive relationship, I came to Glacier Hollow, Alaska for peace. Running my café in a quiet mountain town was supposed to be a fresh start. No chaos. No heartbreak. Definitely no brooding former Navy SEALs with stormy blue eyes.

Then Zeke MacAllister became our new sheriff.

He's gruff, guarded, and way too tempting for a man who clearly isn't looking to be saved—or to save anyone else. But beneath the hard edges and military calm is a man I can't stop thinking about.

Just as sparks ignite between us, Zeke's past crashes into our present, and I'm caught in the crossfire.

He swore he wouldn't let anyone in.

I promised I'd never fall again.

But some fires are impossible to fight.

Protector of Talon Mountain is the sizzling start to the Men of Talon Mountain series—where danger runs deep, the mountains keep secrets, and the hottest thing around might just be the man sworn to protect it all.

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PROLOGUE

SADIE

Anchorage, Alaska

Four Years Ago

I leave with sixty-three dollars, a cracked phone, and one boot.

I don't even realize I'm missing the other one until I'm in my Jeep, hands shaking on the wheel, gasping for air like it's rationed. My cheek is swelling, and my lip's split open. I keep telling myself that it wasn't that bad. That he didn't mean it. That I've stayed this long, so maybe I deserve... No.

I glance at my face in the rearview mirror and slam my hands against the steering wheel. Hard. Once, then again. It stings. No. It hurts. But it silences the voice in my head that still wants to scream.

I'm done. This—whatever it is with Brent—is over.

I drive until the gas tank dips below empty, and when the engine coughs and dies, I coast to a stop outside a diner with a sign that reads

Vacancy Upstairs. Café Hiring Below.

Somewhere off the highway between Anchorage and nowhere. I don't remember

making the turn. Don't remember blinking. But I'm here, and my legs work, so I use them.

The bell over the door jingles when I walk in. Warm light spills onto the floor. It smells like cinnamon and coffee and something deeper—like a place that holds its breath between strangers.

Behind the counter is a woman in her sixties with steel-gray hair twisted into a knot and eyes like she's seen it all and dares you to lie, anyway. She clocks my split lip, the bruises on my wrist, the way my right foot has a warm boot and the left has a plastic shoe I found under the seat.

"You cook?" she asks.

"I can, but mostly I bake."

She eyes me. Not like I'm broken. Like she's measuring. Nodding, she asks, "You got a name?"

"Sadie."

The corners of her mouth lift. "Maggie."

And that's how I meet the woman who saves my life without ever once calling herself a hero.

Maggie doesn't ask questions. Doesn't push. She shows me the stairs that lead to the studio apartment above the café and says, "You can stay 'til you figure it out."

She has more faith in me than I do in myself. At this point I don't even know what 'it' is. The first night, I cry into the pillow and whisper 'thank you' to no one.

The second day, I wake up, get myself dressed and head downstairs to make cinnamon rolls from scratch. I leave them cooling on the counter before dawn. I don't expect anything.

When I come down an hour later, there's a note next to the empty tray.

Not bad. Next time, double the filling. The signature reads, Maggie.

The weeks blur into months, and the months into a year.

I bake. I scrub. I learn the register and the rhythms of life here at The Hollow Hearth—which locals drink their coffee black and which ones need two sugars and a shot of whiskey before noon. Maggie teaches by doing. She doesn't offer praise, but she never hides pride, either.

She tells me stories in pieces. About her husband, gone ten years. About how she bought the café with nothing but a war widow's pension and a backbone made of steel. About the town, too—Glacier Hollow, nestled against the base of Talon Mountain, where snow hits in October and doesn't quit until May.

It's remote. Rugged. The kind of place people come to disappear or begin again. For me, it's both. I get stronger here.

Brent stops calling after the first month. I block his number, delete his name, erase the photos I was once too scared to look at but too scared to throw away. I start wearing color again. I start laughing again. I start seeing myself not as someone who escaped—but someone who survived.

Maggie teaches me how to shoot a rifle. "Because bears are dumb," she says, handing me a box of ammo. "And men can be dumber and far more destructive."

By the time a year passes, I've learned how to stock a pantry for winter, how to read a snowstorm in the shape of the clouds, and how to hold my own when a drunken logger gets mouthy. I'm not the same woman who stumbled through the café doors with one boot and shaking hands.

But I still wake up sometimes expecting the floor to crack beneath me.

Maggie never says it, but she knows. She always knows.

When she gets sick, she tells no one until she has no choice. It starts with fatigue. Then the coughing. Then the ER visit that turns into an overnight that turns into something terminal.

Lung cancer. Fast. Mean. The kind that doesn't care if you're a fighter.

Maggie never smoked a day in her life.

The town rallies, but Maggie waves off the casseroles and the pity. "I've had a good run," she tells me, sitting in her recliner like it's a throne. "But you—you've got decades left. You gonna spend them hiding or making something that matters?"

I cry then. For the first time in front of her.

She doesn't hug me. She just puts her hand over mine and squeezes. "I'm leaving the café to you."

I shake my head. "No, Maggie. I can't..."

"You already are." She fixes me with that stare again. The one that sees too much. "You think this place runs without you? You think I gave you a home for nothing? Nah, girl. I picked you."

I sit beside her until her breathing slows. Until the only sound in the room is the steady tick of the clock.

* * *

The funeral is small. Snow falls lightly as we lower her into the ground beside her husband. Locals huddle in coats, hats in hands, faces drawn. There's no pastor. Just me, reading the words she left behind on a scrap of paper folded in a flour tin.

“Don't mourn me. Mourn the ones who waste their lives being scared. I wasn't one of them.”

When it's over, I don't talk to anyone. I don't go to the potluck in the church basement or the bar down the road where her favorite whiskey sits untouched. I go back to the café... my café.

The door creaks the same way it always has. The lights hum softly overhead. It smells like coffee and cinnamon and ghosts. I lock the door behind me and walk to the kitchen. The apron she always wore is still hanging on the hook by the pantry. I take it down, tie it around my waist. My hands don't shake this time.

I roll out dough. Measure sugar. Start a new batch from scratch.

I think about the girl I used to be. And the woman I've become here. Not because someone saved me—although Maggie certainly did that—but because someone believed I could do more than survive.

I press my palms into the counter and whisper, “I'll make it count, Maggie. I promise.”

The oven clicks as it heats. Outside, the wind howls, and I no longer flinch.

* * *

ZEKE

The op went smooth. Quick in, quick out—one shot fired, none returned. That's rare. Rarer still? My gut staying quiet. No alarms blaring beneath my ribs, no static buzzing behind my eyes. Just the steady crunch of boots on gravel, the low murmur of comms in my ear, and the solid weight of my Glock pressed to my thigh.

We exfil at 0200, load into the bird by 0215, and I'm back on American soil before sunrise. Not bad for a Tuesday.

I should feel satisfied. We did good work. Saved a life. Neutralized threats. No civilian casualties. That's the kind of win commanders jerk off to in their sleep.

But me? I don't celebrate wins. Not anymore. Not when it all feels the same.

I land early, grab my go-bag, and skip the debrief. I'm not on rotation for another three days and nobody argues when I walk off base. They know me. I'm the guy who doesn't screw up. The one who always comes back. The one who doesn't talk.

Isla's probably still asleep. She likes her silk sheets and blackout curtains. Keeps lavender oil on her nightstand, calls it 'soothing.' Says I don't understand how to relax. Says a lot of things when she thinks I'm not listening.

The apartment smells like her perfume when I step inside—floral, heavy, cloying. The kind that sticks to your skin whether or not you want it to.

I drop my keys on the counter, boots still on. The place is too quiet. No music, no TV, just the muffled hum of the A/C. I move down the hall. The bedroom door's open, and my mind takes in and processes everything in the space of a second.

My training includes assessment and appropriate responses. That works well in combat, not so much in personal domestic relations.

One heel kicked halfway under the bed. Red lace thong on the floor. Shirt—mine—draped over the dresser. The moan that breaks the silence is high and breathy, followed by a voice I know too well.

“God, right there.”

Isla.

Another voice follows, deeper. Confident. Familiar.

“No talking, princess.”

My CO. Commander Talbot.

It takes me a second to move. Not because I’m in shock. I’m not. I’m just trying not to kill him.

My hand flexes at my side. One step forward and I could end it. One pull of the Glock holstered at my back and neither of them would ever speak again. As much as I might want to, I don’t.

I stand there long enough for them to see me. Isla gasps, pulls the sheets up to her chest. Talbot doesn't even flinch. His eyes meet mine, and there’s no guilt in them. Just something colder. Dismissive. Like I was a game they got bored with.

"Zeke," Isla says, voice trembling now. “I thought you were?—”

“Gone?” I say in a cold, flat tone. “I was. You’re welcome.”

Talbot smirks, the bastard. “I always said your timing was spot on, MacAllister.”

I don’t speak... I just walk out.

* * *

The next three days pass like a movie I don’t give a shit about. I tell command I’m done. I was supposed to sign re-enlistment papers. I don’t, and I offer them no explanation. I just fill out the papers to end my Naval career, pack up my life, and put my uniform and everything else that goes with it in the trash. The trident, the ribbons, the framed photos—they all go. Nothing feels like mine anymore. Not the rank. Not the condo. And sure as hell not her.

I head north along the coast, somewhere no one knows my name. The motel outside Seattle is a dump—spotty Wi-Fi, a cracked ice bucket, and a bed that squeaks if I so much as shift. I don’t care. It’s hard to care about anything except the hollow pit in my gut and the dead space where my heart used to be.

I run through my options. I could disappear. I could burn everything down. Killing my former CO and my ex-fiancée crosses my mind, but even for me, that’s a step too far. Rural Montana’s out—too far removed from the life I’ve lived since walking away from the ranch where I was the oldest of four boys. A few defense contractors reach out, offering checks and access, but I’ve had enough of D.C. and the bullshit that comes with it. San Diego’s off the list too—too many ghosts waiting for me there.

So I do nothing. For days, I just sit. Think. Stare at the walls until the silence starts to scream. Then, finally, I open the laptop. Not for news. Not for social media. I don’t need headlines or updates. Just a blank search bar staring back at me.

Jobs for Ex-Military.

Nothing grabs me. Security gig in Denver. Bodyguard detail in Dubai. Consulting for a private firm that used to be Blackwater and now calls itself something sanitized. Pass. All of it.

I'm scrolling aimlessly when I see it, buried under a thread titled Jobs Nobody Wants.

No header. No link.

Just: Sheriff needed—Glacier Hollow, Alaska. No questions asked.

That's it. No contact info. No salary. No sign-on bonus. Just a challenge hidden in plain sight.

No questions asked.

I stare at it for a long time. Because here's the thing: I don't want a job. I want a reason to get the hell out of my own head.

And something about that line—it's not just bait. It's a dare.

I click the message. It's one paragraph. Short and cold. Town of less than two hundred. No other applicants. Old sheriff died last winter. Mayor's desperate. Nearest real police presence is five hours away.

I read it twice, decide and then I pick up my phone and call the number listed. A woman answers. Tells me if I can get to Anchorage by the end of the week, someone will pick me up. I don't ask her name. She doesn't ask mine.

We understand each other.

The next morning, I'm on a one-way flight to nowhere.

And for the first time in months, I feel something close to steady.

I don't know what's waiting at the base of Talon Mountain, but I do know this...
whatever the hell this is? It's mine now.

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1

ZEKE

The plane lands on a strip of cleared dirt about the width of a decent driveway and the length of a bad idea. No tower. No hangar. Just a rusted-out fuel tank and a shed that could fall over if I breathe too hard on it.

Welcome to Glacier Hollow, Alaska.

The propeller sputters to a stop. I grab my duffel, slide the door open, and hop out onto solid ground. Cold air bites through my clothing, sharp and clean. No city stink. No diesel fumes. Just trees, sky, and quiet.

A man waits by an idling SUV, hands shoved deep into the pockets of a canvas coat. Late fifties, maybe early sixties. Clean shaven, but with the kind of face that's lived too long in the gray. That must be Hal Burton—the mayor who answered my email with a thirteen-word reply: If you want it, the job is yours. I'll be waiting. Later I wonder if that unlucky number would define Glacier Hollow.

“Sheriff,” he says, voice mild like he's greeting a friend instead of the stranger who's about to take over law enforcement for his entire town. He steps forward, offers a hand. “Hal Burton. Appreciate you coming all this way.”

I shake it. Firm grip, too firm—overcompensating. His eyes do that thing weak men's eyes do when they meet someone who won't look away: they measure and recalculate.

“How many applied?” I ask.

He chuckles, awkward. “Just you.”

Figures.

We don’t waste time on small talk. I toss my duffel into the back of the SUV and climb in.

The drive into town takes ten minutes. Gravel road, tree-lined curves, occasional tire tracks where they don’t belong. Every instinct I have is already working. Watching. Sizing up.

We pass the first houses—small, sturdy. Weathered. Curtains drawn, even in daylight. One woman watering her porch plants looks up, sees us, and turns away fast. A kid on a bike freezes when he spots the sheriff’s decal on the side of the SUV. He bolts down a side street without waving.

Something’s wrong here.

Hal keeps talking. “Town’s quiet these days. Gets a little stir-crazy in winter, sure, but folks mostly keep to themselves.”

“Drawn curtains and locked doors in the middle of the day,” I say. “That normal?”

He pauses. “We’ve had...incidents. Wildlife. Some petty stuff. Vandalism.”

“And the last sheriff?”

“Tom Davies. Good man. Went out hunting before the first snow. Didn’t come back.”

“That happen a lot?”

Another pause. This one’s longer. “Not really.”

We drive up to a squat brick building with an old, hand-painted sign that says GLACIER HOLLOW SHERIFF’S OFFICE . The windows are dark.

Hal hands me a key ring with exactly four keys and a tag that reads DOOR / FILES / CELL / SUV.

“Place is yours,” he says. “We cleaned it out as best we could. There’s a cot in the back if you need to stay the night, though Sadie rents a nice studio over her café, The Hollow Hearth.”

Mentally, I make a note of that. A studio apartment over a café. That might be just the ticket, especially if I can negotiate meals being included in my rent.

He hesitates again, then adds, “Look, I know this town’s not much, and it’s not perfect. But we’ve been without a sheriff going on three months now. Just having you here—well, it’ll help.”

“Help what?”

Another smile that doesn’t match the eyes. “Keep folks calm.”

Calm. Right. I nod once and step out. The keys are cold in my palm. Hal doesn’t follow me inside and hurries down the sidewalk, presumably to the mayor’s office.

The office smells like pine cleaner and old secrets. It’s dark, dusty, with a desk that’s seen better decades and a filing cabinet that lists to one side like it’s drunk. There’s a bulletin board on the wall with faded wanted posters, a town map, and a note written

in shaky handwriting.

Check the ridge. Again.

It's not signed.

I check the drawers—nothing useful. No laptop, no comms gear. Just a half-used notebook and a rusted-out Smith people's movements, their halting conversations when I approach, and the gutted, useless sheriff's office all point to something being wrong.

And it's in her. Sadie Callahan—sharp, wary, doing her damndest to look unbothered. But I saw it. The kind of guarded that's earned, not chosen.

Still, when she looked at me, there was a flicker, as if some part of her still believed that someone might actually be worth trusting. I'm going to prove she's right. If someone in this town is making her feel unsafe, they'll find out real fast what it means to cross the wrong man.

I catch myself chuckling. Funny how fast it's all turned. I've gone from not giving a damn about anything or anyone to feeling like this town—and Sadie—might actually be worth something. Worth everything .

She doesn't know it yet, but she's the reason I'm stepping back into life. And I don't walk away from what's mine.

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2

SADIE

He doesn't just walk in. He invades the café, taking up space... a lot of it. This has to be the man Mayor Burton hired as the new sheriff, Zeke MacAllister. The rumor around town is that he's a former Navy SEAL, and he has that look about him.

He's not the loud kind of big, either. Not like the loggers who swagger in smelling of diesel and frozen sweat, or the out-of-towners who talk too much to make up for being out of their element. No. Zeke MacAllister is the kind of big that doesn't need noise. He walks like someone who knows the floor will move for him. He doesn't just take up physical space, he takes up the air and everything else around him. He has shoulders that look as if someone carved them from stone. He's all clean lines and tactical stillness. His mere presence shifts the whole feel of the café, like the room adjusts around him without his even having to ask.

I watch him like a hawk from behind the counter. His eyes, in turn, sweep the room. Just once. That's all it takes. It's not casual. It's not curious. It's clinical. Calculating. He's checking for exits, threats, faces. Like he's still on a mission and this is enemy territory.

My pulse jumps.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't introduce himself. Just orders black coffee and a blueberry muffin like it's a command.

And I give it to him.

Neutral. Clean. No eye contact longer than it needs to be. I'm proud of that. It's been a long time since a man shook me up like that, and I hold the line.

Or at least I thought I did—until I realize I'm still gripping the edge of the counter after he's long gone. My knuckles are white. My palms are damp.

I release the counter and shake my hands out like I'm flicking off the tension. Like it's just one of those things. A reaction. Nothing more.

He'll be gone soon, anyway. Men like that don't stay.

"You good?" Jenny, my part-time employee, peeks over from her side of the espresso machine, eyes narrowed. She's seventeen, sarcastic, and blessed with the kind of radar only teenage girls have for male hotness and emotional dysfunction.

"I'm fine," I say, reaching for the tray of clean mugs to stack.

"You sure? Because that dude was..." She fans herself with a receipt slip. "Like... wow. Intense."

"Military," I say.

"Yeah, like the sexy Navy SEAL in that streaming show where he never smiles and somehow ends up shirtless every other scene."

I shoot her a look.

She shrugs. "I'm just saying. If he wants a cup of coffee, I'll bring it straight to his shower."

“Out.”

She laughs and disappears into the kitchen to grab more cinnamon rolls. I take the moment to steady myself. To breathe. He’s just a man. A new sheriff. Passing through.

I’ve seen worse. Hell, I loved worse. But still... Zeke MacAllister doesn’t feel like a man who passes through anything. He feels like a man who claims a space and keeps it for his own .

Even the way he looked at me—calm, cool, unreadable—like he already knew things about me I hadn’t said out loud. Like I was a book he was already halfway through.

That should scare me, but it doesn’t. It... unsteadies me, which is far worse. Scary would repel me, unsettling draws me like a moth to a flame.

The bell chimes again, and I flinch, almost spilling an entire pot of coffee on my boots. Just an old man, Walter Barnes, in for his usual stack of pancakes and an hour of not-so-subtle gossip. I smile, wave him to his seat, and fill his mug without asking.

Routine. Predictable. Safe.

“New sheriff looks like he bites,” he mutters into his cup.

“Bites?”

Walter nods. “All coiled up and ready to snap. Like one of those trained dogs they don’t let kids pet.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like people,” I say, setting down the cream.

“Then why come here?” he counters. “Why take the job?”

That’s a good question, and I don’t have a good answer.

When I finally get a breath alone in the back hallway, I press my palms to the wall and close my eyes. I shouldn’t be thinking about him. Not this much. Not when all he did was look at me and order coffee and a muffin like it was part of some covert op.

But something in me stirs. Something I thought I’d buried so deep it hasn’t seen daylight in four years.

The new sheriff isn’t the kind of man to flinch. He’s the kind of man who doesn’t let others get hurt. He’s the kind of man, whether I like it or not, who just walked into my world and rocked it hard, as if he had every right to.

* * *

I close up and head out the back door of the café and into the alley. I make my way around to Main Street’s sidewalks and walk to the end of town. The cottage I bought two years ago is no longer a rundown, ramshackle shack. I’ve spent a lot of time, effort and money bringing it back. It and the two cottages on either side serve as the leading houses to gentrify the small neighborhood that juts out onto a small peninsula.

The cottage faces the bay, so I don’t see the note taped to the door until I walk up onto my front porch. There it is bold as brass in red ink and all caps:

KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT.

No signature. No explanation. Just that.

My heart doesn't just drop—it slams against my ribs and goes cold. My fingers hover over the paper, but I don't touch it right away. I scan the surrounding area—instinct, not logic. Of course, there's no one there. The neighborhood is always quiet at this time of day.

But still. I feel it. That skin-prickling sense that someone's been close. Too close. I don't call the sheriff—not yet. I'd called MacAllister's predecessor, and it had done no good. Basically, he'd patted me on the head and told me not to worry. Instead, I unlock my door, reach up to take down the note, step inside, and shut it behind me like I'm bracing for a storm. The walls feel too thin now. The shadows are longer than they should be. I pull down the blinds and press my back to the door.

The note is still in my hand. I should burn it. Or seal it in an evidentiary baggie, but I don't. Instead, I slide it into the back of my top dresser drawer and cover it with a rolled-up pair of socks.

It's not the handwriting that does it. It's the slant. Aggressive. Familiar in the worst kind of way. I've seen that kind of rage scrawled across bills, sticky notes, grocery lists. The kind of writing that doesn't just say what it wants—it dares you to ignore it. For a second, I swear I can smell his cologne again. Musky. Cheap. Suffocating.

But this isn't him. Different handwriting. Same message. Same sick feeling in my stomach.

The sheriff was probably right. It was nothing... is nothing. Merely a prank or a message meant for someone else. Only it isn't... and I know that. Because this is what he used to do—Brent.

Small, sharp warnings when I started getting too brave. A cracked glass. A slammed door. A 'joke' that wasn't funny at all. This feels the same, but it's different handwriting. The problem is that I'm not that girl anymore.

I go inside, fix dinner and sit curled up in one of my chairs by the fire—a shotgun laid across my lap. The next morning, I rise, lock myself in the bath and shower. Then I fix my hair in the mirror, touch up my makeup, and head back down to the café like everything is fine. Because if I stop now—if I show it's working—then whoever it is will know they have won.

By six-thirty, the café is humming as usual. Ada, from the library, comes in wearing one of her knitted owl sweaters and orders her usual: breakfast quesadilla with eggs, chorizo sausage, cheese, peppers and onions and a can of Diet Coke. She gives me a look like she wants to say more, but then just squeezes my hand and heads to her table.

“Storm’s coming,” she says over her shoulder.

Weather or otherwise? I don’t ask.

Joe from the gas station rolls in next, shoulders hunched from too many years spent underneath SUVs, trucks and the occasional car. I don’t care what time it is, he always smells like rubber and gasoline, but he tips well and eats slow, like he needs time to stretch the quiet and ease into his day.

“I heard we got ourselves a new sheriff,” he says as I pour his coffee. “I’ve seen him around town.”

“We do.”

He raises an eyebrow. “He real, or another rent-a-badge like that last guy the mayor brought in?”

“He didn’t strike me as the rent-a-badge type.”

Joe huffs a dry chuckle. “No, I bet he didn’t. That man looked like he’s got sniper eyes. Like he sees through people.”

I think about the way Zeke looked at me. Not in a way that made my skin crawl. In a way that made me feel exposed, but not unsafe.

“I think he sees a lot,” I say, handing him his plate with a breakfast sandwich with scrambled eggs, ham, onions and cheese on slabs of sourdough.

“Yeah,” Joe mutters. “That’s what scares me.”

I go back to wiping down the counter, pretending my hands aren’t still trembling from last night’s encounter with someone’s sick idea of a joke—the note. The difference between the new sheriff and my ex is a contrast that hits hard.

Zeke didn’t threaten. He didn’t hover or leer or try to shrink me with silence.

He just was. A presence. Solid. Quiet. Watchful. Like he’d taken in everything about me in thirty seconds flat and hadn’t found a single reason to look away.

I don’t know what that means. But I know what it doesn’t feel like. It doesn’t feel like Brent, and that alone is enough to shake me.

At seven-fifteen, the door opens again and for a split second—just one—my pulse spikes like it might be him. It isn’t either of the men who have been occupying my thoughts since last night. Not Brent and not Zeke. It’s just the delivery guy with groceries. He takes them into the back and heads out, leaving the room feeling cold again.

It’s a dangerous thought, the way I catch myself wanting Zeke to walk back in. The way I feel safer when he’s nearby—even though I barely know him. That should

scare me more than the note did, yet oddly, it doesn't.

* * *

It's nearly dark when I see him again.

The sun's dropped behind the ridge, casting Glacier Hollow in that steel-blue shadow it wears so well. I'm wiping down the counter—again—because I don't trust idle hands anymore. Not with everything I've learned about what creeps in when you stop moving.

And then he's just... there.

Zeke MacAllister. Standing inside the café like the bell above the door never made a sound. I glance up at it, almost accusingly. I'm sure it didn't ring.

He's still. Hands in his jacket pockets, jaw tight, eyes scanning the space like he's reading every detail, every object. Not moving. Just watching. Like a stone that decided to breathe.

My pulse stutters. I'm not afraid—but I'm not unaffected, either.

I wipe my hands on a towel and walk over to the register. I could ignore him. Pretend I didn't see. But we both know that'd be a lie.

Eventually, he steps toward the counter. The room fades out—the hum of the refrigerator, the scrape of a fork somewhere in back—all gone. It's just him, walking toward me, eyes locked. Not casing the place like last time. Not looking around.

Just looking at me.

