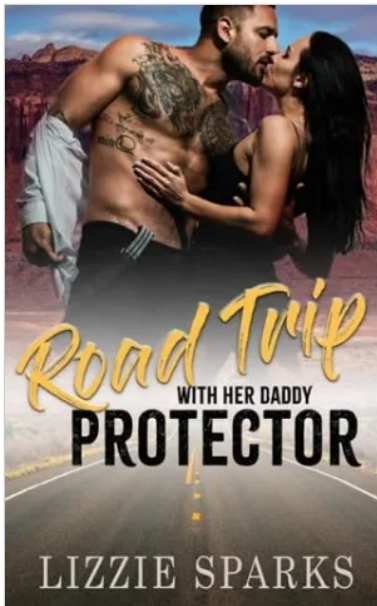




Road Trip With Her Daddy Protector (Love Along Route 14)

Author: *Lizzie Sparks*

Category: Romance

Description: A steamy, suspense-filled age gap romance.

When I hit the road, I wasn't expecting to end up with a grumpy, growly ex-soldier as my unexpected travel companion.

But I also didn't expect someone to want me dead.

Now I'm stuck in a beat-up truck with a man twice my age, a scowl that could curdle milk, and a protective streak a mile wide. He says he's just helping me get from point A to point B. No detours. No distractions.

But I'm the distraction.

The girl with the too-big eyes and the secret I didn't know I was keeping.

He keeps saying he's not a hero. That he's too old, too broken, too far gone to feel anything for someone like me.

But the way he watches me? The way he touches me when he thinks I'm asleep?

The danger's getting closer. And the safest place I've ever known is next to the man who swore he wouldn't care.

This road trip was supposed to be my escape.

Turns out, it's the beginning of everything.

*Perfect for fans of grumpy/sunshine, forced proximity, protective alpha heroes, and slow burn with high stakes.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

Lola

My hands shake as I toss clothes into my old duffel bag, heart thudding so loud I can barely hear the creaking of the front door downstairs. I freeze, fingers clutching my faded jeans.

“Lola!” The deep, gravelly voice carries easily through the house, filling the emptiness with Gus’s usual brusque authority. “We need to move, kid. Now.”

I swallow hard, shoving the jeans into the bag before yanking the zipper closed with a force that nearly breaks it.

Gus has always been gruff, his face permanently etched in a scowl.

But today there’s something more—something urgent beneath his grumpy tone that sends shivers cascading down my spine.

I scramble down the stairs, bag slung over my shoulder.

Gus waits by the door, arms folded across his broad chest. Even at forty-three, he’s built like a fortress, a towering mountain of protective muscle.

His dark hair, streaked lightly with gray, falls across a forehead furrowed in impatience.

His stern gaze locks onto mine as I stumble down the last few steps.

“Finally,” he growls, grabbing my duffel from me without asking. His movements are brisk and precise. “Let’s get moving.”

Outside, twilight casts long shadows across the sleepy Florida street.

The humidity clings to my skin, oppressive and suffocating, echoing my mood.

Gus’s battered truck is idling at the curb, rumbling like an old lion growling awake from slumber.

Without a word, he tosses my bag into the back seat before pulling open the passenger door for me.

I slide inside quickly, pulse racing, throat dry with anxiety.

The driver’s door slams shut, and Gus throws the truck into drive, jolting us forward. The radio is silent, amplifying the charged air that fills the small space between us. I can feel Gus’s gaze flick toward me, heavy and scrutinizing.

“You okay?” he asks, his voice gentler now. It startles me, coming from him, this softness. It almost hurts more than his brusque orders.

I nod, fighting the burning sting behind my eyelids. “I’m fine,” I lie, voice tight.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Lola,” he mutters, eyes narrowing as he watches the road ahead. His large hands grip the steering wheel, knuckles white with tension. “You’ve never been good at it, anyway.”

His bluntness makes me bristle. “Maybe I just got better at it.”

He snorts softly, shaking his head. “You haven’t. And that’s a good thing.”

A painful silence swallows us again, filled only by the truck's rumbling engine.

I turn my gaze out the window, watching the familiar streets of my hometown blur by.

This isn't how I imagined leaving Palm Beach—fleeing like a hunted animal, hiding behind my dad's best friend because my ex-boyfriend turned out to be a dangerous mistake.

"You think he knows?" I ask quietly, my voice barely audible over the engine noise. "Tyler, I mean. Do you think he figured out we're leaving?"

Gus's jaw tightens. "Doesn't matter if he does. I'm not letting him get near you again."

His voice is hard, protective, and it makes something flutter deep in my chest. I swallow again, fists clenching in my lap.

Gus has always been around—always a silent presence in the background of my life.

He was there for my birthday parties, graduations, awkward teen years, even my mom's funeral last summer.

He's always been reliable, strong, dependable.

But this—this level of intensity in his voice, in his stare, feels different. It feels dangerous, complicated.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"For what?" Gus shoots me a sharp look, confusion flickering briefly across his

hardened features.

“For bringing this to your door,” I say, blinking back the tears that threaten to spill over. “Dad would be furious if he knew how badly I messed things up.”

Gus reaches over abruptly, his large hand gently covering mine. The touch sends a shiver racing along my spine. It feels too intimate, too warm.

“Your father would be angry at Tyler, not you,” he says, voice rougher now. “You did nothing wrong, Lola. You hear me?”

I nod slowly, staring down at our intertwined hands, my stomach twisting in a way that has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with Gus himself. He pulls back sharply, as though suddenly aware of the closeness. The loss of his touch feels strangely hollow, leaving me colder than before.

“I’ll protect you,” Gus says after a long moment, voice quieter, almost a vow. “No matter what it takes.”

“Thank you,” I say, barely more than a whisper.

Silence fills the truck again, but it’s different now—charged with something neither of us dares to acknowledge. We speed onto the highway, the lights of Palm Beach fading behind us, my past slipping away with every mile.

“Where are we headed?” I finally dare to ask, glancing at him sidelong.

“North,” he replies shortly, eyes fixed on the road. “I have a place up in the mountains. Quiet. Remote. Nobody will find you there.”

My heart thuds again. “Just you and me?”

His jaw ticks visibly beneath his scruffy beard, his large hands flexing on the steering wheel. “It’s safer that way. At least until I know Tyler’s been handled.”

A strange heat floods my cheeks, and I bite down on my lip hard. “Handled?”

He flicks his gaze toward me, eyes stormy with a dark promise. “He hurt you, Lola. That means he has a reckoning coming.”

The air between us thickens further, tension tightening like a string about to snap. My heart beats violently in my chest, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

“I don’t want you getting hurt because of me,” I murmur, shifting in the worn leather seat.

He gives a humorless laugh. “Trust me, kid. I’ve dealt with worse than Tyler Cole.”

I hate when he calls me kid—especially now, when the weight of this moment, this closeness, pulses through every nerve ending. I’m twenty-one, hardly a child. But next to Gus, I’ve always felt younger, inexperienced—naive.

He sighs heavily, as if reading my thoughts. “Lola, you need to know something.” His voice is deeper, hoarser, than I’ve ever heard it. “Your father was my best friend. I promised him I’d always look after you. But that’s not why I’m doing this. Not the only reason, anyway.”

My breath hitches sharply, eyes widening. “Then...why?”

He hesitates, hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly I’m afraid he’ll break it. “It’s complicated.”

“Tell me,” I say softly, heart hammering so hard I’m sure he can hear it.

“I can’t,” he growls, frustration and regret mingling in his voice. “Not now. Not like this.”

The ache inside me grows. “Then when?”

His eyes lock on mine again, intense and fiery in the dashboard’s faint glow. “When you’re safe, Lola. When there’s nothing between us except honesty.”

I nod slowly, even though it feels like he’s holding back something powerful—something dangerous and forbidden. But I can wait. Because Gus has never lied to me before.

Outside, the night stretches on endlessly, stars scattered across the sky like a map leading to an unknown future. Beside me, Gus’s steady presence anchors me to the moment. For now, it’s enough.

But as the truck roars onward into the night, I can’t ignore the quiet truth whispering deep inside my heart—Gus isn’t just my protector anymore. He’s something much more complicated, much more frightening.

Something forbidden.

And I have no idea how either of us will survive it.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

Gus

The road stretches out before me, endless and dark.

My eyes burn from staring at the dim glow of the headlights, and my fingers grip the steering wheel so hard they ache.

Lola sits quietly in the passenger seat, curled up and staring out the window into the darkness, lost in her thoughts.

Her silence is unsettling—too vulnerable, too unlike the spirited girl I've watched grow up.

Damn Tyler Cole. I clench my jaw, anger simmering beneath my skin.

The mere thought of that cowardly bastard threatening her makes my blood boil.

Lola's father, Ben, was my best friend. My only friend.

When he passed last year, I promised I'd keep Lola safe.

But protecting her now feels far more personal than any oath I made to her father.

I glance at her again, taking in the soft curve of her cheek, the way the neon glow from passing signs washes gently across her pale skin.

Lola's always been off-limits—a bright spark far too young, too innocent, and

definitely too tempting.

At forty-three, I should know better. I should be ashamed of even noticing how beautiful she's become.

She shifts slightly, sighing softly as she adjusts her position. I swallow hard, forcing my gaze back onto the dark road ahead. "Hungry?" My voice is gruffer than I intend, an attempt to hide how distracted she makes me feel.

