Chapter One

Ayla

frustrated.

Packing my backpack, I was excited to get out into nature this weekend. It's been one hell of a week, and I just needed a moment to breathe. I also needed to get my article done. This was also a work trip, but taking pictures of nature never felt like work to me.

I'm trying to make it as a freelance writer and photographer so I can quit my day job and just travel the world. After the sudden death of my mother, this place never felt like home. Deep down I was hoping my father would come back into my life, but it's been four years and I've never seen him.

My mom died in a car accident four years ago, just after my 15th birthday. And I've been on my own ever since. Neither my mom nor father had any family that I knew about, so it was me and my blue-nose bully named Bluey. I moved out of my father's house right after the accident, not that he was ever there, and I've been on my own. Well, I had to be in foster care but I was still on my own living in a stranger's house.

I didn't get Bluey until after I could afford a place of my own, which took a few years as I

was nishing school. But I did it. I graduated and started working at a law rm as a receptionist. I've been there for over a year now and I could buy a small house. Then I adopted Bluey. And it's just been her and me against the world.

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Now if only I could get my foot in the door of being a writer. I'd be able to make my own hours and spend more time in nature with Bluey. But for now, the rm pays the bills, and I don't hate it. It's just not something that I love.

When I was throwing my bags in the back of my vehicle, my phone rang, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I wonder who that could be?" I asked out loud, talking to Bluey. I already knew who it was

before I pulled my phone from my pocket, and saw his name on the screen.

"Babe, I'm just leaving now. Bluey and I will be there in 10 minutes to pick you up." I answered the phone.

"Ayla, I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make it this weekend. Something came up at work and I can't miss it." Jordan said.

"Jordan, you promised. And this is the fth time you've canceled on me." I told him,

"I know, and I'm sorry, but I can't leave, baby. You know I would be there if I could." He said, and I sighed.

"Fine," I breathed out. I wouldn't argue with him. Honestly, I don't even know why I'm still with him.

"Ayla, don't be like that. We will make plans when you get back. But I have to go." He said

before ending the call. Pulling the phone from my ear, I stared at the screen before letting

out a sigh.

"I guess it's just you and me this weekend," I told Bluey, closing the back hatch of my vehicle. Bluey jumped into her seat when I opened the door on the passenger side. I

buckled her in before hopping into the driver's seat.

back before the end of the weekend.

Sunday.

him, but I couldn't place it.

she was with me.

like he was staring into my soul.

even his deep voice was incredibly sexy.

a ride. And I would be okay with that.

out her water dish and lled it up for her.

At least she brought me one.

head in my lap.

attractive stranger.

halfway to the falls before nightfall." I told her while turning on my vehicle and the SUV purred to life. Bluey curled herself into a ball, resting her head on the console.

After picking up a much-needed coffee, I turned onto the highway to start the two-hour

journey out of the city and into the nearby mountain range. This drive was always

"Let's get a coffee and hit the road. We need to get there in enough time to at least make it

Resting my hand on Bluey's head, I let out a sigh. I don't even know why I even bother with dating or relationships. They all seem to end the same. Jordan and I have been dating for almost a year and whenever I think we are going strong, he cancels, or he picks a ght with me. Sure, he's hot with dirty blonde hair and blue eyes. And he has an impressive body, but

you'd think after being together for almost a year, I would feel love for him. I like him, but I

know I don't love him. He's just lling the boyfriend's void for now and that's not fair. I think

we need to have a long talk about where our relationship is going when I get back home on

beautiful, and I loved being on the open road. I took the day off so I could get out there and

Finally, pulling off the highway, we made our way down a dirt road to where we would start our journey up to the waterfalls. Going up the mountain takes more time than coming back down, so we will camp on our way up and then spend the night at the falls before heading back down. I've done this hike before, but never at this time of year and this is private property, so I had to wait for permission. Not that Jim wouldn't grant me access. He's been great when I needed new photos and he was always giving me ideas and pointing me in the right direction.

I always wondered how a little old man could keep so much prime land. Not that he was

little, the man was built like a house. The land tax alone must be excessive, and I wasn't

himself. But he was always curious about my life, and I got this sense of familiarity from

even sure what he did for a living. He was sweet and helpful, but vague when talking about

Turning off the dirt road onto a hidden path, I pulled my vehicle behind some thick trees that blocked it from vehicles traveling down the dirt road I just came from. I unbuckled Bluey before hopping out, closing the door behind her after she jumped out. Going to the boot, I retrieved Bluey's backpack and my own before closing the back and making sure I locked everything up. Before throwing my hikers' pack over my shoulders, I stuffed my purse in. Noticing my phone, I saw I had a few missed texts from Jordan. Rolling my eyes,

I threw my phone in the side pocket of my leggings before pulling out my camera.

the straps up. Bluey and I started our hike up the mountain. The sun was high in the sky as we made our way up the trail, which was barely noticeable. This was a dense, untouched forest, and it never ceased to amaze me. The fall colors turned the forest into an autumn wonderland as we hiked higher up.

Bluey was wandering in and out of the trees in front of me, enjoying being out of the city. We were both enjoying being away and just hearing the forest made me feel like I was home. I always preferred to be in nature and my mother would take me out as much as

she could. After her death, being out here made me miss her less. I felt closer to her like

When I was all ready to go, the pack was sitting comfortably on my shoulders and I did all

It had been a few hours, and I knew we were getting close to where we would step up camp for the night. I wanted to get everything set up before the sun fell below the trees, but I wanted to make it to the river. Listening to the river always puts me to sleep.

