



THE *Protector* OF THE

MOUNTAIN

TESSA KLEIN

The Protector of the Mountain

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Prologue

Poppy

THE BLADE narrowly misses its mark as it flies past my head and strikes a tree with a heavy thump. The fine hairs on my neck stand on end as Noble whinnies, rearing back on his hind legs.

A man moves from behind the thick brush, another knife at his hip, fingers at the ready.

“You missed.” My voice is steady but my heart is thudding as I calm Noble.

The moonlight filtering through the forest’s canopy casts an ethereal shimmer on his hard features. A hook nose. Thick eyebrows. Sunken cheeks and long, scraggly hair. He smiles although it’s closer to a snarl. A predator playing with his prey.

“Did I?” the man says in a rough, melodic voice. Playful and unsettling.

“I’m still breathing.” Barely. I can’t catch my breath. It feels like the knife lodged into my chest and not the tree.

He takes two slow steps toward me. His eyes are so dark. Like I’m looking inside two inkwells. They’re bottomless, cold, and empty with a long raised scar cutting through one of them from forehead to jowl.

I reach for the knife in my boot.

“Easy, Princess.” The playfulness is gone. His voice turns sinister and dark as he strokes the knife at his waist with his fingertips. “You’re worth more to me alive. Make this easy and hop down.”

“I’d rather not,” I say, fingering the blade strapped to Noble.

“Heard you were a fighter.” His tongue swipes across his teeth, lips bulging. He spits to his side and then takes another step. “I don’t mind having a little fun.”

Nerves swell. Three, two, one. I count down, centering myself with my breath before flinging the blade through the air. He twists his body, the knife hitting his shoulder as I urge Noble on.

We take off through the forest but we’re not fast enough. The man recovers, throwing another knife toward us. It misses me, striking Noble. I scream as it sends him into a frenzy, galloping through the thick brush as I try to dodge branches while holding onto the reins.

“Easy, Noble,” I plead. “EASY!”

This is all wrong. This wasn’t supposed to happen. This wasn’t—*thump!*

My body slumps as my vision turns black. The rhythmic thud of Noble’s hooves against the ground fades.

Everything fades.

I feel nothing. I see nothing. I...

Chapter 1

Wolfe

VIBRANT ORANGE, yellow, and red hues paint the sky above Lion's Peak in broad swaths as the sun rises. It reminds me of the cross-section of a ripe, pitted peach covered with a fluffy dollop of cream-colored clouds. My stomach rumbles and my imagination makes a little more sense. The hike from my cabin to the lookout is long, and I haven't had breakfast.

A shame that I don't have any peaches though. They're at the end of their season but I'd have to trek into Whispering Winds for them. I can't remember the last time I made the trip. A year at least. Even longer since I've been inside a grocery store. Most of what I can't hunt or grow off my land comes from farmers around the area. Trading food for favors—sometimes trading nothing at all because we take care of each other around here.

Blaze climbs the stairs to the lookout as I pause, taking in the expansive view of the ridges and valleys surrounding Whispering Winds.

It's mostly dark but I have the vista memorized by heart. The forest is oceanic, rippling and undulating rhythmically as the land rises and falls in dark green waves. Birds flit through the air—dark flecks in an otherwise vivid backdrop. Not even Main Street is awake yet in this sleepy mountain town.

Even though I wake up to this view every day, I'll never tire of it. Much like the mountains and forest, it's a part of me. I can't imagine my life without it.

Blaze whimpers from above, his nose poking through the slats of the fence surrounding the lookout's observation deck. I glance at him over my shoulder and snort. He's perfected his pitiful puppy expression over the years, but he's always been a natural at tugging my heartstrings to get his way. If I didn't know any better, I'd assume he hadn't eaten in weeks based on his masterful performance.

"What's with the look? You hungry?" I ask even though I know the answer.

I spend so much time out here with Blaze that I can gauge his mood and understand what's on his mind by looking at him. A flip of his ear. A shake of his tail. Each little movement and minute detail tells me a story. And vice versa. Sometimes I think he knows what I'm thinking before I do.

Blaze's ears perk as his tongue swipes across his muzzle before whimpering again. His nails scrape against the wood floor as he sits up and brings the pity party to new heights, resting his head on another slat and groaning impatiently.

"Alright," I say, waving him off. "Let's eat."

Blaze barks, jumping and spinning around on the deck as I turn, readjust my pack, and make my way up the stairs. I'll have plenty of time to admire the view and no better way than with a full stomach.

After getting Blaze situated, I make myself an egg and bacon sandwich and head outside with a mug of coffee. The sun's jutting out behind Lion's Peak and a thick mist crawls across the forest's canopy. Once I finish breakfast, I'll radio in my weather report and then get to work on patching the roof. I swear the task list for this little lookout keeps growing no matter how many I check off.

Blaze circles the area next to me once before settling down with a deep sigh.

"Going to be a great day, buddy," I say, giving him a rough pat on his side.

His eyes dart to mine without moving his head and then fix on the view in front of us. I follow his cue, watching as the

darkness of the valley begins to lift. It's chilly but nothing my steaming coffee can't handle.

"Couldn't ask for better weather."

Blaze sighs sharply, gets up, and then heads back inside, sitting down on his bed. I take a sip of my coffee, glancing back at him as he gets a head start on the first nap of the day.

And I thought I was the loner.



"MORNING, DEE," I rasp into the handheld transceiver as I scan the horizon.

"Morning, Wolfe," Dee's voice crackles before dissolving into static.

"Fifty-seven degrees. R-H of forty-nine. Cloud cover is thirty percent and winds from the north-northeast at five. Moderate fog in the south valley. Another good Fall day."

After signing off, I set the transceiver down. My rickety chair creaks and moans as I spin around and glance at Blaze.

"You ready?"

Blaze lifts his head, eyes flaring as he licks his snout.

"Glad to hear it. Now let's go patch this roof."

Blaze sets his head back down and then rolls to his side, turning his back to me. He's not usually this grumpy but he had a routine vet appointment a few days ago. A couple of shots, an ear cleaning, a quick trim to his nails, and here we are. He'll get over it, but he's been extra mopy this time, hoping I'll break and give him a few more treats to buy my way back into his good graces.

"Do you want trout for lunch?"

A single ear perks. His nose twitches, waiting for me to sweeten the deal. That's all he's getting. It's what he was getting for lunch anyway but I'm not telling him that.

“Be my lookout while I work, and it’s yours.”

Blaze knows the signs. Knows where there’s smoke there’s fire. I thought that he’d fear wildfires after being caught up in one a few years back when he was no more than a few months old. It’s how he came to be my sidekick. I found him stranded in the middle of a blaze with nowhere to go. Rescued him and fixed him up. And with no one claiming him, he’s been with me ever since.

He sometimes barks at the wood stove in my cabin but I don’t mind. The best and only partner I need in my life. The only one who could understand this way of life. I gave up trying to find someone long ago.

Blaze rolls onto his paws and stretches out, giving himself a good shake before trotting over to me. I give him the requisite pets—behind the ears, around his scruff, and then a few pats on his rump for good measure.

We’re out the door and ready to start the day. I’ll be spending most of it working on the roof. The fire season is winding down, so I don’t expect a day unlike the ones I’ve had for the last month—more manual labor and passive watching.

Glad I have my partner in crime to keep me company.



A FEW HOURS LATER, I’m breaking a decent sweat. The weather-worn shingles are in a pile at the base of the lookout and I’ve mostly finished patching the roof. The patching is the easy part, it’s managing to get the shingles and supplies to the roof without killing myself that’s difficult.

Although cute, Blaze isn’t much help with the roof repair. Can’t hold a hammer. Can’t steady a nail. Can’t even drag a slab of shingles up the ladder for me. But he can chase off small critters without breaking a sweat. A good boy through and through.

I sit back, resting my forearms on my knees as I survey the valley. The morning mist has cleared off. The wind has picked

up slightly. And the morning chill is still hanging around even though the clouds scudded off and the sun's up. Maybe we've reached the turning point of Fall and are heading into Winter.

Won't be long until the first storms roll in. It's a little early for snow, but I wouldn't write it off. Anything's possible in Whispering Winds, especially on the mountain.

I wipe the sweat from my brow. Nothing like a little manual labor to warm you up. I slowly scoot toward the edge of the roof to check in on Blaze. I haven't heard or seen him in a little bit but when I do, my pulse begins to rise. He's stock-still with his ears up as he stares at the path that leads to the lookout. I follow his gaze but I don't see anything. Don't hear anything but the soft breeze through the trees.

The lookout draws only a handful of hikers each season because it's so far off the beaten path. Fire lookouts are difficult to reach for a reason. They're at the highest points for the best vistas to survey for wildfires. Some are so far up that they get resupplied from helicopters, but it's rare these days.

Hikers who make it to my lookout are undeterred by the difficulty. They're drawn to the rich history of fire lookouts. Most of them are unused and in complete disrepair. History forgotten. This one has been around for nearly a century and maintaining it is a full-time job. Something's always breaking or needs fixing. It's a lonely job, but I'm not sure if I'm cut out to do much else. It's all I know, but I love it.

"See something, boy?" I say, edging closer to Blaze, careful not to fall off the roof. It's not a far fall to the deck but I don't want to test it.

He hasn't moved, eyes focused on the curve in the path where the hikers will emerge. Or maybe a bear. It won't be the first time a bear ambled up this way. Luckily, they tend to reverse course once they see me. They're looking for free food, not a fight. There's a rifle collecting dust inside if it comes down to it.

I exhale harshly as the air shifts around me and my skin erupts in goosebumps. My body's reacting to something I

can't sense. But I feel it—whatever it is. Like the feeling of being watched. Hunted. A gut reaction. My heart's pounding.

I bring my binoculars to my eyes and look at the curve, waiting, until I see the reason my body's going haywire. The reason I can hardly breathe.

I see *her*.

“Fuuuuck.”

It comes out in one long, slow exhale. And when I finally breathe again I can't get enough air. I'm dizzy and disoriented as I see a beautiful angel approaching. I can hardly make out her features but she's doing something wicked to my body.

I can't think. My ears ring as my limbs go numb. Am I having a heart attack? Jesus. I've hardly laid eyes on this angel and she's launching a full-out assault on me.

I'm not fighting back. I surrender. She can have me. I'm all hers.

I cough, sputtering as I collapse on the roof, clinging to the rough shingles as I try to focus. I try to breathe but it feels like this angel has stabbed me repeatedly in my lungs. No amount of breathing can fill them.

I've never felt anything like this before. I don't run into many people, but no one's ever leveled me like this. Have... *mercy*.

“Blaze,” I groan, reaching out for him as he starts barking. “Blaze...”

My vision darkens, colorful spots dance in my periphery, and then air rushes past me. My back hits the hard deck, knocking out what little air I have left in my lungs.

I groan as Blaze starts licking my face, my fingers holding tightly to the railing as I pull myself up slowly.

“I'm fine,” I grit out, my hand gripping the railing as the world finally stops spinning around me.

I turn and see her. She's no longer running. She's struggling to keep her legs moving. My protective instincts

kick in as I take a few shaky steps forward. They explode when I see her falter, falling to the ground in a heap.

I don't think. Adrenaline spikes through my chest as I stride for the stairs, grip the railing, and launch myself over it, landing with a skid on the soft grass.

My entire body aches,

but it's nothing to the pain I feel in my chest after seeing my girl collapse.

My girl?

Jesus. I've seen her for a brief moment and I'm already claiming her.

Blaze sprints past me, reaching her before I'm halfway there. When I finally make it, I slide onto my knees next to her. I want to collect her in my arms and keep her close. Comfort her. But I know I shouldn't. I don't want to move her until I have time to assess her injuries.

And she's a mess. A beautiful mess that's set my body on fire. I close my eyes, take in a centering breath, and then focus on her.

She's so pale that her lips look unnaturally red—like holly berries against fresh-fallen snow. I swallow the urge to press my thumb against them, grabbing her hands instead. They feel like ice. Why are they so cold?

“Angel,” I rasp. “Are you okay?”

My voice is hoarse. Ragged. And I have to tear each word from my throat. I bring her hands to my lips, trying to warm them up with long, deep exhalations.

Her eyes flutter open and when they meet mine, it feels like she's detonating dynamite all over my body. Every part of me feels like it's constricting and expanding all at once, pulsing as her pale, cornflower-blue eyes take me in.

She opens her mouth to speak. Nothing comes out but a fragile breath of air.

“You're safe.”

I try to brush some of the strands off her forehead but they're caked in dried blood. Her dark hair is matted and tangled with mud and forest detritus.

I swallow hard, staring at the nasty bump on her head. It will take too long to get her to a hospital. I need to take her to Griff.

She curls against my chest as I collect her in my arms. Her clothes are like none I've seen before. A long tattered dress and a tunic laced together at the front. It's like she's from a different era.

She has no pack and the boots she's wearing are nothing like an experienced hiker would wear. I have no idea what to make of my mystery girl or how she made it this far dressed like this.

But she needs my help. She tightens her grip around my shirt as I rise to my feet, holding her in my arms. Her grip loosens as she shoves her face against my body.

But I've never felt so protective before. Not even when I saw Blaze in that wildfire. This girl is waking up a deeper part of me. Something I never knew existed inside of me— atrophied no longer.

I stride down the path as quickly as I can manage without shaking her too badly. I'll take her to Griff. Get her fixed up. And then she's coming home with me.

"Rest easy, angel," I rasp, glancing down at her. "I'm taking care of you now."

Her eyes flutter open briefly, a ghost of her smile on her lips, and then she sighs, curling closer against me as I make my way to Griff's cabin, hoping he's there.



"SHE'LL BE OKAY," Penny says, offering me a cup of coffee.

I stare at it for a long moment before taking it mechanically into my hands and taking a sip. I can't taste

anything. All I feel is warmth as it slides across my tongue and down my throat.

“Thanks,” I say, setting the mug down.

I glance at the door. Griff’s been in there a while. My mind’s been racing. Is she okay? Will she be okay? It’s hell not seeing her. I’m fighting every urge to burst in there, collect her in my arms, and take her back to my cabin to spoon-feed her my family’s secret stew to nurse back to health.

But I’m not the doctor. I know what I want to do isn’t what’s best for her, so I’m letting Griff check her over and tell me what I need to do.

“Did she say much?” Penny asks, setting down her mug.

I shake my head. I can hardly think straight let alone talk.

“Strange clothes. It’s a little early for Halloween parties. I wonder where she’s from. Maybe she’s a part of some crazy cult? Or she tried to leave and they were about to sacrifice her.”

I grunt, narrowing my eyes at Penny when her words finally register.

“Griff tells me there’s no such thing around here, but I’m not sure... I’ve always thought there was something off about Whispering Winds. It’s too perfect...”

I wonder too. Not about some cult but her. Her clothes, her wounds—everything about her. I don’t know her name. I don’t know how she made it up to the lookout.

She’s young, fresh out of college maybe. It’s hard to tell given the state of her. But I do know whoever gave her that mark better not show up for her. I’ll dust off the lookout’s rifle, or I’ll let my hands see some action. I’ll make sure that they pay. I’ll...

Penny touches my hand softly, pulling me from my thoughts. “It’s going to be okay.”

I stare at her hand on mine, loosening my grip on my mug before I shatter it. I swallow, leaning back in my chair as sigh. I don’t even know what happened to my girl and here I am

imagining some crazy scenario. Hell, I'm partial to Penny's crazy cult idea. With so many unanswered questions and my protective instincts in overdrive, I can't help myself.

