

A man with a full, dark beard and mustache, wearing a red and blue plaid shirt, stands in a forest. He has extensive tattoos on his arms and chest. He is holding a large, rustic axe over his right shoulder. The background is a dense forest with tall trees and green foliage.

WILDWOOD  
FOREST

*Claimed*  
BY THE LUMBER JACK

CLARA KING

# **Claimed by the Lumberjack**

Crave County: Wildwood Forest

**Clara King**

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## Quinn

The scent of ash and woodsmoke fills my car as I drive up the lonely wooded path toward my sister's house. I tap my fingers against the steering wheel, my nerves mounting the closer I get. It's my sister's birthday today. We've never had the best relationship, and lately it's been worse than ever, but when she called last night asking me to come over and celebrate with her, I couldn't say no. Now that our mom's gone, it's just the two of us. I'm hoping that inviting me over for her birthday means Kimmy wants us to turn over a new leaf, but I can't help the anxiety clawing at my throat...the apprehension. It's so unlike Kimmy to invite me over, especially for a celebration. She usually wants nothing to do with me unless it involves asking for money.

I'm so engrossed in my thoughts that it takes me a second to notice the flames. I freeze for a moment, staring ahead. My heart plummets. In the distance, shrouded by trees, my sister's tiny home is illuminated with raging orange light. Black smoke is billowing up into the sky, flowing out across the treetops. The smoke is choking me now that I'm so close. With a cough, I stop the car and jump out, racing toward the house.

"Kimmy!" I shout.

I feel like I've plunged into a nightmare. It's an inferno. The house is totally engulfed by fire, and I watch in horror as the charred front door slams to the ground, its hinges melting away. Intense heat radiates toward me, and my lungs fill with ash, making me stagger backward with a splutter.

*Holy crap. My sister. What if she's still in there?*

I grab my phone, my heart pounding as I start to dial 911, but then a voice calls out from somewhere behind me.

“Stop.”

I whip around. There, hidden among a cluster of trees, stands my sister and her boyfriend, Travis. They look weirdly calm considering their house is turning into a giant bonfire right before their eyes.

“Kimmy?” Relief washes over me as I head toward them. “Oh my God, Kimmy! What happened?”

“The fire department is on its way,” Travis says, his voice cold and lifeless as usual. “You don’t need to call them.”

“Okay, but you didn’t answer my question…” I look at my sister and gesture toward the burning house, jumping violently when part of the roof caves in with a loud bang. “What the hell happened here?”

There are sirens in the distance, and for a second, I swear I see my sister smile. She’s wearing the same strange, calm expression as Travis. It’s like neither of them is surprised to see their house going up in flames. As if this is something that happens every day.

*What the heck is going on? Are they in shock or something?*

I rest my hands on Kimmy’s shoulders, shaking her gently. “Why won’t you answer me? What happened? Are you okay?”

She just looks at me, that weird little smile still playing on her lips. But the smile doesn’t reach her eyes: they’re full of spite and hatred, just like they always are when she looks at me. I take my hands off her shoulders and step backward, looking between my sister and her boyfriend. Something’s not right. I can feel it. Every nerve in my body is screaming at me to get the hell out of here.

The sirens are almost deafening now. A huge fire truck emblazoned with the words “Crave County Fire Department” parks right outside the burning building, closely followed by a police car. I breathe a sigh of relief as two deputies get out. Now that help has arrived, I can get out of here.

I’m about to head toward the deputies when a pair of arms snake around my waist, gripping me tightly. It’s Travis. I almost gag at the scent of stale beer and unwashed clothes.



“What the hell are you doing?” I gasp, trying to wriggle out of his grasp. “Let me go!”

But his grip only tightens around me. I try to look back at Kimmy, but Travis holds me still as my sister starts to yell, “Over here! She’s over here! Please, officers, you have to help us. She set fire to our house! She tried to kill us!”

My head is spinning. The thick smoke...the blaring sirens... my sister’s screams.

“Kimmy?” I sob, trying once again to twist my body so I can look at her. But Travis won’t let go of me.

“You did this, Quinn,” Kimmy hisses from somewhere behind me.

Travis chuckles, his rancid breath hot on my face as he mutters, “Have fun in prison, bitch.”

The deputies must have heard Kimmy’s cries because they start jogging toward us. I don’t have time to think. Instinct takes over. I use all my strength to swivel my hips around, and with a grunt, I jab my knee hard between Travis’s legs. He yelps like a dog, and his hold on me slackens. I take my chance. I yank myself out of his grasp and barge past my sister, racing straight into Wildwood Forest.

“Help!” I hear Kimmy call from behind me. “Quick! She’s getting away!”

I barely register her words. All I know is I have to run. I duck and dodge through the trees, zigzagging through the forest and trying to put as much distance between me and the burning house as possible. I can hear the deputies chasing me, shouting, their heavy footfalls getting closer. I change directions, doubling back, ducking down, desperate to lose them.

*Run! Run! Run!*

The sirens sound more distant now, but I don’t stop. Pure adrenaline keeps my legs pumping. I don’t know if I’ve been running for minutes or hours, but it feels like my chest is on fire. There’s a painful stitch in my side and my throat burns with each gasping breath, but I keep going, my feet aching as

they pound against the forest floor. From somewhere behind me, I can still hear the echoing of voices. Yelling. Calling out. I can't make out the words, but the sound spurs me on. If I can still hear them, I'm too close. I need to run.

I'm deep into the forest now. The trees here are thicker. Older. Harder to dodge. My shoulder slams against the trunk of an oak tree and I yelp at the pain, but I don't stop moving. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears. A few flakes of snow start to drift down to the forest floor, but I don't notice the cold. My body is all heat and fire and sweat. The voices are gone now—too far away to hear. I manage a few more steps before my aching legs collapse beneath me and I fall to the forest floor with a groan. For a while, I just lie there, trying to catch my breath.

*Now what? I think.*

I've outrun them, but I'm lost deep in Wildwood Forest. And the snow is getting heavier. The leafy canopies can't keep out the fat white flakes that rush down from the sky. The wind is picking up, howling through the forest, making the trees creak and sway. Now that I've stopped running, the cold is biting. I can't stay here. This looks like it's going to turn into a full-blown blizzard.

*As if I need this day to get any worse.*

My whole body is exhausted, but I reluctantly pull myself up from the ground, using a sturdy tree trunk for balance. My legs feel like two useless blocks of Jell-o, and it takes all my energy to stumble forward, looking around the forest as I go. It's disorienting to be surrounded by trees. They stretch out in every direction as far as the eye can see, and I have no idea which way to go. Every path looks the same.

The temperature is still dropping. I start to shiver. I wasn't expecting to spend my day running through a forest in a snowstorm when I pulled on jeans and a light sweater this morning. I should probably start panicking right about now. I'm lost in a blizzard with nothing but a thin layer of wool and denim to protect me. But I'm too exhausted to panic. I think back to my sister's burning house, longing for the warmth of



the flames. My thoughts are going fuzzy, moving in and out of focus like a camera lens is trying to capture them, and I manage a few more steps forward before I stumble again. This time, I can't find the energy to get up. I've never been so tired. Every limb is begging for rest, and all I want to do is curl up on the forest floor and sleep.

My eyelids start to droop. Somewhere deep inside me, a final burst of energy rushes through my lungs.

“Help!” I cry out. “Help!”

My voice is weak and reedy. And anyway, who's going to hear me in the middle of Wildwood Forest? I'm tired of shouting. I'm tired of running. I curl up into a ball, bringing my knees up to my chest. The snow is falling faster and heavier, but I don't feel cold anymore. In fact, I feel strangely warm. I hear the snap of a twig from somewhere nearby, and I summon the last of my energy to turn my head toward the noise. The last thing I see before my eyes flutter closed is a giant walking toward me.

*Weird. I didn't know there were giants in Wildwood Forest...*

Then darkness washes over me and my thoughts melt away.

## Ivor

I swing my axe again and again until the tree starts to tilt forward, slowly toppling over with a loud groan before crashing to the forest floor. It's a big, beautiful fir, but it's diseased, and I can't risk the sickness spreading to other trees. I won't be able to sell it as timber, but I can chop it up and use it for firewood once it's dried out. I raise my trusty axe, ready to start cutting the tree trunk into pieces, when I notice a flake of snow land on my shirt. Then another. The wind is picking up out of nowhere, and I can feel the temperature dropping fast.

*Shit.*

There's a blizzard coming. I can feel it. It looks like I'm going to have to leave my work half finished. Not even a seasoned lumberjack like me wants to be caught in a snowstorm in the middle of Wildwood Forest.

I head away from the felled tree, watching as the snow starts to fall harder. It might be inconvenient, but damn, Wildwood always looks so beautiful in the snow. After more than twenty years of living in this forest, it still takes my breath away: the towering trees, the streams and waterfalls, the birds and the animals and the smell of pine and damp earth. There's no place in the world I'd rather be.

A lot of people can't understand wanting to live alone in a log cabin in the middle of the woods. They see me as a loner. A weirdo. As a guy in his early forties, they expect me to want marriage. Kids. A normal life. Once upon a time, I did want those things. But twenty-three years ago, everything changed. Things are different now, and they've been different for a long time. Being alone has become my version of "normal". I'm better off this way. The forest is my home now, and I don't need anything else.

I'm still a couple of hundred yards away from my cabin when something makes me stop in my tracks. There's a weird sound traveling on the wind—like an injured animal crying out. I frown, following the noise. After so long living in the woods, I can recognize just about any animal sound there is, but this sounds different. It sounds almost...human.

“Help!”

The voice is distant and weak, but I'm sure it's a person. There's somebody out there calling for help. I run toward the voice, then stop for a moment, squinting through the snowfall. I can just about make out a shape in the distance, sprawled on the ground. My heart starts to thump. Adrenaline pushes me forward and I race through the trees until I find myself staring down at...

*Holy shit.*

It's a girl. The most beautiful girl I've ever seen. She's lying curled up, her knees drawn to her chest, and for a second, I see her big blue eyes flutter open, looking straight up at me. My mouth goes dry as we stare at each other. Then her eyes close again. Her skin is as pale as the snow on the ground beneath her, and her lips are tinged blue. Fear starts to crawl up my spine.

*I need to get her out of here. Now.*

I toss my axe aside and scoop the girl up into my arms. She's freezing, yet she smells like smoke and burning wood. I hold her close to me and hurry back toward my cabin, my whole body thrumming with urgency. There's no time to get her to a hospital. Hypothermia has probably set in already.

I shoulder open the door to my cabin and lie the girl down on the couch. My hands reach for her clothes, and I desperately pull off the sodden fabric, forcing myself not to look at her body. I need to get her out of these cold, wet things. I toss them aside, leaving her totally naked beneath me before I start to wrap her up in blankets, keeping my gaze averted. Now is *not* the time for me to be ogling this girl.

Once she's bundled up, I strike a match and start a fire in the hearth, stoking it until it's warm and roaring. Then I sit down in my chair facing the couch, running an anxious hand through my hair. I've done everything I can think of. For the first time ever, I wish I lived closer to civilization. Specifically closer to a damn hospital.