"A little," she answers quietly, turning her head slowly toward me. Her wide blue eyes meet mine, uncertain and searching. "But you don't have to stop if?—"

"We're stopping." The growl in my tone surprises even me. "You need food."

A small, relieved smile flickers across her face, but she quickly covers it, nodding. "Thanks, Gus."

I grunt something unintelligible in reply and slow the truck, pulling off Route 14 toward a neon-lit diner. The place looks ancient, the parking lot almost empty, just a few dusty trucks and motorcycles scattered about. Exactly the kind of quiet, anonymous spot we need right now.

"Stay close," I mutter as we get out, scanning the parking lot with narrowed eyes. Old habits die hard, and my years in the military taught me caution, vigilance. Especially when protecting something—or someone—I care about.

Lola nods obediently, stepping close enough for me to catch a hint of vanilla perfume that tightens my chest. Ignoring the effect she has on me, I open the diner's glass door and gesture her inside.

A bored-looking waitress glances up from the counter, handing us worn menus. "Sit

wherever you like,” she drawls, eyeing me curiously before returning to her crossword puzzle.

We choose a booth toward the back, away from the door and the handful of other patrons. Lola slides onto the cracked red vinyl bench, and I settle across from her, careful not to accidentally brush her legs beneath the table.

Her eyes flit over the menu, but I notice her hand trembling slightly. I want to reach across, steady her nerves, reassure her she’s safe with me. Instead, I clasp my hands tightly, fighting the impulse.

“Order whatever you want,” I say, trying to soften my usual gruff tone.

She glances up, startled, her gaze flickering with uncertainty. “Gus, you don't have to?—”

“I want to,” I interrupt firmly, unwilling to argue about something so trivial. “I promised your dad I'd take care of you. That means feeding you, too.”

She smiles faintly, relaxing just a fraction. “Dad always said you were stubborn.”

“Your dad knew me too well,” I mutter, a reluctant smile tugging at the corner of my lips. I miss Ben more than I like to admit, and seeing pieces of him in Lola only makes it harder. “Besides, stubborn is good sometimes. Keeps people alive.”

Her smile fades, eyes drifting down to her menu again. “Gus, what’s our plan? You still haven’t really told me.”

My jaw tightens instinctively. The truth is, I don't have a clear answer yet, not beyond running and waiting for my old buddies to track Tyler down and neutralize the threat permanently. But I can’t tell her that—not yet.

“Right now, the plan is simple. We keep moving,” I say, voice rougher than before. “The further you are from Tyler, the safer you’ll be.”

Lola chews her lower lip thoughtfully, worry darkening her features. “But what about after? What happens then?”

The waitress interrupts, pad and pen ready. Lola orders a grilled cheese and fries, and I settle for coffee, too restless to eat anything substantial. Once we’re alone again, Lola’s question hangs heavy between us.

“After,” I finally reply, voice measured, “we stay hidden until I know he’s no longer a threat.”

Her eyes widen, fear pooling behind those bright blues. “You mean until he’s dead.”

I grit my teeth, eyes narrowing. “Whatever it takes. Tyler Cole forfeited mercy the moment he threatened you. And trust me, my friends don’t mess around.”

She swallows visibly, pushing her long hair away from her face. “I don’t want you or your friends getting hurt because of me.”

I lean forward slightly, lowering my voice. “This isn’t on you, Lola. None of this is your fault. Tyler’s a predator who chose the wrong victim.” My voice drops to a near-growl. “I’ll handle it.”

Lola’s eyes soften with unexpected emotion, her voice barely audible. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t shown up, Gus.”

My chest tightens painfully at her vulnerability. Damn it, this girl is going to ruin me. “I’ll always show up for you, Lola,” I mutter, uncomfortable with the intensity crackling between us. “Your dad trusted me, and I don’t break promises.”

Her expression falters briefly, something shifting in her gaze—something that makes me feel exposed. “It’s not just because of Dad, is it?”

I hesitate, searching for words that won't betray me. “No, it's not,” I admit quietly. “But we can’t have that conversation right now. It’s complicated.”

Her cheeks flush slightly, eyes widening with surprise. “Complicated?”

I curse inwardly, annoyed at my own slip. “Forget it.”

“No,” she insists gently, leaning forward. “You never say anything without meaning it, Gus.”

The waitress drops off Lola’s plate, and I take the distraction gratefully, sipping my coffee to avoid answering immediately. But when Lola keeps staring, expecting an explanation, I finally sigh.

“Look, Lola, I’ve known you your entire life. Watched you grow up. Protected you,” I say, each word careful and deliberate. “You’re young. Beautiful. You deserve someone who can give you more than protection.”

“What if protection is exactly what I want?” she whispers, voice tremulous.

My pulse jumps sharply, tension coiling deep in my gut. “Don’t say that,” I growl, trying desperately to control myself. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I know exactly what I’m asking,” she says firmly, despite the tremor in her voice. “I’m not a child anymore, Gus.”

“No,” I say roughly, “you're not. But you're still my responsibility. Crossing lines would complicate everything. It’s wrong.”

Her blue eyes blaze with determination. “Does it feel wrong, Gus?”

I close my eyes briefly, breathing deep to steady myself. “Eat your food, Lola,” I mutter tightly, ending the conversation with my tone.

She sighs, retreating slightly as she picks at her fries. The silence settles awkwardly between us again, tension humming like electricity beneath our carefully maintained distance.

When she finishes eating, I toss some cash on the table, and we walk back toward the truck. I open her door, waiting until she's safely inside before rounding to the driver's seat. As we pull away from the diner, the road once again stretches out, dark and uncertain ahead.

“Where are we going next?” she finally asks softly, defeat evident in her voice.

“North,” I repeat simply, glancing at her in the faint reflection of passing lights. “Away from here. I know a place in the mountains. Safe. Secluded.”

She nods silently, turning her head to stare out the window again. The weight of unsaid words fills the space between us, heavier than ever.

As the miles blur by, I force myself to focus. I will protect Lola at all costs, even if it means burying these dangerous feelings forever.

But the aching tension in my chest tells me one undeniable truth—I'm already too far gone to ever truly let her go.

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Lola

I rest my forehead against the cool glass of the truck window, eyelids heavy as I watch the shadows pass by in streaks of black and gray. Gus's quiet breathing and the steady rumble of the truck create a hypnotic rhythm that lulls my tired mind into a fragile half-sleep.

But even as exhaustion drags me under, memories tug at me like dark currents beneath calm water, pulling me back into Tyler's grasp.

The first time I met Tyler Cole, he had seemed so effortlessly charming, his blue eyes bright and playful, his smile crooked in a way that made my heart flutter.

I was nineteen—young, carefree, certain I knew everything.

My father had warned me about guys like Tyler.

“Be careful,” he'd said, his eyes wary. “He's trouble, sweetheart. I can feel it.”

But I hadn't listened. Back then, Tyler's attention had felt like sunshine—warm and addictive. He'd told me I was beautiful, special, different from anyone he'd ever met. And I'd foolishly believed him, losing myself entirely to his charm.

Now, I feel sick at how easily he manipulated me.

How blind I'd been to the truth hiding behind his honeyed words.

The first red flags were subtle, just whispers of his true nature: possessive questions about my friends, silent anger when I spent too much time away from him.

But by the time I saw the danger clearly, I was in too deep to get out easily.

And the last thing he'd whispered, face twisted with cruel determination, still echoes through my head: "You can run, Lola, but I'll find you anywhere."

The thought sends a shudder through my body. A hot tear escapes down my cheek, and I quickly swipe it away, praying Gus doesn't see.

When sleep finally takes me, it's fitful and shallow, riddled with nightmares. Images of Tyler stalking closer, eyes burning with rage, jolt me awake repeatedly until Gus's deep voice finally breaks through.

"Lola. Wake up, kid."

I startle awake, heart hammering, pulse pounding against my ribs. Gus's hand is on my shoulder, gentle yet firm, grounding me. I glance around, disoriented. We've stopped. Outside the truck window, the dull glow of a roadside motel flickers in faded neon.

"What—where are we?" I mumble, rubbing my eyes.

"You need proper sleep," Gus says quietly. He looks weary, eyes shadowed beneath dark brows. "We're at a motel. We'll rest a few hours."

I nod mutely, swallowing hard as he climbs out and walks around the truck. When he opens my door, offering his hand to help me down, the rough warmth of his palm sends sparks up my arm.

The room is small and tired-looking, dimly lit by a lamp on a worn wooden table. But all I see is the single bed dominating the cramped space. Heat floods my cheeks, and I quickly glance away, heart racing with sudden nerves.

Gus stiffens slightly beside me, clearly having the same realization. “I’ll take the floor,” he mutters gruffly, averting his eyes.

“Gus, no,” I protest quietly. “It’ll kill your back. You’ve been driving nonstop—you need real rest.”

He hesitates, jaw tightening stubbornly. “Lola, I can’t?—”

“Yes, you can,” I interrupt gently, stepping closer. “Please. Besides...I’ll feel safer with you next to me.”

His eyes widen slightly, and the muscles in his throat flex visibly as he swallows. Finally, after a long pause, he nods once. “Fine. But only because you need to feel safe.”

I turn away quickly, hiding my flushed face. He waits respectfully outside while I slip into pajamas from my duffel bag, my pulse quickening as I slide beneath the covers, nerves jittering through me like a live wire.

