

*Protected*  
BY THE  
**MOUNTAIN MAN**  
POPPY PARKES



*He was just supposed to provide a safe haven for the young mom and her baby, but sometimes love has bigger plans...*

Mariah is a single mom trying to escape her baby's controlling father, but she and her legal team need time to put together a solid custody case — and, in the meantime, she needs protection.

Ace is the burly, bearded ex-military owner of the local mechanic shop, and he likes to be left alone, thank you very much.

And yet, when he's approached to help hide Mariah and her baby from her

dangerous ex, he doesn't have the heart to say no.

But will the ghosts of his past come back to haunt him...and will they prevent him from protecting the single mother and child under his care if the man she's running from finds her?

***Protected by the Mountain Man is a steamy, over-the-top, instalove small town romance that will warm your heart...and other parts. ;) Happily ever after guaranteed!***

***Happy reading!***

***Love, Poppy***

READER PRAISE FOR THE MOUNTAIN MEN OF HEARTWOOD

“This one will melt your heart and show you true love is a real thing for everyone.”

“A story worth reading and rereading and rereading...”

“*Surprised by the Mountain Man* [is] a sweet and sexy instalove romance, [and] is my favourite to date... Both characters are so authentic and relatable. This high-heat, low-drama steamy romance with some wonderfully unique supporting characters is an entertaining must-read in this fantastic series.”

“Different but in a good way.”

“I loved the body positivity in this book; the FMC learning to love herself and the MMC building her up. The HEA was much deserved and so sweet.”

“I am stunned by this story. When I finished it, I immediately reread the entire story... So well written... This is the story that will make the most hard-hearted believe in love at first sight.”

“A surprisingly unique story...”

“This book packed a lot of feels into one perfectly short read. Veteran advocacy, body positivity, action and mo at of all, delicious love story... recipe for a good time.”

“Their story touched my heart and soul.”

“Such a good book! Loved the story and the characters! Can’t wait to read more!!”

“This was a sweet one.”

“This was a short, instant love story that involved personal tragedy, self consciousness and growing together to learn how to not feel bad about themselves. Avery and Hudson had intense chemistry that hit from the first time they met each other. This book was really good and I recommend you read it.”

“This was a super fast paced and fun little read.”

“Oh boy does this story pack a punch, I really liked Avery and Hudson and so did not see what came! I thought they were developed and interesting characters who had good connection and chemistry, I really liked the love, respect and support between them and could have happily continued reading more about them for much longer.”

“I found this to be a fantastic read. Poppy has done a wonderful job on this read.”

“I really enjoyed both Avery and Hudson because they were both so strong yet flawed in their own right. Their story was believable and heartfelt, and I didn't see the twist at the end coming.”

“Poppy is one of my favorite authors and her stories always give us wonderful characters and beautiful happily ever afters.”

PROTECTED BY THE MOUNTAIN  
MAN

THE MOUNTAIN MEN OF HEARTWOOD

# POPPY PARKES



Copyright © 2023 by [Poppy Parkes](#).

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities between elements of this book and real places, people, or things is coincidental.

This book is intended for adult audiences 18 years and older only. All characters are consenting adults 18 years and older only.

Cover design by [Poppy Premades](#).



## CONTENTS

### The Oops Club

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Mariah

Ace

Epilogue

### The Mountain Men of Heartwood

A Free Book Just For You

Also by Poppy Parkes

About the Author

CONTENT WARNING

*This book contains themes of domestic violence, sexual assault, and non-consent.*

*No explicit or graphic violence is depicted on the page.*

## THE OOPS CLUB

FIND A TYPO OR GRAMMAR ERROR? LET ME REWARD YOU FOR YOUR SKILLS!

Email the following to [poppy@popmyparkes.com](mailto:poppy@popmyparkes.com):

- Screenshot(s) with the error highlighted or circled
- Title of the book you found the error in
- Email you'd like your free book delivered to
- Please use "Oops Club" as the email subject

If you're the first one to find the error, I'll send you one of my Kindle books\* of your choice — for free!

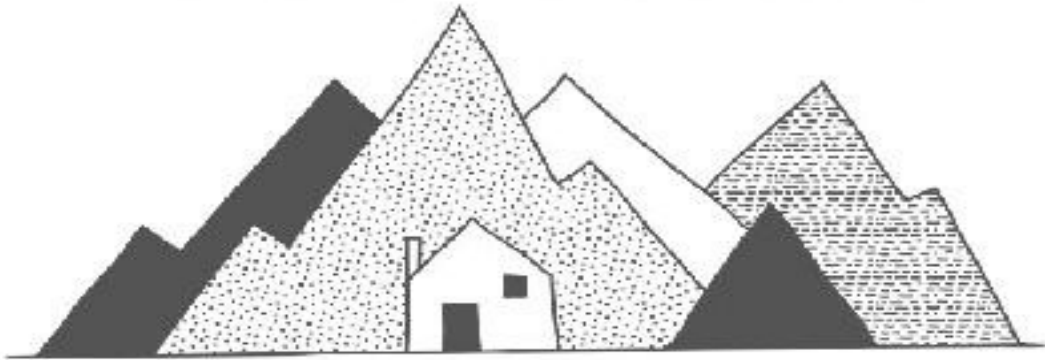
Thanks so much for supporting indie authors!

With love and gratitude,

Poppy

*\*Anthologies, box sets, and collections excluded.*

*Protected*  
BY THE  
**MOUNTAIN MAN**  
POPPY PARKES



## MARIAH

I open the front door to my apartment, thinking it's the mailman with the new baby rocker I ordered — and stagger back with a gasp.

It's not the mailman.

It's Ryan, my ex and the father of my son.

Correction: it's my asshole ex and the regrettable sperm donor to an unplanned pregnancy that resulted in Billy, the most beautiful baby boy and light of my life.

If you look up the phrase “good dad” in the dictionary, you'd find Ryan listed under the antonyms. I'll do anything to keep Billy safe from him.

“Hey there, love,” Ryan sneers, leaning against the doorframe.

I bark a humorless laugh. “I'm not your love. Far from it.”

“Aw, why's that?” He pouts. It's not cute.

“You know why.” I fold my arms across my chest. “Do you need me to remind you? Again?”

He sneers. “Indulge me.”

My stomach turns, bile rising in my throat. *Indulge me*. That's what he'd shouted to me over the music in the club where we'd collided a year and a half ago.

I'd had too many drinks, and I'd foolishly told my friends to go home without me, that I wanted to keep dancing past when they were ready to call it a night. Ryan had appeared at my side during a slower song, asking me to dance. *Indulge me*, he'd said, offering a hand and a sly smile.

I had.

One thing led to another, and now here we are.

"Because you were supposed to be a one-night stand. You turned it into more against my will."

"Against your will?" he splutters like I haven't already said it a hundred times.

"I saw the condom, Ryan. It—"

"Broke," he interrupts. "It happens."

"Sure, but this one had a pinprick in it. You broke it, *before* we had sex. On purpose. There's no other explanation. I'm not stupid."

All of a sudden, Ryan's easy demeanor hardens and his face is far too close to mine. His fingers curl around my wrist, pinning my arm above me against the doorframe.

"I'm not stupid either," he hisses. His sour breath is hot on my face, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of flinching. "Billy's my son. I have a right to him."

I lift my chin, willing my voice not to tremble with the fear swirling like a tide pool in my belly. "Not if you forced him on me. Not if his conception

was a violation of my consent.”

His grip tightens, but I grit my teeth and raise my chin higher. With my free hand, I grapple with the back pocket of my jeans, trying to get a grip on my phone that’s stashed there.

“Billy’s mine,” Ryan growls. “*You’re mine.*”

I manage to slip the phone from my pocket. Holding it behind my back, I squeeze the two buttons on either side of it — a clandestine way to call 911.

“No,” I say.

It’s a single word — hell, a single syllable — but it’s a complete sentence.

And one that enrages Ryan. His other hand finds my throat, slamming me against the door frame, choking me. “You think you can stop me from claiming what’s mine, bitch?”

Gasping for breath, I raise the phone with a trembling hand, tilting the screen so he can see how the line is open to 911. “Care to say that again, Ryan?” I manage.

Through the phone, I can barely hear the tinny voice of the emergency switchboard operator saying they’re dispatching a police car to the GPS associated with my call. I bare my teeth in something like a grin.

Ryan stumbles back. I almost fall to my knees at the sudden release, but just manage to catch myself. I lean against the door frame, massaging my throat with my free hand.

“I’ll be back,” Ryan snarls before taking off.

“Try it,” I rasp after him with bravado I don’t feel. I’m not sure my words catch Ryan, but that’s when the fear catches up with me. I do crumple to the ground after all, chest heaving with wracking sobs.



I'm still there when the police arrive. They take my statement, but none of us seem convinced that there's much we can do to stop Ryan. Not until he escalates things further.

But the police don't know my brother. Graham's got legal connections. He's my ace in the hole, and I know he won't let Ryan get to me and Billy. Not if he has anything to say about it.

So when the officers leave, casting sympathetic glances at me, I open my phone again and call my big brother.

## ACE

**A**s the owner of Lube Job, Heartwood's mechanic shop, I've been around the block more than a few times. I've learned so many tricks of the trade — and the tells of customers.

So I know as soon as Graham Cutter walks into my shop that he's not here on business. He's here for a favor.

“Hey there, Ace,” the younger man says as he approaches the counter where I'm oiling up some tools.

“What is it?” I answer, popping a single eyebrow as both of his shoot skyward in surprise.

“Excuse me?”

I give him a wry smile, wiping my greasy hands on a cloth. “You and Cookie last had your vehicle in two months ago, if that. I do damn good work, so I know you're not here for car trouble.” I rest my elbows on the counter and lean forward. “Which means you're here for something else entirely. So out with it.”

Some men might be offended by my cutting straight to the point. To his credit, Graham is not one of them. He grins, and now it's my turn to be

surprised.

“I knew you were the right one for the job, Ace,” he says, nodding as if confirming something to himself. “Cookie wasn’t sure, but she hasn’t lived here as long as I have. I’m glad I trusted my instincts.”

My gaze narrows. “What job?”

The mirth fades from his warm eyes. “It’s personal.”

In spite of myself, my chest puffs with pride. If Graham, who’s a lawyer or paralegal or something like that, is coming to me with a personal matter, it’s serious. The fact that he trusts me with it means a lot.

“Tell me,” I command.

“It’s my sister.” His voice sounds worn thin. “She needs help. Protection. *Time.*”

“Time for what?”

“For me and my legal team to put together a case to get her abusive ex out of her life permanently.” He shakes his head. “She slept with him once, got pregnant. Turns out he’s a complete asshole and is threatening her and my nephew.”

My fingers curl into fists at my side. There’s not much I hate more than a man who doesn’t know how to treat women with respect — hell, with basic human decency. “How can I help?”