"Thanks, Penny."

Blaze nudges my hand, forcing his head on my lap as he stares up at me. "I'll be fine," I whisper, scratching him behind the ears.

He whimpers, questioning whether I'm being honest.

I'm not sure I am. If she's not fine, I won't be either.

The door to the bedroom creaks open and Griff comes out. He smiles at Penny as I rise, seeing my girl standing in the doorway behind him.

Jesus, she's beautiful. So damn beautiful that I swear I'm getting lightheaded again. What the hell is happening to me?

Griff talks softly to Penny as she pads tentatively into the room, her clothes still a complete mess. I'm glad she's up and about. She was out when I brought her here.

Penny kisses Griff on his cheek before sliding past him and heading for my girl. She wraps her arm around her and they walk back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

Griff heads to the sink, rinsing his hands off as I collapse into my chair again. Blaze rests his head on my lap and tries to nudge me out of my funk.

"How is she?" I ask Griff as he sits down in Penny's chair.

"Tough to say." He stares at me for a few moments before elaborating. "She has memory loss. Can't even remember her name. Where she came from. How she ended up at your lookout."

I swallow hard. "Will she be okay?"

"She needs to see a specialist. I'm not equipped for something like this. She has a nasty bump on her head. Cuts and bruises. But nothing's broken as far as I can tell. But I'm

not sure if the amnesia is real or if she's hiding something. There's something off."

"If she says she can't remember, then she can't remember."

The words fly out of me before I have time to think.

"Maybe it will come back to her," Griff says with a shrug, unaffected by my harshness. "Could be stress-related. I have no doubt that she experienced something awful. She wants to go back with you. Do you mind?"

"I'll take her."

Griff nods. "Penny's getting her some new clothes and toiletries. Apart from the bump and... amnesia, she seems fine. Probably dehydrated and tired. She needs to rest."

I stand up. "I'll make sure she does."

By the time Griff finishes running through the list of symptoms I need to be aware of, the door to the bedroom opens again. Penny walks out. Then she does.

Jesus.

Jesus.

I thought she was beautiful before, but seeing her out of those tattered clothes, the blood and dirt scrubbed clean—it's official, I'm going to have a heart attack. I brought her here for medical attention but I swear I'll be needing it in a few moments.

Her white dress with bright yellow and green colors clings tightly around her torso, fluttering as she walks. Lemons. It's lemons on her dress. Life's given me lemons before, but no more. It's given me her, and I want to make her my damn wife.

I can hardly believe these unhinged thoughts. I don't know her name. I don't know a damn thing about her but I'm all-in and I don't care how crazy that sounds.

"Easy, Wolfe," Penny says, placing her hand on my shoulder. "Keep staring at her like that and you'll scare her off."

I swallow as I finally blink, grunting a response. She pauses as I make my way over to her.

“Griff says you’ll be fine.”

I’m resisting the urge to brush the hair off her face, trying my best to ignore the desire to taste those lips. She needs to be cared for, not pawed at by an older man like me. I need to calm down before I scare her off like Penny says.

She nods, her eyes on the pack she’s clutching at her waist.

“Says you’d like to come with me.” I swallow. Take a deep breath and ask, “Would you?”

She tilts her head up at me, smiles, and with a single word, unravels me. “Yes.”

I take her pack. “We’ll figure it out,” I say, giving into the urge, brushing the hair off her face as I take another look at her bump.

Her eyes flutter. Her chest rises and falls rapidly. “Thanks.”

I place my hand on the small of her back, guide her toward the front of the cabin, and nod goodbye to Griff and Penny.

My girl’s coming home.

Chapter 2

Poppy

IT'S DARK. Trees stand like shadowy figures all around me, silent and imposing, unnerving as they watch me slowly pass by them. It's quiet, only the sounds of my short, ragged breaths and the crunch of my boots against the ground hang in the air.

I don't know where I am. I don't know how long I've been walking but I feel sick and uneasy. And that feeling of being watched keeps growing as I continue walking—as though I have some point I'm headed. I must be going somewhere, right?

Nerves swell inside me because I can't remember. I can't remember anything from how I got here, where I'm going, or... who I am.

I take a few more steps and pause but the sound of feet against the earth doesn't. My heart races. Dread like a cold blanket settles over me as I stand frozen in place. *Go!* I try urging myself but my body refuses to move.

"Princess," a voice calls out from behind me.

I turn and see a man, lean with scraggly hair and a quickening gait heading for me. When I see the scar across his face, something opens up inside me and I take off down the path.

"That's it, Princess," the man calls after me. "I like a good chase." His playful voice turns venomous.

I pump my arms and legs but they feel heavy, like I'm dragging a pile of stones behind me. Why can't I run?

When I turn back around, the man's almost on top of me, reaching out for me as I fail to gain distance between us.

"Princess," he growls, his scar pulsing and red as his mouth froths.

I turn back for the path in front of me, but it's too late. My feet clip a gnarled tree root and I fly through the air, hitting the ground and sliding a few feet before the man catches up to me.

He crouches down, a heavy blade in his hand angled toward me.

"This was how it was always going to end, Princess. This is—"

I grab his wrist and then propel myself forward, driven by survival instincts as I wrap my hand around his throat. His knife is pinned above his head as I apply as much force with my hand as I can muster.

His scar turns a deep purple as he sputters and chokes, flecks of spit flying through in the air. Foam forms at the corners of his mouth as he gurgles something and I scream. And scream and scream. I close my eyes as I let everything inside me out.

He grabs my wrist and when I open my eyes the scarred man is gone. It's no longer night and I'm not in the forest. I'm inside a small room, on a bed, in clothes that aren't my own, face-to-face with another man.

"*Plergha lacht goghl*," he sputters, tapping at my wrist.

My eyes flare open when I realize I'm strangling him. Oh my god. I let go and immediately he slumps over, gasping for breath as he rests his forearms on his legs.

"I'm so sorry," I rasp as I push away from him.

Have I actually been screaming? My throat feels like I have been. It's raw and dry and I can hardly recognize my voice. It's like every syllable leaving my mouth has fought through layers of gravel to be heard.

Or maybe it is my voice. How I actually sound. I can't even remember anything apart from fragments. And I'm not sure how reliable they are.

I lean back on the bed, clutching the blankets to my chest as the man coughs and sputters in front of me. Even though he's sitting, he's big. His arms are as thick as my legs. And his legs are like tree trunks, attached to a torso that looks as bulky and substantial as the mountains.

The coughing subsides, replaced with laughter. A deep rumble that makes my entire body erupt in tingling warmth. When he finally lifts his head, his dark brown eyes meet mine as he smiles. He tenderly touches his thick neck as red marks bloom in thin lines.

More tingles. Waves of them ripple across my skin from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head. I'm sitting down but my heart is racing. I can't seem to fill my lungs with enough air as I stare at the man meeting my gaze.

Who is he? He seems vaguely familiar, fragments coming back to me. A tower. A man and a woman. I try to piece them together but my head is throbbing. I can't...

"Hey, hey," the man rasps, stroking my forehead as my head splits with pain. "Angel, are you okay?"

I slide deeper into the bed, eyes shut as I try to focus on anything but the pain.

"Deep breath, angel," the man says.

Wolfe? The name shoots from the darkness as I catch glimpses of him in my mind's eye. Him carrying me. His lips moving as he forms words I can't hear.

He slides his hand from my forehead to my cheek. It's warm and callused and so big that it covers one side of my face. I can feel the strength in it. Firm and solid. But the way he's touching me is comforting and tender. I'm afraid if I open my eyes he won't be there. I'd have dreamt it—imagined all of it—and I'd wake up yet again.

To the man with the scar.

My lips tremble as I hold back a whimper.

“*Shh-shh*. It’s okay. You’re safe, angel. You’re safe.”

His thumb strokes me in a line from the side of my nose and along my cheekbone. Again and again. And after a few moments, I’m calm. My breathing settles and the pain in my head recedes into a dull ache.

“That’s it,” he says, his voice wrapping around me like a warm, comforting blanket.

I open my eyes and for a brief moment, I see pain in his features. Concern. But it falls away as he smiles.

“Feeling better?” he asks, a single dimple above his thick beard.

I nod, not trusting my voice.

He pulls his hand away and I feel its absence immediately. My cheek throbs from where he touched me, and I want to grab it and place it back on my face. Or somewhere else.

The thought rises out of somewhere deep. It’s uncomfortable how comfortable I feel around a man I don’t know. A man who may or may not be called Wolfe.

Some name but it would suit him if it is his. There’s something wild and animalistic about him, even though he’s treating me with care—something I’m not sure I’m used to.

He leans down and I hear water dripping at his feet.

“I’ve got something for your head,” he says, as I turn, watching him wring a cloth into a large basin. “But you’re going to have to promise me something.”

He sits back up, and I’m again struck by the immensity of him. I’ve never seen a man like him before. Or maybe I have. I’m still getting used to this blank space in my head.

“What?” I ask, my voice like a whisper in the wind.

There’s that smile again. That dimple. He brings the washcloth toward my forehead, so close that I can feel its coolness hovering over my skin.

“I need you to promise me to keep your hands to yourself. That you’re not going to strangle me again, angel. You’ve got a mighty grip, and I’m not sure my throat will be able to hold out for another round.”

I bite down on my lip, closing my eyes as the prickling sensation of a million needles jabbing my skin radiates from my skull and down my back. Both of my cheeks are now molten along with my chest. I’ll need more than a cool cloth to wipe away this red-hot embarrassment.

“Angel?” he says. “Do we have a deal?”

I nod. “Yes,” I say. I open my eyes, ignoring the clench in my stomach as I see him smiling back at me. “I promise not to strangle you again.”

“Good.”

He dabs my forehead and it feels glorious, a shiver racing down my spine as I sink into the pillows.

“That’s one promise I never thought I’d have to make.”

“And one I never thought I’d have to ask for.” He stops dabbing my forehead. “You must be having some vivid dreams.”

I nod. “You can say that.”

I’d like to forget them, but every time I close my eyes I see the man. I see his scar. I have no idea who he is or if he’s real.

He leans back, soaking the cloth in the basin again.

“Wolfe?”

“Yes?” he says, wringing the excess water out.

So it is his name. At least some of my fragments are real, but I don’t have enough to create a cohesive image of what happened to me or how I came to be in his care.

“How did you find me?”

“What’s the last thing you remember, angel?”

Angel. He keeps calling me that. Is that my name? Did I tell him that?”

I close my eyes. The man flashes in my head but I will him away, thinking hard. About Wolfe. I see him, his face filled with concern as he looks down at me. I see the sky and trees moving by as I bounce in his arms.

The cool cloth covers my forehead as Wolfe presses it against me.

“I remember you carrying me through the woods. I remember...”

Feeling safe in his arms. Disoriented and numb but safe.

“You were hurt,” Wolfe says, the lightness in his voice all but gone. “Had a nasty gash on your head. You stumbled up the path to the lookout and then collapsed.” He sighs, and he stops dabbing my forehead. “Scared the hell out of me.”

I open my eyes and the same pain I saw flash on his face in my fragmented memory is painted across his features.

“There was a man too. And a woman, right?”

Wolfe swallows. “Griff and Penny. He checked you out. Told me we should have you seen at the hospital.”

Fear races through me. Fear like I’ve never felt before. I shake my head. “I don’t want to leave. Please, Wolfe.”

The man in my dreams may not be real, but I don’t want to risk it. Not until my memory comes back and I figure out what happened to me. If it comes back.

Wolfe’s jaw flexes and then he shakes his head once as he looks to the side. My stomach clenches when he meets my eyes. I feel the conflict warring in his mind. He’s only known me for a short time but he’s caring for me like family.

Eventually, he gives in, running his hand through his salt and pepper hair and says, “I’ll table it for now, but if you sleep that long again, I’m taking you straight there.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“You fell asleep in my truck yesterday afternoon. It’s a few hours shy of noon the next day.”

Wolfe stretches his neck, joints cracking.

“Please tell me you haven’t stayed in that chair the whole time.”

“Not the whole time,” he says. “Most of it. Blaze needed food.”

“Blaze?”

“My dog.”

As if on command, I hear something clicking against the floor—a large, beautifully colored dog trotting through the door to the bedroom a few seconds later.

“He was the one who spotted you first,” Wolfe says as Blaze rests his head on the edge of the bed.

He licks absently as I stroke his head.

“I guess I should thank you then,” I say, rubbing his ears as his tail thumps against Wolfe’s leg.

“He’s a good boy,” Wolfe says, grunting as he thumps Blaze a few times on his rump. “Ever vigilant. Even-keeled. Never had any issues with—*Blaze!*” Wolfe growls as Blaze crouches low and jumps onto the bed, smothering me with his soft, fluffy body and wasting no time to plant a million kisses on my face.

“Off!” Wolfe’s command falls on deaf puppy ears as he tries uselessly to remove Blaze.

“It’s fine,” I manage in between laughter, Blaze’s tongue tickling my face and neck. By the time Wolfe finally removes Blaze, I can hardly breathe, panting as I watch Wolfe chauffeur my fluffy assailant out of the bedroom.

“Don’t give me that look.” Wolfe stands akimbo as he stares at Blaze. “Do you want some stew or not?”

After a few moments of silence, I hear a loud, groaning sigh from the other room.

“Alright then. I know we don’t get many guests, but I thought I taught you manners. Don’t maul guests. That’s rule number one, Blaze.”

Wolfe makes a half-turn before Blaze groans again. He pauses, shakes his head, and then turns back around.

And for the first time I can remember, I see him—*all* of him. I'm out of breath, and it's not from laughter anymore. It's that easy smile fixed on a ruggedly handsome face. It's his dark eyes that burn everywhere his gaze lands, penetrating me to my core. It's his whole demeanor—all cool, calm, confident, and collected as he leans against the doorframe that hardly fits his enormous body.

Muscles. Galore.

“I forgot to mention, Blaze can be a little stubborn.”

It's his *voice*—rough and smooth all at once, a contradiction I can one hundred percent get behind. So, so deep.

There's another groan from the living room.

“And mouthy.”

I swallow, staring at him. Full lips peeking from beneath a full black beard flecked with white. They curl into a smile, and when I meet his eyes again, my heart beats a little faster.

“In more ways than one,” I say, my voice a little less raspy.

The dimple of his deepens as he folds his arms and takes a few slow steps toward me, each one reverberating through my body.

“I'm sorry about that. He's not usually, so...”

“Mouthy?”

Wolfe nods, stepping toward me again, goosebumps rising all over my arms. I'm not cold. I'm not scared. I'm not sure why my body is reacting so strongly to Wolfe but it feels like every nerve ending has become electrified. I feel... more. Every sensation is heightened.

“Tends to stick to himself. You're the first person he's approached like that before.”

“His first kiss?”

Wolfe snorts. “I’m afraid I beat you to it.”

He sits down in the chair, leaning back with one hand on his knee and the other on my leg. Tingles again. Throbbing between my thighs. There’s more than one layer between his hand and my leg, but it feels like he’s touching bare skin.

There goes my pulse again—heat everywhere as I wonder how someone could have this effect on me.

“He slept at the foot of the bed. Only left when I forced him to go outside. Had to bring his food in here to get him to eat.”

Wolfe scratches the back of his head, and I’m only vaguely aware of what he’s saying to me. All I can think about is how his hand feels on my leg.

“Developed quite an attachment to you. You...” He pauses. “Name hasn’t come back to you yet, has it?”