“Same?” I ask, fighting to keep my voice steady.

He nods. “Black. No sugar.”

That voice—low, steady, calm—but not the kind of calm that comes from comfort. It’s the kind that someone has earned. Carved out through storms and fire.

I pour the coffee, slide the mug across. Hands steady—until his fingers brush mine. The contact is brief, but it sizzles like a lit fuse.

The other customers filter out. Chairs go up. Lights dim. The quiet settles in like it always does when I’m closing up. Jenny’s already gone. The last pot sputters behind me.

Then he says it. “I’m here about the studio over the café.”

I blink. “How’d you hear about that? It’s not listed.”

“You mentioned it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then it must’ve been the mayor...”

“Did he tell you it’s small? Loud in the mornings? And?—”

“I’ll take it.”

I cross my arms. “You haven’t even seen it.”

“I’ve seen enough. It’s close. I’ll be around if anything happens. Your café’s clean,

well-kept. I figure the apartment's the same."

My pulse skips. "You'd really live upstairs?"

He nods. "Short walk for coffee. Easier to keep things secure at night."

I raise a brow. "Café doesn't need a bodyguard."

He steps in closer. Voice low. "Not offering to guard the café."

My breath catches.

He doesn't push it. Just glances toward the back hallway that leads to the stairs.

"I'll pay over the rent to cover meals. I'll cook when your kitchen's closed. I'll keep the place locked up every night. What do you say?"

I swallow. "You sound like you're setting the rules."

"I'm the sheriff. Comes with the badge." A pause. "And I think you want someone to."

I don't answer. Not right away. Because maybe... he's right.

Finally, I nod. "Fine. Keys are in the drawer. You start tomorrow."

He shakes his head. "I start now."

Before I can argue, he's moving—locking the front door, making sure everything's sealed up tight. Herding me toward the back. He doesn't say a word as he picks up his coffee, setting it down on the newel post at the foot of the stairs.

Still nothing. Just sips. Watching me.

Not flirting. Not prying. Just... present. Like I'm something worth paying attention to. My throat tightens.

"I didn't expect you to start so soon," I say.

He shrugs. "I wanted to make sure the café was locked up and make sure you got home safe."

I freeze. The way he says it—it's not a suggestion. It's a fact. Like it's already his job. And somehow, I don't hate it. I should. I want to. But part of me—maybe the part that still wakes up to echoes of slammed doors and broken glass—wants someone to care.

"You checking on everyone in town?" I ask.

"No."

Just that. One word. Final. Unbothered.

"So I'm special?"

His brow ticks up. "You're exposed."

There it is. No fluff. No filter. Just the sheriff, cutting to the truth with a blade of steel.

"Right," I say, softly. Not sure if I mean it as acceptance or surrender.

He finishes his coffee. Sets the mug down. Heads for the back door.

I expect that to be it—but it's not.

He opens the door to the alley, waits for me to step out, then locks it behind us. His voice is quiet. Commanding. No space for argument.

“I'll walk you to and from your place every day. I'll open and lock the café with you. Every time.”

It's not a request. It's not even a conversation.

And I know—I know —I'll follow it. Not because he scares me. But because something in his voice tells me I don't have to be scared anymore.

He walks me to my door. Steps inside first. Sweeps the place like it's protocol. Then moves to the front and looks at me one last time.

That look.

It settles somewhere under my skin, like he's just left a mark there—something permanent.

He steps out as the wind picks up. I close the door, turn the deadbolt.

Just like he told me to.

I hear him walk away.

And I stand there, long after he's gone. Heat crawling up my neck. Pulse racing in ways it hasn't in years.

ZEKE

The following morning I walk Sadie from her cottage to the Hollow Hearth, my hand resting at the small of her back. She doesn't say much, just leans into me like she knows I'm scanning every shadow, every corner. When we reach the door, I give her a nod. "Be careful and call someone if you need to. I'm going to do a little exploring, and I don't know that I'll have reception."

"I'll be fine, Zeke."

I wait until she's safely locked inside before I turn away. Once she's ready to open the town will be waking up and daylight will be creeping over the mountain. I get in the SUV and head towards the other end of town. If anyone is watching, I want them to think I'm going in the opposite direction of the trails that wind above the town—where the tree line thins out and secrets like to hide. But even before I'm out of sight, I feel it. The town's too quiet. Not the calm kind of quiet that settles over a place like Glacier Hollow after a snowstorm.

This is different. Heavy. Artificial. Like someone whispered a warning into every ear and told them to stay inside, stay silent, stay small. My boots crunch over frozen ground, and the hairs on the back of my neck lift. I am reminded that almost since day one, I've felt something wasn't quite right in Glacier Hollow, and I'm going to find out what. So, I go where the noise usually hides—the outskirts.

Circling back, I leave the SUV parked behind the bait shop—careful not to be

seen—and sling my pack over my shoulder, heading north through the brush. No backup. No partner. Just me and my Glock, a thermos of black coffee, a flashlight and instincts that haven't dulled even after everything I've left behind.

The air gets colder fast out here. Denser. Trees hang low with snowmelt, and the only sound is the occasional snap of a branch underfoot.

This is where truth lives—out past the roads, beyond the signal, in the places people think no one will look. But I'm looking.

Several hours pass as my boots crunch over frost-hardened leaves and I move off the trail—because the real traffic doesn't happen on the trails. About three clicks out, I find it—a faint depression in the moss. A path so lightly used it wouldn't show up to the average eye. But I've followed insurgents through the Hindu Kush in worse conditions. I know what a hidden route looks like. This one's fresh.

I crouch, fingers brushing the edges of the tire track, cutting through the soft earth. Not an ATV. Not wide enough. Smaller. Motorbike. Too light for a hunting rig. Too small for logging.

The trail leads into deeper woods, winding through natural choke points and ravines like someone knows how to use the terrain to their advantage. I follow it. Whoever's running this isn't dumb, but they're not invisible either. I respect that.

Forty minutes later after discovering the track, I find the shack. Burned out. Half collapsed. It appears to have been abandoned for years—until you step inside and catch the smell—not smoke, not decay, but sweat, fuel and metal. All of it recent.

I pull my phone from my chest pocket, snap photos from every angle. Interior. Exterior. Close-up on the boot prints in the ash—someone stepped in and out after the last snowfall. Which means in the last twenty-four hours.

I check for tire tracks, shoe patterns. Someone parked out here. Then hiked in. Heavy tread. Same direction as the prints. Two sets. One heavier, one smaller. I document both.

Then I find something I don't like. A spent shell casing near the fireplace. Nine millimeter. Clean. No weather damage. Sloppy or left on purpose? Either way, someone's using this place—and they didn't think they'd be followed. Or worse... they don't care .

I pull a latex glove from my pack, bag the casing, and press two fingers against the charred wall. Still flakes. Which means the fire was recent, not historic—a burn site to destroy something?

I don't get answers. I just collect them.

Ten minutes later, I have a full set of photos and GPS coordinates logged. No immediate threats. No obvious stash. But what's here is enough to tell me one thing: Whatever's happening in Glacier Hollow—it's not random. It's planned. Organized. Hidden.

And nobody's talking. That's not fear of the unknown, that's fear of someone .

In town, people duck their heads and keep their mouths shut because they've already made a choice—to survive, not resist. They don't trust that I'll be here or that I can or will protect them.

I've seen it before. Afghanistan. South Sudan. Even back home, small towns with old blood and dirty money. You don't have to be running a cartel to keep people scared. You just need enough reach and the willingness to act without hesitation.

My boots crunch on the path as I head back, staying off the trail, quiet as a shadow.

The wind cuts colder now. The trees creak overhead.

And for a second—just one—I think about Sadie. The way her shoulders tensed beneath that flannel shirt. The way her voice never wavered, but her hands almost did.

She's seen this kind of silence before. Maybe not the same shape, but the same weight. She's not the reason I'm out here. But she's damn sure one of the reasons I'm not walking away.

I climb a ridge and scan the town through the trees. Everything looks normal from up here. But I know better than anyone—that's when things are most dangerous.

The sun has begun to drop by the time I clear the ridge, slipping behind the jagged line of Talon Mountain. The trail back cuts through town at an angle, past the old mill road and onto Main Street from the back side.

I have a decent layer of mud on my boots, the burned-out shack still on my mind, and a mental list forming of what I need to chase down next, but all of it drops away the second I see her.

Sadie stands just outside the café, arms crossed tight, body turned at an angle. Defensive.

A man stands in front of her. Mid-thirties. Lean frame, too wiry to be a local logger. Jacket too clean, boots too polished. Something about him feels wrong—like he doesn't belong. Like he's trying to.

Then I see his hand snap out and wrap around her wrist.

I don't shout. Don't think. Just move. I cross the street like a shadow with a purpose.

No noise. No warning. Just heat in my limbs, a hum in my chest that, in the past, always meant go. I slide in between them quickly, my body a wall of stone that separates her from whatever the hell this asshole thought he was going to do.

He staggers back, blinking like he hadn't even seen me coming.

Sadie's eyes are wide. Not scared. Alert.

"Is there a problem here?" I ask, voice low, even.

The guy looks between us, jerks his chin toward Sadie like she owes him something. "I was just talking to her. I didn't mean anything by it."

I take a step forward. "You touch her again," I say, voice low and flat, "and I'll give you something to mean."

I've stepped between men and targets before. Civilians, teammates, war zones. This isn't a combat op, but my body doesn't know the difference. My stance shifts. Weight on the balls of my feet. My hand itches toward the Glock on instinct, not threat. I'm not here to pull a weapon. I'm here to make damn sure I don't have to.

This isn't about jealousy. This is about precision. Control. The same way you intercept a predator before it strikes.

He tries to puff up, throw his shoulders back. "I didn't realize you were her boyfriend."

"I'm not."

That stalls him for a half second.

“But I am the sheriff,” I add, stepping closer, slower, “and I’m not in the mood to file paperwork.”

He swallows. His eyes flick to Sadie—looking for backup, maybe. She doesn’t say a word. Smart. I let the silence stretch between us, just long enough to make him start to sweat. Then I tilt my head.

“Do you want to walk away with all your teeth?” I ask.

The guy mutters something I don’t bother catching and turns on his heel. He walks off like he’s not trying to look like he’s hurrying—but he is.

I don’t chase him. I don’t need to. I already own the moment. I wait until he rounds the corner and disappears before I turn back to her. Sadie hasn’t moved. She still holds her wrist slightly away from her side, fingers curled around it—not dramatically, not weakly. Just... guarded.

“You okay?” I ask.

She nods once. “I’m fine.”

Her voice holds steady, but there’s tension behind it. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes a little too wide. Adrenaline. Or maybe it’s the way I stepped in without asking.

I glance down at her hand. “Let me see.”

“It’s not...”

“Sadie.”

That stops her.

She exhales and slowly uncurls her fingers. There are red marks where his grip had been. Nothing broken, but too firm for comfort. I reach out and run my thumb along the inside of her wrist, careful but sure. Her skin's warm. Soft. She doesn't pull away.

"Next time, don't talk to guys who show up like that," I say, eyes still on her wrist.

"I wasn't talking. He followed me out when I came to put the sign up."

My jaw ticks. "Then next time, call me."

She blinks, caught off guard. "It happened fast."

"I can be fast when I need to be."

Her breath catches, just for a second. Not because of what I said. Because of how I said it—calm, final, as if it's a promise I've already decided to keep.

She eases her hand back slowly; her gaze locked on mine. "You can't be everywhere, Zeke... not all the time."

"No," I say. "But I can be here. When it counts."

She opens her mouth like she wants to say something else, then closes it again.

I let the silence hang, then nod toward the café. "The lights are still on inside. You locking up, or am I doing it for you?"

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "I was getting to it."

"Not fast enough."

She shakes her head with a soft laugh and turns, walking back toward the door. I follow her in, making sure it's locked tight behind us, eyes still scanning the street even after he's long gone.

Because whoever that guy was? I don't like the way he looked at her. And I sure as hell don't like that he thought she was alone.

Inside the café, Sadie moves behind the counter with that kind of deliberate calm that only comes from trying too damn hard not to shake. She grabs a rag, starts wiping down a surface that's already spotless, and doesn't look at me for a solid thirty seconds. I don't move. Just lean back against the locked door and watch her hands. Her fingers drift to her wrist and rub over it absently, like she's trying to erase the imprint that sonofabitch left behind.

"You sure you're okay?" I ask again, keeping my voice low.

She nods—too quickly. "Yeah. It was nothing."

It wasn't nothing. I don't call her on it. I just keep watching her hands.

Sadie's the type who holds herself together even when she's cracked down the middle. I can see it now—the tension in her jaw, her shoulders drawn too high, the way her eyes keep flicking around like she's replaying it all in her head on a loop.

"Thank you, though," she says after a beat, finally glancing at me. "For stepping in."

I shrug like it's no big deal, but my stare doesn't soften. "You don't have to thank me for doing what any decent man should've done."

She gives a faint smile and looks away. "You'd be surprised how many don't."

That hits harder than it should. I don't ask what she means, even though part of me wants to. Not tonight. She's still rattled. Barely holding the line. She keeps wiping the same damn spot on the counter until she finally catches herself and straightens. Her hand drifts to her wrist again.

"Who was he?" I ask, voice steady.

She blinks, then looks away. "Just someone from out of town."

The lie's smooth... practiced and total bullshit.

I let the silence linger between us, clear and understood. I'm not here to corner her—especially not in the space she's accustomed to navigating. That doesn't mean I believe her. I observe her eyes, the overly nonchalant shrug, and how her fingers instinctively drift back to her wrist as if driven by reflex, not intention.

I've seen plenty of people lie. Most of them have better poker faces. Sadie's not lying because she's hiding something she did. She's lying because she thinks it's safer if I don't know.

"You should report it anyway," I say. "Let me log it."

She shakes her head. "I didn't recognize him. And he's gone."

"That doesn't mean he's done."

Her lips press together. She's not afraid of me—never has been. But she's afraid of something. Whatever it is, it's got her convinced silence is smarter than the truth.

I push off the door and walk around the counter, stopping close. Close enough to smell sugar and flour and the faint trace of lavender soap. She doesn't back up, but

her body tenses just for a second before she steadies herself again.

“I’m not here to crowd you,” I say quietly, eyes on her face, tracking her breath, the pulse ticking just below her jaw. “But if someone’s trying to scare you, that makes it my business. I’m the sheriff of a small town, and protecting the residents is my top priority.”

Her chin lifts, just enough to show she’s not folding. But her voice drops a little when she asks, “But why me? Why now?”

“Because I said I’d keep you safe.” I let the words land, let the promise settle between us. Then I add, “And I don’t break promises.”

She looks up at me. This time, really looks. Her eyes aren’t just wary anymore—they’re measuring, curious, maybe even wondering if I mean it. I let her study me.

Finally, she exhales and gives a small nod. “If I see him again, I’ll tell you.”

“Good, but you’ll do more than that,” I say. “You’ll call me.”

“I don’t have your number.”

I pull my phone from my pocket, tap it open, and hand it to her. She hesitates for a breath, then takes it, types fast. When she gives it back, I fire off a one-word text to the name she entered:

Sadie.

“You do now.”

Her phone buzzes on the counter behind her. She doesn't move to check it. Just stands there, arms at her sides, like she can't decide if she feels safer... or more exposed.

"Come on, I'll lock up and walk you home. I'll do a complete sweep when I get back."

I move to the kitchen, take out the bagged trash and put it in the dumpster, then come back inside. Locking the back door, I join her by the front door and escort her out, locking that door as well. The street's quiet, but I don't trust it. Not yet.

Sadie walks beside me, arms tucked into her coat, boots making little sound as we head down the sidewalk. She hasn't said much since I locked up the café, but I can feel her beside me—tight shoulders, steady pace, her body turned just slightly inward, like she's used to shrinking without realizing it.

It makes me feel good that she doesn't shrink from me. That says more than anything else.

"You always walk home this late?" I ask.

"Sometimes. Depends on the day."

"Don't anymore."

She looks up at me, half amused. "That an order?"

"Yes."

She huffs a breath—part laugh, part protest—but she doesn't argue. The cottage comes into view, porch light casting a soft glow on the path. It fits her—charming,

worn in all the right ways, but strong underneath. Like her. I scan the windows, the yard, and the surrounding trees. Everything's still. I still don't like it.

She stops at the steps, turns to me. "You gonna do a sweep inside, too?"

"If I wanted to, would you stop me?"

She lifts an eyebrow. "Would you care if I did?"

"No."

That earns a small smile. Real. She digs for her keys, and I step up beside her, watching the shadows shift around the porch. She hands me the keys. I open the door, drawing her inside and locking it. I make a quick sweep, ensuring that no one has disturbed the place. I walk back to her and hand her the keys.

"I like your place. It reminds me of you—strong, warm, comfortable."

"So I'm comfortable?" she says with a grin.

"You know what I mean. It's nice."

"Thanks, and thanks for walking me."

I nod once. "It's kind of what I do, but you're welcome."

She hesitates at the door, glances back over her shoulder. "Are you always this... intense?"

"Yes. Get some sleep tonight," I tell her. "I'll be at the café if anything feels off."

“And if it doesn’t?”

“I’ll still be there.”

That gets a laugh out of her—quiet, quick, but real. It settles something in my chest I didn’t realize was tight. Her lips part like she wants to ask something else. But she doesn’t.

She unlocks the door, steps aside, and smiles. “Goodnight, Sheriff.”

“Good night Sadie. Lock the door behind me.”

I step through the door; it clicks shut. A moment later, I hear the deadbolt turn.

And I walk away, knowing she’s safe.

I walk to the back of the café, let myself in and grab my coffee mug from the shelf, and start for the stairs leading to the studio above. My boots echo softly across the tile. When I hit the first step, I pause, looking back at the quiet kitchen and smile. It, too, reminds me of her.

“She might lie to protect herself,” I mutter under my breath, “but that’s not gonna keep her safe.”

Not from what’s out there. Not from what’s already started. And not from me.

Because the guy who grabbed her, who left that mark? He just made himself a problem. And solving problems is something I do well.

SADIE

It's five a.m. when my alarm buzzes low beside the bed. I'm already half awake, eyes on the ceiling, listening to the wind rattle the bay windows. The cold creeps through the walls like it owns the place, but I don't mind it. Mornings like this are mine. Still. Predictable. Safe.

I dress fast—layers, flannel shirt, jeans, thick socks, boots—and walk into town. I know I could drive, but there's something about making the walk each day that appeals to me more than the warmth and comfort of my Jeep. I head around to the back of the café. I never turn on the lights out front. I always enter the bakery from the back door. I usually leave the same way, but last night Zeke had walked me home, and we'd left through the front door. I unlock the kitchen door and breathe in the stillness like it's medicine. Then I put on my apron, get my baking supplies, and start preheating the ovens.

Cinnamon rolls always come first—yeast, sugar, butter. Cinnamon. I know the measurements by heart. The routine grounds me. It tells my body I'm here, not there. That yesterday didn't follow me in. That the man who grabbed me outside the café is gone. That Zeke didn't feel like a storm I wanted to step into. That he wasn't heat that stuck to my skin after he walked me home and checked every damn window like he'd claimed the walls as his own.

Flour dusts the counter. The scent of brown sugar blooms through the kitchen. By the time the second batch of scones is in the oven—cranberry orange—I've found my

rhythm again. Knead. Fold. Cut. It's not peace, exactly, but it's close.

Then, I hear boots on the stairs. I pause, rolling pin in hand, every part of me suddenly tuned tight. I remind myself Zeke lives upstairs now. This is part of the deal. No one's breaking in. This isn't Brent.

Still, when I turn, Zeke's already there.

Big. Broad. Silent as stone and just as unmoving. He fills the space with his presence alone, like the room shrinks to accommodate him. No knock. No warning. Just calm, steady eyes scanning the kitchen like he's assessing for threats between trays of muffins.

I don't look up right away. I pretend to focus on the scones. But I feel him. The air changes when he enters. It's not dramatic. It's gravitational, as if everything in the room tilts toward him. His steps are soft, but I know they're his. Controlled. Intentional. He doesn't move like a man killing time. He moves like a man who makes it.

I glance over and catch his eyes on my hands—not judging, just watching. Calm. Steady. And somehow more intimate than if he'd touched me.

"Coffee?" I ask, because it's safer than asking what he's thinking.

He nods once. Doesn't smile. Just steps deeper into the kitchen, and suddenly everything feels smaller. The walls. The space between us. My pulse.

I grab a mug—plain white, thick ceramic, no frills—and pour. I don't ask how he takes it. I already know. When I hand it to him, our fingers don't touch, but they could. That tiny space between skin and skin feels louder than the wind outside.

He takes the mug and sips once, eyes still on me. I wait for some sign—approval, comment, something—but all I get is that unreadable stillness he wears like armor. It's not cold, but it's not open either.

"I thought you might sleep in," I say, turning back to the dough. My voice sounds casual, but I can hear the edge in it. Too light. Too aware.

"I don't sleep late," he answers, tone flat and low, like he's stating a fact about the weather. "Especially not when someone left a mark on your wrist less than twelve hours ago."

The words hit harder than I expect. Not because he says them like a threat. Because he remembers and says it like a promise.

I busy my hands again. Muffin tin. Scoop. Repeat. "You planning to do a perimeter sweep before every sunrise?"

"If I need to."

I glance back at him, raising a brow. "Are you always like this?"

"Yep."

I shake my head. "A man of few words."

"A man who chooses his words carefully and doesn't say things he doesn't mean."

The corner of my mouth twitches, but I keep my smile buried. I'm not sure he'd know what to do with it. Or maybe I'm not sure I would.

He doesn't sit. Just leans against the doorframe, watching the oven like he expects it

to confess something. I move around him, aware of how close he is, how warm the air feels in that narrow space between our bodies. He doesn't move. Doesn't flinch. Just watches me with the same quiet intensity he wore when he stared down that guy in the street.

I speak before I think. "I don't make all my tenants coffee in the morning."

"Have you had many other tenants? Does that make me special?"

I have to stop and look at him closely. Did Zeke MacAllister just make a joke?

Zeke lifts the mug slightly—maybe to cover a smile. "Thanks; it's good."

That's it. No effusive compliment. No flirt. Just that one simple sentence. And weirdly, it lands better than anything sweet ever could.

I look at him for a second too long, then turn back to the dough, cutting the last scone with more pressure than necessary. "Kitchen gets noisy around six, just so you know."

"I don't mind."

"Good. Because I don't tiptoe."

"Neither do I."

His voice is closer now. I glance sideways and find him just behind me, not crowding, but definitely in range. He's looking at my hands again. Not the scones. Not the coffee.

The wrist. He's still tracking it. I pull my sleeves down and say nothing. He doesn't

press. He just takes another sip of coffee, then nods toward the front of the café.

“I’m gonna do a walk. Lock the door behind me when I go.”

I nod, throat tighter than I expect. “Be careful.”

His gaze holds mine for a beat that stretches too long to be casual. “Careful is my middle name.”

“That’s an interesting name: Zeke Careful MacAllister.”

He snorts. “You’re sassing me, aren’t you?”

“Am I?”

He shakes his head, and then he’s gone—boots heavy, the door closing with a dull thud. I lock it, like he told me to, then lean against it, exhaling slowly.

Routine used to calm me. But now? I can’t seem to stop thinking about him.

* * *

By the time I’ve unlocked the front door and the bell overhead jingles, I’ve pulled myself together. The scones are out of the oven, the cinnamon rolls proofing for their second rise, and I’ve scrubbed the counters twice even though they didn’t need it. I tell myself it’s just habit, routine. Definitely not because a certain sheriff walked through my kitchen like he belonged there and left my pulse skittering like a live wire.

I expect the sound of boots to mean a regular—the delivery guy, maybe Ada early with her owl sweater and a half-finished paperback. But it’s not. It’s him. Zeke.

Again.

This time, he doesn't just linger by the door. He walks in like he never left, slow and controlled, his eyes scanning the room out of habit, not curiosity. There's no surprise in his gaze when he finds me behind the counter. Just something unreadable—and locked tight.

“You forget something?” I ask, wiping my hands on a towel I suddenly wish wasn't stained with blueberry batter.

His eyes flick to the closed kitchen door, then back to me. “Wanted another look at your security setup.”

“Right. Because I'm sure the muffin case is a known danger zone.” I arch an eyebrow. “Planning to interrogate the scone tray?”

Zeke doesn't smile, but something shifts at the corner of his mouth. “Wouldn't be the worst place to start. Place smells like it's hiding something.”

“Flour and sugar,” I say. “That's the secret.”

“Maybe.” His eyes sweep the café again, then settle back on me. “Quiet in here.”

“It's early.”

He nods once. Then doesn't move.

I tuck the towel over my shoulder and reach for a tray of clean mugs. My back's to him, but I can feel him watching. Not like Brent used to. Not to control. To see. Which somehow makes it worse.

“You always up this early?” he asks.

“Always.”

“Is that a baker thing or a Sadie thing?”

I slide the mugs into the warming shelf, lips twitching. “Both.”