When Gus comes back in, he keeps his gaze carefully averted, pulling off his boots and shrugging out of his jacket.

His movements are precise, almost rigid, as though he's forcing himself not to think too hard about what we're doing.

But as he slides into bed beside me, the mattress dipping under his weight, every nerve in my body ignites.

“Try to sleep, Lola,” he murmurs softly, facing away from me, his broad shoulders tense beneath the thin cotton shirt he’s still wearing.

“Okay,” I whisper back, heart pounding. But sleep feels impossible. Not with Gus so close—his warmth radiating beside me, his steady breathing filling the quiet room.

Minutes stretch into an eternity, and my mind races with forbidden thoughts.

Slowly, I turn onto my side, facing him.

Gus lies perfectly still, eyes closed, his handsome face softened by sleep.

I can't stop myself from studying him—the stubble shadowing his jaw, the faint lines at the corners of his eyes, the strong curve of his mouth.

His chest rises and falls rhythmically, drawing my gaze downward, heat pooling low in my belly.

He’s beautiful. The thought makes me blush deeply, but I don’t look away. Being this close to Gus feels illicit, dangerous—but also so right. I’ve never felt safer or more alive than I do right now, watching him sleep.

Almost involuntarily, my fingers itch to touch him, to trace the hard line of his shoulder, to feel his heartbeat beneath my palm. I close my eyes briefly, trying to calm myself, but the pull is irresistible.

I reach out slowly, my fingertips brushing lightly against his arm, barely a whisper of contact. Gus inhales sharply, muscles tensing beneath my touch. His eyes snap open, locking onto mine, dark and unreadable.

“Lola...” he growls softly, voice thick with sleep and something else—something I

desperately want to understand. “What are you doing?”

“I—I couldn’t sleep,” I whisper nervously, not pulling away.

“You need to sleep,” he insists, but his voice is rougher now, strained. “We both do.”

“Gus,” I murmur, gathering courage, “please don’t push me away.”

He groans softly, shutting his eyes again. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Yes, I do,” I say firmly, scooting closer until mere inches separate us. His warmth seeps into my skin, intoxicating and terrifying. “I’m asking you to stop pretending there’s nothing here.”

His jaw clenches, eyes flashing open again. “Lola, I’m too old, too broken, and?—”

“You’re exactly what I need,” I interrupt boldly, surprising myself. “You make me feel safe. Protected. Wanted.”

His breathing deepens sharply, and he stares into my eyes, a storm raging behind his gaze. “You deserve better,” he whispers roughly, voice tinged with pain.

“I don’t want better,” I whisper back. “I want you.”

He reaches up suddenly, his calloused fingers gently brushing a strand of hair from my cheek. I shiver at the tender touch, heart hammering erratically.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to hear that,” he murmurs softly, thumb grazing my lower lip. “But you’re vulnerable right now. I can’t take advantage of?—”

“You’re not,” I insist quickly, leaning into his hand. “I trust you.”

A deep, tortured sigh escapes him. His fingers linger against my skin, hesitant and gentle. “You have no idea how tempting you are, Lola. How much you test my control.”

“Then stop controlling it,” I breathe, pressing my lips lightly against his palm. He groans, the sound raw and agonized, but his eyes blaze hotter, filled with desire he can't disguise.

Finally, he shakes his head slightly, reluctantly pulling his hand away. “Not tonight,” he says roughly. “You need sleep, and so do I.”

Disappointment aches through me, but beneath it simmers a new, hopeful warmth. Gus didn't deny his feelings—just delayed them. For now.

“Okay,” I whisper, retreating slightly. “But I'm not giving up.”

His lips twitch faintly, a rare smile tugging at his mouth. “I didn't think you would.”

I lie back down, closer now, barely an inch between us. Gus doesn't move away. As silence settles again, my eyes grow heavy at last, comforted by his presence.

“Sleep, Lola,” he murmurs tenderly. “I've got you.”

Wrapped in the safety of Gus's protective warmth, I finally drift toward sleep, knowing he means every word—and that for the first time in my life, I'm exactly where I belong.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

Gus

The morning sunlight is relentless, streaming through the windshield of my battered truck, highlighting every speck of dust on the dashboard and every thought I've tried desperately to bury.

Lola sits quietly beside me, staring out the passenger window at the passing blur of Georgia pines and rural farmland.

The tension between us is thick enough to suffocate.

I haven't stopped replaying last night in my mind—the soft warmth of her body beside mine, her delicate fingers brushing against my skin, the gentle innocence in her wide eyes when she whispered that she wanted me. It nearly broke every last ounce of my self-control to deny her.

I'm her protector. Her father's best friend. She's twenty years younger than me, too young, too innocent, too perfect. She deserves a man who can offer her a future, not some worn-out ex-soldier haunted by a lifetime of regrets. But damn if she doesn't make it impossible to keep my distance.

"Are we stopping soon?" Her soft voice breaks through my thoughts.

I clear my throat, gripping the steering wheel tighter. "We'll stop in Cusp Hollow. It's just ahead on the Georgia border. Figured we could use a break, something nice for a change."

She nods slowly, her fingers twisting nervously in her lap. “Sounds good.”

I glance at her, noticing how the hem of her floral dress inches higher up her thighs as she shifts in her seat. My jaw tightens, and I force my gaze back to the road. This is torture, pure and simple.

Cusp Hollow greets us with a quaint, welcoming charm.

The main street is lined with buildings straight out of an old postcard—brick facades painted in pastel shades, wrought iron lampposts draped with baskets of blooming petunias, and American flags gently fluttering in the warm breeze.

The heart of the town is a wide park square, dotted with benches and statues of historic figures, shaded by towering magnolia trees.

I park near a small diner, the hand-painted sign above the door reading "Maisie's Café" in elegant cursive. Lola steps out of the truck, smoothing her dress down her thighs, completely unaware of how every move she makes tests my resolve.

Inside, the diner is filled with locals chatting over coffee, the scent of bacon and fresh biscuits hanging deliciously in the air. A cheerful woman greets us with a wide smile and guides us to a cozy booth in the corner.

“Coffee?” she asks warmly.

“Please,” Lola replies softly.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, barely able to tear my eyes from Lola long enough to acknowledge the waitress.

Lola opens the menu, biting her lower lip in concentration. “Everything looks so

good.”

“Order whatever you want,” I say, clearing my throat. “We’re not in a rush today.”

Her gaze lifts to mine, blue eyes brightening slightly. “It’s nice here. Peaceful.”

I nod slowly. “Thought you could use a break from...everything.”

She sighs softly, eyes dropping to the table. “Thank you, Gus. For everything.”

I shift uncomfortably. “You don’t need to thank me. I told your dad I’d look after you.”

She glances up sharply, eyes serious. “Is that really all it is? A promise to Dad?”

My chest tightens. “Lola, don’t?—”

“Here you go!” The waitress interrupts cheerfully, placing mugs of steaming coffee before us. “Ready to order?”

Lola orders pancakes and eggs, and I choose biscuits and gravy, suddenly desperate for anything that will distract me from her piercing gaze and the complicated feelings I can’t seem to shake.

Breakfast passes quietly, punctuated by brief, cautious conversation. Once finished, I suggest we walk through town, hopeful the fresh air will clear our heads. Lola eagerly agrees, and we step out onto the sunlit street.

Cusp Hollow feels like stepping back in time, peaceful and unhurried. We wander toward the town square, passing quaint boutiques with colorful awnings, antique stores boasting window displays of delicate china and old books, and a candy shop

with jars of sweets lined neatly in the windows.

At the center of the square stands a grand statue of a soldier, cast in bronze, his expression stoic and dignified. Lola pauses, her hand shading her eyes from the sun as she gazes upward.

“He looks strong,” she murmurs.

I move closer, unable to stop myself. “They usually are. Soldiers, I mean. But strength isn’t always about muscles or battles won.”

She glances at me curiously. “What’s it about, then?”

I take a deep breath, fighting to keep my voice steady. “Survival. Protecting what matters. Sometimes strength is about doing the hardest thing—even when it tears you apart.”

She searches my eyes, hers softening. “Is that why you keep pushing me away?”

I grit my teeth, torn between wanting to pull her into my arms and needing to keep distance between us. “You deserve better, Lola. I’m trying to protect you, even from myself.”

“What if I don’t want to be protected from you?” she whispers.

I turn away abruptly, unable to trust myself around her vulnerability. “Come on. There’s more to see.”

We continue our walk through town, past neatly trimmed lawns and white picket fences. We stop by an old stone fountain, water gently bubbling from its worn surface. Lola dips her fingers into the cool water, smiling faintly.

“It’s like something out of a dream,” she says softly.

“It is,” I agree, though I’m looking at her, not the fountain. The sunlight catches in her hair, illuminating the strands of gold threaded among the darker waves.

We spend the afternoon slowly exploring, stopping briefly in shops to look at trinkets and handmade pottery.

Lola relaxes bit by bit, the tension easing from her shoulders as she becomes engrossed in the town’s simple charm.

But my own tension only worsens, awareness of her presence growing sharper with every passing moment.

As the afternoon sun begins to dip lower, casting golden light over the streets, Lola glances up at me, her expression more relaxed than it’s been in days. “Thank you for today, Gus. It’s helped—being here with you.”

My throat tightens, heart hammering in my chest. “Glad it helped.”

She hesitates, her voice quiet but determined. “You can’t push me away forever.”