I stare at the girl, finally letting myself get a proper look at her. I knew she was beautiful the moment I saw her, but I was too busy trying to save her life to really take it in. Now, it hits me with full force. She's got the sweetest face I've ever seen: plump pink lips which have finally lost their blue tinge, glossy brown hair still wet from the snow, and thick dark eyelashes that flutter slightly in her sleep. Even though her eyes are closed, I can vividly remember the gorgeous, sparkling blue irises that looked up at me before she passed out. I forced myself to look away when I undressed her—I was trying to ward off hypothermia, not grope a girl who looks about half my age—but I can't help noticing how curvy she is...thick and soft and so damn perfect, like something out of a painting. What was an angel like this doing wandering around Wildwood Forest in a storm? And why the hell does she smell like a bonfire?

*Meow.*

I turn to see my cat, Tiger, sauntering into the room. She nuzzles her ginger head against my ankle before fixing her one good eye on the mysterious girl. Then she turns back to me quizzically.

“Don't look at me, buddy,” I mutter, reaching down to pet her furry head. “I'm just as confused as you are.”

Undeterred, Tiger jumps up onto the couch and softly pads the girl's blanketed-covered body before curling up on top of her with a sigh. The girl stirs beneath Tiger's weight, and my heart thuds as those bright blue eyes slowly open.

*Thank God. She's awake.*

## Quinn

I look up at the unfamiliar wooden ceiling, my head pounding. Strange thoughts dance around my mind, thoughts of snow and fire and blaring sirens. I feel shaky and confused, but at least I'm warmer now. Heat is starting to spread through my body, and my skin tingles as feeling returns to my fingers and toes.

*Looks like I'm still alive. That's something.*

I'm wrapped up in unfamiliar blankets, and with a jolt of surprise, I realize I'm totally naked beneath the fabric. There's also a warm weight pressing down on my chest. I lift my head and find myself staring straight into a large green eye.

*Meow.*

There's a ginger cat curled up on my chest, looking at me. There's nothing but a fur-covered slit where its left eye should be, and I instinctively reach out to stroke its head. The kitty nuzzles my hand affectionately, purring with delight.

"Hello, beautiful," I murmur weakly. "Are you my rescuer?"

"She is," a voice rumbles from somewhere to my left. "She got you to wake up."

I prop myself up on my elbows and turn my stiff neck, my heart fluttering at the sound of that deep, gruff voice. There's a giant beside me...the same giant I saw walking toward me before I passed out. He's sitting in a chair, watching me intently. Okay so he's not a real giant like my delirious mind thought he was, but I can see why I was confused. This man is huge—a solid block of muscle with insanely broad shoulders and arms like tree trunks. He makes the wooden chair he's sitting in look like it was made for a child. I think he's probably bigger sitting down than I am when standing up.

“Where am I?” I ask the man, unable to keep my eyes off him. He’s so ruggedly handsome, with piercing green eyes and a wild beard. I can see the hint of a tattoo peeking out from beneath his shirt.

“This is my cabin. I found you out in the forest and carried you back here.”

I can hear the wind raging, the snow falling in white flurries outside the cabin windows. I wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes passed out in a blizzard like this, but this man found me in time, right in the middle of the woods.

“I’m Quinn,” I say, offering the man a tentative smile. “And you just saved my life. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” the man says, shrugging off my thanks as if all he did was hold a door open for me. “I’m Ivor. And that’s Tiger.”

“Tiger...” I smile, stroking her beneath her furry chin, making her purrs intensify. “Cute name for a cute kitty.”

Ivor leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. I feel his eyes boring into the side of my face as he asks, “What were you doing out in Wildwood Forest in the middle of a blizzard?” He sounds almost like he’s mad at me for doing something so stupid, and I feel my defenses start to rise.

“It’s complicated. And I didn’t know there was going to be a blizzard.”

Ivor doesn’t look mollified. He’s frowning at me like I’m a little kid who’s done something stupid. I guess that’s probably how he sees me. But it’s true—I had no idea there was a snowstorm coming. If I’d known, maybe I would have taken my chances with the police.

*The police.*

Suddenly, the fuzziness starts to clear and it all comes back to me. Running from the law. Travis holding me back. Kimmy screaming that it was me who started the fire...that I wanted to kill them both...the smoke clogging my lungs, the voices, the shouting.

“Hey? Are you okay?” Ivor asks, pulling me from my thoughts. He’s still frowning at me curiously and I try to arrange my expression into something more normal.

“I’m fine.” I clear my throat, eager to change the subject. The last thing I need is for Ivor to realize he’s harboring a fugitive. “Anyway, what were *you* doing in Wildwood Forest in a snowstorm?”

“Working,” he grunts, getting up from his chair and heading out of the room. I stare after him, but he’s back in no time holding a steaming mug. “You need to keep warm. Drink this.”

He presses the mug into my hands and the sweet, chocolatey smell of cocoa calms me slightly. I take a long sip, humming with satisfaction. “Thanks. It’s good.”

He sits back in his chair and reaches out a hand to rub behind Tiger’s ears. There’s something about that big strong arm stretching out so close to me that makes my mouth go dry. “What did you mean before?” I ask, turning my gaze away from his arm. “About working in the forest?”

Ivor leans back in his chair. “I live and work in Wildwood. I’m a lumberjack.”

*Damn. No wonder he looks so strong.*

“Anyway,” he continues, “you didn’t answer my question. What were *you* doing out here?”

“Hiking with friends.” The lie sounds forced, but I run with it. “I got separated from the group.”

He doesn’t believe me. I can tell. “How come your clothes smell like smoke?”

“Uh...there was a bonfire. Somebody was having a bonfire uh, near to where we started our hike.” His green eyes narrow in suspicion. Time to change the subject. “Speaking of clothes,” I say, “where are mine exactly?”

Ivor breaks our eye contact and swallows hard. “I had to take them off. They were cold and wet. But I didn’t look.”



I believe him. Still, it makes me shiver to think that I was lying naked in front of this man, his hands ripping my clothes off. Part of me wishes he *had* looked.

“Well, thank you,” I say, ignoring my crazy thoughts. “I really wasn’t in the mood to die of hypothermia.”

“I’m just glad that I found you when I did.” Ivor’s grumpy exterior softens for a moment. “If I hadn’t heard you crying for help then...” He tapers off. But we both know what the outcome would have been. I’d be lying dead on the forest floor by now. Not a cheerful prospect.

“Well, you did hear me,” I say, trying to distract him from the alternative. “And here I am safe and sound with a warm fire, a cat on my lap and a hot cocoa in my hands.”

*And an insanely hot lumberjack sitting right beside me, I think.*

I’d probably be thrilled right about now if my sister hadn’t just tried to get me arrested. I keep replaying it in my mind. What the hell was she thinking? Was she confused from the smoke? In shock from watching her house burn down? Delirious? Or did she plan all this?

“Is there anyone I should call?” Ivor asks after a few moments of silence. “Somebody who needs to know that you’re safe?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Nobody.” It’s sad, but now that my mom’s gone, I’m all alone in the world. A crazy, hopeful part of me believed I had Kimmy. Despite all the fights and the anger, I really thought my sister cared about me deep down. Boy was I wrong.

“Are you sure?” Ivor asks, raising his eyebrows. “Not even your mysterious hiking group?”

I bite back a smile. “Nope. Not even my hiking group.”

“I find it hard to believe that a girl like you doesn’t have a single person to call,” Ivor says, looking at me like he can’t quite work me out.

I shrug. “It’s complicated. Do you live alone out here?” Ivor nods, and I continue. “Then I guess you know a thing or two about having nobody to call in an emergency.

“You could say that.”

He doesn’t elaborate. I have a feeling that Ivor is going to be keeping his cards close to his chest, just like me. He may be secretive and a bit of a grump, but I’ve got secrets of my own. I wonder if Ivor would still be giving me cocoa and taking care of me if he knew what I was running from. If he knew what I was being accused of by my own sister.

“Well, you can stay here as long as you need,” Ivor says. “And at the moment, you don’t have much of a choice. This blizzard will block up the roads really damn fast. We’ll probably be snowed in for a couple of days.”

He says it like he’s expecting me to be disappointed, but all I feel is relief and gratitude. For a few days at least, I’ll be safe. After that, who knows what I’m going to do. If Kimmy and Travis are going to tell the police that it was me who burned down their house, how can I prove my innocence?

I gasp so loudly that Tiger’s head snaps up. She looks at me and sighs with annoyance before curling up again and falling asleep. But I’m too shocked to comfort her. I’ve just remembered something. A detail that has only just clicked into place. When my sister called last night to invite me to celebrate her birthday, she asked me to bring over a box of matches. She said she’d run out and needed something to light the candles on her birthday cake. I did as she asked. Those matches are still sitting in the front seat of my car. It’s the first thing the cops will find when they search it.

*Bringing matches with me. Running away from the cops. Two people insisting I burned down their house, knowing they were inside...crap, this isn’t looking good for me. That’s not just arson, that’s attempted murder. But at least now I know one thing for sure—this was a setup. Kimmy and Travis planned this from the start...but why?*

“Quinn?”

I turn to look at Ivor. I've only just met him, but for some reason, I want to tell him everything. I want to spill every detail and try to explain what's happening. But I can't. Why should he believe me, anyway? Fleeing the scene into the woods doesn't exactly make me look innocent. He might hand me straight over to the cops.

"Sorry," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'm okay. Just kind of shaken up still."

Ivor nods. "Near-death experiences can do that to a person."

"Have you had one? A near-death experience, I mean?"

Ivor furrows his brow. There's silence for a moment before he says, "Not really. Just a few close shaves with falling trees."

There's something he's not telling me, which is fair considering I've failed to mention that I'm being hunted down by police for attempted murder as we speak. But I can't help being intrigued by this big, gruff lumberjack living out here all by himself. He's a welcome distraction from the chaos that is my life, and if we're going to be snowed in together, we may as well get to know each other. Just not the part about me being a suspected attempted murderer...I think I'd better keep that to myself.

## Ivor

Quinn doesn't take long to recover once she's warmed up. Her clothes are still wet, so I lend her one of my shirts to wear. It drowns her five-foot-nothing frame, but she looks so damn adorable in my clothes, sitting on my couch with Tiger on her lap.

She's definitely hiding something from me. There's no way she was hiking in Wildwood Forest in jeans and ballet flats. But I'm letting it slide since I'm hiding things too. When she asked me about near-death experiences, I tensed up, and instinctively I pulled down my shirt sleeves as far as possible. My tattoos cover the scars well, but if you look close enough, you can see the tough, shiny texture across one half of my body. This sweet girl doesn't need to know about that, though. I've been alone for so long that keeping secrets has become second nature.

"This place is super cozy," Quinn says as she gently eases Tiger off her lap and gets up from the couch, wandering around my cabin. I watch her as she gazes at my home with wide eyes. She runs a hand along all my handmade wooden furniture, looking at it reverentially like she's never seen anything like it.

*Fuck, she's so beautiful. It almost hurts how pretty she is.*

"How long have you lived out here?" she asks, forcing me to clear my throat and try to regain control.

"Twenty-three years."

Quinn whistles. "That's as long as I've been alive!"