Uncomfortable feelings rise and not even Wolfe’s hand makes them subside. I shake my head. “I don’t remember,” I say, slouching back against the headboard as my head lolls to the side. There’s a beautiful flower arrangement on the nightstand. Blue and red and white poppies.

“It’s alright, angel. It’s alright,” he adds a little softer.

I stare at the flowers and without thinking, without taking my eyes off of them, I say, “Poppy. You can call me Poppy.”

Wolfe shifts in his seat, his hand pulling away from my leg as he leans forward. “My mother’s favorite flower. Mine too. They grow wild on this side of the mountain, although my mother might have helped with that.”

“I don’t remember my mother,” I say. And then as I turn to face Wolfe, “I don’t remember anything.”

“It will come. You need rest, fresh mountain air, and a belly full of food. You must be starving... Poppy.”

I sigh at the sound of my new name on Wolfe’s lips. But as if on cue, my stomach rumbles.

“Yes,” I say.

“Well, I wasn’t sure when you’d be up but I’ve got some stew simmering. It’s nothing special but it will fill you up. Baked a loaf of sourdough this morning to go with it.”

My stomach rumbles again. “Sounds great. I’d love some.”

Wolfe smiles, reaching over to my leg again and giving it a soft pat. “Good.”

His hand lingers along with a comfortable silence. I may not remember where I came from or how I got here, but I know I’m safe with Wolfe. There’s something about him that settles me. And I don’t want to leave.

A part of me doesn’t *want* to remember. A part of me wants to start over here with Wolfe because I don’t want to face whoever’s looking for me.

“I’ll go grab you a bowl,” Wolfe says, removing his hand from me.

“No,” I blurt, acutely feeling the absence of his touch again.

Wolfe narrows his eyes. “Stomach unsettled?”

“No,” I shake my head.

The only thing I’m feeling unsettled about, apart from my nightmarish visions, is how strongly I crave Wolfe’s touch. I’ve never felt anything like this before.

“I need to get out of this bed. I’d like to walk.”

Wolfe tugs off the blanket. A rush of cool air skims across my bare legs peeking out from beneath a long, flannel shirt. His gaze drops to them before meeting my eyes. It was only a glance, but long enough to send a flash of heat through me.

“Penny gave you some clothes,” he says, swallowing hard. “They’re hanging in the closet. You can take a look if you’d like.”

“I’m fine in this,” I say, taking in a deep breath and inhaling Wolfe’s scent. If his flannel feels this good wrapped around me, I wonder how much better he’d feel. The warmth of him. The weight of him. All of him.

I shake my head. I shouldn't be having these thoughts. It's crazy to have these thoughts. I know nothing about this man and I'm fantasizing about him. Maybe I messed up more than my memory when I hit my head.

Wolfe offers his hand. "Let's eat," he says.

I take his hand. It swallows mine up as he helps me down from the bed. My legs give way and I fall into him.

"Easy," he says, wrapping his arms around me. "Take it slow. One step at a time."

I mumble something incoherent into his chest. It's the best I can do given the circumstances. I don't want to leave his embrace and what it's doing to me. Weak knees and jumbled head.

"Ready?" Wolfe asks me, stroking the back of my head.

I sigh. "Yes."

I wrap my arm around his back as he holds on to me and we make our way out of the bedroom, one step at a time. My body and mind are in conflict against me, warring factions I never thought I'd have to face like this. I'm not sure when I'll remember. When I'll get better.

But I know I'm in safe hands with Wolfe.

I believe him when he says he'll take care of me.

There's nothing else I want right now but him, not even my memory.

Chapter 3

Wolfe

I CAN'T KEEP my eyes off Poppy. Her lips. Her eyes. *Her*. She's so beautiful it hurts. She squeezes the life out of my chest with a single glance, making it damn near impossible to breathe. And my muscles ache because I'm fighting tooth and nail to keep my hands off her. Fighting the urge to flip the table, close the gap between us, scoop my girl up, and carry her back to our bedroom.

Our bedroom. My girl. Jesus. *Jesus*. I already think she's mine. Already have a future laid out before us. Already imagining how she'd look on her back beneath me, clothes strewn on the floor, her hair fanned out above her. *Her*...

The thoughts I'm entertaining are the thoughts of a beast, and I'm a monster for having them for Poppy. She needs my help, not my thick, oafish hands on her. My big, lumbering frame smothering her. It's not right. She can't even remember her name.

Poppy cringes as she tears off a piece of bread. It takes everything in my power not to get up from the table and soothe her again. Seeing her in this state is tearing me up. I want to keep her safe. Protect her. Hold her close. I want her to be okay again. Remember. Even if that means she leaves. I want the best for her.

I let my gaze drop back to my bowl, trying to focus on something other than Poppy. It's a losing battle though. I can't think about anything else but her. Can't close my eyes without seeing her.

She clears her throat, and I angle my gaze at her while she smiles softly at me. The urges rise all over again as her smile makes my lungs seize. I want to touch her. Feel her. But I swallow it along with a spoonful of stew.

I've been too careless, touching her like that back in the bedroom. On her cheek, her leg, and back. Giving into my base urges.

Maybe she shouldn't be with me. Maybe she's better off with Griff and Penny because I don't know how much longer I can hold back.

No.

I'm not letting Poppy leave until she's better. Until she *wants* to go. And that time will come. There's no way around it. She's not the type of woman who'd want to live up in the mountains with a man like me.

It's not an easy life up here, growing most of my food. Fishing. Little interaction with the outside world. I've lived without modern comforts for so long that I don't know how to live any other way.

And I wouldn't live any other way. I can't. It's the only life I know, so I gave up on love rather than hoping I'd find someone who understood this way of life. Understood me.

But there's something about Poppy that's lighting that hopeful part of me. I should stamp it out, but I can't. I—*Jesus*, her eyes.

I drink them in as I swallow a long drag of water. Watching her as she chews softly, glancing around the room tentatively. Nervously. I can't imagine what she must be thinking. She woke up in some stranger's cabin in the middle of nowhere with no memory. I know she's scared, even though she's not admitting it—the night terrors are proof enough.

“How long have you lived in the mountains, Wolfe?”

I swallow another spoonful of stew. “All my life.”

I set down my spoon and lean back in my chair. The old wood creaks beneath me. It's handmade, much like the rest of

the furniture in this cabin.

“You’ve never left?” Poppy leans forward, resting her forearms on the table, one on top of the other.

Her eyes are riveted onto mine. They’re soft and intelligent and piercing. And I prolong the silence a short time so I can stare into them a little longer.

“Never,” I say finally, dragging the word out of my throat. “The mountains are my home. They’re a part of me.”

Poppy’s chin dips as she looks at her bowl. A few beats pass but it feels like an eternity until she finally speaks, glancing back up at me with a smile.

“I wish I had a place like this to call home, feeling like you belong or are a part of something.”

This. This right here, Poppy. Your home. Our home.

The words rise without thought, and I do nothing to quiet them because I want them to be true. Want to tell her. But I know I can’t. We’ve only known each other a short time but I know she’s far too young for me.

“I’m sure you have a home, Poppy. It’ll come to you. And when you remember, I’ll make sure I get you back home. Where you...” I swallow hard. “Where you belong.”

The words leave my mouth bitter. I don’t want her to leave, but I know I can’t keep her. She’s not mine, no matter how much I’d like her to be.

“Home,” she says softly as she grabs her spoon and starts stirring the stew absently.

“I’m sure your family’s worried sick. Bet you have a dog like Blaze.”

A boyfriend. I’d have said husband but there’s no ring on her finger. Can’t believe no one’s locked her down. And if she has a boyfriend, he doesn’t deserve her, letting harm come to her like this.

If she were mine, I’d protect her. I’d keep her safe and make sure she’s cared for. Loved. Not a single need unmet.

There's not a damn thing I wouldn't do for Poppy.

Her eyes meet mine again, and I see the cloud lift a little.

"Maybe," she says before eating a little more stew. "Do you have family here, Wolfe?"

I nod. "My brother. Lives a little closer to town a few miles from here. Haven't seen him since the fall fire season started."

"Fire season?"

"The time of year when conditions for wildfires are at their peak. Leaves fall. Sunlight and wind reach the forest floor and dry out the wildland fuel. Used to be a few months but the length's creeping longer by the year."

Poppy nods. "Do you put them out?"

"Sometimes. If it's a bad one. Mostly I watch. Looking out from the tower for smoke."

"Have you been through a bad one?"

I nod. "Been at this for many years, Poppy. Thankfully, the season's still short around Whispering Winds. Snow starts early up here and leaves late." I look to my right at Blaze, fast asleep in his bed. "But sometimes the conditions are right, and there's little you can do to stop Mother Nature. I found Blaze in the worst wildfire I've ever seen. Been with me nearly five years now."

When I turn back around, Poppy's staring at me. And as though breaking from a trance, she shakes her head, redness blooming across her cheeks.

"Sounds dangerous," she says before taking a sip from her drink.

"There's more danger in the forest than a wildfire."

"Like monsters?" Poppy asks.

I laugh. A deep rumble that rattles my chest.

"I'm sorry," she says, shaking her head as she plays with her stew. "I don't know where that came from."

I take a deep, settling breath and a realization sets in. She's not wrong. There are monsters in this forest. One of them is staring right at her. If she knew the thoughts I had, she'd be scared. She'd want to leave and never look back.

I lean forward, watching Poppy closely as she turns her stew over absently. "No need to apologize, Poppy. We've got bears and mountain lions. Though you're more likely to break a leg than be mauled by one. The trails can be dangerous. Storms too. The animals—well, they mostly stick to themselves."

I lean back, sighing as I stretch. Poppy's still turning her stew over absently when I settle back in. My muscles tense, seeing her tense.

"But now that you mention it. There could be a Sasquatch or two running amok through the woods. I think I know a couple of mountain men that might be descendents. Might have a little bit of Sasquatch DNA in me, honestly," I add with a shrug.

Poppy snorts and my muscles relax. "I guess we'll have to be on the lookout. And I'll be watching you closely, Wolfe. Just in case."

I smile, watching her as she takes another bite of stew before pushing her bowl away.

"That was delicious," she says. "Thank you for everything. For putting up with me because I know you'd rather be out there protecting your mountain from fires."

She has no idea. I glance at my bowl. It's empty save a carrot and potato that I start poking out with my spoon as I resist the urge to tell her what's on my mind.

The only place I want to be is right here with Poppy by my side. In my arms. In my bed. I've spent more than a decade protecting this mountain from forest fires. I want to spend the rest of my life protecting her.

"I'm right where I belong," I say. "Where I'm needed."

Another smile. Another blush. She's staring at her bowl like it's about to reveal some secret. Like it holds the key to

unlocking her memory. Anything but to look at me and see the flames beginning to burn in my eyes. For her.

Fuck, I'm coming on too strong. Too damn fast. That's what I get for spending so much time alone on the mountain. I don't know how to act around people, let alone a woman like Poppy.

A *young* woman like Poppy.

As if I need another reminder that it would never work. She's far too young for me. I shouldn't be entertaining the thoughts, the urges, or the possibility of us. She has her whole life ahead of her and shouldn't be tethered to a mountain man like me.

"But," I force out, my throat dry and constricted. "I need to wrap up a few things at the fire tower today. Need to finish patching the roof before the weather turns."

"Can I come?"

"It's a grueling hike, Poppy," I say, her face falling immediately. "You need your rest. I'll take you up there in a few days when you've recovered."

"Okay," she says, regaining the warmth in her voice. "I'd love to see what makes this mountain so irresistible. The fire tower." She pauses for a few beats and then smiles. "I might even remember it this time."

"I'll make sure it's memorable," I say.

So memorable that you'll never want to leave. That you'll want to stay here with me. With Blaze. Start a fam—*Jesus*.

I stand up, tossing my napkin on the table as I grab my bowl and then move toward Poppy. "I'll leave Blaze here while I'm gone."

"To protect me from a wild Sasquatch?" she asks as I round the corner next to her.

My lungs seize yet again when our eyes meet and she smiles at me playfully. I'm hooked on her smile. Hooked on her voice. Her scent. On *her*. I've never felt this way about anyone, and I know I never will.

I kneel bracing one arm on the table. “Can’t be too careful, can I?”

“I guess not,” she says. “Knowing my luck I’m sure today would be the perfect day for him to show up with his family.”

“Well, on the bright side, at least I know you’ll be able to handle yourself.” And I can’t help myself. I take Poppy’s hand in mine, electricity sparking against my fingertips when they touch her soft skin. “I know firsthand that you’ve got quite a death grip.”

She groans, dropping her head. “I’m so sorry about that.”

Again with the urge. And again with my failure to stop it. I take her chin in between two fingers, raising it so I can see her gorgeous eyes again. I’m close enough that every breath I take is filled with her scent.

She wets her lips. Swallows.

“No need to apologize, Poppy,” I rasp, my voice gravelly. Thick. “No need...”

My eyes dart to her lips. Red. Full. Inviting. I wonder if they feel as soft as they look. I wonder if they’d taste as sweet too. I wonder...

I shake my head. I’m doing it again.

I stand up, grabbing her bowl off the table before turning around and heading for the sink. I drop the bowls in the sink and let the water run while I grip the counter so hard I swear I’ll break off a piece of it at any moment.

I take a deep breath and sigh, my hands shaking from adrenaline.

“You’re probably right,” Poppy says from the living room.

I turn around and find her curled up on the couch, cuddling Blaze on my lap. I’ve never been so jealous of a dog before but I am, seeing Blaze sprawled out on Poppy’s bare legs, head nudged against her body.

“About?” I manage to say, turning around and shutting off the tap.

“I don’t think I’m ready for a hike. I know I’ve slept for a day, but I’m pretty sure I’m going to fall asleep the moment you leave.”

I shake off excess water from my hands and then head over to her.

“Keep eating my stew and you’ll get your strength back up in no time.”

She smiles. “Maybe I’ll grow a beard just like yours too. That’s the secret to a mountain man’s beard. Mountain man stew.”

I snort. “Might be.”

“Oh god, I hope not,” she says, shoving her face into Blaze’s fur.

“Well, the fridge is stocked. The gardens too. Relax and settle in. Anything you want is yours.”

If only it went the other way. I want you, Poppy. You’re all I want.

“Thanks, Wolfe.” She shakes her head. “For everything. I don’t know how I’ll repay you.”

“Seeing you healthy again is payment enough, angel.”

She grins, her cheeks reddening a shade lighter than her lips.

I take one more look before grabbing my pack, my lunch, and my coat. “Take care of her,” I call back to Blaze from the doorway. “And don’t feed Blaze too much. He can get a little bossy when he’s hungry.”

“We’ll be fine,” Poppy says. “Go protect your mountain.”

And for the first time, I don’t want to leave. I want to stay here with Poppy.

She’s all I want.



I WIPE my brow as I sit back on the roof, looking out across the valley. It used to be my favorite view. It used to calm my nerves and soothe my soul. Now?

I can't leave the lookout fast enough because the only view I want is of Poppy. Thankfully, she's still there when I close my eyes. I can trace her outline with my mind's eye, piecing her together bit by bit until I see her, smiling back at me.

But it's not enough.

Something animalistic tears through me and I scream. I fucking roar because I can't believe someone so small and delicate has me wrapped around their finger. And Poppy does. She has no clue that I'm at her every beck and call. That there isn't a damn thing I wouldn't do for her.

I thrust my hand through my hair, shaking it out before scrubbing my face and beard. It makes no sense that I can have such intense feelings for someone so soon. So quick. But I can't help it. There's something about her. Something that I felt the moment I laid eyes on her.