Zeke crosses the floor, footsteps steady, and leans a hip against the counter. He doesn’t ask for coffee this time. He just waits.

“You’ve been here long?” he asks.

“In the café or the town?”

“Both.”

I hesitate. It’s not that I don’t want to tell him. I just haven’t had to explain it to anyone new in years. People around here know enough to leave the past where it lies. Zeke, though—he has a way of looking like he sees every fracture line under the surface.

“About four years,” I answer, turning to pull plates from the shelf behind me. “Started working here. Then took it over when Maggie passed.”

“That the woman who owned it?”

I nod. “She was a lot tougher than she looked. She didn’t believe in excuses or weak coffee.”

“Smart woman.”

“She’d have liked you,” I say before I can stop myself.

That earns me a look. Not soft. But a little less guarded. “You think so?”

“She respected people who didn’t waste words.”

Zeke watches me as I set a tray on the prep counter. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You respect people like that?”

I reach for a set of ramekins, placing them in a carrying box. Keeping my voice even, I say, “I respect a lot of things, Sheriff. But respect, like trust, has to be earned, and I don’t just hand it out willy-nilly or without reason.”

“Those smell good. What’s in them?” he asks, nodding to the container.

“Baked eggs in stuffing with sausage. They’re headed up to a group of hikers. I can reheat them right before we take them up to their camp.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and when I glance over, he’s still watching me. Like he’s listening for the words I didn’t say. Then, almost casually, he nods to the tray. “You deliver those?”

I laugh under my breath. “I deliver, or have delivered, a lot of things. You offering to help?”

“If you’re short-staffed.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got Jenny coming in at seven. She’ll take them up.”

“I’m not afraid of earning my keep,” he says, voice smooth but anchored with something heavier. “Especially if it keeps you from dropping things.”

I lift the box, but I’m hyperaware of the way he moves—how deliberate it is. He measures every step and every word before offering them. Controlled men used to scare me. Zeke doesn’t. But he makes me feel more than I should.

“You always this hands-on, Sheriff?” I ask, trying to keep it light.

“Only when it counts.”

“That supposed to impress me?”

“Does it?”

I glance at him sidelong. “You’re a real confident man, Sheriff Serious.”

His eyebrow arches, slow and amused. “You like me serious.”

The tray almost slips from my hands. I catch it in time, but the clatter of ceramic against metal rings out sharper than I would have imagined. Zeke’s eyes track the movement, then flick back to my face.

I recover quickly. “That’s a bold assumption.”

“Not really,” he murmurs. “You’re not scared of serious. You fear unpredictable. There’s a difference.”

The way he says it—quiet, razor-precise—it cuts through my defenses faster than anything has in years. I swallow and look down, adjusting a coffee cup that doesn’t need adjusting.

“I’ve got to get these out front,” I say.

Zeke doesn’t stop me. He just steps aside, but not far.

As I pass, his voice follows—low, warm, dangerous in all the ways I’m not ready for.

“You let me know if anything feels off today.”

I pause at the door and look back at him. “Does that include you?”

He holds my gaze for a long beat. “I’m not off, Sadie. I’m exactly as I seem. That’s the difference.”

And the worst part is—I believe him.

The day rolls forward in a blur of coffee, orders, laughter that feels slightly off-kilter, and the steady churn of routine trying its best to drown out everything under my skin. It mostly works—until the shift ends and the café empties and there’s nothing left between me and the silence I’ve spent years learning how to survive.

Jenny’s gone. I wash the last mug. I count the money in the register drawer and close it.

And I’m alone.

I lock the front and head out back to put out the trash, lock up and head for my cottage. A second to breathe. To shake out the strange tightness that’s curled under my ribs since this morning, since Zeke walked into the kitchen like it was his to walk through.

I get to the cottage and let myself in. I don’t turn on the lights. Instead, I walk straight

to the dresser, pull open the top drawer, and stare down at the folded piece of paper shoved beneath a pair of wool socks. The note.

I haven't looked at it since the night it appeared. But I feel it. Like it hums. Like it's still speaking even when I try not to listen.

KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT.

I pick it up, unfold it, and read it again. Same red ink. Same message. No signature. No doubt.

My fingers twitch. I want to burn it--strike a match, watch it curl and blacken into ash. I want to erase it like it never existed, like that part of me—the part that used to cower—no longer answers to this kind of threat.

But I don't burn it. Instead, I fold it into a tight square and tuck it into my coat pocket.

The air outside bites, cold and still; even so I step onto the porch, wrapping my arms around myself and stare out at the bay. Normally, I do that from the comfort and warmth of my home, but sometimes when something rattles loose inside me and I can't figure out how to cage it again, I need the frigid air to enter me. I breathe in deeply and feel the calm settle over me.

Footsteps crunch behind me a minute later. I don't turn. I know it's him. Zeke doesn't announce himself. He steps onto the porch as if someone invited him. Like it's his right.

I hear the creak of the wood under his boots as he leans against the railing beside me, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the dark line where the bay meets the sky. He doesn't speak, and neither do I. We just stand there, shoulder to shoulder, not quite touching,

silence between us like a held breath.

The wind gusts off the water, sharp and dry. I take in a deep breath and then exhale slowly.

“You got people here who don’t want to be seen?” His voice is quiet, but it carries.

I stare straight ahead. “I’ve got people who want me invisible.”

Zeke’s jaw clenches hard. I hear it more than see it—the flex of muscle, the way his whole body tightens like violence might be the only answer he trusts. “That ends now.”

The words don’t come soft. They land like a command. And maybe I should bristle—maybe I should push back, remind him I’ve been handling myself for years. But I don’t. Because something in the way he says it—controlled, measured, absolute—makes the fear in my chest quiet just a little.

“You don’t even know what I’m dealing with,” I say, trying for distance that doesn’t quite stick.

“I don’t need to know yet,” he says. “I’ll find out. But whoever thinks they can threaten you? They picked the wrong town... and the wrong sheriff.”

My heart jumps. It’s not romantic—not in the flowers-and-love-songs way. It’s something deeper. Older. Like protection that doesn’t need permission. I glance over at him, and even in the dark, I can see the intensity in his face. Not anger. Focus.

“I can take care of myself,” I say, softer this time.

“I don’t doubt it,” he answers, and it sounds like truth. “But now you don’t have to do

it alone.”

That undoes something in me. It’s not fear. Not exactly. But it flutters low in my belly, sharp and warm. It coils through my veins and pulses beneath my skin. Want, maybe. Or the terrifying possibility that I’m beginning to trust him, and I don’t know if that’s safer—or more dangerous—than the note in my pocket.

The kitchen in the cottage is still. Not quiet in the empty way. Quiet in the held breath kind of way.

Zeke left ten minutes ago, his boots thudding down the porch steps, his shadow swallowed by the dark. I watched him go from the window, heart still pulsing in my throat like I’d just outrun something even though I hadn’t moved an inch.

I’ve been on my own for a long time. Even when I wasn’t technically alone. Even when Brent was breathing down my neck and calling it love. I’ve forgotten what it felt like to have someone mean it when they say they’ll keep you safe.

And Zeke... he means it. That’s the problem.

I lock the door. The deadbolt clicks like punctuation, and I lean my back against it. My hands are icy. Not from the air, but from memory.

I go through the motions—light the fire, make a cup of tea I won’t finish, tuck a blanket around my legs as I curl into the old armchair Maggie used to call her ‘thinking throne.’ The wind whistles under the eaves, and somewhere outside, a branch scrapes the siding.

I try to read. Try to lose myself in the pages. But I keep glancing up, expecting something. Dreading something. Wanting something I shouldn’t.

I pick up my phone. My fingers hover over Zeke's name—just Zeke, nothing else—and for a second, I consider it. Just to say thank you. Or that the cafe has been locked. Or that I'm... fine.

But I don't text. I put the phone down face-down and bury my hands beneath the blanket.

Fine feels like a lie I'm tired of wearing.

I close my eyes, and Zeke's voice echoes back— 'Now you don't have to do it alone.'

It wasn't a question. It wasn't an offer. It was final—a statement of fact. For the first time in years, I think I might want to believe it.

That's when I hear it. Not the wind. Not the usual creaks of the cottage settling. This is sharper. A scrape. Close. Too close. It sounds like it's coming from the back, near the kitchen window. My whole body goes still. My breath catches before I can even think.

I stand, slow and silent, the chill of the floorboards pressing into my bare feet. My eyes lock on the hallway as I cross to the hearth and wrap my fingers around the fire poker—solid iron, heavier than it looks. I grip it tight, the weight grounding me. Another noise. Softer this time. Hesitant.

I move carefully, my body coiled tight, every step deliberate. My heart hammers in my chest, but I keep going, because I have to. Maybe Zeke's right. Maybe this isn't over. Maybe I'm not alone.

I reach the kitchen, press my back to the wall, and angle myself toward the window. The curtain stirs slightly, but the glass is intact. Nothing moves inside.

Then I hear it again—louder this time, but definitely outside.

I ease toward the window, eyes scanning every shadow, and that's when I see it. The shutter. One of the hinges has come loose in the wind. It shifts again, slamming lightly against the siding.

I exhale hard, the tension in my chest easing just a little. There's no one here. No threat. Just wind and wood and nerves stretched too thin.

Still, I keep the poker in my hand a while longer. Just in case.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:46 am

5

ZEKE

The mayor's office smells like stale coffee and cheap wood polish. I don't sit. Hal's already behind his desk, leaning back like he's trying too hard to look comfortable, like he thinks if he smiles wide enough, I'll stop asking questions.

He's wrong.

I drop the stack of printed photos on his desk. GPS coordinates handwritten across the top page. He doesn't look at them right away.

"You find something?" he asks, tone light.

"I found activity," I reply, watching his expression with a sniper's patience. "Off-trail, unmarked routes through federal land. Fresh tire tracks. A burned-out structure that was occupied in the last forty-eight hours. Looks like a transit point."

He flips through the photos with a sigh that's too practiced. "Probably kids. Maybe some local loggers moving gear without permits. Happens more often than you think."

I let the silence stretch long enough to make him squirm. Then I lean forward, hands braced on the edge of his desk.

"Don't insult my intelligence."

Hal's smile wavers.

"This wasn't kids screwing around in the woods. The paths are too clean. Too strategic. They follow tactical cover, lead to blind ridges and cut through choke points. You know who moves like that?" I ask, voice low, deliberate. "Someone who knows how to avoid being seen."

He exhales, like he's tired of the game he started. "Zeke, we're a town of a couple hundred people. You think someone's running a smuggling ring through our backyard with no one noticing?"

"Someone is noticing," I say, standing upright again. "They're just too scared to say anything."

Hal's face closes up. Not defensive. Guarded. There's a difference.

"Look," he says, folding his hands together. "We've had... tensions in the past. A few folks with bad habits. I'm not denying something's been brewing. But unless you've got bodies or a name, I can't run to the state police with trail dust and ghost stories."

I nod once, slow. File him under what he just told me without saying a word—complicit or scared. Maybe both. Either way, I can't trust him. Not yet.

I leave without another word. I've learned over the years—truth rarely comes from confrontation. It's what people do when they think you've stopped looking that gives them away.

Back out on the street, the wind's sharper, the sky already tipping toward gray. Another storm is coming. I feel it in my bones.

I should head to the ridge again. Push farther west. But my boots turn toward the café, not because I need coffee, but because she's there. I don't make excuses. I don't explain myself. And I sure as hell don't ask permission.

I walk the perimeter twice. Slow. Purposeful. Not hurried. Just visible enough that anyone watching will know—she's not alone. Not anymore.

The people in this town will start noticing—if they haven't already. A woman at the gas station watches me from behind the glass, lips pressed thin. She doesn't smile, doesn't nod, just stares.

Joe narrows his eyes as he fills two five-gallon containers while I walk by. "You sure do a lot of walking, Sheriff," he says, toothpick shifting between his teeth. "Might give folks the idea you're sniffing around where you don't belong."

"Maybe I am," I say.

He takes the toothpick from his mouth and spits to one side. "And maybe you oughta leave well enough alone."

He heads inside without another word. I make a note of the boots he's wearing. Same tread I saw in the snow by Sadie's alley two nights ago.

A teenager riding his bike slows down when he sees me standing across from the café's front door. Even Ada, the librarian, squints out from behind her owl-patterned scarf as she walks past, her expression unreadable.

Good. Let them whisper. Let them wonder if I'm staying too close, watching too long, standing too still. I am.

Something's off in this town. Because I can't shake the tension that settled in me last

night after I dropped Sadie off, that stayed through the night, through the morning, through every minute I spent walking Glacier Hollow like I already owned it.

She's under my skin now. Not like a distraction. Not like weakness, more like a reason. I'd never thought I'd have another reason. I thought I'd come up here and hide—knock a few heads together on Saturday night and lose myself in the Alaskan wilderness.

At noon, I take a slow loop around the café's back alley and stop near the dumpster. A cigarette butt lies half-buried in the snow. Still fresh. No lipstick, so not hers. Sadie doesn't smoke.

I scan the fence line. Tracks. Barely visible, leading out toward the trees behind the row of buildings. Someone's been watching. Or worse—circling.

I mark it. Mental note. I take out my cell phone and take a picture. Putting my phone back in my pocket, I file it under the same list I keep in my head—things I'll deal with when the time comes.

The café door swings open and two people who look like locals walk out hand-in-hand as I approach the front. Sadie stands behind the counter, sleeves rolled to her elbows, hands dusted with flour. She looks up, sees me through the glass, and something flickers behind her eyes. Not surprise. Something more dangerous. Relief.

She doesn't wave. Doesn't smile. Just holds my gaze like she knows exactly why I'm here, and she's not about to ask me to stop; she won't have to. I won't stop until it's done.

The sky's gone heavy by the time I loop back toward the café again. Wind cutting lower, carrying that dry bite that always comes before real cold. Main Street's half-dead—just a few lights still burning, a couple of trucks parked in front of the bar, and

the flicker of static from the bait shop's old TV bouncing off the window glass.

I see her before she sees me. Sadie stands just inside the doorway, her back to the street, apron already off, her hair pulled back tighter than usual. She's moving slowly, deliberately. The way people do when they're pretending they're not tired. When they're used to doing everything alone.

She shuts off the front light. Turns the lock. I move across the street, slow and silent. She doesn't jump when she sees me, but her breath catches. Just enough for me to clock it.

"You walking home?" I ask, voice low.

She hesitates. Not out of fear. Out of calculation. "It's only four blocks," she says.

"Too far."

She crosses her arms. "You offering me a ride?"

"No." I keep my eyes on hers. "I'll walk you."

Her lips twitch like she wants to challenge me, but doesn't quite get the words out fast enough. "You're not asking, are you?"

"Not even a little."

She exhales through her nose. Frustrated. Amused. Maybe both. She pulls her coat tighter around her shoulders and steps out, letting the door fall shut behind her with a click. I lock it, double check it, and fall into step beside her as if it's already been decided—which, let's be clear, it has.

The wind cuts between buildings, snapping down the side streets like it's chasing something. She pulls her scarf up, face half-hidden. Her boots crunch against the gravel, steady, but she walks fast, like she's trying to stay one step ahead of whatever's been breathing down her neck lately.

I don't talk. Don't fill the air just to hear myself, neither does she. But the silence this time isn't awkward. It's tense. Like a coiled wire between us—tight, humming with something sharp. Awareness. Hesitation. Heat.

When we turn the corner onto her street, she slows. Finally she asks, "You always this protective?"

"Only when I think someone needs it."

"And you've decided I do?"

"I don't decide. I observe. You're jumpy. You don't ask for help. You flinch when someone touches you—even when it's gentle. You pretend to be okay even when you're not." I glance over at her. "That's need, Sadie. Doesn't make you weak. Makes you a target."

She's quiet for a long beat. Then, "So I'm a target?"

I nod. "And someone's hoping you'll break."

Her mouth opens. Then closes again. I let it hang.

We walk another half block in silence before she breaks it again. "You don't talk about yourself much, do you?"

I shrug. "Nothing to say."

“You’ve got the look of a man who’s got a lot to say.”

I give her the barest glance. “Are you asking, deflecting, or fishing?”

Her shoulders rise like she’s laughing without a sound. “Just trying to even the field. You push. You watch. You show up when I don’t ask you to.”

“You’re not telling me to stop.”

“Maybe I should.”

“Then do it.”

She doesn’t.

We reach the edge of her walkway. The porch light is on, casting a low amber glow across the slats. The wind’s stronger here, coming in off the bay behind her house. Her hair has come loose in the front. One stubborn curl brushes her cheek. I want to tuck it behind her ear, but I don’t... not yet.

Instead, I say, “Who left the note?”

She goes still.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she says, but it’s too fast. Too clipped.

“You’re a terrible liar. Besides, trying to lie to me is futile.”

She turns her face away, jaw tight. “It was nothing.”

“Nothing leaves ink that red and letters that angry.”

She stiffens.

“I saw you fold it and put it in your pocket last night.”

Her eyes flick to mine. “You were watching me?”

“I’m always watching. Especially when it matters.”

She swallows, throat working. “I didn’t want to make it a thing.”

“Somebody made it a thing the second they threatened you.”

“I’ve dealt with worse.”

“That’s not the point.”

She doesn’t answer.

I take a step closer. Not looming. Just enough to make her feel it. The shift in pressure. The choice.

“You said you’ve got people who want you invisible,” I say. “I need to know who they are. Or you’re gonna wake up one day and find they’ve made you disappear entirely.”

Her eyes shine, not from tears, but from the effort it takes to not let them fall.

“You don’t know what you’re walking into, Zeke,” she whispers.

I keep my voice low. Steel wrapped in calm. “I know what I’m not walking away from.”

She looks at me like she's not sure whether to push me back or pull me in.

Then she says, "You're dangerous."

I let that settle, then nod once. "Only to people who forget who I'm protecting."

We stand at the bottom step of her porch. The wind's ripping harder now, coming off the bay in gusts that cut through coats and settle straight in your bones. Sadie doesn't shiver, but I see her hand tighten around the key in her pocket like she's holding onto more than just metal. She walks up ahead of me, shoulders squared. I follow her, scanning the shadows, the tree line across the street, the shape of the car that hasn't moved in two days near the bend.

She pauses in front of the door. Pulls the keys out. Fingers hesitate over the lock.

"You always this bossy?" she asks, trying for light, but the weight's still in her voice. She wants to distract me. Or herself.

"Only when I care if someone ends up dead," I say. I don't smile when I say it, because I'm not joking. And she knows that.

Her breath hitches, almost like she wants to respond but doesn't quite have the words. She turns the key and pushes the door open. Warmth spills out from inside, the faint scent of clove and cinnamon still lingering in the air. Something lived-in and clean. A space that feels like her.

I don't follow her in. Not yet.

She stops just over the threshold. Glances back. "You're going to make me check the house, aren't you?"

“No,” I say, stepping closer. “I’m going to do it.”

I move past her, slow and steady, my eyes tracking everything. No signs of entry. No broken windows. The furniture’s undisturbed, and the curtains are closed like she left them. Still, I walk the perimeter—kitchen, living room, small hallway, bathroom, bedroom. Every door. Every closet. Every window lock. I don’t speak until I’ve finished. Then I come back to the front door, where she’s standing with one arm wrapped around her middle like she’s trying to hold something in.

“Clear,” I say.

She exhales through her nose. Doesn’t say thank you this time. Just watches me, eyes searching mine like she’s trying to figure out what kind of man walks into someone else’s home like this and doesn’t flinch at the intimacy.

I step into her space again. Not touching. Just close enough that she can feel the heat coming off me. My voice drops. “Lock it. Top and bottom.”

Her eyes flick to the locks. She hesitates, then reaches out. Her hand is steady until she gets to the deadbolt. That’s when I see it—the tiniest shake in her fingers. Like her nerves are vibrating just beneath the surface.

I say nothing.

She slides the bolt home with a soft click.

“Good,” I murmur. “Again tomorrow. And every night after.”

She nods, but her gaze doesn’t lift from the lock. Her fingers hover there like she wants to keep them busy. Like the stillness is suddenly too loud.

“You saw the note,” she says quietly.

I nod. “I did.”

She swallows. “It’s not the first.”

That lands with weight I wasn’t expecting. “You said it was nothing.”

“It felt safer to pretend.”

I study her, every line in her face, the edges of her fear hidden under practiced calm.

“Safer for whom?”

She doesn’t answer.

“I need the truth, Sadie.”

“I know.”

“I don’t mean eventually. I mean now.”

Her shoulders draw tighter. “It’s not that simple.”

“It is,” I say, my tone sharpening. “You either trust me, or you don’t.”

Her head lifts then. Eyes locked on mine, fierce despite the tremble I saw seconds ago. “You think it’s about trust?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t need another man telling me what I owe him,” she says, voice low and

steady. “Even if he’s wearing a badge.”

I nod slowly. “Good. Because I don’t need you to owe me anything. I need you alive.”

She looks away, jaw clenched.

I don’t crowd her. Don’t reach for her. I’ve pushed enough for one night. But the tension between us is thicker now. Hotter. Like a wire strung too tight.

“You’re not the only one carrying damage, Sadie,” I say, voice softer now, more steel than smoke. “I just don’t let mine walk with me every minute of every day.”

She flinches, just barely. But she doesn’t step back. She unlocks the deadbolt and cracks the door open, allowing me to exit. She doesn’t close the door.

I turn before she can answer. Move down the steps, boots crunching gravel. I don’t look back until I hit the edge of the street and glance over my shoulder.

She’s still standing there in the doorway—one hand resting against the edge of the door. Her silhouette framed in the soft light from behind.

Watching me. Waiting. And then finally closing the door with the almost inaudible sound of the deadbolt being relocked. I file it all away—the tremble, the fight, the part of her that still opens the door. Because whoever left that note thinks they’re scaring her into silence.

They’re wrong. She’s not breaking. She’s waking up. And whoever they are? They just made the list of wrongs I mean to right.

6

SADIE

I wake before the alarm. The sky outside is still black, the kind of quiet that settles over Glacier Hollow when the wind forgets to breathe. My fingers twitch under the blanket, and I know before I open my eyes that I'm not going back to sleep.

Zeke. That's what fills my head first. Not cinnamon rolls. Not the checklist taped to the café fridge. Him. The way he stood beside me on the porch last night, arms crossed, calm and solid as stone. The way his voice wrapped around mine like a promise I didn't want to need.

'You're not alone anymore.'

He might not have meant those words to stick. But they have. They echo now in the silence of my cottage, in the way my skin still feels too aware of his presence—even hours later.

I sit up slowly, stretch, and glance toward the front windows. The bay is still a blur of darkness and ice, but something else catches my eye. A shape, maybe. A shift. I freeze, breath held. Nothing moves.

I throw on a flannel shirt, thick socks, and a heavy cardigan, then step quietly into the kitchen. I don't flip on the light. I don't want to disturb whatever calm I've managed to hold onto. But I go straight to the back window—the one near the kitchen sink. The one that creaked the night before last.

I didn't imagine it. I know I didn't.

It takes me a few seconds to unbolt the door. The wind cuts sharply the second I crack it open. It bites into my skin and steals the warmth from under my sleeves, but I step out onto the back stoop, anyway.

At first, all I see is frost. The ground is a patchwork of grass and snow, crusted with ice that glints under the porch light. I scan slowly, careful not to miss anything. And then I see them... boot prints.

Faint, but there. A shallow arc in the patch of earth between my porch and the trees at the edge of my yard. Someone must have stepped there before the snow fell; the snow softened the edges but didn't erase the pattern completely.

My pulse kicks up. Not a rush. Not a scream. Just that heavy thud in my chest, slow and loud and real. Someone was here. Last night. After Zeke left.

I grip the railing, my knuckles white against the wood. Part of me wants to run back inside, bolt the door, and pretend I didn't see it. Pretend it was an animal. A trick of the light. But I know better. These aren't paw prints or wind patterns. These are boots. Heavy. Male.

And I know what it means. Whoever left that note? They're not done. They're circling again. I square my shoulders, shake the cold from my arms, and head back inside.

There's a part of me that wants to call Zeke immediately. But I don't. Not yet. I'm not ready to hand this over. Not until I feel like I'm standing on my own two feet. I need to move. I need routine. Life for me here in Glacier Hollow has been relatively easy—Maggie's death notwithstanding. I don't want to fold at the first sign of trouble. If I do, I worry I will never be able to truly stand on my own.

I pull on my warmest, fur-lined boots, pull on my heavy coat and begin the walk down to the café. Once there, I enter the kitchen as silently as I can and turn on the lights, tie my apron around my waist, and pull the flour from the pantry. If I'm going to fall apart, it's not going to be while I'm standing still.

I remind myself when the going gets tough, the tough bake.

I move like it matters—like the measuring and stirring and rolling of dough is going to keep me together. Butter melts into sugar. Dough turns to silk under my palms. The scent of cinnamon blooms through the kitchen. It's too early for customers, too early for Jenny, but not too early for this.

I'm elbow-deep in scone dough when I hear footsteps above me. I freeze for half a breath, but then the creak of the floor tells me exactly who it is. Heavy. Controlled. Nothing frantic about it.