*Jesus.* I knew she was young, but finding out she's a full eighteen years younger feels like having ice water dumped over my head. She's vulnerable and innocent, and I wish like

hell I could stop the way my cock swells when I look at her. It makes me feel like a dirty old man.

“So,” she continues, “what do you do out here all day? When you’re not working?”

“I walk a lot. Fish in the streams. Build furniture from the trees I cut down. I like being outside.”

Quinn smiles at me. “That sounds pretty awesome. I’m more of a sit-on-the-couch-and-binge-watch-shows kind of person.”

“Sorry. I don’t have a TV.”

I make a mental note to go down to Winterdale and buy one as soon as possible. Then I remember that by the time the roads are clear enough for me to go into the town, Quinn will have gone back to wherever she came from and so getting a TV will be useless. The thought fills me with something hard and painful right in the center of my chest. I’ve always liked being alone, but this curvy beauty has barely been here five minutes and already I’m dreading the moment she’ll leave.

“Hey, do you have any board games?” Quinn asks brightly. “If we’re snowed in, we might as well try and have fun.”

She’s smiling, but I can see the pain in her eyes. Whatever’s hurting her, she’s still trying to stay upbeat. Like a little ray of sunshine.

“I think I have a chess set somewhere.”

“Perfect!” Quinn smiles at me like I just made her day. “But it’s been a long time since I played, and I’m not very good. You might have to remind me of the rules.”

I grab the chess set from the attic and set up the board.

“Black or white?” I ask.

“I’ll play white.”

We start the game, the wind howling outside as we move our pieces. Quinn frowns in concentration, staring at the board. I take the opportunity to look at her, wishing I could reach out and touch the soft skin of her face. Even beneath my

huge shirt, I can see the outline of her curves, the plumpness of her breasts straining against the material. Blood rushes down to my cock, and I barely notice when Quinn captures one of my pieces with a whoop of satisfaction.

“Ha! Your horse is mine!” she says, taking it off the board.

“I’m pretty sure it’s called a knight.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “You’re just mad that I’m winning.”

I bite back a smirk as I take one of her bishops. “Spoke too soon.”

“Damn, I didn’t even notice your prawn over there.”

“My what?”

She frowns at me. “Your prawn. You know, the little piece.”

“You mean my pawn?”

“That’s what I said!”

I shake my head, smiling. “Pretty sure you said prawn.”

“You must be hearing things,” Quinn says, pressing her lips together to hold back a grin. “I said pawn. I knew it was pawn all along.”

“Of course, you did.”

“Just wait,” Quinn says as she moves her remaining bishop. “I’m coming for your castle.”

“You mean my rook?”

“Nope. Your castle. The thing in the corner.”

“That’s called a rook.”

Quinn laughs. “Alright Mr. Know-it-All, your rook. Whatever it’s called, it’s mine now.” She slides her bishop into the corner and takes my rook.

“Damn,” I mutter. “I thought you said you weren’t very good at chess.”

“Fast learner.” She beams at me, and her smile takes my damn breath away. How is she having such a powerful effect

on me? I've never been interested in anybody before, yet with Quinn, the tiniest gestures are enough to send my body haywire.

"Are you from around these parts?" I ask, smiling at her cute little groan of annoyance when I capture a free white pawn.

"Yes, I'm from Rose Creek," she says.

"I know it." Rose Creek is the next town over from Winterdale. It's a quaint little mountain town named after the creek that runs through it. "What do you do all day down in Rose Creek?"

"Nothing very interesting. I work at the grocery store. But it's not what I want to do forever."

"What do you want to do forever?"

Quinn narrows her eyes at me teasingly. "You're trying to distract me from the game. This is your sneaky technique."

"No, really, I'm interested." I want to know everything about Quinn. If she won't be honest about why she's in Wildwood Forest, then I at least want to hear about her life.

Quinn shrugs, looking a little bashful. "I want to be an illustrator. For children's books."

"That's awesome. So, you like drawing?"

"Yes. And painting. I like to work with watercolor." She smiles sadly. "I don't think it's ever going to happen though. It's a hard industry to break into and there's not much money in it when you're just starting out."

Something in my heart twinges. She already sounds resigned about her fate, like she just knows her dreams won't come true. She must see something sad in my expression because her gaze softens as she says, "I'll always have it as a hobby, though. And who knows, maybe one day. Anyway... what about you? What made you want to be a lumberjack?"

"The work suits me. I spend my days outside working for myself."



“Doesn’t it get lonely out here living all alone in the woods?” Quinn asks, looking up from the board.

I open my mouth to say the usual “I never get lonely”, but something stops me. The truth is, now that Quinn is here, I’m starting to think maybe I have been lonely after all. I’ve only just met her, and yet already she’s turned my world upside down in a way I can’t even explain. It’s like she’s lit the whole place up with those bright blue eyes and that sweet little smile.

“Maybe,” I say. “Sometimes.”

Quinn looks at me thoughtfully for a moment before returning her gaze to the chess board. Her eyes go wide and I watch as she slides her queen across the board.

“Checkmate!”

I raise my eyebrows and examine the board. She’s backed me right up into a corner.

“Damn. Nice job.”

“Thank you,” she says, beaming with pride. “But we’re not done yet. For my prize, we’re going to make a cake.”

“Since when was there a prize involved?”

“Since right now,” Quinn says jumping up from the table. “Come on, don’t be a sore loser. Let’s bake!”

I chuckle. “Alright fine. I guess we’re baking a cake.”

The afternoon passes in a happy haze of baking, talking, laughing, and playing various games which Quinn always seems to beat me at. Things are so easy with her. I feel like we’ve known each other forever.

“You’re letting me win!” she cries after beating me at checkers for the third time, one hand holding a forkful of cake and the other pointing at me accusingly. “Admit it!”

“I’m really not.”

The truth is I’m just so damn distracted. It’s hard to concentrate on games when this curvy little angel is sitting right across from me. Part of me is convinced this whole day has been nothing more than a very realistic dream. I’m scared

that I'm going to wake up alone in my bed any moment now. But what scares me even more is the idea that Quinn will be leaving in just a few days. It forces me to keep my guard up. Sure, she's the most beautiful girl I've ever met. She's sweet and adorable and her curves are enough to drive a man crazy. But I can't get carried away. I can't be left heartbroken when she leaves. There's a reason I prefer being alone. I know all about relying on people only to lose them forever...I've been burned before, in more ways than one, and I can't let it happen again. Not ever.

## Quinn

I stretch out in Ivor's bed, inhaling the deep masculine scent of his room. I was ready to sleep on the couch, but he insisted I have his bed for the night, and being wrapped up in his sheets gives me a thrill of pleasure. I feel like I'm surrounded by Ivor. Being with him today almost made me forget my problems. He's so big and strong that I can't help but feel safe when I'm with him, like he's keeping all my worries at bay, physically beating every fear and anxiety to a pulp. He may be reserved and a little grumpy, but he went along with all my games without complaint, and he gave me everything I wanted from cocoa to cake. Not that I needed to play games with him...I could have happily sat and stared at him all day long. He's so damn gorgeous with his wild beard and intense green eyes—just thinking about him makes something warm and tingly bloom between my thighs.

*What a crazy day.*

I was accused of attempted murder, ran from the police, almost died of hypothermia, and met the sexiest man I've ever seen all in less than twenty-four hours. No wonder I'm so tired.

I hear Tiger padding into the room, and I smile at the sound of her soft paws against the wooden floor. Then I hear a weird sound.

*Oh my God! Tiger's choking!*

I jump out of bed and switch on the light, watching in horror as Tiger opens her mouth and lets out a series of hacking coughs.

"Ivor!" I shout, running out of the room to where Ivor is lying on the couch. "Ivor, come quick! Something's wrong with Tiger!"

Ivor springs up from the couch, yanking off the blankets and hurrying into his bedroom. I follow close behind, my heart hammering. Ivor turns on the bedroom light and watches as Tiger lets out another weird noise, her stomach convulsing.

“It’s okay,” he says, breathing a sigh of relief. “It’s just a hairball.”

“A hairball?” I ask. “Oh, thank God. I thought she was choking!”

“She’s okay.” Ivor reaches down to pet Tiger’s head. Her choking noises abruptly stop and she fixes us with her eye, looking between us as if to ask what all the fuss was about. Then she jumps onto the bed and curls up.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, feeling like an idiot. “I’ve never had cats before. I didn’t know that’s what a hairball sounds like.”

Now that I know Tiger’s okay, my eyes drift to Ivor. He’s wearing nothing but a pair of boxers, and I let my eyes flicker toward his bulge for a second, sucking in a breath. His underwear doesn’t leave much to the imagination. I can see the huge, thick outline of his cock straining against the material, and I feel desire pooling hot and urgent between my thighs. My gaze moves up to his thick chest, broad and solid and covered in tattoos. But there’s something else. Scars. The tattoos cover them well, but the skin on one side of his chest is shiny and mottled like it’s been burned.

“Not pretty, huh?” Ivor asks when he catches me looking.

“What happened?”

He looks down at his chest, avoiding my gaze. For a minute, it seems like he isn’t going to answer me, but eventually he says, “It was a house fire. A long time ago now.” Before I can respond, he turns away from me. “Goodnight, Quinn.”

He closes the bedroom door behind him.

\* \* \*

I wake up early and tiptoe into the kitchen, careful not to wake Ivor. I still feel guilty for getting him up in the middle of the night for a furball, so I figured I could at least make him

breakfast. I also feel awkward for asking about his scars. He was obviously reluctant to talk about them, and I think maybe I overstepped a boundary.

Tiger pads into the kitchen when I start cooking the bacon. She stares up at me, her eye wide with longing.

“Okay, you can have a teensy little bit,” I tell her, breaking off a piece from the pan and letting it cool before I place it on the floor next to her. She gobbles it up and looks up at me again expectantly. “Sorry sweetie but this is Ivor’s breakfast, not yours.”

I hear a sound from the living room and a moment later, Ivor appears in the doorway. He’s fully dressed but his short-sleeved t-shirt shows off the tattoos and scars on his arms. I’m so curious to hear more about the house fire. When did it happen? Where? Was anybody else hurt? But Ivor was pretty quick to shut down the topic last night, so I have to follow his lead.

“I’m making you an apology breakfast,” I say, flipping over the bacon. “For the hairball incident.”

“Thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to,” I tell him with a smile, plating up the bacon and eggs.

We sit at the table together eating our breakfast. The silence feels a little tense, and I put my knife and fork down.

“Listen, I’m really sorry if I made you uncomfortable last night. Asking about your scars and everything.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ivor says without looking at me. He’s been avoiding my gaze since he woke up, and it makes something sad and heavy sink down inside my chest. He’s probably sick of me. He’s used to being alone—that’s how he likes things. Now, suddenly, here’s some dumb girl who got herself lost in a blizzard, forcing him to play games and bake cakes and talk about stuff he wants to keep bottled up. Why should he tell me anything? It’s not like he knows me...I’m just the girl he saved from the storm...the girl who’s lying to him about why she was out there in the first place.

“I think I’m going to head outside,” I say getting up from the table.

Ivor frowns up at me. “Outside? It’s freezing out there.”

“It’s not snowing anymore and the wind has died down too. Besides, I’m only going in front of the cabin. I’m not in the mood to get lost and nearly die again.”