And I can't ignore it, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me feel. Fate brought my girl to me, and I'll do everything in my power to keep her with me. I just hope when her memory returns she'll stay. If she doesn't, I'll follow her anywhere if she'll have me.

I thought I'd never leave these mountains but for Poppy? The choice is easy.

A helicopter circles the eastern valley. It's not unusual during fire season, but we're at the end. There's no need to waste fuel or resources. Training maybe. Or maybe search and rescue. Maybe...

Could they be looking for my girl?

She's only been with me a few days and the idea of her leaving so soon doesn't sit well. The radio's been silent. If it was a search and rescue, I'd have heard something by now. Training?

After brushing myself off, I climb down the ladder from the roof and head inside. The roof is patched up and winter-

ready. I have a few more items on my to-do list, but it can wait for another day. My girl's waiting for me.

I head to the radio to call dispatch to sign off for the day.

The radio crackles for a short time before they respond with the go-ahead. Once I finish with my rundown of the day and inform them of when I'll be back, I sign off. But rather than ending the call, they continue. They tell me about the helicopter. About the rescue mission.

And the more I listen, the more it feels like there's a weight on my chest. A boulder weighing me down.

My time with Poppy is coming to an end.

Chapter 4

Poppy

IT'S STILL LIGHT out when I wake up.

My head isn't throbbing. My muscles aren't aching. Sprawled out on my side, cuddling a pillow that smells like Wolfe, I feel safe. I'm calm and relaxed even though I shouldn't be, given the circumstances.

I should be more worried than I am. Memory loss isn't something to ignore. Neither are the nightmares that plague me each time I sleep. But this time was different. I didn't have any nightmares—nothing but unremarkable blackness until I woke up.

And now, when I close my eyes I don't see the man with a scarred face. I see Wolfe. It may be fleeting but I'll take it.

I stretch out, my feet rubbing something furry. Blaze groans and I snort.

"Sorry," I mutter, sitting up and scratching him behind his ears as I look around at the cabin.

At least my short-term memory is still intact. I might not remember falling asleep, but remember everything else, especially the way Wolfe looked at me.

Warmth spreads across my skin as I close my eyes and see him. Muscles bulge under his flannel shirt as he shifts his weight in his chair, eyes fixated on mine. Drifting when he thinks I'm not looking.

I don't need to look though. I can feel his gaze on my skin everywhere it lands like a hot spike dragging across my skin.

And when he touches me, it feels like that hot spike is being driven deep into my belly, heat spreading through my core.

“Wolfe back yet?” I ask Blaze.

Unfortunately, the bump on my head didn’t unlock an ability to talk to animals. Blaze hops off the couch and trots into the kitchen. A few seconds later he returns with a metal bowl snug in his mouth, shoving it onto my lap.

“I’ll take that as a *no*.”

Blaze licks his muzzle before letting out a soft bark as he sits down.

“And that you’re hungry.”

He shoves his face onto my legs and gives me a pitiful look that melts my heart. “Alright, show me where your food is.”

Blaze leads me into the kitchen and sits in front of one of the cabinets, pawing at it a few times for good measure. I wouldn’t have needed his help to find it though. The wood panel has been scratched repeatedly—long white grooves etched in all different directions. There are bite marks along the edges with a chunk or two missing, including the handle.

“You’re a handful, aren’t you?” I ask, kneeling next to him. “But you’re not going to give me any trouble are you?” I ask half-joking—the other half seriously questioning what kind of dog Wolfe left me with.

After getting Blaze situated, I break off a piece of Wolfe’s sourdough, add a heaping spoonful of peanut butter on top of it, and then wander around the cabin.

It’s the first time I’ve had a real chance to look around. It’s not large—a single, open room divided into a living area on one side and the kitchen on the other. There’s only one bedroom in the back, and I feel bad for stealing it. Although, it’s not like I asked for it. I’ve been out cold most of the time I’ve been here.

Wolfe can have it back. I don’t want to impose any more than I have. The couch is comfortable enough, but I can’t

imagine it being large enough for Wolfe. All those thick limbs of his hanging off of it, clutching a pillow.

Wishing it was me...

An uncomfortable thought rises. What if I'm taken? What if he's worried sick looking for me and...

What if. What if. What. If.

There are too many questions circling and none of them have answers. They won't until I remember or someone who knows me shows up at Wolfe's door. The likelihood of that happening is low. I don't even know where I am but I know it's far from civilization.

After looking around in the cabin a while longer, I head outside. Only to immediately head back inside when I open the door. It's *freezing*. I let out a shuddering sigh, teeth chattering as I walk to the bedroom to find something warm.

Fortunately, there are more than enough warm clothes hanging in Wolfe's closet. Unfortunately, they're meant to fit a giant and not an average woman. And no matter how many times I riffle through the clothes, they don't get any smaller. The clothes that Penny offered me aren't warm enough either. I guess no one expected a cold front to move through.

I grab a flannel shirt that most likely needed the wool from an entire flock of sheep to create and slide it on. As I button it up, I head into the bathroom and see the result.

"Perfect," I mutter, lifting my arms out.

Stick me on a mast and I'll catch enough wind to navigate a small vessel through rough waters. Well, it's better than freezing. Maybe. I'm not sure. Now to find a belt...

Unfortunately, none of them fit but I found a small nylon rope to complete the hideous ensemble. As I make my way out of the bedroom, head down as I finish tying the rope, Blaze starts growling at me.

I take another step and he starts barking, backing away, cowering as though he's about to take on some monster. I get that this outfit isn't exactly the height of fashion, but yikes.

“It’s me, Blaze,” I say, kneeling. Almost as soon as he hears my voice he relaxes, wagging his tail as he trots over to me. He’s hesitant, sniffing me, until finally realizing I’m not a threat and starts licking my hands.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, scratching his ears.

As soon as I’m outside, I begin to understand why Wolfe loves it out here. It’s *gorgeous*.

His cabin is surrounded by tall trees. They’re so large that I imagine most are over a century old. Sturdy and unchanged. There’s a lot of history and I’d like to hear more about the land when Wolfe returns.

I stare up into the sky. It’s darker now and heavy clouds are moving in. The winds are picking up and the temperature seems to be dropping even more.

“Are we in for a storm, Blaze?”

He sits there, panting at me before trotting away. I watch as he sniffs the ground, moving along the fenced perimeter of the garden. I follow, watching him as he picks up his pace before taking off into the forest after a chipmunk.

Not exactly the companion Wolfe hoped for me, I think. I sigh, turning back to the gardens. They’re well-kept in neat rows. And even though the foliage is browning and wilting, there are plenty of pumpkins, squash, and other vegetables ready to harvest.

I unlock the latch and head inside. When I reach the pumpkins, something familiar rises. A strong smell of spice. Warm feelings and the sound of laughter echo in my head as I close my eyes and see the outline of figures slowly coming into focus. Faces that I can’t completely place smiling at me—a memory unlocking, piece by piece.

But it’s fleeting and the more I try to refocus the more it disperses until finally, it’s gone. Ephemeral like a wisp of smoke.

After browsing the gardens, I decide to make a soup for Wolfe. It’s the least I can do for everything he’s done for me. By the time I’ve finished collecting everything I need, Blaze

comes back completely soaked and muddy and makes a beeline into the cabin before I have the chance to react.

Metal crashes. Wood scrapes against wood. My heart is in my throat as I close my eyes and turn, hoping by some miracle that this is some sort of hallucination brought on by my head injury.

But when I open my eyes, pinching myself as I see the mayhem unfolding before my eyes, I know I'm not dreaming. I also know that the man with the scarred face in my dreams will be the least of my worries. Wolfe's going to kill me before he finds me.

"Oh. My. God..."

There's nothing else to say as Blaze zooms into the kitchen and out of it, hopping onto the couch and off of it. Back and forth. Up and down. Whatever he found in the woods, I'd like a piece of it because I'm going to need some to outrun Wolfe when he sees what happened to his cabin.

"Blaze," I groan, rubbing my eyes. "What are you doing?"

Whatever he wants, apparently. And right now, he's nothing but a blur of muddy fur as he takes off back outside.

I take one long, slow look at the destruction, turn around, and close the door behind me. I'm not sure there's a rug large enough to sweep an entire cabin under. I'll tackle that... eventually.

I roam around a little, trying to find Blaze. Eventually, I come across a small barn a small enclosure on the edge of the property. I don't remember Wolfe mentioning any other animals but Blaze and I haven't seen any either.

It's rustic and weather-worn. Inviting isn't a word I'd use to describe it but I'm curious. I take a tentative look inside and find Blaze rolling around on the dirt and straw floor as a strong smell overwhelms me.

Whatever animals Wolfe once raised are long gone. It looks like the barn is being used as nothing more than storage. Tools line the walls on my right. Rakes and shovels. Hammers

and drills and saws and axes. And many more that I have no clue what they're used for.

After wandering around for a few minutes, I walk back my previous statement. There are plenty of animals living in this barn, but none are the kind I'd like to pet.

Bats are roosting in the rafters. There are more empty hornets nests than I can count. And I'm pretty sure the rustling I hear behind a stack of hay in the corner is not a friendly barn cat but a small family of raccoons angry that I've intruded on their home.

I back away slowly as Blaze growls at a dark corner.

I'm nearly out of the barn when I notice a longbow hanging next to the tools. It looks handmade. Smooth but well-worn with a quiver hanging next to it filled with arrows.

I don't have time to think before I grab it off the wall, sling the quiver over me, and head outside. It's like another part of me is taking over as I wander around outside searching for something. When I move behind the cabin, I pause, staring at a bale of hay with a target attached to it.

My mind's blank as I prepare myself. Every movement I make seems practiced. I don't remember shooting a bow before but my body does. It feels natural in my hand as I run my fingers across the supple curve.

My breathing is slow and steady and as I turn around, I see Blaze sitting behind me, watching me curiously.

"I don't know," I mutter, as though answering an unasked question.

I turn, readying the bow as I look down toward the target. Again, my body moves without thought as I reach behind me and grab an arrow. But as soon as my fingertips touch one, searing pain shoots through my skull as though it's splitting my head in two, sending me and the bow to the ground.

Memories flood through me in rapid succession.

Me in a large courtyard, the clang of metal against metal. Stone walls. *Flash*. Long elegant dresses. Dancing. The sound

of music and the smell of food. *Flash*. The snap of a bowstring and the thump of an arrow. *Flash*. A woman's face inches from mine. Scared. Urging me to go. *Flash*. The forest. *Flash*. The man with a scarred face but this time there's lights. Strong, lights so bright and piercing that it makes the pain in my head so intense that I start dry heaving.

It's not until I feel Blaze against my body that I finally relax and the pain subsides. He licks my face as I swallow bile in my throat, my mind a maelstrom of uneasiness as I try to unravel what the memory fragments mean.

And whether they're real. They can't be, right? None of them are making any sense. Or maybe Penny was on to something when she asked if I'd come from some Halloween party. The clothing everyone wore in these fragments looks more like costumes. Something from a different age. I may not remember where I came from, but I know *when* I came from.

My legs are wobbly as I stand. My stomach's queasy. And I'm again left with more questions than answers.

A surge of emotions rush through me. Frustration with my condition. Annoyance with being so lost. And anger that I'll have to leave the one person that makes everything make sense to me. This little world here on the mountain makes sense to me.

But what's happening to me does not.

The first arrow whips through the air and hits the mark. I'm already replacing the arrow, shooting it and three more in rapid succession. I'm not sure I've taken a single breath by the time I grab the final arrow, position it, and then fire it.

It hits its mark, and when I finally take a breath, I feel someone's hand on my neck.

"Nice shoot—"

I don't think—I react—grabbing the person's hand, rotating as I throw them over my hip and onto their back with a scream.

My eyes bulge and my heart drops into my stomach as Wolfe coughs and sputters, rolling on the ground.

“I’m so sorry! I—I don’t...”

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what happened or how I was able to throw a man the size of Wolfe over my hip and onto the ground, but it scares me.

Who am I? *What* am I? And what’s going to happen when I find out?

Chapter 5

Wolfe

SWEET. Jesus.

I think I'm in love. There's no question about it as I stare up at Poppy—slightly dazed, highly aroused, and out of breath after getting the wind knocked out of me. It feels like I'm underwater as I watch her lips move without hearing her words. Pink hues paint her pale cheeks and her eyes are watery and remorseful as they assess me.

There's no need to worry. Even though I'm flat on my back after she tossed me over her hip like a sack of potatoes, I'll be fine. A single kiss from those soft cherry lips would make everything feel better. I'd be back on my feet and after a few minutes, she'd be the one on her back. Her stomach. Another set of cheeks would be red. Her sweet little—*fuck*.

The urges won't quit when I'm around Poppy. *Poppy*. It's not her real name. I know that now. Although I know a little about her, it's still more than she knows. She deserves to know, even though I know what it will mean. There's no way someone like Poppy would want to stay in a place like this. She lives a different kind of life.

"I'm so sorry," Poppy says, her words finally reaching me.

"I'll be fine," I grunt, savoring the feel of her hands on my chest as she kneels next to me. "Where'd you learn to shoot like that anyway?" I ask although I can hazard a pretty good guess now.

She falls back onto her heels and shakes her head. "I don't know."

Her gaze darkens as she bows her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Poppy,” I say, sitting up. I should tell her now, but there’s a block inside me that won’t budge. And seeing her... feeling her... I can’t.

Her soft skin is cold beneath my palm as I cup her face, thumb brushing against her. I want to press my thumb against her lips, toying gently with them as I imagine tasting them. Her pink tongue swipes across them, and when I look into her eyes again, I can’t help but wonder if she’s thinking the same thing.

What I wouldn’t give for one taste.

“Wolfe?”

I let my hand fall away, and for a brief moment, I think she might be annoyed that I pulled back. A slight frown forms on her face, but when she talks, it’s clear that it’s all in my head.

“Are you okay? It looked like you went somewhere else for a moment.”

I rub the back of my neck, smiling as I say, “I think I might have. I’m a little loopy after being thrown like a sack of potatoes.”

Poppy’s blush deepens as I rub my lower back, throbbing beneath my fingertips. I glance behind me and see a few small rocks I landed on. I’ll feel that tomorrow.

“You might be small, Poppy, but you sure pack a wallop.”

She covers her face in her hands and groans. “I’m so sorry, Wolfe,” she says, her voice muffled. “I’m a little skittish.”

Poppy lets her hands fall from her face as she sits back up. “And with you gone. I guess I’m more on edge.”

She doesn’t need to apologize. There’s not a damn thing Poppy could do that would change my feelings for her.

“You’re full of surprises, Poppy,” I say, grabbing her hand. “And I wonder how many more you’ve got left.”

“I wish I knew,” she says.

Her hand's so soft in mine. Cold and trembling. I want to warm it up. All of her. I bring my lips to her hand as she lets out a short gasp. I pause a few inches from her skin when Poppy says, "I think I have another surprise, Wolfe."

I swallow, meeting her eyes as her sweet scent hits me. I take another deep breath of her before she says, "I think that's my horse."



"NOBLE," I mutter under my breath as I look out the window at the horse standing inside my barn. It's been a long time since that barn has housed animals. It was never home to a horse. Goats and chickens mostly.

I turn around, listening to the wind hammering the cabin walls. The windows are rattling. Rain's coming down hard. A great storm might be coming or it might not. The weather in Whispering Winds is predictable in that it's unpredictable. Sometimes these storms blow through in a few hours. Sometimes they stick around. Wasn't expecting one, but it won't matter because we've got everything we need here.