Zeke. The knot in my chest pulls tighter before it loosens.

He steps into the kitchen like he owns the air in it. Big frame filling the space at the bottom of the stairs. His hair is still damp from the shower, a black T-shirt stretched across his chest like a second skin. He doesn't speak at first—just scans the space with those sharp, assessing eyes.

"I heard movement," he says simply. His voice is low. Rasped with sleep, but already alert.

"I warned you. I need to start early," I reply, hands still in the dough. "Besides, I couldn't sleep."

He watches me for a second longer than necessary, and I know he doesn't buy it. But he doesn't press—yet. I glance up at him. "I... heard something the last couple of

nights. Near the window. I checked this morning and found prints.”

Zeke doesn’t move right away. His whole body goes still in that way he does when his brain goes tactical. Then he steps into the room, past the counter, past me, toward the back door.

“You should have called me,” he says. Not angry. Just matter-of-fact.

“I know.”

He turns, arms crossed over his chest. “Show me.”

“I don’t have time...”

He hands me my coat. “Make time.”

Realizing I have little choice in the matter, I wipe my hands, follow him out the door and allow him to help me into his official SUV and we drive back to the cottage. We get out and walk to the space beyond the back door, and I gesture toward the patch of ground. He steps closer, eyes scanning fast, dropping into a crouch like it’s second nature. He doesn’t say a word for a long moment.

Then he stands, helps me back into the SUV and climbs in behind the wheel. “Same tread as the alley last week. Same direction.”

My breath catches. “So it’s not random.”

“No.” He walks toward me again. “It’s targeted. Someone’s testing the perimeter. Watching patterns.”

I swallow hard. “Zeke... what if it’s more than a threat? What if they’re planning

something worse?”

His eyes darken as he parks behind the café and helps me out. “Then they will be disappointed,” he said.

He steps closer. Close enough that I can feel the heat of his body as we head back into the café. Once inside, I look up at him, and it’s like the air shifts again. He doesn’t touch me—but I feel it, anyway.

“I’m done waiting for you to ask me for help,” he says, voice lower now.

I nod slowly. My pulse is beating so hard I can feel it in my throat. “Okay.”

He lifts a hand, brushes a strand of hair behind my ear. His touch is gentle, but there’s nothing soft in his expression as he nods and says, “You’re mine to protect now.”

I don’t flinch. I don’t argue. Because something in the way he says it makes me believe I actually am.

* * *

The bell over the café door jingles, sharp and clear, just as I’m sliding a tray of cinnamon rolls onto the counter. I don’t need to look up to know it’s him. Zeke’s footsteps don’t sound like anyone else’s. Steady. Measured. Like he walks with gravity instead of pace.

I feel him before I see him—heat behind my spine, attention like a pressure point. I straighten too fast, wiping my hands on a towel that’s already flour-streaked. When I finally lift my gaze, he’s already watching me. His eyes skim over my face like he’s scanning for damage.

“You came back for your cinnamon roll,” I say, keeping my voice light as I move to refill the coffee carafes and pour him a mug. “I was worried the town might devolve into chaos if you broke with your routine.”

Zeke crosses the room without answering. He doesn’t smile. He rarely does. But the corner of his mouth twitches like I’ve earned half a point. He leans against the back counter, arms crossed over his broad chest, gaze sharp.

The silence that settles between us isn’t passive—it’s strategic. He’s cataloging me. Waiting for the next crack. And somehow, that unnerves me more than if he were demanding answers.

The front door chimes again. A small cluster of regulars drifts in—Walter, Ada, Jenny’s boyfriend who always orders a muffin but never finishes it. I shift into gear, greeting each one, wiping counters, moving trays. Zeke stays near the back, watching but not hovering, like he’s there to take stock of who looks at me too long or talks too quietly.

I hate that it makes me feel... steady.

By ten, the café’s full, and I’ve lost count of the times I’ve brushed past Zeke behind the counter. He’s been pulling mugs, wiping tables, and even helped Jenny carry two loaded trays when the high school kids came in for a quick breakfast before school. He doesn’t act like he owns the place—but he makes it clear that if anything went wrong in here, it’d go through him first.

He’s all precision and economy of movement, and I’m too aware of him. The heat of his arm when I reach past him for a pan. The shift of muscle under his shirt when he lifts a crate of bottled drinks without asking. The way his eyes follow mine like he can feel every thought before I speak it.

I reach for a canister of flour on the shelf above the prep station and stretch up, standing on tiptoe to reach it. My balance wobbles just a second before I feel his hand on my lower back. Big, warm, steady.

“I’ve got it,” he says, voice close to my ear.

I freeze, caught between the safety of his hand and the way my pulse spikes. I should move. He reaches around me, brushes against my shoulder, and grabs the canister like it’s nothing. His arm brushes mine, firm and unhurried, and suddenly the entire kitchen feels about ten degrees warmer. I can smell him—clean soap, cedar, the faintest trace of coffee. He sets the flour down and doesn’t move away immediately.

“You always stock things where you can’t reach them?” he asks, eyes on mine.

“One of the occupational hazards of not being related to the Amazonian warriors,” I say, trying for casual. My voice comes out too soft.

He doesn’t tease. Just nods once. “Then maybe you need someone taller around more often.”

I can’t think of a single response that won’t sound like a confession, so I do what I’m best at—I pivot. I grab a whisk, move to the mixing bowl, start in on the scone batter like it demands every cell of my attention.

But Zeke stays close. Not touching, not crowding—but present. Solid. Like a wall I didn’t know I’d leaned on until I stopped, pretending I didn’t need one.

Jenny flies in, grabbing another tray of baked goods and heading back to the front, tossing a wink in my direction as she catches Zeke watching me again.

“Need me to step out so you two can work that tension out over a bag of flour?” she

mutters, low enough for only me to hear.

“Jenny,” I hiss, cheeks flaming.

“I’m just saying,” she says with a mischievous grin before disappearing through the café doors again.

I glance at Zeke. He didn’t hear her—probably. But the way his eyes flick back to mine a second later tells me he picked up something . I stir faster, heart pounding.

“Everything okay?” he asks, one eyebrow raised.

“Totally,” I say, voice too bright. “Just... scone math.”

He watches me stir as though he has already figured out the puzzle but is not finished playing with it.

“I’ve got to do a drive around the town. Let folks see I’m watching,” he says finally. “You need anything before I head out?”

A million things. Protection. Answers. A second of peace. I shake my head.

“No. I’m good.”

He doesn’t move. His hand comes to rest on the counter beside me—casual, but close. I stop whisking.

“You’re still lying,” he says, voice low, private. “And you know I’ll wait you out.”

My throat tightens. “I know.”

His eyes search mine for a beat longer, then he nods once and straightens. “Keep the back door locked. I’ll be back around noon. Call if anything feels off.”

I nod. “Zeke?—”

He pauses. I don’t finish the sentence. I don’t even know what I was going to say. He doesn’t need me to. He just looks at me like I already said enough. Then he’s gone, the door swinging shut behind him with a quiet click that leaves the room colder than before.

The late-morning rush slows to a simmer just before eleven, and Jenny finally makes her way behind the counter with a refill pitcher in one hand and her phone in the other. Her messy ponytail hangs sideways, and powdered sugar dusts her apron, but her eyes are sharp and more alert than I usually see at this hour.

She plants herself beside the espresso machine and leans in. “So... did you see that guy out front last night?”

I pause mid-reach for a fresh mug. “What guy?”

She drops the voice a notch. “Creepy guy. Parked across the street in an old green pickup. Same truck I saw a few nights ago, around closing. Just... sitting there. No lights, no engine running, just watching.”

My pulse jerks, but I keep my tone even. “You sure he wasn’t waiting for someone at the bar across the street?”

Jenny snorts. “At nine thirty? With his headlights off? And no one got in or out for like twenty minutes? Nah. He was watching us. Watching you, probably.”

I force a chuckle. “Well, I’m not that interesting.”

Jenny gives me a look, the one that says she knows I'm full of it. She opens her mouth to say more, but just then, Zeke returns from his drive round town.

The second he steps through the door, the air changes. That fast, that tangible. Jenny notices it, too. She goes quiet and suddenly remembers she has a table waiting for fresh coffee.

Zeke crosses the room and stops in front of the counter; his body language is loose, but he locks his eyes on mine. He doesn't say a word, just lifts a brow. A silent question.

I answer with a practiced smile, the kind I've given customers a thousand times over. "Everything's fine."

He doesn't believe me. Of course he doesn't. That stare of his could peel paint off a wall.

Still, he says nothing. Not here. Not now. He just nods once and moves to lean against the end of the counter, arms crossed, scanning the café like a predator watching over his territory. The man spends more time in my café than he does in his office.

The rest of the shift crawls by. Zeke lingers. Doesn't hover—but doesn't leave, either. When he goes back upstairs, I catch myself watching the stairs for too long after his boots disappear.

By eight, the café is mostly empty. The dinner crowd has almost cleared out. Jenny's already packing up for the day, and I've retreated into the back kitchen under the excuse of prepping tomorrow's pastries. I press my fingers to my temples, trying to quiet the static.

When I step outside to catch a breath, the wind bites harder. It cuts through my jacket like it has something to prove. I scan the alley instinctively, half expecting to see a dark shape tucked between parked cars. But there's nothing. Not tonight.

Still, when I look up, I spot him. Zeke at the end of the alley shrouded in shadow. How the hell did he get there? The last time I saw him he was going up to his place over the café. His arms are crossed, and his head is down like he's checking something on his phone—but I know better. He's watching. Not lurking. Not hiding. Just there .

That night, I close up fast. Lights off. Windows locked. Trash taken out in under three minutes. When I turn the key in the door, he's already beside me, silent as always. I don't startle anymore. I don't need to ask what he's doing here. I know.

We walk in silence. The kind that doesn't feel empty. The kind that feels like everything matters too much to speak aloud.

The sky's a muted blue-black, clouds moving like smoke across the moon. My boots crunch over frozen gravel, and his steps fall in rhythm with mine. There's no space between us. Not really. Even when there is, it hums with potential. With pressure. With something that's building, always building.

“You want me to sweep the house again?” he asks as we step onto my porch.

I hesitate. “No, I made sure everything was locked up tight when I left this morning.”

He doesn't argue. But he doesn't move away either. I turn to face him. He's close enough that I can see the faint line of stubble on his jaw, the way the porch light glints off the edges of his collar. His eyes are darker now, like they're carrying something he's not saying. Something he won't until I ask.

“I don’t want to need you this much,” I blurt out without thinking.

He lifts a hand and tips my chin up with just two fingers. Firm. Gentle. Decisive.

“You need me, Sadie,” he says, voice low. “And I’m not going anywhere. So stop treating that like it’s a burden.”

My breath catches. The porch disappears. The cold disappears. There’s just him. Just us. And that weight in the air we’ve been circling for days.

Zeke steps in, slow but sure, like he knows I won’t pull back. His hand slides to the curve of my jaw. Warm. Commanding. His lips hover just above mine. Not touching. Not yet.

My pulse hammers in my throat. Everything in me wants to lean in. Close the distance. But I don’t.

I press my hand gently to his chest. Not a push. Just... a pause.

“I can’t,” I whisper. “Not yet.”

He doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t sigh or retreat. He just nods once and stays right where he is, eyes locked on mine. His voice is a rasp when he speaks again.

“I can wait. But I won’t wait forever.”

And that should scare me, but... it thrills me. He steps back. Just enough. His eyes still hold mine, like he’s daring me to look away first. I don’t.

“Lock both bolts,” he says, nodding toward the door.

I nod.

He waits until the lock clicks into place before he turns and walks into the dark. No words. No goodbye. But everything about him says soon, and that's exactly the problem.

Because for the first time in years... I want soon.

7

ZEKE

The air bites colder the farther I get from the road. It's early, not even six, but I couldn't sit in that studio apartment above the café one second longer. Not with Sadie's face still in my head. The way she looked at me last night when I leaned in, when she stopped me—not afraid, not unsure. Just not ready.

I respect that. But it doesn't mean I don't feel it. Want her. All of her.

So instead of pacing in front of the cottage like a man ready to burn something down, I lace up my boots and head back toward the shack. The one in the woods no one's supposed to remember.

Snow crunches under my steps, but it's patchy now—the melt is starting to win in places. Leaves stick to frost and mud. My breath comes out in sharp clouds. I move fast, not because I'm rushed. Because I know exactly where I'm going.

The shack hasn't changed. Still half-collapsed, still stinking faintly of burnt metal and fuel. But I don't stop at the threshold like last time. This time, I walk around the back.

If you're hiding something, you don't leave it near the fire. You build your burn site where it covers the truth, not where it lives.

I press my hand against the rear wall—rot-soft in one spot, brittle in another. Then I crouch. There, at the base: a panel of rotted siding loose enough to pry up with a

blade. I slide my knife from my belt and wedge it beneath the edge. The panel lifts with a groan and reveals what I'd suspected. A stash point.

Inside: two burner phones, both dead but intact. A GPS beacon, tucked into a small metal tin. And a weatherproof field notebook sealed in a ziplock bag. When I open it, I see it immediately: not scribbles. Logs. Tight writing. Encrypted. Not military standard, but close enough that I'd bet money on someone with a background in spec ops or intelligence passed through this shack. Probably used it as a drop.

I take photos of everything, glove the evidence, and slide it all into my pack. Then I circle the shack again. That's when I find the tire tracks. They weren't here last time—not clearly. Snow disguised them. But now the earth's softer, and I can see the full impression of the treads. Deep, staggered pattern. Familiar.

I snap a shot. Then scroll back through the photos I took behind Sadie's place yesterday. I pull up the boot prints and the tire tracks from the alley and compare them to the ones I snapped a week ago outside the gas station—both match.

His truck's always parked in the same spot. Old Chevy, forest green, lifted just enough to clear brush. I've seen that exact tread on the side of the bait shop. I'd bet the shell casing came from the same trip.

I exhale slowly. My fists tighten without thinking. I'm not surprised. I've already discovered the guy's got a mouth on him, the kind of man who throws his weight around the second someone makes him feel small. But this? Leaving boot prints outside Sadie's house? Circling her like a predator?

I check my compass, reroute toward the ridgeline west of the shack. There's a trail up there the loggers used years ago. I want to know how deep this rabbit hole goes. As I climb, my mind drifts back to Sadie. I could hear her fingers shaking just a little when she locked the door last night. Her voice when she said, 'I don't want to need you this

much.'

She doesn't know it yet but needing someone doesn't make her weak. It means she's still got something to protect. That puts her miles ahead of anyone in this town who's already folded.

The ridge levels out. I stop at the top, crouch low, and scan the valley below. Not much to see but trees, an old switchback, and a rusted hunting stand leaning sideways into the brush. Still, I log the coordinates. This is where someone would sit if they wanted eyes on the shack from a distance.

By the time I start the descent, the sun's higher. I check my watch. Still early enough to make my next move without drawing attention. I want to confront Joe. I want to pin him to the goddamn wall and ask him why he thinks he can put boots on Sadie's property like he owns the dirt under her feet.

But I've learned better. Let a man think he's not being watched, and he'll always show his cards.

So I head back to town. Not fast. Not hidden either. Let them see me walking through the trees. Let them guess where I've been. I want whoever's behind this to start sweating.

Because one thing's certain now. This wasn't random. This wasn't kids. This was organized. Calculated. Someone in Glacier Hollow is building something in the shadows, and they're trying to put Sadie in the middle of it. They're going to regret that.

The cold sinks in deeper the closer I get to town. Not the kind you feel on your skin. The kind that lives beneath it—bone-deep, tight with instinct. I've been tracking threats my whole life, and whatever this is? It's circling. Getting bolder.

I take the long way back, cutting down a side trail that loops around the gas station. Joe's place. A squat cinderblock building with a flickering neon sign and three rusting pumps that look like they haven't seen maintenance since the Clinton administration. I stop in, keeping it casual. Just a routine patrol, reminding him that I'm a presence. That's the excuse I'll use, if he asks.

Joe's out front, stacking windshield fluid on a shelf like it's a delicate art. He hears me before he sees me. I watch the shift in his shoulders. Quick. Tense. Not the reaction of a man with nothing to hide.

"Morning, Sheriff," he says, not quite meeting my eyes.

I nod, slow. "Joe."

He wipes his hands on a rag, even though they're already clean. Stalls. "Something I can help you with?"

I let the pause hang long enough for discomfort to settle in. "Routine check-in. Making the rounds. Saw a vehicle out past Mile Marker Seven. Tread looked familiar."

Joe doesn't flinch. But he also doesn't ask what kind of tread. Doesn't pretend to be curious. Just shrugs. "People dump all kinds of trash up that way."

"Sure," I say, stepping a little closer. "Have you been out that way recently?"

His mouth tightens. He shakes his head. "Nah. Busy here. Fuel shipments, tourists."

There haven't been tourists since February. And he knows I know it. I nod, feigning belief, and glanced at his old Ford parked beside the building. Same tread. I'd bet my badge on it. I don't call him out. Not yet. Let him think I'm still connecting dots. Let

him wonder how many I've already connected. That's when people start making mistakes.

"You see anyone hanging around the café lately? After hours? Unfamiliar vehicles?" I ask.

Joe finally looks up. Brief eye contact. Then he shrugs again. "Just the usual crowd. Teens sometimes. Kids acting tough."

Liar. But the kind who thinks he's smarter than he is.

"Alright," I say, already turning back toward my office. "If you do, let me know. I'm tracking a pattern."

That gets him. His shoulders jerk—just enough to register. Good. Let it stew.

Back at the sheriff's office, I upload the cache contents from the shack to the server I had installed and attached to the state's secure network when I first came to Glacier Hollow. The encrypted logbook is still a mess of symbols and half-coded entries, but I've got a few keywords flagged—names, GPS entries, dates. One matches the day before Tom Davies disappeared.

I make a note. It's not enough for a warrant, not yet. But it's getting there.

I walk over to the monitor on the far wall and pull up the live feeds from the motion-activated cameras I installed last week—one behind Sadie's cottage, one at the alley behind the café. She doesn't know about the second one. I didn't ask. I'm not sorry.

I scan the timestamps. Four nights ago, both cameras logged motion within minutes of each other. Sadie never mentioned anyone in the alley. But there's movement in the footage—a figure just outside frame. And then nothing.

I scrub forward. A gap. Two hours of dead feed. Like someone jammed it or disabled the power source. I check the other feed—same thing. Same window.

Whoever left that note knew where the blind spots were. That means this isn't random. It's tactical. Someone's planning something bigger, and they're getting too damn comfortable.

I lean back in my chair, jaw tight. I can't be everywhere at once. But I can make damn sure whoever's watching her knows they're being watched right back.

I grab my jacket, lock up the footage with a digital watermark, and head back out.

If Joe's in this, he won't be alone.

* * *

The sun's gone by the time I make it back into town, shadows stretching long over the ridge as the wind cuts colder. The kind of cold that sinks into bone. I don't mind it—it keeps me sharp. Keeps me present. But tonight, it's got a bite, and I don't like what it's trying to warn me about.

Joe's garage didn't give me what I wanted—not in words. But his silence? The way his hand shook when I stepped too close? That told me plenty. His tread matches what I found near Sadie's. Same wear pattern. Same unique chunk missing from the heel. The bastard was there, and unless he's got an explanation for why he's leaving boot prints behind her house in the dead of night, we've got a problem. Correction—we already do.

I pull my phone from my jacket and hit the encrypted number buried beneath a dummy contact. It rings twice before a voice answers, low and sharp.

“MacAllister.”

“Knox,” I say, adjusting my grip on the wheel. “You still breathing?”

“Barely. Some asshole shot at a grizzly a half mile from my camp last week. Spooked the sow, tore up a trailhead. What do you need?”

I glance at the buildings passing by—the diner, the post office, the lit-up bar where locals pretend their problems stay behind with the empties. “A second set of eyes. Quiet ones.”

There’s a pause. The kind where you can hear someone lean forward through the line, like distance doesn’t matter when someone like Caleb Knox is thinking. “You onto something?”

“Not sure. It feels like someone’s circling. Not random. I need someone who can move in the trees without leaving a shadow.”

Another pause. Then, “Who’s the girl?”

I don’t ask how he knows. He always knows.

“Her name’s Sadie Callahan. Owns and runs the café. She’s smart. She’s not soft, but she’s alone. And someone’s targeting her.”

Knox’s breath comes through the line, slow and controlled. “You like her.”

“Not the point.”

“Bullshit. That is always the point... and the only one that counts.”

I don't answer that. Instead, I say, "I've got tracks. A known player. A green truck. The night she found a note, one of my cameras behind her house was disabled. I don't like coincidences."

"You want me to shadow?"

"Just observe. Quiet. You see anything move that shouldn't, I want to know."

There's a long beat. Then Knox says, "I'll be on the ridge by dawn. Don't bother trying to find me."

He hangs up before I can thank him. Typical. I don't need pleasantries from the man—I just need his eyes. And if there's anyone better at vanishing into the mountain than me, it's Caleb. Reclusive as hell, sharp as broken glass, and loyal to the last breath.

By the time I swing back toward Main Street, the café's mostly dark. One light still burns in the kitchen window. She's still inside.

I park behind the alley, cutting the engine before it echoes. My boots crunch against the gravel as I approach the back entrance, and I don't knock. I never knock. I walk in like I belong there—because tonight, I do.

Sadie's wiping down the front counter, back to me. Her hair's tied up in a messy twist, a streak of flour at her jaw. She doesn't turn when I come in—she doesn't need to. She knows it's me. Her shoulders shift like she's bracing for something she doesn't want to admit she wants.

"Still working?" I ask, voice low as I shut the door behind me.

She glances back, smile small but real. "Had to prep tomorrow's inventory. Besides, I

like the quiet.”

I step into the kitchen without asking. I’m past the point of needing permission. She hands me a rag automatically, and I fall into rhythm with her, wiping down surfaces already spotless.

“You check the locks?” I ask.

“Twice.”

“Good.”

She leans into the fridge, grabs a carton of eggs, and the movement pulls her shirt tighter across her back. I shouldn’t be looking. Doesn’t stop me.

When she turns, her eyes find mine, like she already knows where my head went. There’s a pull between us now, stronger than ever. It hums under the surface of everything we’re not saying.

I reach for a jar near the sink, and she steps in at the same time. We collide—not hard, but enough that my chest brushes her shoulder. Her breath catches, and my hand settles on the counter beside hers. Not touching. Not yet.

Her eyes flick to mine, wide and sharp. “Sorry.”

“I’m not,” I say, low. Honest.

She exhales, shaky but not afraid. I see it in her. The weight she’s carrying. The fight she’s still holding onto with both hands.

I step back before I forget myself, grab my jacket from the hook near the door. “I’m

walking you home.”

She hesitates. “Zeke, you don’t have to?—”

“I do,” I cut in. “Because someone was there, Sadie. Someone who doesn’t belong. I’m not leaving you alone in the dark to pretend that’s okay.”

Her shoulders drop. Not in defeat. In trust. She grabs her coat, flips off the lights, and we walk into the night.

By the time we reach her cottage, the sky’s clear. The moon cuts silver across the snow, and the entire world feels like it’s waiting for something. She steps up onto the porch, keys in hand. I hover behind her, too close to be polite, too far to be a mistake.

She turns slowly. Her breath comes in clouds. So does mine.

There’s a smudge of flour on her chest, just beneath her collarbone. Without thinking, I reach up and brush it away with my thumb. She freezes beneath my touch. I swear her heart’s beating just as hard as mine.

“Thanks,” she says, voice a whisper.

I lower my mouth to hers and kiss her. No hesitation, no warning—just the heat of my hand sliding to the side of her neck, and then my mouth covering hers like it’s the only thing that’s ever made sense. She exhales against me, soft and startled, but she doesn’t pull away. Her fingers curl in my jacket, and when I deepen the kiss, she leans in like she’s been waiting for this—for me.

It’s not soft. It’s not slow. It’s weeks of tension, of unsaid words and guarded glances, burning down between us in one long, hungry kiss. I taste flour and coffee and the truth she won’t say out loud yet. Her lips part, and I take more, anchoring her

against me with one hand at her waist, the other still cupped at her neck.

Then I pull back. Not because I want to—but because if I don't, I won't stop.

Her eyes are wide, lips parted, chest rising fast. She looks stunned. Wrecked. So do I.

But I step back, slow and controlled, every muscle tight. My voice is low when I speak. "Top and bottom lock."

She nods, barely moving. Still watching me like I've unraveled something inside her.

I wait until the deadbolt clicks. Until I know she's safe inside. Then I turn into the darkness, jaw tight, hand still tingling from where I touched her. My hands still remember the shape of her. My mouth still burns from the way she tasted. Whoever's circling her, whoever thinks they can move pieces behind closed doors—they just made a fatal miscalculation.

And my promise still stands: whoever's coming for her... they're already too late.

Because I'm not circling. I'm closing in.

8

SADIE

Maggie's headstone is simple. Smooth granite, a little weather-worn now, set just back from the spruce line where the snow always melts slower. It doesn't say much—just her name, a dash of dates, and a line she used to say every time I doubted myself: Make good things, anyway.