“I’ll come with you,” Ivor says, about to get up and abandon his breakfast.

“No, it’s okay. I won’t be long...I just need some air.”

The truth is I need to get out of this cabin for a minute. I need to gather myself and think about what I’m going to do next. As much as I already love being with Ivor, he’s a stranger who has no reason to want me around. And the weather is much milder today which means the snow will start melting soon. I need to figure out what I’m going to do once the roads are cleared, and I can’t focus knowing that this sexy hulk of a man is in the same room as me.

I grab my clothes from yesterday which have dried out in front of the fire. I pull them on in the bathroom before Ivor gives me an enormous coat to wrap around myself.

“Don’t stay out there too long,” he says. “And keep the cabin in sight. Okay?”

“I will. Promise.”

The snow outside is so deep that I can barely get the door open, but a push from Ivor is all it takes. With a quick thanks, I head outside into the brisk morning air, my feet crunching against the thick layer of snow. The forest has been transformed into a winter wonderland. I feel like I’ve been transported to Narnia as I walk through the woods, careful to keep the cabin in sight. I stop about fifty yards away and lean back against a tree, taking some deep breaths.

*When did my life turn into such a crazy whirlwind?*

I wonder where Kimmy is now. Where will she go now her home has burned to the ground? And would she really set fire to her own house just to hurt me? I’m still struggling to

believe it. Maybe asking for matches was a coincidence. Maybe this whole thing is just a big misunderstanding. It's all so muddled inside my head that I take a moment to bury my face in my hands and sigh. Tears are pricking behind my eyes, but I try to hold them back. I don't want Ivor to see that I've been crying.

With a sniff, I look up again and freeze. My whole body tenses and my breath catches in my throat as I stare ahead. A mountain lion is stalking toward me. Its amber eyes are fixed on me, sizing me up. For a moment I can't move. I just stare. Then, I take a shaky step backward, cringing at the way my foot makes a loud crunching sound against the snowy ground. The mountain lion doesn't stop prowling. My stomach drops as I debate running for the cabin, but I'll never make it—especially not in the snow. Besides, running will give it a reason to chase me. Instead, I keep on walking slowly backward, my eyes fixed on that hungry leonine face.

*Crap, what am I meant to do? Lie on the ground face-down? No, dammit, that's for grizzly bears, what are you supposed to do for mountain lions? Make yourself big and scary?*

The mountain lion starts to slow down like it's preparing to pounce, and my heart lurches unpleasantly as I take my chance.

“Hey!” I shout, spreading my arms wide above my head. “Listen here, cougar! I'm big and intimidating, so don't even think about it.”

The mountain lion hesitates for a moment, its ears laid back. But then it takes another step forward.

“Stay back!” I snap, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. “I did not escape arrest and survive hypothermia just for you to come along and attack me!”

Again, the mountain lion pauses. But all too soon, it starts to stalk toward me again. This time, I can't suppress my whimper of fear.



“HEY!” a voice shouts from behind me. I don’t dare to turn away from the cougar, but I almost sob with relief when I hear Ivor running toward us. I watch as a large rock whirls past me, landing in the snow right at the cougar’s feet. It takes a tentative step back, then another rock hits, and the mountain lion turns and scarpers, disappearing into the snowy trees.

I don’t realize I’m crying until Ivor’s arms loop around me and I’m sobbing into his chest. I feel him scoop me up into his arms like I’m weightless, carrying me back to his cabin and closing the door behind us.

*I’m safe. With Ivor, I’ll be safe.*

## Ivor

I'm shaking as I carry Quinn back to my cabin. Fuck, what is it with this girl and near-death experiences? I shouldn't have let her out of my sight. I was cleaning the kitchen after the breakfast she made for me when I heard her crying out, and then I looked out of the window to see a damn cougar staring her down. I swear it almost scared me to death.

"I'm sorry," Quinn sobs as I set her down on the couch, wrapping my arms around her. "God, that was so scary."

"Hey, it's okay." I stroke her hair, holding her close. "You're safe now. You're safe."

She hiccups, rubbing her eyes with her hands. "That's twice you've saved my life. I'm like a magnet for bad luck right now. It's all too much."

I'm an asshole for thinking it, but it feels so damn right to hold Quinn in my arms, rubbing her back, pressing her softness against me. Seeing that mountain lion ready to attack her has made me never want to let her go.

"I'm so sorry Ivor," she says again, her voice thick with emotion. "God, you must be so sick of me."

"Of course I'm not sick of you," I tell her, frowning. "I like having you here, Quinn."

Her watery blue eyes look up at me hopefully. "Yeah? Even though I attract hypothermia and mountain lions?"

"Yes."

"Even though I'm better at chess than you are?"

I chuckle. "Yes. Really, Quinn. I know I'm not the best at showing how I feel, but I'm glad you're here."

She gives me a shaky smile. “Thank you. I’m glad to be here.”

For one crazy second, I think she’s about to kiss me. Her eyes flicker to my lips and I tense up in anticipation, but the moment passes and she looks away.

“Do you want some cocoa?” I ask. “It’s good for shock.”

Quinn nods. “I’d like that.”

She follows me into the kitchen where I start to heat the milk, watching her discreetly out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m sorry again for yesterday by the way,” she says. “The furball and the scars.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing.”

I hand her a steaming cup of cocoa and she drinks it down gratefully. She looks so sweet and innocent sipping her cocoa, her red-rimmed eyes blinking up at me. I’ve been trying to keep my defenses raised, but something about Quinn makes me want to open up. I can’t help trusting her. I’ve seen her at her most vulnerable, and it makes me want to return the favor.

“Do you really want to know?” I ask her after a few minutes of sipping our cocoa in silence. “About the scars, I mean?”

Quinn looks at me and nods, her eyes flickering to the exposed skin on my arms.

“Well,” I continue, “if you want to know, then I’ll tell you about it.”

Quinn looks surprised but intrigued as I lead her back into the living room and we sit down on the couch together. Obviously Tiger is feeling left out because she comes in from the bedroom and jumps up onto my lap.

“Now this is my kind of kitty,” Quinn says, reaching to stroke under Tiger’s chin. “Too small to try and attack me.”

“I wouldn’t count on that. You haven’t seen her when she’s grumpy.”

Quinn chortles before looking up at me expectantly. “You don’t have to talk about the scars if you don’t want to. I know

it's none of my business. I was just curious.”

“It's okay. It's about time I told somebody.”

My mouth has gone a little dry, and I can't help but stare at the fire dancing in the hearth, the sight of the flames sparking a phantom burning pain in my chest.

“It was over twenty years ago,” I say, my voice sounding hoarse. “I still lived at home with my mom, my dad, and my brother.” I clear my throat. This is harder than I thought it would be, but I press on. “We were a normal family. My dad was pretty wealthy. He owned a chain of repair shops. My parents were crazy about each other. And my brother, Jason, was still in high school. He wanted to study to become a vet. He loved animals.”

I take a second to stroke Tiger, gathering myself before I continue.

“One night, I was coming home from some high school party and our house was...it was on fire.” Quinn's eyes widen but I don't stop talking. “I called the fire department and then I ran inside but it spread so fast that I couldn't even make it up the stairs. God knows I tried. In the end, the firefighters had to pull me out of there. My chest and arms were covered in third-degree burns. I lived, obviously, but my family...my mom, my dad, my brother...they all died.”

I chance a look at Quinn. She's holding a hand to her mouth looking horrified, but now that I've started, I may as well finish.

“It was an electrical fault. There's no way we could have known about it. After they died, I got all my dad's wealth...the money, the business. But it didn't mean shit. Because they were gone. So, I moved out here. I sold my dad's repair shop chain and made a life for myself in Wildwood Forest. Built a cabin, and started work as a lumberjack. Then five years ago, I was in Winterdale buying groceries. I came out of the store and found a ginger cat cowering beneath my truck.” I smile despite myself as I look down at Tiger. “She was skin and bones. Sick and half blind. I got her to the vet, and even though she lost an eye, she got better. Healthier. She's been

with me ever since.” I look up at Quinn. “So, there it is. That’s the story.”

Quinn wipes away a tear and rests a hand on my shoulder. “Oh, Ivor, I’m so sorry. I can’t even imagine...”

“It was a long time ago,” I tell her, reaching up to cover her hand with my own. “I felt guilty for a long time. I wished I’d never gone to that party. I wished I’d been there with them. The scars reminded me of how I failed to save them, so that’s why I got them covered up with tattoos.

Quinn shakes her head. “The scars show that you were brave enough to run into a burning building to try and save your family. They don’t show failure, Ivor. They show courage.”

I offer her a small smile. “That’s a nice way to look at it.”

“Wasn’t there anybody around to help you after it happened?” Quinn asks. “Anybody to take care of you? An aunt or uncle? A grandparent?”

“There was some extended family, yeah.” I shrug. “Honestly, nobody really knew what to say to me. I was just the orphan guy who lost his whole family in a house fire. People would look at me with so much pity. They’d tiptoe around me and lower their voices when I was there, like I was a living breathing funeral. I figured I was better off alone.”

Quinn nods. “It can’t have been easy. Dealing with the loss of your family and having to adjust to people treating you differently all at once.”

“Nope, it wasn’t easy. But a lot of time has passed and I’ve come to terms with what happened. I’m happy living in Wildwood. I’m happy with the life I’ve built for myself.”

Or at least, I thought I was happy. Until Quinn stumbled into my life and made me feel more alive than I’ve ever felt before. Now I’m starting to think that I didn’t really know what happiness was before I set eyes on her sweet little face.

“Well, I think it’s amazing what you’ve built here,” Quinn says, smiling at me. “You should be so proud of yourself.”

I nod. “I haven’t talked about this in over twenty years. It’s weird to talk about it so openly. But it feels good.”

Quinn presses her lips together and nods. “Thank you for telling me all this. You’ve been so honest with me...and so I think it’s time for me to be honest with you too.”

She takes a deep breath and starts to talk.

## Quinn

I'm still reeling from Ivor's story. I'm totally in awe of his courage, and knowing I'm the only person he's told about this makes me feel so much closer to him. Something has shifted between us since the moment he picked me up and carried me away from that mountain lion. It's like the floodgates are open and all the things we've been holding back are finally ready to pour out. I owe Ivor the truth, but at the same time, I'm hesitant to go into detail after hearing his story. His whole family died in a house fire—how would he feel if he knew I was being hunted down for arson? I'll give him the truth, but not all of it.

“The truth is, I wasn't hiking in Wildwood Forest like I said,” I say. Ivor doesn't even pretend to look surprised. “I was running...it's complicated, and I can't say exactly why, not yet. But I was running from my sister.”

“Your sister?” Ivor asks.

“Yes.” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “We've never been close, but things escalated when my mom died a few months ago. The thing is, my mom left everything to me. Kimmy didn't get a penny in my mom's will. That probably sounds mean and unfair, but Kimmy can't be trusted with money. She spends it on drugs and alcohol for her and her boyfriend, Travis. She's been begging me and my mom for money for as long as I can remember, and I guess my mom decided she was done with it, so she left everything to me. As you can probably guess, my sister wasn't super thrilled.”

Ivor's grip on my shoulder tightens and he gives me a comforting squeeze which makes my heart flutter. It almost makes me forget what I'm talking about.