“I have to,” I say roughly, meeting her gaze. “It’s the right thing.”

She steps closer, determination flashing in her eyes. “What if it’s not?”

“Lola—”

“I’m tired of running from what I feel,” she whispers fiercely. “Aren’t you tired too?”

Her words land like a punch, and I take a shaky breath, every instinct screaming at

me to pull her close, to give in. “More than you know.”

She lifts her chin defiantly. “Then stop fighting.”

“I can’t,” I whisper roughly, barely holding on. “Not yet.”

Her eyes hold mine, understanding softening the defiance in her gaze. She nods slowly. “Not yet. But I won’t stop waiting.”

I force myself to step back, breaking the moment before it breaks me. “We should go.”

We walk back to the truck in silence, both of us carrying the weight of unspoken words. But as we leave Cusp Hollow behind, heading back to the uncertain road ahead, one thing is clear—I won’t be able to keep pushing Lola away forever.

And part of me doesn’t want to.

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Lola

The Georgia countryside rushes past in a blur of emerald greens and earthy browns, the gentle hum of the truck engine filling the silence between Gus and me.

After our brief but comforting stop in Cusp Hollow, there's a lighter energy in the cab, despite the lingering tension simmering beneath the surface.

I sneak a glance at Gus, taking in his strong profile, the way his jaw is set in quiet determination. My heart beats a little faster just watching him drive. Being with Gus feels easy, natural, like breathing—even when things between us are complicated.

“Wanna play a game?” I ask, breaking the quiet.

He glances at me with a half-smile, eyebrow raised. “What kind of game?”

“License plate alphabet,” I explain cheerfully. “You find a plate starting with each letter of the alphabet, in order.”

He chuckles softly, shaking his head. “That's a kid's game.”

I pout playfully. “Come on, tough guy. Afraid you'll lose?”

Gus's eyes sparkle with amusement. “Fine. But I'm warning you, I'm very competitive.”

“I bet you are,” I tease, ignoring the flutter in my stomach.

We spend the next hour searching the road for letters, laughing, bantering, and playfully arguing over who spotted the plates first. It feels effortless with Gus—so different from Tyler.

With Tyler, everything was exhausting, like walking on eggshells.

With Gus, even a simple car game makes my heart feel lighter.

As the afternoon fades, Gus pulls into a hotel parking lot, nestled along a quiet stretch just off Route 14. The small brick building is neat and inviting, surrounded by blooming azaleas.

"We'll rest here tonight," Gus says gently. "You okay?"

I nod, smiling softly. "I'm better than okay."

Inside, Gus checks us in while I linger in the lobby, fingers tracing the pattern on the vintage wallpaper. My pulse quickens as he returns, room key dangling from his hand. Once inside our room, I immediately notice there's only one bed again.

He clears his throat awkwardly. "I can ask for another room if?—"

"No," I interrupt quickly. "This is fine. I mean, I feel safer this way."

His eyes darken slightly, but he nods. "Alright. Why don't you take a shower first?"

"Thanks," I reply, heart hammering. I grab my bag and slip into the small bathroom, shutting the door gently behind me.

The hot water feels incredible, washing away road dust and tension. But as I stand beneath the spray, my thoughts drift inevitably to Gus—the heat in his eyes, the way

he struggles to push me away, even when I know he doesn't want to.

A bold idea flickers to life. If Gus won't let go of his reservations, maybe he just needs a little encouragement. I wrap a fluffy white towel tightly around myself, my heart thumping wildly as I step back into the room.

Gus sits on the edge of the bed, phone in hand, scrolling absently. The moment I enter, he freezes, eyes locked on me, wide and stunned.

"Forgot my pajamas," I say softly, feigning innocence. I cross the room slowly, aware of the way his gaze follows every movement, lingering on my bare shoulders, the curve of my legs.

"Lola..." His voice is a hoarse whisper, strained with barely restrained desire. "What are you doing?"

"Just getting my clothes," I say innocently, opening my bag on the bed beside him, purposely standing close enough for him to feel my warmth. His eyes burn trails along my skin, and heat blooms low in my stomach.

"You're making this impossible," he growls quietly, eyes dark with intensity.

"Good," I whisper back, daring to meet his heated gaze. "Maybe I want it to be impossible."

"Lola," he warns, fists clenching at his sides, his breathing ragged.

"Gus," I say softly, boldly stepping closer, heart racing. "Tell me you don't want me. Tell me right now, and I'll stop."

His eyes blaze, torment and desire warring within them. Finally, he shakes his head,

voice rough. "I can't."

"Then stop fighting it," I breathe, closing the tiny space between us, my body inches from his. "We both want this."

For a heartbeat, he doesn't move, tension radiating from every muscle. And then, with a groan of surrender, his arms wrap tightly around my waist, pulling me flush against him.

"God help me," he mutters fiercely, his mouth finding mine in a hungry, desperate kiss. Fire ignites in my veins as his lips claim mine, strong and demanding, the world falling away until nothing exists except the feel of Gus holding me.

I gasp softly as his hands slide along my back, fingers gripping my towel, dangerously close to unraveling it completely. "You have no idea how badly I want you," he growls against my lips, his breath hot and urgent.

"Show me," I whisper breathlessly, my heart pounding. "Please, Gus."

He pauses, breathing heavily, forehead pressed to mine. "Lola, once we do this, there's no going back."

"I don't want to go back," I whisper fiercely. "I just want you."

His eyes meet mine, dark and intense, finally giving in completely. "Then you're mine, Lola. Only mine."

A shiver races through me, excitement and heat pooling low. "Yours," I promise softly, sealing my vow with another kiss, knowing in this moment that I'm exactly where I belong.

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Gus

If you'd asked me last year if I thought I'd be standing here with this beauty before me in nothing but a towel, I'd have laughed at you. Yet, here I am.

Here she is.

There's nothing more I want in this world but her.

I keep kissing her, pressing her warm body fresh from the shower against mine. She's soft in all the right places, and she fits perfectly against me.

"I'm yours," she whispers, stepping back slowly as she releases the towel from her perfect body.

Whoa.

My eyes can't comprehend the tight little body I'm gazing at. "You're definitely mine. And I'm going to show you all night long." I lean in, going to kiss her once more but she pulls back.

Her big eyes blink slowly. "Be careful with me. I've never done anything like this before."

I stall. "What do you mean, sweetheart? Are you saying you're a virgin?"

She nods. "Yeah."

I growl at the implication. I've never been with a virgin before, even when I was one, but right now I don't care. I'll treat her right and take care of her like she deserves to be treated. "I'll go slowly," I tell her, leaning in and capturing her lips with mine.

Together we move toward the bed, and I sit down. She steps closer, between my legs. I run my nose over her belly button, my hands traveling up her thighs. I keep moving my hands up, and slide my fingers over her wetness.

She's soaked for me, and I gaze up at her. "You're so ready for me."

She grabs at my shirt, and I help her remove it from my body. I quickly help her remove my pants and boxers, so I'm as naked as she is.

"Wow," she whispers, her eyes taking in the size of my cock.

"Don't worry, I know it's bigger than most, but I won't hurt you with it. I'll make you feel so good with it."

She sucks in a deep breath and sidles up closer to me. "Can I suck on it?" Her big doe eyes are so innocent, and I can't help but smile.

"Yes, sweetheart. You can suck on it all you want, but not before I eat your sweet little pussy first."

She gasps. "I've never had anyone do that before."

I stand from the bed, repositioning her so she's lying flat on the bed for me.

The bed dips as I climb between her legs, making a nice spot for myself.

"Allow me to be the first then," I say as I kiss my way up her soft thighs.

I swipe my tongue over her soft skin, letting her wetness flood my mouth.

“You taste amazing,” I tell her as I work my way up toward her clit.

I let myself nibble on the bundle of nerves as I press my palms against her thighs, spreading her legs more for me.

I keep working her body as she moans and mewls throughout the room. I keep sucking, nibbling, and letting her know exactly how much I want her.

My own body hardens at the taste of her, and I can't get enough. I nearly pass out from licking her, and I can feel my own orgasm creeping closer.

I've never fucking come while going down on a woman, but there's a first time for everything. I use my fingers on her opening, pushing one finger inside her.

She's tight, and I can't wait until I can bury my cock deep inside her. She grinds against my face, and I can feel her orgasm light her up as she screams out, “I'm coming.”

My own orgasm takes over, and my hard cock unleashes ribbon after ribbon of cum against the sheets.

“Holy fuck,” I whisper as soon as both our bodies calm. “I've never done that before.”

Lola blinks lazily at me, her post orgasmic bliss taking over. “Done what?”

“Come from eating pussy. You're magical.”

She smiles, and I kiss her before leaving the bed to clean us up. I pad into the

bathroom, grabbing a cloth for her.

After cleaning us up, I lay down next to her. “You felt so good,” I tell her.

Lola smiles at me, and I realize I’d do anything to keep this woman smiling for the rest of her life. I haven’t even fucked her yet, and I’d do anything for her.

I pull her into my arms and together we lay in bed, resting as I hear her breathing even out.

Morning sunlight spills through the windshield, bathing the truck cab in a warm, golden glow.

I grip the steering wheel loosely, stealing glances at Lola as she gazes dreamily out the passenger window.

My heart feels lighter today, freer than it has in years.

It's impossible to ignore the profound shift that's happened between us.