“I’ve got a case going, like I said,” Graham continues. “But it’s going to take some time. While I’m putting things together, I’d like her to hide out in Heartwood. To keep her and her little boy safe.”

“I get that,” I say. “But where do I come in?”

“I want her to stay with you, Ace.” He’s talking fast now, as if he thinks I can’t say no if he’s going a mile a minute. “It’s unexpected, so it’ll be hard for her baby’s father to find her — and if he does, a guy like you will scare him off.”

*A guy like you.* He means a rough man, with calloused palms, big muscles, and a glare that broadcasts to one and all that I won’t brook a bit of bullshit.

It doesn’t hurt that I served a stint in the Army when I was young and didn’t know what to do with myself. Sure, I worked with military vehicles more than anything...but my time in the service taught me how to handle myself.

Graham’s smart. He’s probably done his research. Not many here in Heartwood know my history.

That means he’s probably also discovered how I left the Army — or really, how I was exiled from it.

And he still wants me to protect his sister.

That means a lot.

I probably shouldn’t let it sway me...but even after all these years, the wound my dishonorable discharge left me with still hurts. I jump at the chance to prove myself to Graham.

And maybe, if I’m being honest, prove myself to *myself*.

“Okay,” I say. “How long?”

Graham’s lips form a grim line. “As long as it takes.”

I give a curt nod. “No problem. I’m here to help.”

The other man claps me on the shoulder, eyes swimming with emotion. “You don’t know what this means, Ace. Thank you.”

“Just get your sister and her kid safe,” I say before turning back to my tools.  
“That’s the important thing.”

*I learned that the hard way*, I add silently, grimacing to myself even as I’m glad to have this unasked-for chance at redemption.

I just hope I’m up to the task.

## MARIAH

““**Y**ou want me to do *what?*” I practically screech into my phone.

When he hears my tone, Billy stops gumming his crinkly teething toy, forehead puckering adorably as his big dark eyes find mine. I take a steadying breath and force myself to smile at him. My son goes back to his gumming.

“It’s just for a little while,” Graham’s voice comes through the cell’s speakerphone. “To keep you safe.”

I wince at the unspoken words. *To keep you safe from your abusive ex, the stupidest mistake you ever made.*

“Won’t I get in trouble for leaving down with his son?” I have to spit out the last two words. I hate referring to my sweet thirteen-month-old as Ryan’s son. But it’s the truth, as much as I detest it.

And it’s all my fault. If only I’d been smart enough to dodge out of Ryan’s grip, we wouldn’t be in this mess.

“No, you’re not crossing state lines,” Graham says.

“You’re sure?”

I almost smile at the sound of his familiar exasperated sigh. Almost. “Would I say it if it wasn’t true?”

I shrug. “No,” I’m forced to concede.

“So you agree?”

Now it’s my turn to sigh. Running away to the tiny town of Heartwood is the last thing I want to do. Graham and I grew up there, and there’s a reason why I left. It’s too small, too claustrophobic. The bigger city I reside in is still Montana, but with more.

More culture.

More people.

More opportunities.

Just . . . *more*.

And is Heartwood really that much safer? If Ryan follows us there, it wouldn’t be hard to track us down.

“Mariah?” Graham’s voice comes through the phone. “Will you let me do this for you?” I hear the pleading in his words, how worried my big brother is.

When Graham starts acting worried is when I know things are bad.

I look at Billy, who’s kicking his chubby legs as he eyeballs the crinkly toy in his equally chubby hands.

There’s one more thing my city has more of: dangerous assholes. I fell for the tricks of one of them like the fool that I am. And now I’ve put not only myself but my child in danger.

“Yeah,” I say at last, shoulders slumping. “Yes, I’ll do it.”

*I'll do anything*, I add silently. *Anything to keep my baby safe. Even go back to the town that I detest.*

Graham doesn't bother to hide his relief. "Thank goodness. Pack your bags. I'll get you seats on the next flight out. Be ready."

My stomach clenches. Suddenly, everything is so real — too real. Am I about to literally run for the hills?

Then I remember Ryan's vise grip on my throat, and I'm on my feet. I hoist Billy, taking his toy with him, and head for the bedroom. There, I set him in his standing activity center and, grabbing an empty duffel from the back of my closet, start throwing fresh clothes and clean diapers into it as fast as I can.

If I was reluctant to leave a few minutes ago, the memory of my last encounter with my baby's biological father has lit a fire under my ass.

I'm leaving for us. Me and Billy.

And because I'm suddenly terrified that if I don't, Ryan might seriously hurt me to get to Billy — or worse.

I shudder as nightmares try to come to life in my mind.

Shaking my head as if I can clear my fears from it, I grab a second bag and keep packing, moving even faster.

I won't let that happen, to me or to my boy. I refuse to become another domestic violence statistic.

And if that means spending some time in my least favorite place on earth, then I'll do it. Happily. That and more.

I'd said I'd do *anything*, and I've never meant anything more.



## ACE

I stand in the center of my apartment, knotting my fingers together as I gaze around the place. I'm an avowed bachelor living in a studio apartment above my mechanic garage. My place is exactly what you might expect — thrifted furniture, bare walls, mismatched plates and silverware.

It's not much, and certainly nothing fancy, but it's always been good enough for a blue-collar guy like me.

But now I'm going to have a woman here. A mother, and her baby. And suddenly, the grease stains on the carpet just inside the front door and the scent of car oil permeating the place don't seem right.

I'm not sure what I can do to fix it, though. Not at the last minute. So it'll have to be enough.

Even though, judging by the pictures I've seen of the woman coming to live with me, this place is so much less than what she deserves.

I'm an older guy, nearing forty at an uncomfortably fast speed, so Graham and his sister didn't run in the same circles as me. But there's a chance I might've met Mariah before she left town. I'd looked her up on social media to check. And while I didn't recognize her, her picture my stomach had filled

with the sensation of flutters.

It's filled with them right now as I think of her picture — a bright-eyed brunette with long hair, tanned skin, and the biggest, most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

My fingers curl into fists of their own accord at the thought that anyone would ever dare to hurt her. Whatever else this guy who's trying to get her and her kid might be, he's surely a fool. Only a fool would give up a chance to be in this radiant woman's life in a meaningful way.

If Mariah was mine, I'd treat her right.

Not that I have a chance in hell with her.

But if I did...I'd treat her *right*.

I sweep my gaze around the interior of my apartment again, and cringe. Even if I would treat this woman right, it's likely she wouldn't give me a shot. Not after living in this dump.

Okay, it's not a dump. But it's not exactly the best place for a mom and baby.

I've tried my best to spruce it up. I purchased new sheets and pillows for the bed.

While it's a studio apartment, I hung a draping curtain to section off a more private area for mom and baby.

I even bought some nice-smelling candles from Works of Heart down the street. Avery, the shop's owner, had assured me the candle would make my apartment smell more homey.

I hope so. All I want is for this younger woman and her kid to feel at home here. To feel safe.

It's the least that she deserves.

It's the least that *anyone* deserves.

And while I might have failed at making that happen back in my military days, I know better now. I'm determined to do better now. I just hope I don't screw it all up again.

## MARIAH

**B**y the time I wrestle Billy and his car seat, his stroller, his diaper bag, and our carry-ons off the tiny plane that's landed at the closest airport to Heartwood, sweat is streaming off my body. It doesn't matter that it's a crisp, cold March, or that we have to deplane straight onto the tarmac because the plane is so tiny. I'm sweating like I'm doing the workout of my life.

Which is fair, because I kind of am.

Mom life is not for the faint of heart, and it is guaranteed to put your body through its paces for years.

I'm learning that the hard way, I guess. With gritted teeth and a pitted-out shirt as I haul all our stuff toward the terminal.

At least once I'm off the plane, I can buckle Billy into his car seat, then clip that into his stroller, stashing the diaper bag in the storage area beneath his seat. Then I'm just pushing the stroller and toting my duffels, one over each shoulder.

I thought I'd packed conservatively. But my screaming muscles are telling me otherwise.

Nobody tells you when you have a baby how much stuff they come with. Even when you travel light, there are certain essentials that you've got to have.

All of our essentials are pushing my body to the max right now.

But that's nothing compared to how my mind is reeling, seeing the familiar mountains of my old hometown with my own eyes for the first time in years.

The last time I saw these mountains, I was barely eighteen and ready to take on the world. I was certain I had the brightest, most beautiful future ahead.

Now look at me. A single mom on the run from her ex, returning to live in the one place I swore I never would, tail between my legs.

A failure.

My cheeks burn with heat, but not from the effort of pushing Billy's stroller up the ramp into the terminal, twin duffel bags threatening to topple me backward.

No, my face is on fire with embarrassment. With shame.

Maybe I was crazy to come back here.

Then I glance at Billy, who's grinning sleepily up at me from his car seat, and my belly contracts.

*He's* why I'm here. To protect my son. It doesn't matter what I think or how I feel about Heartwood. I couldn't protect Billy from Ryan on my own. If Graham thinks I have a better shot at doing that here in Heartwood, I believe him.

I have to.

What other choice do I have? I've already fucked things up enough when left to my own devices. It's time to give my family's way a chance.

And if I have to do that, I'll follow my brother's lead.

At least, that's what I think until he meets me on the other side of airport security with news of my living situation for the foreseeable future.

"I've got you all set up," he says after he releases me from a tight hug and commandeers my duffel bags. I try not to sigh with relief too loudly.

"Thanks for doing that," I say, trying not to let my breathlessness leak into my voice. I'm not sure that I'm very successful.

"Well..." Graham slides me a sidelong glance that sets my spidey senses tingling.

I frown. "What? Please don't tell me there's something worse than having to go back to living with our parents as a single mom."

He sucks in a breath like he's getting ready to dive headfirst into the deep end of a swimming pool. "The good news is that you're not staying with our parents."

Momentary celebration blossoms behind my breastbone before my brain processes with my brother's saying. "Then...I'm staying with you?" I ask.

"Not exactly." Graham winces, and my throat clenches because that's not a good sign.

I stop in the middle of the airport's exit doorway, not caring that I cause a couple of travelers to bump into me and mutter epithets under their breath as they divert around me.

"Graham," I say, his name a complete sentence. "Where am I staying?"

“The safest place I could imagine,” he says like it’s some kind of reassurance.

“*Graham*,” I say one more, unsure if I’m about to burst into tears or an angry rant. “What did you do?”

He winces again.

But then he squares his shoulders, lifts his chin, and meets my gaze, making my jaw dangle with his seriousness.

“The best I could, Mariah,” he says, voice trembling with emotion.

And just like that, I can’t be mad at my brother.

I can’t even be scared anymore.

All I can do is set the lock on the stroller so it doesn’t roll away, then wrap my brother in a big bear hug, pressing my cheek to his chest, hearing his heart trip over itself.