“Um, anyway...my mom wasn't a rich woman. But still, my sister is desperate to get her hands on my mom's money. I told

her that I'd happily give her half, but that I would have to hold onto it and make sure she wasn't just spending it on drugs. I tried to be as fair as possible because I know it can't have been easy for her. But she hates me. She thinks I'm looking down on her. Patronizing her. When in reality, I just don't want to watch my younger sister kill herself with drugs and alcohol."

My voice tapers off. Ivor says, "You did the right thing. It was your mom's money and she decided to leave it to you. That was her choice, and she obviously had her reasons. You did nothing wrong, Quinn."

I want to melt into his arms and wrap myself around him. He feels so safe. So strong and solid.

"It sucks," I say with a sigh, "but I'm glad I was in Wildwood, even if I did almost die of hypothermia. Otherwise I would never have met you."

Something shines in Ivor's green eyes, and for a moment I think he might kiss me. His eyes linger on my lips for a beat too long, and I feel my heart start to pound before he looks away.

"I'm glad I met you too, Quinn," he says. But I want more. I want him to look at my lips again. I want him to kiss me. I want *him*. He doesn't feel like just a hot stranger anymore. I feel like I understand him so much better now, and it makes me crave him desperately.

"Ivor?" I ask quietly, building up my courage.

"Yes?"

I open my mouth but no sound comes out. I want to ask him to kiss me. I want to tell him that he's been driving me crazy since the second I set eyes on him. But somehow, facing down a mountain lion seemed easier than admitting my feelings to Ivor.

"What are you thinking, Quinn?" he asks, noticing my hesitation.

"I was...I was thinking about...kissing."

Ivor raises an eyebrow. "Kissing?"



“Kissing you. Specifically.”

His eyes darken and my breath catches as his hand reaches up to touch my cheek.

“Are you saying you want me to kiss you, Quinn?”

I swallow nervously. “Only if you want to.”

Ivor makes a noise somewhere in the back of his throat. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since the moment I saw you. But you’re so young…” His voice falters as his eyes land on my lips.

“I’m old enough to know what I want,” I tell him, my voice barely a whisper.

With a groan, Ivor pulls me to him and crashes his lips against mine. Everything melts away. My sister, the police, all of it. All that matters is Ivor. He tastes like cocoa and I moan against him, savoring the way he opens his mouth and slides his tongue against mine, invading me in the most delicious way. Something raw and sensual starts to pulse between my legs, an aching need that awakened the moment I saw this hulking lumberjack. I deepen our kiss, loving the way his rough beard scratches against my chin as our mouths lock together urgently.

I feel those huge hands reach around me, grabbing my ass and pulling me onto his lap. I straddle him. It makes me feel so tiny to be perched on top of him, my legs wrapped around his thick torso. Big and little. His hardness pressing against my softness. I loop my arms around his neck as he kisses me, his hands still gripping my ass. He starts to move my body back and forward on top of him, grinding me against him. Even through the fabric of my jeans, I can feel his thick erection, and I whimper with need, wishing there was nothing between us.

Ivor pulls away from our kiss, his eyes glazed with desire as he grabs at my sweater, pulling it up over my head. I reach to do the same for his shirt and for a moment, I see him flinch.

“I can keep it on if you want.”

I shake my head. “I want to see you. All of you.”

With that, he helps me pull off his shirt, revealing his tattooed chest. Instinctively, I reach out to touch the shiny burn scars, running my hand against the mottled skin. It gives me a thrill of pleasure to touch this intimate part of him, getting to feel the evidence of his courage beneath my fingers, knowing that he's shared his deepest secrets with me. It makes me feel so close to him. But I want to be even closer. I reach down between us to unzip his jeans and I hear Ivor's breathing go ragged.

"You're sure this is what you want?" he asks, his voice hoarse. "Because I don't know if I can stop myself."

"I want this," I tell him. "More than anything."

He growls somewhere deep in his throat before pulling me close to him and lifting me off the couch, carrying me into his bedroom. He sets me down on the bed and I take a moment just to stare at him as he starts to pull down his jeans. Those thick arms, his giant frame, the way those intense green eyes are fixed on me as he kicks off his pants and reaches for the waistband of his boxers...he's like a dream. A fantasy. My forest giant, the brave, protective lumberjack who keeps me safe. I want to give myself to him completely.

He yanks down the final piece of clothing between us, and I stare. His cock is as big as the rest of him. Thick, veiny, and hard as a tree trunk. The sight makes my mouth go dry. I'm so wet that I can feel it soaking my panties as Ivor reaches for me, pulling down my jeans. I sit up and unhook my bra, too turned on to be nervous.

"Fuck," Ivor mutters, feasting his eyes on my plump tits. He reaches out to massage them, rubbing the pads of his thumbs against my nipples. "You're beautiful, Quinn," he says as I tip my head back with a whimper, squirming. He sinks his head down toward my right breast and teases my pebbled nipple with his tongue, sucking on the sensitive nub until I'm panting for more.

"Please," I gasp. "I need you. I'm aching so badly."

He pulls away from my breast with a gentle popping sound before looking straight into my eyes as he says, "There's

something I need too, Quinn. I need to taste you.”

His hands grope for my panties, pulling them down in one desperate motion until I’m naked beneath him. Then he pushes my thighs apart, and I suck in a breath. I feel like a raw nerve. Totally exposed. At his mercy. His eyes are fixed on my most private place. No doubt he can see how wet I am, can smell my arousal...it’s almost too much. Then, before I have a second to prepare myself, he sinks his head down between my legs.

“Oh!”

His mouth latches onto my clit and my vision goes white. My hips buck, my body unable to take the pleasure. But Ivor holds me down, making me take it. It feels so good. I claw at the sheets like a wild animal, crying out as Ivor plunges two fingers inside my pussy, stretching me open, fucking me with his fingers as he worships my clit.

“Oh, God!” I sob. “Oh, God!”

But even God can’t save me from Ivor’s hungry mouth and probing fingers. He picks up the pace, slamming two digits in and out of my virgin pussy until I’m trembling, desperate for release. My body coils tighter and tighter with every thrust of his fingers. Then, with a scream of pleasure, I fall over the edge. My orgasm rockets through me, pulsing and throbbing, leaving me breathless. I feel Ivor pull his fingers out of me before licking dry my sensitive core, lapping up every last drop with a satisfied groan.

“You taste so damn sweet,” he says when he finally comes up for air, his mouth shining with my come. “Like strawberries and cream.”

I’m too dazed to reply. Instead, I urge him toward me until he’s kneeling on the bed, positioned between my legs. I shudder at the feel of his cock pressing against my thigh, so close to where I want it to be.

“Fuck, you have no idea how much I’ve been wanting to do this,” Ivor says, positioning his cock at my entrance. Every

nerve in my body quivers with anticipation, but there's also a little fear.

"Me too. But I've never had sex before," I tell him, looking down between my thick thighs to stare at the place where the head of his cock pushes against me.

"Neither have I," Ivor says, hooking a thumb under my chin and forcing me to look up at him. "But I promise I won't hurt you. I'll go as slow as you need. I'm going to take care of you, Quinn."

I nod, opening my legs wider. I may be nervous, but I'm so ready for him. I can feel my wetness spreading down my thighs, soaking the sheets beneath us. Ivor starts to inch forward, his eyes fixed on mine as he slowly pushes inside me. I let out a hiss of breath as he stretches me open. It doesn't hurt, but it's uncomfortable, like something far too big being forced into something tiny. I screw my eyes shut as he sinks deeper before finally bottoming out inside me, leaving me panting at the tenderness.

"Are you okay?" Ivor asks, looking at me urgently. He's gritting his teeth like he's having to hold himself back, and I nod.

"I'm okay. It's just a little sore."

"Don't worry, baby. We'll take it slow."

I shudder with pleasure when Ivor calls me baby in that deep, gruff voice. He presses a kiss on my lips before slowly, he starts to move.

## Ivor

It takes all my self-restraint not to come the second I bottom out inside Quinn's tight pussy. She's so soft and wet, and her sweet little hole clamps my cock like a vise, making me see stars. I want to claim her completely but I promised I'd be gentle with her, so I start slow, watching her face for signs of pain as I move. I don't want to hurt her. I only want to make her feel good. She whimpers slightly, but after a few more thrusts, I feel her body start to relax. The discomfort begins to melt into pleasure, and she throws her head back with a desperate moan. I love hearing those sounds...hearing that I'm making her feel good.

"You can go faster," Quinn gasps, propping herself on her elbows to watch my cock sinking deep inside her. "Oh, God, it feels amazing."

I don't need telling twice. I pick up the pace, relishing the way Quinn's moans get louder the harder I fuck her. Her plump, round tits bounce with every thrust, and I reach down to tease her nipples.

"Fuck," I growl. "You look so perfect with my dick inside you."

Quinn sobs in reply as I stare at her thick curves, watching my cock sink inside her pretty pink pussy again and again, my balls slapping against her ass as I drive into her. The wet smacking sounds of skin-on-skin fill the room, and I let myself go wild. I grab her thighs and spread them wider, folding her body in half and pushing her legs up so they're almost touching her ears. Quinn yelps at the new position, her eyes going blank as I ram my cock into her slurping pussy, rutting her like an animal.

"Oh, yes!" Quinn screams, her body trembling around me.

“You like being full of my cock?” I grit out. “You like when I fuck you hard like this?”

“Yes!” she sobs, her hands scratching at my shoulders, clawing at the skin. “Please don’t stop. Please, Ivor!”

“I’m not stopping until you come again.”

I readjust Quinn’s position, giving my fingers access to her swollen clit. I reach between us and rub at the sensitive bundle of nerves, still pounding her pussy in a punishing rhythm. I can hear the moment she’s about to come. Her cries reach fever pitch and her body starts to tighten beneath me, her pussy clenching so hard that my mind goes blank.

“Holy shit, come for me, baby,” I groan. “Come hard on my cock.”

Quinn does as she’s told, sobbing as she orgasms. Her body trembles, her pussy throbbing hard. It’s as much as I can take. With a deep roar of pleasure, I let her milk me dry, spurting my release deep inside her. When I’m finally spent, I collapse onto the bed, my cock coated in her sweet juices. There’s silence except for our ragged breathing, and I reach out for Quinn, pulling her close to me.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, my voice hoarse. “Was I too rough with you?”

She shakes her head, her eyes still dazed. “You were amazing...can we do it again?”

I chuckle. “I like your thinking. But give me a few minutes first.”

I have a feeling Quinn is going to be insatiable, and my cock soon starts to stir again at the thought.

“I hope you don’t have any plans today,” I tell her, pulling her on top of me. “Because I’m not letting you leave this bedroom for a very long time.”

Quinn bites her lip and smiles, her eyes lighting up with anticipation. “I like the sound of that.”

\* \* \*

As promised, Quinn and I spend the rest of the day in bed together. I can't get enough of her sexy curves and watching her come for me over and over again is fucking incredible. It's dark outside by the time we finally collapse from pure exhaustion, drifting off to sleep in each other's arms, and I swear I've never been happier. I never thought a pretty young thing like Quinn could ever want a scarred old lumberjack like me, and it feels so damn good to have the girl of my dreams wrapped up in my arms, her breathing deep and relaxed as she falls asleep.