She's mine now, and the thought fills me with an undeniable pride—and a deep, fierce protectiveness.

“You alright over there?” I ask gently, my voice softer than usual.

She turns toward me, her smile radiant and genuine. “Better than alright. I feel...perfect.”

Warmth blooms in my chest, and I chuckle softly. “Glad to hear it.”

We drive in comfortable silence, the road winding gently through dense Georgia

woodlands.

Lola hums softly along with the radio, occasionally glancing my way with eyes bright and full of quiet joy.

Every time our gazes meet, my pulse quickens.

I've never felt like this—never allowed myself to imagine something this good could be real.

After an hour or two, Lola points excitedly toward a sign for a state park. "Can we stop here? Take a little hike? Stretch our legs?"

"Sounds like a great idea," I reply easily, pulling into the small parking area beneath towering oaks and maples.

We step from the truck into the fresh morning air, breathing deeply. Birds sing cheerfully overhead, their songs echoing softly through the trees. I reach out instinctively, my hand finding Lola's. Her fingers lace with mine naturally, and the simple gesture sends warmth through me.

The trail winds gently through the woods, sunlight filtering through the dense canopy above, dappling the path with golden patches. Lola walks close beside me, her steps light, eyes sparkling with happiness.

"It's beautiful out here," she murmurs, squeezing my hand softly.

"Yeah," I agree, though my gaze remains fixed on her. "Absolutely perfect."

She laughs softly, nudging me playfully. "You're supposed to be looking at the trees, Gus."

“Why would I do that when you’re right here?” I tease gently.

Her cheeks flush pink, but she leans into me, head resting briefly against my arm. “I’ve never felt this way,” she admits quietly. “This...safe. Happy.”

I stop walking, turning to face her fully, heart pounding with sudden intensity. “I promise, Lola, I’ll do everything to make sure you always feel this way. Safe. Happy. Loved.”

Her eyes widen at the last word, shimmering with emotion. “Loved?”

I nod slowly, reaching up to cup her cheek tenderly. “Loved,” I repeat softly, voice rough with sincerity. “That’s exactly what this is.”

Her breath catches softly, and she steps closer, lifting onto her toes to bring her lips closer to mine. “Then show me again,” she whispers.

I don’t hesitate. My mouth claims hers gently, savoring her softness, her warmth. Her arms wrap around my neck, fingers threading into my hair, pulling me closer. The kiss deepens, slow and passionate, filled with everything we’ve both been holding back for far too long.

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Lola

I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe I'm having all these feelings.

Gus lays down a blanket, and smiles at me. "I figured we could enjoy ourselves a bit before heading back to the truck."

I smile wide. "I love that idea."

Together we lay down on the blanket, and Gus pulls me close to his body. He kisses me, making me forget about all the bad things in the world going on right now.

He rolls on top of me, gazing down at me. "You're gorgeous, and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe."

I smile. "I already feel safer with you than I ever have before." All my troubles melt away and I let Gus hold me.

We remove our clothes, and I have to say, it feels thrilling knowing somebody could happen upon this trail at any moment.

"I want you," he tells me as he kisses a path across my chest. He trails kisses across my breasts, focusing his attention on each nipple. He sucks one into his mouth, nibbling softly as my body grows needier.

His hand roams over my heated skin, and he pushes a finger at my opening. "You're so goddamn tight," he whispers before pushing it inside me.

I spread my legs, trying to open myself up more for him. “It feels weird,” I say, feeling the intrusion.

“I’m going to make it feel so much better,” he whispers across my breasts as he pumps his finger inside me. He sucks a nipple into his mouth as his hand works my pussy over and over.

His thumb pushes against my clit and I moan out.

He licks his lips. “I’ll never stop wanting this.”

I squirm a little as his eyes burn straight through me. “Gus.” His name is on repeat, and I don’t think I could think of another word if I tried.

I feel safe in his arms.

My body builds toward an orgasm, and he hasn’t even entered me yet.

“You’re so needy. Such a needy little girl.” He pushes his finger deeper inside me, and I moan even louder.

I glance into the sky, the clouds passing slowly as I moan again. My body loses control as I pump my hips.

“That’s it, baby. Ride my finger.”

I do as he says, my body building and building. I come as I squeeze my eyes shut. I shout out, “Gus.”

He holds me as my body unravels. “Keep coming,” he tells me as he positions his thickness at my entrance.

He removes his hand and pushes the tip of his dick inside me.

I spread my legs even wider, wrapping them around his waist.

“That’s it. Open yourself up for your daddy.”

I smile at the name he’s given himself. I like it. A daddy protector, taking care of me.

“Daddy,” I whisper, liking the way it rolls off my tongue.

“You’re my little girl and I’m never going to let anyone hurt you.”

I trust him. I believe him.

He pushes deeper inside me, his hand still working my clit as he does.

“You’re too big,” I whine. “Too deep.”

He stalls, his eyes connecting with mine. “Baby, I know you can handle me. Breathe,” he whispers on repeat. “Just breathe, baby.”

I grip onto him as I try to relax. The intrusion is too much, but I close my eyes and do as he says. I breathe.

He rocks his body gently in tune with mine, and after a few moments it no longer feels weird and starts to feel good.

“Yes,” I moan as he starts to move a little faster.

“You’re doing such a good job, little girl.” He pumps his hips faster, rocking his dick further inside me.

I squeeze my legs around him, moving in speed with him. Soon my body is once again building to that pleasure point. “Ah, yes,” I moan again, his body pressing mine down into the earth.

I like the feeling of him on top of me. Protecting me. Keeping me safe. Daddy’s little girl.

“I’m so close to coming deep inside you.” He keeps pushing, fucking me senseless.

“Please do it.” I want him to fill me up. I want his DNA mixed with mine. I want it so badly. “Please,” I whine.

“I’ll do anything you ever want me to do.” He keeps pushing his thickness inside me, and my body comes alive.

“Yes, Gus, Daddy, yes...” my words are incoherent, and Gus smiles down at me.

“I’m loving you, baby.” He grips onto me tighter as my body releases once more, my orgasm crashing down around me.

“Yes, Daddy.” My body’s spent, and I drop my arms to the ground as Gus braces himself above me.

“I’m so close.” He pumps a few more time and then grunts through his own orgasm. “That’s it,” he whispers. “Take all of me.”

Our breathing is labored as he moves off of me. We clean ourselves up as our bodies calm. He kisses me as we pack our things, and I feel like this is the start of something amazing.

Something forever.

The gravel road twists and climbs through a cathedral of towering pines before spilling us out onto a small plateau ringed by mountains.

Morning has stretched into late afternoon, and the sun hangs low—an amber coin caught between the blue-green peaks.

My breath catches when Gus steers the truck around one final bend and the cabin appears, sturdy and timeless, like it grew from the earth instead of being built.

Massive cedar logs interlock at the corners, their warm, honey-brown grain glowing in the slanting light.

A stone chimney rises along one side, thick as an ancient oak trunk, and thin wisps of smoke curl lazily from the flue where Gus must have left the flue open the last time he was here.

A wide porch wraps three sides, its railing carved with simple mountain motifs—bear prints, pinecones, crescent moons.

Flower boxes overflow with late-summer petunias in reckless shades of fuchsia and violet, and the faint scent of sap and moss hangs in the crisp air.

It is achingly beautiful... and blessedly remote.

“This is it,” Gus says, voice a rough murmur as he kills the engine. “Home base until the situation with Tyler is handled.”

Home. The word settles over me like a quilt, heavy with promise and safety. I press my palm to the dashboard for a moment, grounding myself. For the first time since I fled Florida, I truly believe I might be out of Tyler’s reach.

Gus hops from the cab and circles to my door before I can grab the handle. He opens it, offering a hand. I take it, heart flipping at the easy strength of his grip. His thumb brushes my knuckles—a tiny touch, yet it makes my pulse dance.

“Welcome to Saddleback,” he says, gesturing toward the expanse of woods behind the cabin. “Nearest neighbor is eight miles down the mountain. Cell signal’s spotty and there’s only one road in.”

“Perfect,” I breathe, drinking in the hush of rustling branches and distant birdsong. “It’s beautiful, Gus.”

He gives a soft, almost shy smile that melts the last of my nerves. “Wait till you see inside.”

But first, unloading. We spend twenty minutes ferrying supplies from the truck: duffels of clothes, a cooler stuffed with groceries, a battered crate full of Gus’s tools and spare parts, and a small, locked case I’ve learned not to ask about.

Every so often Gus scans the tree line, eyes narrowed, warrior-sharp, before returning to the task at hand.

The tension in his shoulders reminds me we didn’t come here for vacation.

When the truck bed is finally empty, I wipe sweat from my brow with the back of my wrist. “Do you think Tyler could find us way out here?”

Gus sets the crate on the porch with a dull thud.

“Highly unlikely,” he says, voice low. “Mason and Decker are tracking him in Florida. They’ll keep me updated.”

But I'm not taking chances." He nods toward the case at his feet; I recognize the matte-black finish of a gun safe.

"I'll do a perimeter sweep after we're settled.

Motion sensors, fresh batteries in the trail cams. If anyone so much as sneezes inside three hundred yards, we'll know. "

A shiver skates down my spine—half fear, half awe. "You really thought of everything."

"It's my job to think of everything," he answers, but when our eyes meet the hardness slips, replaced by warmth. "And my job to keep you safe."

