



The Mountain Man's Girl

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Description: She trespassed on the wrong mans land. Now, shes MINE.

Traeger escaped to the mountains to get away from his past. To get away from the memories, and finally breathe steady. But a group of college kids have decided to trespass up on his mountain, disturbing his peace. Rattling his calm. He intends to teach them a lesson about breaking the law. But when he goes out to confront them, he finds himself facing his own moral dilemma.

Its not kidnapping if hes just trying to help a girl out, right? After all, she is wounded.

But try telling that to the girl who finds herself being hauled off into the deep woods by a man who may or may not be bigfoot.

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Tarryn

“Are you seriously packing heels?” Kelsey picks up my leopard print Jimmy Choos, giving me a look like I’m the most absurd person she’s ever met. “It’s a hiking trip, Tarryn. You bring hiking boots.”

“Obviously.” I roll my eyes. She’s acting like I’m an idiot with no common sense. Of course, I know that. “I wasn’t bringing those to hike in. I was...” I don’t even bother finishing my sentence as her brow rises in eager anticipation, loading up that tongue of hers to mock me further. It’s all she’s been doing lately. Ever since we planned this trip, she’s been making fun of me. She thinks it’s hilarious that I’ve never been camping before. But I didn’t grow up with a Boy Scout as a father like she did. My dad liked to spend his time on his yacht, not traipsing through the woods with bugs and wild animals. Although, the way some of the young girls acted when they were drunk, you’d think he was a zookeeper.

“I’m hiking in my sneakers.” I take my heels from her judgy hands, wrapping each one in its protective little bag before they get any more opinionated fingerprints on them.

“I guess you wouldn’t own a pair of hiking boots, would you?” She looks down at her feet, which are tucked into a big pair of muddy boots that look like they belong to a lumberjack. No, I definitely would never buy a pair of shoes that look like that. Pretty cowgirl boots with feather detailing are the types of boots I like. Or some black knee-highs with a stiletto heel. “You’re going to have to watch your step in those sneakers.

It will be rocky terrain, and you don't want to roll your ankle. Carter should've told you to order some."

I'm surprised he didn't since he told me to order just about everything else under the sun. I've spent a mini fortune on all the gear: the pack, the tent, the sleeping bag. Two air pad thingies for us to sleep on. A pillow that looks like a whoopee cushion. And a hammock. I spent so much money, and I doubt I'll ever use any of it again. But Carter said he'll gladly take it all off my hands if I'm not a fan of backpacking. He even made sure I got a pack that will fit him just in case.

I shove my heels into my bag, tucking them in between my sweatshirts.

"Why are you still packing the heels?" What's with her and my shoes? Geez.

"I'm bringing them for when we go into town for dinner." Your girl likes to look cute when she's out in public. Plus, I want to look good for my boyfriend so that when we get back under our sleeping bags, he'll be ready to rip my clothes off. If I were to wear the shoes she has on, he wouldn't even want to touch me.

Again, her eyes are revealing exactly how naive she thinks I am as they creep up to her hairline, wrinkles appearing across her brow.

"We aren't going into town for dinner, Tarryn. We're going to be eating at our campsite."

We're going to be eating in the woods? No one ever mentioned that.

"What exactly are we going to eat?" Because no one told me to pack any food. Maybe this is another one of those things I should've just known. Common sense camping 101. With the way she's looking at me, I feel myself getting dumber with every twitch of her creased brow and shake of her head.

“We’re going to hunt for our food.”

I swallow down the horror that snakes its way into my stomach and makes it churn with disgusted dread. I don’t hunt. And I definitely don’t eat squirrel or raccoon or whatever other animals you find in the woods. That’s absolutely disgusting.

“Oh my God.” She busts out laughing. “You should see your face right now.” Her laugh almost sounds like a cackling witch. Shrill and evil, and laced with so much judgement. “I’m kidding, Tarr. God, you are so gullible. The guys planned the menu and are bringing everything we need. I picked up some granola bars and oatmeal for breakfast along with some gorp to snack on, and I know Jeff is bringing tuna, and peanut butter and jelly packets, so we’re all set for food.”

Oh, thank goodness. Not that I want to live off PB&J for five days or have any clue as to what gorp is, but it’s better than eating squirrel. But that means we’re going to be stuck in the woods for the entire time. I thought we’d at least get to have a little hiking reprieve every evening. Hike for a few hours, go back to our campground and shower, and then change into some normal clothes to go into the little mountain town for some dinner. Maybe do a little bit of shopping or go to a movie, something to break up the monotony. But it looks like we’ll be roughing it all week, doing who knows what out in the woods.

I guess I won’t be needing my heels after all. Nor will I need my flat iron or my cute skirts, but I’m not going to unpack all of it now. I’ll wait until Kelsey isn’t present or she’ll think I’m even more ridiculous than she already does. Although maybe I’ll still bring my flat iron. I hate when my hair gets frizzy after I wash it, and I read that campgrounds have electrical outlets.

That reminds me... “Will we need quarters for the showers?” It said online that some campgrounds have coin-operated showers. It’s like a quarter for a minute of water, and I don’t want to find myself stuck in the woods without enough money to wash

away the grime.

“We aren’t staying at an official campground.” She shakes her head like I should know all this, but Carter didn’t give me any of the details. He just said all I have to do is show up and look pretty. “We’ll be backpacking , hence that big pack.” She looks at it like it’s more than obvious and I’m a complete moron. “We’ll be staying along the trail, so there won’t be any showers. Just the lakes and springs to bathe in.”

Oh my God. Please tell me this is another one of her jokes. But she isn’t laughing. Her expression is flat, and I can tell by the twinkling gleam in her eye that she’s being completely serious.

Oh my freaking word. Whose idea was this?

It’s spring break. We’re supposed to be relaxing and having fun. What happened to lounging by the beach and drinking fruity cocktails? We could’ve rented a house and been partying poolside. But nope, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be traipsing through the woods, sleeping on the ground, and bathing in dirty lakes, which could have leeches in them for all I know. I’d love to know if she’s researched that fact, but I’m not going to ask in case she starts mocking me again.

“You know, if you don’t want to come, you don’t have to.”

And let Carter down? No. He’s really excited about this. Ever since we first started dating, he’s been wanting to take me camping. Although, I may have fibbed to him about being interested in the idea. I hate everything about this. The dark woods, the hiking, the dirt. Ugh... I should’ve told him I’m a glamping kind of girl. I’d be fine with a fancy trailer to stay in at night. A roof over our heads. A hot shower. An actual bed to sleep on, not something that looks as thin as a pancake. I’m sure I’ll feel every rock on the ground laying on that thing.

“No. I’m not backing out. It will be an adventure. It’s going to be fun.” I force my cheeks up, trying to think positive. After all, Carter loves backpacking so maybe it really won’t be that bad. And Kelsey is excited about it too. She’s been talking nonstop about the trip. She’s even been on the phone with Carter a few times planning. If I didn’t know she had a crush on Jeff and was trying to make things official between them on this trip, I’d be worried she was trying to move in on my boyfriend. But that’s never going to happen. I’m completely confident in what Carter and I have. Though, I’m not confident I’m going to survive for five days in the woods.

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Traeger

My phone starts ringing in my back pocket, breaking the silence of the morning. Disturbing the peace up here on this mountain. Disrupting my calm. It's my burner phone, which means whoever is calling needs something from me. Only a select few have the number, and if any one of them is calling, then shit is going down. Shit I don't want to be a part of. I left that life behind for good reason and I'm not interested in going back.

I tug on the rope one last time, making sure it's strong enough to hold whatever comes walking into my trap. Even the largest bear up on this mountain couldn't stand a chance against my knots, so it should be good to go. I pick up my tools and tuck them into my belt, then start heading down to check the next trap. My phone starts buzzing again, burning a hole in my conscience with every ring. It could be an emergency. A life-or-death situation. And how am I going to feel if I ignore the call and find out that one of my good friends has died on account of me not answering?

"Hello," I grunt, sounding as though I haven't used my voice in ages. Guess it has been a few days. There aren't a whole lot of animals crossing my path to converse with, so my vocal cords don't get stretched much.

"Took you long enough," the old familiar voice rumbles through the line. "I was beginning to think I needed to send search and rescue up to that mountain of yours to find your corpse."

“If I were dead, the coyotes would’ve eaten me by now. Why are you calling, Ryker?”

“Really? That’s how you’re going to greet your old friend?”

Only when I know that old friend needs something from me. If this were a friendly check-in to shoot the shit and see if I’m still kicking, he would’ve sent me a damn email. But whatever he wants to discuss can’t have a paper trail.

“You calling to ask how many buzzards I saw flying over top the mountain today?” I saw three circling this morning, which means some kind of animal met its fate. “Or are you calling to invite me to a barbecue? Sorry, but I’m a little busy this weekend and won’t be able to make it.”

“Busy doing what? Wrangling bears? Bird-watching?” He thinks I twiddle my thumbs all day long, but I’ve got plenty to occupy my time with. And believe me, after everything I went through, boredom is welcome. “It’s not a barbecue, but what do you say to having dinner with me tonight? I’ll take you out to the nicest place in town and buy you a steak. When was the last time you had a decent meal?”

He acts like I’m living off MREs up here. I grow what I can in the way of vegetables, and drive into town to stock up on dry goods, meat, and whatever supplies I need, so I never go without.

“Breakfast,” I grunt. “I had myself some deer sausage and a quail egg omelet.” And it was better than any fancy-ass meal I can get in town.

“Yeah. Well, when was the last time you ate a meal you didn’t have shoot and skin first?”

“You going to tell me why you’re so interested in feeding me?” It’s about time he

gets to the real meat and potatoes because I know there's a reason brewing behind this friendly get-together.

"Can't say. I'm on the clock." In other words, Uncle Sam is listening and it isn't safe for him to talk. He's a cop, and down at the station, you never know who's eavesdropping on the line. The place is crawling with bugs. "But I'll tell you this..." His voice drops and I can tell he's covering his mouth. "I've got a dirty pen out on the land, and I need some help handling the rabid pigs." Which is code for the fact that he's dealing with some dirty cops.

This is the exact reason I moved off grid. I lost faith in people. The agents I worked with, the ones meant to serve and protect, were just as crooked as the criminals we were investigating. In fact, they were worse. There was no one I could trust. And the few I could were dropping like flies. So, I fled before they could eliminate me too. Sounds like Ryker's now dealing with the same. Only these fuckers are carrying police badges.

"Nothing ever changes, does it?" I sigh. "Just tell me when and where and I'll be there." As much as I don't want to get involved, this man took out the drug dealer who had his gun pointed right at my forehead, so I won't turn my back on him.

"How about we say seven at the finest steakhouse in town? Means you'll have to dust off your old suit and shave that beard of yours."

Nah, I'm not shaving for shit. I'm not trying to impress anyone or find myself a woman. I just need to get the information from him and then I'll be handling everything else from behind my computer screen.

"I'll see you at seven."

I cut the line and stare out at the mountain ridge, taking in a deep breath of the clean

crisp air. Listening to the quiet. The calm. Feeling the cool breeze whip across my skin. It's peaceful up here. No noise. No drama. And no fucking crooked agents breathing down my neck, wanting me to break the law for them, wanting to ensure I fall in line. I worked so damn hard, feeling proud of protecting my country, but then the truth was revealed, and I realized exactly who I was working for: criminals.

It's just a dinner with an old pal and then I'll be back up here breathing steady again.

Tarryn

It's worse than I expected. We've been walking for hours. Uphill. In the mud. With these huge, heavy packs on our backs. I can't even feel my toes anymore. Right as we started on the trail, we had to cross a creek bed, and my wet feet are numb now. Of course, the others have dry feet, which they've been pointing out for the last few hours. "See, your feet would be dry if you were wearing hiking boots. Now, your feet are going to stink."

Kelsey turned to Carter and told him she feels sorry for him. I'm surprised she didn't offer to sleep in his tent instead of with Jeff. For wanting things to happen between her and Jeff, her flirtations sure have been pointed in the wrong direction.

"Can you move any faster, babe?" Carter stops and turns, looking annoyed again. I'm trying to catch up, but he's walking so fast. "I'd like to get up to that ridge before dark so we can watch the sunset." He points to a spot way up the mountain, and I nearly break down in tears. That looks to be another two hours away. At least.

"I'm trying, Carter. But this pack is heavy." And about two times too big for my frame. I should've taken the advice of the salesclerk and gone with the smaller one. But Carter insisted that I get something that would fit him on the off chance I never used it again.

"That's probably because of all the heels you packed," Kelsey mocks.

“Heels?” Carter’s brow forms a V, a sign that he’s further annoyed.

