

ONE YEAR BEFORE

Twigs and branches tore at her arms like razor wire, so fast was she running. Breath coming in bull puffs, stinging her nose, drying out her throat and mouth. Her feet churned the soil into clouds of dust. It hadn't rained in weeks, the driest August on record.

If rain had been predicted, Terry wouldn't be here right now, caught in this mad race to a nonexistent finish line. She always checked the Weather Channel assiduously before a hike. Five-day forecasts were relatively accurate, and Terry didn't backpack for more than three. That way, she only had to take two days off, brackets around a weekend, including time for travel. As with everything else, Terry was practical in her outdoor pursuits. She didn't push herself to cover long distances, nor deal with things like bad weather. Trying to get a stove lit under a drumbeat of rain, slick outer gear humidifying the inside of your tent. Who needed that?

What she wouldn't give right now for the annoyances of a drowned-out expedition.

He was right behind her.

Huh, huh, huh came the breaths she fought to drag in. She could feel their pulse in her eardrums. She couldn't keep going at this pace much longer. She'd had a head start, but the man was taller and fleetier than she, made strong by all the work entailed in the shelter he was starting to build.

He had asked Terry if she wanted to see the shelter, and for a moment, she'd been tempted. With horrified regret, she recalled the keen insight and interest the man had exhibited in her approach to hiking and equipment preferences. His attention had been compelling. But coming to her senses—just go off with a strange man in the woods?—Terry had declined, and then he had gotten angry.

That was when she ran.

Woods surrounded her on all sides, both cape and canopy. She broke through another pincushion of sticks, shutting her eyes to protect them, hoping the ground would stay level before her. Fat, fleshy leaves slapped at her face; then, she realized that the leaves were actually flying through the air like missiles.

Terry twisted, shooting a look over her shoulder as she raced on.

The man was hacking at trees with a machete, reducing their protruding branches to stubs. Whereas Terry had only her body to use as a blade, which was taking its toll upon her. Bubbles of blood dotted her arms; welts stood up on the exposed part of her chest. Her shoes relentlessly beat the clods of earth, stirring up that crematorium wake of ashy dirt behind her.

She had told the man her name. That was the thing Terry couldn't let go of now—how susceptible she had been to his charms. "Terry," he had echoed. "A solid, capable name." If he had said her name was beautiful, or even pretty, the connection would've been lost. Terry herself was neither of those things, and she knew that her name wasn't either. Its full version—Theresa—felt too fancy and she'd adopted the diminutive

in girlhood. Terry lived alone, cooked herself solid, nutritious meals, and assisted a pool of doctors during the week, while hiking solo on the weekends. The man seemed to recognize all of this about her, and be drawn to her despite it.

Or because of it.

A meaty stick caught her in the back, thrown like a javelin by the man. Terry nearly went down, but stumbled and regained her footing. She was close to giving up, just stopping like a kid in a game of tag. *Okay, you got me.* He would in the end anyway, wouldn't he? But no, she couldn't die out here in her beloved Adirondacks. The man was close enough now that she could hear the hissing slash of the machete blade, feel a rainfall of slender pine needles when he sliced through the air with the weapon's steel edge. She drilled down and found a final spurt of speed, not daring to take another look behind her.

But the woods were opening up at last, giving way to some other sort of terrain. What was it? Her brain was too oxygen deprived, too terror fueled, to process the change in landscape.

The man hurled his machete in a great, soaring arc of rage, its silver spear turning end over end, headed right for her.

They were at a gully. That was what explained all the sudden space.

Terry dove just before the blade hit the rim of earth and plunged into the ground.



He would expect her to roll all the way to the base of the ravine, use the creek that rushed there to make her escape. Instead, Terry threw both hands out, clawing her nails into dirt, stones, and grit, arresting her fall halfway down the hill. Scrabbling on her belly in panic, praying that her movements were invisible from above, Terry made her way to an overhang of rock and slid beneath it. The stone ceiling protected her

from sight. Terry tasted soil, felt some creature of the earth—a worm, or maybe a small snake—squiggle away, its sinuous body cool against her bare cheek.

The man bushwhacked past the new, wobbly trees that clung to the ravine, maneuvering downhill through brittle, rain-deprived brush, and coming within a few feet of Terry. Upon reaching the bottom, he entered the water and went splashing downriver. After a while, she could no longer hear his churning feet.

Enough time passed that Terry began to picture her getaway. She'd only be half a day later than expected, and who was there to expect her, really? Just the doctor who worked Mondays. Terry pictured signing the Turtle Ridge trail register, her hand shaking so hard that her entry would be nearly illegible, although she would still follow protocol, do the right thing; that was Terry's way. She could actually feel the wooden lid on the box that protected the log, too heavy to hold, given her compromised state. It would fall, catching her bruised and scraped fingers, and she would bite back a bleat of pain.

But at least she'd be safe.

She had saved herself. Calm, capable Terry, far too prepared and competent to wind up in trouble in the woods, would be out of this mess soon.

Then a pair of arms as strong as winches slid beneath the rock and pulled her out.

PART ONE

LOST

CHAPTER ONE

We deceive ourselves.

Those were the words in Natalie Abbott's head when she woke up the morning of her wedding.

It was a terrible thing to think, especially when you were about to get married, and Natalie immediately rolled over in the lofty bed and tried to fall back asleep. Today would be a huge day, and tomorrow promised in some ways to be even bigger.

But sleep refused to come, forestalled by the prospect of this afternoon's ceremony, and last-minute preparations still left to make for their honeymoon. Sunlight streamed through the gauzy curtains that hung over the windows across from her bed. The country inn where she and Doug were getting married dated back to 1812, and amenities like blackout shades had been sacrificed in favor of historical detail. The glass in the windows had warbles in it that had been blown there two centuries ago.

Apprehension began to turn into anticipation. Natalie wrapped her

arms around herself—this inn did have air-conditioning, at least—and shivered in pure delight. What a beautiful place to be married. If you were going to start a new life, this was the setting for it.

There was a knock on the door, and Natalie threw back the flowery sheets and padded across the floorboards, wearing only a baby-doll nightie. She had hoped that Doug might make a middle-of-the-night excursion to her room, despite the ban against them seeing each other until this afternoon. A final romantic interlude with her fiancé seemed worth shucking some old-fashioned superstition. Most of the married couples they knew had bent other rules, agreeing to a “first look” for convenience’s sake, for instance, while Natalie and Doug had decided to opt for tradition and take wedding photos after the ceremony.