I was walking by the cliffs; the river owing below as we made our way down to the

riverbed. Not paying attention, I tripped over something. I cursed before looking behind me

to see what I had tripped over. Seeing that it was only a small tree root sticking out of the

I had this eerie feeling of being watched before I entered a small clearing. And when I say

small, it was a place in the dense forest that had a few trees missing. It was maybe 10 feet

ground, I shook my head and turned my attention back to the path ahead.

by 10 feet. One step into the clearing and I was staring at six naked men. I was confused but also terried. Being outnumbered and my gun was in my pack. I brought it just in case, but I've seen no one out here.

All the men looked young and built with hard, dened muscles. All of them towered over

me, and I immediately felt small. One man in the center instantly caught my attention. He

was taller and bulkier than the others. He had dark brown hair and deep blue eyes. I felt

"Miss, you shouldn't be here." One man spoke, and it pulled my attention from the very

"I have permission from Jim to be out here." I stumbled out, cringing at the sound of my

voice. Great, I'm going to die in the middle of nowhere and no one will ever nd my body.

Not that anyone would look.

"Bluey," I called out, and I heard her coming up to the left of me. She entered the clearing, coming over to stand in front of me.

"You said Jim gave you permission to be out here?" Mr. Dreamy blue eyes asked me. And

"Sorry for the interruption. You guys have fun." I said before disappearing into the trees on the other side, in the direction that I was originally heading in.

I was walking faster than before, trying to put as much distance between myself and them

nowhere? Even though I didn't fear they would kill me, all of them could have taken me for

as possible. What the hell did I stumble upon? Yes, they were all sexy but maybe it was

some kind of s****I thing? Why else would they have been naked in the middle of

"What the hell was that?" I asked Bluey, not that she could answer me.

she wandered away from me while I dug out the tent and the lantern.

"What a good girl! Now let's go nd some more." I told her, patting her head.

were lucky, we may actually see some northern lights.

"That's right. Umm, did I interrupt something?" I said, nding the trees behind them very

directly at them, I shued to the other side of the clearing, with Bluey panting beside me.

interesting and I could feel my face heating up. Still facing in their direction but not looking

I probably should have stopped to pull my gun out of my pack, but for some reason, I didn't feel unsafe. Not sure why, you would think that growing up in a city, I would be leery of everyone, especially a group of men. I must be losing my damn mind.

Bluey and I nally found the clearing that met the riverbed. I was exhausted and starving

and thankful to put this pack down. What the hell did I bring that was so heavy? Setting

down my pack, I kneeled to get some water while Bluey came panting over to me. I pulled

"Go nd some sticks." After taking her bag off her, I told her. I'm not sure she'll listen, but

I'm glad the tent is just a small pop-up; it was easy to set up. After it was all set up, I rolled out my sleeping pad and then my sleeping bag. And now the sun was setting behind the trees and I was thankful the re pit was still where I built it last time I was out here.

"Bluey," I called out, and she came running through the trees with one stick in her mouth.

"Bluey, what should I do about Jordan? I know you like him and sure he's okay. And it helps that he doesn't charge me for your visits, but I don't feel sad thinking about him not being in our life." I told her. I was sitting cross-legged beside the re. Bluey was lying with her

I knew she couldn't speak back to me, but I also found that talking to her made me feel

better. Just saying my problems to her would help me understand what I needed to do.

And I feel like I have just wasted a year of my life on someone who I didn't see a future

these moments with? No. And if he wanted to share them with me, he would be here.

with. Jordan made me happy when he was around, but was he someone I wanted to share

It took about an hour to get the re going and to make sure I had enough wood before the

sweater for Bluey. When we were both cozy and sitting by the re, I pulled out some beef

jerky and a couple of granola bars. It was nally time to relax and watch the stars. If we

sun went down. It was getting cold, so I put on more clothing, and I even brought a

Bluey lifted her head. Looking behind me, she let out a growl. I heard a twig snap behind me, and I whipped around to see three naked men walking up to my camp. All of them seemed to be in rough shape. Scars covered their bodies, and they were scruffy looking. I could immediately smell them, and they needed a shower.

Bluey bared her teeth in warning, causing them to laugh, as I stood up from where I was

sitting. I immediately regret not pulling out my gun now. I didn't get the same feeling

around these men as I did the others. These men were dangerous, and I was terried.

"Now, look who we have here, and she's all alone." One chuckled.

Stepping around the re, I grabbed Bluey by her sweater as I moved back, away from them. I had to think of a plan quickly or I knew they would kill me.

"What do you want?" I stuttered out, hating that my voice betrayed me.

"What's a pretty thing like you doing out here all by yourself? And in Wolf country, no less.

Don't tell me you have a death wish?" Another spoke. Wolf country? I've never seen a wolf

"I have permission to be here." My voice was becoming a little braver. I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life. In the city, at least someone would hear you scream, but out here there was no one.

out here and I was no stranger to the area.

would kill her if they got the chance.

"At least one of us does." The third one taunted. I backed up until my back hit a tree and they circled me. Bluey was growling, trying to get away from me, but I knew these men

"Kill the dog. Let's have some fun with her before we rip her throat out." One man commented.

In a blink of an eye, Bluey was ripped from my grip, and I was thrown to the ground with a thud, bouncing my head off the ground. My vision blurred before I felt something heavy on my chest and my top was ripped open, the cold air hitting my chest.

I let out a scream when something sharp cut down my chest and stomach. I could hear Bluey barking, but it was the earth-shaking growl that brought me back to my senses. The heaviness lifted off my chest but was replaced with a burning sensation as something sharp ripped horizontally across my stomach.

"Bluey," I called out, rolling onto my side, holding my stomach. My vision was still blurry,

but I could make out what I thought were wolves ghting.

Bluey, licking my face, pulled me from the chaos happening around us.

"Bluey," I panted out before my vision went black.