“I didn’t bring heels.” I look toward Kelsey who’s smirking at me. “But you guys gave me all the food to carry, and it isn’t light.”

“It’s freeze-dried meals, babe. I’m carrying two tents, pots and pans, and my sleeping bag. And Jeff has an entire pack of water bottles on his back.” Yeah, well good for him. They’re strong guys who are used to doing this type of thing. This is my first time. “Kelsey’s got a full pack too, and even she’s moving fast.”

Yeah, well, Kelsey’s only carrying a few granola bars and like two outfits. Plus, her pack is half the size of mine. My pack was heavy even before he put the food in.

Maybe this was a bad idea. We’re only a half a day in, and I’m already miserable and he’s already annoyed. I wanted to impress Carter and show interest in his hobbies, but I think this is going to be one hobby he does on his own or with his buddies.

“I’ll try to walk faster, Carter, if you try to be a little nicer.” He’s been rude since the start. As soon as I showed up in sneakers, he was annoyed, saying I should’ve bought some hiking boots. I reminded him again that I’ve never done this before. And it’s not the shoes. I doubt I’d be walking any faster in big clunky boots. It’s the ginormous pack.

“I am being nice, Tarryn. But I’m not going to baby you the entire trip. We need to toughen you up.” Toughen me up? But I thought he liked me soft and sweet. “You need to get out from under daddy’s credit card and learn some survival skills.” Wow. I had no idea he felt that way. He’s acting like I’m a spoiled brat. I survive just fine on my own. My dad didn’t teach me wilderness smarts, but he did teach me street smarts and business smarts: skills I think are more important.

“Seriously,” Kelsey agrees. “You need to learn how to do something other than

shop.”

Wow. So they both share this opinion? I wonder how many times they talked about me when they were planning out the details of this trip, because they’re both looking at each other shaking their heads. I’ve lived with Kelsey for three years and she’s never been so rude. But ever since I started dating Carter, she’s been making it a point to cut me down in front of him. It’s like she’s determined to embarrass me for some reason.

“Come on, you guys. We need to get moving,” Jeff grumbles. And now they’re all mad at me. Awesome. I shove past Kelsey and start walking up the trail again. I’ll prove exactly how tough I can be.

“Look,” Kelsey says, pointing to a sign nailed onto the tree, and I practically jump for joy when I see it. It’s my saving grace. “That sign says private property. No trespassing.”

“It’s not private property.” Carter steps around me, going up to the thing. “This is public land.” He turns and holds up his GPS device to show his screen. “We’re right here.” He points to the dot on the map. “It’s a national forest. These are public trails. No one can own the land.”

And yet, that sign says private property. Maybe this is where the public trail ends and everything beyond this point is for government officials only. Here’s hoping that’s the case.

“Yeah, but this part could be restricted government land or was sold off,” I state. It’s not completely unheard of. There could be a cell phone tower up there or an air tower or something.

“I doubt it.” He shakes his head. “It’s not like they’d have a public trail leading right

to private government property or someone's front door. Someone probably just put it up as a prank."

Really? How many pranksters are coming out here and nailing up private property signs onto trees? It could've been put up as a warning because there's treacherous land up ahead and they want to deter hikers from going farther up the mountain. There could be a chance of boulders falling or it could be someplace at risk of a landslide.

Carter turns and continues up the trail, ignoring the warning sign. The other two follow suit, not questioning a thing either. I hesitate, having my reservations. My gut is telling me we should turn back now. But as they start getting further ahead, nearly out of sight, I tuck away my doubts and work to catch up. There's no way I'm getting left behind. Without Carter's GPS, I wouldn't know how to navigate my way back down on my own. We took a lot of turns. Went on a few offshoots. And I was too busy watching the ground, making sure I didn't trip on any rocks, that I didn't memorize any landmarks. Which means I have no choice but to go with them even if it is against my better judgement.

Finally, we get to the spot where we'll be staying for the night. I drop my pack, feeling like I can barely stand up straight. By the end of this week, I'm going to turn into a hunchback. My chiropractor is going to have to work a miracle.

I turn and breathe out on a gasp as I see the view of the mountain ridge and the valley below. It's spectacular. Easily the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. And it's so quiet up here. No traffic noise. No hustle and bustle. Just the sound of the leaves fluttering in the breeze—and of course the three behind me that don't know the meaning of the word silence. They've been talking nonstop on our entire trek up the mountain.

Until today, I never really gave thought to how much Carter likes to talk. But now,

I'm realizing that he's always monopolizing our conversations. Always talking about himself. He bragged and bragged for the last hour about all the treacherous hikes he's done, but I wasn't impressed. Kelsey was, though. She was hanging onto his every word, kissing his ass with all of her compliments. And I wasn't the only one taking notice of her interest. I think Jeff has realized that he's not the one she has a crush on. It's more than obvious now it's my boyfriend she wants to be with.

"All right. Why don't you girls start putting together that tent while we work on this one," Carter says, dropping two big sacks down on the ground. Of course, Kelsey quickly rushes to his command to get started. She's eager to impress. Eager to show him that she's a tough, rugged outdoorsy woman who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty. She's eager to prove that she's better than me every step of the way. All she's proving though, is that she's not a good friend.

Little Miss Girl Scout empties the contents of the sack before my feet and I feel like I'm staring at a tarp with a bunch of poles, and there aren't any instructions in the heap of stuff. The guys are busy getting their tent put up, and I start studying every move like I'm watching a how-to video. Studying where they're putting the poles, and which end goes where.

"Come on, Tarryn," Kelsey snaps. "It's going to get dark soon. We need to get this up before we can't see."

She starts grabbing poles and snapping ends together, so I pick one up and copy her actions, but it doesn't work for me and snaps right back. "Careful. If you break one, we'll be screwed." She takes the thing from my hand, giving me a look like I'm incompetent. Maybe if I had an instruction manual, I would know what the heck I'm doing, but I'm going blind here. And everyone is mocking my naiveté. Carter has stopped what he's doing and is now looking at me like I'm an idiot.

He gave me the same look earlier when I put my pack on and nearly toppled forward.

And when he gave me the compass so I could have a job and be our directional guide, he shook his head like I was a moron. Sorry, but I couldn't read the thing. And when I freaked out over a spider, a giant spider that looked like a black widow, they all rolled their eyes, grumbling how it's going to be a long trip with Little Miss Prissy Pants.

All day, I've seen a new side to my boyfriend that I haven't enjoyed. He's a bit bossy with all this stuff. And he's not very considerate or sensitive to the fact that this is all new to me. He's acting like I should already know how to put a tent together, yet I've never owned one so how the heck would I know what to do? But if I ask, it will just prove that I'm some pampered princess with no survival skills.

Coming on this trip was definitely a mistake. I'm not even sure Carter and I are going to make it out of the woods as a couple.

Traeger

I can't get home fast enough. Winding up the mountain road, getting deeper into the forest, farther away from the noise and the lights. Away from the smog of the stress that radiates in everyone's eyes. Finally, the tension is subsiding and I'm starting to feel like myself again. It was good seeing Ryker though, catching up with him. But hearing him talk about all the shit that's going down at his station is the exact reason I don't need the government in my life anymore. The shit he was telling me was making my nerves itch.

I've definitely got some work cut out for me. It's gonna take me hacking into the police mainframe and scouring through the code for all the erased surveillance footage for me to find the evidence he's looking for. But I should have what he needs within a day or two.

I take the final bend up into my private drive and park right in front of my cabin. As soon as I'm outside, I breathe in, needing to fill my lungs with that crisp clean air, but it's thick and heavy this evening, twinged with the scent of smoke. It smells like there's a fire burning somewhere close. I leave my mountain for a few hours, and I've got trespassers on my property. Go fucking figure. It's not the first time, and I'm sure it won't be the last.

I rush inside and pull up my surveillance cameras, looking to see who's squatting on my land. Sure enough, I've got four on the west ridge. All sitting around a campfire, roasting marshmallows. Looks like a bunch of college students from what I can tell.

Kids will come up here and ignore the signs saying this is private property. Youth these days have no respect for the law. But after I'm done with them, they will.

I grab my shotgun and head outside, taking the old miner's tunnel so they don't hear me coming. I want to put the fear of God in them, so they'll never ignore another sign again. Had they kept going and wandered deeper onto my property, they would've found themselves caught up in one of my traps and could've gotten seriously hurt. Then I'd be having to haul their asses back down to a medic. And they'd probably try to claim a lawsuit on my ass. A headache I don't need in my life.

I move quietly, knowing exactly where to walk so they don't hear me coming. I like the element of surprise. I want to jolt them with fear so they remember this moment for the rest of their lives. A madman came after them with a gun, and they were almost killed. Little do they know I'm loaded with blanks.

"The legend is: the natives would trap their sacrifices. Catch them in nets and then offer them up to the gods on the full moon. That's why it's called Whispered Echoes. Because at night you can supposedly hear the whispers of the ones who lost their lives. Their ghosts still haunt these mountains."

I shake my head. The kid is full of shit. It's called "Whispered Echoes" because the winds get so heavy that it sounds like voices whispering on the ridge and echoing throughout the valley. I don't know where this kid heard that bullshit, but it's probably just his way of scaring the girls so they'll be more inclined to snuggle up for safety tonight.

"So, do we need to be worried, Carter? The natives may still live up here. They may be the ones who put up those signs."

The girl's voice is like a golden melody. Fluttering through the trees like a ray of light. Warm and cozy. Although, it's tinged with fear. She's probably terrified

someone's going to come out of the woods and she's going to become the next sacrifice. Or that a ghost is going to haunt her in her sleep.

Guilt creeps into my good conscience at the thought, and I make the decision not to scare her further. It's probably for the best anyway. If these kids go running off, they might end up hurting themselves on their way back down the mountain. Especially in the dark. Nah, these four aren't going anywhere tonight. Come morning though, I'll make sure they head back down the mountain to the public trail. There's plenty of land for them to camp on that's not private.

"No, Tarryn," the other girl states with a voice that's nowhere near as pretty and is dripping with annoyance. "No one's going to come and rip you from your tent tonight and slit your throat. God, you're so gullible." Even I can hear the eye roll in the girl's voice. But she shouldn't be mocking her friend. It's a natural response to be scared when you're told a scary story.

"It's an old legend," says the guy who I now have locked in my scope. He looks like a pompous little shit. "No one lives up here anymore." More lies. And it's not just me up here in these parts. "The natives moved away." Another lie. The mountain ridge is still home to many.

"But we saw the private property signs. Someone had to put them up, Carter." The angelic voice flutters on the breeze, wrapping its soft tendrils around my nerves. I can only see the back of her head, but I can imagine the fear in her eyes. "I still don't think it was a good idea to come up here. We should've turned around when we saw the first private property sign. This could still be their land, even if they don't live out here anymore."

At least one of them has a lick of sense. Her friends should've listened to her. Come tomorrow, they're going to wish they had.

“Stop being so paranoid, Tarryn. God, it’s getting annoying,” says the smug little prick she called Carter. He’s trying to look rugged and tough with his flannel shirt and his pitiful attempt at growing a beard, but he looks like he could barely hold an axe. The guy has no meat on his bones. And what the fuck is that on his head? Does he have a man bun? Damn. Maybe I’m just too damn old, but you’d never catch me dead with a freaking bun on my head. And let’s just say if there were a real threat up on this mountain, that guy wouldn’t be able to defend himself, let alone those two girls.

Not sure what the other guy looks like. He must’ve gone to bed because there’s a snore drifting out from one of the tents.

“I’m going to turn in,” says the sweet voice. The one with the pretty name: Tarryn . I wish I could see her face, though from the sound of her voice, I know she’s upset. One of my jobs as an investigator was to watch for tells through the surveillance feeds. A tick of a jaw muscle. A twitch of an eye. Different inflections in voices. I bet if I could see her face, I’d see the fake smile tipping down instead of up at the corners of her lips, and I know I’d see it in her eyes. The guy just called her annoying, but he’s one to talk. Everything about him is annoying right down to his knee-high wool socks with Scooby Doo on them.

Tarryn heads into the tent, and all I get to see is a glimpse of her figure. Though, the big, baggy sweatshirt is hiding most of her petite frame. The girl is definitely on the shorter side. A fact that’s bringing out my protective side. A big ol’ grizzly would make a snack out of someone her size. And with those curves, they’d enjoy the feast. So would any hot-blooded male.

When the arrogant jerk rises and starts making his way to the same tent, I let out a low grumble. He whips his head around, his eyes scanning for the animal that just made the sound. I hear her nervous voice from within.

“What was that, you guys?”