Tradition was important to both of them, and for much the same reason: neither had had a lot of it while growing up. Which meant there were gaps, big holes, when it came to talking about their pasts, but Natalie never blamed Doug for going stony and silent. There were parts of her own upbringing that she avoided thinking about as well.

“Doug?” she whispered, cracking the door.

“Doug!” came the retort as her sister pushed her way through the opening. “You get to spend your whole life with him. But this is the last day I can take care of my baby sister.” Claudia gave an exaggerated sniff, then smiled at Natalie.

Natalie took a step backward, allowing Claudia inside and offering a smile in return. Doug was maintaining the custom, her older sister was keeping the promise she’d made back when Natalie was just a toddler and Claudia already crossing the threshold to teen status, and the faint trace of foreboding, with which Natalie had woken, was finally receding, like a wave on the beach, before the wonder of this day.

Claudia held out a tray. “The inn sent breakfast since Doug’s in the dining room eating his,” she said. “And Dad wants to know if there’s anything he can do to help.”

They exchanged smiles, Natalie knowing that the blend of ingredients she saw on her sister's face must be mirrored on her own. Indulgence, regret, annoyance.

"My mani?" Natalie suggested, displaying ten ragged nails. It was about as likely that her father would take on the task of grooming as anything else—which was to say, not very likely at all.

Claudia acknowledged the comment with a wry nod, then set the tray on an antique desk and whipped a cloth napkin off a plate. She poured coffee from a carafe, its fragrance filling the room. "The girl is coming in a few hours with her kit," she said. "She'll do your toes too."

Natalie wiggled her toes against the wood floorboards. She walked over to the desk—though the motion felt more like prancing—and took a bite out of a muffin. "Then I guess we won't need Dad's assistance."

They traded smiles again. Claudia fingered a strand of Natalie's hair while Natalie explored the interior of an omelet. "I think you should wear it up after all," Claudia said.

Natalie looked up at her big sister, and nodded.



Later that afternoon, Natalie glanced at the porcelain clock in her suite, an analog relic that actually ticked. Just past two o'clock, with her hair and makeup already completed. Less than two hours to go.

Natalie gave the woman laboring over her scruffy hands an apologetic look before casting her gaze toward the view outside. As dictated by custom, she and Doug had parted just before midnight last night. Right now, he was probably hanging out in one of the outbuildings scattered across the generous grounds of the inn, or maybe playing a game of tennis or basketball on the far-off courts.

Absurdly, Natalie missed him. Until this moment, she hadn't realized how accustomed she had grown to having Doug by her side. It'd been

easy to allow the distance between herself and her friends to draw itself out because Doug filled a void inside Natalie that no one else ever had. From the night they'd met three years ago, stumbling into each other—literally—at the bar where Doug drank with his buddies, a gaping hole inside Natalie had closed over like water filling in a space.

“Hold still,” the woman doing Natalie’s nails cautioned.

Natalie hadn’t even realized that she’d flinched. She felt a pang of loneliness, incongruous on this day when she was going to pledge herself to be joined to someone else forever.

Her sister had left to see to the host of last-minute tasks—checking on the floral arrangements, making sure the fruit gummies were tied up in their taffeta bundles—while Natalie had filled the remainder of her morning with a long, luxurious bath. Then came the arrival of the three beautifying women, like Sleeping Beauty’s trio of fairies: this one who did nails, another who had applied a painterly palette of makeup, and a third who’d looped Natalie’s hair into a series of curlicues, then added a dozen slender braids, securing the whole thing with a rafter of vines. Natalie felt a bit silly being tended to so richly, but even she had to admit that the effect appeared to be worth it. Doug would hardly recognize her. They could let out her hair like a pleated cloak around them when they had sex for the first time as a married couple.

Natalie glanced down at her lap, then at the floor. Her manicure was nearly done, and her toenails glistened like tiny peach seashells.

Claudia was to be her maid—make that *matron*—of honor, and Natalie also had two bridesmaids. Not her closest friends from the city—there’d been tension with Eva and Val ever since Natalie had met Doug, and it’d come to a head after the engagement. Natalie had been forced to reach out to a pair of old college friends, with whom she had largely lost touch, but who rallied when Natalie explained that she was getting married.

Most of Doug’s boyhood crop of friends had also dispersed, but the

two who remained in the city, Mark and Brett, got drinks or ate lunch with Doug fairly regularly. Natalie was glad she had at least matched her fiancé's set of groomsmen. It would have been all too easy to have nobody standing up there besides her sister, an uncomfortable reminder of the way her own friendships had disintegrated.

A rap on the door and Claudia reentered, Natalie's wedding gown in its plastic sheath slung over her arm.

"Doug's mother just arrived," she announced. "I helped unload her bags and showed her where her room was on the map." This last said with just a touch of perplexity—helplessness puzzled Claudia. She added, "She seems to like the inn."

Natalie gave her sister a smile that felt a trifle wistful. "I was hoping she might come over here to say hello. You know, before the ceremony."

"I'm sure she will," Claudia replied briskly. Problem presented, solution imposed—that was Claudia's way. Often, she even had the power to enact said solution. Only not in this case. "Give her a few moments to settle in."

When Natalie first met Doug, she had hoped that she and his mom might become close. In Natalie's view, almost any mother who was still alive held that warm, thriving potential. But Gail Larson seemed too overwhelmed by life to have much to offer anybody else, and this extended to her own son. She pattered around her overlarge apartment—three bedrooms in New York City!—assisted by a phalanx of friends, several of whom had been invited to the wedding.

The woman doing Natalie's nails reinserted her bronze-coated brush into its bottle and dabbed on a clear top coat. Then she stood up, wagging a finger in Claudia's direction. "Don't come anywhere near her with that dress for at least thirty minutes, you hear?"

"We'll just chitchat till she's dry," Claudia agreed, setting a timer on her phone.

When it chimed a half hour later, Claudia helped Natalie into her

dress, shimmying the ivory silk down over Natalie's hips, then sucking in a breath.

"Oh my goodness," she said. "Will you just take a look at you. My baby sister, who could believe it?" And she rotated Natalie toward the mirror.

Natalie was surprised to feel a pinprick of tears. Claudia flew across the room for tissues, dabbing carefully at Natalie's eyes to avoid smudging the color on her lids.

"I know you must miss Mom," Claudia said. "Especially today."

Natalie gazed at herself in the glass, trying to conjure the face she'd stared at so many times in her parents' wedding portraits.

"I wish I missed her," she whispered. "I don't even have that."