I've got everything I need.

The thought rises while I stride into the kitchen, eyes on Poppy as she moves efficiently through my tiny kitchen like it's hers. It is hers or at least, I wish it was. I don't want her to leave. She fits in perfectly but our time is running out.

After speaking with Dee on the radio earlier, I knew Poppy's the girl the helicopter was searching for. Fit the description. The timeline. And when they told me she was an actress, that checked out too. Never seen a woman as beautiful as Poppy.

I'm glad that her life isn't in danger from those things she has nightmares over, but I'm living in one now that Poppy will be leaving me.

Dee's buying me another day with her—enough time to fill her in and show her around the mountain. Maybe plant the

seed that a mountain life isn't so bad. But coming from a life like hers, I doubt it will be enough.

I sit down at the table, unable to take my eyes off Poppy. She's making me something special as an apology. I told her it was necessary but she insisted.

"It's almost ready," she says, glancing over at me.

"I've got nothing but time," I say, leaning back in my chair, folding my arms across my chest as I watch Poppy take a spoonful of bright orange soup into her mouth.

She closes her eyes, swallows, and then lets out a sensual moan that makes my pants uncomfortably tight.

"You're going to love it, Wolfe," she says, her tongue swiping across her lips as my breath catches in my chest. And then again when she dips her finger into her mouth, cheeks hollowing as she stares at me.

Hard to focus when all the blood in my head has gone south.

I rub my eyes and then perch my arms on the edge of the table as I ask, "Is this a family recipe?"

"I'm not sure," she says. "I can't remember. Remember?" she adds with a smile before turning back around to the stove.

She grabs another pinch of salt and adds it to the pot.

"It must be," she says. "It feels like second nature making this. Muscle memory I guess."

"You've got no problems with that," I add, smiling even though my back still aches.

She groans. "Yeah. I can't believe you haven't kicked me out yet. I've strangled you, thrown you around, let your dog run rampant inside your cabin, and on top of that, I made you adopt my horse for the time being."

I snort. "Maybe you have a point."

The truth is that she could've burned down my cabin and I wouldn't care. She has a hold on me and there's nothing I can do to break it. I don't want to break it either.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen next.”

“I’ll be sure to keep the bow and arrows under lock and key.”

She shakes her head. “I’m a little dangerous, huh?”

Only to my heart, sweet girl.

“I don’t mind, Poppy. I like you as you are. You can handle yourself. You can handle me.”

She smiles over her shoulder before turning back to her soup, hair flipping. “What if the way I am now isn’t me?” she asks, still stirring. “What if I’m...”

The rest of her sentence hangs in the air as I stand and move toward her. Dark strands of hair frame her face as she lowers her head and drops the wooden spoon, bracing herself on the counter.

I open my mouth but stop myself.

Each time I build the nerve to tell what I found out, I hold back. I know it’s selfish but she’ll find out soon enough. I want to live in this world a little longer.

I’m only a few feet away from her but already I feel the crackling energy between us. I feel each time we’re close. It sends a jolt into my stomach and races through my chest as I close the gap, placing my hand on her mid back before cupping her neck, soothing her the best I can.

“Trust me when I say that everything will be okay, Poppy. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Except me,” she whispers. “I’m afraid of what I might be. I can do things... I’ve seen things that make me wonder.”

“Poppy,” I rasp, twirling a strand of her hair around my finger as I grapple with telling her the truth. “Poppy, there’s some—”

Before I have the chance to finish, she spins around. It feels like every muscle in my body has seized. My heart’s beating so fast that it feels like my entire body’s vibrating. She’s so damn gorgeous my body can’t take it. I can’t think

straight. I can't think, period. I swear I'm the one with amnesia.

Her teeth scrape against her bottom lip as she appraises me beneath long lashes, and I resist the urge to step forward and pin her against the counter. Cup her face and capture those lips that keep beckoning me.

"I don't want to think about it anymore. About the past," she whispers. "I want to think about what's in front of me." Her gaze drifts slowly away from my eyes, down my neck, and across my chest before snapping back up.

"And what's in front of you, Poppy?" My voice sounds like it's been dragged through miles of jagged gravel, words crawling from my lips.

Without thinking, I place a hand on Poppy's hip and she lets out a soft moan. Her eyes flutter shut as she grasps the hem of my shirt.

When she opens her eyes again, I no longer see my sweet little Poppy. The delicate angel. Scared and tired and uncertain. There's a heat in her gaze and I feel it across my skin like a hungry wildfire.

There's only one answer to my question and she's giving it to me silently. I feel it—her delicate fingers like firebrands against my body as she slides her hands over me. I see it on her skin, flushed as she takes in heavy breaths.

It's taking every bit of restraint left in me not to palm her breasts as I kiss her. Taste her. Devour her. If I give in now, I won't stop. There's no way I could stop myself once I tasted Poppy's sweet lips.

"Poppy," I moan, cupping her face as I breathe in her scent.

It's like a shock to the system, electrifying my senses and engulfing my nerves in fire. The restraints are falling away. I can't stop myself. I can't fucking take it any longer.

"What's in front of you, angel? What do you want?" I ask hoarsely as my hand slides along the curves of her body—

across her hip and up her ribcage as I kiss the crown of her head.

I'm losing it. I'm fucking losing it.

"I..." Poppy moans as I feel her chest rise and fall rapidly against my body. "I..."

Crack.

The lights go out. Neither of us moves. The only sounds in the cabin are the storm outside, the tapping of Blaze's nails against the floor as he trots to us, and the rhythmic sound of Poppy's breath against my skin.

Fuck. What am I doing? What are *we* doing? I'm tormenting myself with a possibility that never will be.

"Good thing the soup's ready or we'd be having stale bread for dinner tonight."

Or each other. The thoughts refuse to relent.

"Generator should kick on soon."

"Too bad," she says, her fingers still toying with my shirt—each movement sending a jolt through me.

I can't help but wonder how those fingers would feel on bare skin. How they'd look running along my body. Wrapped around my...

I swallow, closing my eyes as I fail miserably to shut out the bad things I'd like to do to this good girl.

"Why's that?" I ask, my mind undressing her.

Each button undone one by one. My flannel parting slightly to reveal a long line of Poppy's perfect little body. The curve of her tits. Her navel. Panties and thighs.

"I don't mind the dark. And I wouldn't mind eating by candlelight or by the fire."

"I could turn the generator off."

I'd take a fucking sledgehammer to it if it would make Poppy happy. We're still so close, neither of us wanting to

move. My hands on her. Her hands moving along my back. Up and down. Up and down.

“No,” she says. “It’s fine.”

“I’ll keep the lights off then. I’ll get you your candlelit dinner Poppy. I’ll...”

I’ll do anything to make her happy. Make her stay. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.

“Okay,” she says as the generator powers up and the lights come on.

She groans, clenching tightly against me as I wrap my arms around her.

“The light’s grating now.”

I reach behind her, flipping a switch and engulfing us in darkness again.

“Better?” I ask, stroking the back of her head, taking in another deep breath of her.

“Much,” she says against her chest. “You’re quite the protector, Wolfe. Caring for me. Making sure I’m comfortable. You’re... like no one I’ve ever met. But now it’s my turn to return the favor.”

“Yeah?”

She pulls back, leaning against the counter as I brace my hands on either side of her.

“I want you to get off your feet. It’s my turn to take care of you. The soup’s ready, and I’m sure you’re starving after the day you’ve had, cleaning up after all of my messes.”

“I don’t mind one bit.”

Her eyes search my face, wondering if I mean it. And I do. There’s nothing Poppy could throw at me that I couldn’t handle. Except maybe an axe. Yeah, that wouldn’t be good. She’s a whiz with a bow and hand-to-hand combat. I’m not interested in finding out if her blade work is at the same level.

“Well, sit down and relax. I’ll take care of the candles and more importantly, your belly,” she adds, prodding my stomach. She smiles, mouthing *firm*.

It’s not the only thing about my body that’s firm. If she leans a little closer, she’d find out quickly.

“I don’t want to ask you twice, Wolfe.”

“I know what happens when you get angry,” I say. “I might end up on my back again.”

Poppy smiles and then rolls up onto her toes, her leg brushing in between mine and against the firmest part of my body. It sends a fluttering jolt through me.

And then again when she whispers, “Would that be so bad?”

This girl.

“Not at all,” I rasp, my hands skimming down her sides as she rocks back onto her heels.

Forget dinner, I want my dessert.



THIS DOESN’T FEEL REAL.

Maybe there’s something about the candlelight that’s playing tricks with my mind as I steal glances at the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Or maybe it’s the minor head trauma, compliments of Poppy’s super-human strength that has me all sorts of mixed up.

I keep biting the inside of my mouth to remind myself I’m not dreaming. Poppy is real. Everything I feel for her is real. And she’s all I want.

But does she want me? A recluse who spends his time high up in the mountains. Watching. Waiting. Prepared for anything that might come my way.

But nothing could prepare me for Poppy. Nothing could prepare me for the fire she lit inside me the day she stumbled

up the mountain path. My fate was sealed the moment I laid eyes on her. And no matter what happens next, I know I'll never be the same.

I take another spoonful of Poppy's soup as I watch her. There's something about the way the flickering candlelight plays with her delicate features that makes her even more beautiful. Her lips look softer. Her eyes more playful. And no matter how hard I try, I can't look away.

"The storm's coming down hard now," she says, turning her head to the window. "I guess you get them often if you have a generator."

I finally swallow the soup sitting in my mouth and set the spoon down in the empty bowl.

"Sometimes it seems like we have more storms than clear days, Poppy. Rain and wind and snow. Fires and smoke. Hail. There's no weather this mountain hasn't seen, except for tornadoes. Still waiting for that one."

"I'm not," Poppy says. "I've been through many of them before. They're scary."

I swallow hard. "You remember?"

Poppy turns to me, smiling. "Bits and pieces but it's still a little hazy." She eats a spoonful of soup and then says. "My mother used to make this soup. I knew it the moment I tasted it. And the more I ate, the more the memories of her came back to me. I can't remember what she looks like though."

"That's great, Poppy," I say as more uncomfortable thoughts rise.

"Something wrong?"

I shake my head. "Nothing's wrong Poppy. Must be tough not being able to remember your mother's face. I know it won't be long until you remember everything."

She nods as she scoops up more soup.

"And then you'll be back to your normal life."

Her spoon is a few inches from her lips when he pauses, her eyes fixed on mine. “I’m not sure that’s possible,” she says after a few moments, taking the spoon into her mouth and swallowing.

She leans back in her chair and yawns as she stares lazily at the bowl.

“You’ve had a long day, Poppy. You need your rest.”

I push away from the table, grabbing my bowl before moving over to hers. When I reach for it, she grabs my wrist. “I’d sleep better if you were with me.”

Pressure builds against my fly as I look down at Poppy. “I’ll be right outside your door. You’re safe.”

“I know but I’m tired of feeling like an imposition. I’ll take the couch then.”

I shake my head as one of her fingers begins to stroke my arm. My mind’s swirling so fast that it’s a miracle anything coherent leaves my lips.

“That’s not happening.”

“Then stay with me.” Her voice is low and pleading. “I want you close in case I have another nightmare.”

My jaw tenses as I grit my teeth. Sleeping in the same bed as Poppy? A man only has so much restraint and Poppy’s whittling mine down.

Stroking... stroking... fucking stroking. Those tiny fingers are unraveling me expertly with soft, sensual movements.

“It would make me feel better knowing you’re close. I’m not above throwing you again,” she says. “It will be a softer landing this time though.”

I laugh and then shake my head. “Okay, Poppy. If it will make you feel safer. I’ll stay with you tonight.”

“Didn’t think I’d need to twist your arm.”

“It’s not...”

“Kidding,” she says, letting go of my arm. “I’m going to shower. I’ll clean up here when I’m done. I’ve already made too many messes for you today.”

She stands up and glances at Blaze, fast asleep in front of the wood stove.

“That wasn’t your fault,” I say, missing her hand on my arm.

Still can’t believe Blaze lost his mind like that. I thought I trained him better.

“Still,” she says, moving toward the bedroom. “I’ll clean up.”

“You’re my guest, Poppy. And you cooked the best meal I’ve had in years. My mother would be ashamed if I didn’t do the dishes.”

She smiles at me over her shoulder as I try not to stare at the way her hips sway with each step. “Better get to it,” she says. “Because I’m taking over once I’m done. And I don’t take long showers.”

“Challenge accepted, Poppy.”

Her eyes flare for a brief moment before she spins around and rushes off to the bedroom.

I start on the dishes, stopping almost immediately as I take a deep breath, closing my eyes as I picture her in my head.

I see the way her nose crinkles right before she laughs. The way her eyes light up when they meet with mine. Or when she sees Blaze. I know all of her subtle movements and tics and mannerisms because when Poppy’s with me, she’s all I see. All I focus on. All I *want*.

I try not to think about Poppy in the shower. Naked. Hands scrubbing her body. Her hair. Water sliding across her skin, slick and wet and—*fuck*. There’s no way I can keep Poppy out of my head.

I lean into it. I stop fighting it as I scrub the dishes clean and imagine how perfect her tits would look in the palm of my hands. In my mouth. How the curve of her ass would look

slamming into me as I wrap a fist around her hair, tugging her as I drive deeper and deeper into her.

Poppy on her back. Her side. Her stomach. On me bouncing and bouncing and bouncing. Her lips around my cock. My face between her thighs.

There's no place my mind hasn't gone by the time I'm finishing up, letting a plate clang against the enamel before sinking my head into my hands.

"I hope you saved some for me," Poppy says from behind me.

She's standing in the doorway of the bedroom, towel wrapped around her body, hair soaked as she stares at me. I try to respond but all that comes out is a strangled grunt that makes Poppy laugh.

Her towel drops as the door closes, and for a brief moment, I no longer have to imagine her naked.

I'm not sure how much sleep I'll be getting tonight.

Chapter 6

Poppy

AND THEN YOU'LL be back to your normal life.

I thought about his comment the entire shower, and now that I'm toweling off, I still can't let it go. Wolfe wants me gone once my memory returns.

It hurts more than it should but it's not like I didn't see it coming. I've been a burden ever since I showed up in his life. He's content up here in his mountain retreat by himself, and once I leave, he'll be the one going back to his normal life.

But how am I supposed to go back to normal life when I know a man like Wolfe exists in this world? I thought we had a connection but I guess I've been reading into something that isn't there.

And I'm running out of time. My memories aren't tiny fragments anymore. They're not pieces disconnected from a whole.

I remember my name, my family, and my dog Max. I remember how I got here. Why I'm here, how I learned to throw a mountain man onto his back, and all of the physical skills my body remembered. I remember it all. But none of it matters if I don't have Wolfe.

After I finish toweling off, I pad into the bedroom, the cold air clinging to my warm skin as I listen to the clang of dishes in the sink. He didn't have to clean up, but I'm thinking Wolfe doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do.

He'll be sharing the bed... Maybe he...

I sigh. It's a ridiculous thought. I clutch my towel as I head for the bedroom door I forgot to close.

When I make it to the doorway, I no longer feel the cool air. I wouldn't be surprised if every bead of water on my body evaporates in a few seconds from the heat being generated from looking at Wolfe. Watching his arms flex as he scrubs a plate.

My heart races and my stomach flutters as I imagine those hands over my body, molded against my breasts. My ass. My throat. Holding me in place. Pinning me down. The thoughts I'm having are unrelenting. And my body's reaction is so strong that I can hardly breathe.