Carter does one more scan around the woods and decides it's nothing. If he were smart, which we've already established he's not, he'd grab a flashlight and come and ensure there isn't something—or someone—out here. There could be a mountain lion or a bear...or someone like me. A grumpy recluse with a gun who may be slightly unhinged. Especially when I know he's sleeping in the same tent with the pretty girl, which means he has some kind of claim on her.

Thankfully, my good conscience is in control, but if it weren't, I'd be slitting that tent and snatching that girl away from the idiots she's with. I'd keep her safe.

“It's probably just a raccoon. Nothing for us to worry about. Just stay close to me and you'll be fine.”

He climbs into the tent, and I have to bite back another growl. Now, she's going to snuggle up to the little prick. And what's it to me? She's young enough to be my daughter. They're college kids, which means she's probably not much older than twenty-one, and I'm forty. An old geezer compared to her. There's not an ounce of me that should be jealous over the fact that she's going to be sleeping in the same tent with that guy. And yet, I feel it racing right up my nerves and locking my jaw up.

As soon as the sun rises, I'll be chasing them off my mountain. Breathing the calm back into my life and getting my sanity back on straight. The last thing I need is to be jealous over some young girl. I need to forget the voice that sounds like an angel, forget that delectable little morsel of a body, which is meant to be devoured. Shit. I'm going back inside. My surveillance alarm will ring once they get moving in the morning. Then I'll make sure they get off my mountain and never come back.

5

Tarryn

I start to crawl my way to the door of the tent, but Carter grabs my leg to stop me.

“Morning, babe. Don’t get up just yet. Something rose with the sun this morning.”

I look over my shoulder and see that his cock is standing straight up in his boxers. For the first time since dating him, I’m not turned on by the sight, nor am I pleased that he thinks I want to get frisky with him after the way he treated me last night. I’m annoyed. He was being such a jerk, acting like I’m an idiot. From putting the tent together to prepping dinner, and then after. All night he was treating me like I’m stupid, and he never once defended me when Kelsey chimed in with her snippy little comments.

If I’m honest with myself, I’m not sure how I even feel about him anymore, and I certainly don’t want to have sex with him. In fact, he’s giving me the ick. And the look on his face is kind of creepy.

“After hiking all day, we’re both dirty, Carter.” It’s a lame excuse considering we’ve had sex after a workout at the gym before, but I’m not touching him right now. Or maybe ever again based on the way I’m feeling.

“My dick is always clean, babe. Why don’t you give it a little taste and see for yourself?”

Gross. I'm not going down on him. He was hiking all day yesterday, and I'm sure he was sweating between his legs. Besides, he doesn't deserve it. He can take care of himself with his grimy hands. Or go see if Kelsey will suck him off. I'm sure she'll be more than willing to bow down.

"I didn't sleep last night, Carter." It's not an excuse, it's the truth. Every sound kept me awake and made me nervous. Not to mention all the snoring. All three of them sounded like a choir of sputtering engines, drawing any native, or wild animal right to our location. "I want to get some coffee, take in some fresh air, and enjoy the view before we head back down."

"We're not going back down," he grunts. "We're going farther up."

What? Since when? He told me we would be walking downhill today. There's no way I'm going farther up the mountain. I saw another private property sign when I went off to do my business after dinner, so I know we shouldn't be here. With three signs nailed to trees, I fail to believe it's a prank. Someone went to a lot of trouble to mark their property.

"But this is private land, Carter." For the fiftieth freaking time.

"If anyone was out here, they would've come out and shooed us away last night, but they didn't, did they? We're fine. Private property or not, they're never going to know we were even here. And it's not like we're harming anything. We're taking all our trash with us."

They may not know we were here, but we may get harmed. I'm not really interested in being sacrificed to some moon god by a native and become the next ghost whispering on the wind.

"I still think we should air on the safe side and go back down. I'm sure there are tons

of beautiful spots on a different mountain.” Though, I have no interest in climbing another trail for hours today. The thought actually makes me want to cry. It’s breathtaking out here. Quiet and peaceful, but the backpack—and the people I’m with—definitely detract from the experience. I think this will be my maiden and final voyage. Backpacking is definitely not my jam, and neither is Carter.

“We’re not going down. We’re going up.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not going that way.” I reach for the zipper of the tent and crawl out, finding myself faced with Kelsey’s nasty glare.

“Don’t be stubborn, Tarryn,” Carter calls out, sounding pissed. He’s really not who I thought he was. “You’ll never make it back by yourself. You’ll get lost.” Then he should be a good boyfriend and come with me.

“You’re being such a fucking buzzkill,” says the girl who was supposed to be my friend. She’s proven in the last twenty-four hours that she is not a girls’ girl. Friends don’t try to steal their friends’ boyfriends.

“And you’re being such a bitch.” I’m done with her walking all over me. We’ll see how much she likes a taste of her own medicine. By the offended look on her face, I can tell she doesn’t care for it so much.

“You’re killing the whole vibe, Tarryn,” Carter snaps as he climbs from the tent, defending the one who is not his girlfriend. I think they may be perfect for each other. “This was supposed to be a fun trip, but you’re making it miserable.” I’m making it miserable? I beg to differ. This giant backpack and these two meanies are the ones making it miserable.

“All we need to do is go a different way. That’s all I’m asking.” This mountain range is huge, and I’m sure there are plenty of other spots just as beautiful.

“You said you were up for an adventure,” he argues, still unbending.

“Yeah, but I never said I was up for trespassing on someone’s land. Now, can we pick a different route?”

Or just put an end to this entire trip right now, because I’m done. With all of it. And with him.

“No. We’re going this way. If you want to go back, fine, suit yourself. But the rest of us are going up.” Carter turns and starts packing up the gear. His decision is final, and he’s not even going to consider my opinion. If he thinks I’d want to date him after dismissing me like this, he’s delusional.

His two minions follow suit, both narrowing their eyes on me as they tear down the tents. Kelsey bumps into my arm, looking smug. She’s happy Carter sided with her. I look back down the trail, wondering if I could make it back on my own. But even if I did manage to find my way down, how would I get home? Carter drove, and there’s no way he’ll give me the keys to his truck. And I doubt Uber even exists out here.

Dread sinks my stomach. I have no choice. I turn, reaching for my heavy pack and begin shoving all my stuff inside. I didn’t even get my coffee.

They’re all geared up, the silence still thick between us. Them versus me. They turn to start hiking up the mountain, and I look back down the trail one last time, wishing I’d never come on this trip. I turn and start trudging up after them, already struggling to catch up. Watching my every step so I don’t fall. I don’t need to give them any more reason to be annoyed with me.

“You should’ve listened to her.”

My head snaps up at the sound of the deep voice. There’s a giant of a man blocking

our path, holding a shotgun in his hands. If it weren't for his eyes, I'd think I was staring at bigfoot. The guy has to be at least six and a half feet tall, and his chin is covered in hair. His muscles look like they were carved from stone, like he's straight out of the cavemen era. Maybe he is.

"Like the girl said, this is private property, and you're trespassing on my land. Do you make it a habit of not following authority?"

I freaking told them, but they didn't listen. And now look. Some crazed man is going to murder us. I should've told my dad where I was going. He's not going to know where to look for my body. And by the time he realizes I'm missing, the birds will have eaten my corpse.

"You can't own a mountain." Carter crosses his arms, acting ignorant again. He's the stupid one, going up against a madman with a gun. "It's part of a national forest."

"You aren't very smart, are you, boy?" the beast grits through his teeth, narrowing his rigid brow right on my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. Carter needs to keep his mouth shut. He should be apologizing and turning around to leave. He should be telling the man he'll never do it again, but instead, he's facing off with the guy who is easily twice his size in strength and a foot taller.

"We're sorry," I sputter out.

The giant's head cocks to the side and now I'm caught under his scrutiny. His dark eyes are locked on me for what feels like an eternity. I think my body is shaking. I've never been so terrified in all my life. He looks like he might be certifiably crazy. A really good-looking crazy man.

"Show me the proof that you own this mountain," Carter spouts off again, proving his idiocy.

The giant's eyes slide over to the boy who I'm shocked I was ever attracted to. He's scrawny and arrogant and has a freaking man bun.

"Someone should've taught you some respect, boy. You should turn and thank that girl right there"—his eyes glance in my direction, sending a shiver down my spine—"because of her, I'm going to give your entitled puny ass a five second head start to get off my land. Five...four..."

Carter widens his stance, refusing to budge, and I start to think he should be shot. That may be the only way he learns a lesson.

A loud bang goes off and I scream, nearly jumping five feet in the air. I didn't mean it. But thankfully, Carter isn't hit. He and the others scream and take off running down the mountain, but my shocked feet don't move. When the giant's eyes lock on me again, I finally get them to work. I take off after my friends, but they're already out of view. No one is waiting for me. Some protector Carter is. He just left me to fend for myself, not even giving me a second thought. None of them care what happens to me.

My foot hits a rock and I stumble forward, trying to catch myself, but then my ankle rolls, and I feel something snap. I hit the ground, reaching out to brace the impact, but I still face-plant in the dirt. Shit. This is not good. I think I might have broken my ankle.

"Help!" I yell out. "You guys, I'm hurt!" Ouch. Shoot. It really hurts. "Carter!"

Nothing. They're gone. I can't even hear them in the distance. How could they move that fast? Because none of them were carrying such a giant pack on their backs.

I try to stand, but the second I put any weight on my foot, I go down. I work to get the pack off my back, hoping that will help. It's hard to see through the tears. I try to get

up again, but I still can't. It hurts too much. I start to crawl on hands and knees down the hill, getting nowhere fast, feeling the pain shoot up my leg with every movement.

"You guys, please! I'm really hurt."

Still nothing. The only thing I hear is the sound of my pounding heart, and...the heavy breathing from the beast who's closing in on me. I wipe my eyes, and try one more time to stand, grabbing onto the tree trunk and pulling myself up. But as soon as I put weight down, my foot gives out and I start to fall again. I'm caught before I hit the ground, swept right up into the air. Trapped in two strong arms. The madman has me. He's captured me and now he's carrying me back up the mountain, deeper onto his property. Further away from safety.

"Help! Please! Carter! Kelsey! Jeff! Anyone! Please!"

"They're gone," the man growls. "Your friends left you all alone."

"They're coming back," I sob. Yet, he's walking so fast, his strides so wide that I doubt they'll be able to catch up to us before he hurts me. Where is he taking me? And why did they leave me?

Traeger

They're not coming back. His spineless little ass looked like he wet himself when I shot the blank off at the tree. For being so tough at the tongue, he sure showed his lack of a backbone, didn't he? I should chase him back down the mountain and shoot the entitled jerk in the foot for leaving this girl all by herself. She's hurt. And it looks bad. Though to tell you the truth, she's probably better off without him. Or any of them for that matter. I was listening to the way they spoke to her this morning, and I wanted to come out of my hiding spot and tell them all off.

I probably would have, had that little shit pressed further for a blow job. It brought a big smile to my face when she refused to take care of his needs. Honestly, a girl of her caliber—so fucking pretty she's blinding—deserves better than him. She deserves someone strong and capable. Someone who can keep her safe and has some brains. Someone who would take a bullet for her.

She's the only smart one out of the bunch. More than once she insisted on them going a different way, but none of them would listen. They trekked right onto my property, acting as if they owned the place. Those three have no respect for authority or the law. And they definitely had no fear. Had I truly been a lunatic, I could've shot them for real.

Let's hope the little punk has now learned a lesson. Though I fucking doubt it. Entitlement seemed to be bred deep in his snotty little ass. But I hope this pretty girl with raven eyes and the face of an angel has learned that she deserves better than a

bratty little pipsqueak who leaves her alone in the woods with a man who's carrying a gun. Though, I would never hurt one single hair on her beautiful head.

"Where are you taking me?" She cries. "Please let me go. I'm sorry we trespassed. I tried to tell them to go back, but they didn't listen. Please don't hurt me."

I have no intentions of hurting her, but she's not going anywhere. Not with that banged-up foot. She'd never make it down the mountain on her own. It looks broken. I watched it give out on her every time she tried to put weight on it. And if that's the case, I need to wrap it up and elevate it. Even if it's a bad sprain, she won't be able to walk on the thing for a few days, which means I'll have to give her a lift back to town. Or...she could just stay here for a couple of nights and heal up.

Bad fucking idea, Traeger . One look at the girl and I felt all my blood run south, turning hot in my shaft. I may not aim my gun at her, but something else was locked and loaded, ready to pump a few rounds into that tight little body. And I'm not shootin' blanks.

"Let me go!" Her voice is even thicker with fear as she struggles in my arms, trying to get free, but I tighten my hold to thwart her efforts.

"Quit. You're going to hurt yourself." She's liable to break something else if she doesn't calm down.