We carry the last bags inside. The interior is all knotty-pine walls and exposed beams, the air tinged with wood smoke and lemon oil.

Antique lanterns hang from wrought-iron hooks, their amber bulbs casting cozy pools of light.

A river-stone hearth dominates the living room, fronted by a deep leather sofa and a Navajo-pattern blanket draped across the back.

Everything feels solid, permanent—like the cabin has withstood a hundred storms and will weather a hundred more.

"Kitchen's through there," Gus says, nodding toward an archway. "Two bedrooms upstairs, plus a loft. Generator's full, and I've got solar panels on the south roof. We can stay off-grid for a while."

I trail my fingers over a polished cedar banister. "It's amazing. I can't believe you

built this.”

He shrugs, a little embarrassed. “Picked away at it after deployments. Gave me something to do with my hands.”

I laugh softly. “Your idea of a ‘handyman project’ is most people’s dream home.”

He lifts one shoulder. “Come on—I’ll show you your room.”

Upstairs, the hallway smells like fresh sawdust and lavender.

He opens a heavy timber door to reveal a room bathed in dappled light.

A quilt of moss-green and cream covers a queen-size bed.

In the corner, a reading nook holds an overstuffed chair beneath a dormer window.

Bookshelves line the wall, already half-filled with classics and field guides.

“I stocked a few titles I thought you’d like,” Gus says, almost shy. “Bronte, Austen... some modern stuff too.”

Emotion swells in my chest. He remembers my love of reading, something Tyler mocked as “boring.” I turn, intending only to thank him, but the earnest tenderness in his hazel eyes pulls me in. I rise on tiptoe and brush a kiss across his mouth.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

His hands settle at my waist. “You’re welcome.” The syllables rumble through me like distant thunder.

We linger a moment longer—breathing the same air, hearts righting themselves—then he releases me. “Let’s get the food put away.”

Downstairs, we move in domestic rhythm: me unpacking dry goods into rough-hewn cabinets, Gus stowing perishables in a propane fridge. He sets a cast-iron kettle on the gas range, ignites the burner with a click. Soon the kitchen is filled with steam and the earthy scent of Earl Grey.

Cup warming my hands, I perch on a barstool while Gus flips open his phone—a sturdy satellite model—and sends a text to Mason. He sees my curious look and reads aloud: “Made it to Ridge. Perimeter secure. Any movement on TC?”

I blow across my tea. “Do you really think he’ll chase me this far?”

Gus leans against the counter, arms crossed. The sleeves of his thermal shirt cling to biceps that still make me blush. “Tyler strikes me as the kind who hates losing. But he’s also sloppy. Mason finds patterns, exploits them. If Tyler leaves Florida, we’ll know.”

I nod, comforted but still wary. “And until then?”

“Until then, we live.” He steps closer, hooking a finger under my chin so I meet his gaze. “We hike, fish, read by the fire. We make this cabin ours.”

The word ours thrums through me like a plucked string. I set my mug aside and wrap my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek to his chest. His heartbeat thuds steady beneath my ear, a drum I could fall asleep to.

By twilight the truck is empty, groceries stored, linens fresh on the bed. Gus fires up the generator long enough to pump well water, then shuts it down to save fuel. Solar batteries click into place with a reassuring hum.

On the porch we share a simple dinner—grilled cheese sandwiches crisped in cast iron, paired with tomato soup that steams in enamel mugs. Night settles around us, thick with pine resin and cricket song. In the distance an owl hoots, its mournful call echoing off the ridgeline.

Gus sits beside me on a cedar bench, one arm draped along the back. Lantern light throws amber across his sharp cheekbones, the silver at his temples glinting like moonlit metal. I reach over, tracing the strong line of his jaw.

“What’s going on inside that head of yours?” I ask softly.

He exhales, turning so our knees brush. “Strategy. Entry points, sight lines. I keep running scenarios.” A wry smile tugs his mouth. “Old habits.”

“Do any of those scenarios involve Tyler showing up here?”

“Worst-case planning, yes. But I built this place like a fortress.” He taps the railing. “Reinforced window frames, door bars, hidden panic room in the pantry. Cameras feed to my phone.”

I blink. “A panic room?”

“Small crawl space behind the shelves,” he explains. “Steel plate walls, coded latch. If something happens and I’m not here, you lock yourself in and hit the beacon inside. Mason’s team gets an instant alert.”

The thought of hiding while Gus faces danger alone sends a chill through me. “I don’t want to be locked away while you’re out there.”

His gaze softens, but his answer is firm. “Your safety is non-negotiable, Lola. Promise me.”

Reluctantly, I nod. “Okay. I promise.”

He leans in, pressing a kiss to my forehead—a benediction and a brand. “Good girl.”

Heat blooms across my skin. We sit in silence a while longer, watching stars prick the sky open. Eventually Gus stands and reaches for my hand. “Bed?”

My pulse flutters. “Bed.”

Upstairs, he follows me into my room. Night air through the window ruffles the curtains. Gus closes and latches it, then does the same with the one across the hall. Satisfied, he returns and draws me into his arms.

“As much as I’d love to stay, I should bunk in the loft,” he murmurs against my hair.

I clutch his shirt. “Stay.”

A beat of hesitation, then he nods, stripping down to a white tee and flannel pants. I change into one of his shirts—soft cotton that hangs mid-thigh and smells like cedar and soap—then crawl beneath the quilt. The mattress dips under his weight as he joins me.

Wrapped in Gus’s embrace, surrounded by mountains older than memory, I could almost believe Tyler Cole is just a bad dream. But before sleep claims me, a question whispers through the dark.

“Gus?”

“Hmm?”

“If he finds us... promise you won’t face him alone.”

His arms tighten. “We’ll face him together, sweetheart. And we’ll win.”

With that vow settling over us like armor, I finally drift to sleep—knowing that wherever this road leads, Gus and I will walk it side by side.

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Gus

Three quiet days pass in a blur of mountain air, shared coffee mugs, and the soft, stolen kisses that make the cabin seem like the safest place on earth—almost. Lola laughs more now, easy and unguarded, and every time I catch the sound drifting down the hall it buries itself under my ribs like a permanent brand.

But peace is fragile. It only takes one vibration in my pocket to remind me why we're here.

I'm on the porch sanding a rocking-chair arm when the satellite phone buzzes. The caller ID reads Mason. I step to the railing, eyes sweeping the treeline before answering.

"Talk to me."

"Tyler Cole's off the grid," Mason says without preamble. "Ditched his condo two nights ago. Plate reader caught his Camaro north on I-75, then nothing. He's ghosted."

A low curse rumbles in my chest. "He's coming."

"That's our read. You want us to converge?"

"Negative," I say, gaze sliding to the open front door, where I can hear Lola humming in the kitchen. "I need him here—alone. Keep the team in reserve. I'll call in the cavalry when it's done."

Mason pauses. “Copy that. You sure about this, boss?”

“It’s the only way to end it clean.” I lower my voice. “All the bread-crumbs are in place—burner phone ping, credit-card trail to Dahlonaga, fresh prints on Lola’s old apartment mail slot. He’ll follow the map I drew.”

“Roger. We’ll stay dark. Send the flash if things go sideways.”

The line clicks dead. I breathe out slowly, sliding the phone back into my pocket. Every step I’ve taken since Florida has funneled Tyler toward these mountains. My mountains. Here, the terrain fights for me.

Footsteps on the porch. Lola emerges, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Sunlight catches her hair, turning the strands to ribbons of honey. “Everything okay?”

I force a smile. “Just Mason, checking in. Still no sign of Tyler.” Not a lie—just not the whole truth.

Her shoulders loosen. “Maybe he finally gave up.”

“Maybe.” Not a damn chance.

She leans against the railing beside me, tracing the fresh grain where I’ve sanded. “This chair’s going to be gorgeous when you’re finished.”

“Gotta keep busy.” I set the sandpaper down and tug her gently between my legs, palms resting on her hips. “How’s cabin fever?”

She grins, looping her arms around my neck. “Non-existent. I’ve got books, trails, and you.” Her smile dims, worry creeping back. “But I still check the windows at night.”

I kiss her temple. “That’s smart, not scared. And smart keeps you alive.”

Her breath hitches against my collarbone. “We are safe, right?”

“Safer than anywhere else on earth,” I promise, and it’s true—because danger is on its way here, where I can control the ground under its feet.

That afternoon I busy myself stringing new monofilament trip lines along the north ridge.

From the crest I can see the dusty switchback road a mile below— the only drivable approach.

If Tyler stays in the Camaro, the hidden spike strip will shred his tires before he hits the creek crossing.

If he abandons the car and hikes, the IR sensors will catch his heat signature long before he’s in rifle range.

I test each camera, sending the live feeds to my phone, then descend to the cabin as late-sun shadows stretch long and blue.

Inside, the scent of rosemary and garlic greets me. Lola stirs a cast-iron pot, freckles glowing in the firelight. Home and war all tangled together. I clear my throat.

“Smells amazing.”

She beams. “Chicken and gnocchi. Hope you’re hungry.”

Starving—for her, for a world where men like Tyler don’t exist. I set my rifle on the entry table and wash up. Over dinner we talk about nothing heavy—constellations,

the fox tracks she found near the creek, which pie we'll bake first when the blackberries ripen.