It's not until Wolfe drops a dish in the sink that I finally snap out of it.

"I hope you saved some for me."

Wolfe turns, a tingling sensation growing on my skin everywhere his gaze lands. Up my leg. Along my arm and neck until finally our eyes meet and my breath hitches. There might be a large gap between us, but the way he's looking at me makes me feel like he's all over me.

He makes a strange, throaty noise as he stumbles forward and I laugh. Apparently, he's not as stoic as he seems. There's another part of him beneath that thick, stony facade and I'm going to unwrap it.

I take a step back, placing my hand on the door. My towel shifts as I close the door, slipping off my body as it shuts. I wonder if he saw.

The coughing fit from the kitchen a few seconds later gives me my answer.



WHEN WOLFE WALKS out of the bathroom, it's my turn to become a muddled, incoherent mess. The room's dim, lit only by the smoldering embers of a dying fire in the living room

and the light seeping out from behind the bathroom door. It's more than enough light for me to get a perfect view from bed.

"Still awake?" Wolfe asks in a low rumble, holding tightly to the towel around his waist. His eyes probably haven't adjusted yet, but I assume he can feel me watching him.

I take a deep breath as he whispers my name, and takes a step forward. Electricity pulses through me as I silently take him in. His thick legs. His abs—bricked up like a wall. The two angular lines that dive below his towel...

I clear my throat. "I'm up." My voice is an octave too high. Too thin.

Wolfe grunts as I grab the water set out for me. I take a long sip as he moves around the bed and to the closet on the other side of the room. Each step he takes rumbles in my chest and shakes the glass in my hand until he finally stops.

"I sleep in my boxers. I hope you don't mind."

I try my best not to spit out my water.

"Not at all," I say after finally swallowing.

Wolfe grunts again as I slide back beneath the covers and turn to him. He's standing in front of the closet as tall and broad as a mountain, my eyes slowly taking every inch of him. Ridges and valleys of hard muscles. His eyes.

Oh no.

He's staring at me, an amused expression on his face after finding me openly checking him out. I guess his eyesight finally adjusted. I burrow beneath the blanket, which is slowly becoming a furnace fueled by the heat of my embarrassment.

"I'm going to change. Fair warning, Poppy."

My eyes flare. My core clenches. And when I hear the towel drop, my imagination goes haywire along with the rest of my body.

Don't look. Don't look. Do. Not—oh... my.

I looked. I'm still looking. I can't stop looking. That's a big butt. And that's a huge... And it's gone! Wolfe slides his

boxers on and then stretches his arms over his head, groaning.

He walks slowly over to the bathroom. I close my eyes, the image of his naked body emblazoned in my mind. He turns off the light and then he walks over to me.

I feel his heat as he leans down toward me and rasps, “I guess you missed my warning.”

I swallow hard, blood racing to my ears and pounding in my head. Wolfe presses a kiss on my forehead, snorts lightly, and then moves onto the other side of the bed.

The way the bed shifts from his weight when he slides into it nearly rolls me into him. A part of me wishes it did, while the other part of me is still grappling with his words. I shouldn't be getting my hopes up.

“Goodnight, Poppy. Try not to strangle me in your sleep.”

“I'll do my best so long as you don't crush me in yours.”

“I make no promises, Poppy. It's been a long time since I shared a bed.”

I let out a deep sigh, repositioning myself, acutely aware of how close Wolfe feels even though I can't see him. Feel the warmth from his mostly naked body. Breathe in the fresh smell of soap on him.

I usually have difficulties falling asleep, but before I know it, I'm out like a light.



I BLINK AWAKE, my vision blurry as my eyes adjust to the light. I've never slept so soundly. And I've never been more comfortable than I am now, snuggled up to this fuzzy bear.

Wait.

I blink a few more times and turn my head slowly, surveying the solid mounds of muscles I'm clinging to. I don't remember moving at all during the night let alone snuggling up to Wolfe.

His scent fills my lungs with each breath as I move my fingers across his torso, feeling his firm muscles. My pulse quickens as my belly twists. And when I realize that his arm is around me and I've slung my leg over him, I'm in partial shock.

Do I move? Do I... *enjoy* this for a little longer? I promised not to strangle him. I never promised not to cuddle him in my sleep. It's not my fault. My body knows what it wants.

I stroke his chest absently as I listen to his heart beating. I could lay like this forever, snuggled against a warm slab of muscle. *Ahem*. Wolfe. There's more to him than his insane body. The one I'm holding onto right now. The one that I'm sure was built by wrestling bears and hauling felled trees. The one...

That's now stroking my back slowly. His touch is tender as prickling sensations cascade through my body. My mind's racing as I continue stroking him absently.

And then he laughs. A deep laugh that jolts me from my stupor.

"What's so funny?" I ask as I finally peer up at him.

His hair's beautifully disheveled, and I barely resist the urge to reach up and tunnel my fingers through it. He doesn't look like he just woke up. No tired eyes or sagging eyelids. His gaze is light, playful, and almost energetic as he stares at me.

"It's hard not to laugh when you're caressing my nipple, Poppy."

He laughs again as I stare at my hand. Sure enough.

"Sorry," I mutter into his chest.

"No need to be sorry, Poppy. I love having your hands on me."

I smile as I cozy up even closer to him.

"You do?"

“I do.”

He kisses the top of my head. Warmth spreads from the crown of my head all the way down my body, pooling between my thighs.

“I like feeling you against me,” he says, stroking my back with one hand while the other reaches for my hand. “Sleeping next to you.” He brings it to his lips and kisses it softly. “Even if you drool on me and fondle my nipples.”

“I didn’t drool.” I touch the corner of my mouth and then his chest, hair matted with... “Okay, maybe a little drool. I guess I’m not the best bed-sharer after all. I didn’t snore, did I?”

“Not at all,” he says, stroking my hair. It feels so comforting and soothing that I forget all about drooling on him. Almost. “You didn’t make a single sound. Scared me a little, especially after you fell asleep mid-sentence. I stayed awake to make sure you were still breathing.”

I swallow hard. “You did?”

“Once you rolled onto me, I could finally sleep. I could feel you breathing, so I could relax.”

“I don’t remember anything until I woke up.”

“No more nightmares?”

I shake my head. “None.”

But there’s something scarier rearing its head. Real memories. Some details might be hazy but they’ll clear up soon. I want to live in the haze a little longer. I don’t want to tell Wolfe that I remember. I want to feel *this*. The way my head fits perfectly against his chest. The way he holds me. How my heart beats a little faster each time he talks. His scent.

“And your memory?” Wolfe asks. “Is it coming back?”

I let the question linger, simmering in my head as I try to figure out a response. I don’t want to lie to Wolfe. I won’t lie to Wolfe. He’s been nothing but kind and caring.

“It is,” I say, blinking a few warm tears. “But some of it is still hazy.”

It’s true.

Wolfe shifts, both of us on our sides. He lowers himself down so that we’re face to face. I don’t want him to see me with tears in my eyes, but it’s too late. His eyes narrow on them as a lump forms in my throat.

“What’s wrong?” Wolfe asks as he cradles my face, his thumb brushing my tears away. “You’re remembering who you are, sweet girl.”

“But will you remember me?”

“How could I forget you, Poppy? You’re like no one I’ve ever known. You’re...”

Something flashes in his eyes. Fear. Uneasiness. I can’t place it, but it’s clear he’s struggling just as much as I am.

“Poppy, I know who you are,” he says. “They’re looking for you. Your family. People you know. They were searching all over the mountains for you yesterday.”

“You knew?” I ask, my voice wavering.

“I wanted to tell you,” he says, his thumb stroking my lips. His fingers trace my face delicately as he looks earnestly at me. As though he’s trying to memorize every hair on my head. Every freckle on my skin. I’ve never had anyone look at me like this before. Really look at me.

“But I was selfish, Poppy. I wanted more time with you. I wanted...” Wolfe closes his eyes and shakes his head once before opening them again. Heat builds everywhere as Wolfe stares at me so intensely that I can hardly breathe.

“What do you want, Wolfe?” I ask with what little breath I have in my lungs. Each word burns as it leaves my lips but I don’t care. The pain is more than worth an answer.

Wolfe strokes my face, his eyes never leaving mine, each movement sends a current of electricity down my body in a rippling wave.

“I want you, Poppy. I have from the moment I laid eyes on you. There’s nothing more in this world that I want.”

“Then take me, Wolfe.”

“I can’t,” he growls, pressing his forehead against mine as his breathing becomes erratic. “We can’t.”

I gasp as he shoves his face into the crook of my neck, breathing me in deeply as his beard scrubs against me. His hands slide across my body as every part of me screams for more. Around my neck. Along my ribcage and across my stomach. Down my back and between my thighs. Anywhere. Everywhere.

“Says who?” I rasp, exhaling harshly as he kisses my throat and then pins me roughly against the bed. He’s looming over me, his hands enclosed around my wrists as he stares down at me.

“Poppy,” he growls as he straddles me, grinding into me as my body feels like it’s unraveling beneath him. More.

More, more, more. I need more of Wolfe. I need all of him, but he’s resisting. Like he’s doing me some sort of favor.

“Wolfe,” I pant, my entire body flushed.

He drags his hands along my arms as he kisses my cheek. The edge of my jaw. A line down the column of my throat. The weight of his body begins crushing the air from my lungs but I don’t care. I want Wolfe’s lips on my body. I want to feel him. I don’t—*fuck*—he readjusts his position and his cock rubs against my clit.

“You’re too young,” Wolfe rasps into the hollow of my throat. He drags his hand down the sides of my ribcage as he grinds against me. The sensations rolling through me are so intense that it feels like every muscle in my core is constricting. Tightening and twisting as Wolfe presses against me.

“You have your whole life ahead of you.” He groans against my sternum as he fingers the neckline of the flannel shirt. “You don’t belong in the mountains, tethered to an older mountain man like me. You belong—”

“With you,” I say, the words coming out forcefully and reflexively. I thread my fingers through his hair, tugging so I can see his eyes. A sharp, jagged pain stabs me in my chest when I see sadness in them. Hollowness and despair. Wolfe doesn’t want me gone. He wants *me* but he thinks I’m better off without him.

No.

“None of that matter to me, Wolfe. I remember enough and it changes nothing. I’m right where I belong.”

He’s quiet for a few beats as his eyes search my face, seconds stretching for what feels like an eternity. “When?”

“Yesterday,” I whisper, my fingers delicately touching his face. “In the shower. It came to me piece by piece and then all at once. You weren’t the only one being selfish. I didn’t want to tell you, I wanted to stay with you. I can’t go back to a normal life now.”

“Margot,” Wolfe says, and I nearly laugh. My real name sounds so foreign.

“Call me Poppy, Wolfe.”

He shakes his head as he cups my face, thumb brushing my lips. “I’m going to call you something better.”

“What?” I say breathlessly as my heart thumps faster.

“Mine,” he says, our lips crashing together.

Chapter 7

Wolfe

MARGOT? Poppy? Fuck names. She's mine and I'm never letting her go.

"So fucking sweet," I growl against her lips, my forehead pressing against hers as I finally take a breath. Both of us pant. My lips tingle—throbbing and aching to capture her lips again.

"Wolfe," Poppy whimpers as her nails bite into my flesh. Clawing. Dragging. Trying to gain purchase as I dive back in.

My tongue parts her lips, penetrating her mouth as I taste heaven. Perfection. A fucking dream. There's nothing better than Poppy's lips against mine, her taste on my tongue, and her sensual moans as she writhes beneath me.

Explosive and all-consuming. I could kiss my girl forever and it wouldn't be long enough. My body's slumped against hers, crushing her beneath me and for a split second, I panic, pulling back and breaking the seal of our lips.

Poppy's eyes flare, gasping as she says, "Wh-what? Why'd you stop."

I brush her cheek lightly with my fingertips, already flushed. "I'm crushing you, sweet girl."

She smiles. "I can throw you, remember?"

"That you—*fuck.*" I exhale, long and slow as my eyes roll back in my head. Poppy's hand around my cock, massaging me through my boxers has me seeing stars.

"I have a good grip too," she says, dragging her teeth across her bottom lip.

“My throat remembers,” I rasp as wave after unrelenting wave of pleasure rolls through me. “But not too hard,” I say, grabbing her wrist and pinning it above her head with the other.

“I’ll kiss it better if it hurts,” she moans into my ear before taking the lobe between her teeth, tugging, and letting it go.

Something cracks deep inside me. The final crack. The one that shatters all self-restraint and logical thought, unleashes the part of me I’ve tried to chain up when I’m around Poppy. It’s out. Free. And nothing will stop me from making Poppy mine.

“Poppy,” I growl, shoving my face into the crook of her neck. “You have no idea what I want to do to you, angel.” I lick a line across her throat.

“I have an idea.” She gasps, her chest heaving as I kiss her sternum. “But why don’t you—*oh!*”

The buttons of the flannel shirt fly through the air as I yank it open. I’m at a loss for words. I’ve never seen such a beautiful sight before. I drag my palm down her chest, my vision hazy with disbelief.

Is this real? Is Poppy real? Have I finally gone insane from spending my life alone on the mountain? If it means I’ll spend the rest of my life with Poppy, bring on the insanity. A life without her isn’t a life.

Every inch of her feels electric—energy crackling beneath my hands as I slide them over her flawless body. I haven’t seen a quarter of my sweet girl, and I’m already losing my mind.

“Wolfe?” Poppy exhales, gripping my hand. “What’s wrong?”

My eyes refocus as I meet hers. It hurts to see the concern on her features.

“What’s wrong?” I mutter, reaching for her face. She nestles against my palm, eyelids fluttering shut as she takes in a shaky breath. “You’ve shattered my world, angel. I’m tattered, broken, and on my knees staring at my salvation. You couldn’t remember your past, and I can’t remember life before

you. I can't imagine a future without you. You're everything to me, Poppy. You're... you're my world."

Poppy smiles and it hits me square in the chest. She nuzzles against my palm, kissing me and I feel heat rake across my skin. Her eyes meet mine, watery and so clear, and I can't breathe.

"No," she says, sliding her hands over my cheeks and through my hair. "I'm yours."

I sigh as a primal urge I've never experienced takes control. "Again," I growl, wrapping my hands around her wrists, pulling them away as I kiss her palms, breathing in her scent. "Tell me, Poppy."

"I'm yours."

"That's right, Poppy. You're mine." I mold my palms around her perfect breasts, massaging them as I kiss their sensual curves. "And I'm going to make you mine." I kiss a line down her torso. "Again." Tongue flat against torso, swirling. "Again." The heat from between her legs throbs against me. "And again."

Poppy shudders against me as I draw my hands down her sides, my face scrubbing against her silky body as she moans. I can feel the tension in her body. It radiates off of her as she twists uncontrollably. She's so wound up but I'll make her unravel. I'll make her scream. I'll make her come so hard she'll be amnesiac all over again.

I wrap my hands around her thighs as my lips graze her sex, her panties already soaked. I've hardly touched her and she's bucking against me, squirming. Needy. My lips tortuously close to her.

"Wolfe," she moans. "Please..."

"Kiss you here?" I ask thickly, drawing a line down her pussy with my finger as she cries out.

"Y-yes," she moans. "Please, Wolfe. *Please...*" The final please makes my cock lurch against my boxers. I'm so hard it's painful, a throbbing ache that won't be soothed until I'm inside my girl.

“Anything for my girl,” I rasp, kissing her inner thigh as I slide out of my boxers and fist my cock. “Anything...”