“Thank you,” I murmur, words suddenly raspy with emotion. I bite my trembling lip, willing back the tears suddenly welling in my eyes.

After a moment, Graham returns the hug, holding me close. “I know,” he murmurs, kissing the top of my head with brotherly love. “I know.”

I soften into his embrace.

“But,” he says, the single syllable brimming with reluctance, “you might not like it.”

I stiffen, and after the momentary reprieve, it feels so much worse. I step away, feeling my own eyes harden as I search my brother’s face.

“Explain,” I growl in a voice that even I don’t recognize.

## ACE

**S** *he's mad.*

The text from Graham comes through when I'm smoothing the clean sheets on the single bed in my place, having just made it up fresh for my incoming guest.

*Mad?* I write back, frowning at my phone as I tap its screen with permanently grease-stained fingers.

*At the whole situation,* Graham writes back. Then, a moment later, he continues, *It's possible that I didn't tell her exactly where she'd be staying. I thought it would make her change her mind.*

I sigh, not bothering to write back.

What can I say? I'm just here to provide a safe space for an at-risk mom and her kid, no matter what my feelings are after looking her up on social media.

It's not my problem or my fault if Graham's sister doesn't want to stay with me, or if she's angry at her brother.

Still, I won't deny that thinking about the sweet mouth I saw in her pictures twisting in anger lights an unexpected spark in my low belly. It's one thing to be beautiful, it's quite another to be a badass.



And if Mariah is anything like the image of her in my mind is shaping up to be, she is a *total* badass.

I just hope I can keep her and her baby safe until Graham can make certain her ex can't hurt them anymore.

I think again of the beautiful woman in the pictures, wondering how any fool of a man would dare to upset her, much less harm her, and the spark in my belly grows into a flame.

Not just of desire, although there certainly is that.

But of anger of my own. Of fierce protectiveness. Of the certainty that I'll do everything in my power to keep this woman safe, and not just because her brother asked me or because it's the right thing to do — which it is.

I'm doing it because I want to.

Because I *need* to.

And, if I'm brave enough to admit it to myself — which I'm not sure I am — to prove to myself that my past failures don't define me any longer.

The heat in my belly is joined by a painful twinge of fear.

I hope I'm up to the task. I hope I don't choke when it matters most. Not again.

## MARIAH

I know I should be grateful.

I know I should be thanking my lucky stars that Ryan hasn't put me in the ground, and that Graham's got my back, and that he's convinced a friend who's former military to protect me and Billy until we're clear of Ryan for good.

But gratitude is the last thing I feel as I sit in Graham's idling car and stare down the dirty mechanic shop that we'll be living over with a total stranger.

Clenching my jaw and balling my fingers into fists, I try to put a name to the storm of emotions swirling inside me.

Dread? Maybe.

Hope? I'm not sure if I dare to hope yet.

Anger? Oh yeah. I'm so full of anger, I wouldn't be surprised if I transformed into the damn Hulk and destroy my brother's car from the inside out..

"You want me and Billy to live *there*?" I stab a finger at the shop from the passenger seat, wincing anew at the name of the mechanic shop. *Lube Job*. With a name like that, the owner's got to be a creep.

I certainly don't need any more of those in my life.

"Just for a little while," my brother says as if that makes everything better.

"Allow me to remind you that your nephew is crawling. That he puts everything in his mouth. That a place like that," I nod again at the shop, "is the very *worst* place for a thirteen-month-old to be."

"You're not living in the shop. There's an apartment above it. Ace assures me that you and Billy will have privacy."

"Ace?" I snort. "That's not exactly a name that instills confidence."

"But Ryan does?" Graham fires back, lips forming a thin line as he spits my ex's name.

His words find their target, hitting me like a punch in the gut.

I physically flinch.

My brother's face falls.

"Shit," he says, reaching from the driver's seat and squeezing my shoulder. "I shouldn't have said that."

"But you're right," I manage, voice reedy with tears. "I'm not in any position to judge. I've already made all the worst choices."

Graham shakes his head. "You're doing your best. And I was still out of line. I'm sorry."

I nod, but I can't stop my hands from shaking. I curl them into twin knots, willing the pain that's reverberating through me like a clanging bell to ease.

It doesn't work, but I draw myself up in my seat anyway and jut my chin at Lube Job. "Well, should we get on with it?"

“Mariah...” he says, eyes troubled.

Now it’s my turn to shake my head. “It’s okay.” I grab his hand and squeeze it. “Really. And anyway, I deserved it.”

Graham doesn’t believe me. “You’re okay?”

I squeeze again. “Promise,” I lie, hoisting a smile on my lips, the gesture feeling as heavy as the mountains surrounding Heartwood.

My brother hesitates a moment longer, then finally acquiesces. “Okay,” he says, killing the engine and swinging open his door. “Let’s leave your things for now. I can bring them up later. Ace is eager to meet you.”

“Is he?” I know Graham can hear my disbelief because I can taste it on my own tongue.

He meets my gaze before he gets out of the car and I can’t look away. “Have I ever lied to you?”

I rake through my memory, half-hoping I can come up with even just one solitary instance where my brother didn’t tell me the whole truth. But I come up empty-handed.

“No,” I’m forced to concede.

“And I’m not about to start now.” His eyes blaze with feeling as he speaks.

I’m forced to nod, to acknowledge that I have no reason to distrust him.

“Okay,” I sigh.

But he doesn’t understand how easy it is for one awful person to fracture your trust in all people. While it’s true that Graham’s never done me wrong, Ryan has taught me too well about the human race’s capacity for wrongdoing.

I trust my brother.

I don't think he'd hurt me on purpose.

But, as I slide out of the car and move to unbuckle Billy from his car seat, I can't shake the deep dread blossoming in my belly. While I can't deny that I've made an excellent disaster of my life all on my own, Ryan has taught me that things can always get worse.

I hope Graham and this Ace prove me wrong — but I struggle to truly believe that anyone can.

## ACE

**I** hear two car doors slam outside, then a third, and my heart jumps to my throat, threatening to choke me.

They're here.

I know it before I glance through the window, but I can't stop myself from checking. Old habits, I guess. It's how I look to see if I've got a customer when I'm not already down in the shop.

Casting a last glance around my tidied place and the curtained-off area, I hope that it's enough, even though I'm pretty damn sure it's not.

There are footsteps on the exterior wooden stairs leading up to the apartment, then a knock at the door. A few steps bring me to my front door, and I throw it open before moving back to let Graham and his sister and nephew enter.

And then, just like that, she's here.

In my place.

Far more beautiful than her pictures were capable of capturing.

Graham's saying something about the next steps in the case, how he hopes it won't take long, but I barely hear him. Nodding like I understand even

though I'm also certainly missing something, I can't take my eyes off Mariah.

She's got tired circles under her eyes, her hair's a mess, and she keeps boosting her kid up higher on her hip like she's been doing it forever and is exhausted.

She's travel-worn and weary. But something about her catches at my heart, making it snag in a way that tells me I'll do anything for this woman.

*Anything.*

I'd be lying if I said the sensation wasn't familiar. Hadn't I felt just the same thing all those years ago, in my military days?

The truth sears in fast and hot. Because I failed the object of that affection. Who's to say I won't do the same with Mariah and her son?

Graham's still talking, but I'm fighting a war within myself — a war *against* myself. Against my memories.

Who's to say I won't make the same mistakes again? Me, that's who.

Maybe this is my shot at redemption, even though I'm not sure I believe in such a thing. Still, just because I've failed once doesn't mean I have to do so again.

Maybe this time, I can do better.

No, I tell myself. This time I *will* do better.

I'm determined. Starting right here, right now.

I step forward, extending my arms to Mariah. "Need a break? I can hold your little one for a bit if you want."

Both Graham and his sister freeze, his eyes on her and hers on me.

For a long, breathless moment, I fear that I've done exactly the wrong thing.

But then she softens and nods. "Was it that obvious? He refused to sit anywhere this whole trip other than in my lap, and I'm tired."

"No shame in being tired," I mutter, accepting the soft squish of the little one as she passes her son over. I don't miss the fact that Mariah trusts me, a total stranger, enough to let me hold the most precious part of her life.

I don't take that lightly.

Gathering the kid into my arms, I make sure he's secure. He sits up straight, perching high on my hip, big eyes exploring my face. I look back, surprised to find myself enjoying the examination. There's no judgment in it, no fear, only easy curiosity.

Before I know it, a smile has cracked across my bearded face. A big one. I can't recall the last time I grinned so big.

Graham notices, sucking a breath in. "Ace smiling?" He chuckles, shaking his head. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you smile, man."

I grunt. "It's a completely normal human expression, Graham. Or haven't you heard?"

Mariah stifles a giggle, and I take the win, heart swelling. I made this beautiful woman laugh, even though she looks like she is so tired that she might fall asleep standing.

"Yeah," Graham's saying. "Just not for you."

I shoot him a glare. "You don't think I'm human?"

He raises both hands in surrender. "I do. I just wasn't sure until this moment."



I'm not sure if I should be grumpy about Graham's words until he winks at me and I soften, turning back to the kid in my arms.

"What's this one's name?" I growl, biting back a second smile as the little one tugs gently at my beard.

"Billy," Mariah says, her voice a chorus of bells in my ears despite the exhaustion permeating it.

"Hello, Billy." I take his tiny hand between my thumb and index finger, shaking it gently. "Pleasure to meet you."

Billy coos back, eyes crinkling up at the corners in happiness.

I can't help it.

I don't even *want* to help it.

I let another huge grin charge across my face, so big that I feel my eyes creasing at their corners. It's an unfamiliar sensation, but not an unwanted one.

Sweeping my gaze around the room, I see Graham shaking his head in bemusement and his sister peering at me with more curiosity than she's yet shown, as if I've revealed something she didn't expect.

I wonder what it is.

I wonder what she thinks of it.

I try not to hope too hard that she's impressed with it.

Yeah, the kid's adorable and she's so damn beautiful, but I shouldn't get attached. I'm not a stand-in for a husband or a father. I'm a bodyguard until I don't need to be. And once we reach that point, there's a good chance I'll never see Mariah or Billy again.

“Let me show you the space I’ve set up for you,” I say gruffly, trying and failing to hold off the sudden sadness washing over me. “It’s a studio apartment, so there aren’t any separate rooms, but I’ve done the best I can to give you both the privacy you need.”

“I’m sure it’ll be wonderful,” Mariah says as if she’s surprised by her own words.

But I don’t have time to think about what that means, if anything. I’m too busy feeling sorry for myself because there’s no way in hell that a woman like her — young, beautiful, badass — could ever want a washed-up, backwater, aging man like me.

There’s no way in hell that I have a future with Mariah. I’ve been a fool to even let myself dream of such a possibility.

I just wish it didn’t hurt so much to stop myself from hoping that she might find something about my flaws to love.