Claudia adjusted the silken threads that held the dress up until they formed a rippling line across each of Natalie's shoulders, then walked her around the bridal suite so Natalie could get a feel for her shoes and the long sweep of her dress. As they passed the bank of windows, Claudia halted abruptly enough that Natalie's toes bit the hem of her gown. Claudia steadied her, then crouched down to peer outside.

"Natalie," she said, her voice sharp. "What are those guys doing?"

CHAPTER TWO

Natalie and Doug had chosen the Blooming Garden Inn in upstate New York because its idyllic, pastoral setting seemed the stuff of wedding dreams. The bridal suite occupied a wing of the Victorian structure, painted sage, adorned by violet shutters. The suite had its own separate entrance looking out over the wildflower meadow where the ceremony would take place.

Standing beside her sister, Natalie bent down too, and looked.

At the end of the winding stone walk that led away from the suite, white wooden chairs had been set up. None of the rows were filled yet, but it was still a bit early, plus Natalie and Doug had known that their wedding would be on the small side. Both of their family trees were so fractured, with breaks and jogs along the lines. It was another of the things that bound them together.

“Are those Doug’s groomsmen?” Claudia asked, sounding slightly annoyed. She leaned closer to the window. “They’re going to be late.”

Beyond the meadow lay an empty field, which marked the boundary

between the inn's property and the road running alongside. And standing in the midst of that field were two men who from this vantage point did look a lot like Doug's best friends.

Natalie twisted to look at her sister over her shoulder, feeling the glide of ivory silk against her. "Why would they just be standing around over there?"

"They're not even dressed," Claudia replied, still with that tinge of annoyance. Her sister didn't like unexpected disruptions or changes in plan.

"And I don't think they're just 'standing around,'" Claudia added. "It looks like they're upset about something."

Natalie dropped to her knees to get a better look through the glass, her skirt forming a puddle of silk on the floor.

"Let me go see what's happening," Claudia proposed, straightening up from the window.

But Natalie was the one getting married, growing up in some sense after today. She gave a quick shake of her head. "I'll do it."

"Natalie!" Claudia burst out. "You can't go out there like that."

Natalie began heading for the door that opened onto the meadow. "It's early. No one's even seated yet."

Except for the musicians. Standing in the doorway, Natalie could see them unfolding chairs and propping sheet music on metal stands, an elderly foursome that she and Doug had had constant trouble working with. They didn't even return texts. Natalie hoped they wouldn't be as clueless when it came to the program she and Doug had put together. Natalie had wanted music playing while the guests began to gather, and during rehearsal, the quartet seemed uncertain about the right time to start.

Natalie took a step outdoors, Claudia behind her, still protesting.

Mellow afternoon light lay over the grounds. Natalie and Doug had decided to forego an evening ceremony because they wanted to get an

early start the next morning. Well, Doug did anyway. He'd given Natalie a bunch of details about the route they'd be taking and why leaving first thing mattered. When Natalie suggested pushing their honeymoon back a day—the idea of twenty-four unscheduled hours to lounge around the inn alone together feeling like the height of luxury—Doug had balked, saying that honeymoons always started the day after the wedding. Natalie wasn't sure if that was Doug sticking to time-honed ritual again, or if he was just eager to get going. Their honeymoon destination had been his idea after all.

A trellised gazebo stood in the midst of the meadow, awaiting the moment when Natalie and Doug would say their vows. Was Doug inside it already? Flowers draped the entrance, making it hard to see. An aisle had been mown between the tall, waving meadow grasses, and Natalie's father stood at one end, shifting from foot to foot as if he wasn't quite clear about his role in all this. None of the other members of the wedding party had come down from the inn yet.

Claudia shielded her eyes, squinting. "That's definitely them."

Sunlight shone right into Natalie's face, and she could hardly see. She visored her eyes, moving closer. Mark and Brett presented an odd sight, huddled together, wearing shorts and ratty tees. Natalie supposed men didn't need as much time to get ready, but this was cutting it close even so.

The two did appear to be arguing, their mouths open as they gesticulated with their hands, although their voices weren't loud enough to carry.

Doug emerged from the gazebo, squinting out at the field, and Natalie's heart leapt inside her. Her fiancé looked so stunningly handsome in his wedding garb—linen pants and a broadcloth coat, a single rosebud at his breast—that the sight momentarily distracted her from whatever might be taking place in the field.

Doug began to cross the meadow, tall flowers tickling at his legs. It could've been a photo shoot in a magazine, except for the expression of anger plastered across her fiancé's face. He joined his friends in the

adjacent field while Natalie took another step toward it. All three guys became embroiled in discussion, Doug's gestures also effusive. One of his hands was balled into a fist, the other raised and outturned as if in protest.

Protest over what? Claudia was still trailing her, and Natalie shot her sister a brief look of confusion before hurrying forward on her own.

Mark withdrew a phone from his pocket and swiped his thumb across the screen, frowning. He shook the device as he walked in a circle, holding it up toward the sky.

Cell signal was spotty in this little country town. It would be nonexistent where Natalie and Doug were headed on their honeymoon tomorrow.

All three guys turned around at the same time to face the road. It lay, one lane and spooling, barricaded on its opposite side by a thin strip of forest. A dark, late-model sedan came gliding along the asphalt, like a shark slicing through the gray-black sea.

Natalie picked up her skirts, fighting to close the distance between herself and Doug.

Her fiancé's voice became audible. "No way. Not now."

A few early guests must have emerged and caught sight of Natalie; from behind she could hear whispered *oohs* and *aahs* gathering force like a wind. She felt her freshly manicured nails dig into her palms as her hands formed panicked fists.

Natalie hurried past the last of the prettily arrayed chairs and into the field, her path sending her across a portion of aisle.

The string quartet launched into the preamble Natalie and Doug had selected to play before the processional began. Natalie knew they should have hired someone else. Notes from Beethoven's Ninth soared toward a cloudless blue lid of sky. Triggered by the strains of music, Natalie's father raised his head and took a few halting steps.

Claudia went running over, stretching out an arm to stop their dad, whose glossy shoes caught a loose clod of earth. He tripped, righting himself as he looked around for Natalie in the dazzling sunlight. Claudia

dashed forward, holding up her dress, and signaling the musicians to stop with a guillotine motion to her neck.

The instruments abruptly cut off.

Mark and Brett and Doug all looked up at once with identical expressions on their faces. As if they'd been suddenly jarred out of whatever had been preoccupying them, jolted back to the here and now. They grew flustered, brushing at their clothes, edging sideways until they were out of sight of Natalie's father, the musicians, and whichever guests had begun to assemble.