I stand there with icy fingers shoved deep in my coat pockets, breath ghosting in the morning air, heart still echoing from Zeke's kiss the night before.

I haven't been here in months. Not since the first note. Not since I started counting shadows again and checking locks twice, sometimes three times, before going to bed.

I swallow hard and drop to a crouch, brushing away a few pine needles that have settled near the base of the stone.

"Hey, Maggie." My voice comes out quiet, a little hoarse. "Sorry, it's been a while."

There's no one else out here. No wind, no birds. Just the trees creaking under old snow and the heaviness in my chest that doesn't seem to go away anymore.

"I should've come sooner. I just... I didn't want to bring this here. But you'd see through it anyway, wouldn't you?" My laugh is brittle. "I'm scared. Again."

I blink hard, eyes burning even as the cold bites at my skin. "It's happening all over.

The notes, the watching, the waiting for something to snap. I told myself I left that behind in Anchorage. I convinced myself that I had moved on from being the kind of woman who flinches every time a car door slams. But I'm not. I thought I could build something safe here. Quiet. But the quiet isn't safe anymore, Maggie. It's just silent."

My throat tightens as I sit back on my heels. "And Zeke..."

His name alone makes something twist low in my stomach. Last night comes back in sharp pieces—his hand at my jaw, the heat of his mouth on mine, the way he kissed me like it wasn't a question. Like he already knew the answer. Like he'd waited long enough.

"I don't know what to do with him," I whisper. "He's... different. He doesn't crowd me. He doesn't pull. He just stands there like a goddamn mountain and waits for me to decide. And that should make it easier, right? But it doesn't. Because I think if I fall for him, it's going to be real. And if it's real, I don't know if I'll survive losing it."

I reach up, rub the heel of my hand against my chest like I can ease the pressure there. It doesn't help. Not when the past still lingers like smoke in my lungs.

The flashback hits hard, fast. Not a memory, exactly. More like muscle-deep recall. The kind that pulls breath from your body before your brain catches up.

* * *

Anchorage, Alaska

Four Years Ago

Brent's voice was calm. It always was. That's what made it so easy for people to

believe him. He didn't shout. He didn't throw things. He just... shifted the temperature in a room with a look.

"You can't keep talking to me like that," I'd said, crossing my arms tight, trying to hold my ground.

Brent didn't raise his voice. He never had to. "You think I don't know what's best for us? For you?"

"I'm not a child..."

"Then stop acting like one." He stepped forward, and I remember the way his shadow fell across my feet. "You run your mouth too freely, Sadie. One day, someone's going to shut it for you. And I won't stop them."

He said it with a smile. He kissed my cheek after. And I remember thinking—he didn't hit you, so it doesn't count. He didn't leave a bruise, so you can't call it abuse.

I believed that for too long.

Now, back at Maggie's grave, I press my forehead against my knees. Let the cold soak into my bones. Let the truth settle without flinching.

Zeke's not like him. I know that. Every part of me knows that. He doesn't make me small. He makes the world feel bigger—like there's room to breathe again. And that's what terrifies me. Because if he's real, then I don't get to pretend anymore. I don't get to keep hiding behind flour and early mornings and the lie that I'm fine on my own.

"I think I'm falling for him," I say to the granite. "And I don't know how to do that without losing something of myself."

The wind picks up again. Just a breath of it, but enough to remind me I can't stay out here forever. I rise slowly, knees stiff from the cold, and press my hand to the top of the headstone.

"Keep an eye on me," I whisper. "Because I think everything's about to change."

I head back to town with my coat zipped high and my scarf pulled tight, but none of it keeps out the warmth rising in my chest—or the chill of what might come next.

Because falling in love with Zeke MacAllister doesn't feel like a decision. It feels like fate.

* * *

The café is still dark when I unlock the back door. The scent of cinnamon, coffee, and baked sugar hits me the second I step inside—comforting and grounding, even though the ovens haven't been turned on yet. I kick off the frost from my boots, shrug out of my coat, and hang it on the hook by the pantry. My hands are still cold from the walk back from the cemetery, but the burn in my chest hasn't dulled. If anything, it's sharper now. Louder.

I don't turn the lights on in the kitchen. There's just enough glow from the early morning outside to see my way around. I reach for a mixing bowl, pull the flour bin closer, and try to lose myself in routine. Routine has always been safer than thinking. But it's no good today.

Because Zeke is already here. I feel him before I see him—stillness at the edge of the room, weight pressing into the air like gravity has a favorite. I glance toward the stairs that lead up to his apartment above the café. He's leaning against the wall near the dry storage shelf, arms crossed, gaze locked on me.

“You walk back from the cemetery alone?” he asks, voice low and even.

I swallow, fingers tightening on the rim of the bowl. “You’re watching me again?”

“Always,” he corrects. “And I’m not apologizing for it.”

I set the bowl down with a little more force than necessary, flour dusting the air between us. “I needed space.”

“You needed distance,” he says, pushing off the wall and crossing toward me with that slow, controlled pace that makes everything inside me coil tight. “Not silence. And not another lie.”

I freeze. “What lie?”

Zeke stops just short of touching me. His eyes don’t soften. They sharpen. “The man who grabbed you. You said he was a stranger.”

I look down, heart pounding like it’s trying to leap out of my chest. “He... he didn’t hurt me.”

“That’s not the point, Sadie.”

Though his voice isn’t raised, it’s sharp. Not in anger. In clarity. In truth. He’s not trying to scare me. He’s trying to pull me out of whatever corner I’ve backed myself into.

I wrap my arms around my middle and lean against the prep table. “His name’s Adam.”

Zeke stays quiet, giving me the space I’ve never asked for out loud but always hoped

for deep down.

I keep going. “He’s Brent’s cousin. He used to come around sometimes. He was always... too friendly. The kind of guy who’d hug too long or make comments that sounded like compliments until you actually listened to the words.”

Zeke’s jaw tightens.

I press forward. “When I finally told Brent I was leaving, Adam started showing up more. Brent said he just wanted someone to check in, make sure I wasn’t doing anything ‘impulsive.’” I give a hollow laugh. “Impulsive meaning thinking for myself. Talking to people who weren’t him.”

Zeke steps closer, hand resting lightly on the edge of the counter beside me. Not touching, just anchoring. “So Adam came to Glacier Hollow to remind you that you’re still being watched.”

“I don’t know that for sure,” I say, but it’s weak. And we both know it.

Zeke studies me. “You didn’t report it.”

“I couldn’t prove it was him. No name, no plates. And I thought maybe... maybe if I didn’t acknowledge it, it would stop.” I pause, voice quieter. “I didn’t want to need help. I didn’t want to be the woman people whispered about, the one who brought her baggage into town and expected everyone else to carry it.”

His voice goes softer but somehow firmer too. “You’re not a burden.”

“I am to myself,” I say, honest and exhausted. “Every time I feel safe again, something shifts. And it’s like I’m back in that apartment, waiting for the next controlled sentence or slammed drawer or check-in that isn’t really a check-in.”

Zeke exhales slowly, the heat of it brushing across my cheek before he leans in. His hand comes up, thumb brushing along my jaw. Gentle. Commanding. “You should’ve told me, Sadie.”

“I know.”

“I will not ask you again next time.”

“I know that too.”

He steps even closer now, our bodies inches apart, the air between us burning hotter than the ovens ever get. “I can handle this,” he says. “But I need to know what I’m up against. No more half-truths. Not when it comes to you.”

His hand slides to the back of my neck, the pressure firm enough to anchor me but never forceful. My breath catches, heart thundering against my ribs like it’s trying to answer before my mouth can.

I nod, slowly. “Okay.”

Zeke studies me a beat longer, eyes scanning every inch of my face like he’s committing it to memory.

“Good,” he says quietly. “Because I’m not letting this go.”

And for the first time, I think I’m done pretending I want him to.

Zeke doesn’t move for a long second after I say it. After I give him the truth in pieces, jagged and trembling. He just watches me, and I swear the air goes still between us. I expect something—questions, anger, some kind of reaction that will make this harder. But he doesn’t give me that. He doesn’t flinch or tighten or pace the

way Brent used to when things didn't go his way.

Instead, he says nothing.

Then, softly, like a vow carved in stone, "He won't come back."

It's not dramatic. Not loud. Just absolute.

Something in me cracks open. I don't mean to break. Not here. Not in front of him. But the words hit harder than I expect. Not because I doubt him. But because I believe him. Because he says it like it's already settled. Like this war I've been fighting in my head, bracing for in my bones, has already ended and I just didn't know it yet.

My eyes burn, and I blink fast, but it's no use. The breath I try to draw in gets stuck halfway, and suddenly I'm not standing on my own anymore.

Zeke moves before I can fall apart completely. He steps in, wraps one brawny arm around my shoulders, the other hand flat and steady on the small of my back. And that's it. No speeches. No reassurances. Just heat and strength and the scent of cedar and smoke that always clings to him like the past isn't something he outran—it's something he buried.

I curl into him before I can think better of it. My forehead presses against his chest, the fabric of his shirt soft against my skin, and I breathe him in like I'm starving for air. His heartbeat is steady beneath my cheek, calm in a way mine isn't. Not yet.

"I'm sorry," I whisper against him. "I didn't mean to dump all of that on you this morning."

He doesn't answer. Just tightens his hold. One hand comes up, slides through my

hair, not to fix anything—just to remind me he’s here.

And I let myself stay there. Just for a minute. Maybe two.

It’s too long. It’s not long enough.

This is the part I usually run from—the part where needing someone turns into leaning on them, even just for a moment. I’ve been doing everything alone for so long it’s fused into my bones. But Zeke doesn’t feel like a crutch. He feels like a wall. Solid. Built for weathering storms as if he was made to hold the line.

And right now, I need that more than I want to admit.

His chin brushes the top of my head when he finally speaks again. “You don’t have to apologize for trusting me.”

I pull back slowly, breath catching on the edge of a sigh I don’t want to release. My hands still rest on his chest, and I can feel every breath he takes beneath my palms. Every beat of that calm, controlled heart.

“I don’t do this,” I say, quieter now. “Let people in.”

Zeke’s gaze doesn’t waver. “Then don’t waste it on someone who won’t carry the weight.”

God. That’s the thing with him. He says stuff like that and doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t dress it up. Doesn’t say it like it’s supposed to be romantic. Just says it, because it’s true. And it lands harder than anything sweet ever could.

I look at him for a second too long, then step back, needing space before I do something reckless—like pull him in again.

“I need to prep the next batch of rolls,” I say, trying to ground myself in routine again.

Zeke nods, but doesn’t leave. He just leans against the counter, watching me, eyes unreadable but not unkind. “I’ll stay until Jenny gets here.”

“You don’t have to.”

He just arches an eyebrow. “That was cute. Try again.”

I huff a breath, but there’s a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. It’s small. Fragile. But real.

“Okay,” I say, turning back to the dough. “You can stay.”

His voice is lower when he answers. “I wasn’t asking for permission.”

My heart skips, then settles in my chest like it’s committing his words to memory.

We work in silence for a little while. I mix dough. He sips the coffee I hand him without asking. And the air between us hums with something heavy and hot and growing by the second.

There’s no music playing. No customers filtering in yet. Just the quiet clatter of bowls and the scratch of metal against ceramic as I shape the rolls. And Zeke’s presence, always there. Always steady.

When Jenny finally bursts through the front, late as usual and muttering something about a flat tire and a missing shoe, I almost jump. Zeke straightens and gives me a look before heading toward the back, probably to check the locks again even though I already told him I’d done it twice.

But just before he disappears through the door, he looks back. And what's in his eyes is not the look of a man passing time.

It's a warning. It's a promise. It's the storm before the wildfire, and for the first time since I arrived in Glacier Hollow, I think I might be ready to let it burn.

ZEKE

The knock at the café's back door is deliberate—three quick raps, evenly spaced, quiet enough not to wake anyone who's not listening. I was expecting it. Caleb Knox doesn't show up anywhere uninvited unless he has a reason. And when he has a reason, you answer.

I open the door and find him exactly where I knew he'd be—on the top step, arms crossed, dressed in camo and oil-stained wool, looking like he just walked out of a survival manual and dared it to keep up. Tall, broad, and built like the mountain behind him, Caleb is still as stone, his eyes scanning the street before they settle on me.

"Took you long enough," I say, stepping back to let him in.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't say much, ever. Just ducks inside, the low creak of the floor the only sound he brings with him. I lead him up the stairs to my studio apartment. His beard's longer than the last time I saw him, streaked with early frost, and there's a fresh scar near his temple I don't ask about. I never do.

"I parked in the brush," he says finally, voice low and dry as gravel. "Didn't want to spook the wrong eyes."

Smart. Glacier Hollow's too quiet lately. The kind of quiet that feels like a setup. I gesture to the small kitchen table and drop the packet of evidence I pulled from the

burn site—phones, beacon, encrypted field log, all carefully bagged and labeled.

“Found these two days ago. Back behind the shack. Hidden panel, clean drop. Didn’t smell like local work.”

Caleb sits, eyes narrowing as he pulls the GPS unit from the bag and turns it in his hand. “This is military-spec. Modified, but not cheap. Not the kind of gear you leave behind unless you’re planning to come back.”

He says it like a fact. Like it’s already proven. He’s not wrong.

“Any activity near the site?” he asks, flipping open the field log. “You run the boot prints?”

“Matched them to Joe Hanley. Gas station. But he’s not smart enough to be running this. At most, he’s a runner. Maybe a watcher. The kind of guy who sells fuel to whoever’s passing through and doesn’t ask questions as long as his tank stays full.”

Caleb scans the coded shorthand on the page, his brow furrowing slightly—an expression that, for him, might as well be a shout. “This is a courier log. Routes, weights, dates. No names. But this symbol—” he taps the corner of the page “—I’ve seen that before. In a cartel drop zone outside Sitka.”

My jaw tightens. “You think they’re using this town?”

“I think they’re testing it,” he replies. “Smaller population. Fewer patrols. High tree cover. Ideal for ATV runs and short-range flights.”

I nod. It lines up. The fresh tire tracks. The staggered drop patterns. The camera blackouts. “Any chance they’re tied to Anchorage?”

Caleb hesitates. “Possible. But I doubt it. Anchorage runs bigger ops. Too visible. This is backdoor work. Move it through the trees, load it on small planes, then vanish. Your girl...”

“Careful,” I warn.

He meets my eyes without flinching. “Sadie,” he corrects, slowly, like he knows exactly what line he just stepped up to. “She’s a variable. Either she saw something, or someone’s using her café as a test point.”

My jaw ticks. “She knows nothing.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s being watched.” He sets the logbook down and leans forward, elbows braced on his knees. “If it’s this Adam guy—or whoever he’s working for—they’re trying to send a message. Proximity’s deliberate.”

I pace to the window, arms crossed, watching the dark curl of mist off the pines beyond town. “They’re getting too close. First the notes. Then the print behind her place. Now surveillance gaps that line up to the minute.”

“You think she’s in the center,” Caleb says, not asking.

“I know she is.” I turn back, tone flat. “And if they keep circling, it will not be a warning next time. It’s going to be a test. See how far they can push before I push back.”

Caleb doesn’t blink. “Then you better be ready to break something when they do.”

He means it. And I already am.

I grab my phone, pull up the feed from the backup camera I installed across from

Sadie's back fence—discreet, hidden under a gutted power box. This one stayed online the night the others blacked out. And sure enough, there's a flicker of movement just before the time stamps disappear. A green blur. A vehicle.

"Green truck," I say, showing him the footage. "Adam or someone driving for him. Circles once, then gone."

Caleb's voice is low, but sharp. "This has the feel of someone establishing dominance. Not an attack—yet. But close."

"He left a mark on her wrist," I say. "That was the first move. That was personal."

"And the last one he's going to get."

We lock eyes. It's not a threat. It's a statement. Caleb nods once, then picks up the burner phones. "I'll take these back to my place. See if I can pull anything from the logs. Most guys who think they're smart still forget Bluetooth syncs and cached text. I'll gut 'em and call you in twenty-four."

"You good staying in the trees?"

"I was born in the trees," he mutters.

And with that, he's gone—silent as ever, leaving nothing behind but tension and the sharp bite of cold air through the open door. I close it behind him, lock it, then grab my coat and gun. If Sadie's in the crosshairs, then I'm going hunting.

And I'm not coming back empty-handed.

* * *

The next morning, I don't give myself time to think or to stew. I take the stairs two at a time, give Sadie a quick kiss, throw on my jacket, and head straight for Hal Burton's office before I can talk myself out of it.

The mayor's building sits just off Main, tucked between the post office and an antique shop that only opens for four hours a day and never on Tuesdays. No one's in the lobby, but I hear voices drifting from Hal's office. I don't knock. He ends the speaker call and looks up fast when I push the door open. His expression shifts from annoyed to rattled in under a second, and I know I've already got him.

"Sheriff," he says, trying for breezy. "You could have called."

"And you could've told me the truth," I reply, shutting the door behind me with a quiet click that sounds a hell of a lot louder in the tight room. I move to his desk and drop the printed copies of the encrypted GPS logs between us. Pages scatter slightly—Caleb's markings highlighted in red, my annotations boxed in black. Hal blinks, then glances down at the pages like they might catch fire.

"What is this?" he asks, voice tight.

"You tell me."

I stay standing. Arms crossed. Silent.

Hal wets his lips. His hands go to the papers, but he doesn't touch them. Just stares. "Look, Zeke, you know I hired you, and I've got your back... I've got the whole town's best interest in mind..."

I cut him off. "Spare me the politics. You knew someone was using Glacier Hollow as a transit point. You took money. I'm betting under the table. And I'm betting you didn't ask too many questions about where it came from or what they were moving

through that trail.”

Hal flinches. Just a hair. Then the crack widens.

“I thought it was just smuggling,” he says. “Backwoods crap. Cigarettes, maybe liquor. Nothing major. I didn’t ask for details.”

“You didn’t ask because you didn’t want to know. That’s not the same thing.”

He sinks back into his chair like I just punched him in the gut. “They came to me during the budget freeze last winter. Said they’d help fund emergency road repair for keeping my eyes off some old trails. That’s it. Said it was just short-term. Just ‘off-the-grid’ logistics.”

“Who’s they?”

Hal shakes his head. “Never got a name. Just a phone number that doesn’t work anymore. And a guy who came in with a contractor’s badge and a thick envelope. I figured it was shady, but we were going under. No state support. Tom was already gone.”

“Wrong,” I snap, stepping in. “Tom didn’t vanish. They erased him. No records, no reports, no backup. You buried his file. Or someone made you do it.”

Hal’s face drains of color. He doesn’t deny it.

I lean down, palms on his desk. “Tell me this ends with cigarette runs and under-the-table snowplow contracts, Hal. Tell me this doesn’t end with someone putting eyes on Sadie Callahan’s front porch.”

His mouth opens, closes. For the first time, I see it—shame, real and sharp, cutting

deeper than politics ever could.

“I didn’t know about her,” he says finally. “I swear. I wouldn’t...”

“You did. Maybe not her name. But you knew someone was watching something. And you let it happen.”

He bows his head. “What happens now?”

I straighten. “You’re going to give me everything. Names. Phone numbers. Bank records. You’re going to tell the town you approved an audit of past accounts, effective immediately.”

“And if I don’t?”

I smile, cold and tight. “Then I bring the state in. And when they find out you blocked a sheriff’s missing person report and accepted funds from an untraceable source, you won’t just lose the office—you’ll lose your pension and spend some time as a guest of the State... maybe even the Feds.”

Hal nods slowly. “I’ll get the files.”

“Good,” I say, already turning. “Because we’re out of time.”

I’m halfway down the steps of the municipal building when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I recognize the encrypted signature before I swipe.

Caleb’s voice is low and crisp. “We’ve got a problem.”

I stop walking, step into the alley between buildings to keep out of sight. “Talk.”

“I’m behind Joe’s. Been here for two hours. Thought he was solo until ten minutes ago. Someone came out the back—tall, lean, black parka. Moves like he’s used to not being seen.”

My heart spikes.

“Face?”

“I didn’t get a clean angle, but he turned when he hit the tree line. I recognized him.”

“Who?”

“The guy from the picture: Adam.”

I grip the phone tighter, every muscle going tight and ready. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. I never forget the face of someone who tailgates a woman like she owes him something.”

A beat of silence. Then Caleb adds, “He was carrying a pack. Heavy. Hunched right. Like it had weight.”

Drugs. Weapons. Something worse. I exhale slow.

“You tailing?”

“Already moving. You want him brought in?”

“No. Not yet,” I say. “I want to know where he sleeps. Who he reports to. Then we burn it down.”

“You got it. I’ll check in again at midnight. Hey, could you save me one of those cinnamon rolls? They sure smelled good.”

He hangs up, and I smile. I stay in the alley for another second, letting the cold bite into my skin, the tension winding tighter in my spine. Adam. Back in town. Moving out of Joe’s backdoor like he owns it. Like Sadie didn’t already tell him to stay away with every trembling inch of her voice.

He’s about to find out exactly what that costs. I pocket the phone, step back into the street, and head straight for the café. Because tonight, I’m not waiting to be needed... to show her she needs protection. Tonight, I’m going to show her she already has it.

* * *

The walk to Sadie’s place is quieter than usual, but not in the brittle, guarded way it used to be. Her arm brushes mine a little more than it needs to. She keeps glancing up at me like she wants to say something and can’t find the shape of it. I don’t push. Not with her. I learned quick—Sadie doesn’t respond to pressure. She opens when she’s ready. Not a second before.

She unlocks her front door, then pauses with her hand on the knob, snow melting in her hair. The porch light catches the curve of her cheekbone, the pink in her nose from the cold. When she looks at me, there’s something softer in her eyes than I’ve seen before.

“Thank you,” she says. Simple. Direct. But it lands like a damn sledgehammer.

“For walking you home?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

Her lips twitch, almost a smile. “For not making me feel weak when I needed you.”

I step closer. Not touching. Just there. “Needing someone doesn’t make you weak, Sadie.”

She nods once, then pushes it open. Warmth spills out—vanilla and cinnamon, faint remnants of the café clinging to her space.

“You want to come in for a minute?” she asks. “I was going to make some tea.”

I should say no. I should walk away and give her space to breathe. But something in her voice makes that impossible. There’s no fear in it. No performance. Just an open door and an offer.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ll stay.”

Inside, she moves easily, like having me here doesn’t throw her off anymore. I notice the little things. How she fills the kettle without asking what kind I want. How she pulls two mugs from the cupboard, not just one. The place is small—kitchen table near the front window, a reading chair in the corner, knit blanket tossed over the arm like she just got up from it.

I sit at the table. She joins me a minute later, brushing stray flour off one of the mugs as if she’s embarrassed. I don’t care. I’d drink it off her fingers if she let me.

“So,” she says, cupping her hands around the steaming mug. “How bad is it out there?”

I know what she means. She’s not asking about the weather. She’s asking about Adam. About the man she told me about—the one who had no business being near her then or now.

I don’t lie. “It’s escalating.”

Her jaw tightens, but she nods. Accepts it.

“Adam’s back?” she asks, voice quieter.

I meet her gaze. “Yeah. Caleb saw him.”

“You know Caleb?”

“I served with him. How do you know him?”

She grins. “I’ve lived here more than four years, remember? He’s had a meal at the café more than once. Interesting guy.”

I chuckle. “That’s one word for him. In any event, he came out of Joe’s back entrance this afternoon. Oh he told me I’m supposed to bring him one of your cinnamon rolls.”

Her mug wobbles slightly. She sets it down before it sloshes over. “He can have as many as he likes, any time he likes. So it is Brent. He really is involved.”

“Yeah,” I say again. “And I’m handling it.”

She nods, then looks down at her hands. “I don’t want him to scare me.”

“He doesn’t get that power anymore,” I say, leaning forward. “You’re not the woman he knew. And you’re not alone.”

Her eyes lift, and for a second, the air thickens. We sit like that—just watching each other, breathing in the same charged space. I should say more. I don’t. I just hold her stare and let the weight between us settle.

After a while, I stand. “I should go.”

She stands too. Quickly. Too quickly. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to stay,” I say. “But if I do—” I pause, step in just a little closer, enough that her breath catches. “I won’t pretend it’s just tea.”

She steps into me. Not all the way. Just enough. Her hand rises slowly, fingers brushing the front of my jacket like she’s grounding herself.

“Then don’t,” she whispers.

I start to turn. I have to. But her hand curls in my sleeve. And then her lips are on mine.

Soft. Deliberate. She kisses me like it’s a choice she’s thought about for too long—and now she’s done waiting. It’s not desperate. It’s not tentative. It’s a confirmation. A spark lit with purpose.

I kiss her back, deepening it, angling her jaw with one hand as the other curls around her waist. Her warmth and softness mold perfectly against me; it feels as though I was made to hold her.

But I stop. I don’t want to. Every muscle in my body screams not to. But I ease back just enough to breathe against her lips.

“Not like this,” I murmur.

She blinks up at me, dazed and open and beautiful as hell.