Afterward we curl on the sofa, her head on my chest, a battered paperback in her hands. She reads aloud until her voice grows thick with sleep. When she drifts off, I slide out carefully, cover her with the Navajo blanket, and pad to the kitchen.

I open the gun safe, checking the cleaned .

45, the extra mags, the radio beacon for Mason.

Last, I pull out a small velvet box—nothing tactical about it.

Inside, a simple platinum ring set with a marquise diamond my mother once wore.

I thumb the facets, imagining it on Lola's finger after all this ugliness is gone.

A soft voice behind me: "Couldn't sleep?"

I snap the lid shut, turning. Lola stands in the doorway, blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Her eyes drop to the safe, then lift to mine.

"You're expecting him." Not a question.

I exhale. "Mason thinks Tyler's missing. I think he's hunting. And I'm done letting him choose the battlefield."

Her chin trembles, but she nods. "What's the plan, soldier?"

The old call sign slips over me like armor. "He'll hit the switchback by dawn if he keeps the pace he's been averaging. When the spikes take his car, he'll hoof it up the

ridge. I'll intercept at the old fire tower."

"I'm coming," she says instantly.

"No." I cross the room, framing her face with my hands. "I need you here, in the panic room, beacon ready. This ends tonight, Lola. I swear it."

Tears glimmer, but she blinks them away. "Then come back to me."

"Nothing could stop me." I kiss her, slow and certain, letting her feel the vow. Then I press the velvet box into her palm. "For after."

Her gasp is a broken whisper. "Gus?—"

"Hold on to it. A reminder of everything waiting for us on the other side."

She clutches the box to her heart. "I love you."

"I love you more."

Midnight finds me ghosting through the treeline, moonlight silvering the rifle barrel. Fog pools in the hollows, soft as breath. Every crunch of gravel down on the switchback drifts up clear—a car crawling, engine laboring on the grade.

Right on schedule, Tyler. Follow the crumbs.

I hunker behind a fallen log, heartbeat steady, eyes on the thermal display. A lone figure appears—hot white against the cool forest, moving uphill with dogged purpose.

I chamber a round and wait.

Tonight, the hunter becomes the hunted, and I'll finally give Lola the peace she deserves.

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Lola

Something is different tonight.

Gus moves through the cabin like a storm contained—silent, coiled, and deliberate. He’s spoken maybe a dozen words since sunset, and each of them felt measured, weighed for unnecessary weight before he let it leave his tongue.

I dry the last dinner plate and stack it in the cupboard, watching him out of the corner of my eye as he checks the battery indicator on the generator, then the feed on the trail-cam tablet, then the deadbolt on the front door he’s already locked twice.

“Gus,” I say, keeping my voice even. “Are we safe?”

He pauses mid-stride, meeting my gaze across the kitchen. For a heartbeat his eyes soften—hazel under the low lamplight, the green flecks I love turning dark and deep. Then the soldier slides the curtain of calm back into place.

“Nothing’s getting past me,” he answers. Which is not what I asked, and we both know it.

I cross the floor until I’m close enough to smell cedar and gun oil on his shirt. My fingers curl into the hem. “Tell me the truth.”

He exhales, a slow press of air between clenched teeth. “Truth is I’d die before I let anyone hurt you.”

“That’s not the same as safe.”

His jaw flexes. “Safe enough for now.” A fingertip ghosts down my cheek, tender despite the tension vibrating through him. “But I need you in the panic room tonight, Lola.”

Cold slips beneath my skin. “He’s close.”

Gus doesn’t confirm, but his silence is confirmation enough. He presses a kiss to my forehead. “Pack a small bag. Water, flashlight, jacket. Go now. I’ll lock you in and join you when it’s over.”

“When,” not if. My stomach flips. “I’m not hiding while?—”

A sharp rap explodes against the front door, three rapid knocks that rattle the hinges.

We both freeze.

Another knock—slow this time, taunting.

Gus’s eyes blaze. He grabs my wrist and pulls me behind the kitchen island, shoving a pistol into my palm. “Safety’s off. Aim, squeeze, breathe.” Then he’s gone, ghosting down the hall toward the living room, rifle raised.

My heartbeat slams in my ears.

“Gus?” I whisper. No answer.

The doorknob rattles, followed by a smooth, almost amused voice that slides under the door like smoke. “Lola, sweetheart... open up. You forgot to leave a forwarding address.”

Tyler.

My fingers tighten on the pistol. Last time I heard that voice it was hissing threats in my ear, promising he'd hunt me to the ends of the earth. He kept his promise.

A crash—wood splintering. The door gives. I choke back a scream.

“Gus Monroe,” Tyler calls, footsteps creaking across the entryway. “Survival expert, ex-Delta... impressive résumé. Too bad you picked the wrong girl to play hero for.”

Another sound—boots scuffing, furniture scraping. Then Gus's growl, low and lethal: “Step away from that threshold and you might walk out of these mountains alive.”

Tyler laughs, a sharp, ugly bark. “Come now, we both know that's not your plan.”

Silence swells. I can feel them measuring distance, angles, intent. My pulse hammers so loudly I'm sure they can hear.

A single gunshot cracks, deafening in the enclosed space. Glass shatters. I bite down on a scream and flatten behind the island.

Gus shouts, “Lola, panic room! Now!”

I scramble toward the pantry, forcing stiff legs to move. A second shot booms, chips of pine zinging off the doorframe above my head. I dive through the pantry doorway, slamming the hidden panel. Darkness swallows me.

The latch clicks. I engage the steel bar, then fumble for the small monitor linked to the cabin's cameras. The infrared feed flickers to life: the living-room outline rendered in heat-map whites and grays. Two figures circle each other—Gus broader, steadier; Tyler wiry, quick.

Tyler lunges. Gus pivots, delivering a brutal elbow that sends Tyler crashing into the coffee table. Wood splinters. Tyler rises, blood hot on his face, and fires again. Spark flares off the fireplace grate; Gus rolls, returns fire, the muzzle flash white lightning.

I can't breathe. Each second stretches like wire, taut and slicing. My fingers hover over the red beacon button that will summon Mason's team, but Gus asked for time. I owe him that.

On-screen Tyler darts behind the couch, ripping a lamp cord free, swinging the base like a club. Gus advances, rifle in one hand, sofa between them. Tyler hurls the lamp; it smashes against the hearth.

Then they're on each other—rifle knocked aside, fists and knees and fury. Gus drives Tyler into the stone mantle; the impact vibrates through the feed. Tyler claws for his waistband—knife glinting.

My scream echoes against steel walls: "Gus!"

He twists, the blade skimming his ribs, crimson blooming on his shirt.

Instead of retreating he surges forward, trapping Tyler's knife arm, head-butting him with a sickening crack.

Tyler staggers. Gus wrenches the knife free, flips it, and pins Tyler's wrist to the mantle with the blade buried through the cuff of his jacket.

Tyler howls.

Gus steps back, chest heaving. "It's over."

Tyler laughs through blood-stained teeth. "For you maybe." He yanks a small remote

from his pocket, thumb poised. “You’re not the only one who planned ahead.”

The color drains from Gus’s face. I know what Tyler means—booby trap, car bomb, something outside... my vision tunnels.

Before Tyler can press the button, Gus drives a knee into his gut. The remote skitters across the floor. Gus tackles him, grappling, wrenching Tyler’s free arm behind his back until bone pops. Tyler screams, going limp.

Sirens wail in the distance—an avalanche of relief. Mason must have triggered the sheriff’s net when the perimeter alarms tripped.

Gus drags Tyler to the center of the room, boot on his spine, rifle trained. The front door bursts open—blue lights strobing, deputies pouring in. In seconds Tyler is cuffed, the knife collected, the remote sealed in an evidence bag.

Only when the room clears do I unseal the panic room. The moment the panel swings wide, Gus is there, blood seeping through his shirt but eyes blazing with desperate worry.

“Lola.” My name is a prayer on his lips.

I throw myself into his arms, gripping him hard enough to bruise. “You’re bleeding.”

“Graze.” He brushes my hair back, scanning me for injuries. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Tears blur my vision. “You kept your promise.”

He kisses me, fierce and trembling. “And I always will.”

Deputy radios crackle downstairs; EMTs call for blot dressings. Gus allows them to

steer him toward the porch steps. I keep my hand locked in his the entire time.

While they tend his wound, Mason jogs up the drive, grin splitting his face. “Hell of a show, Monroe.” He nods toward me. “You okay, ma’am?”

“I am now.”

Tyler is loaded into a cruiser, head bandaged, eyes filled with venom. I meet his stare one last time—and feel nothing but gratitude for the man beside me.

Gus squeezes my fingers. “It’s done.” He reaches into his pocket, draws out the velvet box now streaked with his blood. “Time to talk about after.”

Tears spill freely. “Yes,” I whisper. “After.”

The mountains stand silent witness as he slides the ring onto my finger, its diamond catching the flashing lights and turning them into stars.

For the first time since the night everything fell apart, I’m not running. I’m exactly where I belong—safe in the arms of the man who would move mountains, set traps, and bleed for me.

And together, we watch Tyler Cole disappear into the dark, unable to touch us ever again.

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Gus

Dawn creeps soft and gold over Saddleback, Tennessee, brushing the porch rail with light the color of honey.

Lola and I sit side by side on the steps, wrapped in a single blanket.

The deputies cleared out before sunrise, Tyler's cruiser taillights swallowed by the switchbacks below, and the hush they left behind is as deep as snowfall.