Because I might be a fool, but I’m not stupid. I know there’s nothing here to love. Nothing for a bright young thing like her.

## MARIAH

**I** disappear behind the crisp, clean sheet that Ace used to section off a private area in the studio apartment for me and Billy. Strangely breathless, I sink onto the mattress that's stacked high with thick blankets and inviting pillows and try to calm my racing heart.

Why am I feeling...whatever *this* is? I can't even find words to describe it.

It's not just my heart that's galloping. My hands are shaking and my breath is coming too fast, hitching when I think of the big burly man somewhere on the other side of the curtain.

The man that Billy and I are alone with now that Graham's left.

It's not fear that I'm feeling, which would make sense. To find myself and my child dropped with a strange man, basically defenseless, should at least give me reason to worry, especially with my history.

But for some reason, I'm not worried. Not even a little. Maybe for the first time since I found myself pregnant with Ryan's child.

Which is crazy.

I have every reason to distrust not just Ace, but every strange man I cross paths with. Ryan has given me more than enough of those reasons.

But I'm not scared of Ace.

I'm scared of how I'm feeling *because* of Ace.

I think.

In an attempt to distract myself from my own confusion, I turn my attention to Billy, who's wiggling in my arms. I check his diaper, verifying what I assumed to be true.

"You want a change, buddy?" I ask my son. He smiles wide and kicks his little feet all the harder.

I don't miss that Ace's rustling on the other side of the curtain stops when I speak, as if he's as captivated by my sing-song voice as Billy is.

But that, too, must be crazy. Right? Because there's no way that a man like Ace would ever be interested in a woman like me.

Not that I care who is or is not interested in me, I tell myself firmly as I heft Billy on my hip and grope in the diaper bag until I came up with wipes and a fresh diaper.

I wish I could believe myself.

Because for a woman like me, with an ongoing history with an abusive former partner, to be interested in a man sight unseen? That doesn't make any sense. Not even a little.

And yet, it's more than mere curiosity that trains my ear to Ace's movements — or lack of thereof — as I clean Billy up and get him ready for this next phase of our life.

I must be a fool.

That's the only reasonable explanation.

But it's one thing to think foolish things, and quite another to act on those foolish things.

I might be foolish, a romantic with my head in the clouds. That's probably why I spent the night that I did with Ryan, after all.

But I'm smart enough to know not to act on those feelings. Not anymore.

I think.

I hope.

I swallow hard as I gaze at Billy in his fresh diaper. I have to act smarter than I used to. For my son, if not for me.

I have to. He deserves that much from his mother.

Resolve strengthened, I stand, picking up Billy in the same smooth motion. Then, drawing a deep, steadying breath, I push through the curtain to face Ace without my brother for the first time, knowing that I have to stay strong for my child.

It turns out that I didn't have to worry about any of this.

Because when I step out of the curtained area and lock eyes with Ace, my throat suddenly constricting, he takes one wide-eyed look at me and, turning on his heel, runs for it.

He tosses a single strangled statement over his shoulder as he lets himself out the front door. "Make yourself at home."

Before I know it, Billy and I are alone in a strange man's apartment, and I'm left to wonder what the hell I did wrong.

Not much, of that I'm pretty certain.

Then why is my chest echoing with an odd and unfamiliar emptiness?

I give myself a shake. This is good. This is preferable, in fact. Ace has generously given me space to, in his words, make myself at home.

Even though the nape of my neck is prickling with unease — not fear, but a worry that I've made a faux pas — I set about to do just that.

Retreating to the curtained area for a moment, I re-emerge with a cooler packed with pureed vegetables. Stepping into the kitchen area of the studio apartment, I unload all the containers of puree into the fridge except one.

That one I empty into a sturdy-looking bowl I find in a cupboard. Then, sitting at the tiny kitchen table with Billy on my lap, I present my son with the vegetables and a spoon. He starts filling his mouth with sweet potato that I steamed and blended smooth before we left, using only his chubby hands.

Normally I might be irritated at my child's insistence on forgoing the spoon I'm offering. But instead, I'm distracted by thoughts of Ace, and wishing I had the good sense not to be.

## ACE

**I** don't trust myself with Mariah, and I don't like it one bit.  
I'm not used to feeling not in control of myself.

The last time I felt like this, the consequences were devastating — for me, sure, but far worse for the people I failed.

I don't want to fail Mariah.

I also don't want to scare her.

And I'm terrified that if I stay close to her, I won't be able to stop myself from letting our hands brush, or stepping too close to catch a whiff of her flowery scent, or holding her gaze for a second too long and letting all things she's making me feel spill out of my mouth in a torrent of words declaring feelings she doesn't reciprocate.

So I leave.

I put as much space between us as I can.

For both our sakes.

Because the last thing she needs is living with a guy that creeps her out by coming on far too strong. She already has enough creeps in her life.

But now where do I go? It's late in the afternoon, and experience tells me it's likely that no more customers coming into the shop today. I need something to do instead of standing like an idiot at the bottom of the stairs up to my apartment.

I start walking, with no destination in mind. Thankfully the March day isn't too crisp because I didn't grab a jacket to put over my flannel, and I'm sure as hell not going back upstairs to get one.

Without thinking, my feet carry me to The Huckleberry, Heartwood's diner that is also a bar that is also, somehow, a family restaurant.

Realizing where I am, I shrug to myself and step inside, the bell at the top of the front door jingling my arrival. I slide onto a stool at the counter, eyeing the shelves displaying the morning's rejected donuts and the army of alcohol bottles lining the wall I'm facing.

Emmeline, one of the staff, materializes before me. "Got a hankering for something sweet?" she asks, nodding to the donuts I'm looking at.

I swallow hard and choke a little. I do crave something sweet, but not food. No, it's the sweetest woman I've ever laid eyes on.

Giving myself a shake as if I can toss off the image of Mariah hovering in my mind's eye, I clear my throat. "Er, better making it a drink. Something stiff."

The young woman leans her head to one side and snaps her gum. "Whiskey okay?"

"Sure." I don't really care. She could serve me rat poison and I just might drink it if I thought it could clear my head.

A shriek from behind me makes me flinch. I grit my teeth, forcing my pulse to calm. It's been so many years since I served in the military, but I still haven't gotten used to loud noises.



Aside from the ones that vehicles that frequent my shop make, of course. Those motor sounds and screeches are music to my ears somehow.

As Emmeline slides a tumbler of whiskey across the counter toward me, I turn to see a little girl maybe three or four years old streaking from the pink-painted family restaurant section at the back of The Huck. There's a huge smile on her face as she runs from the red-haired woman with fawn-colored skin that matches her own.

"I'm going to get you, Kiri!" says Quinn in a playful voice as she chases her daughter around the front of The Huck, red curls bobbing. A big man with a thick brown hair and an even thicker middle steps to the register at the counter to pay Emmeline.

I jut my chin at Kiri. "The kid's looking really good," I say to Doc Pearce he hands Emmeline some cash.

The doctor who runs Heartwood's medical clinic grins. He's been doing that a lot more since Quinn and Kiri came to town. "Isn't she? Her pediatric cardiologists are amazed at her progress. A year ago they weren't sure if her heart was strong enough for her to get around without accessibility aids."

I clap him on the shoulder. "You did good Doc."

He shakes his head. "It wasn't me. I just referred her to the specialists. It's been all them — and her."

"No, I mean you did good taking those two under your wing last year. They'd be lost without you."

"You're giving me too much credit," Doc Pearce chuckles as Emmeline hands back his change. "Quinn's a hell of a woman, and a mother. And Kiri's a force of nature, just like her mom."

“Yeah, but they were in trouble, and you helped. That counts for a lot,” Emmeline points out. “You saved them.”

“I think it’s more accurate to say that they saved me,” the doctor says, voice turning thoughtful. Then he fixes his eyes on me. “The way I hear it, I’m not the only one who’s been taking in mothers in trouble.”

Emmeline’s eyes turn wide as they swivel to me. “What’s this, Ace? You finally giving up that bachelor life?”

“Nope,” I mutter, feeling the back of my neck grow hot. “Just doing Graham a favor.”

“Graham? The paralegal?” Emmeline frowns. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“I’m giving his sister and nephew a place to crash while they figure out some legal stuff.”

Doc Pearce nods as Kiri and Quinn zoom by again. “I’m sure Graham and Cookie don’t have much space, with their own little one at home.”

I shrug. “It’s temporary. And, uh, it’s best kept quiet.”

Quinn pauses in her pursuit. “Emmeline, keep something quiet?” She teases gently. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Emmeline opens her mouth in protest. “Hey! I can too keep a secret. And besides, it was *your* husband who spilled the beans on this one.”

The doctor raises both hands in defeat. “Guilty as charged. But,” he says more seriously, “I’ll be sure to not share it with anyone else until I hear that it’s safe.”

“To make it up to you, why don’t you and your guests join us for dinner tomorrow?” Quinn says, watching Kiri run in circles.

My eyebrows knit. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea...”

“It’ll be good to get out of the house. I’m sure it’s cramped, the three of you in that little apartment above your shop,” Quinn presses. “And I could use another mom friend.”

I consider for a moment. It’s true that both Quinn and Mariah share the experience of being forced to run from a shitty ex. Maybe it would be good for Mariah to have someone who’s been there before to talk to about what she’s going through.

“Okay,” I relent. “But I’m bringing dessert.”

“It’s a date! Come by at about six.” Quinn tosses the words over her shoulder as she captures her daughter and tickles her, making the kid dissolve in a fit of giggles.

“See you tomorrow night,” Doc Pearce says, wiggling his eyebrows as he follows his wife and Kiri out the door. “All three of you.”

Emmeline’s beaming from the other side of the counter. Everyone seems way happier than they have any right to be over a simple dinner that’s already making my stomach tie up in knots.

I hope I’ve done the right thing.

There’s only one way to find out.

I finish my whiskey in one swallow, throw down enough cash to cover the drink and Emmeline’s tip, and get to my feet. “Thanks for the drink. It hit the spot.”

“You heading out already?” she asks.

“I’ve got to break the news about dinner to my guest and hope she won’t be mad.”

“I have a feeling that she won’t be mad. Women liked being asked out to dinner by handsome men.”

“I’m not asking her out.” I pop a single eyebrow at the younger woman.  
“And I’m not handsome.”

Emmeline snorts, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, okay. And I’m not charmingly sarcastic.”

I stare at her. “But...you *are* sarcastic.”

She grins wolfishly. “Exactly.”

Understanding dawns on me, and my neck gets hot again as I turn on my heel and head out the door for home, shaking my head.

## MARIAH

**A** dinner at a stranger's house? A dinner which is essentially a double date for couples, with a side of kid playdate? When the other half of my "couple" is also a stranger?

Yeah, that's not something I ever saw myself agreeing to.