I peel her panties away from her slick sex as she gasps, her fingers twisting into my hair as I brush my lips against her. Slowly. Sensually. Until I can't take it anymore. I drag my tongue against her in one long stroke as Poppy screams my name and tightens her grip.

“Perfect little pussy,” I moan against her, lapping her up as I stroke myself. Pre-cum leaks onto the bed as I writhe along with Poppy, fucking her pussy with my tongue, swirling against her clit as she bucks against me.

I let go of my cock and then tear off her panties, tossing them over my shoulder before slipping back between her thighs and parting her folds with my tongue.

“*Ohmygod,*” Poppy cries out, arching against the bed as I slide my tongue across her sensitive nub. Back and forth. Back and forth. Circling it again and again as Poppy clenches my head between her thighs.

“Squeeze me, Poppy. Fucking clench against me,” I bellow against her pussy as I continue devouring her. So fucking perfect. My girl tastes like heaven and screams like hell with every stroke of my tongue, and when I slip a finger inside her, I've never heard a more beautiful noise.

“Good fucking girl, Poppy.” I slide my finger deeper, stroking her in the right place as I continue toying with her clit. “Tight fucking girl.” I slide my arm across her abdomen pressing down and pinning her in place as I continue eating her pussy.

Moans and the slick sound of my tongue lapping her up rent the air. If I had neighbors they'd be calling the cops, mistaking her moans for a murder. These aren't cries of pain or agony. My girl's unraveling at the seams as I make her feel things no man has ever made her feel. Or ever will. She's mine and no man will ever touch her again.

Her legs clamp down against me, fingers twisting through my hair as she finally unravels, shuddering and moaning as

she comes.

“Wolfe,” she moans, her legs finally relaxing against my head. “That was... I’ve never. No one...”

She can’t even complete a sentence, and as I slide onto my knees and look down at her, I’m at a loss for words. Poppy’s beautiful, but post-orgasm Poppy is something else entirely.

“So fucking beautiful,” I rasp, shaking my head. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She smiles at me. “If I ever get amnesia again, I won’t forget my first orgasm.”

Blood rushes to my head. Static in my ears. I can’t believe it.

“First?” I breathe, grabbing her knees as I try to stabilize myself.

“First,” she repeats, reaching forward and tapping the head of my cock. It sends a jolt of electricity through my body, all the way to the crown of my head as I try to wrap my mind around her revelation.

“You’ve never?”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend. Never had sex. You’re the first man I’ve been with, Wolfe.”

I exhale, long and slow. “Fuck.” I shake my head. “I’m a monster, aren’t I Poppy?”

She shakes her head. “You’re not a monster. I *want* you so, so much. You’re everything I never knew I wanted. You’re perfect. My...” Poppy swallows. Blinks a few times. “You’re my soul mate. How else could we have found each other?”

I don’t know. I’d resigned myself to living out the rest of my life alone on the mountain. Living off the land. Watching it. Protecting it. I had no plans to marry. No plans to search for a partner. No plans until I saw Poppy.

The moment I laid eyes on Poppy I knew fate had a different plan for me. She’s the one I’d protect for the rest of my life.

“Poppy,” I rasp, lowering myself. My cock slides against her slick folds as she moans. “My sweet, perfect, Poppy.”

She molds her hands to her breasts, eyes hazy with need as she stares at me.

“Fate brought you to my mountain,” I say, sliding my cock against her quicker. Rubbing her. Feeling her sex. “And now I’m going to make sure you stay where you belong. With me.” Faster and faster. “Would you like that, Poppy?”

“Yes,” she moans. “I want to be with you, Wolfe. I want—*ahohhh!*” Her words are swallowed up by a moan as I slide my cock inside her, pressing and pushing against the resistance.

“Breathe for me, Poppy. Easy.”

Poppy rocks her hips against me, parting for me as I push a little harder, careful not to hurt my girl.

“That’s it. Good girl, Poppy. Good... fucking...”

Heavenly. Out of this world. Sublime. The way Poppy’s pussy feels wrapped around the head of my cock is sending me to another dimension and I’m barely inside her.

“So fucking tight, Poppy,” I moan, reaching for her face, flushed as she breathes heavily. And the way she’s looking up at me? Jesus, she’s loving this. “You love my cock inside you, don’t you?”

I push, fighting against the resistance—retreating and then pressing forward again to gain an inch. Moans and gasps. Her fingers curl against her lips as she nods frantically.

“Tell me, Poppy,” I say, swiping her hand away as I reach down and stroke her clit in slow circles. Jesus, she’s so beautiful. I bet she looks even better when she comes. I missed it the first time around, but I won’t miss it again. “Tell me how it feels to have my cock inside you.”

“I love it,” she moans, her hands moving across the covers, clenching and releasing. “It’s so big. So...” Her heels dig into me, urging me forward. “More, Wolfe. I want to feel all of you. *Please.*”

I grunt, slumping forward as I hook my arms beneath her, cradling her against me. “No need to beg, Poppy. I’ll give you everything you want.” I press my forehead against hers, rubbing my face against hers and into the crook of her neck. Marking her like a fucking animal. “Everything you need.” Poppy moans into my ear, sending a jolt down my spine and in between my legs. *Fuuuuck*. “Everything,” I bellow against her skin as I push through the final bit of resistance, filling my girl completely.

“Wolfe,” Poppy moans as she takes hold of my back, running her hands up and down as I start thrusting.

I grit my teeth, waves of pleasure rolling through my body. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before, and with Poppy clinging to me, our hearts beating against each other’s chest I’ve never felt more connected. Like we’re fucking one.

It’s a miracle I found Poppy. And another if I can last longer than a few seconds inside my girl.

“You’re fucking milking me,” I rasp, sliding in and out. Deeper, harder, faster as I dig my teeth into her shoulder. I fist the sheets on either side of her and shove my face into her neck again as I keep pumping, feeling her constrict around me.

So tight. So wet. And so fucking mine.

“Yes,” Poppy moans. “Like that,” she begs, dragging her nails against my back as I hold fruitlessly to the last string of self-restraint keeping the animalistic part of me at bay. The part that wants to rut my sweet girl. Pump harder. Unleash inside her and make her mine completely.

But there’s only so much I can do. It’s only a matter of time before everything falls apart and it takes over. And I—

“Make me yours, Wolfe.”

Snip.

I bellow into the blankets, rearing back as an animalistic roar tears through my chest. It feels like I’m on fire as I look down at my flushed Poppy. My undoing. The one I’ll never be able to live without.

“Poppy,” I growl as I wrap my arms around her legs, locking them in place as I start thrusting hard into her. The sound of damp skin against damp skin rents the air. “There’s no going back. You’ll be mine forever. You’ll be...”

I can’t talk let alone think straight as I increase my pace, no longer in control.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Poppy moans. “And neither are you.” Each word is punctuated by the sound of my balls slapping against the curve of her ass. The springs creaking. The bed shaking. “It goes both ways,” she says, reaching for my legs, her fingers against my thighs. “You’re mine and I’m never letting you go.”

I pump into her as I lose all semblance of control. In and out. Deeper and deeper until finally I feel her clench. See her orgasm crest as she rides the wave. Gorgeous. Perfect. *Mine*.

Another squeeze and I explode. Pressure like I’ve never felt before releasing, spilling out of me as I slump into her, still pumping as she cries out my name.

“Poppy,” I moan against her slick skin. “Fuck, Poppy, I don’t know what came over me.”

Poppy snorts. “I don’t know either but I liked it. A whole lot,” she adds, moaning.

We lay together for a while, my cock still inside her. I’m not sure how long we’re silent, but eventually, she breaks it. “I don’t want to go back, Wolfe. I want to stay with you.”

Uncomfortable feelings rise again, and I can’t push them down. I’m spent. “I’m not letting you run away from your life, Poppy. You can’t hide out here forever. Your parents are worried. People you know and love are out there right now looking for you. I want to keep you here with me but it’s selfish of me.”

Poppy sighs. “I know. Can it wait a little while longer? Once they know I’m here. Once they know... Wolfe, it’s not going to be easy. I’ll have to leave for months at a time to film. Paparazzi will be all over this mountain for a chance to snap a photo of the reclusive mountain man I’m dating.”

“We’re dating?”

The look on her face lets me know how stupid that question is. “You’re still inside me, Wolfe. Yes, we’re dating.”

My cock hardens at the thought. She’s fucking mine.

“I don’t care how difficult it will be.” I kiss her softly on her lips. “Besides, I’m part Sasquatch. They’ll never get a picture of me.”

The tension in Poppy’s body seems to melt. She nuzzles against me and then says, “I love you, Wolfe. I can’t believe I found you.”

It feels like I’m floating. Like I’ve become weightless from three simple words. “I love you too, Poppy.”

I kiss her again, tongue sliding into her mouth, tasting her sweetness. I’m ready to go all over again until there’s a metal clang at the door. Both of us stop and look back.

Blaze is in the doorway, his metal bowl in front of him as he pants. He barks once, picks up the bowl, and then tosses it again.

I groan. “I guess some things will never change.”

Poppy leans toward me and whispers, “I hope our morning routine is one of them.” She clenches and moans. “This is the perfect way to wake up in the morning, Wolfe.”

“Perfect,” I growl, thrusting into her until Blaze starts barking.

Fucking cockblock.

Chapter 8

Poppy

THE VIEW from the fire lookout is breathtaking. The swath of verdant green trees, pocketed with autumnal colors, extends farther than I can see. Peaks and rocky outcroppings jut out.

It's like I'm in a different world up here. The air is so crisp and fresh that it feels like every breath I take cleanses me from the inside out. I'm beginning to understand why Wolfe is attached to this mountain. His way of life. A place like this needs protecting—someone to look after it. And I can't think of a man better for the job than Wolfe. He's the protector of the mountain and all of its inhabitants, including me.

"I can't believe you look at this all day," I remark softly, eyes fixed on a few birds flitting through the sky playfully. "You're a lucky man."

"Unbelievably lucky," Wolfe says as I turn my head, his gaze focused on me. "And I'd trade it all away for you, Poppy. Wouldn't have a second thought about it."

I smile, my cheeks warming as I shake my head and take another look at the valley. I vaguely remember Whispering Winds. I passed through the main street quickly on the way to Cherry Ridge a few months ago. I remember it was charming, but unfortunately, it was too small to house the cast and crew for the months we needed to film in the mountains.

I thought I'd make a trip over there one day to see it, but I never made it back. Once production got underway I had no time. When we weren't filming, I had my training. Horseback riding. Sword fighting and archery. Hand-to-hand combat.

Acting was the easy part—balancing everything else was the challenge.

I was so tired by the end of every day, but I loved every second. I'd dreamed of making it big as an actress for as long as I could remember. And this was my big break—a leading role in a fantasy TV show. I thought I was dreaming when I got the news that I was cast. I swear they mixed me up with someone else. It wasn't until we started filming that it began to sink in.

They wanted someone under the radar, so I guess it was a good thing that I struggled for so many years, cobbling together small roles.

I understand Wolfe's trade all too well because I'm considering a trade of my own. He's worth more to me than anything. And it's going to be hard leaving him tomorrow morning

“You don't need to trade it for me, Wolfe. You have me. I'm all yours. Need I remind you how many times you made me yours today?”

Wolfe slides his arm around me. “I could use a refresher. It's been too long.”

“It's been forty-five minutes, Wolfe. I'm surprised you still have the stamina to keep going, given your age,” I add jokingly.

At thirty-seven, Wolfe's more than a decade older than me but he's more athletic and well, energetic than any man my age.

“Is that a challenge, Poppy?”

I curl into him, relishing the warmth of his body and his scent. The world melts away when I'm in his arms. All worry and anxiety melt away. No one's ever made me feel so loved and protected before.

“Maybe,” I rasp into his chest, taking another deep breath as air rushes across my body. “*Wolfe!*”

He's carrying me over his shoulder as I cling to him, balling my fists against his back as he takes me inside the lookout.

You'd think I'd get used to Wolfe's size—the way he can sweep me off my feet with no effort at all. But each time he picks me up, wrapping those big arms around me, it feels like I'm in freefall. Heady. Turned on.

I love the way he makes me feel. How easy and natural everything is with him.

My ass hits the thin fabric of the cot as he sets me down and begins unbuttoning his shirt.

"I'm not having sex on a cot," I protest because I'm not sure either of us will fit.

Wolfe nods and when his shirt hits the floor, I take everything back. A cot. A rocky cliff with gravel, dirt, and bugs. The location no longer matters. Wolfe can take me anywhere he damn well pleases.

I swallow hard, watching every movement. His fingers on his belt, leather slipping through the loops. I glance up at him and watch his lips moving but I don't register what he's saying.

I mumble something incoherent and then my brain finally catches up.

"Up," he says. "Shirt off."

My body responds before my brain. I'm on my feet, peeling off my shirt before I recognize what I'm doing.

"Pants too?" I ask, cringing inwardly.

He smiles and my body ignites—the wood stove's roaring fire is unnecessary when I have Wolfe's eyes on me. His smile is perfect. All those thick, rippling muscles. And that penetrating gaze that makes me feel weightless.

Having sex with a ruggedly handsome mountain man in his fire lookout at dusk was never on my bucket list but it should have been.

“Pants too, Poppy. I need you naked.”

My body’s electric as I slip out of my leggings, leaving them in a pile on the ground next to me. I move to my underwear but Wolfe closes the gap, snatches my wrist, and leans into me.

“I’ll be taking those off, Poppy.”

A frisson of excitement races through me.

“With your teeth, I hope.”

“Is there any other way, sweet girl?”

Goosebumps flare across my body.

“I guess not.”

Wolfe shoves his face against the crown of my head and inhales. “I love your scent, Poppy.”

I kiss his chest as I hold onto him tightly.

“I love you, Wolfe.”

He pulls me in deeper as he gusts out a deep sigh. “Fuck, Poppy. I love you more than anything in this world. It’s going to be fucking hell when you go back to filming.”

We spent most of the day talking about it. It was the only one that made sense. I need to finish up the production and Wolfe needs to stay on the mountain until the fire season’s over. The mountain needs Wolfe, and I can’t let down the entire production that hinges on me. So tomorrow morning, he’ll be dropping me off.

It’s hard leaving the man of my dreams for the time being, but we’re going to make it work. There’s nothing we can’t overcome together.

“I know,” I say, sighing into his chest. “I don’t want to spend another night without you.”

“You won’t have to, Poppy. Once this fire season’s over, you’ll never sleep alone again. I promise you that. And I’ll never make a promise I can’t keep.”

I smile. “I believe you, Wolfe, but I don’t want you to give up anything for me. You belong in these mountains and I’d never want you to sacrifice them for me.”

He strokes my hair. “I belong with you, Poppy. Anywhere you go is home to me.”

Wolfe’s words. His voice. The way he’s holding me. Everything about him makes my body melt. I never thought I’d find someone like Wolfe, and I certainly never envisioned meeting him the way we did.

“I’ve waited my whole life for a woman like you, Poppy. If I needed to wait another one before I could be with you, I would.”

I smile against his chest. “Well, I’m glad it won’t come to that.”

We hold each other for a little longer as the sun begins to set, the beginning of the end of a memorable day.

“Sun’s setting, Poppy.”

“We should head back before it’s dark.”

Wolfe grunts and then grips my hair, tugging it backward. Our eyes meet and the intensity in his gaze sends a jolt through my core. “Can’t go home yet. Need to complete your challenge.”