Yet Lola hasn't said more than three words since I strapped the last sensor back onto its post and re-armed the cabin. Her fingers trace the diamond on her hand; her eyes stay fixed on the horizon.

I clear my throat. "Painkillers kickin' in?" The graze on my ribs burns, but nothing compared to the ache of her silence.

"They're fine," she answers, voice quiet. Another beat passes before she turns. "Did you plan this from the beginning, Gus? Lure Tyler here so you could finish it on your terms?"

The question hangs between us, sharp as broken glass. I inhale, steady. "Yes."

Her breath catches, equal parts hurt and relief. "When?"

"Back in Florida—after the night he left the first threat on your windshield. I knew he wouldn't stop."

I also knew the only place I could guarantee your safety was my turf.

” I drag a palm over my face. “Every step... the trip lines, the fake paper trail, even the single-bed motel rooms—I was pushing him toward this ridge.”

She closes her eyes, shoulders lifting on a slow inhale. “You used me as bait.”

The truth tastes like rust. “I used myself as much as you. And I hate that it hurt you.” I turn fully, cupping her jaw with bandaged fingers. “I love you, Lola Grace Bennett. I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for the fear I put in your eyes.”

Tears spill over, glimmering. “I was terrified... but I never doubted you’d come back.”

A shaky laugh escapes me. “Stubborn faith.”

“Stubborn love,” she corrects, sliding onto my lap, knees bracketing my hips. She tangles her fingers in my hair, studying me with a seriousness that steals my breath. “Promise me no more secrets.”

“Scout’s honor,” I vow, pressing my palm over her heart. “From here on, it’s just us. No enemies. No running.”

She leans in, brushing her mouth over mine. The kiss is gentle at first, tasting of morning coffee and unshed tears, but it deepens quickly—weeks of tension melting into heat. Her soft sigh against my lips sparks every protective, possessive instinct in my body.

I rise, lifting her effortlessly. She squeals, laughter brightening the quiet woods as I carry her across the threshold—the one tradition I’ve been dying to fulfill.

Inside, the cabin is ours again, shadows chased away by sunbeams spilling through the high windows. I set her on the kitchen counter, hands sliding beneath her borrowed flannel shirt to find warm, silky skin.

“Gus,” she whispers, pupils dark and blown wide. “Marry me today.”

My heart slams. “I was going to wait—give you ceremony, flowers?—”

She hooks her heels behind my back, pulling me closer. “All I need is you, a promise, and these mountains.”

I’m powerless against that smile. I press feather-light kisses along her jaw, her throat, feeling her pulse flutter beneath my lips. “Then today it is.”

We stumble down the hall, trading kisses like secrets. Clothes trail behind us—a shirt here, a pair of leggings there—until the bedroom door thumps shut. Morning light washes the quilts in gold as I lay her gently across them.

“I love you,” she says, voice trembling with joy.

“And I love you,” I answer, sliding the ring fully onto her finger. “Always, Lola. Forever.”

Her answer is a kiss that sparks like flint striking steel. Heat roars to life, urgent and undeniable. Hands roam, breaths hitch, the outside world shrinking to the span of the mattress and the thundering beat of two hearts learning to keep time together.

When we finally surface, sun now high and bright, our bodies twined and lazy beneath the quilt, peace settles over me deeper than any I’ve ever known. Lola’s head rests on my shoulder, her laughter rumbling against my chest as she traces circles where fresh gauze peeks from my bandage.

“So,” she murmurs, “wife me yet?”

I grin, tipping her chin up for another languid kiss. “First light tomorrow, on the porch, with the ranger as witness. Then we take a honeymoon every day for the rest of our lives.”

Her smile could power the whole ridge. “Best mission plan I’ve ever heard, Monroe.”

Outside, blue jays chatter and the creek babbles its endless song, but inside this log-and-stone fortress the future stretches wide and bright—free of fear, sparkling with promise.

And wrapped in the woman who turned my battle plan into a forever kind of peace, I know I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

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LOLA

Snowflakes swirl like powdered sugar over Saddleback, frosting every pine bough and turning the log-cabin porch into a story-book postcard.

A year has slipped by since the night I told Gus I was pregnant, and now the tiny heartbeat we once imagined is bundled against my chest in a cream-knit sling, warm and perfect and ours.

“Easy, sweetheart,” I murmur, kissing the soft tuft of auburn curls that peek from beneath the baby’s cap. “Daddy’s almost finished.”

Daddy—Gus Monroe—stands a few yards away, splitting firewood with smooth, practiced strokes.

Even in the pale afternoon light he looks larger than life: flannel sleeves shoved to his elbows, silver flecks at his temples sparkling as bright as the new wedding band he still twists whenever he’s nervous or proud (which, with us, is almost always).

“All set!” he calls, stacking the last split log onto the sled. His grin crinkles the corners of his hazel eyes—those same eyes I see every time our daughter opens hers wide in wonder. “Ready to head inside, sunshine?”

I arch a brow. “Ask the real boss.”

Gus wipes his palms and steps onto the porch. Instantly his big hands cradle the baby-sling with reverence. “How’s my girl? Keeping Mama warm?” He peppers our

daughter's cheeks with gentle kisses, and the tiny bundle squeaks a contented answer.

We named her Grace Eleanor Monroe —Grace, for the miracle she is; Eleanor, for my dad's mother, who taught him that quiet loyalty can be the fiercest kind of love.

We call her Ellie most days, but Gus prefers "my girl," said in the same awed tone he once reserved for mountain sunrises and rare rifle stocks.

Inside, the cabin hums with holiday life.

Garlands of pine and cinnamon-stick twine over the mantel; gingerbread cools on the sideboard.

My dad hums off-key carols while stirring venison stew in the cast-iron pot—his third visit this season, because a granddaughter is the best excuse to linger.

Mason and Decker arrived an hour ago with their wives, claiming they were "just passing through," though the arm-load of gifts and baby toys says otherwise.

When Gus shoulders the door open, a chorus of hellos and there they are! spills into the entryway. Boots come off, coats are hung, and Ellie is passed from loving arm to loving arm like the world's most delicate snow-angel.

Dad pats Gus's back. "Wood split?"

"Full cord, sir," Gus answers with playful salute. "Should last through the next front."

"That front's nothing compared to Florida summers," Mason teases from the sofa, bouncing Ellie on his knee. "You two picked the right place to hide out."

"Live," I correct, tugging a knit blanket higher over my daughter's toes. "Hide-and-seek season ended when Tyler asked the warden for a plea deal."

Decker lifts his mug. “To peace hard-won.”

Everyone echoes cheers , clinking enamel against stoneware. Ellie startles, wide blue-green eyes blinking up at Mason. The room melts into coos and shushes until her lower lip trembles, searching.

“That,” Gus says, swooping in, “is my cue.” He scoops her close, settles into the rocker near the hearth, and begins the low rumble of a lullaby he half-invented during our first sleepless nights.

The sight of this mountain-rough man crooning nonsense about pine-cone toes and honey-bee noses still takes my breath away.

Dad ladles stew into bowls and elbows me gently. “You happy, pumpkin?”

“More than I ever dreamed.” I glance at Gus—at the firelight glinting off his wedding band, at the way Ellie’s fist curls around his finger—and my heart feels bigger than my chest can hold. “It was a long road...”

“But the right one,” he finishes, eyes twinkling.

Gus lifts his gaze to meet mine as if he hears every word, even across the crowded room. The look we share is the same vow we’ve whispered through trials and triumphs: Safe. Loved. Always.

Dinner is loud and wonderful—stories of old missions, plans for sledding tomorrow, bets on whose cinnamon-cookie stack will topple first. Later, our friends head out to rented cabins down the ridge, promising breakfast at dawn.

Dad retreats to his favorite guest room with a book of fly-fishing knots and a slice of pie.

At last, the house is quiet save for the crackle of embers and the steady tick of Ellie's breathing. I carry her up the stairs, lay her in the cradle Gus built from fallen cedar, and sing a soft refrain of his pine-cone lullaby. She drifts off, lips parted in a sleepy smile.

Downstairs I find Gus on the porch, snow still sifting from a pearl-gray sky. He wraps me in his arms, drawing me against the familiar wall of warmth and strength. For a moment we say nothing, watching moonlight silver the ridge and turn the world pristine again.

"Thank you," he whispers into my hair.

"For what?" I tilt my face up, letting our noses touch.

"For trusting me when I was more battle plan than boyfriend. For making this cabin a home. For her ." His voice shakes on the last word—the forever kind of wonder that never quite settles.

I slide my mittened hands over his chest. "You once promised me a honeymoon every day for the rest of our lives. Looks like you're keeping score."

He chuckles. "I intend to keep winning." He dips his head, kisses me—slow, sure, tasting of peppermint and promise. Heat flares even in the crisp air.

Behind us, Ellie sighs in her sleep, and the wind breathes through cathedral pines, their branches bowing like guardians.

Tyler Cole is a ghost of a bad chapter; fear is a visitor no longer welcome.

This cabin, these mountains, this family—they are the beginning and the ending, the whole wild journey etched in cedar and snowfall.

Gus breaks the kiss but keeps me close, his forehead resting against mine. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Monroe.”

“Merry Christmas, hero.”

The words float up with our breath, crystallizing in the cold before drifting away—joining the hush of Saddleback and the bright, unbreakable future waiting just beyond the tree line.