At a distance, Natalie followed their progress across the field.

Mark began shaking his phone as if a small animal had latched itself onto his hand. He swiped at the screen, a goggle of dismay distorting his features.

Natalie's skirts tangled, and she came to a stop.

The *thunk* of twin car doors could be heard from the road. Two men emerged from the vehicle, dressed in cheap, slick suits and square-toed boots, which chewed up the field as the men began crossing it.

Mark and Brett exchanged looks, while Doug gave them a merciless glare.

The two men were heading straight for them. One was brick-faced with sullen features, mottled, ruddy skin, and an elongated head. The other seemed to have a handicap. The heel on his left boot was a good three inches higher than the one on the right, and he walked with a plodding, relentless hitch in his step. The first man broke into a jog as his friend struggled to keep up.

"Mark—" Doug warned. He didn't appear to have noticed Natalie, now standing a little ways behind him.

His groomsmen pivoted in the direction of the two men, leaving the bower of blossoms, partially trod-upon aisle, and thankfully still-empty chairs. Mark and Brett walked casually toward the road, at a slightly faster clip than a stroll. When they reached the men in a broad sweep

of grass, Mark and Brett sandwiched the pair, guiding them away from where the festivities were set to begin.

Natalie spun in place, fighting to understand what had just happened.

Claudia could be heard shushing their father: “I don’t know, Dad. I’ll find out.”

Doug headed back toward the gazebo, the look on his face the antithesis of a party: a poisonous brew of knit eyebrows and carved-out hollows in his cheeks forged by clenching his jaw.

Natalie reached out to him. “Doug?”

He looked surprised to see her there, his vision clouded.

Then his face folded. “Did you see those screwups?” he asked, voice so low and thunderous that Natalie had trouble making out what he’d said. “They ruined our day—”

“Doug, no!” Natalie interrupted. She felt a flicker of fear. Things couldn’t be ruined as easily as that. It didn’t matter who those men were, or what connection they had to Mark and Brett. Anything like that was peripheral, outside the confines of the union she and Doug were about to enter into. Natalie took her fiancé’s face between her hands. His cheeks felt heated, fiery. “No,” she repeated. “It’s going to be perfect.”

Doug looked down, as if only now truly parsing her presence.

“All that matters is us,” Natalie whispered, holding his gaze.

Gone were the music, those men, the guests who would soon be getting situated in their seats. Natalie’s sister, just itching to fix whatever had happened, and their father, ambling about and bewildered. Nothing and nobody existed except for Natalie and Doug. Amber late-day light shone down, enveloping them in their own golden halo.

Natalie rose on tiptoes, unsteady in her heels, and Doug caught her, one arm upon the small of her back, strong enough to keep her from falling.

Then he learned over, just an inch or two, and they looked into each other’s eyes. Natalie had to blink from the sheer overwhelm of their stare. Passion had always been a spark in dry grass between them,

instantaneously ignited. Yearning, reaching, Natalie made up the difference between their two bodies until she could brush Doug's mouth with her own. It was fevered like the rest of him, and tasted of anger.

Doug caught her lips between his own, kissing back hard, biting her almost. Natalie moaned, the sound lost to all the space around them. She drank Doug in, a bloodletting only she could absorb. Doug pulled her closer, flattening her breasts against his broad chest until Natalie could no longer tell where he ended and she began.

There was a stirring from behind, and dazed, Natalie and Doug parted.

The pastor hurried toward them.

"Hey, I think you folks might be jumping the gun," he said, settling himself into place at the gazebo and straightening his tie. "The wedding hasn't even started yet."

CHAPTER THREE

Best wedding kiss ever Mia texted after the long, boring ceremony was finally over. She looked down in frustration at the line that stopped halfway across the screen. Five words appeared: *Message could not be delivered.*

She bit her lip, and felt her annoyance ease a little. Mia's braces had just been taken off last week—she'd begged the ortho to make sure it happened in time for her aunt's wedding—and the silky feel of her teeth amazed her every time.

Mia stuffed her useless phone into the clutch her mother had loaned her. Aunt Nat and Uncle Doug were running back down the aisle, a shower of rose petals tossed at their heads. Mia got up and reached into the basket placed at the end of each row of seats so that she could throw a handful. A breeze lifted the velvet scallops and scattered them across the grass. Pretty. Mia decided to do the same thing if she ever got married.

What were you supposed to do at a wedding after the wedding part ended? Eat, of course, and dance, but neither seemed to be an option just

yet. If her dad were here, she'd at least have someone to talk to, but again, not an option. Mia decided to go in search of her mother and grandfather.

They were nowhere to be found. Not standing in the field with the other clumps of guests, or near the little structure where the ceremony took place. Mia figured her grandfather must've had some need he couldn't figure out on his own—maybe he wanted a drink, or a phone that actually worked—and her mom was attending to it. That was kind of her mom's way, taking care of everything for everybody, whether they wanted her to or not. Although there were plenty of drinks right here, Mia observed, as she wandered around in the bright sunshine. A waiter passed by, tray held high above his shoulder, and Mia reached for a glass of champagne.

The waiter looked down as she took it. "You of age?"

He looked pretty young himself. Cute too. "Everybody's of age today, cowboy," Mia replied, then danced off with the glass tipping in her hand.

She decided to go ditch her phone. If she had it on her, she would only try to use it, and that was a losing battle. Guests looked down and smiled as Mia tripped past. Her borrowed shoes weren't easy to walk in. Mia didn't recognize any of these people, and still couldn't find a member of her family. Actually, she thought she saw one person who might be related—distantly—in part because he saw fit to snatch the nearly full glass out of her hand. Mia didn't really care. Champagne tasted sour, plus she was already feeling a little fuzzy in the head.

After making a quick pit stop at her room, Mia came back out of the hotel and finally spotted her aunt and uncle. They were standing beside a tree with leaves partially cloaking them, kissing in a way that made Mia's cheeks burn. She looked away, and when she took a second glance, they had stepped deeper in between the branches, although they could still be overheard.

"Are we going to talk about what happened?" Aunt Nat asked.

Silence, until Mia wondered if they were kissing again, but then

Uncle Doug spoke. “You don’t have to worry about it. Call it a blast from the past.”

Mia crept closer to the tree.

“Mark and Brett’s pasts, you mean?” Aunt Nat asked.

They were talking about the two hot groomsmen, but other than that, Mia couldn’t make sense of a single word. Still, she did know that a conversation this tense didn’t belong on your wedding day, and her skin began to prickle. Her mom and dad used to sound like this. Before they stopped talking to each other at all.