I walk into the cave, winding through the old miner's tunnel until I get to the other side. She finally starts to settle, either that, or her fear is locking her up in shock.

"I'm sorry. Please just let me go."

We exit on the other side and I carry her right up my front steps and straight into my cabin, turning the lock to ensure those friends of hers don't come busting into my

place. Trespassing seems to be commonplace for them.

“You shouldn’t have listened to your friends,” I state. “Following the lead of people like that gets you into trouble.” She could’ve been shot or arrested had it been someone else’s property. She could be in danger right now, held prisoner by a monster, and her friends have left her high and dry. They didn’t even come back when they heard her screaming out. It makes me want to hurt the lot of them.

“I know, and I’m sorry. Just please don’t hurt me.”

I place her down on my sofa and crouch in front of her. The air sucks through my teeth on a ragged breath as I get an up-close look at her. Her eyes are like the feathers of a raven. Black at first glance, but in a different light, you see flecks of gold, amber, and a hint of blue. They’re fucking beautiful. And that beauty doesn’t stop there. She has little freckles painted across her nose. Her lips are plump and rosy pink and she doesn’t have a lick of makeup on. She’s akin to a porcelain doll. Fragile. Flawless. Innocent...and way too fucking young for me to be drooling over.

I reach for her ankle, needing to get those thoughts out of my head. She lets out a little whimper as soon as I touch her skin. I’m not sure if it’s from fear or pain, but I loosen my grip on her, giving her foot a closer inspection. It’s already the size of her calf and turning purple from where she banged it on the rock. I definitely think she broke it, which means I need to get it wrapped so she doesn’t do further damage.

“Stay put,” I grunt. It’s a challenge trying to keep the tension from my voice. It’s been a long damn time since I’ve been affected by a woman. And never with this much force. I storm from the room, grabbing the medical supplies I need along with an ice pack. Of course, when I come back into the room, she’s on her hands and knees, crawling toward my front door. I step in front of her path, and she stops. Have to admit, I admire her tenacity. But she needs to save her strength and get that ankle braced.

Her head lifts, and she looks just like a baby doe afraid of a predator. She really is a small little thing. Petite with some curvy hips. But she's way too fucking young. "Where do you think you're going with that ankle?" My voice is locked with the tension that's bearing down on my nerves. "Huh? A bear will get you before you make it halfway down the mountain. Now, why don't you turn your little behind around and crawl back over to the couch so I can bandage up that ankle."

"I want to leave."

"You're not going anywhere." It would be on my damn conscience if anything happened to this girl, and I'm not willing to live with that shit. "Now, crawl on back over there or I'll pick you up and carry your ass over."

There's a glimmer of defiance shimmering right below the surface of her stare, puckering up those plump lips, but her mouth stays closed. She tries to stand and hobble back over to my couch, but she loses her balance and falls right into my arms. "Easy, cowgirl. I got ya."

I swoop her up and carry her back over, tempted to keep her locked on my lap, but then she'll feel how perverted I am. Getting aroused over some young girl. "We need to get this ankle of yours bandaged up so you don't do further damage. Here, take these." I sit her down then hand her two Advil and a glass of water, but she pulls back, shaking her head.

"I'm not taking anything. No way."

She assumes I'm trying to drug her. Again, she's playing it smart, but I need her to take the pain meds or else she's going to be hurting even worse. I put them in my mouth and toss them back, proving they aren't poisoned. As soon as I'm done wrapping her foot, I'll grab the bottle and leave it out on the table so she can see that it's legit.

“Suit yourself, but you’re going to be in some serious pain soon.”

I place the glass of water back on my coffee table and reach for her foot, running my thumb over her bones. She flinches under the pressure, and I know it hurts, but I need to check things out. Feels like a clean break, so that’s good. As long as I can get it bandaged tight and keep her off her foot, it will set proper and she’ll be just fine.

“Who are you?”

My eyes lift and I’m nearly blinded by her looks again. She’s something straight out of heaven. An angel with some killer eyes. And those plump pink lips... Fuck me.

“Name is Traeger,” I grunt, looking back down and reaching for the roll of bandage. The sooner I get it done, the sooner I can get the temptation out of my sight.

“Why do you live all the way out here?”

Because it’s the only place I can breathe. And I don’t have to look over my shoulder and wonder if someone’s going to stab me in the back.

“Because the air is clean, and the views are beautiful.” Though, the view I’ve got right now is more breathtaking than anything I’ve ever seen. “I retired up here three years ago.”

“Retired? But you’re so young. Did you play football?”

Her eyes trail down my frame, carving a path over my muscles and leaving a trail of tingles every place they land. The fire in my gut is burning so hot it’s near its boiling point and already spilling out the end of my dick. I think I’ve been without a woman for far too long. My need is making me crave things that are forbidden. I’m probably not much younger than her father.

“I’m not that young, doll. I’m forty. And no, I only played ball in college.” Then I realized I wanted to do more with my life, so I became a special agent, worked my way up through the system until there was no place to go other than ten feet underground. So instead, I went six thousand feet above. “How old are you?” I dare asking the question.

“I’m twenty-one.” That’s a fucking relief, given the stiff state of my dick. “Thank you for helping me, by the way. I really am sorry for trespassing and imposing on your life.”

She’s not an imposition. A surprising distraction, a gorgeous temptation, but surprisingly not an imposition.

“The only ones who need to be apologizing are the ones who left you out here by yourself. You never leave a man behind. If you were mine, I would’ve carried you down that mountain. That boyfriend of yours isn’t a man.” He’s a little pipsqueak who probably couldn’t even lift her up if he wanted to.

“He’s no longer my boyfriend,” she’s quick to respond, and damn if that doesn’t make my dick pulse. “I can’t believe they left me. Who does that?”

“A kid with no sense and no backbone.” It’s been how long since they took off running, and my surveillance alarms haven’t gone off, which means they aren’t coming back for her.

Good .

“You’re going to need to keep this elevated.” I grab the ottoman and stack up some pillows for her to prop her foot on. “Need anything to eat or drink?”

I have to keep my mind busy or else I might try to act on these inappropriate

thoughts.

“I’m okay. Thank you.”

Yeah, well I need to fucking eat before I bury my head between those little thighs and devour her pussy. I stalk into my kitchen, banging the pans around as I work. I’ve never been so on edge. This young girl is turning me into a madman.

Tarryn

I look over at the door, wondering if I should make a run for it while he's distracted, but how far am I really going to get? Four strides of his giant feet and he'll be able to catch me. And even if I made it out, I'm not sure I could find my way down the mountain. It would be hard enough with two working feet, but I've only got one and the other is seriously killing me right now.

I glance back over at the huge man, watching his muscles as he works. One squeeze of his giant palm around my neck and he could choke me out. But...I'm not getting the sense that he would hurt me. He just bandaged me up when he could've restrained me and had his wicked way with my body. Even still, I need to play it smart. I can't get swept up in his good looks and let myself fall prey to my kidnapper.

What I need is to get ahold of a phone and let my dad know where I am. He'll send a helicopter with a search and rescue team for me. I at least know the name of the trailhead we started on and which direction we walked. I'm sure they'd be able to find me. I doubt there are any other cabins out in the woods.

"Would you mind if I used your phone? I just want to let my dad know I'm okay. When I don't return with my friends, he's going to freak out and send an army for me."

He stops slicing the bread and my focus goes right to the knife, watching as his grip around it tightens, as his knuckles start to turn white.

“Don’t have a phone. Cell tower doesn’t reach all the way up here. As soon as the storm passes, I’ll take you back to town.”

Storm. What storm? And how does he watch that big TV hanging on his wall if he doesn’t get any reception out here?

“But you have electricity. And cable.” I look toward the flat screen hanging above the mantle.

“Solar panels,” he grunts, looking grumpier than before. I should stop questioning him. I’m only making him mad. I need to get into his good graces so he doesn’t want to hurt me. “And that’s got a satellite.” He points the sharp end of the knife at the screen, and I will not be questioning him again.

“You said a storm was coming?”

How am I going to navigate through the woods in the rain with a banged-up foot? I left my pack behind, which means I have no flashlight or compass to guide my way.

“Yes,” he grunts, looking back down at the loaf of bread. I didn’t see a cloud in the sky but maybe these things roll in fast. I’m sure the weather is extreme up here on the mountain. And had we camped out, we would’ve been stuck in it. But instead, I’m trapped inside this strange man’s cabin, unsure of what his intentions are with me. He could be promising to take me back just so I’ll trust him, but his intentions may not be as noble.

I watch him work, keeping my eyes locked on his every move, making sure he doesn’t slip anything into the food he’s making. He’s like a master chef, dicing vegetables, sautéing onions, flipping things in the pan without using a spatula. I’m not sure what he’s making, but the smells coming from the kitchen are heavenly. Definitely better than the freeze-dried meal I had last night.

“What did you do before you retired?” It looks like he was a chef for a Michelin star restaurant.

He tenses up when I speak, and I think he may prefer to work in silence. Maybe I should remain silent so he doesn’t get annoyed with me.

“I worked for the government,” he grunts.

That should be a good sign. Right? Usually, government workers have background checks and have to be honest, hardworking individuals. Though, my dad would love to argue different. He thinks the government steals too much of his money.

“So, what did you do for the government?”

Again, his eyes narrow in as his shoulders stiffen. I never learn, do I?

“You sure do ask a lot of questions,” he grits through his clenched teeth. “I was an agent for internal intelligence.”

“That’s so cool. Did you get to work on top-secret cases?”

“I did. But it wasn’t cool.” His eyes return to the bread. “There are a lot of bad guys out there. I advise you never to trust anyone. Just because they hold some kind of official title doesn’t mean they’re decent human beings.”

Is that his way of telling me he’s a bad guy?

“Are you a decent person?”

His head snaps up, those dark eyes locking me in their intensity. If it weren’t for the stern line of his lips, I’d be swooning. But beyond his rugged beard, dark eyes, and

insane physique, he could be crazy. And I need to remember that. Yet...there's something in his eyes that makes me believe he's good. The way he spoke about protecting me, and how furious he was that my friends left me, it just doesn't seem like he intends on killing me.

"I'm honest. And I've never broken the law, but I'm human. My thoughts aren't always decent. Especially not when I'm staring at a pretty girl."

A shiver runs down my spine, and I suddenly feel flushed. Kelsey would shake her head if she knew I was attracted to this man and feeling any kind of excitement that he might find me pretty.

"What are you thinking about right now?" The question flies out before I can stop my mouth. I really need to learn to keep quiet.

"Gonna have to plead the fifth."

My gut tightens, but not with fear. Butterflies rise out from under the fear and begin to flutter their little wings, excited that his cheeks have just turned the shade of the tomato he's now cutting. It looks like he's blushing. And he can no longer meet my eyes. I find it hard to believe that a bad man would filter his thoughts. Someone with evil intent would probably describe in detail every dirty thought and intent, just to try to scare me.

"Have you always lived alone?"

I wonder if there's ever been a woman in his life. He doesn't have a ring on his finger, so I assume he's not married, plus there isn't a single female touch in this place. It's like a true man-cave. Rugged, manly, but clean and organized. It's cozy and warm and in no way screams "a murderer lives here."

“Yes,” he grunts again. He’s not long-winded, that’s for sure. I’m used to Carter talking my ear off. You ask him a question and he gives you every detail you didn’t need or want, but Traeger seems like the type of guy who only speaks when there’s something important to say.

“Have you ever been in love?”

His head snaps up again and those eyes are even darker now. “Do you always ask so many questions?”

“Only when I’m nervous.” Or trying to learn more about my captor. If he’s capable of love, then it means he has a heart inside that ripped chest.

“You don’t have to be nervous. I meant what I said. I’m not gonna hurt you. You’re safe with me. And no...” He shakes his head. “I have never been in love. I thought I was once or twice, but I quickly realized it was just lust disguised as love, and it faded when true colors were revealed.”

I can definitely relate. Over the last twenty-four hours, Carter’s true colors were revealed, and now I can’t even stand the guy. “I thought I loved Carter, but now I don’t even know how I was ever attracted to him. He’s not even my type.”

His eye cocks up along with his lips and it’s the first hint of amusement I’ve seen from him. “You don’t go for man buns?”

I giggle at his remark. Carter really did look ridiculous with the thing.

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “I think I was trying so hard to avoid dating someone like my dad, that I was looking at things through rose-colored glasses. He was nice, and different from all my exes, and he was all in.” At least, up until this hiking trip he was. But then he seemed all into Kelsey. “All of my previous boyfriends were always

looking for something better.”

“Don’t know how there’s anyone better than you.”

My eyes snap in his direction at his mumbled comment, and another rush of heat warms my insides when I see the way he’s looking at me. He quickly returns his attention to his task, and now I’m intrigued.