“When I take you, Sadie...” I let the words come slow, weighted with everything I haven’t said yet. “You’ll know it’s real.”

Her breath shudders. “It already feels real.”

My thumb brushes her cheek. “Then we do this right. I brought nothing with me.”

“That’s all right. If you tell me you’re clean, I’ll believe you. I’m clean too and have been on birth control since I was in my teens.”

Every practical detail blurs into insignificance as I lean in to kiss her with fervent urgency—slowly yet deliberately, relishing the gravity of the moment. Her lips are a blazing softness, igniting a deep-seated reminder of everything I hold dear. As I retreat, my hand clings to her hip with a fierce promise, a silent vow that pulses in the air between us, charged with an electrifying blend of reassurance and fervent tenderness.

“I have to meet Caleb. You lock up after me. Don’t go near the door or the windows until I call and give you the all clear.”

She kisses me again and nods as she watches me go, and this time, I don’t feel like I’m leaving something unfinished.

Because when this fire starts to burn, it won’t be an accident. It’ll be a goddamn reckoning.

10

SADIE

It starts with his hands.

Not his voice. Not his eyes. Just the slow, deliberate way his fingers trace the line of my jaw, down the side of my neck, pausing at the pulse point that always jumps when he gets too close. It's warm in the dream—thick, like the air can't decide if it wants to be rain or heat—but I don't care. Zeke's hands are on me, and that's the only thing that matters.

His mouth follows next. Rough stubble scraping across the hollow beneath my ear as he kisses lower. His breath fans against my skin, and I swear I feel every inch in places that haven't been touched in longer than I want to admit. My back arches into him, and I don't stop it. I don't hide it. In the dream, there's no pretending I don't want this. Him.

He lifts my shirt, slow like he's savoring it. Like undressing me is something sacred, something he's been waiting to do since the day he stepped into my café kitchen and I told him I didn't need help.

He peels the fabric up and over, and his voice, low and rough, curls through the space between us.

“Mine now.”

God, the way he says it. Not like a question. Like a promise. A claim written into bone.

I reach for him—his shoulders, his chest, the ridged muscle that never moves unless he wants it to. He's solid. Heavy. Warm. His body presses me down against the bed—my bed, I think, though nothing looks exactly the same. Doesn't matter. My legs wrap around his hips like they've done this before, like my body remembers what my mind's only starting to admit.

His hands find my wrists, pinning them above my head with one smooth motion. Not rough. Not too tight. Just enough to make my breath catch. His mouth is everywhere—collarbone, sternum, the soft underside of my breast that no one's ever bothered to kiss like it mattered.

He pulls back, just enough to look down at me. His eyes are dark, blazing, wild in a way Zeke lets no one else see.

"I'm gonna ruin you for anyone else," he says, his voice gravel and smoke. "But I'll put you back together, too. You ready for that?"

I nod. I can't speak. I am ready. I want this. Want him.

He shifts, one knee parting my thighs, and I feel the full length of him press against the place I'm already aching. I gasp, fingers flexing, hips rising. The friction is perfect. Insistent. My whole body is trembling now, wired tight with anticipation.

"Zeke," I whisper, not sure if I'm pleading or praising.

"Say it again," he growls.

"Zeke..."

He leans down, capturing my mouth in a kiss that's nothing like the ones we've shared so far. This one is possession. Heat. The edge of something dangerous and beautiful. I moan into him, hips rocking, thighs tightening.

Then he pushes inside me—thick and deep and perfect—and I...

I bolt upright in bed, sweat slick across my chest and neck, the sheets twisted around my hips like they're trying to hold me in place. My breath's ragged. Thighs tight. My heart is still pounding, and the echo of his name is stuck in my throat.

I drag a hand over my face and whisper a curse into the dark. That wasn't just a dream. It wasn't just lust, either. It was need. Bone-deep need. Coiled in my chest and between my legs like it's been waiting for permission. Like everything I've been pushing down finally clawed its way free in the safety of sleep.

I fall back against the pillows, chest heaving, my nipples still tight and tingling against the soft cotton of my sleep shirt. Everything inside me is still vibrating. His name is still on my lips. My thighs squeeze together instinctively, chasing some echo of friction that's long since faded.

I cover my face again and groan. Jesus, I'm in trouble. Because that dream didn't feel made up. It felt inevitable. I let myself feel it for another breath—two. The weight of his hands, the rough heat of his voice, the way he looked at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

When I finally drag myself out of bed, the chill in the cottage cuts right through the heat still thrumming low in my belly, but it doesn't dull it completely.

I pad barefoot to the kitchen, fill the kettle with shaking hands, and stare out the window as the water starts to boil. The woods beyond are dark and quiet, but I don't feel alone. Not in the scary way. Not anymore.

I feel watched. But not like prey. It's more like I've already been claimed, and the mountain's just waiting for me to figure it out. I laugh at myself, savoring the sound and the feeling it provokes.

By the time I pour the tea, I know the truth. I want Zeke. Not just his protection. Not just his steadiness. I want him. All of him. The dominant, intense, frustrating man who sees through every wall I've ever tried to build. The man who kissed me like he could already taste the rest of me. Who pulled back because he wants it to mean something more.

I take a long sip, set the mug down, and look out at the trees again.

"I'm ready," I whisper.

And this time, I mean it.

* * *

I've never spent this much time choosing a damn sweater. It's stupid. Or at least, it should be. But this morning, everything feels sharper—like I'm moving through the world with skin a little too thin. Zeke's kiss still echoes in my body like thunder in the mountains, low and rolling, promising more. And that dream?

I flush just thinking about it. It wasn't just vivid. It was honest. Like my subconscious finally got sick of waiting for the rest of me to catch up. So now I stand in front of my bedroom mirror, my closet wide open behind me, heart pounding like I'm about to do something reckless and irreversible.

I settle on a soft charcoal sweater that clings in the right places without looking like I'm trying too hard. Skinny jeans. Brown leather boots. And for the first time since I moved to Glacier Hollow, I wear my hair down. Not half-up. Not in a bun. Loose.

Soft.

Then I reach for the mascara. Just one coat. Enough to make my lashes frame my eyes. A touch of color on my cheeks. A little gloss. That's it. Nothing dramatic. But it's intentional... and that's what matters.

I grab my coat and keys, check the locks out of habit, and step into the cold. The walk to the café takes longer than it should—not because of the distance, but because I can't stop rehearsing what I might say if he looks at me the way he did last night. If he touches me again.

By the time I push open the back door, the sky's still mostly dark. The kitchen smells like lemon cleaner and day-old bread. My boots pad across the hardwood as I flick on the lights and move to prep like I always do—only this time, I feel like I'm vibrating under my skin.

I'm halfway through rolling out dough when I hear the stairs creak... Zeke. I don't need to look. I feel him. Besides, who else would it be? It's like gravity just changed direction. My chest tightens, pulse jumping in my throat. I keep kneading, trying to pretend my hands are steady when they aren't.

He says nothing at first. Just moves around the kitchen like he belongs there—because, well, he does. We fall into our rhythm. Me prepping scones. Him checking locks and resetting the café's security system. I glance up once, catch his eyes lingering on me. Not in a way that makes me feel self-conscious. In a way that says he sees everything—the mascara, the hair, the gloss. His eyes heat, but he doesn't call me on it.

Instead, he just moves closer.

The morning rush starts slow. A few locals filter in early for coffee and breakfast, and

I keep busy with their orders. Zeke stays close, moving in and out of the kitchen, helping without being asked. Watching. Always watching.

By mid-morning, the café hums with voices, clinking dishes, the hiss of the espresso machine. Jenny makes some joke about me finally dressing like I have someone to impress, and I laugh it off. But Zeke hears it. I know he does. He doesn't comment—but his gaze lingers longer after that.

We're in the kitchen, just the two of us, when it happens. I step back from the prep table, arms full of clean trays, and don't realize he's behind me until my back presses into his chest. I freeze. Not because I'm afraid—never that. But because the sensation is immediate. Intense.

He doesn't move. Neither do I. I can feel the length of his cock begin to harden and press against his fly.

The trays in my arms go still. My heartbeat roars in my ears. His hands hover, just shy of touching my waist, like he's waiting to see what I'll do. His breath fans across the back of my neck, and I swear the air between us thickens.

I could step away. I don't.

Instead, I set the trays down slowly, carefully, without breaking contact. My back still pressed to his chest, I tilt my head just slightly—enough to catch his gaze out of the corner of my eye.

“Zeke...” My voice is softer than I mean for it to be.

He leans forward just enough that his lips hover near my ear. “I'm trying really hard not to push you,” he says, voice low and tight. “But you keep backing into me like you want me to forget why I shouldn't.”

I swallow. “Maybe I do.”

He exhales hard, like I just knocked the air out of him. “You sure about that?”

“I didn’t think I’d ever feel like this again,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “But I do. With you.”

Zeke’s jaw flexes, his control razor-thin. “Say the word, Sadie. And I’ll give you everything.”

My pulse skitters. I want to say yes. I want to turn around and pull him into me until nothing else exists. But just as I open my mouth, the bell over the café door rings—sharp and sudden. A reminder.

He steps back. Barely. Just enough. “Later,” he says.

It’s not a question. It’s a fact. And I believe him.

Zeke spends the rest of his day performing his official duties while finding time to check in on me. Oh, he talks to the other locals—he seems to have a real knack for fitting in when he wants to. Finally, that evening I get the last of my customers out and manage to turn off the lights and lock the front door.

I’m in the back—in the kitchen—when I hear the door unlock. He walks in and locks the door behind him before closing the distance between us. His body is behind me, heat pouring off him like a furnace I’ve wandered too close to without thinking. My back is up against his chest, breath tight in my throat, and his hands reach down to grasp my hips and pull me into the cradle of his pelvis, his hard cock nestled against my ass.

It’s a good thing the café is closed, because I doubt any clattering of mugs or

murmuring from customers would get through the sensual buzz that's coursing through my body. There's only my pulse, thunder-loud, and Zeke's voice echoing in my mind.

'Say the word, Sadie. And I'll give you everything.'

I turn slowly in his hold, hands flat against his chest now. I have to tilt my chin to meet his eyes. He's already watching me—like he never looked away.

"I don't want space anymore," I say, steady and clear.

His jaw ticks once, hard. His fingers tighten just slightly on my waist. His nostrils flare as he exhales through his nose, slow and controlled, like he's trying to keep himself from detonating on the spot.

"You're sure?" he growls, his voice deeper than I've ever heard it.

I nod. "I've never been more sure."

He doesn't speak again. He just moves.

One second I'm standing in the kitchen with flour on my hands and tension in my lungs, and the next he's dragging me up the back stairwell—broad hands locked around my wrist, mouth set in a tight, unreadable line. We don't talk as we climb. We don't need to.

His door slams behind us, barely shut before he's on me. His mouth finds mine in a crushing kiss that steals every coherent thought from my head. I gasp, and he takes that too—tongue sliding past my lips, one hand tangling in my hair while the other grabs my hip and pulls me flush against him. There's nothing hesitant. Nothing unsure. Just pure, caged control finally let loose.

I don't recognize the sound I make when he lifts me. One arm around my thighs, the other cradling the back of my neck as he carries me across the room. I cling to him, fingers digging into the back of his shirt, heart hammering against my ribs. He lays me down on his bed like he's done it a hundred times in his head, like this was always inevitable.

His mouth doesn't leave mine.

Even as his weight settles over me, even as his hand slips beneath the hem of my sweater to find bare skin, he kisses me like he's claiming something. Like he's starving. Like he's been waiting and now that he has me, he's not wasting a single second.

"You've been driving me fucking crazy all day," he rasps against my throat, lips brushing my jaw as he pushes the sweater up and over my head. "Coming to work with your hair down. Lip gloss. That goddamn sweater."

I shiver as he drags his mouth down to my collarbone, biting just hard enough to make me gasp. "You noticed."

"I notice everything." His voice vibrates against my skin. "And I'm done pretending I can ignore it."

His hand finds the clasp of my bra, pops it with ease, and I can barely catch my breath before he's kissing a path down my chest, teeth grazing one tight peak while his thumb teases the other. The sensation punches straight through me, raw and electric.

"Zeke," I breathe, arching beneath him.

He groans low in his throat, a sound that reverberates through my whole body. "Say it

again.”

“Zeke,” I repeat, shakier this time.

He slides lower, kisses the soft curve of my stomach, his hands everywhere at once—stroking, gripping, steadying. He peels my jeans down my legs, his movements rough but reverent, like he’s trying to memorize every inch as he goes.

I reach for his shirt, tug it up, and he lets me. It clears his head in one fluid motion, and suddenly all that hard muscle I’ve imagined in stolen glances is right there, mine to touch.

God.

I drag my palms down his chest, feel the tight flex of his abs, the rise and fall of his breath. He’s hot. Solid. Unshakable. And right now—he’s mine.

“I want all of you,” I whisper.

“You have me,” he answers, voice like gravel. “You’ve always had me.”

Then he lowers his head again and slides my panties down, slow and deliberate. When his mouth replaces the heat of his fingers, I cry out—hips bucking, fingers tangling in the sheets. He holds me down with one hand on my thigh, his other arm braced beside me, tongue teasing in tight, devastating circles that have me writhing within seconds.

“You taste so good,” he growls against me. “Sweet. Addictive.”

My hands find his hair. I’m shaking, legs trembling, and he doesn’t stop. Not when I beg. Not when I moan his name like it’s the only word I know. And when I come, it’s

like falling. Like free-falling through something too big to hold.

This is the spark that sets the wildfire ablaze.

11

ZEKE

I feel it when she shatters beneath my touch, her entire body seizing with an electrifying intensity—a symphony of sensation crashing through her. Her hips jerk violently, an involuntary dance of raw desire, while her thighs quiver uncontrollably like autumn leaves caught in a hurricane.

Each breath explodes into desperate gasps, spilling into the air with an ethereal resonance, as though something sacred is being unleashed. She screams my name, a sound that reverberates through the charged atmosphere between us, and I hold her firmly, grounding her as relentless waves of ecstasy surge through her.

I refuse to hurry her through this exquisite unraveling; I want her to feel every thundering pulse echoing like a distant storm, every deliberate drag of my tongue tracing pathways of fire, every precise flick of pressure that sends shivers cascading down her spine. I want her to remember this moment forever, as if carving it into stone—to know what it's like to be utterly dismantled by someone who genuinely cherishes their work, someone who understands devoted artistry and the beauty of surrender.

As her body finally surrenders under my relentless touch, I know I've etched an indelible mark on her soul. In the most profound way imaginable.

Sadie arches, her spine a perfect, graceful arc, and cries out my name as if it's the only word she can recall. I revel in every second of her surrender—memorizing each

tremble and gasp, the exact way her fingers grasp the sheets with frantic desperation. That orgasm, a reckless masterpiece of beauty, belongs to me. I forged it for her. And now that I've witnessed this, felt this, I crave more. I yearn to claim every part of her, to possess her entirely.

She's still trembling when I finally pull back, my lips glistening with her honey, my jaw tense with the effort of holding back. I plant a lingering kiss on the tender inside of her thigh, then trace another gentle kiss along the soft curve of her hip. Her skin is a tapestry of warmth, flushed and slightly damp, radiating heat that seeps into my palms. Her eyes are closed, her lips slightly parted, her chest heaving with rapid breaths. She looks utterly undone—in the most exquisite way imaginable.

“Zeke...” she whispers with her eyes closed and skin aglow, her breath still catching on the edges of her voice. Her soft limbs collapse beneath her, every muscle sinking into the mattress, wholly undone.

“Yeah, sweetheart,” I murmur back, my voice a low promise as my lips begin their slow pilgrimage up her belly, leaving trails of sensation in their wake, lingering as they discover each of the places where she responds most fully.

I savor the softness of her skin, the warmth beneath it, kissing each rib and curve with the kind of devotion only she can draw out of me. I can feel her heart race then slow, her ragged breath hitch as I tease her with light brushes of my mouth, gently anchoring her back to me with every touch, every whisper.

“That was my orgasm. They're all mine from now on, and I'll make sure you get plenty of them. You know that, don't you?”

She's caught somewhere in that fragile space between awareness and ecstasy. Her head tips sideways, then back, a slow and hazy nod that carries both confirmation and surrender.

“Good,” I say, voice lower now, rougher and demanding. “Because now it’s my turn.”

We reach for each other, nothing else mattering in this moment. Her fingers find my hair, my shoulders, every movement charged with promise. Sadie’s eyes close as she pulls me up until every boundary disappears.

I cover her body with mine, her warmth and softness igniting a pulse of urgency between us. Lips meet lips, hungry for more, eager to take all they can from this breathless, stolen time. Hands press skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. Every stroke and every touch starts to melt everything else away. We arch closer, tighter, tangled bodies, finding our rhythm with all the urgency of our need. We are breath mingling and harmonizing, taking over and devouring. We are...

My mouth traces feverish kisses along her body, every movement charged with raw, deliberate passion. My lips press searing kisses along the smooth curve of her hip, then follow the fragile line of her stomach. Her skin shimmers with a damp, heated flush, pulsing with the lingering embers of our previous fire. She tastes of sweat and sugar, intertwined with a hint of Sadie—a flavor that promises to haunt my every craving.

Hovering above her, I anchor myself with one hand beside her head while the other boldly explores her inner thigh, setting her perfectly in place. Her eyes surrender to closed bliss as her chest rises, electrified with anticipation.

Her fingers grip my shoulders hard as I settle deeply between her thighs. Lifting my gaze, I find hers already locked onto me—unyielding, raw, and exposed, her parted lips and heaving chest laying bare an unmasked desire.

"Zeke..." she breathes, the word dripping pure, unspoken permission rather than doubt.

I grip her thighs with determined insistence, gently prying them open wider as I slide upward, my body following the slick, heated track between her legs. My forearm braces beside her head while the other guides my hard length into perfect alignment. In an instant, her legs curl around me like desperate vines, as though they have been waiting for the moment I fill the void, aching for release.

Her eyes close again.

"No," I growl—a low, commanding edge of dominance. I press the head of my arousal against her inviting entrance, teasing with the promise of that first stretching flood. "Eyes on me," I demand.

Immediately, she lifts her gaze—wide, dark, raw with unfiltered longing. My breath catches as I lose myself in that fierce stare. There is no hiding in those eyes; she exposes every part of herself, giving more than I ever thought possible. That profound trust smashes into me like a powerful blow to the chest.

And I answer it.

I thrust into her with a single, powerful stroke, sinking deep within her. The gasp that explodes from her lips slams into me like a searing, incendiary bullet. Her hands claw at my back, nails raking over my muscles as I pause long enough for her to drink in the full, intoxicating presence of me—the overwhelming stretch that binds us in that moment of unadulterated intensity.

"Jesus, Sadie..." I murmur, my voice rough with unrestrained desire. "You feel like heaven."

Her hips begin a slow and deliberate dance, moving with a wildness that is both precise and primal, each calculated motion drawing me deeper into the kind of breathless wanting I can scarcely endure.

Her eyes close as I drive into her slowly, my pace languid at first, her body swaying like a serpent, then tightening around me with a force that sends shivers up my spine. A soft, breathy sigh escapes her lips, and it takes everything I have not to lose myself completely. The air between us is charged, her movements becoming more insistent, wrapping me in her lingering wet heat. And I am at once lost and found.

Sadie moans, softly at first, then louder, the rhythm building, and all my senses are ablaze, alive with the feeling of her. I can barely hang on to the need to hold back, barely keep myself from letting go in that raw, explosive moment when everything within me wants to surrender to this burning, beautiful madness.

She is all around me, irresistibly tight, calling me to let go, daring me to lose control, and I don't know how much longer I can keep from falling, how much longer I can keep from giving in. A desperate thrill runs through me, my self-control unraveling, my last defenses crumbling, until finally I lose my battle entirely, completely at her mercy.

"Zeke," she gasps again—a raw, aching sound that sends shivers cascading down my spine.

I pull back just enough to catch a soft, yearning whimper from her before plunging back in—deeper, harder. With every measured thrust, she devours me with fervent hunger. Her breath shudders against my mouth as I set a relentless rhythm—fast, punishing, and utterly unyielding; not reckless, but desperately needy. It's as if this moment has been written in the stars ever since I first saw her in that sunlit café, with flour gracing her cheek and fire igniting her eyes.

Her legs squeeze tighter around me, her arms anchoring themselves around my neck. Every moan she offers is a tribute to our raw intensity; every arch of her body fuels my desire to give her all that I am. I press my forehead to hers, and our lips collide in a panting, heated encounter, our slick bodies melding in a rhythm that feels

predestined.

Each thrust awakens exquisite sensitivity—a whispered invocation of my name dissolving into desperate, fragmented pleas. With every movement, her inner curves quiver in a delicate dance, and I feel that familiar, explosive rush building as she teeters once more on the edge of divine release.

“You’re mine,” I grit out, fucking into her harder. “Say it.”

“Yes,” she moans, head thrown back, neck arched. “I’m yours, Zeke.”

That’s it. That’s the goddamn fuse.

I lose all semblance of control as I drive into her with an almost feral intensity, desperate to etch this moment so deep into her very bones that no one else can ever make her feel this overwhelming urge. Her hands grab at me as if my body is the only lifeline keeping her anchored here, and damn, I relish the thought of being that anchor.

She cries out in raw agony as she shatters into climax, her entire body convulsing in a fierce, electric grip around me. I’m lost in the wild cadence of her contractions, pulses, and trembles—a disorienting, intoxicating fervor. My jaw locks tight, muscles tensing under the strain of holding back the tide, yet I refuse to let go. Not now.

I deliberately ease my momentum, each breath a battle to regain control, allowing her to soar on the rapture without completely surrendering control. My arms tremble with the effort of restraint while I watch, transfixed, as she descends from the precipice of ecstasy that we’ve scaled together.

She meets my eyes with a searing look—lips swollen, vibrant red, cheeks flushed, and eyes unsteady yet brimming with fierce, lingering pleasure. Her hair is a riot of

untamed disarray, her body exposed and gloriously spent, looking more magnificent than ever.

Lowering myself onto my elbows, I enshroud her in my arms, letting our bodies finally merge completely as I give a final thrust and find my own release. Her legs cling tightly to my waist as if to hold on until the world outside ceases to exist, and I have no desire to let go.

I trail gentle, incendiary kisses along her temple, her cheek, and the delicate corner of her mouth—each touch a potent reminder of our connection. As she tilts her face up, her lips press against my neck, and I freeze, cherishing every second of this heightened communion. My hand ascends along her back, finding its place between her shoulder blades, anchoring her to me with undeniable intensity.

Eventually, I ease apart with careful, deliberate movements, rolling to my side and drawing her close with every shift. She curls into my chest as though it is her only sanctuary—her cheek pressed against my pulsating heart, one leg entwined with mine, her breath a soft, feverish caress on my skin.

For a long, charged silence we exist; words are needless in the electric stillness that envelops us. Her fingers trace sinuous, intricate paths over my ribs while my hand tenderly stokes down her spine, keeping her irrevocably near.

Then she shifts slightly, not breaking our connection but just enough to lift her head and fix her gaze on me—her eyes full of a raw intensity that sends my heart into a wild, swelling beat.

“You scare me,” she says quietly.

I pause, hand stilling at the small of her back. Her eyes are open—clear, honest, searching.

I don't flinch. I don't pull back. Instead, I brush her hair from her face, lean in, and press a kiss to her forehead. "Good," I say. "Because that means you care."

Her breath catches. "I do."

I nod, not needing anything else from her at this moment. I already feel it—in her body, her eyes, the way she lets me in.

Tonight was just the beginning, that much is certain. Adam, Brent—those bastards—and whatever else is going on in Glacier Hollow and whoever is responsible are still out there. Still lingering and threatening.

Sadie curls tighter into my chest, her soft breath warm where it meets my skin and even where it doesn't. Her heartbeat wild, frantic and unfocused. Just like mine. I hold her tenderly until the only sound left in the room is our breathing, fading like a distant echo in an empty cavern. A soft rhythm shared between us that makes me feel like we're the only ones left in the world.

I know, without question or the faintest shadow of a doubt, that this wasn't just sex. It would never be just a release. We crossed a line, and once crossed, it could never be uncrossed. A claim made, raw and urgent, and there's no going back now.

Tomorrow, whoever is out there threatening my woman and my town is going to come to the harsh realization that the mountain and all of its inhabitants have been reclaimed. That it belongs to me, to us. And soon, very soon, those who are responsible are going to bleed.

12

ZEKE

A piercing wail jolts me from sleep. The distinct, urgent cry of the town's volunteer fire department siren slices through the predawn stillness, setting my pulse racing. Beside me, Sadie stirs, her warmth a fleeting comfort as reality crashes in.

"Zeke?" Her voice is thick with sleep, laced with concern.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, muscles coiling with readiness. "It's the fire alarm," I say, reaching for my jeans. "Something's wrong. I have to go"

Sadie sits up, allowing the sheet to puddle in her lap, wide awake now. "Be careful."

I nod, pulling on my shirt and boots with practiced efficiency. The shrill siren continues its relentless call, each pulse tightening the knot in my gut. As I fasten my belt, my phone buzzes on the nightstand. I snatch it up, recognizing Caleb's number.