She should leave, go in search of her mom, but Mia couldn’t bring herself to turn away from the tree. Far across the lawn arose a sudden plume of laughter, glasses clinking, the buzz of a party really getting started. The dull, old-timey musicians had left, and now a DJ was playing something by some hip band.

“Okay, I get it,” Aunt Nat said after a pause. “They’re your friends, you’re protective of them. But can you at least tell me why you got so ticked off?”

Mia frowned. She knew something must’ve happened before she came down from the hotel—her mom had been all rustled and upset as she took her place at the head of the aisle, plus Uncle Doug’s groomsmen had almost been late, still adjusting their ties when they appeared—but Mia herself hadn’t been there to see whatever it was. She was always missing out on stuff other people were right in the middle of.

“Do you?” Uncle Doug said.

“What?” Aunt Nat responded.

“Get it,” Uncle Doug said.

“What?” Aunt Nat asked again.

“Come on, Nat,” Uncle Doug said, and though his voice sounded gentle, something in it warned Mia that what he was about to say wouldn’t be. “We both know that friends haven’t exactly been your strong suit in life.”

There was a silence. Something in Mia's chest plopped with hurt for her aunt.

She began to back away. Fast, almost falling in her loaner shoes. She shouldn't have been here in the first place. The kissing had been private, not for anybody else's eyes, but this was secret in a different way altogether. No wonder her parents were getting divorced. If this was what marriage was like, then Mia would skip it completely, even if the rose petal part had been nice.

But then Aunt Nat answered, cool and strong. "Don't turn this around on me, Doug. I have a right to ask. Who were those men?"

Mia practically let out a cheer.

Uncle Doug snorted. "You mean Lefty and his partner?"

"Doug!" Aunt Nat said, protesting and laughing at the same time. "Way to make fun of the handicapped guy. He had a *limp*. That isn't what made him shady."

Feeling better somehow, Mia began to drift in the direction of the band. Maybe she'd get another glass of champagne, drink the whole thing this time. The taste had become less gross on her tongue, like chilled honey and lemon.

But then Uncle Doug spoke again. "Shady," he repeated. "Look, Mark and Brett are big boys. They can handle things on their own." A second or two ticked by. "I'll tell you more about it. Just not today, okay?" A pause and he added, "Today is for us."

Mia saw her aunt and uncle's bodies merge behind the leafy boughs before she finally turned away for real, racing off across the lawn.



The wedding had begun to wind down—outdoor dinner eaten, dances danced, and speeches made—before Mia realized she'd barely gotten to see her mother all night. She'd caught glimpses of her flitting form,

ducking here, pausing there. Everything had been such a bustle, her mom seeing to a zillion tasks and demands, but as the guests began to head over to the pool or the bar, Mia decided she'd better return to their shared room.

She passed a waiter clearing empty plates and glasses from a long plank table. Another waiter dipped a taper into a tub strewn with flowers, igniting a flame for the lingering partygoers still milling around. Twinkling candles had been scattered all over, even though it wasn't full dark yet. Night was descending in that slow, lazy way it did in summer, as if it might decide never to arrive.

A path wound through the grounds, forming a shortcut to the steps at the front of the hotel. Mia jogged left to take it, her heels sinking into soft dirt. Mountains rose like hooded shoulders, making Mia feel claustrophobic, like they could close in around her at any second. She missed the towering skyscrapers back home in New York, fixed in place by foundations and cement.

Shouts and calls arose from the pool area and floodlit tennis courts, too distant to provide much comfort. Mia had been unprepared for how spooky it would feel out here alone in the blue half-light of evening. The moon hadn't yet risen, and there were no stars. Mia went to fish out her cell phone, then remembered she didn't have it on her. She felt like she'd been suddenly paralyzed or struck blind. What was she supposed to do with her hands and eyes without a phone? She sped up, grasses nipping at her bare legs. Some kind of nocturnal bird took flight with a great rush of wings.

Mia hurried on. The parking lot lay between her and the hotel, and the sight of the cars was somehow reassuring, so man-made and of this world. Nature by itself was intimidating. Not for the first time, Mia wondered why Aunt Nat and Uncle Doug had chosen to get married in the country versus someplace romantic like a castle in Europe or on a beach. She stepped out of the field, grateful for the feel of asphalt beneath her feet.

Mia ran past the first row of cars, swatting at a bug that landed on her neck. Her hand came away bloody, and she looked down at it with distaste. She'd have to wait to find a sink at the hotel; she couldn't very well wipe off her hand on her fancy dress. Luckily, the building was visible now, casting its shadow across the hunched vehicles. She rounded a corner and came upon two people standing on either side of a car.

"Hey there."

Mia stopped in place, facing Uncle Doug's friends, the ones who'd been in the wedding. They were both so hot, they made the cute waiter look ugly.

"Hi," Mia said shyly. Just the one word caused her cheeks to fire. No lines about cowboys coming out of her now. "What's up?" she added stupidly.

The first friend—she was pretty sure his name was Mark—gave a hard tug on a rope, making muscles ripple beneath his rolled-up sleeves.

Mia only registered then that there must be a reason they were here at the car. She felt like she was drugged—the lingering effects of the champagne maybe—as she lifted her head and spotted a long boat on the roof. It was a beautiful contraption, made out of some kind of highly polished wood. Mia had never seen anything like it. Of course, it wasn't like she went around boating all the time.

Both guys followed her gaze. Then the one named Mark explained, "Got to make sure tomorrow gets off to a good start."

His words brought back a bite of memory. Not only had Aunt Nat decided to get married way up here, she was also heading into the woods for her honeymoon. Again, Hawaii or Paris would've been way better choices as far as Mia was concerned. No matter where Aunt Nat went, though, it still meant that Mia would be stuck all alone in the city for the next week, her friends' schedules booked up with camps and sports and get-a-head-start-on-school programs. Mia's parents were no use in the company department these days. Aunt Nat was all she had.

The hot guys were looking at her, their eyes glinting in the night.

Mia studied the top of the car again, trying to come up with something to say. “Nice boat.” Was that a canoe? Or a kayak?

The second guy looked at Mark. Brett? Derek? He had a hot guy’s name.

“Wedding present,” he explained.

Mark chuckled, giving Brett-slash-Derek a playful slug on the arm. “Groomsmen,” he added. “It ain’t all about the bachelor party and chicks with whipped cream.”

Mia felt her face flare again. Not because of what Mark had said, but because he was staring right at her. Mia dropped her eyes, but she could tell that Mark kept right on looking. She lifted her gaze, and he smiled. Mia smiled hesitantly back.