“And how do you intend to do that?” I ask breathlessly as my heart hammers against my ribcage. I swear every time I look at Wolfe my pulse begins to race. Every sense becomes heightened.

Wolfe takes a half-step back, my hair still in his firm grasp as his eyes travel the length of me, slowly. Aching slow. My nipples are so tight they almost hurt. And even though I’m basically naked, I’m flushed from head to toe. Feverish from the hungry, primal look in Wolfe’s eyes. The need. The want. The desire...

For me.

I feel it. I feel it all over my body. Bone deep. And the thought of a man like Wolfe wanting me like this. So

completely obsessed with me is turning me on in ways I never thought possible.

“I’ll need you to walk behind me, Poppy. Place your hands on the window and watch the sunset over the mountains.”

I swallow. “And then?”

He leans in, one hand tugging my hair while the other wraps around the base of my throat. “I’m going to take over, Poppy. I’m going to make you come on my face.”

Wolfe drags his hand down between my breasts, sliding it lower and lower as he kisses my neck. It’s a good thing he has his hand firmly wrapped around my hair because without it, my wobbly legs would’ve given out.

“You’ll come hard, Poppy, I promise you that,” he rasps against my neck before dragging his tongue across my skin. He makes a throaty sound and I gasp as his free hand slides between my legs, cupping me.

“And then I’ll fuck this tight little pussy. My pussy,” he growls, stroking my clit. “Isn’t that right, Poppy?”

“Yes,” I moan, rubbing against his hand. “Yes.”

“Good girl,” he rasps. “Now do as I say.”

He lets go and then spanks my ass, a shot of adrenaline spiking through my chest.

My eyes flare as I look at Wolfe, and after a few moments, I walk over to the window and place my hands on it, watching the sunset over the mountains, my body alight in anticipation.

“Good girl, Poppy,” he says, floorboards creaking as he walks over to me.

Wolfe wastes no time, his tongue sliding over my soaked panties as he fixes his hands firmly against my legs. His beard scratches against my thighs as he devours me and I press against his face.

“That’s it, Poppy,” he growls against me. “Push into me. Use my face.”

There's a sharp snap and then my panties fall to the ground.

"I'll need to buy more underwear," I pant, legs trembling.

"You'll need to wear less underwear."

Wolfe continues fucking me with his tongue, owning me with his mouth, and true to his word, he makes me come harder than ever before the sun sets.

Before I have the chance to catch my breath, he slips inside me, fixing his hands around my waist as he starts pumping. Slow and long and deep. I feel every inch of him as he fills me up, my face against the window as my breath fogs the glass.

It feels so good. So fucking good as he continues to take what he wants. Me. Claiming me. Making me his as he thrusts again and again.

"I love you, Poppy," Wolfe says, dragging his palm along my back.

I glance at him over my shoulder, eyes raking over the slabs of pure muscles flexing as he stares at me. Groaning. Moaning. His chest heaving as he increases the pace. His eyes never leaving mine. Focused on me.

"I. Love. You," I pant in between thrusts.

But love hardly captures what I feel for this man.

I'm his.

Hopelessly his and I can't think of anything better.

Epilogue

Poppy - A Few Months Later...

“ARE YOU READY, NOBLE?” I ask, stroking his forehead.

He nudges me and then snorts, his breath fogging in front of us with each exhalation. It was supposed to be cold for this scene, but mid-December is a different kind of cold compared to mid-Fall in the mountains.

I’ll need a roaring fire, a steaming mug of hot chocolate, and my smoldering mountain man by my side to warm up after this. Thankfully, I have all three at my disposal.

We only lasted one day without sleeping in the same bed before we found a rental cabin in between our shooting location and Wolfe’s lookout. We spend our days doing what we love, and then we come home and spend our nights doing what we love.

Ahem.

I’ve never been happier. And now that we’re finally wrapping up one of the last scenes, and Wolfe isn’t on-call anymore, we’re untethered. I can’t wait to spend every single second of every single day with Wolfe.

I hope I’m not too much for Wolfe, but something tells me he doesn’t mind. He’s every bit as obsessed with me as I am with him, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

“I promise I won’t miss this time.”

The rough voice jolts me but thankfully doesn’t spook Noble.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver says, placing his hand on my shoulder as I turn around. I try not to cringe, but every time I see that scar on his face a shot of adrenaline races through me. I get flashbacks to more than a month ago when I thought those dreams and fragments were real—someone was actually after me.

No, it was Oliver—a fantastic actor who knows how to play a villain. The reality is that he’s one of the sweetest men I’ve met. He was more than apologetic for what happened, and it took a better part of a month for him to believe me when I told him it wasn’t his fault. Even so, I’ve never been gifted so many flowers and chocolates and charcuterie trays and fruit baskets and balloons before.

Wolfe ate like a king.

“I’m alright,” I say, shaking my head as I try not to focus on the scar. I know it’s nothing more than makeup, but it makes my stomach churn nonetheless. “And I told you... No more apologies.”

He nods, giving me a light shake on the shoulder. “I’m not sure I can make that promise, but I’ll try Margot.”

I’m still trying to get used to my real name. Wolfe still calls me Poppy at my request and I love it—a reminder of how we met.

Oliver cups his hands, blowing into them a few times before shaking them out. “I have a feeling it’s going to be a single take. I promise there won’t be a repeat of last time. My hands are warm. Fingers nimble. I’m ready.”

“It’s going to be fine. Besides, the change to the script will make sure of it.”

“He’s not mad is he?”

I snort. “No. He’s not.”

I think.

Oliver seems nervous, but there’s no time left. Everyone’s in place and we’re ready to go.



I REACH for the knife in my boot as Oliver takes a step toward me.

We've rehearsed this scene so many times that everything comes second nature. I don't have to think about anything, my body takes care of everything.

"Easy, Princess."

But no matter how many times I've heard Oliver use this voice, it still sends a chill to my core. It's difficult to wrap my hand around how a soft-spoken man like him with a caring heart can create something that sounds so sinister. So dark and evil.

He strokes the knife at his waist with his fingertips. "You're worth more to me alive. Make this easy and hop down."

"I'd rather not," I say, fingering the blade strapped to Noble.

"Heard you were a fighter." His eyes narrow at the sound of branches breaking and leaves crunching. I glance to the left, hand at the ready as he spits to his side and then takes another step. "I don't mind having a little fun."

I count down in my head again, centering myself with my breath. This time will be different. We have more safety measures in place. People are in place to capture Noble in case he gets spooked again and runs off. Wolfe. Everything will be fine.

"Touch that blade again and your horse gets one to the throat."

I swallow as goosebumps rise all over my body. No matter how many times I've heard him say his line, my body reacts to it all the same.

"Don't do this. I can—"

"Keep your mouth shut."

He walks closer to me as he twirls the point of his knife into his palm. The wind howls through the trees as leaves crunch and branches buckle and moan.

“Now, Princess. How about you—”

Both of us turn as Wolfe barrels out of the bushes and tackles Oliver to the ground. My belly cinches tight as I watch my man save me.

When the director saw Wolfe, he knew he needed to cast him. It took some convincing, but when he explained what Wolfe would be doing, he agreed.

Maybe I could flub a line. Fall off my horse. Do something so we can have another take and Wolfe can save me all over again. I could get used to that.

The scuffle between Oliver and Wolfe ends, and when I see him rise, muscles bulging from beneath tattered clothes, I almost get my wish. Wolfe’s the only man who could make me faint with a single, heated glance, and the way he’s walking toward me like he’s going to whisk me away and then have his way with me has me all sorts of mixed up.

I need to focus. I need to finish out the scene.

“Princess,” Wolfe says, bowing low to me. “I need you to come with me.”

God, his voice. It’s somehow even deeper. And then the way he’s speaking to me—it feels like we’re all alone. Like there are no cameras or crew or lights all around us. Only us.

“Who are you?” I ask, voice shakier than I intend.

He rises, taking a few steps closer to me.

“You don’t recognize me?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No.”

He smiles. “It’s been a long time, Poppy but I’ve come to collect my debt. The kiss you owe me. And once I have it, I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

“William? I can’t be—*look out!*”

“She’s coming with me,” Oliver rasps as he rises to his feet, knife at the ready. “She’s mine.”

He rears back, ready to fling the blade, but I beat him to it, hitting him square in the chest. The fake blade bounces off of him of course, but it’s a direct hit and he tumbles to the ground, clutching his chest.

Wolfe inspects him, giving him a nudge with his foot before returning to me. He collects me in his arms as he lowers me from Noble.

I sigh against his chest. “Will.”

“Poppy,” he says.

“I haven’t heard that name in so long.”

The fake name my character used when she was younger, sneaking out of the castle to interact with other children. When she wanted to know what it was like to be normal. When the sub-plot was added to the show, I couldn’t think of a better name than Poppy.

“Ten years, twenty-seven days, and eleven hours. And I thought about you every second of it.”

I swallow hard, a lump forming in my throat. I know this isn’t real, but it feels real to me.

“And now it’s time for you to collect your debt,” I say, pulling back to look at him.

Our lips collide and my body explodes. Every time our lips touch it feels like the first time. Explosive and earth-shattering and I can’t believe how lucky I am to have found him. Or for him to find me.

The director ends the scene but we keep kissing. There’s movement all around me but it’s nothing but a blur. The only thing that matters is this kiss. Us together. I love Wolfe so much and I can’t contain it.

When we finally pull away, Wolfe sighs against my lips.

“Think we’ll have to re-shoot?”

“Probably not,” I say. “You nailed it.”

“Pity,” Wolfe says. “I wouldn’t mind giving it a go a few more times.”

“Yeah?”

“A dozen. Can’t be too thorough, now can we? Especially when I’m inspired,” he adds, his gaze scorching my skin as it travels lower.

“I’m not sure I’d be able to handle it, Wolfe.”

He makes a throaty sound. “Why not?”

“Kissing you like that,” I say, dragging my finger down his chest. “Over and over again. I’m afraid we might turn this into a different kind of movie.”

Wolfe’s throat bobs as he swallows. “Think you might be right. Better save that for tonight.”

“What are we going to do tonight?” I ask, as though I’m clueless.

“I think you know what we’re going to do tonight. Our favorite thing.”

“Yeah?”

He brushes the hair off my neck, kisses a line up to my ear, and then rasps, “Each other.”

I smile.

I laugh.

I leap into his arms as the crew swarms all around us. All of it fades away as I melt into Wolfe’s arms.

Protected. Desired. Loved.

Wolfe makes me feel it all, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

Epilogue

Wolfe - One Year After That...

SNOW FALLS IN THICK, fluffy flakes all around me as I walk slowly down the Main Street of Whispering Winds. There are no cars around—everything has been cleared to make way for the festive stalls. It smells amazing. I hate to admit it but, the sweet smell of cinnamon and spiced food and drinks is giving Poppy's scent a run for its money.

But who am I kidding? I'd get sick of the sweet holiday scent, but I'll never get sick of Poppy's.

I pause, taking in the view of the Whispering Winds' Christmas festival. Every weekend until Christmas, the town comes alive to celebrate. Games and events and the best food I've had. Santa and his reindeer make an appearance, as well as his most trusted elves. Some might think we're a little too over the top in Whispering Winds during the holiday season. I used to be one of them. But it's the one time of year when the whole town comes together and celebrates.

It's a shame that I skipped out on it for a few decades but now that I have Poppy and our newborn baby girl, there won't be a year that we miss it.

"What is it, Wolfe?" Poppy asks, tugging at my sleeve as I cling to our stroller, Rose fast asleep in a bundle.

I turn to Poppy, her nose and cheeks already red. "Nothing. I'm just thinking about how lucky I am. Beautiful child. Gorgeous and amazing wife. Living out my dream in a place like this."

I nod to the festival. Bright string lights shimmer as snow falls and Christmas music plays. Kids bundled up are running all over the place without a care in the world. I remember when I was one of them. And I'm thinking about Rose and the friends she makes running like that too. Maybe a few more siblings in tow.

I thought I was living the perfect life out on the mountain by myself. I had everything figured out, living out life on my terms, but then Poppy stumbled up that path and everything changed.

I had it all wrong.

"I am gorgeous and amazing, aren't I?" Poppy says, jokingly.

I laugh, leaning in to kiss her chilled forehead. "And so much more. Mother, movie star, and my dream girl. I love you, Poppy."

"I love you too, Mr. Mountain Man. You're the best thing to ever happen to me. Well, until Rose outshined you."

I snort. "True. She's only a few months old and she's already putting me in my place."

"Right beside us. That's your place."

"My favorite place."

"Mistletoe!"

Both of us turn to the voice. It's a woman I've never seen before in a garish Christmas outfit holding mistletoe out on a stick with string. I look at Poppy who looks just as confused as I am but then she laughs hops up onto her toes and kisses me.

The woman makes a gleeful noise before running off.

"For the record," Poppy says, "I don't need mistletoe to kiss you. But that was fun. Are there usually people running around with mistletoe?"

"Not that I remember," I say, pushing the stroller as Poppy latches onto my arm.

“Well, she seemed fun. The guy she was with though, not so much. I feel bad that she has to deal with that big ol’ grump.”

“Guess I was too focused on your lips to notice.”

“Well, there he is,” Poppy says, pointing to another couple kissing underneath the mobile mistletoe.

I nearly choke when I see it’s Nick with the woman. “Never thought I’d see the day that Nick would be at the Christmas festival.”

“Why’s that?”

It’s a bit of a sad story, and it’s not mine to recount. I tell Poppy the truth though.

“Nick isn’t a fan of Christmas. He’s made that known. He’s the real Scrooge of the mountain, and I’m not sure what she did to drag him here, let alone get him to wear a Santa hat.

“People do a lot for love,” Poppy says.

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Poppy.”

“Would you sit on Santa’s lap for me? I’d love to get a picture of that.”

“I’m not sure if Santa would be up for that. Wouldn’t want to crush whoever it is this year.”

“How else will you get what you want for Christmas this year?”

“I already have everything I could ever want, Poppy.”

“What about me underneath the Christmas tree?”

“Alright, where’s Santa?” I growl, looking around frantically.

Poppy laughs. “Well, it will be a Christmas miracle if you don’t smother him.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes because I want you to smother me with your—”

“*Wolfe!*” Her eyes flare before she adds, “There are kids around.”

“Can’t help it, Poppy. You planted the seed and it’s growing out of control right now. Are you going to wear a bow when you’re under the tree?”

She leans in, whispering, “That’s all I’m going to be wearing, Wolfe.”

“Do I have to wait until Christmas?”

“We’ll see.”

“Poppy,” I rasp, trying my best to walk in a straight line. It’s hard when all the blood in my head has gone south. “I think you might be on the naughty list for this kind of torture.”

“How does it feel to be married to someone on the naughty list?”

I stop the stroller, turning to Poppy as I wrap my hand around her skull and kiss her harshly, driven by an insatiable hunger to taste her lips.

When we finally break away, I tell her how I feel about it. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Now watch Rose for a moment. I need to do something.”

Poppy swallows as she licks her lips. “What’s that?” she asks out of breath.

“I’m going to buy a bow for you to wear tonight.”

“But it’s not Christmas yet.”

“You’re not the only one on the naughty list, Poppy.”

She smiles and I move past her, heading for the stall filled with wrapping paper, festive boxes, and most importantly, ribbons.

I think it’s about time we start a new Christmas tradition.

* * *

Thanks for reading! Want more mountain men? You can find the rest of the series [here](#).

You can also read Bear’s story (Wolfe’s brother) for free [here](#).

Happy reading!

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