And yet when Ace floats the idea, something inside me doesn't hesitate. I'm saying yes before I realize what I'm doing.

I think about it later that night when I'm tucked into bed with Billy snoring gently in the bedside bassinet Graham stopped by to set up earlier. I can hear Ace snoring much less gently from the couch on the other side of the curtain, but somehow it doesn't bother me.

Why did I say yes to the dinner date with Ace's friends? Is it for the same reason that the big man's hacksaw snores comfort me more than they irritate me?

*Trust.*

The word floats to the front of my mind unbidden. I gasp into the dark, then freeze when Ace's snores stop. I hold my breath until his begins again.

I *trust* this man.

I'm not sure why. I don't know him. He's been out of the apartment more than he's been in it since my arrival.

I don't know if that's his usual, or if he's giving me space. Either way, I find myself missing his solid, quiet presence.

Because when Ace is here, I feel like I can breathe better. My heart doesn't have to work as hard to beat, and keeping up with Billy is easier somehow. When Ace is here, I don't stress and worry and tie myself into knots about what the future holds.

I trust him. Deeply.

And while I'm not certain why, I'm confident in that feeling.

Maybe I'm a fool. After all, I didn't exactly make the right choice when I hooked up with Ryan.

Then again, I didn't think I was making a lifelong commitment to the guy when I agreed to spend a single night with him. I'm not sure that, given a second chance to choose my child's father, I would pick Ryan at the time.

I sure as hell wouldn't choose him now. Not after everything that he's put us through.

But Ace? Something in my belly leaps at the idea of making him the father of my future children. From the way he gently tussles with Billy, making my boy laugh long and hard, he has the makings of a good dad.

I don't miss the fact that I trust Ace, a virtual stranger, to hold my son when I balk at letting Billy's own father within ten feet of him.

That means something.

It means a great deal, in fact.

So when Ace came to me with his proposal of dinner at his friends' home, he'd already earned my trust, and I said yes. He wouldn't have asked me and Billy to join him for something he thought was a bad idea.

It might be a weird dinner, with me and Billy being the odd ones out in a room of people that already know each other. And it might be extra awkward, with four adults and only two of them romantically paired.

But Ace thinks it's a good idea, and for some reason, I can't come up with a reason to disbelieve him.

I find myself smiling into the darkness, butterflies stirring in my belly. I curl my knees up to my chest and pull the covers up to my nose, enjoying the feeling even while I'm not sure what it means.

## ACE

**I**’m so damn nervous.

I probably should never have accepted Quinn’s dinner invitation. This has got to be a huge mistake. Mariah’s probably angry that I cornered her into this.

I slide a look over at Mariah perched next to me on the couch in Doc Peace’s living room. She’s chatting with Quinn, both of them animated and smiling as they talk. Billy’s rolling and cooing on a blanket on the floor with Kiri entertaining him with toys.

Mariah doesn’t look mad.

But maybe she’s making the best of a bad situation.

I swallow hard.

I hope I didn’t fuck this whole thing up.

“Ace.”

I jump when I hear my name coming from my opposite side. I swivel to see Doc Pearce looking at me from the door to the kitchen, a bemused expression written over his face.



“Uh, yeah?” I’m surprised to find myself oddly out of breath.

The doctor’s lips twitch. “Want to join me in here?” He nods into the kitchen. “I could use your opinion on the roast.”

“Um, sure.” I look at Mariah to see if she’ll mind being abandoned, but she and Quinn are laughing so hard at something that Mariah’s hiccuping and both Billy and Kiri are staring at her.

“Are you okay?” I ask, chest clenching with concern.

She waves me off, still laughing as she shakes her head. “Yeah, I’m fine. Quinn just—“ she hiccups “— made the funniest joke—“ another hiccup “— about breastfeeding—“

She cuts off, still laughing hysterically waving at me. Neck hot as I try not to think about Mariah’s breasts, even in the most innocuous scenario of feeding her little one, I shove my thumb at the doctor.

“I’m going to go help if that’s okay?”

She nods, catching her breath and wiping tears from her eyes. “Sure, babe, whatever you need.”

I freeze.

*Babe.*

She called me *babe*.

Her babe? Or is it just a term of generalized affection? Either way, I’ll take it.

She doesn’t seem to notice that she’s caused every hair on my body to stand on end or my blood to freeze in my veins. She’s asking Quinn about mastitis when Doc Pearce clears his throat behind me.

That breaks the spell. I stand and flee to the kitchen.

“You, uh, need help with the dinner?” I ask, wiping my damp palms on my jeans.

The doctor shakes his head, smiling. “Nope, dinner’s fine. You just looked like you needed a lifeline.”

I grimace. “Was it that obvious?”

He fixes me with a shrewd look. “Mariah didn’t seem to notice, if that’s what you mean.”

The back of my neck flushes so hot that the heat bleeds up to my cheeks, turning what’s visible above my beard red and rosy. “I mean — I’m just helping her out — for her brother—“ I stammer.

The doctor smiles kindly. “You’re doing a good thing. A generous thing. But that doesn’t mean you don’t have any feelings tied up in it.”

“Shouldn’t it?” The doc is touching on something that’s been bugging me. If I was really helping Mariah out of the goodness of my heart, I wouldn’t have these hungry feelings for her.

Would I?

“These things can be complicated.” He chuckles. “Believe me, I know.”

Of course the man would. His situation with Quinn wasn’t all that different from the one I find myself in with Mariah. “So what did you do?”

He shakes his head. “I tried to play it cool until I was no longer able to. Then the choices were either to tell Quinn how I felt, or abandon her and Kiri.” His jaw hardens. “And there was no way in hell I was going to do the latter.”

I nod, heart suddenly feeling like it just might burst. I’d forgotten that I’m not alone, that Doc Pearce has walked this path — or one similar to it — before me. “That’s exactly how I feel. About not abandoning them, I mean. But...” I

hesitate. “I didn’t expect this. To feel like—“ I gesture vaguely. “To feel all this. Whatever *this* is.”

He claps me on the shoulder. “I understand completely.”

“It’s unreasonable, right?” I press. “To feel so strongly about someone I barely know?”

“Maybe. But love isn’t always reasonable.” He looks at me thoughtfully. “Does she feel the same as you?”

My belly clenches. “I have no idea.”

“Well, you should find out. Before you do anything, I mean.”

I frown. “Do anything?”

“You know,” he says, smile tilting. “Before you make any declarations of love.”

My mind balks at his use of the word *love* — and my belly warms to it.

“Shit,” I mutter, more to myself than to the good doctor. “I’ve got it bad, don’t I, Doc?”

He places a kind hand on my forearm and squeezes. “For this woman? Looks like. And you know you can call me Carter, right?”

“Sure, Doc,” I say, throat full of emotion — for Mariah, yes, but also from being seen so fully by this man.

Grateful tears blur my vision. Shaking my head, I swipe them away. “How’s that roast?”

Doc Pearce steps to the oven and peers through the window. It’s looking just about done. Should we treat our women to some tasty dinner?”

I pop a single eyebrow at him. “Our women? I don’t think I can call Mariah mine.”

“Just being hopeful on your behalf,” he says with a smile. His eyes grow a little sad. “I hope I’m not wrong.”

“Me too,” I mutter, giving voice to a wish that I didn’t quite know I had, not until this moment. “Me too.”

## MARIAH

**T**he glow of the evening doesn't wear off until I'm back at Ace's place. Billy's asleep and I'm in the apartment's single bathroom brushing my teeth when the wave of emotion hits.

No, not a wave.

A storm.

A tsunami.

A torrent of feeling that picks me up and tosses me until I don't know up from down.

One minute I'm staring down my reflection in the mirror as I brush my teeth. The next my forehead is crinkling and my vision is blurring with tears that wash down my cheeks fast and hot.

Tonight is what early motherhood should have been like: a safe man by my side while Billy and I visited with new friends.

Instead, my life has been a nightmare: a constant power struggle with the man who violated my trust, impregnated me against my will, and has made my life and Billy's life a living hell ever since.

My son deserves better.

Hell, *I* deserve better, even with all my bad choices.

Nobody should be subjected to a terror like Ryan.

I've always known that, always believed it. But it wasn't until I got back to Heartwood and into Ace's care that I fully realized how much I have lost by being tied to Ryan.

I'm devastated at how much I've missed out on. How much Billy has and will continue to miss out on. All because of one man.

The door to the bathroom opens with a bang. I suppress a scream, sort of, but still spray toothpaste in my surprise.

Ace stands in the open doorway and at first, there's a fire in his eyes that turns my insides molten.

But that fire fades quickly.

"I thought...I mean, I heard..." he manages before faltering, rubbing a big hand over the back of his neck. "I, uh, thought you were in trouble."

"I was just having an emotional moment," I say in a small voice before I rinse my toothbrush and my mouth. "Sorry if I disturbed you."

Ace's face is a storm of confusion in the mirror. "Disturbed me? Not in a thousand years."

This man — a stranger — thought I was in trouble and threw himself into the perceived fray? In turn, I have to restrain myself from throwing myself into his arms.

I don't turn around, but stay facing the sink, meeting his eyes in the mirror — just in case I can't resist that throwing-myself-into-the-burly-mountain-

man's-arms urge. "I'm okay."

He leans his head to one side. "Are you, though?"

My first instinct is to scowl and double down, telling him to mind his business, stubborn idiot that I am.

But my second is to tell the truth.

That's the instinct that I listen to.

Leaning the heels of my hands on the edges of the sink, I spill it all. How I met Ryan. The way he tricked me into being the mother of his child. The way I regret everything, everything, everything—

"No." He cuts me off with a fierce growl, stepping to my side. He takes my face in his hands and turning it to him, so gently it might make me start crying all over again. "No. I hate how you've been treated, and Billy too. But I don't regret that you're here, in my home, safe."

"Safe," I echo Ace. "You've made me feel more safe than I ever have. Did you know that?"

His forehead creases in what I first think is anger, but then realize is relief. "Really? You mean that?"

It's his vulnerability that undoes me.

I'm in his arms, his hands at my waist, my arms around his torso, before I realize that I've moved.

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it," I whisper, voice hoarse.

"No," Ace says, a slow smile lifting one corner of his lips. "You wouldn't, would you?"

I shake my head. “No. At least, I try not to. I’m sure it makes me a huge pain in the ass for everyone around me.”

“A woman who knows what she wants and refuses to settle for less?” He laughs, a short, guttural sound. “That makes you irresistible.”

My lips part in shock. “It does?”

He nods. “To the right men. To decent men.”

My heart is throwing itself against the insides of my ribs when I speak, breathless. “To you?”

“Absolutely.” Ace growls the single word, melting every last one of my reserves.

I wind my arms around the back of his neck, marveling that I’ve found someone like him: handsome and strong and, best of all, trustworthy.