The next morning, I'm woken by the sound of a loud vehicle in the distance. I blink the sleep from my eyes, taking a second to gaze at Quinn. She looks so peaceful. So beautiful. Tiger must have come in at some point during the night because she's curled up on the end of the bed. Her eye opens lazily for a moment when she feels me move, before she gives a loud sigh, stretches out her paws, and goes back to sleep.

Only then do I pay attention to the sound that woke me. It's unmistakable: a snow plow. Somebody is clearing the snow off the nearby mountain path. My heart drops as it slowly dawns on me what this means: Quinn can go home. There's nothing to keep her here now that the roads are clear—she's free to head back to Rose Creek and walk straight out of my life.

*Fuck.*

How the hell did I live without her for so long? Now that I've experienced being with Quinn, I can't imagine having to give her up. The thought is like torture. I sit for a while, mulling it over in my head, trying to figure out what to do when suddenly there's a rapping on my front door.

Tiger and I turn our heads toward the sound. It's not often that people come knocking on my door. Occasionally I might see Evan, my closest neighbor, or Griffin, who lives in his own cabin deeper in the forest. But why the hell would either of them be knocking on my door at this time in the morning?

I get out of bed and pull on a shirt and pants. Quinn stirs at the sound of me getting dressed.

“Good morning,” she mumbles sleepily. “What time is it?”

“Early. Sorry I woke you but there’s somebody at the door.”

Immediately, Quinn looks wide awake. “Who is it?”

I shrug, frowning when the knocking starts up again. “No idea. I’m going to see. Stay here.”

Quinn looks strangely nervous as I head out of the bedroom toward the front door. I open it, the white morning light blinding me for a moment before I take in the sight of two deputies standing on my doorstep, their badges shining in the sunlight.

“Good morning, sir,” one of the deputies says. “We’re sorry to call so early. We’re from the Crave County Sheriff’s Office, and we have a couple of questions for you.”

“For me?” I ask.

*What the hell could these guys want with me?*

“Yes, sir. We’re questioning everybody in the local area. Have you seen this woman?”

The deputy presents me with a photograph and it takes me a second to realize what I’m looking at. It’s Quinn, my Quinn, smiling up at the camera.

*What the fuck is happening?*

My mind is reeling, but I manage to keep a poker face.

“Never seen her before,” I say, tearing my gaze away from the photo. “Why are you looking for her?”

“She’s wanted for questioning,” the second deputy pipes up. “In connection with a case of arson and attempted murder. She was last seen running into Wildwood Forest two days ago.”

My fists clench. I want to cuss these guys out and tell them that they don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about. Quinn would never do anything to hurt anyone. But I keep my cool and take a step back into the cabin.

“Sorry. Can’t help you.”

“Here’s my card,” the first deputy says, handing it over to me. “If you see her, get in touch.”



“Sure,” I say, my jaw set. “But you’re wasting your time. If she was out here two days ago then that means she was caught up in the blizzard. She’s probably lying dead somewhere.”

“It’s a definite possibility. But we’ve still got to look either way.”

I watch as they head out of the forest, my heart pounding as the words “arson” and “attempted murder” swirl around in my head. I close the front door and turn toward the bedroom, ready to find out what the hell is going on.

## Quinn

I crack the bedroom door open and press my ear to the gap as the men at the door talk to Ivor. My hands are shaking as I listen, waiting for him to tell them that I'm right here in his cabin. But he doesn't. He says he's never seen me before and I press my hand over my mouth, stifling a sob of relief. When I hear them leave a few moments later, my legs are so wobbly that I almost collapse. My time with Ivor has been so amazing that it totally pushed everything else from my mind. I've been kidding myself, trying to pretend like I can bury my head in the sand and ignore what's happening. But now the truth has come knocking at the front door, and it's time for me to face it.

I hear Ivor walking toward the bedroom, and I get up, opening the door before he reaches it. He's frowning, looking bewildered.

"Ivor, I can explain," I say, my voice sounding strangely high-pitched.

He doesn't say a word. He just beckons me toward the couch, and we sit side by side staring at the charred logs in the fireplace.

"I know it sounds crazy," I begin finally. "But first, you have to know that I'm innocent."

Ivor's frown deepens. "I know you're innocent, Quinn. I have no doubt about that. What I don't understand is why the police think you're some kind of criminal. Just tell me what's going on. Tell me what you're running from."

It fills me with relief that he believes me. He says it with so much conviction like he knows I could never do what I'm being accused of, and it makes me feel a surge of affection toward him.

“Okay,” I say as Ivor reaches out to hold my hand. “It’s complicated, but it all happened two days ago, the day of my sister’s birthday...”

Ivor listens attentively as I explain what happened: the matches, the fire, the way Travis held onto me, my sister accusing me, the police chasing me into the forest. With every word, Ivor’s frown deepens, and something fierce and stormy passes across his face.

“Those fucking assholes,” he mutters.

I nod sadly. “They set me up. My sister resents that my mom left me her money, but I’m still so shocked that she would set fire to her own house just to get back at me.”

“I bet they’re not just framing you,” Ivor says. “They’re probably committing insurance fraud as well. They’ll tell the insurance company that it was arson, get a big chunk of money, and land you in prison at the same time.”

I sigh. “Kimmy and Travis will do anything for money. It’s all they’ve ever cared about.” I feel tears start to rise as I remember the way my sister screamed that I started the fire. That I wanted to kill them both.

“Hey,” Ivor says, pulling me close to him. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to fix this. I won’t let anything happen to you, Quinn. And I won’t let anybody get away with trying to hurt you.”

“But what can we do?” I ask, my tears falling thick and heavy. “What if the police don’t believe me? I brought matches to the house and then I ran away from the cops. And now I’ve been hiding out for days, putting you in danger for harboring a fugitive. I’m sorry, Ivor. I’m really sorry.”

“None of this is your fault.” Ivor’s voice is firm as he reaches up to wipe away my tears. “You ran because you were scared. And you didn’t put me in danger—I’m the one who brought you here, remember?”

“I know, but I should have been honest with you before.” I squeeze his hand, leaning my head against his burly shoulder. “After you told me about what happened to your family, I

didn't know how to admit that I was being accused of starting a fire."

"I would never have believed you were guilty, Quinn. Not for a second." He presses his lips to mine in a long, lingering kiss full of tenderness and reassurance. Then he pulls back with the tiniest of smiles like he's just had an idea. "We're going to fix this."

"But how?"

"Don't worry. We'll need a little help, but I know just the guy."

Ivor's eyes are twinkling and his confidence makes something light and hopeful swell in my chest.

"Who?" I ask, eager to know what Ivor is planning.

"His name is Griffin Scott. And he's the ex-sheriff of Crave County."

My eyebrows raise in surprise. "And you know him?"

"I sure do. He lives in Wildwood Forest now that he's retired."

"And you really think he'll help us?"

Ivor nods. "I'm sure of it. Griffin's a good man. He cares about fairness, and he'll want to hear your story."

Ivor's confidence in Griffin is contagious. It's pretty scary to put my fate into the hands of a man I've never met, but I trust Ivor's judgment, and I believe in his promise to keep me safe. My lumberjack has already saved me twice. I just hope we can pull it off a third time.

\* \* \*

Griffin's cabin is deep in the woods, just like Ivor said. I'm paranoid as we walk through the trees, constantly looking for signs of the police...or maybe even another cougar. But everything is quiet and peaceful as we reach Griffin's front door a few minutes later. Ivor knocks and the door is flung open by a scowling man. He's as big as Ivor, with a wild salt-and-pepper beard and a face that seems to be stuck in a

permanent frown. There's something sad in his eyes, and I quietly wonder why the former sheriff of Crave County ended up moving to a cabin in the middle of Wildwood Forest.

"Morning, Griffin," Ivor says. "Sorry to bother you so early. Mind if we come in?"

Griffin nods reluctantly, opening the door wider. We head inside the warm cabin, watching as Griffin sits down in a chair by the fire, looking up at us.

"What can I do for you folks?" he asks, his voice deep and quiet.

"We need your help," Ivor says. He launches into an explanation, repeating everything I told him back in his cabin while Griffin listens, his head cocked and his eyes narrowed. There's silence for a moment when Ivor's finished talking, and I wait with bated breath, crossing my fingers behind my back.

"I'm retired," Griffin says eventually. "And you damn well know it."

My heart sinks, and I take a step forward before Ivor has a chance to get mad. "Please, Mr. Scott. I don't know who else to turn to. Ivor says you used to be the sheriff for the whole of Crave County...I really think you can help me. I'm innocent, sir. And I don't want to go to prison for something I didn't do."

Griffin's eyes flicker between me and Ivor for a moment, considering us.

"I know you're retired," Ivor says. "I know you swore you'd never work a case again. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Griffin sighs, running a hand through his hair. He mutters something angrily under his breath before saying, "Dammit, alright then. I'll help you clear your name. If you really are being framed then someone's gotta do something about it... just wish it didn't have to be me." He adds the last part with a bitter undertone, but I'm too relieved to care.

"Thank you so much," I say, choking back tears. I feel Ivor grip my hand tightly and it makes me feel stronger.

Griffin waves off my thanks, his frown still in place. I wonder if he's ever smiled before...I can't even imagine what it would look like if he did.

"So, here's the plan," Griffin says, standing up from his chair. "We go to wherever your sister and her boyfriend are staying. And we get them to admit to starting the fire themselves."

It's my turn to frown. "How are we going to do that?"

"That's for you to figure out," he says. "You'll go in with a hidden recorder, and you'll get them to admit it all on tape."

I feel Ivor stiffen beside me. "I don't want Quinn putting herself in danger."

Griffin shakes his head. "She's not going to be in any danger. We'll be right outside the whole time, and once we've got it on tape, I'll show it to the boys and girls down at the Sheriff's Office. I doubt it will be admissible as evidence, but it will give them a reason to take another look at the case, especially if it's me who's asking." He takes a step toward us and crosses his arms. "That's the best I can do. Take it or leave it."

I take a deep breath and nod. "Let's do it."

“You’re sure you don’t want me to go in there with you?” I ask for the third time. Quinn and I are sitting in the backseat of Griffin’s truck, heading toward Quinn’s mom’s house in Rose Creek. That’s where she thinks Kimmy and Travis must be staying, even though they have no damn right to be there.

“I’m sure,” Quinn says, offering me a small smile. “They won’t admit to anything if you’re there.”

“But if that Travis asshole puts his hands on you again—”

“It will be okay.” She reaches up to touch my cheek, and I lose myself in those pretty blue eyes. “I know you’re right outside if I need you.”

I rest my forehead against hers, wishing like hell we were back at my cabin, with Quinn safe and sound in my arms. I hate the thought of her having to see Kimmy and Travis again after everything those assholes have put her through.

*Fuck, if I ever get my hands on Travis...*

“It’s just up here,” Quinn says, her voice wavering slightly. “At the end of the block. Their cars are parked outside.”

Griffin slows down, stopping his truck a few houses away from Quinn’s mom’s place.

“Got your recorder?” Griffin asks, turning back to look at us.