"Zeke," he says the moment I answer, his voice taut. "Joe's garage is up in flames. The fire department is already here, but it's bad. The shop area is going to be a complete loss. The fire's threatening the fuel pumps."

"Damn it," I hiss, adrenaline surging. "Any sign of Joe?"

"Negative. He's not answering his phone, and no one's seen him."

"I'm on my way." I end the call and turn to Sadie, who watches me with a mix of fear and determination.

"Joe's garage is burning," I inform her, grabbing my jacket. "Stay here. Lock the doors."

She opens her mouth to protest but thinks better of it, nodding instead. "Be safe, Zeke."

I stride to the door, pausing briefly to look back at her. "I'll be back soon."

The drive to Joe's garage is a blur, my mind racing faster than the truck's engine. As I approach, the night sky glows ominously, the acrid scent of burning fuel seeping through the vents. Flames engulf the structure, licking hungrily at the darkness, while firefighters battle valiantly to contain the inferno.

I park a safe distance away and make my way to Caleb, who stands near the perimeter, his face illuminated by the fire's eerie light.

"Any updates?" I ask, scanning the chaotic scene.

Caleb shakes his head, frustration clear. "Joe's still missing. We found his truck out back, but no sign of him."

I clench my jaw; the implications chilling. "And Adam?"

"The guy in the picture?" I nod. "Gone. No one's seen him since yesterday."

Damn it. The pieces are falling into a pattern I don't like.

"This fire..." I begin, but Caleb finishes my thought.

"Arson. No doubt about it. There are found traces of accelerant near the rear entrance."

I exhale sharply, anger simmering beneath the surface. "We need to find Joe and Adam. Now."

Caleb nods. "I noticed ATV tracks leading from the back of the shop into the woods. They might give us a lead."

"Let's follow them," I say without hesitation. "Grab what you need."

Minutes later, we're on the trail, flashlights cutting through the dense forest darkness. The tracks are fresh, the churned earth betraying a hurried departure.

"They were in a rush," Caleb observes, crouching to examine the disturbed soil.

"Desperate men make mistakes," I reply, eyes scanning the path ahead. "Let's hope they left us something to go on."

We press on, the forest closing in around us, each step heightening my sense of urgency. After what feels like an eternity, we emerge onto a remote ridge. The acrid scent of smoke hangs heavy in the air.

"Another burn site," Caleb mutters, pointing to a charred clearing ahead.

We approach cautiously, the ground beneath our boots transitioning from soft earth to scorched remains. In the center of the devastation lies a chilling sight: a dark stain marring the blackened soil.

"Blood," I state grimly, kneeling to inspect it.

Caleb exhales slowly. "Someone was injured here. Recently."

I rise, resolve hardening. "We need to find out whose blood this was and where they were taken."

Caleb nods, determination mirrored in his eyes. "Agreed. But Zeke, this is escalating. Whoever's behind this isn't afraid to spill blood."

"Neither am I," I reply coldly. "Especially when it comes to protecting what's mine."

We share a brief, understanding glance before turning back toward the trail. The night is far from over, and the hunt has just begun.

* * *

I guide the SUV off the main road, tires biting into the packed snow as we follow the trail Caleb marked. The radio crackles with static and clipped updates from the fire crew. Joe's garage is under control—for now. The pumps were inches from going up. Would've taken half the block with them. Too close for comfort.

The guy in charge of the fire response? Travis Holt. It's a name I know, if not the face. At least not until now. Last I heard, he was supposed to be dead. But that rumor, like most in Glacier Hollow, doesn't hold up under daylight.

Travis Holt—former SEAL turned bestselling author—decided this town needed a fire station more than another book. So he bought one of the old buildings, gutted it, rebuilt it, and formed a volunteer crew from scratch. Trained them himself. No frills. Just function.

When I get him on the radio, his voice is cool. Steady. All edges sanded down by experience. He's not the hand-shaking, back-slapping type—but I don't need charm. I

need competence. And he's got it.

"Is the town safe?" I ask him.

"From the fire? Yeah. We've got it contained. Pumps are fine. From whoever lit it? Not even close. You know who you're chasing?"

"Pieces," I say. "Still putting it together. I've got another SEAL riding with me?"

"Figured that was Caleb."

I smile a little. "If we need you?"

"You will," he says. No drama. Just fact. I nod to myself and keep driving. "I've got your back. Be careful. Abby likes your Sadie."

I don't bother to deny she is now my Sadie. "Then that makes two of us. Keep me advised on the fire and if you can, keep your eyes open on the town until Caleb and I get back."

"Will do. Good hunting, Zeke."

The call ends. As the SUV rolls along beside me, Caleb's scanning the tree line through the passenger window, his jaw set. He has said little since we left the edge of town, but he doesn't need to. His tight shoulders tell me everything. He's reading the woods like a language most men have forgotten.

"Pull off here," he says suddenly, voice low.

I do, killing the engine as soon as we're stopped. The silence afterward is absolute. We get out without a word and head into the trees, our boots softly crunching over

ice. Caleb moves ahead, crouching low when he reaches the first set of ATV tracks. I kneel beside him and take a closer look—fresh treads, staggered in places where the machine hit a rut. Someone was in a hurry. But not reckless. This trail was chosen, not stumbled onto.

“Blood,” Caleb says, pointing ahead to a pine sapling sprayed dark at the base.

I follow the trail with my eyes. It’s not a lot. But it’s enough to say someone left here injured—or worse. And I know, even before I say it aloud, that this wasn’t a random act of violence. This was a message. A warning.

I stand slowly, scanning the shadows deeper into the woods. Whoever ran this op torched the garage to cover a trail—but the real cleanup happened out here.

“This was a drop site,” I mutter. “They torched the garage to sever ties. What they didn’t count on is that we were already watching.”

Caleb nods, pulling out his phone and snapping photos. “Or that your fire department could respond so quickly.”

“Apparently six months ago, we didn’t have a fire department.”

Caleb nods. “I’ll keep tracking. You go deal with what’s next.”

I know what he means. The town. Sadie. The fallout. I turn back toward the SUV, the weight of it all pressing down like the snow-heavy sky above us. Joe’s gone. Adam too. But they didn’t vanish without help.

I climb back into the SUV, start the engine, and grip the wheel tight. Glacier Hollow isn’t just some quiet town anymore. It’s a fuse. And someone’s already lit the match.

* * *

The second I'm back in cell range, I pull over and make the call. There's only one guy I trust for what I need right now—Detective Nate Barnett, Anchorage PD, white-collar unit. We served together back in Coronado. He owes me, and we both know it.

The line clicks twice before he picks up. "MacAllister. Thought you were allergic to phones."

"I need a name run through your financial unit," I say without preamble. "Brent Holloway. He ever pop up in anything off the books? Private LLCs, corporate laundering, suspicious movement of funds through Alaska fronts. He was involved with my girl, Sadie Callahan."

Nate exhales like I just dumped a lot on his desk before breakfast. "Is he your target because of her or something else?"

"He's about to be both."

A pause. Then, "Give me an hour."

I hang up and head back toward town. The sky's still low and gray, bleeding into the mountains like it can't decide whether to snow or rain. Dirt from the ridge Caleb tracked still cakes my boots. That bloodstain hasn't left my head. Someone got hurt bad out there—maybe Adam. But we didn't find a body. Just a burn site and tire tracks headed east.

By the time I park behind the café, the streets are stirring with early risers. The fire crew is cleaning up the last of the fire. A couple of regulars with coffee already in hand are watching. A maintenance truck creeping toward the bridge. All quiet on the surface. But the kind of quiet that makes your skin itch.

I step into the back of the café. Sadie's at the prep table, apron already dusted in flour, a tray of cinnamon rolls cooling by the window. She glances up when she hears me, and something shifts in her expression—something tight.

She doesn't say it. But I know.

I cross the room in three strides. "What happened?"

She hesitates. Wipes her hands on a towel, then reaches into her coat pocket. I watch her movements. Too careful. Too practiced. She pulls out a folded piece of paper. Her fingers don't shake, but her eyes won't meet mine when she hands it over.

I unfold it. Printed block letters again. No signature. Same type as before.

YOU SHOULD HAVE STAYED QUIET.

This time, it's not just a threat. It's a reprimand. A warning shot across the bow.

I crumple the paper in my fist, jaw clenching. "When?"

She finally meets my eyes. "This morning. In the mailbox. I didn't... I was going to wait to show you."

"No," I snap, but not at her. I step in, close the space between us until she has no choice but to feel it. My heat. My control. My protection. "You don't get to keep this shit from me anymore. Not after last night."

Her breath catches. She nods. Small. Honest.

I cup her jaw, not rough, but firm enough to anchor her. "No more hiding. No more soft-stepping around what this is. They want you afraid, Sadie. They want you

second-guessing what you deserve. That ends now."

Her eyes shine, but she holds the tears back. "I'm not used to someone standing with me."

"Then get used to it," I growl. "Because I'm not going anywhere. And anyone who touches what's mine pays for it. In blood."

My phone buzzes. Anchorage area code. I answer it without looking.

Nate's voice comes through, sharp and grim. "Your guy's dirty. Brent Holloway has three LLCs tied to a shell firm based out of Sitka. All of them cycling high-volume cash deposits with no source. My guess? Laundering. We've been watching one of the fronts for months. Didn't have a name until now."

I glance at Sadie. Her brows furrow, reading my expression.

"You got names on the other signatories?" I ask.

"One. Adam Holloway. You think he's involved?"

"He's not just involved. He's the fucking middleman."

Nate goes quiet. Then, "Want me to keep digging?"

"No," I say. "I'll send you what I have via a secure fax line."

"Since when did Glacier Hollow have a secure fax line?"

"Since I made them hook us up. We're closing this down. Now."

I hang up. Sadie hasn't moved. But she knows. She always does.

"It's Brent," I say. "He's not just watching. He's moving money. And Adam's been running it through this town. Joe was a piece of it. The garage fire was a cleanup job."

Sadie presses a hand to the counter. "And I'm a liability."

I shake my head, stepping in. "You're a mistake they made. The biggest one was threatening you, thinking they could scare you... thinking I wouldn't burn the entire mountain down to keep you safe."

Her lips part. Her voice cracks just a little. "Zeke... what do we do now?"

I lean in, press a kiss to her forehead. "We end it. We hunt them down, we make it loud, and we make damn sure no one ever comes back."

"Can you do that all by yourself?" she asks, concerned.

"No, but I'm not alone. I have three former SEALs to call on. Trust me, Brent and his buddies have no idea what they've taken on."

"Three?"

"Yeah, Nate, Caleb and Travis."

"Travis is an ex-SEAL?"

"Former, babe. Once you're special ops anything—SEAL, Ranger, Force Recon—you're always one. If you no longer work for the military, you may be former, but never ex."

She grins and shakes her head, exhaling like she's been holding her breath for weeks. Maybe she has. But she doesn't step away, and I don't let go.

* * *

The new cameras for the café and Sadie's cottage go in faster than I expect. I'd already had the basics—motion sensors, wireless feeds, entry points locked—but this? This is different. Thermal imaging. AI-based motion alerts. Full perimeter, real-time uplink to my secure feed. I'm not taking chances anymore. Not with Sadie.

She's in the kitchen, pretending not to watch me drill a new mount above the window that faces the woods. I can feel her eyes on my back, a soft hum of curiosity and worry stitched together.

"It'll be next to impossible to take a shower without one of these things lighting up," she says, voice wry.

I glance over my shoulder, meet her gaze. "Good. Then I'll know you're safe even if I'm not here."

She bites her bottom lip, the way she does when she's unsure if she should push. "Zeke... this feels like a lot."

"It is," I say, straightening. "Because the threat isn't low anymore, Sadie. You finding that note today? That wasn't a bluff. That was escalation."

She stiffens slightly, arms wrapping around herself. The memory of it is fresh—white envelope tucked into her mailbox, no return address, no stamp. Just her name scrawled in that same jagged hand as before. She hadn't meant for me to see it. Tried to hide it, fold it away into her coat pocket like it was something to unpack later. But I caught her. And this time, I didn't let her lie.

“I told you I wouldn’t let you do this alone,” I say. “That wasn’t conditional. I meant it.”

Sadie doesn’t argue. She just nods, the motion is small and solemn. “I know. I just... it’s hard. Having someone worry about me like this. I’m not used to it.”

I set the drill down and cross the room. My hands find her waist, pull her in until her body melts against mine like she’s been waiting for this. She always does. “Get used to it. Because I’m not going anywhere. And neither are those cameras.”

Her breath catches. “Okay,” she whispers.

I press a kiss to her temple, then her cheek. Her arms slide around my back, and I feel the tension in her slowly fade.

By the time I finish mounting the last unit, it’s late. She’s still in the studio, curled in my chair with her legs tucked under her, one of my flannels draped over her shoulders. She looks small like that—like something I could carry, protect, hide from the rest of the damn world. And she’s watching me again, eyes soft and full of something she hasn’t named yet.

I lock the windows. Bolt the door. Then I turn and nod toward the bed. “You staying?”

She doesn’t answer with words. Just stands slowly and walks over to me, pulls the flannel tighter, then nods once. “I don’t want to go back to my place tonight.”

“You won’t.”

I dim the lights, draw the blackout curtains, and give her space. She disappears into the bathroom for a few minutes, and when she returns, she’s wearing one of my

shirts—black cotton, hangs off her shoulder, stops mid-thigh. She looks better in it than I ever have. Both my chest and groin tighten. She's not doing it for show. She's doing it because it feels like mine, like comfort, like a promise.

“I can sleep on the couch,” I offer, voice lower now.

She walks straight into me, presses a kiss to my sternum. “Don't you dare.”

13

SADIE

Zeke pulls me into his arms, wrapping them around me like a promise. There's no rush. Just warmth. Just a steady, deliberate closeness standing next to him. His body fits against mine like it's always belonged there—strong and sure, familiar in a way that makes my chest ache. I press closer, molding myself into him, letting the heat of his skin settle the last of my nerves. I exhale slowly, content and grounded.

His hand trails down my side, fingers dragging over the cotton of his shirt still on my body. There's something soothing in the way he touches me—like he's confirming I'm real, here, his. When he reaches my hip, he lingers, thumb brushing soft, slow circles. I shiver—not from the cold. It's the kind of shiver that comes from being wanted and known and seen all at once.

My hand finds his, sliding my fingers between his. The way he squeezes back makes something bloom deep in my chest. I lean in, pressing my lips to the curve of his neck—a soft kiss, quiet, like thank you, like I'm here, too. The silence between us isn't empty. It's full. It hums.

Then he turns his head, and our mouths meet. It starts soft—barely a breath—but deepens quickly. His kiss is slow and thorough, like he's tasting something rare. Like there's nowhere else he'd rather be. I sigh into it, my fingers drifting under his shirt, skimming the hard lines of his stomach over the small ridges of old scars. He doesn't flinch. Doesn't stop me. He lets me touch him like I belong there. Like he wants me to.

There's no fear now. No second-guessing. Just the steady rise of need and the deeper weight of trust that's only grown between us.

He kisses me again, slower this time, longer—like he's memorizing the shape of my mouth, the way I breathe his name. His hands roam carefully, confidently, as if I'm a map he's traced before but wants to learn all over again. And when I whisper his name, it slips out like a secret I don't want to hide anymore.

I lower myself to my knees in front of him, the hardwood cool beneath me, but all I feel is the heat rolling off Zeke's body. He's leaning against the edge of the table, arms braced, watching me with those dark, storm-swept eyes that see too much. That always see me.

My fingers find his belt buckle, and I pause—not from nerves, but because this moment deserves to be felt. His chest rises on a sharp inhale. I hear it. Feel it. He coils his control tightly, as if he's about to break.

“You don't have to—” he says, voice rough, low.

I lift my gaze to meet his. “I want to,” I whisper.

His jaw tightens, but he nods. That slight movement is all the permission I need.

I ease his jeans down, the slow drag of denim revealing skin I've only seen in flashes. Every inch of him is hard, carved, restrained. I place a kiss on his hip, then another along the inside of his thigh, and he groans—just once, but it's enough to send heat spiraling between my legs. His hand hovers near my hair, not pulling, not forcing. Just there. Like he needs the anchor as much as I do.

I wrap my fingers around him, my thumb brushing over the soft skin at the tip, and he hisses through his teeth. The sound is raw. Unfiltered.

When I take him into my mouth, slowly, fully, his hand finally finds me—threading into my hair, tightening just enough to tell me he feels it. Really feels it.

He murmurs my name like it's a warning and a prayer all at once. "Sadie..."

I hum around him, letting him feel the vibration. His whole body shudders. I don't rush. I want to give him this. To watch the control unravel. To know I can wreck him as much as he's wrecked me.

He tastes like salt and skin and something that's just him. I close my eyes and focus on every sound he makes, every twitch of muscle, every low growl that tells me I'm driving him insane.

When his hand tightens in my hair, I slow, easing off and looking up. Now, his eyes are dark and wild, like molten metal.

"Come here," he says, voice wrecked.

He lifts me without effort, pulling me back into his arms, his mouth already finding mine. There's nothing hurried in the kiss—just heat and need and the kind of reverence that makes my heart ache. He sweeps me up in his arms and carries me to the bed.

"You undo me," he whispers against my lips as he lays me down. "You have from the moment I first laid eyes on you."

I smile, reaching up for him, breath shallow, heart pounding so hard I'm sure he can feel it.

"I'm not sorry," I whisper.

“Don’t be,” he says, sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling me closer. “I want to stay undone if it’s by you.”

I tug Zeke’s shirt over his head, my fingers lingering for a beat longer than they need to on the warmth of his skin. He lifts the hem of the one I’m wearing—his, soft and worn—and drags it over my head, slowly, carefully. When our bodies press together, skin to skin, heat to heat, it’s not frantic like before. It’s slower. Fuller. A kind of heat that doesn’t flare and vanish—it simmers. Deep and consuming.

He kisses a warm, electrifying path along my jaw, his lips brushing tenderly over the sensitive skin, down over my throat to the gentle curve of my breast. He lingers there, teasing and playful, his breath a soft whisper against my skin. His mouth closes around my nipple, his tongue swirling before delivering a sharp, thrilling nip. The sensation courses through me like a surge of lightning, and I hiss with surprise, my hands gripping the quilt, twisting it into a tangled mess beneath my fingers.

Zeke emits a low, satisfied sound that vibrates against my skin, a soft hum of pleasure as he moves to the other nipple. He draws it into his mouth with deliberate slowness, his lips insistent and claiming, sucking gently but with intent. He laves it with long, swirling strokes of his tongue, creating a spiral of heat that leaves me gasping, my body responding instinctively, squirming and arching beneath him.

My skin feels ignited, every nerve alive and flickering, coiling under his attentive touch. I crave more, an intense need surging through me, desperate and trembling with anticipation. He shifts his position, centering his body between my legs, and I find it hard to breathe, to think, as I consume his touch like it’s the very air I need. He continues his journey down my body with a mixture of tongue and teeth, each kiss a sizzling imprint on my skin.

When he enters me, I gasp—a sound I couldn’t stop if I tried. It’s not loud. It’s soft, reverent. My legs wrap around his waist without thought, driven by instinct and need.

My hands find his jaw, cupping it gently, holding him close as I look up into his eyes. And he's looking right back—steady, intense, like I'm the only thing that's ever mattered. That look... it undoes me more than any touch.

He moves inside me with a rhythm that feels less like sex and more like communion—every thrust deliberate, every connection drawing us tighter. There's no rush. No frantic build. It's a dance, and we move together perfectly, my hips rising to meet his in time, our bodies synced like we've been doing this for years instead of hours.

He touches me like I'm something precious. Even so, there's no mistaking the way he claims me with every stroke. His hands grip my waist, firm but never harsh. His body surrounds mine, shields me. Every breathless moan I let slip, every time I whisper his name—"Zeke"—it pulls him deeper, grounds us harder.

He kisses me slowly, lingering at my mouth, my jaw, my neck. His lips brush over my collarbone, then down my shoulder, like he's tasting every piece of me he missed last night. I cling to him like I'll float away if I don't. Not because I'm afraid—but because I've never wanted anything more than this. Than him. Than us, like this.

The pleasure builds gradually, winding through me like a current I don't want to resist. My body arches under his, rising into him, chasing that rising pressure, feeling the tension coil tighter and tighter until I'm nothing but sensation and sound. And the whole time, I keep my eyes on him. I don't look away. I want him to see me unravel. To know that this is his.

When I finally come, it's not a fall—it's a slow, shuddering bloom. My breath comes in stutters. My body trembles around him. But I don't close my eyes. I hold his gaze, and I see everything in it. The fire. The devotion. The promise.

And when he follows me, his body seizing, his mouth on mine, I feel it everywhere.

In the way he groans my name against my lips. In the way his arms tighten around me like he'll never let go.

He doesn't pull away when it's over. He just shifts, just enough to keep me close, pressing kisses to my temple, my hair, the corner of my mouth. I nestle into his chest, our legs tangled beneath the sheet, his heartbeat loud and steady under my cheek.

I say nothing. I don't need to.

He holds me long after the room has gone still, his arm strong around my waist, his other hand reaching for the phone on the nightstand. The soft glow from the screen lights the side of his face—sharp jaw, furrowed brow, eyes scanning.

He's watching the monitors. Protecting.

Even now. Even after everything.

I close my eyes, lulled by the warmth of his body and the strength in his silence.

Whatever's coming, I know this now for certain—I won't be facing it alone.

* * *

When I wake, the first thing I feel is heat. Not the too-warm, too-much kind that makes me kick off the covers—but the kind that settles deep in my chest. Slow. Steady. Safe.

Zeke wraps his arm around my waist, heavy and possessive, his hand resting just beneath the curve of my breast. I press my cheek against his chest, the steady beat of his heart like a metronome anchoring me to the moment. His skin is warm under my palm, bare and solid and unmistakably his.

I shift slightly, and his grip tightens. Not harsh. Just firm. Certain.

“Morning,” he rumbles, voice rough with sleep.

I tilt my chin, my eyes blinking open slowly. He’s already watching me.

That same unreadable expression is there—quiet intensity, focus, like he’s scanning every inch of my face and cataloging it for later. The corners of his mouth tip just enough to call it a smile.

“You’ve been staring,” I say, voice still scratchy from sleep.

“Yeah,” he answers simply, like he doesn’t see a reason to deny it. “I could watch you sleep for hours.”

The blush that rises in my cheeks is instant. I try to duck my face into his chest, but he catches my chin gently between his fingers, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“You’re beautiful when you’re quiet like this,” he says, dragging his thumb slowly along my lower lip. “Peaceful. Like you know you’re safe.”

“I do,” I whisper. “With you, I do.”

The silence stretches again, but it’s not heavy. It’s full. Lush. Like the air has weight and heat and something important simmering just beneath the surface.

My hand rests over his heart. I feel every thud, every slow rise and fall of his chest. And I know—if I’m going to tell him, it has to be now. While the world is still soft and quiet and he’s looking at me, like nothing I could say would make him let go.

“I never told you the complete story,” I say, and my voice sounds too loud suddenly,

even though it's barely above a whisper. "About when I left Brent."

Zeke's expression shifts—subtle, but instant. That protective edge in his jaw, the way his eyes narrow slightly. Alert. But he doesn't speak. He just waits.

I inhale slowly, steadying myself.

"It wasn't the worst day. Not by a mile. But it was the one where I stopped pretending I could fix him... or survive him."

I sit up slightly, letting the sheet fall to my waist. Zeke follows me, propping himself up on an elbow, his hand still anchored to my side like he knows I'll float away if he lets go.

"We'd been at his sister's house. There was some fundraiser thing. He didn't like the way I was talking to one of the board members—too confident, too friendly, too something. I don't even remember what I said. But he stewed the entire drive home."

I look down, tracing a pattern on the sheets with one finger.

"He waited until we were inside. Until I'd taken my heels off. Then he pushed me up against the wall and..." I stop. Swallow. The air feels colder suddenly.

Zeke's body tenses, but even so, he says nothing.

"He backhanded me so that my lip was split, and I had a bruise on my cheek for more than a week. He said I needed to be reminded of who I belonged to... that I'd started to forget. When I tried to pull away, he shoved me to the ground and called me weak. Said no one else would want me, anyway."

Zeke's breath hisses between his teeth, sharp and silent. His jaw flexes once, hard.

His hand moves to mine—big and warm and shaking, just barely. He brings it to his lips. He leans in and softly kisses my cheek where the ghost of a bruise once lived and then gently kisses my lips. His mouth is reverent. Devastating.

I start to cry. Silent tears this time. Not from pain, but from the softness. From the weight of being seen. Of being held together so gently after being torn apart for so long.

Zeke shifts, kneeling in front of me on the bed, one leg braced on either side of mine. He cradles my face in both hands like I'm something precious—like I'm breakable, even though we both know I'm not.

“You survived,” he murmurs, his forehead pressing to mine. “And I swear to God, Sadie, I’ll make sure you thrive.”