“Hey,” he said again, walking around the car in her direction. He stopped within a foot or so of her, close enough that she could sniff faint sweat on his body, along with an overlay of clean deodorant. He smelled like a man. “Pretty dress.”

“Thanks.” Her face must be a mask of red by now. She could feel it, like paint. Thank God she’d gotten her braces taken off.

Mark held her eyes with his. “I’m not so sure it’s a good idea for you to be out here all by yourself.” He took a look around the shadowed lot and gave a mock shiver.

That made her nerves loosen their grip. “I think I can handle it,” she retorted.

Mark looked down at her again. Droopy eyes that said he was thinking way more than he ever would say, skin so smooth it gleamed. Just a bristle of hair on his chin, but still, a man’s growth, not a boy’s. He was more gorgeous than any actor. Mia cursed her comatose phone for like the thousandth time that night. She was missing the selfie that would’ve redeemed her whole summer, made every girl in school jealous next year.

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” Mark said, and his voice became

genuinely caring. “It’s whatever else is out here.” Another look traded with his friend. “Can I walk you back to the inn?”

It wasn’t like the hotel was far away, but still, Mia felt her whole body begin to tingle. Alone time with the legit hot guy. She cocked her head up at him, taking a step forward. Mark shot one more look over his shoulder, then settled a hand lightly on her waist, igniting a strip of flame. Mia wasn’t sure she’d be able to walk. She didn’t know if he could sense the effect he was having, but Mark steered her gently out of the parking lot, headed in the direction of the building.

The other guy called, “Tell Doug good night from me,” before rising on the soles of his shoes and leaning over the car.

CHAPTER FOUR

Natalie stood on tiptoes, T-shirt riding up and exposing her stomach to the predawn chill. She was trying to make sure their new canoe was lashed on securely, but if it didn't warm up soon, she was going to have to stop and dig her fleece out of her pack.

Their wedding gift from Mark and Brett was a study in polished woods, lying like a glossy brown beetle on the roof of the car. Natalie went higher on her toes, reaching to stroke the canoe's smooth finish. In just a few hours, this vessel would become of the utmost importance: Natalie and Doug's primary mode of transport as they paddled through the most untouched stretch of wilderness the Adirondacks had to offer.

Doug and his mother came walking down from the inn, Doug holding on to his mom as if she were a brimming glass, about to spill. Gail Larson wasn't exactly the maternal type—in fact, Doug seemed more inclined to protect her than the reverse—but still, Natalie watched their progression with a pang of jealousy.

Her mother-in-law came to a stop just before the parking lot. "I think

I'll say my goodbyes to you now," she said. "It's a bit early for me. I'd like to get some more rest."

Natalie stepped forward for an embrace, Gail hugging back weakly.

"Sure you can make it okay on your own, Mom?" Doug asked.

Gail was already turning to go, picking her way across the grasses growing at the edge of the lot. She lifted her hand in a small wave.

Doug came over, did a couple of things with the ties around the canoe and the roof rack on which it lay, and suddenly the boat didn't budge so much as an inch. Doug turned and wrapped his arms around Natalie's waist. "Ready to go?"

She settled into his embrace, grateful for the transfer of warmth from her husband. *Her husband*. Doug's ability to see a problem and fix it, the way he had of setting a course and steering things, gave Natalie the feeling that she had finally come home. She grinned, nodding assent. "As ready as I'll ever be." The words came out darker than she had intended. Natalie suppressed a flicker of apprehension, focusing on the sensation of her husband's firm, unwavering hold.

Mark and Brett had volunteered to bring Natalie and Doug to their put-in spot on the lake. This was to be a somewhat elaborate endeavor, requiring two cars. After dropping them off, Mark and Brett would drive separately to the spot where Natalie and Doug were going to emerge from the woods just over a week from now. They would leave Doug's car there before driving together in Brett's back to the city.

Doug's groomsmen had really stepped up, Natalie reflected, despite whatever weirdness had gone on before the wedding. They'd just barely made it into the processional on time, but any lingering resentment on Natalie's part was eased when Claudia told her that Mark had escorted Mia back to her room last night after the girl had gotten turned around on the sprawling grounds, returning her red-faced and giggling.

It had turned out to be a wonderful celebration in the end.

Doug loosened his arms, letting Natalie out of his grasp, and walked

around to the rear of the car. It was Mark and Brett's turn to emerge from the inn, yawning and sleep-drugged, scrubbing at their faces as they lugged along suitcases and garment bags.

They'd all partied pretty hard last night, and Mark and Brett looked as tired as Natalie felt. Given the place she and Doug were headed, such a state seemed not only unwise, but potentially dangerous. They needed their wits sharpened, to be on the lookout for things. What kind of trip had they planned for their honeymoon? Natalie wondered suddenly. A period of time that was supposed to be spent relaxing and simply enjoying each other, but would instead require navigating dense reaches of forest, grappling with equipment, and providing for themselves.

It was too late for such thoughts, although a small shudder took hold of her. Here in the mountains, the sun hadn't yet penetrated the sky, and the morning remained tin-colored, chilly for July. Back home in the city, the heat would already be mounting its assault on the day.

"Everyone feeling good?" Mark shouted as he trudged across the lot, Brett following at a dawdle. "A hangover is what every backcountry trip should start out on."

"Let's get this show on the road," Doug called out, clearly impatient. He held up his phone. "You have the location in your GPS? Our phones won't work up there."

"They barely work here either. We've been kicking it old-school for three days," Mark called back. "That's why I stopped at a gas station and bought this." He held out a wedge of paper, whose neat accordion folds would do nothing, Natalie knew, to assist her in making their way. She and maps spoke a different language.

When they had begun to plan this trip, Doug had asked Natalie if she was sure she would be up for it. She'd never been a big outdoor-person, although Doug had taken her rafting and they'd camped out a few times. Still, Doug had voiced concern that Natalie couldn't survive a whole week without creature comforts. Had it been pride—a need to

prove herself to her then-future husband—that had gotten Natalie into this mess?

Not a mess, she chided. In fact, it was the ultimate in romance: two people on their own in nature at the start of their lives together. Living life pared back to basics. *Think about it*, Doug had said when he first proposed the idea. *Skinny-dipping. Sleeping beneath the stars. I don't want some waiter coming up and taking our drink orders*, he'd concluded. *I just want you.*

We can always order the daiquiris back home, Natalie had joked, although no self-respecting New York City bar had blended a daiquiri in a decade, and Natalie had actually been looking forward to the lack of affectation that would come with a good, old-fashioned stay at a tropical resort.