“Brody said I had small tits. Jake told me I was a ditz. And Carter basically said I was a pampered princess with no survival skills.” Those are just a few of the things I’ve been told over the last few years. I was also told I was frigid in bed, but I don’t need to share that with him.

“Yeah, well don’t listen to them. Your body is perfect. And you proved your intelligence back there with your friends. As far as being a pampered princess, a girl as beautiful as you should be spoiled. You don’t need to know how to survive out in the wilderness; you just need someone by your side who will protect you. That pipsqueak isn’t good enough for a girl like you, so you’re better off.”

And now those butterflies are trying to fly me right off this mountain. Coming from this strong and dominant man, his perspective makes me feel special. I don’t get the feeling he hands out compliments too often, and he just gave me a whole slew of them whether he realizes it or not.

“What about you? Do you ever get lonely up here?”

He stares at the contents inside the big pot, stirring it with a spoon, around and around. I guess he’s not going to answer my question. Maybe it was too personal.

“Nah, I like my space.” His answer is disappointing, which is a ridiculous reaction for me to have toward my kidnapper. “Women bring drama, and drama is something I

strive to avoid.”

“Well, I’m sorry for disrupting your morning, I can get out of your hair.” I place my foot on the ground and the pain immediately rushes in. Dammit, I don’t know how I’m going to make my way out of here.

He’s suddenly crouched in front of me, checking my foot. “You aren’t going anywhere. And you aren’t a disruption. Surprisingly, I don’t mind having you in my space. Now, how about some soup and a grilled cheese?”

My stomach rumbles on cue and he smirks. It’s the first near crack of a true smile, and it makes him look even more handsome.

Traeger

As soon as she falls asleep, I'm in front of my computer, scouring the police server for a missing person's report on the girl. Sadly, there isn't one. But that works in my favor. It means I get to keep her for a few more days. Or maybe even longer. Shit, Traeger. You can't be thinking like that. You should be driving her back down the mountain first thing in the morning. She's too fucking young. And yet, when I'm talking to her, it doesn't feel like there's a nineteen-year age gap between us. The only part about her that reminds me of our age difference is her ripe little body: so fresh and petite.

Her small tits that sit high and perky on her chest remind me of how they haven't been weighted down by the gravity of old age and stress. Damn, I bet those little babies are sensitive. I bet I could suck on one of her little nipples and make her entire body tingle with need. The little prick who said they were too small has no idea what he's talking about. They're perfect. And so is the rest of her.

I bet that little pussy is as tight as can be. Small lips. Puffed-out clit. Fresh pink skin.

I reach down and grab my dick, trying to squeeze the thought out of my head. But as soon as my fist closes around my shaft, my mind travels further into the gutter, thinking of how I could pin her down with my large frame and have my wicked way. Exploring every inch. Licking over every delicious part. Drive my tongue into her ripe little body and make her come down my chin. I bet she'd be begging for it. The way she was looking at me all afternoon, I bet I could sweet talk my way into those

little panties if I wanted to.

But I'm not going to fucking do that. I'm going to keep my distance because a girl like her deserves better than a grumpy old recluse.

The last bit of my orgasm dies on the thought, and I tuck myself back into my pants. It's time to let the fantasy go and get back to work. I need to find the surveillance footage that Ryker is looking for. Some evidence went missing from the warehouse and he wants to find out exactly what was taken. I work through the system fast, getting him what he needs. When I hear a whimper coming from the other room, my fingers pause on the keyboard. I rise to go check on Tarryn. She finally took some pills with dinner, but they may be wearing off.

I pick up my pace when I hear another whimper. "Traeger, please help." She's calling for me.

"I'm coming, angel."

I rush into the room and find her on the ground, tangled up in the sheet.

"I got you, little one." I remove the sheet from around her legs and scoop her up. "What happened? Did you fall out of bed?" I'm hoping she wasn't trying to make a run for it and got tangled up.

"I needed to use the bathroom, but I got stuck. And my foot hurts so much."

I need to get some more pain meds into her. "Next time, just call for me and I'll get you." I carry her into the bathroom and place her down on her good leg, turning my head away so I can't see her undress. "I won't look. I just want to make sure you're safely seated then I'll leave."

She works to get her panties off, and then lowers herself down, using me for support. I turn and walk out, giving her her privacy. "I'm going to get you some more painkillers and I'll be right back to help you back to bed."

"Thank you," I hear her sweetly say as I close the door. Her soft voice hits me smack dab in the left side of my chest. There's something about this girl that brings out my protective side. I don't want her to feel one ounce of pain.

"You ready for me, baby girl?" I call through the door upon my return.

"Yes."

I turn my head as I enter, trying to be respectful. "Just grab onto me."

She gets herself decent and then I scoop her back up and carry her back to my bed. "Here, take these." I hand her the pills and the water from the nightstand, and as she takes her pills, I get her leg propped up again.

"I'll be right out in the other room. If you need anything, just call for me. I don't want you to get hurt."

"You won't stay with me?"

As soon as I meet her eyes, I'm locked in her clutches. She could ask the world of me, and I think I'd say yes.

"I just wanted to give you space so you felt safe, but if you want me to stay, I'll stay."

She pulls the sheet back from the empty side, making room for me to join her. "I feel safer with you."

The muscle in my chest swells with pride at the fact. I've never felt needed before, and it's a feeling I could grow accustomed to.

I walk around to the other side of the bed and strip out of my jeans and shirt. When I hear a little whimper, I look over to see if her leg is giving her strife, but I think the source of her sound is coming from something else. Her eyes are locked on my bare chest, her little teeth sinking into her lower lip. And my cock lurches at the attention, drawing her stare right between my legs.

This time she lets out a gasp, swallowing hard. I watch the movement, wondering what it would feel like if my cock were down her throat, feeling the constriction as she swallowed my cum. The thought has me growing stiffer, and her eyes grow even larger. Cheeks even pinker.

"If you keep staring at it like that, it's going to think you want something." She looks up and her eyes grow even wider. "Don't worry. I promise I won't cross a line."

I climb into bed, pulling the comforter up over my hard dick before she sees the wet stain forming on the front of my boxers.

"What if...um... What if I wanted you to?" Her quiet little question is asked on quivering lips, and that right there is one of the reasons I won't.

"I'm too old for you, angel." Too old and too bitter. "Someone as pretty and as young deserves better than an old grump like me."

She shakes her head. "Maybe sex would make you less grumpy."

Fuck me. She's offering herself up, practically begging me to fuck her. It probably would make me less grumpy, and if I were a bad man, I'd pin her down and fuck her senseless. Plow into her until she forgets her own name. But...I'm not a bad man.

And I'm not going to do something she'll end up regretting. She may be turned on by the sight of my dick, but once the lust clears, she'll realize she made a mistake.

“Although I'm flattered, angel, and would give my left nut to sink inside your hot little body, I'm going to do what's best for you. Now, lie back so I can tuck you in. You need to get your rest so that foot will heal.” And I need to go jerk myself off again so my balls don't turn as blue as her ankle.

I pull the comforter over her lush body and then turn to get the light. As soon as we're cast in darkness, I run my hands down my face, wondering why the hell I didn't take the bait. The prettiest girl just asked me to have sex with her and I went and said no. Because she's going to go back to her life in a few days and I'm going to stay right up here on my mountaintop . There's no point in muddying up the waters when nothing is going to come of it. Besides, after the day she's had, I don't think she's in her right mind. The adrenaline, the drugs, the confusion are all clouding her good judgement and I refuse to take advantage.

But damn is it a feat to keep my hands to myself. Especially when her warm little body is so close. And smells so good.

Tarryn

My stomach sinks with the rejection. If I had any question as to whether this man was a murderer or a rapist, he just proved that he's neither. He's hard as a rock, yet he refused my offer. Kelsey would be shaking her head at me if she knew I just offered my kidnapper sex, but I've never craved a man or sex so much in my life. Traeger has been kind and helpful, and beyond respectful. Any male would've taken advantage, snuck a peek in the bathroom when I was trying to do my business, but he didn't. He was a true gentleman, which only makes me want him more. But for some reason, he doesn't want me.

He said he'd give his left nut to sink inside my tight body, but he doesn't think it's best for me. How does he know what's best for me?

"I'm a grown woman. I should be able to decide what's best." The comment goes flying out into the darkness, and I instantly regret the desperation that's clear in my voice.

"I'm nineteen years older than you, doll. You don't need to be getting mixed up with someone my age." But the guys my age aren't half as sexy or half as mature. And no one has ever made me feel safe.

"Age is just a number. I know a girl who's dating one of our professors and he's forty-six."

“Yeah, well, he should be ashamed of himself for taking advantage of such a young girl.”

But she’s the one who pursued him. He tried to refuse her, but she wouldn’t let up. And now, they’re engaged to be married.

“But they love each other,” I defend, wondering why I’m still talking. I sound pathetic. I’m practically trying to convince him to sleep with me.

“I can promise you, I’m not lovable. I’m a grumpy bastard set in my ways. I like my routine and my quiet. And I can tell after talking to you, you have a bright future ahead of you. You don’t need to be caught up with a mountain man who spends his days checking bear traps and making jerky.”

“But what if all I want is sex? No strings. No commitment, just sex.”

“It’s never just sex, doll. Sex leads to feelings. And feelings lead to wanting something that can’t happen. In a few days, I’ll take you back, and you’ll forget I ever existed. It’s for the best.”

He’s wrong. I don’t think I’ll ever forget him. He looked out for me when the people who I thought cared about me left me stranded in the woods, wounded and alone.

10

Traeger

Things have been tense between us this morning. Tarryn woke up in a mood, and I'm guessing it's because she didn't get her way last night. I didn't get mine either, but I still stand by my decision. Though my dick thinks I'm a fucking moron. And he's probably right.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" I ask, trying to come up with something to occupy the awkward silence that has fallen between us. Yesterday, she was an open book, talking to me for hours, telling me all about her life. How she lost her mom when she was young and what it was like growing up with her dad. She impressed me with everything she's accomplished and everything she's striving for. But now, she's barely said two words.

"No, thank you. Do you mind if I take a bath?"

"Sure, I'll go run one for you."

I fill the tub with hot water and bubbles then turn to go get her, but I don't have to go far. She's managed to crawl her way to me. One look at her on her hands and knees and I'm flooded with dirty thoughts.

"It's all set for you. How about you get undressed and wrap this towel around you, then I'll put you into the tub?"

She stares at the towel in my hand but doesn't take it. The next thing I know, she's stripping out of her clothes. I quickly turn away, trying to be a gentleman, but I got a glimpse of her pink bra, and damn was it sexy.

"I'm ready," she states, sounding almost pissed. I should've fucked her so she wouldn't be so grumpy.

I hold out the towel, covering her front before I scoop her off the ground and place her into the tub. "Keep your foot on the edge," I grunt. "It needs to stay dry." I walk to the shower and grab the soap and shampoo. "Here." I place them on the side of the tub.

"Can you help me wash my back before you leave?"

I should tell her no. My restraint is already at a negative knowing she's a foot away from me and naked as can be, but in the position she's in, she's not going to be able to reach it on her own.

"Lean forward," I bark, pumping a few squirts of the body wash into my palms. If I were a good man, I'd grab a washcloth, but my decency is fading fast. And as soon as I touch her slick skin, it fades faster. I run my hands over her smooth back, rubbing the soap all around. Top all the way to the bottom, stopping right above her round, tempting backside. My fingertips itching to go lower.

"God, that feels so good," she practically moans, and I run my thumbs back up her spine into safe territory before I cross a line. I massage across her skin, wanting to remove the tension from her muscles and her tight shoulders. She drops her head back, relaxing into my touch, and I fight not to run my hands down her chest. I'd give anything to slip my soapy fingers over her breasts and give them a thorough cleaning.

"I'll let you finish up," I say, grabbing the towel to dry my hands off. I need to get out

of this steamy room before I do something I shouldn't. I may be a good man, but even I have limits on my willpower. "Let me know when you're done, and I'll come back in to get you. I'll leave a robe for you to slip on."

I go to stand but am stopped by her sweet voice.

"Can you wash the rest of me?"

Is she trying to kill me? The girl is bound and determined to weaken my defenses and get me to succumb to these forbidden desires. She doesn't know what she's asking for. One touch...one fucking taste...and I'll become a fiend. I already feel the madness boiling through my veins and pricking along my sanity. If she keeps begging, I'm going to turn into a bad man.

"Please."

Her teeth sink down into her lip and I see the seduction burning like white hot flames in her eyes. When her back arches and her little tits appear above the surface of the bubbles, the last of my decency snaps. Her nipples are dusty rose and as tight as can be, begging to be played with. I will never understand how any male could think they're anything less than perfect.