“Will you kiss me, Ace?” I ask, practically panting.

Instead of words, he answers me with action. Catching my lower back in his big hands, he pulls my waist to him until I can feel his hardness, how ready and willing he is.

For me.

For this.

For *us*.

Then he takes a hand and, so gently I could weep, he cradles the back of my neck, guiding my mouth to his.

I’m so eager that I can’t wait for his patient guidance. Cupping his bearded face in my palms, I crash my mouth to his, I taste him for the first time.



He is heat.

He is velvet strength.

He is everything I'd ever dreamed of.

I tangle my tongue with his, abandoning myself to the moment, praying that I'm not making a huge mistake.

## ACE

**I**t's Mariah echoing my use of the word *safe* that turns me hard. I start to wonder if that makes me a bad person, then decide I don't care.

She's here in my arms, looking up at me with eyes somehow so full of trust after everything she's been through, and there's no way in hell I'm walking away from this moment.

Away from her.

When I kiss Mariah, everything changes.

Our lips touch, and it's like a notch is marked in the span of my life: there's before this moment, and there will be after, but nothing will remain the same.

I don't say anything, but my kisses on her lips, her face, and her tender neck are my declaration that I am hers and she is mine from this moment on.

Even if this is the only time we're ever lovers, I belong to this woman. I count myself as family, as a protector, as whatever she needs me to be.

I fell in love when I was deployed in the Middle East too, with a woman named Kelly. It felt just like this: my heart captured by an exquisite infantrywoman with an unfortunate man in her past, a kiss shared, one moment in time that changed everything.

But then morning came and Kelly told me to leave, that our tryst was just for the night. I was crushed, young fool that I was, but I did as I was told.

I left.

I thought I was doing right by her, respecting her wishes. And maybe I was.

But that doesn't change the fact that, when Kelly's abusive ex found out about our night together, he made her pay for it. He beat her within an inch of her life, and then nature did the rest.

I know it's not my fault that she died. Not technically. But I feel responsible nonetheless.

I shouldn't have left.

I should have obeyed the feeling in my gut that, come what may, I was bonded to that woman.

Maybe if I'd stayed, Kelly would still be alive.

But she's not, and even though her ex was court marshaled, dishonorably discharged, and eventually sentenced to prison, it doesn't feel like justice was done. Not to me.

Now, miracle of miracles, I've found another woman that ignites me in the same way Kelly did.

I don't know where this thing with Mariah is leading, but one thing is certain: I won't make the same mistake twice. I will never abandon her to whatever pain her ex is intent on inflicting.

I refuse.

Not until I know that he's been neutralized and that she and Billy are safe.

I guess that's up to Graham. But while Mariah's brother is working on the legal end, I'll be here making sure this woman and her child remain unharmed.

Of course, that doesn't mean I don't ache for more.

Mariah's hands travel from the back of my neck, down my broad shoulders, and land at the small of my back. She pulls me close, grinding her hips against my hardness.

A groan tears from my throat.

She takes advantage of my parted lips and thrusts her tongue into my mouth. I don't back down from the challenge, whipping my tongue with hers. My blood runs hot as I think of how I intend to make her scream with pleasure before this night is over, if she'll let me.

One hand finds the zipper of my jeans and caresses the bulge within.

I think she'll let me.

I think she'll beg for it.

I smile wickedly against her mouth.

Mariah feels my lusty grin and pulls back, searching my face with questioning eyes. "What is it? Have I done something wrong?"

Clasping her close to my chest, I shake my head. "You're doing everything right."

Sudden doubt creases her forehead. "Are you sure? I—I'm not being too forward? Ruining everything?"

I grab her by the shoulders, squeezing gently. "I'm positive. I haven't felt like this in a very long time, and it's all thanks to you." I pop a single eyebrow

and swivel my hips against hers. “Can’t you tell?”

Her worried pout smooths into a smile as the expression in her eyes turns hard and hungry. “I feel it. I feel *you*. And I want you.”

I lower my face to her neck and nibble at the soft flesh I find there. “All in good time,” I murmur, raking her skin gently with my teeth.

She shudders, and when she speaks her voice is strained with arousal. “But I need you, Ace.” She hooks a leg around my waist, grinding her opening against my cock through our jeans, and I almost lose it right then and there.

I pull back, gulping deep breaths to steady myself and my twitching, eager shaft. “I want you so badly, Mariah,” I growl.

She traces my cheek then rakes my beard with light fingers. “I want you too.”

“But...” I have to grapple for control of my breath, my body, my voice. I focus on Mariah’s face, her flushed cheeks and delicious mouth. “But,” I say again, resolve firming, “won’t you let me love you first? Before I *make* love to you?”

The change that comes over her face is subtle, but I don’t miss a bit of it. Her eyes widen. Her forehead, creased with the frustration of unmet desire, smooths.

Holding her, I feel the muscles in her body loosen. Not all the way, but enough that I know that she’s heard me. Enough that I know that she feels safe.

“Yes,” she breathes, all the tension gone from her voice now, replaced by trusting anticipation. “I will let you.”

“Good,” I growl. I can barely get the single syllable out from around the lump in my throat that springs up at how much she trusts me.

Sweeping her off her feet and wholly into my arms, I carry her to the couch. I sit her down, unbutton her jeans, and, unable to keep the wolfish grin from my face, say, “Take off your pants.”

The fire returns to her eyes, but her muscles stay loose and languid as she peels off her jeans and panties and settles back where I set her. I touch a single knee with one light hand and she swings both thighs wide.

“Love me, Ace,” she whispers, running a light thumb over my lips before leaning back. “Love all of me.”

I don’t wait for a single second.

I lower my face to her glistening opening and take my first taste of the feast waiting for me there.

## MARIAH

**I** spread my legs and Ace's nose flares. His jaw ticks when he realizes my juices are coating my slick folds and running down my legs. I want him more than anything else — including my next breath of air.

“Jesus, Mariah,” Ace groans as he lowers his mouth onto my opening. I shudder as he drags the flat of his tongue upward. He does it so lazily, almost like he has all the time in the world as he's tasting a vineyard's finest wine or a five-star meal.

All I can do is whimper, arching my hips upward in a silent plea for more. His beard rubs against my core, and I'm forced to bite down on a moan before it erupts into the apartment, waking Billy.

I've never been so desperate for my child to sleep deeply as I am at this moment.

Ace swirls his skilled tongue around my inside. Then he's on my clit, flicking it with his tongue. I try not to cry out as he lashes my sensitive nub of nerves.

I want to do nothing else but accept whatever Ace wants to do to and with my body. To give him complete power over me.

He has one hand on my stomach as he pins me to the couch and devours me like a starved animal. My entire body jerks and twists under his assault, and I find myself becoming wetter and wetter by the second.

At one point, he cups the entirety of my core with his hot mouth, cupping my wet and silky folds with his lips, and sucks on them.

“Ace,” I whimper out weakly in response to what he’s doing to my body. Before I can process it, my knees jerk up.

He throws them over his shoulder, keeping me locked there. He murmurs what seems to be a curse that’s muffled as I thump my heels onto his upper back, bringing myself harder against his mouth, feeding myself to him.

He withdraws his mouth, penetrating me with his fingers instead. My body spasming at the fresh attention, I have no complaints. Soon, my tightness is clenching hard onto his two fingers, which almost makes me come right there.

He swirls his tongue around my clits, making me hyper-aware of him. I arch up on the bed, thrusting my core back against his mouth in the rhythm of his fingers. I’m completely lost in his touch.

I am close, so close, and I need this more than I need my next breath.

My opening clenches hungrily around his fingers, and he groans softly into me in return.

“Come, love,” he rasps.

That’s all it takes. I draw my knees up to my tummy as he holds onto the bottom of my thighs, keeping me locked there as I completely lose myself to him. My heart is pounding so fast I think it could leap out of me, and my ears are ringing.



Chest heaving, my body finally relaxes and Ace slips his fingers out of my core. His eyes are heavy on me as he moves up my body. He lays kisses over my belly until he reaches my breasts.

He takes a nipple into his mouth and pulls at it hard, causing my core to pulsate again. “I want to spend more than this time with you, be more to you than a protector — although I’m so happy to get to do that too.”

I let loose a gasp that has nothing to do with the sensation throbbing in my low belly. Could this mean that Ace wants me the way that I want him — in the forever way?

I didn’t know it was possible, but my heart speeds up at his words, pounding in my chest.

My core clenches as I nod. “Yes, I want it too, Ace. I...I want *you*.”

I was already wet and ready for my mountain man, but the way that he grips my hips with even more power as he takes him my reply makes me absolutely drenched.

Then we’re both grappling with the remainder of our clothes until, panting, we’re finally naked before each other, nothing separating us but our individual fears of being wrong.

And now, maybe not even that anymore. Not now that we’ve made our declarations to each other.

Hungrily, I let my eyes drop to his cock, standing tall and proud and so damn ready for me.

I’m no virgin, obviously, but Ace will still stretch me out with how big he is. But I don’t care. I want all of him.

I open my legs wide and reach for him my mountain man with both hands. He needs no more invitation.

Ace strokes himself a few times before aligning his hardness with my slick opening. However, he doesn't enter me just yet.

His eyes flick to mine, and I see a glint of mischief there, almost as if he's teasing me. He swirls the head of his thickness over my throbbing clit, and I gasp from how sensitive I still am.

Then, finally, forever and a day later, he settles his cock between my slick folds and rocks it up and down my core, letting my juices coat him.

I watch him as he moves, taking in the flex and release of his abs that are toned from working in the shop. I relish how the tip of his hardness hits my clit every time he swings upward, and it's elating knowing that his shaft is so wet because of me — because of how *I* turn on this incredible man, making him feel so many things.

“Ace, hurry.” My whispered words are out of my mouth before I realize that I'm speaking.

With a low growl, he finally aligns himself between my opening. With his free hand, he brushes my hair off my face, raking his fingers through it. It feels almost as good as his tongue on my nub, somehow. I could lose myself in those eyes that heat only for me.

Ace thrusts into me without any warning. I can feel my walls clamping down on him as he stretches me with pleasure as much as with pain. I have to bite down on my tongue to myself stop from crying out in ecstasy.

“Damn it, Mariah,” he rasps. “You feel so good. So perfect. I—I don't think I can last long.”

I don't care how long he lasts, only that he's taking all of me, staking out his territory and claiming me as his own.

Quicker and faster, he pounds into me, each thrust making my breast pounce with him. I whimper when his tongue trails onto the crook of my neck, lightly suckling on my delicate skin to leave more in its wake.

"Ace," I moan quietly as he continues to mark me, bringing so many new sensations. "Yes."

Almost as if my words are what triggers him, his arms and shoulder ripple as he fists the pillows that are askew on the couch around us. His face is rocky with determination as he pounds hard into me, on a mission to make sweet love to me.