But Doug had said, “That’s the future Mrs. Larson,” in a tone of such approval—he might as well have said, *That’s my girl*—that Natalie was helpless before it. Even as she also looked down at herself with distaste, observing her tendency to acquiesce, go along with whatever Doug wanted.

It’s not just that you don’t have time for us anymore, Eva and Val had once told her. *It’s like you don’t even wish you did*. No wonder Natalie had had to dig up bridesmaids from the buried time capsule that was college. Meeting Doug, the prospect of their marriage, had woven a cocoon around the two of them, protective, but also isolating and alone.

As soon as Natalie had approved the honeymoon, Doug got right to work, purchasing gear and hiring a guide to plan out their route. And now they were ready to embark, too late for second thoughts or regret.

Natalie shivered, her arms sandpapery with gooseflesh. A momentary signal blip allowed her phone to ding an alert, and she grabbed for the device. Before climbing out of bed this morning, Doug still asleep beside her, Natalie had uploaded a stream of photos from last night—or tried to. They must’ve finally appeared. She glanced down

at the screen, hoping for a comment from the ashes of her friendships with Val and Eva.

Not even a *like*.

A few months ago, Natalie had begun a position in medical HR, recommended to the head of the department by her sister, who was a nurse in the same healthcare system. She hadn't grown close with anyone at her new job yet, and none of her coworkers had been able to make the trip up for the wedding, although one had texted sorry I missed such a fun night beneath a selfie of Natalie and her bridesmaids on the dance floor.

Natalie suspected those college friendships were going to dwindle away again, even though they'd all promised, sloppily, drunkenly to keep in better touch.

Would it be just her and Doug from now on? On the river, and in life?

Another alert sounded. Mia, probably benefiting from the same lift in signal, had texted u were the most beautiful bride along with six exclamation points. Natalie felt a warming flash of love. Natalie had been more than a sister to Claudia, a trial daughter almost, and in much the same way, Mia felt like more than a niece to Natalie.

She noticed Doug staring at her, a smile on his face that looked loving, excited, and nervous, all at once. He mouthed a *let's go*, and Natalie shoved her phone into her pocket as she hurried over to the car.

She paused.

She could at least get her fleece out of her pack. She might've acceded all thoughts and preferences of her own when it came to this honeymoon, but she didn't have to be cold, damn it.

"Just a sec," she said to Doug, hoping that chattering teeth didn't cause her voice to tremble. "I need to get something first. It's freezing out here."

She flipped open the trunk, and had just begun to dig through the contents of her pack, when a shout assailed her.

“Aunt Nat, don’t go!” The voice was heaving, out of breath. “Don’t leave yet!”

Natalie spun around to see her niece flying down the inn’s drive, all overlong legs and waving arms. Claudia followed in Mia’s churned-up path, and their father brought up the rear, blinking and stumbling under the load of bags he carried, which prevented him from joining the scrum Natalie and Mia and Claudia formed as they all hugged goodbye.

The sun broke like an egg over the horizon, rendering the entire world a blushing, new-bride pink.

CHAPTER FIVE

In hindsight, Kurt Pierson wished he'd had some idea of his location when he went into the river. That way he could've climbed back up and pillaged the left-behinds of their disbanded group. Tools, gear, even the chickens would've helped him begin some sort of subsistence living, although Kurt quickly came to understand that he would've slaughtered every last one of those birds, rather than wait for them to lay eggs. The hunger that attacked when you didn't have a single bite to eat was like a kind of madness.

That had been two years ago, give or take—Kurt had no access to a calendar—but the memory of his suffering was as acute as if he were still experiencing it.

His belly had been empty, gnawed apart by a thousand teeth, although his head was stuffed full of knowledge. The people with whom he'd come into these woods, intent on starting some sort of utopia, and armed with strategies for wilderness survival, had been forced to admit failure. The starry-eyed group of philosophers had met online, yearning

after a mythical Walden, but didn't even last one season, leaving Kurt to carry out their plan by himself in the woods. Doing anything alone was its own special brand of hell to Kurt, but for once in his life, solitude had been the least crushing of his burdens.

His very ability to survive was in jeopardy.

During those initial months, hunger undermined what had always been Kurt's greatest asset: his mind. So he'd doubled down, dousing himself with cold creek water whenever wooziness took hold, locating vines to build a snare as he'd been shown. When he couldn't tie the green strands tightly enough, he sacrificed a pair of laces from one of his boots, letting the lip flap around his ankle as he strode off to hide in a makeshift blind.

By then it was fall, the carnival of color on the trees allowing for a fairly accurate estimate of the passage of time. A month or more since he'd separated from his group. He had lost perhaps twenty pounds, he figured, ten percent of his body weight.

The first animal he trapped—a chipmunk or possibly a mole, something small and brown and skittering—was so close to life that had Kurt released it, it would've scampered away. Instead, Kurt pounded it into a mash with a rock, his arm growing more feeble with every strike, before he ate the creature raw, spitting out bits of fur. Without a single match, Kurt didn't have any way to cook his kill.

Because of how things ended, Kurt had chosen not to accompany his group out of the wilderness. Just call it a loss, and return to civilization? He couldn't do that; he suspected what would await him there. Still, despite having mined his companions for knowledge, Kurt was finding that theoretical understanding stood far apart from actual application. Before too much time had passed, life proved itself sufficiently difficult that he began to consider an exit strategy.

After snaring the chipmunk, he decided that if ever he was going to have the vigor to trek out of the woods, this would be the time. It took a

full day of walking, but eventually Kurt came to a trail and followed the path to its outlet. There he jumped back, concealing himself behind a tree, hoping that his hunger-addled sight had been wrong. Kurt snaked back through this more trafficked region of the forest to find a second winding path. Then a third. One trail after another, in a kaleidoscopic whirl, expending calories he couldn't spare only to confirm what he'd already guessed would be true.

Posters were tacked up at every trailhead, each bearing a recent photograph of Kurt, along with two that had been doctored to show what he would look like with longer hair and a beard. Blocky letters demanded *Have you seen this man?* Surely they'd barnstormed the surrounding towns too.

Kurt Pierson was a badly wanted man, and having emerged, dripping and reborn from that river, he had to confront the facts. If he couldn't make a life for himself in this wilderness, then he would spend the rest of it in a prison cell.

Things had gone wrong for their troupe in the woods, yet only Kurt had acted, and if he slunk back to the real world as his compatriots had, he would be leaving to face murder charges. He owed the fact that he hadn't yet been captured—for surely his former group members had given him up without a qualm—to the impenetrable density of this region, the low likelihood of locating a target within it.