I reach over and pump my hands full of soap, getting them nice and lathered. She's already squirming in the tub, creating little waves that are parting the bubbles and giving me glimpses of her pretty little pussy. Her need is in the driver's seat, and it's time for me to take the wheel.

I run my hands along her shoulders, massaging the soap into her skin. "I was trying to behave." I slide my fingers lower, pressing along her collarbone, slowly inching my way down to her pretty little tits. "I was trying to be good and do right by you. But my naughty girl won't take no for an answer. She wants these big hands touching

parts they have no business touching.”

I slide right over her two perky mounds and groan as I pinch her tight little peaks between the tips of my fingers. She bows back on a moan, arching right up into my touch. I knew these little babies would be sensitive. There’s a tidal wave of need ripping right through her, going straight to her swollen cunt. I stare between her spread legs, seeing her little button magnified by the water. It’s already poking out from its hiding place. Begging for some attention of its own.

“You like that, pretty girl?” She nods as I pluck the sensations right from her young body. I should be ashamed of myself, but there isn’t a single part of me that is regretting one moment of this. She’s something special.

“Such a dirty little girl, aren’t you? But not to worry, angel, I’m gonna get you nice and clean.” I rub my soapy thumbs around her pebbled nipples, squeezing each little breast within my grip. She’s whimpering like a cat in heat, her hands clutched on the sides of the tub, her hips rocking under the water as if the waves will give her the friction she needs. I give her peaks another tight pinch, and she cries out on a gasp.

“Traeger.”

“I know,” I groan. “I’m gonna make it feel better.”

I begin my descent, slipping my hand under the water, running along her soft little abdomen. She’s the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen. Definitely too perfect for the likes of me.

She bucks against me when I run my fingers between her legs. “Is this it? Is this the spot that needs to be washed?” I rub over her swollen clit, dying to have it between my lips. I’d suck the orgasm right out of her. Drill her with pleasure until her body quakes.

“Traeger.” Her mouth presses against the side of my arm, kissing over my skin as I play with her little button. With every stroke of her tongue, another drop of cum seeps from the end of my dick. I grip the back of her hair and pull her head back, needing her to give me a real kiss.

“Give me those sweet lips, angel.”

I lower my head, and she raises up, kissing me so sweetly I feel it tingle all the way down to my toes. There’s something so innocent and angelic about this girl. I draw her tongue into my mouth and suck on it. She’s squirming against my hand, her little body writhing in her need. I rub my fingers through her folds and press against her entrance. Sliding in ever so slowly. Her hips thrust forward and she sucks me into her tight heat, and I’m about to lose my sanity. Never felt anything so fucking good.

“This little cunt needs to give me what I want,” I pant against her lips, pumping in and out faster. “You need to be a good girl for me and come, angel.”

My command has her bucking up, her clit grinding against my palm as she works to find her release. Her inner walls start to contract around my fingers and my cock pulses between my legs, imagining her clenching around my shaft. I squeeze her nipple as she rides through the storm. Her sweet sounds echoing throughout the room.

“All clean,” I whisper against her cheek as she struggles to catch her breath. Her eyes flutter open and there’s something in the look she’s giving me that has my pulse racing. She’s looking at me like I’m a king. Like I’m a martyr. But a decent man wouldn’t have touched a girl nearly half his age.

“I like my bath-time.” She smirks, and I shake my head on a chuckle.

“Yeah, well, it’s time to get you out before you turn into a prune.”

I reach in and scoop her giggling ass up. After all these years of silence, living with the anger, I'm smiling again. This little ray of sunshine has barged into my life and parted the dark clouds. She was wrong. I don't need sex to make me less grumpy, I just need her.

Tarryn

The loud clap of thunder jolts me right from my sleep. After another mind-blowing orgasm, I couldn't keep my eyes open. I sit up and the credits are playing on the screen. I slept through the entire movie.

"Traeger," I call out, my voice sounding groggy with sleep. He doesn't answer so I try again, this time clearing my throat. "Traeger!" But there still isn't a peep coming from anywhere in the cabin.

He usually comes rushing in when I call for him, but I don't think he's in the house. I work to stand, hobbling over to the window to see if he's outside sitting on the front porch. It's raining so hard I can barely see through the thick downpour, but no one is out there in this mess. Another clap of thunder has me jumping back and clinging to the wall for support. If the electricity goes out, I'm not sure how I'll see.

"Traeger." I start to hobble my way down the hall to see if he's in the bedroom. Right as I call for him again, the sound of the front door opening comes from behind me.

"What were you doing out there?" I turn. He's soaked, a downpour hitting the floor from his poncho.

I limp my way over to him as he works to get the wet thing off and hang it up by the door.

“Went down to grab your pack for you.” He takes the big thing off his back and places it on the ground. “Figured you’d want to get out of my huge clothes.” His eyes travel over the big flannel he let me borrow.

I don’t want to change. I love having his smell wrapped around me, and I love the dark look in his eyes as he stares at my bare legs.

“You went out in this horrible rain to get my clothes?” It’s awful out there. He’s lucky he didn’t get struck by lightning.

“I was worried it’d get washed away and we’d never find it. Plus, I didn’t want your belongings to get ruined.”

Wow. I’ve never met anyone so kind or considerate before. Since I’ve gotten here, he’s bent over backwards to take care of me, making sure I’m not in pain, making me the most delicious meals, giving me the most incredible pleasure and not demanding anything in return, and now this. Traipsing through a violent storm to make sure my things didn’t get ruined.

“You really didn’t have to do that, but thank you, Traeger.”

I reach for his shoulders and wrap my arms around his neck, wanting to thank him properly.

“Careful. I’m gonna get you all wet, doll.”

“I already am,” I purr, trailing my fingers down his chest. I work the top button of his flannel out from its little hole then slowly slide down to the next one, unfastening one at a time. “We need to get you out of these soaked clothes.”

His hands grip my waist, jerking me forward, and his mouth hovers a mere inch from

mine. There's a storm as wild as the one outside brewing in his eyes and it thunders all the way down my spine. "I've been trying to behave, Tarryn. Trying to be a good man, but there's only so much I can take."

"Then just give me what I want." I unfasten the final button then trail my fingers up along his hard stomach, running through his soft hair. His head dips lower and I close the distance, brushing my lips against his mouth, teasing him with the wisp of my tongue before I pull back and start kissing my way down his ripple of abs. I don't know how he could think he's old when he's built like a warrior. Strong and so incredibly sexy. He's in better shape than most of the guys I'm in school with. If it weren't for the salt and pepper mixed throughout his beard, I would never have guessed his age.

"We need to get you out of these pants, too." I drop down to my knees coming face to face with his massive girth. It's pressing hard against the front of his jeans. The cold water doing nothing to keep it down.

"Let me help you, angel." He works to unfasten his belt, and my tongue runs across my lower lip, watching with rapt attention as he tugs them down his thick, hairy thighs. Traeger is all man. Solid. Strong. And seriously massive. Carter was so thin and scrawny in comparison. I could always feel his bones when we'd make love, and it almost made me self-conscious about myself. I definitely had more meat on my bones than he did. But Traeger makes me feel petite and delicate.

He steps out of his jeans, and I can already see his cock poking through the slit of his boxers. I lean in and press my lips right against his smooth skin, running along his shaft.

"Always such an eager little thing," he groans above me. His head drops back on his shoulders, eyes closed tight as I kiss my way over him. I get the impression he hasn't been with a woman in a really long time. Every touch causes him to tremble. Every

kiss makes him groan. It's like he's already close to his release and I haven't even sucked him between my cheeks yet.

“Quit teasing and wrap those pretty little lips around me.”

“I think the grumpy man needs to learn some patience,” I purr as he shrugs his boxers down and steps out of them. I've never seen a cock so perfect. Carter wasn't nearly as stacked in the dick department. Not by a long shot. Traeger is long and thick, and his crown is perfectly round.

He holds it up to my mouth, running his soft cap across my lips. I tease my tongue out wanting a taste, licking up the drips of cum that are already leaking from the end. His hips buck and his cock parts the seam of my mouth, pushing its way forward, sliding right in. And I eagerly open wide, trying to swallow as much as I can. He starts pumping himself in. Fucking me slow and steady. Low rumbles coming from his chest.

“Never felt anything so good. I'm about to spew my load, baby girl.”

I suction harder, working him faster. In and out. Trying to take him deeper. Swallowing his pleasure as he fucks the back of my throat. A wild roar tears from his chest, and I feel his cum start to run down the back of my throat. I swallow down every drop, hungry for all he has to feed me. When he pulls himself from my lips, I almost whimper at the loss. Sucking on him is soothing; it's like drinking from a bottle.

“Goddamn,” he grunts, sliding from my lips. I look up as I wipe my mouth, and the way he's looking at me makes my chest pound. It feels like there's something between us. A connection deeper than lust forming. At least...I know there is for me. I'm falling for him. And these feelings are already stronger than anything I felt with Carter. I'm starting to realize that it doesn't take time to fall in love, it just takes the

right person. And the man above me is starting to feel like he could be my person.

12

Traeger

I look down into her pretty eyes and it's there, a feeling stirring inside my chest. She's made an impression and it's drilling deeper by the second.

"You're truly something." I run my thumb across her blushed cheek, memorizing every little fleck across her skin. "Baby, you keep looking at me like that and I'm not gonna want to take you home." The thought of taking her back already puts me on edge. She stormed into my life like a flash flood, and now I'm drowning in feelings I don't know what to do with. Feelings that should be forbidden given our age difference.

She nuzzles into my palm, marking me further with her sweetness. "I don't want you to take me home. I like my bath time and my feedings too much."

So do I. I reach down and pick her up, wrapping her legs around my waist. It's time for my feeding now, and I can tell she wants it. Her little panties are soaked through and marking my abs with her sweet essence. I walk her into the bedroom and lay her down. Admiring the view of her flushed cheeks and creamy bare thighs.

My hand slides up her soft skin, moving the shirt out of my way so I can see what's hiding between her legs. Her little cotton underwear is soaked through, outlining just how hungry her pussy is for sex. I move in and inhale deep, committing her scent to memory. God, she smells good. I lick across the cotton, and groan as her sweet taste hits my tongue. She tastes like honey tinged with fresh innocence. Young and ripe.

“So good,” I grunt, going in for another long slow swipe up her center, flicking right over her swollen nub, which is molded to her panties. She bucks against me. Such a sensitive little thing.

I reach for her waistband and slide them right down her thighs. The moment I’m face to face with her pretty cunt, the restraint is snapped. I dive in, kissing my way through her folds, licking up all her sweet stickiness. I never knew how much I would crave a woman, but I’ve never been so starved.

She squirms against my mouth, eagerly trying to get more, so I drive my tongue straight into her heat, pumping into her tight little body.

“Traeger.” Her hand grips onto my hair, tugging me closer. She rocks her little hips to meet my tongue. Her clit rubbing against my mouth, grinding down harder as she starts to build to her release. This girl is something straight out of my fantasies. She’s so hungry for it that it doesn’t take much to get her off.

I slide out of her center and lick my way up to her clit. It’s time to give this little body what it needs. As soon as my lips suction around her swollen button, she screams. Her entire body bows off the bed. Her pussy squirting all over my sheets. I suck harder, and she goes right over the edge, giving me the most incredible gift.

Her body spasms against my mouth and I hold on, riding out her storm, making sure she doesn’t miss a beat of her pleasure. The spot she’s left on the bed isn’t the only wet stain made. My cock is making its own mess, spewing another load as I rub against the sheets. I feel like I’m a damn teenager getting his first nut. I’m losing control of myself with this girl and it’s a damn good feeling. One I could grow addicted to.

Everything about her is enticing. Her sweet voice. Her pretty face. Her smile. It’s all like one heady drug, and I’m quickly becoming consumed by it.

“God, you’re incredible,” she gasps, trying to catch her breath. I think she’s the incredible one. “A girl could get used to this treatment.”

I tuck her in closer, wrapping her in my huge frame. A guy could get used to it too. But...our time together has an expiration date, and it’s coming up quick. Her spring break is only a week, then it’s back to reality.

“Yeah, well don’t go getting too attached, doll. As soon as the rain clears, I’m gonna have to take you home. You’ve got classes to finish up, and a graduation to attend.”

As soon as I mention it, her entire body deflates in my arms, but it’s a foolish notion to think we can be together. She told me she wants to become a businesswoman. And there ain’t no business all the way up here on this mountaintop. Not unless she works remotely from behind a computer screen. I shouldn’t even be giving it thought. That girl doesn’t need to be strapped down to an old geezer like me. She deserves to go live her life and have fun.