On a mission to make me lose my damn mind.

I moan, hoping it's not too loud but unable to control a single part of me as he pumps into me. The initial pain at his bigness has given way to every good thing. I am writhing, whimpering, and panting as he thrusts into me, bringing me close to another orgasm. I manage to open my eyes to see his jaws clenched, his skin glistening with sweat.

"Ace," I whisper, prying my eyes open and parting my dry lips. "I'm—"

"You're close, aren't you?" he asks, fingers finding their way into my hair and tugging at it. I marvel at how this man knew what my body wanted before I did.

I nod, completely wrecked. I just need his touch on me. That's all I'll ever need, I think.

As if he's reading my mind, Ace crashes his lips onto mine. I become entirely undone, a rocket going off. My toes curl as he swallows my moan, working perfectly with me as he chokes out my name.

“Fuck, Mariah,” he grits out, moving in me just right. “I’m close.”

“Me too,” I whisper. “Please, let’s come together.”

He pulls out until just the tip of his shaft is inside me, then thrusts into me again, fully sheathing his beautiful cock in my folds again and again. He moves at a furious pace that makes it seem impossible that the couch is still holding us, that we haven’t obliterated it with our love-making.

I whimper and clutch hold of his shoulders, holding on for dear life through this glorious assault of pleasure. I could lose myself in this sensation, but I force my eyes to open and stare into the brightest eyes I’ve ever seen.

He takes me so hard that I can’t even think of anything else but him — and I don’t want to.

I know my opening must be gripping him like a vise because his deep thrusts have turned staccato. His short, hard pumps take me ever closer to losing it.

Ace’s hands roam over my body before settling on my thighs. He raises my legs and hooks them around his waist tightly, making me hold onto him as he gives me more.

Then, he hits a spot that makes me fully lose it.

“*There,*” I gasp.

“Come with me, beautiful,” he grits out.

My body can do nothing but obey my man. I plummet off the edge of pure sensation as it gives way to climax. I ride the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had, gifted to me by the beautiful man inside me. He groans at my tightness as my velvet walls try to milk him dry.

“Mariah, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough of you,” he pants as I writhe around him. I can feel my core pulsing as he continues to drive hard

into me. When he thrusts one last time, the hardest push of all, I feel his member flexing within me before hot fluid flood my aching core. I claw at him as he collapses onto me, holding our bodies close to one another as I rock against him in my own sweet release.

It is, in a word, perfect.

So much in my life is anything but. This moment, though? Perfect, and I'm not afraid to declare it, even if it's only to myself.

Ace kneads his strong fingers into the tender muscles of my back as we hold each other. Slowly, gently, he smooths my hair back. I melt against him and, miracle of miracles after all that I've been through lately, I feel safe enough to fall asleep in my mountain man's arms.

## ACE

I don't sleep a wink.

But that's just fine by me because I don't want to miss a minute of this: Mariah asleep in my arms, her little one snoozing in the makeshift bedroom, and me watching over our odd little family.

*Family.* It's the first time I've ever been able to envision such a thing for my future, and it's all because of the woman I just shared the best night of my life with.

I'm as shocked as I am honored that Mariah fell asleep after our love-making. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she finds it difficult to trust men, after everything she's been through.

But the fact that she drifted right to sleep in my arms, naked and well-fucked, means that she really does feel safe here with me, just as she'd said yesterday.

That means everything.

So there's no way I'm sleeping through this. Not in a million years.

At some point in the night, I adjust us so we're laying in a more comfortable position. I tuck a soft blanket around us and slide a pillow beneath Mariah's

head.

But I don't sleep a wink.

Which is why I catch the strange sound outside.

At first, I don't think anything of it. A light scuff on the pavement below, as if from a stray dog passing through, or maybe even a bear.

But then it comes again, louder, and the hair on the back of my neck prickles to attention. After years of living above my shop, I've learned to tell the difference between ambient sounds and that of customers.

Glancing at the clock on my wall, I see that it's just after four o'clock in the morning, so there's no sane customer downstairs wanting their car tended.

But I know the sound of a boot scuffing on the pavement outside my shop, and that's what I just heard.

I'm tempted to ignore it, to stay warm and cozy with Mariah. But then I remember why she's here with me in the first place, and decide I'd best go investigate. Better safe than sorry, especially with Mariah's asshole ex out to get her.

With regret, I slide my arms from around Mariah and lift myself from the couch. She shifts and sighs, but I hold my breath and she settles back into deep sleep. I cock my head, making sure I hear Billy's soft snores coming from the curtained-off area.

Then I hear it one more time: a scuff of sole on concrete, followed by a string of muttered curses.

My mouth forms a hard line as my skin prickles again. I waste no time in throwing on yesterday's jeans, shirt, and a pair of boots. I hesitate, then grab my axe too. I keep it behind the front door, handy for when I want to head to

the forest that surround Heartwood to chop wood to keep my apartment warm through the winter.

I've never had to use it for an intruder, but there's a first time for everything.

I'm hoping that whoever's downstairs is just a half-drunk straggler staggering his way home from a long night — and morning — at Pixie's bar down the street. If it's not, though — if whoever is downstairs is who I fear it might be, I'll be glad to have more than my fists to fend off trouble.

Hand on the knob of the front door, I hesitate, the back of my neck prickling once more.

What if it *is* Ryan, Mariah's ex, downstairs, ready to make a scene? Can I handle him alone? I've got military training, sure, but it's been a while, and I'm older now.

Just to be on the safe side, I grab my phone and shoot a quick text to Mac, an old buddy and local police chief.

*It's probably nothing, I type, but there's a potential intruder outside my place. Might be the guy Mariah's hiding out from. Will update you after I find out.*

I don't expect a reply this early, but my text gets marked as "read" straight away.

*I'll be right over,* comes Mac's reply.

I don't realize how worried I am until I read his text and feel relieved to know that backup is on the way.

Mariah and Billy have so quickly become my whole world. And even though it doesn't make a bit of sense, I'm terrified that I'll let them down.



My grip on the door as I quietly let myself out of my apartment is steadier knowing that I'm protecting my woman — yes, *my* woman, I silently declare to myself and the world — and that I won't be doing it alone.

## MARIAH

**I** wake slowly as thin light filters through my closed eyelids. Something niggles at the edge of my mind, something both warm and languid — and then something else, a cold, sharp thing.

I remember. Ace's arms around me, his hardness inside me, and my unfathomable certainty that I have found a home in him. I shiver at the memory indelibly seared on my brain — and at the anticipation of making more such memories with Ace.

But then the sharp edge cuts through my dreaminess and brings me crashing back to reality.

From outside comes the sound of muted footsteps and a low, murmured voice. Ace's, I realize with an electric thrill that shoots from my heart straight to my nether region. I shiver again.

And then again, but this third time with fear.

Because another voice filters into the apartment, loud and seeming to emanate straight from my worst nightmares.

“Get the fuck out of my way.” Ryan's voice barrels up from below, through the walls, and through all my defenses. I'm suddenly hyper-aware that I'm

naked under the blanket Ace must have laid over me, and it feels too damn vulnerable.

Clutching the blanket to my chest, I stand and try to reassemble yesterday's outfit. My hands are shaking so hard that it's a challenge. On the other side of the curtained-off area, Billy stirs, then begins to fuss.

"Shit," I mutter as I fail to put my foot through the correct opening of my panties for the fourth time in a row.

Ace says something outside, but Ryan's voice interrupts, cutting through the little courage I've somehow kept scraped together throughout the course of trying to free myself and Billy from his clutches. "This has nothing to do with you. Get out of my way before I make you."

I've got clothes on now, but I'm shaking harder than ever. Billy has gone from fussing to crying, and I feel like I'm getting torn to pieces.

Do I grab my son and run? Leave Billy here and go face Ryan? Or simply snuggle Billy in my arms and try to pretend none of this is happening?

Ryan yells again, a string of expletives, shattering any hope of the last option. But am I ready to face him?

Every cell in my body is screaming that I'm not, that I should take Billy and run like hell.

But then I remember Ace, and his gentle touch and kind eyes and how he feels like home. Am I willing to abandon him, to miss out on exploring whatever future we could have together?

Something in my belly hardens, and my chin lifts.

No. Just like I won't let Ryan trap me and my son, I won't let him steal Ace from me. I refuse.

Fear giving way to anger, I pop into the makeshift bedroom. I quickly change Billy into a fresh diaper as the voices escalate outside, then set him back in his bassinet with a few board books and a toddler-safe music toy.

“Sorry, buddy, but you have to stay in here a little longer,” I say as I switch the music toy on, its slightly off-key tunes mostly drowning out the raised voices from downstairs. “Mama’s got to deal with an old problem once and for all.”

As if he understands, Billy doesn’t fuss, but settles with his board books, happily drooling on the pages.

The hardness in my belly has turned to iron, then steel. I let it help me stand tall as I exit Ace’s apartment to face down the man trying his damndest to ruin my life and Billy’s along with it.

## ACE

**M**ac pulls up in his pickup just in time to hear Mariah's ex bellow at me, "Get out of my way before I make you!"

Which is good, because introducing my fist to Ryan's face was starting to sound too good to continue to resist.

Oh, and also because Ryan is clearly angling for a fight. His ugly mug is so close to me, he rains spittle on my face every time he opens his mouth.

Which is a lot.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" Mac says as he walks up. He catches my eye, and the quirk of his lips tells me that he's in my corner.

The tightness in my chest eases slightly, and my grip on the handle of the axe loosens.

A little.

"Yeah, this guy has kidnapped my woman," Ryan practically shrieks, stabbing me in the chest with a finger.

With slow, deliberate eyes, I look down to where he touched me, then back up to meet his gaze, one of my eyebrows popping.

“*Your* woman?” I say.

Ryan doesn’t catch the warning in my tone. “And my kid,” he adds, turning to Mac. “See? Kidnapping.”

“You keep saying that word,” Mac says with a smirk. “It doesn’t mean what you seem to think it means.”

“She’s not yours,” I say, voice a heavy rumble in my chest. *She’s mine*, I want to say, to shout from the damn rooftops. But I don’t because even though I want Mariah to be mine, she first belongs to herself.

My words seem to shock Ryan to silence. He stares at me, eyes wide, before turning away.

Mac relaxes slightly at my side, but I’m standing ready when Ryan rounds back on me with a leer, sending his fist careening toward my face. I take his punch on the cheek, but a second later I’ve got his arm behind his back as his knees crash into the pavement.

“This isn’t a fight you can win,” I growl into the man’s ear. I hold him immobilized as he struggles against my grip. “Walk away.”

“You really should listen, but what do I know?” Mac sighs idly, as if he doesn’t really care — as if he’s looking for a reason to lock an asshole up. He doesn’t get many opportunities to do that in a quiet town like Heartwood.

“She’s *mine*,” Ryan whines, struggling harder.