Quinn nods, holding up her wrist. She’s wearing a black watch with a secret audio device hidden inside, courtesy of Griffin.

“Good,” he says. “Press the button on the side and it will start recording.”

“Got it. Thanks.” Quinn takes a deep breath and looks at me. “Here goes nothing.”

“Be careful,” I tell her. “If anything happens, no matter how small, you run right out of there, you hear me?”

“I promise.”

I capture her lips in a searing kiss, pulling her close to me. It feels so damn wrong to let her go in there alone. I should be there to protect her. To keep her safe.

“Alright folks, maybe save the smooching until we’re done here,” Griffin barks from the front seat.

Quinn pulls away from me reluctantly and opens the door, stepping out of the truck.

“Don’t worry,” she says, her voice earnest. “I’ll be back soon. Then we can put all this craziness behind us.”

I nod. “I’ll be right here, baby.”

She smiles at me, but I can see the nervousness in her eyes as she closes the door and turns away from the truck, heading toward the house.

“Fuck, Griffin, are you sure this is a good idea?” I ask, my throat going dry as I watch Quinn walk away from us.

“It was the best I could come up with. It’s not every day I get people knocking on my door telling me they’ve been framed and that they want me to help them.”

“Can we at least wait outside the house? We can crouch down outside the window and listen in, just to make sure she’s safe.”

Griffin sighs. “Fine. But we can’t be seen. Otherwise, it’ll blow the whole thing.”

We get out of the truck, doing our best to act natural as we head for the house. But it’s not easy to be inconspicuous when you’re as huge as Griffin and me.

“You must really care about this girl, huh?” Griffin asks.

“I do. More than anything. I fucking love her.”



The words come from nowhere before I can even realize what I'm saying, but I know in my heart that they're true. I've been captivated by Quinn since the minute I set eyes on her lying on the snowy forest floor. I've spent so long isolating myself from the world, but Quinn has brought sunshine back into my life for the first time in over twenty years. She's everything I've ever dreamed of and I'm totally fucking in love with her.

"Damn," Griffin says quietly. "Well...good for you, buddy."

We stop talking as we approach the house, crouching down outside the window, shielding ourselves behind a mass of bushes. I'm still not happy about letting Quinn go into the house alone, but at least from here we can hear what's going on and be ready to rescue her if things go wrong.

"Do you really think she'll be able to get her sister to confess?" I whisper.

Griffin shrugs. "I guess we'll see. I was sheriff for a long time, and one of the things I learned pretty damn fast in my job was to never underestimate the power of women. I'm sure she'll do just fine."

We hear a distant knocking. It sounds like Quinn is finally going in.

## Quinn

My hand trembles as I reach up to knock on the front door of my childhood home. My mom left this place to me in her will, and I've been making plans to sell it. Kimmy must have stolen the keys from my car after I ran off into the woods.

The door opens and Kimmy stares at me, her eyes widening in surprise.

"I just want to talk," I say hurriedly, holding my hands up.

"The police said you were probably dead," she says. "Buried under the snow in Wildwood Forest."

Her voice is casual, but I can see something flicker in her eyes. My sister might hate me enough to put me in jail, but I know she doesn't want to see me dead...not really.

"I'm alive and well. And I want to talk to you."

"What is there to say?" Kimmy asks, her gaze turning hard and steely once more. "You burned down my house."

"I didn't! You know I didn't!"

Kimmy shrugs, and instinctively, I press the button on the watch, starting the recorder. "The police think it was you," she says. "That's all that matters."

She makes to close the door but I block it with my foot, shouldering my way inside the house.

"You can't stop me from coming in," I say firmly. "This is my damn house."

Rage flits across Kimmy's face as I walk into the living room, but I'm not afraid of my sister.

"It shouldn't be your damn house," Kimmy snaps. "Mom should have left half of it to me! I don't know what bullshit

lies you told her to make her cut me out, but she was my mom too and I deserve half.”

I know I should try and keep my temper in check. I’m here for one reason: to clear my name and get Kimmy’s complete confession on tape. But I can’t help the way my blood pressure rises at her words.

“You deserve it?” I ask, my voice shaking with anger. “You *deserve* it? Are you kidding me? You’ve been using mom for money for years. When she got sick, you didn’t visit her or help out or care for her at all. You didn’t organize her funeral. I did! All you cared about was how much money you could squeeze out of her, and even after she died that was still all you cared about.”

Kimmy looks livid, but she just rolls her eyes at me, trying to play it off. “Whatever, Quinn. Take the moral high ground if it makes you feel better. That’s all you do. Like you don’t care about money...if you’re *so* uninterested in money then why won’t you give me my fucking half?”

“There is no half!” I snap. “Mom didn’t leave you half. You weren’t there for her, and she didn’t want you to end up dead from an overdose in your twenties. If she’d given you half of everything you’d have spent it all on drugs.”

“It’s none of your business what I spend my own damn money on.” Kimmy sniffs indignantly. “Anyway, none of that matters anymore. Now you’re finally going to get what’s coming to you.”

It’s an opportunity. The perfect moment to get her to say it. I rein my anger in and refocus on what I’m here for: the confession.

“So, this is your big plan?” I ask. “Framing me for arson?”

Kimmy smiles slyly at me. “Not just arson. Attempted murder.”

“But what do you get out of all this?” I ask, my heart thudding.

Kimmy rolls her eyes. “Money, obviously. The insurance will pay out for our house. We’ll sue your ass for

compensation. And *you* can fuck off to jail.”

“Was this all your idea?” I ask. “Or did Travis come up with it?”

“It was my idea,” she says smugly. “It was Travis who started the fire, but the rest was all me.” She’s trying to boast. She wants me to be impressed by her cunning, but all I feel is relief. I’ve got what I came for. I’m one step closer to putting this crazy mess behind me and getting back to Ivor.

“Well,” I say, taking a step toward the door. “That’s all really smart Kimmy.”

She laughs like I’ve said something hilariously dumb. “Where do you think you’re going? I’m not letting you leave, Quinn.” She shakes her head at me. “You really shouldn’t have come here.”

I whirl around and race back into the hallway, heading for the front door, but Travis is standing there blocking my path. I try to run in the opposite direction but he snatches me up, holding me still.

“Well, hey there, Quinn,” he says, his breath reeking of beer. “Nice of you to stop by.”

“Get your hands off me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” He’s talking right into my ear, making me shiver with disgust. “Remember last time we saw each other, Quinn? You kicked me in the balls.”

“I kneed you actually, asshole.” I try to squirm away from him but he holds me tight. Kimmy watches us, looking amused by my distress.

“Well, I think it’s time you got a little payback,” Travis says. “You need to be taught a lesson.”

I stiffen as he pushes me toward Kimmy. She grabs me, yanking my arms behind my back so that I’m facing Travis. His fists are clenched and my throat goes dry as he stalks toward me. He reminds me of the cougar with his narrowed eyes and hungry expression.

“How are you gonna explain this to the police?” I say, flinching as he raises his fist.

“That’s obvious,” Kimmy chuckles. “You failed to kill us last time, so you came here to finish the job. Travis attacked you in self-defense.”

“Self-defense?” I splutter. “You seriously think the police will believe that he beat up a five-foot woman in self-defense?”

“I don’t give a shit if they believe it or not,” Travis snaps. “Either way, I’m making you pay.”

Kimmy tightens her grip on my arms and I cry out in pain, bracing myself for the impact of Travis’s fist. I squeeze my eyes shut, but the blow never comes. At that moment, the door bursts open, slamming against the wall to reveal Ivor and Griffin. Travis drops his fist and whirls around, but Ivor is already striding toward him, his face full of a dangerous rage.

“What the—” Travis begins.

*Smack.*

Ivor’s massive fist smashes into Travis’s face, flooring him. Kimmy screams. Blood streams from Travis’s nose, but Ivor grabs him by the scruff of the neck and pulls him back onto his feet, ready to punch him again.

“Ivor,” Griffin says, grabbing his shoulder. “That’s enough. Quinn doesn’t need you getting arrested for assault.”

Reluctantly, Ivor drops his fist, but that doesn’t stop him from shoving Travis up against the wall, crushing him as he hisses, “If you ever touch my girl again, you’re a dead man. I’ll feed you to the fucking mountain lions. Got that?”

Travis’s nose is set at a funny angle, and he whimpers as blood pours down his face. But he nods and Ivor releases him, shoving him back to the floor for good measure. Then he reaches for me and pulls me into his arms, stroking my hair as he holds me.

“I’m here, baby,” he mutters. “It’s over now.”

“Quinn,” Griffin says over Ivor’s shoulder. “Did you get it?”

I can’t help but grin at him, nodding. “I got it.”

Kimmy is staring at us incredulously. “What the fuck is going on? What did you get?”

“Your full confession,” I say. “On tape.”

Her jaw drops open. “You set me up!” she cries, her eyes filling with panic as she looks between Griffin, Ivor, and me. She knows it’s over.

“Yes,” Ivor says, staring at my sister in disgust. “We did. Looks like it’s your turn to be hunted down by the police. You fucking earned it.”

“There won’t be any hunting down necessary,” Griffin says as he reaches for Kimmy’s wrists, slapping on a pair of handcuffs. “I already sent a message to the Crave County Sheriff’s Office. They’re sending out a couple of deputies to pick these two up as we speak.”

Almost immediately, we hear the sound of a car pulling up outside, and two deputies join us in the hallway, greeting Griffin like old friends. I watch as they haul Travis and Kimmy into a patrol car, and my sister gives me one last scathing look as the deputy closes the car door after her. There’s a pang of sadness in my heart. Despite everything, watching my younger sister being carted off to jail isn’t fun. But she chose to do what she did, and now she’ll have to suffer the consequences.

“I’m going to head down to the sheriff’s office and show them the recording,” Griffin says, reaching out to take the watch from me. “It sure helps that I overheard most of what was said, and I bet more evidence will come to light now that the case is being reexamined.”

“Thank you, Griffin,” I say, reaching out to shake his hand. “Truly, you’re a lifesaver.”

He just nods, his face stuck in its usual grumpy mask.

“Take my truck and head home,” he says, throwing the keys to Ivor. “I’ll get a ride in the patrol car.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Ivor says, pocketing the keys. “I owe you one.”

“Yeah. You bet your ass you do.”

With that, Griffin gets into the patrol car and the deputies drive away, leaving me and Ivor alone in the hallway. Once the car is out of earshot, I collapse against Ivor, letting myself melt into his embrace.

“That’s the third time you’ve saved me,” I mumble against his chest. “I seem to have a habit of getting into trouble.”

Ivor lifts me up into his arms so that our faces are level. His intense green eyes fix on me, and my breath catches.

“I’ll always be here to look after you, Quinn. Always.” He kisses me hard and I can’t help smiling against his lips. My perfect lumberjack. He’s all I need.

“Come on,” he says, pulling back and carrying me out of the house. “Let’s get you home.”

*Home.* I think of Ivor’s cozy cabin and I smile.

“Home sounds good,” I say.

I'm so damn relieved to have Quinn back at the cabin with me. My fist is throbbing from punching that asshole Travis in the face, and there's blood on my shirt, but all that matters is having Quinn in my arms as I carry her across the threshold and into the cabin. Tiger greets us with a cheerful meow as I set Quinn down on the couch and start a fire in the hearth.