13

Tarryn

When I see the blue sky, my stomach sinks. It means Traeger's going to take me home. The last six days have been the best of my life. And call me crazy if you want, but I've fallen in love with the big grump. Though, he hasn't been grumpy lately. In fact, he's been chatty and fun, and so very attentive. He's shown me exactly how I deserve to be treated. And I don't want this to end.

"Rain stopped," he says, coming up behind me. It sounds like the grumpiness is back in his voice. "Guess, it's time to take you home."

"Wow." I turn, feeling my stomach sink further. "I didn't realize you wanted me gone that bad." It's like he can't get rid of me fast enough. And here I thought there was something building between us.

Kelsey would be shaking her head at me, thinking I'm the most naive person on the planet for believing this man could fall in love with me.

"It's not about what I want, doll. You've got classes and a life to get back to, and I've got shit that needs to get done. It's time for us to quit messing around and get back to reality."

And there goes that future I was imagining. I pictured it perfectly. Me rocking our baby on the front porch while he's out chopping wood. He'd come in for a break and kiss my forehead, telling me he's the luckiest man in the world.

“I guess I’ll go pack now.” I turn as a tear slips down my face, hoping he didn’t see it fall.

“It’s for the best, angel.” His gruff voice hits my back. “It was never going to work between us.”

But it could’ve if he wanted it to. He just doesn’t.

“Once you’re back in your routine, doll, you’ll realize you’re better off. And I promise you’ll forget all about me.”

He’s wrong. But there’s no sense in arguing. I’m not going to beg the man to love me.

14

Traeger

It's for the best. I know it is. She's young and deserves to go and have all those life experiences. Be free to live and go out with her friends, chase her career dreams. She doesn't need to be locked up in a cabin with me. But the thought of letting her go is nearly suffocating. And the closer we get to her campus, the harder it is to breathe.

She hasn't said a word since we got in the car. And don't think I missed the pained look in her eyes or the tear that slipped free. It nearly fucking broke me, but I know I'm doing what's right for her. As soon as she's back in her routine, she'll realize it was just a spring break fling. Some seriously hot fucking fun with an older man. Something she can check off her bucket list.

She'll find herself surrounded by all those guys her age and realize that what she felt for me was nothing more than lust. Me, on the other hand, I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do. It wasn't just lust for me. It was fucking everything. I fell in love with the girl. Everything about her made me feel lighter, happier. For the first time since I can recall or maybe ever, I wasn't mentally harping on the past, or reeling in my bitterness towards the broken system. I was waking up with a smile on my face and a purpose to my day: to take care of my angel.

Now, what the fuck am I supposed to do? How do I go back to the silence? How do I go back to the empty house and an empty bed? She made it feel like home. She brought this calming energy with her, and I've never slept so well. I don't know how I'm supposed to go back to the darkness, the loneliness, the monotony. But I fucking

have to. It would be selfish of me to keep her, but damn if I haven't given it a lot of thought. Wavered on my stance a few times. Nearly turned the car around about a dozen. But it's wrong to steal her future away from her.

"This is it." Her sad little voice nearly rips my heart in two as she points to her apartment building. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt this girl. I probably shouldn't have let things get so far between us, but it's really fucking hard to regret the best moments of my life. I'm just glad I didn't make love to her, because I don't think I'd be able to let her go if I had.

Before I even get the truck shut off, she's climbing out.

"Here, let me get that for you, doll." I jump down and rush around to grab her pack, but she doesn't hand it to me.

"I've got it."

She won't even look at me.

"Please, babe. Just give me this one last moment."

Her eyes look up and the tears pooling in them nearly slice me open. "You can have as many moments as you want. It doesn't have to be goodbye, Traeger."

"Yeah, it does." I grab her pack. "You've got a life to go live. You don't need to be wrapped up with some old, retired guy who thinks watching the sun set is a fun way to spend a Friday night."

"I love those sunsets. Being with you is fun no matter what we're doing."

"Come on, angel. Let's get you inside." Before I take you back up the mountain with

me. “Don’t worry,” I tell her as she opens her door. “In a few weeks you’ll forget all about me.”

“I doubt I’ll forget the one and only man I’ve ever been in love with.” The air gets sucked right out of my lungs. She takes the pack from me and puts it on her table. “Thanks for taking care of me and bringing me back. Be safe up there.”

Fuck. How the hell am I supposed to walk out that door? By putting one foot in front of the other. You’re doing the right thing, even if it hurts like hell.

“Bye, doll. You take that ankle of yours to a doctor and have it looked at. We want to make sure it’s set right.”

She’s no longer able to look me in the eyes. I pull her in for one last hug, feeling like my soul is being ripped from my body. If she were thirty-plus years old, having lived her life, a woman ready to settle down and start a family, I would’ve asked her to marry me. But she’s only just emerged from her cocoon and needs to go fly.

“Take care, baby.” I release her shuddering frame and storm from her apartment, shutting the door before I say the words I shouldn’t. I love you isn’t what she needs to hear to get over me. She needs a clean break and a chance to heal. And I...need go figure out how to breathe again. But as I wind back up the mountain, getting farther away from my girl, it just gets harder. The air gets thicker, and the loneliness closes in.

15

Tarryn

The sound of the door opening has my heart leaping inside my chest, hoping Traeger realized he made a mistake. I quickly wipe the tears from my eyes, gathering myself before I walk out of my room.

Disappointment settles right into my gut when I see my roommate and...my ex-boyfriend. They're too busy making out to realize I've entered the room, and here I thought they'd be worried sick about me. I thought they'd be down at the police station, demanding a search party, or hiking up the mountain in search for me. But nope, they're not even thinking about me. They're too busy trying to tear each other's clothes off.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised." I cross my arms, watching as the two startle apart. Carter turns and his eyes start to creep up to that receding hairline. I never noticed it until now. It's probably why he keeps his hair long—to hide the fact. I really don't know what I ever saw in him. Looks or personality.

"It's not what you think." He swallows hard, shoving Kelsey away. "I... We just. God, I'm so relieved you're okay, baby."

I jerk away from him as he tries to reach for me. I don't want his hands on me.

"Don't, Carter. I don't want you anywhere near me."

“Don’t be like that, Tarryn. We’ve been worried sick about you. What you just saw was us seeking comfort in one another. It’s been really hard this last week. We weren’t sure we’d ever see you again.”

“So instead of going out and searching for me, you decided to make out? Makes perfect sense.” I roll my eyes. He’s a moron if he really believes I’m buying this shit.

“We filed a missing person’s report,” he quickly defends. “The cops were supposed to find you.”

No cops ever came knocking on Traeger’s door, so I wonder if that’s a lie too.

“And you didn’t think to take the police back up the trail and look for me?”

One day of searching and they would’ve found the cabin. It’s not like we were that far away from where they last saw me. Another tenth of a mile and they would’ve seen the smoke from the chimney and known exactly where to look.

“The police never called us back,” Kelsey states as if that’s an excuse.

“And in the meantime, you both decided to fuck. I see.” Makes perfect sense. “You know...” I turn toward Carter. “Even if I hated you both, I still would’ve been up there day and night, searching until I found you. I wouldn’t have stopped until I knew you were safe. It just goes to show the difference between someone who’s decent and someone who’s an asshole. You two are actually perfect for each other.”

“We were letting the police do their job,” Carter argues his pathetic point again, sounding pissed. “We didn’t want to interfere and get in their way. Where were you anyway?”

“I hurt myself. And the man whose land you trespassed on, helped me. He took me

in, bandaged up my broken ankle, and then..." He made me feel special. He spoiled me day and night and took care of me. "He brought me back as soon as the storm cleared. He didn't leave me in the woods like you all did."

"We thought you were behind us," Kelsey makes another piss-poor attempt at defending her actions. "If you hadn't been in those stupid sneakers, you wouldn't have hurt yourself." And here we go playing the blame game again. I'm done. There's no point in arguing with them anymore. It's like circling a clogged drain. They're never going to see the error in their ways. It's truly sad how ignorant they are to common decency.

"You can blame it on whatever you want, Kelsey. But you never leave a man stranded. You guys are jerks, and I want you to leave."

"But I live here." Kelsey cocks her chin. "And he's my guest, so he's welcome too."

I step right up to her, no longer intimidated by her bitchiness. Since living with Traeger, I gained a backbone, apparently. "Not anymore you don't. This is my apartment. My dad is the one who pays the rent and allowed you to live here rent free, but his generosity has ended. So you can take your freeloading ass and leave." For all the time she made fun of me for being spoiled, she certainly didn't mind the perks. But those perks only come with a friendship, and she is no longer my friend.

She looks shocked, but she had to have seen this coming. Did she really think I was going to let her live in my place after how rude she was and after she decided to fuck my boyfriend? She's the idiot now.

"Where am I supposed to live?"

"I don't know." I shrug. "With tiny dick." I look toward Carter. It makes no difference to me where she lives, but it's not going to be here. "I'm going to have the

locks changed tomorrow, so make sure you come and get your things before three.”

She looks like she wants to say something, but what can she really say at this point? And even if she apologized, I have no use for it. I’m done. With both of them.

I turn and walk into my room, picking up my phone to call my dad. I need to get him to have the locks changed. And after everything I’ve been through, I could use some comfort.

“Hi, sweetheart.”

“Hi, Dad. How are you?”

“Hey, listen, Jules and I are about to eat dinner. Is it okay if we talk later? Maybe in a day or two?”

I haven’t spoken to him in almost two weeks. He has no idea I broke my ankle or that I’ve been up in the mountains for the last week, but it doesn’t seem like he cares. He’s busy with his young girlfriend. She’s become his priority over the last six months. Although, by now I should be used to it. Before her, there was another, and another. For as far back as I can remember, women have been coming in and out of my life.

“Oh, before you go, I just wanted to make sure you get two tickets for the graduation. Jules wants to come with me.”

Great. He wants to bring his twenty-three-year-old girlfriend to my graduation. This day keeps getting better and better.

“Okay, Dad.” I wish I’d never called him. Now, I’m even more depressed.

“Great. We’ll talk later. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

And once again, I’m alone with my pain and misery. Realizing that everyone I cared about just disappointed me in the last fifteen minutes.

16

Traeger

I feel like I want to tear the walls down. I'm going crazy. I can't even stand to be in my own house anymore.

My phone rings and I want to throw it across the room.

"What?" I bark into the line.

"Fuck, man. You okay? You sound grumpier than usual."

He has no idea. I can't sleep, I can barely eat, and my chest feels like there's a gaping hole in it. God, I miss her so fucking much.

"What do you need, Ryker?" I barely grit the question through my teeth.

"Talk to me, man. What's going on?"

I need to calm my ass down and not take my shit out on people who don't deserve it.

"I met someone," I sigh. "But we come from two separate worlds, so it didn't work out. The girl got to me pretty hard though and I'm struggling."

"Shit. I never thought Mr. Recluse would have it in him to fall in love. I thought you'd die a lonely bastard."

I'm going to now. And with the pain in my chest, I may be going to an early grave.

"So, how come it won't work out. Is she a city girl?"

No. Tarryn said she hated the hustle and bustle of the city. She told me it would be a dream of hers to work from home so she wouldn't have to be around people or deal with the commute.

"Nah. That's not the problem. She's..." Fuck. I can barely say it. "She's twenty-one. It's our age that's the problem."

He lets out a low whistle. "You? Robbing the cradle? Never thought I'd see the day. But why are you letting age stand in your way? If it's right, it's right."

I'd love to hear her father's opinion on the matter, because I doubt he'll feel comfortable with her dating someone almost as old as him.

"You know that girl from the restaurant?" he asks.

"The one you said was the daughter of the woman you were seeing?" I definitely recall the tension between them, but she was giving him the brush-off hardcore.

"I'm not seeing her mom. That was a drunken mistake. It's the daughter who I've fallen in love with, and there's no way age is going to stop how I feel." And here I thought I was robbing the cradle. "Life's too damn short to care what others think, Traeger. If you two love each other, you shouldn't let age stand in your way."

But it's not just age, it's life. And Tarryn's barely started living hers.

"Guys their age," he continues, "don't know what the fuck they're doing. They aren't cut out to protect them or take care of them. It takes a mature man—someone wise

and strong to know how the fuck to navigate a relationship. And boys these days aren't built the same. They need us, Traeger. She needs you."

His point is valid. Carter just left her alone to fend for herself. And he never once came looking for her. Tarryn needs someone who can protect her and keep her safe. Someone who can provide for her. And fulfill all her needs. She deserves to be spoiled, pampered, and given the world.

"If I were you, I'd think long and hard about that decision. Love doesn't come around often, and you need to seize the day. I'd burn the world down for my Rowan. No one and nothing would stand in my way."