I open my mouth to snap back, but a clear voice from behind me beats me to it.

“I was never yours. The only way you got me was by tricking me, and even then you couldn’t keep me.”

I turn to see Mariah striding down the stairs, head high and eyes blazing.

My heart feels like it might burst at the sight because when she'd shown up here only a couple of days ago, she'd looked so tired and so scared. Still strong, still brave, but worn down.

That Mariah is gone. In her place stands a powerhouse, a warrior who knows that this battle's victory belongs to her.

She's come to face her abuser, and I'm so damn proud of her.

Ryan seizes the opportunity of my distraction and twists out of my grip. I'm too slow to catch him again, and Mac also misses him as he steals his freedom.

"You're mine, bitch, and you'll never not be," Ryan spits as he stalks toward Mariah.

Mariah pales but does not back down "No, Ryan. I'm really, *really* not."

"You are," he screams, raising a fist. "And I'm going to make you see that if it's the last thing I do."

Ryan sends his fist flying toward Mariah's face. For the first time, she flinches, ducking to protect her head with her arms, but it won't save her from the bruises he'll leave on her exposed limbs.

I'm there before he can lay a finger on her, standing between Ryan and Mariah. With a single palm, I catch the punch he intended for her and twist, hearing the sick sound of tendon and bone pulled past where they should be.

Ryan crumples, and I'm tempted to come down hard on him with my own fists. But then Mariah is there, catching hold of my face between her palms, turning me to look at her as she speaks my name.

The sound of her voice comes as if from far away. For a moment it feels like I'm back in the Middle East, having just learned that the woman I'd

loved had fallen prey to the worst sort of man.

A man like Ryan.

I can't let another man like him harm another woman I care about.

I have to protect Mariah and Billy.

I try to turn back to Ryan, but Mariah tugs me back around to face her once more, and now tears are running down her cheeks.

It's the tears that stop me more than anything. I lift a hand to her face, trace a tear down her face with a thumb, and am surprised to see how much my hand trembles.

Then her gaze shifts to something over my shoulder, and her eyes fly wide as her hands drop from my cheeks. I whirl around, expecting to see Ryan advancing on us — on *her* — once more.

But it's Graham, running toward us waving his cell phone. "I got it!" he's yelling, and now my hearing rushes back to full volume. "I got it all on video! He doesn't stand a chance in court now."

I follow the nod of Graham's chin toward Ryan. Pivoting, I raise the axe I'm somehow still holding, ready for anything — ready to *do* anything to protect the woman I love.

But all I see is Mac leaning over a cowering Ryan, clicking handcuffs into place. "I told you," Mac says, shaking his head at Ryan but wearing a broad grin. His set of handcuffs probably gets only slightly more use than Heartwood's single jail cell. "You really should have listened."

"It was smart of you to call me," Graham says to Mac as he moves to stand beside the officer, both of them staring down at Ryan. Graham says to the sniveling excuse for a man, "You just made this case really easy for us to



win.”

“Good,” comes Mariah’s voice from over my shoulder, trembling even in just that single syllable.

I turn just as she begins to sway on the spot. I catch her and, holding her so close, I sink slowly to the ground. She turns, wrapping her arms around my neck. Burying her face in my chest, she begins to weep.

“You were so brave,” I murmur into her hair, tears of my own blurring my vision. “So damn brave. But you don’t have to be, not anymore. You’re safe.”

She pulls away for a moment to gaze up at me. “You made me safe. You saved me.”

I shake my head. “You made yourself safe. I just helped a little. But I’ll always be here for you, a safe haven for whenever you need it.”

My belly twists painfully at the thought that Mariah might leave now that the threat of Ryan is neutralized.

But she allays my fear without hesitation. “For whenever I need it?” she says, eyes dancing through her tears.

I nod. “Any time, for as long as you like.”

“How about we start with forever? Or at least the foreseeable future.”

My jaw drops as my heart soars. “You...mean it?”

Now it’s her turn to nod. “For as long as you’ll have me.” I see my own fear reflected in her eyes for a moment.

“Then forever it is,” I say, holding her tighter.

Mariah buries her face in my chest again, and I breathe in her scent, fresh tears of my own gathering at the fact that this woman is giving herself to me so willingly after being given so many reasons not to trust any man ever again.

I'm so damn grateful.

## EPILOGUE

MARIAH

### THREE YEARS LATER

I smooth my skirt over my thighs as I sit on the bench outside the courtroom and try not to let my hands shake.

I'm only moderately successful.

The husky man sitting next to me takes one of my trembling hands in his big one. "Nervous?" Ace asks, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he looks at me.

I brush my free hand over his beard once. There's a little more gray in it than there used to be, but I think it's made my husband even more handsome. "I am...although I'm not sure why."

"There's nothing to be nervous about," he reassures me. "But it *is* a big deal, so it makes sense that you've got the jitters." He leans his head to one side and his eyes dance. "You're not going to run on me, though, are you?"

His teasing works. I laugh, Ace's words having driven a wedge through my worries. "Not in a million years."

And why would I run now, after everything? I didn't run when I had to face down Ryan and argue my case for sole custody of Billy. I won, no contest, with Ace by my side cheering me on.

I didn't run when I found myself suddenly, surprisingly pregnant with Ace's child, our daughter, Bethany, just a couple of months after me and Billy arrived on his doorstep. Both Billy and Bethany are with my brother and sister-in-law while we take care of business here at the courthouse.

And I *definitely* didn't run when Ace got down on one knee before me at my baby shower, asking me with my massively pregnant belly and in front of all our friends and family to marry him. I did the next week, a month before

Bethany made her debut.

There's no reason for me to run now, not after Ace has proven himself to me again and again.

But still, my stomach is tied up in knots over today. I guess Ace is right, it *is* a big deal, both in reality as well as symbolically.

I clutch onto my husband's hand and, when he squeezes it, my nerves untangle a little more.

Then the baby in my belly performs a flip and a little kick. I squeeze Ace's hand for a whole new reason now, pressing his palm against the still-subtle swell of my baby bump.

Ace's eyes fly wide. "Is that...?"

I nod. "The first time I've felt this little one move."

My heart does a somersault when Ace's eyes grow misty with emotion. He leans close and kisses my lips gently, hand still against my belly.

"I love you," he murmurs into my hair when he pulls away.

"I love you more," I reply, and he smiles.

"I know this is more than we'd planned for in such a short time," he says, leaning his forehead against mine. "But we'll make it work, just like we always do. And it'll be easier once the construction crew is done building our new house. I can't wait to live in it, all of us together."

"Together," I nod, getting a little misty myself at the idea of the house Ace and I designed. "Like a family."

"Not *like* a family," Ace corrects. "As a family. Because that's what we are. Forever."

“Forever,” I echo, and mean it.

He’s right. We’re not *like* a family, we *are* a family — thrown together in the most unconventional way, sure, but no less closely tied for it.

The doors to the courtroom we’re waiting next to swing open. We look at the clerk now standing in the doorway.

She reads from a paper in her hands, then looks expectantly at us. “Adoption case for William Cutter?”

I nod, and Ace and I rise to our feet as one, my hand still safe inside his.

“And my son goes by Billy, not William,” I tell the clerk.

She smiles at me. “*Billy* Cutter’s adoption case, then. Shall we?” She gestures into the courtroom.

Ace squeezes my hand as he guides me, following the clerk. “Let’s go make this family even more official than it already is.”

I’m not sure how I ever got this lucky, to have two beautiful babies, one more on the way, and this amazing, protective, mountain man of a husband to raise and love them with...but I’m so glad I did.

I follow Ace into the courtroom and into the next step of our future, so ready to see what comes next for us — together.





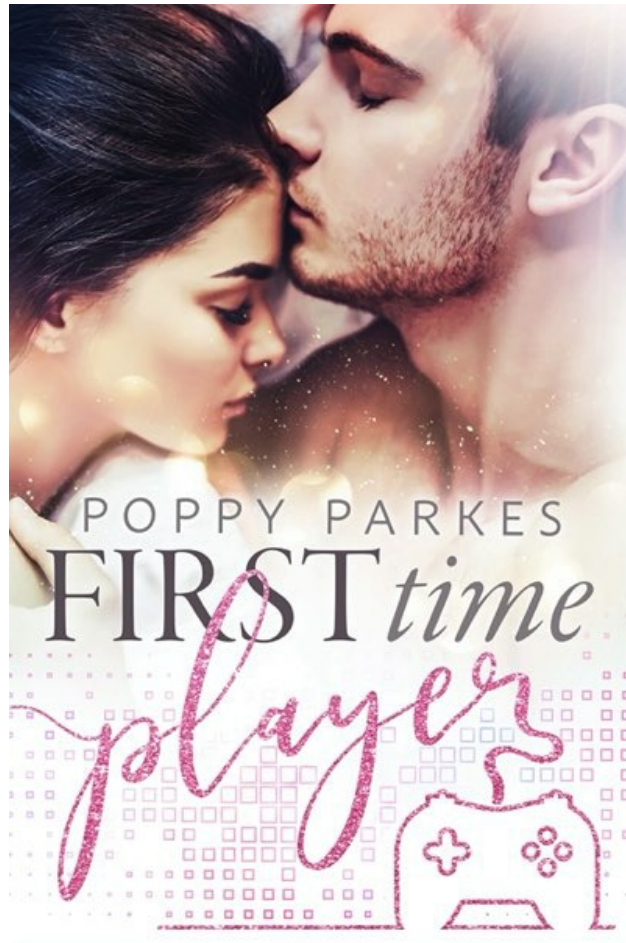
**Don't miss any of The Mountain Men of Heartwood!**

These rugged mountain men are gruff and grumpy men with hearts of gold. Come for the rugged wilderness and small town charm of the Rocky Mountains, stay for the insta-love chemistry and swoony mostly-standalone stories that will leave your Kindle smoldering.

**FALL IN LOVE WITH A NEW MOUNTAIN MAN TODAY...**



A FREE BOOK JUST FOR YOU



CAN'T GET ENOUGH ROMANCE?

Sign up for my mailing list and receive a **free digital copy** of *First Time Player*, a sexy second chance nerd romance. It's guaranteed to light your fire and make your smile. ;)

**[Grab your free book here!](#)**

ALSO BY POPPY PARKES

Poppy  
Parkes

**WANT MORE STEAMY, SATISFYING ROMANCES?**

I have over fifty titles to choose from!

Find them all here:

**[www.poppyparkes.com/books](http://www.poppyparkes.com/books)**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Poppy Parkes is the author of steamy romances to light your fire and make you smile. Poppy writes, paints, and dreams in the mountains, where she raises her two boys. She is in love with luscious color, moon-gazing, and dancing wild. And coffee. And wine. And chocolate. You know how it is.

[www.poppyparkes.com](http://www.poppyparkes.com)