"It's so good to be back," she says, beaming up at me.

I return her smile. "You're safe now. You know that, right?"

She nods, snuggling against me as I sit down beside her. "I know. I always feel safe with you, Ivor."

Her words fill me with warmth and I reach out to stroke her hair, running my fingers through the soft tresses. I take a deep breath and say, "I want you to stay here, Quinn."

She turns her head to look at me, her eyebrows raised. "Stay here?"

I nod. "Live here. With me."

Quinn stares at me. "Really? You mean it?"

"Of course I mean it." I'm hit with a huge wave of love as I look into her wide blue eyes, tracing the sweet line of her lips with my finger. "I don't want to lose you, Quinn. I don't want to be without you for a second."

Her eyes fill with tears and her face splits into a grin. "I want to stay here more than anything. I don't want to leave you either."

"Then don't."

"You're sure?" she asks breathlessly. "I mean, I seem to attract chaos wherever I go. Maybe your cabin will suddenly flood or be hit by lightning or..."



“I’ll take the chaos,” I say, interrupting her with a chuckle. “All that matters is being with you. You’ve changed my life, Quinn. I’ve been alone for so long that I never even realized I was missing anything. Then you showed up, and from the moment I saw you I just knew...I knew I needed you.” I pause, taking a moment to gather myself before I say, “I love you, Quinn. I’m completely fucking in love with you, and I know it’s crazy. I know it’s too soon. But it’s how I feel.”

Quinn laughs with delight and throws her arms around my shoulders, her sweet curves pressing against me as she says, “I love you too, Ivor. I’ve been crazy about you since I woke up in your cabin. You’ve saved my life in so many ways, and I’m not just talking about cougars or hypothermia.” She rests her forehead against mine, her voice full of emotion. “You’re all I want.”

I think my heart might fucking burst. I’m so full of happiness that I don’t know if my body can contain it all, and I pull Quinn onto my lap, kissing every inch of skin I can reach.

“It’s just you and me now, baby,” I tell her. “And this is our cabin, okay? Not just mine. Ours. I’ll buy you a TV for your shows and some paints for your illustrations: anything you want. I know it’s remote out here, but I’ll make sure you’re comfortable.”

“That sounds perfect.” She grins up at me, her eyes sparkling. “But as long as I’m with you, I don’t care how remote it is. I like being in the forest. When I’m not busy dying of hypothermia or getting attacked by cougars, anyway.”

“I’ll keep you safe,” I tell her solemnly. “I promise.”

“I know you will.”

I lean in to kiss her, capturing those plump lips between my own, groaning at my girl’s sweet taste. My cock swells as I push my tongue between her lips, opening her up to me as I dominate her mouth.

*She’s mine. Mine. And I’m never letting her go.*

“Ivor,” she gasps, pulling away from our kiss. “I need...”

“What do you need, baby?”

“You. Inside me.” Her wide eyes are full of desire, and I can see the way she’s pressing her legs together like she’s frustrated. “I’m aching for you.”

*Fuck.* Her words awaken something feral in me, and I grab at her clothes, tossing them all aside until she’s standing naked in front of me, five feet of gorgeous curves and soft skin. I yank down my jeans and boxers, my cock springing free, desperate to be deep inside my girl’s sweet pussy.

“I want you to ride me, Quinn,” I say, lying back on the couch, my whole body thrumming with need. “Use my cock to make yourself come.”

Quinn shudders before scrambling on top of me. She’s so damn tiny. I don’t know how she manages to take my cock, but she does. I hold it in position, my thick rod pressing against her soft, wet core. With a cry of pleasure, she sinks down onto it, taking every inch, her pussy stretching around my girth.

“Oh God, yes,” she sobs. “I needed it so badly.”

*My insatiable angel.*

I’m seeing stars as her tightness clenches around me. She looks so fucking sexy sitting on my cock, her cheeks flushed, whimpering as she squirms with pleasure.

“Ride it, baby,” I grit out. “Ride my cock.”

With a gasp, Quinn starts to bounce on me, her hands reaching for my shoulders to balance herself. She closes her eyes and throws her head back, crying out as I hit the perfect spot inside her. I buck my hips, thrusting upward, and we move together in a punishing rhythm that leaves Quinn sobbing for more. She rides me like a wild thing, pleasuring herself with my cock, grinding her clit against me. I watch her in awe. Her plump, rounded breasts bounce with every thrust, and I groan at the sweet, wet sounds of her pussy being invaded by my cock.

*Holy fuck. How did I get so lucky?*

“Oh, Ivor!” Quinn cries. “Yes! It feels so good!”

I grit my teeth, desperate to come inside her, but I hold myself back. I want to make her come first.

“Fuck, baby, take it,” I groan. “Come for me. Come hard on my cock.”

“I’m so close,” she gasps, her face screwing up as she slams herself desperately against me. “Oh, God, it feels so good...I can’t take it.”

“You can take it,” I tell her, my breath ragged. “You’re doing so good, baby. Now come for me. I’m not going to stop fucking you until this sweet pussy comes.”

She trembles at my words, her moans turning to screams as she finally gives in to the pleasure. Her pussy throbs hard around me, wet and pulsing, milking my cock greedily. I hold Quinn’s hips tight, keeping her still as I thrust my cock deep inside her and come with a strangled groan, filling her up with my release. Quinn doesn’t stop moving. She rides out her orgasm, savoring every wave of pleasure until she’s finally spent.

I pull her down into my arms, listening to the sound of her breathing as it finally slows. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the feel of her soft curves pressing against me: it gives me a thrill of satisfaction as I kiss her neck, breathing in her sweet scent.

“I love you so much, Quinn,” I murmur.

She beams at me. My beautiful girl, the angel who has changed my life forever.

“I love you too, Ivor,” she says. “More than anything.”

## Epilogue

### Quinn

“What tree, mommy?” Rowan asks, pointing to yet another tree that we pass. It’s a beautiful day in Wildwood Forest and we’re exploring the woods just outside the cabin.

I take a look at the tree he’s pointing at, inspecting the leaves and narrowing my eyes in exaggerated concentration. “Hm, I’m not sure. We’ll have to ask daddy.”

“Dada!” Rowan calls.

I hear my husband come running out of the cabin, frowning with worry. He’s endlessly protective of me and Rowan, always on high alert and ready to take care of us. It’s one of the many things I love about him.

“Are you okay?” Ivor asks, looking between us. He reaches out to loop an arm around my waist, and I melt against him with a chuckle.

“We’re fine! But Rowan wants to know what this tree is.”

Ivor’s worried expression changes into a smile as he makes a show of inspecting the tree, making Rowan laugh by pretending the branches are tickling him. Our son is my mini-me in every way except for his eyes: that beautiful green is all Ivor.

“This is a Rocky Mountain Juniper tree,” Ivor says, reaching down to pull Rowan into his arms. “One of my favorites.”

“Wocky Mount.” Rowan claps his hands. “Wocky Mount.”

Ivor and I exchange a grin. Our son brings us so much joy, and he’s fascinated by the forest we live in. He stares around in childish wonder, pointing at another tree.

“What tree?”

“That’s a subalpine fir,” I say, smiling proudly. Ivor has taught me so much, and now I can’t imagine not living in the woods. I know this place like the back of my hand.

“Subwin four,” Rowan says before babbling something that only he can understand.

“Exactly!” Ivor says, pressing a kiss on our son’s head. “You have a very clever mommy. She knows all about these woods.”

Wildwood Forest is a huge source of inspiration for my illustrating. I love to spend my days outside painting the trees and the animals, and I’m even thinking of working on my own illustrated children’s book set in the forest. I think Rowan would love that. Once I moved in with Ivor and sold my mom’s house, I had enough money to quit my job at the grocery store and pursue my art full-time. It’s been a dream come true, but it’s nothing in comparison to getting to spend time with my perfect family.

“Let’s go inside,” I say, smiling at the way my son’s eyelids start to droop as Ivor holds him in his arms. “I think somebody needs a nap.”

We head back into the cabin and lay Rowan in his crib. He makes a sweet noise in his sleep, and I feel my heart swell with love for my perfect baby boy.

*Meow.*

Tiger mews from the living room and Ivor chuckles under his breath. “I think the other baby is feeling neglected.”

Quietly, we pad out of the bedroom and close the door behind us, leaving Rowan to sleep. Tiger is stretched out in front of the fireplace, presenting her fluffy belly to us to stroke.

“Hello, you,” I say, squatting down to shower her with affection. “Do you need some attention too?”

“She always needs attention,” Ivor chortles, reaching to rub behind her ears.

“Aw, she’s a sweet baby.”

Tiger eventually gets tired of being stroked and curls up in front of the fire with a contented sigh.

“Now I think it’s about time my wife got some attention,” Ivor says, sitting down on the couch and pulling me onto his lap.

I beam at him, snuggling against his warm chest. I feel so safe wrapped up in my husband’s arms, even though there’s nothing for me to be scared of anymore. Kimmy and Travis were sent to prison for a long list of charges, from arson to insurance fraud to obstruction of justice. I haven’t heard a word from either of them, and they’ve both been banned from contacting me. I’ll be forever grateful to Griffin Scott for all his help, though we don’t see a lot of him—he keeps to himself. But most of all, I’m grateful to Ivor. My handsome lumberjack has taken care of me from the day I met him and I know he’d do anything for me and our son.

“I love you so much,” I tell Ivor with a happy sigh, pressing a kiss against his lips.

He smiles beneath his unruly beard. “I love you too, Quinn. More than anything.”

“I’ve been thinking...” I say, running my thumb against the scars on his arm, “maybe it’s time Rowan had a little brother or sister to play with.”

Ivor makes a noise of approval deep in his throat before he leans in to press a kiss against my neck. “I think that’s the best damn idea I’ve ever heard.”

Excitement fills me as I imagine bringing another baby into our beautiful family, and I throw my arms around Ivor, laughing with delight.

“I guess we better get started,” Ivor says, grinning slyly at me. “I don’t want to waste any time.”

I giggle as he reaches for my clothes, already starting to pull them off. My husband and I are totally insatiable. My body has changed a lot since giving birth to Rowan, and my curves are wider than ever, but Ivor seems to love them. He makes me feel so sexy...so wanted. I catch him staring at me all the time,

his gaze full of hunger and longing. No doubt it's the same way I look at him: my big, sexy lumberjack.

"You're gonna look so damn beautiful carrying my baby again," Ivor murmurs. "Fuck, what did I do to deserve you, Quinn?"

I smile against his lips as he kisses me, my heart full of pure love. No matter how crazy things got before, I'll never regret what happened...if I hadn't run away from the police, I never would have met Ivor. And he's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

"I'm so happy to be yours," I say, pulling back to look into his intense green eyes.

"Good." Ivor smiles. "Because you're mine forever, baby. And I'm never letting you go."

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Hi there! I'm Clara King and I'm an indie romance writer. Thank you so much for checking out my work. I really hope you enjoyed it, and it would mean the world to me if you could rate and review this book on Amazon. I write steamy romance stories full of grumpy alphas and the curvy sunshine women they love, so if you enjoyed this couple's book, stick around and stay tuned for more!

Love Clara xo

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