My throat closes up. My hands curl into his shoulders, holding on.

“I don’t know how to do that,” I whisper.

“Yes, you do,” he says, brushing his lips over my temple. “You’ve been doing it every day since you got here. Getting up. Feeding people. Building something new. You already know how, baby. You just didn’t have anyone watching your back while you did it.”

His hand finds the small of my back and pulls me into his lap. I fold into him without hesitation, chest to chest, skin to skin, like I belong there. Maybe I do.

We don’t talk after that. There’s nothing left to say. I feel the shift between us as clearly as the sunrise beginning to filter through the curtains.

He lays us back down, pulling the sheet up around us, one hand fisted gently in my

hair, the other anchored against my lower back. I nestle into his chest, my leg sliding between his. His breath slows. So does mine.

For the first time since I left Brent, I don't feel like I'm running anymore.

I fall asleep again like that, curled against him, the tension gone. Not because everything's fixed. But because I believe him now—when he says I'll be okay. That we'll be okay. Tomorrow will come. And with it, whatever storm is waiting. But for now, in this room, in this bed, in these arms? I am complete and strong and home.

14

ZEKE

I 'm already half-dressed when the encrypted ping comes through Caleb's secure phone. It's not a phone call or text—just a low-frequency code, the kind only a former SEAL would know how to send or read. The moment I see it, I feel the switch flip in my blood.

Sadie's still asleep, curled tight into my side, one leg slung over mine like she's keeping me anchored. At some point, she must have slipped my shirt back on. Her breathing is slow, steady, mouth slightly parted. Peaceful. I watch her for one more second, burning the image into my mind before I slip from the bed and grab my stuff from the floor.

I'm tugging my boots on when she stirs.

Her voice is thick with sleep. "What time is it?"

"Early." I keep my voice low, even. "Go back to sleep."

She lifts her head, blinking. "You're lying."

I glance over my shoulder. Her eyes are clearer now. Watching me. Always watching.

"Something's up," she says.

I nod once, grabbing my comm from the top drawer and clipping it to my belt. “Caleb picked up something. Might be a signal from one of the ATVs we tracked near the burn site.”

She pushes the covers back, sitting up. My shirt is still on her, one shoulder bare, hair tangled and perfect. Her brow pulls in just enough to tell me she’s trying not to worry. It’s instinct. She’s always trying to stay out of the way, trying not to need too much.

“You going alone?”

“Not a chance.” I step back toward her, lean down, and cup her face in my hand. “Caleb’s already out. He’s triangulating the signal. I’m going to meet him on the southern trail.”

Her lips part like she’s about to ask the question I already have an answer to.

“You’re not coming,” I say. “But you’re not staying here either.”

“Zeke—”

“No,” I cut in, firm but not unkind. “Not negotiable.”

She lifts her chin. “So where am I supposed to go?”

“With Wren.”

“Who?”

“Wren. She’s Caleb’s sister. She knows her way around the woods and dangerous situations.”

That catches her off guard. “Caleb’s sister? Did you know she lived here?”

I nod. “She’s got a cabin about five miles east of town. Wildlife researcher and medic. She keeps to herself, knows the terrain better than most of the men I’ve trained with. She’s smart, fast, and fully stocked. If anything goes sideways, you’ll be safer with her than anyone else.”

Sadie’s quiet for a second. Then, “She knows I’m coming?”

“She will by the time we get there.” I reach for my jacket. “I’ll drop you off. Then I’m meeting Caleb.”

“Zeke—”

“I need to be able to move,” I tell her, stepping close again, lowering my voice. “If I’m thinking about you being alone here, I’m distracted. You want me sharp. You want this done right? You let me put you somewhere I know you’ll be safe.”

Her jaw tightens, but not with anger. With effort. She hates it—being protected. Being watched. She still sees it like a weight. But she nods anyway.

“Okay,” she says. “Wren’s place it is.”

I kiss her forehead, then her mouth. It’s not soft this time. Not rushed either. Just full. Final. Like something I’ll carry with me when I’m walking through the trees, hunting ghosts.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re in the truck. Sadie’s bundled in my flannel and her coat, coffee in a thermos between her palms, legs tucked beneath her like she’s trying to make herself smaller. But she doesn’t ask questions. Doesn’t argue. Just watches the road and me, like she’s already thinking ten steps ahead.

“Tell me about her,” she says after a mile. “Wren.”

“Sharp as hell,” I say. “Born with a scalpel in one hand and a field guide in the other. Ran search and rescue ops on Denali before she moved back out here. Left after one of her team didn’t make it back during a blizzard. She doesn’t talk about it.”

Sadie nods, absorbing it all. “She doesn’t like people?”

“She likes animals better. But she’ll like you.”

“Why?”

I glance at her. “Because you don’t make noise unless you have something worth saying.”

She smiles a little, tucking her chin into her scarf. I can still see the worry behind her eyes. But there’s something else too. Trust.

By the time we hit the trailhead that branches toward Wren’s land, I already see smoke curling through the trees—her chimney. She’s up.

I park and kill the engine. “You wait here.”

I jog up the path, crunching frost and pine needles under my boots. Wren’s already outside by the time I get there—lean, tanned skin, in a heavy cable-knit sweater and jeans, her dark braid swinging over one shoulder. Her eyes—same sharp gray as Caleb’s—narrow as she takes me in.

“Trouble?” she asks.

“Maybe,” I answer. “Need a favor.”

Her arms cross. “If it’s about Caleb, I swear to God...”

“It’s not. It’s about her.” I jerk my thumb toward the truck. “Her name’s Sadie. She’s under threat, and I can’t have her out there right now. I need her somewhere tight and guarded.”

Wren stares at me for a long moment. Then, “She knows how to shut up and follow directions?”

“Better than most men I’ve worked with.”

Wren’s mouth twitches. “She cook?”

I grin. “Better than anyone.”

“Then she can stay.”

I walk back to the truck, open the passenger door. Sadie looks up at me, eyes searching. I just nod.

“She’s good. You’ll be safe here.”

Sadie hesitates. Then reaches out, her hand slipping into mine. “You’ll come back?”

“Every damn time,” I say. Then lean down, brushing her mouth with mine one more time. “Don’t get comfortable. This is just a pause. Not the end.”

As I watch her disappear into the house with Wren, my phone buzzes in my jacket. Caleb. I answer, already turning back toward the truck.

“Signal’s stronger. Moving west toward the ridge near the old fire road.”

“You think they know we’re listening?”

“I think they want us to follow,” Caleb says.

I grip the wheel, heart thudding once, hard. “Then let’s not disappoint them.”

* * *

The southern ridge smells like pine sap and powder. Caleb is already crouched in the tree line to my left, one eye on the narrow trail below. We’ve got the decoy load packed in the back of my rig—empty crates, a staged signal broadcast from an old smuggler’s radio, and enough false chatter to make anyone listening think we’re dumb enough to be running product through the old trails.

They took the bait.

I hear them before I see them—two ATVs riding staggered, engines chewing up the ground like they’re chasing time. One front, one rear. Classic flanking pattern. It’s them. Has to be.

“They’re moving fast,” Caleb murmurs through the comms. “One’s got a different frame than before—added weight.”

“That’ll be Brent.” I rest my hand over the butt of my sidearm, keeping my pace even as I cut through the trees. “We flank them at the hollow bend. You take Adam. I want Brent breathing when this is over.”

“Copy. Just say when.”

I give the signal and move to intercept, boots crunching the frost-bitten underbrush. The wind howls through the pines, covering our sound, but the birds have gone silent.

That's how I know it's time.

The second the ATVs curve into the clearing, I step out from behind the stacked crates, my weapon drawn, stance wide.

“End of the line, Brent.”

The ATV screeches to a stop. Brent jerks the helmet off, his face gaunt and angry. “You have no idea what you're walking into.”

“I know enough.” I keep the barrel of my gun trained on his center mass. “You've been laundering money through Sitka fronts. Adam's been your errand boy. Joe Hanley was cleanup, and when that got messy, you tried to torch the evidence. You were sloppy. I've got it all.”

From the tree line, Caleb appears behind Adam like a ghost, rifle at the ready.

Brent's lip curls. “You think this ends with a little paperwork and a gun show?”

“I think it ends here if you don't drop that sidearm tucked behind your belt.” I tilt my chin, and he knows I see it. “You brought this fight to Glacier Hollow. That was your first mistake.”

Brent laughs—bitter and ragged—and slowly pulls the weapon free. But instead of tossing it aside, he raises it.

I don't hesitate. One shot, center-left. His gun goes flying. He stumbles back, clutching his side.

Adam yells something, spinning to run, but Caleb's faster. He fires a warning shot that kicks up dirt inches from Adam's boots, forcing him to his knees with hands

raised.

Brent drops to the ground, gasping through his teeth, hand slick with blood. “You son of a bitch,” he spits.

“You’re lucky I wanted you breathing,” I say, stepping in. I knock the gun farther from his reach with my boot and crouch beside him. “You think I’m not capable of more?”

“You don’t know who you’re messing with—what we’re connected to,” he growls.

“I don’t care who’s backing you,” I say, voice flat. “You touched her. You scared her. You tried to erase this town like it’s collateral damage. That ends now.”

He wheezes. “You gonna kill me?”

I shake my head. “No. I want you to live with what comes next. Every trial. Every headline. Every hour spent in federal custody while your empire burns. I want you to watch it all fall apart.”

Brent laughs again, but the sound’s wet and losing strength. He’s fading.

I turn to Caleb. “Get Adam zip-tied and call Travis Holt...”

“I thought he was dead,” says Caleb, confused.

“Not so much. Tell him we’ve got two suspects and a body trail he’ll want to map. I’ll stabilize Brent until he can get the medic up here.”

Caleb nods and moves.

Brent glares up at me. “She’ll never forgive you for this.”

“She already has,” I say. “And she’s not the one who should be afraid right now.”

He tries to speak again, but I press gauze from my field kit into the wound—not gentle, not cruel. Just enough to remind him I’m the reason he’s still alive. A low rumble from the south catches my attention—a second vehicle approaching, slower, cautious. Caleb radios confirmation: Travis, rolling in with the volunteer medic. That’s our wrap.

I rise to my feet, step back, and let the shadows swallow me as the others move in. Brent groans on the ground. Adam swears under his breath as Caleb zip-ties his wrists.

I let my gun hang low and walk to the edge of the trees, my heart pounding in my chest—not from the fight. From what comes next. Because this wasn’t about strategy. This wasn’t about territory or power. This was about protecting what’s mine. And I did.

But now, I have to go back to Sadie. I pull out my phone and text her just two words:

It’s done.

She doesn’t reply right away. I don’t expect her to. But a few seconds later, the dots appear. Then her message pops up:

Come home.

Just that.

I pocket the phone, my chest tightening in a way that has nothing to do with

adrenaline and everything to do with her. Brent's bleeding in the dirt. Adam's cuffed and hauled to his feet. But all I can think about is the woman waiting for me on the other side of this. The one who wore my shirt to bed.

I know this isn't over... not yet.

Adam's cuffed and propped against the back bumper of Travis's truck, his face pale, eyes darting like a cornered animal. He's been quiet since Caleb dragged him off the trail—too quiet. But I know that silence. It's not defiance. It's self-preservation. And it won't last.

I lean against the hood of my SUV, arms crossed, watching him with the kind of stillness that makes men sweat. Caleb stands off to the side, rifle slung and ready, keeping eyes on the tree line while Travis and the medic work over Brent's bleeding side.

I give it another thirty seconds before I push off the hood and walk toward Adam. He flinches, just barely, but I see it. His nerves cracking.

"You ready to talk?" I ask, voice low and sharp.

He shakes his head, jaw clenched, but his eyes don't meet mine.

"Then I'm going to help you understand the situation." I crouch, bracing one forearm on my knee so I'm eye level with him. "Brent's going down. That garage fire? Arson. We've got photos, boot prints, cell tower pings, everything. The burn site? Blood and debris. The Feds are already interested, Adam. When they come knocking, and they will, you'll want it on record that you cooperated. Because if you don't, you're going down with him—and I promise, he won't protect you."

"I didn't kill anyone," Adam blurts, too fast.

I nod once. “Then tell me who did.”

He hesitates. Swallows. His lip trembles, and I know I’ve got him. All I have to do is keep pushing.

“I just moved money,” he says finally. “Brent set it all up through the LLCs. I didn’t even know the names on half of them. I’d get a packet, do the transfers, keep my head down. That was the deal.”

“And Tom Davies?” I ask, voice suddenly cold. “You keep your head down there too?”

Adam freezes.

I lean in closer. “You were there. The night he disappeared. Tell me what happened.”

Adam’s mouth opens, but no words come out. His breathing starts to go shallow, like he’s choking on his own guilt.

“Folks around here seemed to think the two of you were friends, or at least friendly.” My tone is sharper now. “The sheriff died trying to protect this town. Trying to stop whatever the hell Brent was bringing in through those trails. What did Hal have to do with it?”

That breaks him.

Adam’s head drops forward, and the words tumble out fast, like he’s been holding them in so long they’ve rotted. “Hal knew. About the drops, the ATV runs, the shell companies. He didn’t want to, not at first, but Brent leaned on him. Said the town needed funding. That he’d ‘take care’ of Tom if he didn’t back off.”

“And he let him,” I say, fury spiking through my blood. “Hal let him.”

Adam nods miserably. “Tom found a cache spot near Ridge Hollow. Said it didn’t feel right. Said he’d go back the next day and report it. He never got the chance. Brent confronted him in the woods that night. I wasn’t there, I swear—I just heard them talking about it after. Brent said he ‘handled’ it. I didn’t ask how.”

I stand slowly, fists clenched at my sides. Caleb’s already moving toward us. He heard enough.

“We get a location?” Caleb asks, quietly.

Adam doesn’t hesitate now. “Half-mile past the old power line marker. There’s a rock shelf, and a dry streambed behind it. That’s where they put him.”

Caleb’s already turning toward the trail. I follow. We leave Travis behind to secure the site and deal with Brent’s transport. He’s stable now, conscious, which is more than he deserves.

The hike is short but brutal—tight switchbacks, roots slick with snowmelt. Caleb leads, flashlight beam cutting ahead in rhythmic sweeps. We reach the power line marker, a rusted pole barely standing. Just past it, the ground levels, then dips into the streambed Adam described.

“Here,” Caleb says, kneeling beside a stretch of churned earth.

I drop beside him. The soil’s been disturbed—months ago, maybe more—but the freeze didn’t reach deep enough to hide everything. Caleb pulls a folding entrenching tool from his pack, and together we start to dig. The silence between us is grim, determined.

Six inches down, the stench hits. Earth and death. We find the body ten minutes later, wrapped in plastic sheeting. Not buried deep. Just hidden. Forgotten by the men who wanted him erased.

But not anymore.

Caleb strips his gloves, jaw tight. “It’s him.”

Tom Davies. Former sheriff. Good man. Honest. Loyal. And dead because he tried to do the right thing. I stand and take a long breath, staring out over the ridge.

“They thought they could bury him,” I say. “But all they did was plant the fuse.”

Caleb nods once. “You gonna bring Hal in?”

“Yeah,” I reply, voice low. “But not tonight.”

“Why?”

I turn toward the darkening trees. My phone buzzes again—another message from Sadie. No words. Just a photo of the fire crackling in Wren’s hearth and a glimpse of her curled up on the couch in my flannel.

Because tonight, I need to remind myself why I’m doing this.

Because when I go after Hal, there’s not going to be any more hiding.

I slide the phone back in my pocket and start toward the trail.

“Let’s go,” I say. “It’s almost time.”

Caleb doesn't ask for what... he knows.

SADIE

It's not until I see the flashing red and blue lights illuminating the facade of Town Hall that I finally believe it's truly over.

I'm standing at the front of the café—like all the other patrons—with a steaming mug of coffee clutched tightly in both hands, my gaze fixed on the window as if I might miss the moment if I dare blink. But there it is—Zeke, tall and authoritative beside his official Sheriff's Department SUV, Travis's red checkered flannel stark against the gray stone of the old church, and Caleb leaning with a casual defiance against his vehicle, arms crossed and jaw set in a determined line. Hal Burton, the former mayor of Glacier Hollow, is in handcuffs, his complexion ashen and his features drawn tight as Nate Barrett guides him down the front steps like a weary man dragging the trash to the curb. He helps Hal into the back of the State's SUV for the long drive back to Anchorage.

Jenny moves silently through the crowd, not uttering a word. She doesn't need to. Her actions speak volumes as she weaves between customers, methodically refilling coffee mugs before settling onto one of the bar stools, her eyes bright yet inscrutable. I take another sip, feeling my heart thunder against my ribs, a relentless beat that matches the tension in the air.

It's more than the arrest that sends shivers down my spine. It's the profound silence that follows. That rare, hushed stillness that blankets a place when its people collectively realize that the storm has finally begun to lift.

Wren steps into the café, her presence commanding attention as she surveys the

room. It's hard for me to fathom that I've lived here for four years without ever crossing paths with her before Zeke took me to her cabin for safety.

"You've got a nice little place here. I was sorry to hear Maggie died." Her eyes land on her brother. "You do know he's going to be impossible to live with now that he helped bring down a corrupt mayor."

I don't respond. Not immediately. Because the truth is, my mind isn't on the café or even the town. It's on Zeke. On the way he appeared last night—grimy, streaked with blood, and utterly exhausted—but still so intensely focused, still so irrevocably mine.

He'd texted me two simple words: It's done.

That was all the message said, but it spoke volumes. And now I'm on the brink of facing a version of this town that hasn't existed since I arrived—maybe even before. A town where I'm not just the girl with the cinnamon rolls and the quiet smile. I'm the woman who stood her ground. Who spoke her truth, and who has a mountain man at her side, willing to set the world ablaze to protect her.

* * *

Before the morning sun fully rises over Glacier Hollow, I unlock the café door and flip the sign to OPEN, my heart pounding louder than it should. The wind outside bites sharp, swirling flakes into tiny tornados that race down Main Street. The cold has a way of making the town feel smaller, tighter. More fragile.

I'm still adjusting the chairs when I hear the bell above the door ring—clear, familiar. My hands pause mid-movement, breath catching, because I know that sound. I know what it means: someone's here before the espresso machine has even warmed.

It's Ada.

She steps inside, bundled in her thick parka, arms crossed tight, face pink from the cold. There's something in her eyes that grabs me—unshed tears, pride maybe, or just that kind of worn-down hope that's clung on too long.

“You're opening, right?” she asks, voice trembling as she steps forward. “Because I didn't eat breakfast, and I'm starving.”

I smile, heart aching just a little at how much her presence means. “Pick a table, Ada. Coffee's on me.”

She doesn't pick a table. She walks straight to me, arms opening wide, and pulls me into a hug so fierce I lose my breath for a second.

“You're brave,” she whispers against my shoulder. “We all saw it. We didn't say anything, but you did. You saw it, and you didn't look away.”

I wrap my arms around her. “I didn't feel brave. I just got tired of being afraid.”

She pulls back just enough to look me in the eye. “Maybe. But you had heart. Maggie saw that. And that means something.”

Her words hit deep. I blink fast and nod. “Thanks, Ada.”

Behind her, the morning crowd starts to drift in. John and Lydia from the general store shuffle through the door, their gloved hands linked like always. Pete clomps in, his boots knocking snow against the threshold, muttering about frostbite and frozen fish traps. He grunts a hello and pulls me into a bear hug so tight I squeak. The man smells like pine and campfire, but he's family now. They all are.

The café hums with something different today. Not the same frantic tension that's been pulsing under every smile. This morning feels... cleaner. Like the town just exhaled for the first time in weeks. Like we're on the other side of something.

Two hours later, as the sunlight finally spills golden through the front windows, I hear the door open again. It's him.

Zeke walks in like he always does—quiet, grounded, like the mountain carved him out of rock and decided to lend him to the rest of us. His eyes find me across the café, and before I can move, he's already behind the counter, taking the towel from my hands like it's the most natural thing in the world.

And then—he kisses me. Not in secret. Not rushed. Right there in front of everyone, his hands on my hips, mouth warm and steady on mine, like he's never once cared about hiding. Like he's making a point. Ada lets out a delighted squeal, and someone—probably Pete—lets loose a low whistle.

I smile against his lips, my cheeks flushed with something brighter than embarrassment. “Bold move, Sheriff.”

He doesn't pull back right away. Just lowers his head, voice rough. “Needed that.”

“Me too,” I breathe.

The café settles into its rhythm after that—plates clinking, spoons stirring, voices low and steady. I hand off a tray of cinnamon rolls and start wiping the counter again, but my eyes keep drifting to where Zeke now sits.

Same stool. Same place he claimed that first day.

Back then, he felt too big for this space—too dangerous, too still. Now he fits, as if that spot was always meant for him.

He leans back, coffee mug in one hand, toying with a sugar packet in the other, and watches me like there's nowhere else he'd rather be. I wipe my hands on a towel and walk toward him, heart thudding in a rhythm I'm finally not afraid of.

“You’re in my seat,” I tease.

He lifts his gaze, smiles slowly and deliberately. “This is where you found me.”

Without thinking, without giving myself the chance to hesitate, I reach for him. My hands slide up his chest, into the scruff on his face, and I kiss him like I’ve been waiting years to do it in broad daylight. His arm snakes around my waist, pulling me close, and for a minute—there’s no one else in the room.

“I love you,” I say when we finally part, my voice soft but certain.

Zeke doesn’t even blink. “I know,” he replies, thumb brushing my jaw. “I love you too, Sadie.”

A soft ‘aww’ rises from the back of the café—probably Jenny—but I barely hear it.

“You sure about saying that with half the town watching?” I ask, eyebrows raised.

Zeke grins. “I’d shout it from the top of Talon Mountain if that’s what you needed.”

I kiss him again, gentler this time, and rest my forehead against his. “No need. You’re right here. That’s all I need.”

The rest of the day flies by in a blur of gratitude and cinnamon sugar. But when we pour the last cup, tuck in the chairs, and the sun begins to dip, I grab my coat and start the short walk back to my cottage.

It’s quiet, the kind of stillness that wraps around you like a warm blanket. I breathe it in, every pine-scented gust of wind a reminder that I’m home.

* * *

The sun sinks low, casting long, shimmering rays over the landscape as I make my slow, deliberate walk to the cemetery. The air is crisp, imbued with a freshness that doesn't bite but rather caresses my skin, while the snow crunches softly under my sturdy boots. It's one of those days that Glacier Hollow seems to capture perfectly—quiet and bathed in a golden glow, with a wildness lingering at its edges. I pull my knitted scarf tightly around my neck and bury my hands in the deep pockets of my coat. In one hand, I cling to a neatly folded note I never sent.

Maggie's grave lies tucked away near the back, nestled under the lean silhouette of a crooked pine whose branches seem almost to bow in memory. The surrounding snow has been recently cleared—perhaps by careful hands, maybe Ada's or even Wren's; it hardly matters now. Despite the passage of time, she remains remembered.

I crouch beside the grave, running my gloved hand along the weathered edge of the stone, feeling the chill through the fabric. Then, I settle onto a small, timeworn bench beside it. My breath escapes in delicate, frosty clouds, and for a few lingering seconds, I simply sit, as if allowing the quiet stillness of the place to envelop me like a soft, comforting blanket.

"I know I promised," I murmur into the hushed air, my voice barely disturbing the silence. "And I wanted to tell you... I kept it."

A gentle breeze picks up, tugging stray strands of hair across my face, as if playfully echoing her presence. I tuck them away behind my ear and continue with quiet determination.

"I got out. I didn't just survive—I truly lived. I found something good, someone good, and I refused to let fear dictate my fate." My throat tightens with emotion, but the words continue to flow unimpeded. "I made it count, Maggie. Just like you always told me to."

Above me, the trees creak and whisper in the wind, their rustling branches suggesting

they, too, are absorbing every unspoken sentiment. They stand sentinel, as if holding space for all the thoughts too delicate to articulate.

“I wish you could’ve met him,” I whisper, as if confiding in the quiet earth. “I know you would’ve liked him—maybe not immediately, since he’s a bit rough around the edges, but you would have seen it in time. Maybe even before I did. The way he looks at me, the way he holds me as if I’m something precious and worthy of protection.”

I press my hand reverently against the cool surface of the stone. “He makes me feel safe, even when the rest of the world falls apart. He reminds me I am more than what happened to me, and that I don’t have to keep proving I deserve to exist.”

As the wind shifts once more, this time with a gentler, almost tender touch, I could swear that it carries her familiar voice—soft and reassuring. ‘You always did, Sadie.’

A bittersweet smile finds its way to my lips. I rise slowly, dusting the fresh snow off my coat with a measured farewell gesture.

Before I turn to leave, I steal one last, lingering glance at the crooked pine and the steadfast stone beneath it. “Thank you,” I murmur into the fading light. “Thank you for getting me here—for being the reason I never gave up.”

Then, with a newfound resolve, I begin the journey back toward town, toward Zeke, and toward whatever awaits me next. This time, the future no longer looms as a specter of fear. I know who I am, and I know who’s waiting at the end of the trail.

* * *

Ready for the next story!