He's right. I've been thinking about this all wrong. I've been thinking that she had to make a choice between her life or me, but she doesn't. I can move. As much I hate the thought of living back in the city again, I could do it. I could get a place, she could chase her dreams, have her friends, her career, and then have me. I could be there to make sure she's safe, to make sure she has everything she needs. Because for as much as I hate the idea of living amongst the crowds and the crookedness, I hate the idea of not having her more. And if I even stop to think about her finding someone else, of letting another man touch her sweet body, I want to burn the world down.

"You still there, Traeger?"

"I've gotta run, man."

I need to go hatch a plan to get my girl.

17

Tarryn

Graduation caps go flying up in the air, and I realize it's over. There are kids smiling and cheering all around me and I can't even crack a smile. I've been on the verge of tears all day. I was barely able to disguise my swollen eyes with makeup. I've been crying for days. It's a wonder that I was able to finish up my classes. But honestly, they were the only mental reprieve I had. They gave me a few hours of distraction from the depression I've sunk into.

It feels like it's never going to stop. This aching pain. The homesick feeling that churns in my stomach from the second I wake up. And I can barely sleep. I wake up searching for Traeger, and as soon as reality sets in, I'm crying again. It's truly miserable.

"Hello! Are you going to get up and go? Our line is moving."

It's time to leave now. I rise from my chair and follow the person in front of me, putting one foot in front of the other, staring at the ground so I don't trip as I hobble along in my boot. It's time to go meet up with my dad and his girlfriend. I didn't get to see him beforehand because he was running late. Apparently, Jules needed some extra time to get ready. In other words, he was too busy fucking her to give a fuck about being on time for his daughter's graduation.

He never called me back, by the way. He sent me a text making sure I got the extra ticket for her and that's it. I can't really blame him though. I understand how

consuming love can be. I understand the mental obsession, and the need to spend every waking moment with that person. If Traeger were here, I probably wouldn't even care whether my dad was or not. I wonder what he's doing right now? He's probably out checking his traps or building the addition to his cabin.

We exit the auditorium, and I find myself lost in the sea of people, trying to hobble my way through the crowd but getting knocked in every direction. I turn toward the bathroom, wanting a minute to clear my emotions before I face my dad, but I find my path blocked by a big man in a suit. I nearly run right into his chest, apologizing as I stumble back.

"Where you running to, doll?"

My heart nearly explodes in my chest at the sound of that deep rugged voice. It's him. He's here. Traeger came.

I draw my eyes up slowly and my vision blurs even more. He looks different. His beard is gone. But it's definitely him. His strong cheekbones. The little crow's-feet etched around the rim of his eyes. Though, never before have I seen the look he's giving me now. It makes me lose my balance and sway forward. He catches me just like he always does, keeping me steady, giving me strength.

"Easy, cowgirl. I got you."

"What are you doing here, Traeger?"

"Came to see my girl graduate. Couldn't miss her big day."

The tears start slipping down, and he grips my cheeks, swiping them away with his big thumbs. "Don't cry, baby. It kills me to see you sad."

“I don’t want you to go, Traeger.”

“Not going anywhere.” He shakes his head. “Sorry, doll. I tried to let you go, but I just can’t do it. You’re stuck with me now. For as long as this old heart keeps kicking.”

My knees grow weaker, and I cling to his shoulders. My heart is nearly kicking out of my chest now. “I’ve missed you so much, Traeger. It felt like I couldn’t breathe these last three weeks.”

“Same, babe, which is why I’ve decided to move to the city so I can be close to you.”

“Move to the city? No. It’s awful here. I want to move to the cabin. It’s suffocating and loud here, and people are so rude.” I never realized how self-absorbed people are. But everywhere I go, people are snippy and unfriendly. “Up on your mountain, it’s so peaceful and calm, and the views are amazing. I’ve missed it so much. But not as much as I’ve missed you. It’s been the most miserable three weeks of my life.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I thought I was doing right by you. I wanted you to be young and experience everything. But then I got to thinking about you experiencing other men, and I wanted to burn the world down. I thought about kidnapping you in your sleep, hauling you back to my cabin, and locking you under me forever.”

Mmm... I get tingly just thinking about. “Then why didn’t you?” I’d be more than willing to be his captive for the rest of my life.

“I’m here, aren’t I? And I don’t plan on leaving without you.”

I lean up onto my toes, brushing my lips across his, feeling his soft warm skin settling the ache that’s been living inside my chest. Finally, it feels like I can breathe again. The paralyzing pain is gone, and I’ve never felt such joy. “I love you, Traeger.”

“I love you more, baby.”

He parts my lips with his tongue and kisses me senseless. The noise fades around us and all I can hear is my beating heart. My entire body is engulfed in heat and I need him. I let out a little whimper, and he pulls back, staring into my eyes.

“Come, doll. Its time to take care of my girl.” He grabs my waist and starts leading me through the crowd. He’s a man on a mission, and I can barely think past the throbbing pain that’s pulsing between my legs.

“Tarryn! Congratulations, sweetheart.” I look up, nearly grunting my frustration when I see my dad. His timing is terrible.

“Hi, Dad. Thanks.” The words come out twinged with annoyance. “Hi, Jules.” I look to the one, clinging to his side. The girl who’s nearly my age. But instead of being irritated with her, I’m happy. “I want you two to meet my special someone. Dad, Jules, this is Traeger. Traeger, this is my dad and his girlfriend Jules.”

“Fiancée!” she corrects, practically shouting as she holds her hand out for Traeger to shake and I see the huge diamond ring on her finger. It looks like my dad failed to share some big news with me.

“It’s nice to meet you both.” Traeger’s voice is a little rough; it sounds like he’s uncomfortable. But it could just be the crowded place. He likes his quiet and calm. And so do I.

“Don’t you think you’re a little old to be dating my daughter?”

My father’s rude comment has me practically snarling. I step in front of Traeger, shielding him from my father’s rudeness. “Wow. Isn’t that a little hypocritical, Dad, considering Jules is only two years older than me, and yet, you’re seven years older

than Traeger. To my calculation, that would make you way too old to be marrying her.” I no longer give a rat’s ass who he wants to marry, but I will not stand for him being rude to my man. “I don’t think you should be speaking on the matter. Besides, aren’t you the one who always says you can’t help the one you love? I’m in love with this man, and if you give him a chance, I think you’ll love him too.”

“Tarryn.” Traeger grips my waist. “It’s okay for him to be concerned. If it were our daughter, I’d have the same question. He’s just looking out for you.”

I glance up at him, feeling my heart beat even faster. Loving him even more. “But I don’t want anyone being rude to you.”

“I can handle it, baby. Go easy on your dad.”

“How did you two meet?” My father’s question has me turning back.

“Funny you should ask. We met when I broke my ankle.” He looks down and jerks back up when he sees my cast. It’s the first time he’s noticed it.

“Why didn’t you tell me you broke your ankle?”

“I tried. Remember when I called you three weeks ago and you were having dinner? You never called me back; otherwise, I would’ve told you.”

It’s on him. Not me. He’s the one that’s been the absent dad, and judging by the look on his face, I think he’s realizing it.

“Anyway, my friends and I went backpacking. We got spooked by a wild animal in the woods.” I glance up at my big grumpy man who’s got a smirk on his face. “We all took off running, and I ended up falling and breaking my ankle. Carter and Kelsey left me behind on the mountain, and I had no one there to help me. But then Traeger

found me.” More like captured me. “He stopped and helped me. He took me to his cabin and bandaged me up. If it weren’t for him, I never would’ve made it back alive.”

My father’s head snaps up to Traeger, and I see the shift in his eyes. He holds out his hand. “Thank you for saving my daughter. I never liked those two.” My dad’s attention shifts to me. “That roommate of yours always rubbed me the wrong way. And that kid you were dating was a pompous ass.”

Traeger’s hold on me tightens. He agrees with that sentiment.

“Guess we have a bit of catching up to do. How about we go grab something to eat so I can get to know this special person in your life. Will you join us for dinner, Traeger?”

“I’d be honored, sir.”

Traeger takes my hand, and we follow my dad out, coming up with a plan to meet at the restaurant.

“Can we just swing by my place really quick?” There’s something I need before we go eat. Something I’m desperate for.

“Sure. Do you want to tell your dad we’ll be running late?” Nah. After all the times my dad has made me wait on him, he deserves to know how it feels for a change.

“We shouldn’t be too long. I just need to get something. Besides, with graduation, there will definitely be a wait at the restaurant today.” It’s the finest steakhouse in town and where everyone is probably going for their graduation dinner. My father forgot to make a reservation, so I’m guessing we’ll have a long wait to get in.

“What do you need to get?” He reaches for my hand and locks our fingers together.

“My graduation present.”

His head turns. “Can I give you mine while we’re there?”

“That’s what I’m hoping for. But if you have another present for me, I’ll take that too.” I bite down on my smirk as his nostrils flare. He catches my drift, and then we’re suddenly breaking the speed limit to get to my apartment.

As soon as we’re locked inside, it’s like two wild animals going at it. Our mouths come crashing together, and our hands begin tearing at each other’s clothing. It’s an aggressive attack on all my senses. My body is trembling, and my panties get soaked in the storm. I’ve been desperate for this moment for weeks, wanting him to claim me and make me his.

“You should let your dad know we’re going to be a while. Once isn’t going to be enough.”

“Just fuck me already, Traeger.”

He lifts me on a wild roar and carries me to my bed. My back hits the mattress and then my thighs are pressed up to my hips. He’s staring between my legs, making my clit quiver under his scrutiny. If I’d known he was going to show up today, I would’ve shaved.

“I like this.” His fingers rub over my little patch of curls, causing me to buck off the bed as his thumb brushes over my clit. “Always so sensitive,” he groans. “God, I missed this pretty little pussy.” His thumb is stoking the flames. Making me burn so hot, I can’t take it any longer. If he doesn’t fuck me now, I’m going to go insane.

“You need to put that big dick inside me now, Traeger. I can’t take it any longer.”

Another growl barrels from his throat and he shifts forward, lining himself up right with my entrance. “There’s no turning back, angel. Once I come inside you, you can consider yourself mine. Is that what you’re ready for? I’m talking forever, babe.”

I nod my head, pushing my hips forward and showing him exactly how ready I am. I press against his crown, feeling the pressure at my entrance. My body expanding to take him in. It’s a slow slide down his shaft. My walls stretching around his wide girth, trembling as the feeling starts to take hold. “You can consider me owned now,” I moan. “I’m yours, Traeger. And this pussy is now your private property.” No one will ever be allowed to trespass on what’s his again.

“Fuck, baby. You feel so goddamn good.” His voice is strained and his shoulders are practically shaking. It’s like he’s fighting the tension, fighting to hold himself off. “I just need a moment, babe. I’m about to come.”

I lean up, right to his ear, licking across his soft skin before I suck his lobe between my lips. “I want you to come, Traeger. I need you to mark your territory.”

It’s like the last string of his restraint snaps and then he’s suddenly fucking me like his life depends on it. He’s like a madman, thrusting deep, fucking me hard, slamming the bed against the wall with every thrust. It’s a cataclysmic eruption of intense need mixed with insane pleasure, and my body shatters. The orgasm plunders through me like a violent storm. Shocks hitting every nerve. My screams probably heard next door. He bears down on my clit and another orgasm plows through. It’s almost too much, yet divinely perfect at the same time. And by the time the storm passes, I’m wrecked. Head to toe shattered in the most delicious way.

“Damn, baby. You sure know how to wring a man dry.”

He pulls out and drops to my side, tucking me right into his chest. I nuzzle in, breathing in his cologne, relishing the feel of his strong arms wrapped around me. It feels like I'm whole again. The homesickness gone. The pain replaced with relief, happiness. I feel safe and protected. And for the first time in my life, there's not a single doubt on what I want for my future. It's him. Nothing else really matters, just as long as I'm this mountain man's girl.

18

Traeger

We wind up the mountain, and the closer we get to home, the happier I feel. It's different this time. It's no longer my escape from the past. It's no longer my hiding place from the world and all the evil and corruption. It's the place where I'm going to build my future with the love of my life. It's going to be where I raise my kids. I can picture it now. Tarryn sitting on the front porch, our baby in her arms as she rocks them to sleep. It's the most breathtaking view on the mountain.

"What are you smiling about?"

I glance over, squeezing her fingers tighter. "I'm gonna marry you one day."

Now she's the one smiling.

"Is that so?"

"It certainly is. And we're going to have the most amazing life."

One I never imagined was possible.

"Well, one day I'll say yes."

I take the final turn up to the cabin, and a different image comes to mind. Her in a white dress, the sun setting in the background, and a whispered "I do" echoing on the

wind.