That first fall and winter, staying alive was Kurt's only goal. He made do with dry, crackly leaves spread across the bare ground during the remaining clear days, then boughs strapped to the trunk of a tree with pond grasses to keep out the autumnal rains, and a snow cave forged after the first blizzard.

The bout of hunger Kurt experienced once everything froze made the one that had hit before he'd trapped the chipmunk seem akin to skipping a midday snack. He could hardly stagger to his feet in the mornings; during the nights, his body contorted itself into the shape of a fetus.

There wasn't a single animal to snare, no grasses to suck green juices from before spitting out a rough mat of stems. The snows came unceasingly, without the sky pausing to catch its breath. The worst moment arrived when, while gnawing at his nails, Kurt accidentally bit a piece of flesh off the tip of his finger. He chewed and swallowed it, savoring the morsel. A plan occurred, making sense in the state he was in. He would cannibalize himself until there was no more of him to be had.

If an off-season hunter hadn't arrived, Kurt would've died that day or the next. Alerted by the clap of gunfire through the silent snow, Kurt first trudged, then fell to his knees and crawled, winding up near the hunter who was dressing his illegal kill.

Kurt crouched, undetected, beneath an overhang of branches until the hunter left. Then he emerged to scoop up each clump of innards left steaming on the snow. Kurt parceled them out, knowing he would throw everything up if he ate it at once. He consumed the leavings like bloody ice pops until they ran out some days later, at which point Kurt was spurred onto his feet again for a second shamble through the woods.

If he'd had the energy, he would've jeered at himself for how little distance he had to cover in order to change his destiny. An abandoned ranger's cabin had stood nearby in a thicket all along. The tiny structure was windowless and falling down, but a few items—tinned food and kitchen implements mostly—had been left behind. These and some Swiss-cheesed wool blankets enabled Kurt to endure long enough for spring to poke its mossy snout out of the ground. At that point, snow-melt collapsed the cabin he'd called home for the last days, weeks, months—he had little idea of time by then—and Kurt barely crawled out in time to avoid being crushed.

He was so shrunken and frail that he lay blinking on the wettened soil, not registering for a while that a deer, also winter weakened, had stumbled into the trap Kurt had never dismantled, and which was now exposed by receding snows.

Kurt knelt beside the animal, gnawing at its hide until he bore down to a heated swath of flesh. He tore a hunk off the deer's body with his teeth while it still lay expiring, and as the deer's life ran out, Kurt felt his own begin to return.

Spring turned out to be a lazy man's banquet: all those helpless, mewling young. Kurt feasted on minute birds in their nests, baby gophers that he consumed in one bite, even a litter of bobcats. He had to kill the mother when she appeared—more feasting—but by that time he'd pilfered a machete in addition to other essentials from the first backcountry hiker of the season, who had strayed too close to Kurt's lair.

The hiker returned from a dunk in the creek to find his pack lighter, thinned out, and as he stomped off—cursing about there being no place left where a man could be alone anymore, and since when did backpackers steal from each other—a nearly forgotten hunger awakened in Kurt.

He had always fueled himself, satisfied the deepest portion of his appetite, with succor derived from other people. That was why he'd chosen to enter the woods in the first place—what better source of study than living in a small pack of people utterly dependent upon one another? How Kurt had enjoyed those initial days spent together, a time of intimate wonder during which he'd borne witness to the ways in which a flock of differing folks adapted to having their entire lives dismantled, and adjusted to a life devoid of possessions and creature comforts.

It was something Kurt had come to miss back home: that close surveillance of others. Kurt's son was getting older, eleven then, less needy and dependent. Bizarrely enough, he'd begun to express an inclination to spend time on his own. That one had come out of nowhere, and Kurt had been ill-prepared for it. In addition, his wife had filed for divorce, saying she'd always felt held at a distance by Kurt, a claim that was patently absurd. Kurt had never observed anyone as deeply as he had his wife. The chance to live in the sort of proximity that building a

new society would require served to appease Kurt, allowed him to get past the loss of his family.

Exposing people's most intimate aspects, sucking on their skinned meat as he did the wildlife that were restoring him to health, gave Kurt a depth of satisfaction, one that made him pity men who didn't have the same. And with the physical deprivations of winter relieved, Kurt needed his other form of nutrition more desperately than ever. He was alone out here. No wife, nor son, not one member of the group with whom he had originally come to these woods.

Why had he not thought to take the hiker along with the pickings of his pack?

The more terrain Kurt covered, the greater his risk of discovery. It'd be safer to remain still, wait for somebody else to come along.

In this new life of his, Kurt didn't have a good way of marking time, and granularity finer than big chunks of months, the passing of the seasons, eluded him, an artifact of the world he had lost. Rain had washed clean the char marks Kurt had slashed onto a boulder for a rudimentary calendar, and the cabin wall he'd carved a tally into during the winter collapsed. But as the days began, undeniably, to pile up, Kurt started fearing that another hiker might never venture this far off the beaten path, into this particular pocket of wilderness.

Spring had turned to the flesh of his first full summer before he was given an opportunity. A female hiker, making her lone way through the woods, businesslike and methodical as she traversed the difficult terrain. She stopped and spoke when Kurt approached her, not unwary—nowhere near as blithely unaware as the utopians had been—although Kurt did catch the faintest hint of a smile beginning to bloom on her face while they conversed.

For a few blissful minutes, the woods held the prospect of becoming the Brigadoon Kurt's fellow woodsmen had imagined but failed to create. Bushes clustered with berries, a laughing, crystalline stream,

the crackle of a freshly lit fire—all should've combined to seduce Kurt's new companion, the source of lasting study he needed to procure lest he perish from loneliness.

Although Kurt was typically able to predict moods, thoughts, and behaviors in others with unerring accuracy, he hadn't anticipated how fiercely this woman would try to leave. How much of a fight she'd put up.

Or what he would have to do to stop her.

During the yawning emptiness of the days to come, Kurt had ample opportunity to debrief, rehash, figure out what had gone so terribly wrong.

He had tried to keep the hiker here by dint of brute force, instead of relying on what had always been his truest skill set, his special talent. Which was digging out—like a dentist did rot in a tooth—the weak, sore spots people had, then positioning himself to fill them. That kind of finesse had nearly been lost to starvation and cold, but it could be regained. And although such maneuvering took time, time was all Kurt had now.

When next somebody came along, he would be prepared to make them stay.