

Silver Falls Series Book 1

# A SOFT KISS *in* WINTER



USA TODAY Bestselling Author

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## Chapter One

One heard a variety of noises echoing through the trees when alone on the mountain, but a woman screaming wasn't one of them.

Gideon stopped, turned his head left, then right. He'd heard more than a few animals make a sound similar to a woman screaming—or a baby crying—to attract prey and if that's what he heard, it meant something was tracking him.

A thin sheet of ice lay over the snow on the ground, the harsh crunching sound it made as he moved through the forest loud in the stillness. He took half a dozen steps, his head cocked to one side in an attempt to hear whatever it was following him and stopped when another scream echoed through the trees. It came from his left, down in the small valley at the bottom of the hill.

He pulled the hood off his head and let it fall against his back. Staring down the hill, he slowed his breath and went completely still so he could hear. The whiney of a horse followed by what sounded like laughter filled the air seconds before another scream reached him. It wasn't an animal. Someone was on the old wagon trail, and from the sounds of it, they weren't alone.

Who in their right mind would be this far up the mountain this time of year?

He dropped his pack, reached for his Winchester and stood, leaving his supplies where they were and made his way down the hill. His feet slipped out from under him twice, the dense thicket of trees scattered along the bank the only thing keeping him from tumbling down to the snowy trail below. The voices filtering through the trees grew louder the further down he went. They were male but he couldn't tell how many.

He saw the wagon first, the whole thing leaning to the right. The front wheel was broken. The contents that once sat under the white canopy covering the back were strewn across the ground as if they'd been thrown. He crept closer, the voices growing in volume, and he froze when he heard a muffled, feminine scream followed by a man laughing. Fury raced through his veins when someone said, "Hurry up! You're taking too long."

Gideon made it far enough down to see them. He crouched near a tree, bracing his shoulder against it and pointed his rifle toward the scene below. A man at the back of the wagon was jumping in place, blowing on his hands. It was cold this morning, the temperature dropping by the minute and the fool wasn't dressed to be out in the open. His coat was threadbare, his hands and head uncovered and there wasn't an ounce of fat on him anywhere. Another man stepped around the back of the wagon and looked inside, grinning.

Muffled whimpers and another scream was all it took to bring Gideon to his full height. He started down the hill, the rifle raised and pointed at the man still jumping up and down. It only took a few seconds

for him to be spotted. The expression on the man's face as he looked his way showed his shock at seeing someone. He stopped jumping, his eyes widening. "Holy hell... Ira!"

The man reached for the gun hanging by his hip. Gideon flipped the rifle around and cracked him across the jaw with the stock. He bellowed as blood flew from his mouth, then staggered and looked toward the wagon before running. Gideon let him go and raised the rifle, pointing it at the man still standing at the back of the wagon. Another scream filled the air, the woman's frantic crying scraping along Gideon's brain until flashes of images from memories long buried caused his vision to blur, the screams he still heard every night echoing through his head.

Someone inside the wagon cursed. Gideon saw movement, and the barrel of a pistol pointed his way out of the corner of his eye, and had sense enough to duck as the man fired.

Instinct and a haze of red fury brought the front of his gun up and the moment the man's feet touched the ground and he lunged toward him, Gideon pulled the trigger.

The man's expression stilled, his mouth opening as a final breath escaped his lungs and Gideon watched as he sank to his knees, falling face first into the snow. Turning to the other one, he raised the rifle, sighting on him but lowered it as the man was halfway around the bend, churning up snow as he ran. He let him go. He wasn't worth the bullet.

The woman was still screaming. He raised his rifle and stepped around the corner of the wagon to see inside. She was on her knees, her

lip busted and bleeding, her long hair in tangles around her face. Her dress was ripped at the shoulder, her left breast exposed but it was her eyes that drew his attention. They were swollen, red, and puffy, but what he saw in them made something in his chest clench tight. Terror. Pure, horrifying terror. Her wide-eyed expression turned ashen, her scream piercing until the noise faded, her eyes rolling back into her head, and she dropped as if dead.

Memories assaulted him so fast he couldn't breathe past them. He gasped, squeezed his eyes shut and tried to block the voices whispering through his head and forced his mind to focus on the problem at hand instead. He steadied his breathing, pushed the memories aside and glanced around the area to make sure no one else was hiding, then walked around the wagon three times to be sure.

The breath he was holding fled in a rush. He lowered his rifle and raised one hand, wiping the sweat from his eyes and stared at the dead man by his feet before jumping onto the back of the wagon. Two fingers on the woman's neck proved she wasn't dead. Just fainted if he had to guess, which suited him fine. A hysterical female was the last thing he wanted to deal with.

The rifle felt heavy in his hands all of a sudden and he turned and leaned against the back of the wagon. The dead man's blood was turning the thin layer of snow and ice around him red. He sighed. He didn't need this, nor did he want it. Life was simple and he liked it that way. He

hunted, made his way around the mountain, and went home again. It wasn't complicated or filled with decisions that didn't impact him.

He glanced over his shoulder, back inside the wagon. The woman was still facedown amongst the cluttered mess around her. He saw a blanket by her feet and lifted it, covering her body from neck to toe. As much as he wanted to walk back up that hillside and leave, a niggling voice in the back of his head wouldn't let him. The dead man at his feet told him he couldn't.

"Damn it," he muttered, inhaling another breath and letting it out. He reached for the dead man, grabbing him under both arms and started pulling him away from the wagon. He dragged him down the trail a good ways before tossing him to the side of the road and dropping him. He stared at him for long minutes. The ground was frozen solid and he wasn't worth the time it would take to try and bury him. He scraped his foot across the ground, kicking a pile of snow over the sorry bastard and left him where he lay and walked back to the wagon.

A glance inside showed the woman still unconscious. The contents inside the wagon were strewn from front to back. Things thrown to the ground showed everything from cooking pots to dried meats and clothing. Where the hell was this woman going with winter coming on? There was nothing on this side of the mountain. Why was she even up here?

The horses whinnied. Gideon walked around the wagon and saw three of them hobbled near a line of trees and an ox still hooked to the

wagon. As much as one would come in handy to haul his gear, they'd never make it up the backside of the mountain.

He pulled a knife from his belt, cut their reins and pocketed the leather before giving each animal a slap on his rump to get him moving. They'd be lucky to survive out in the open but there was little he could do about it. At least with letting them go, they might be able to find something to eat if they wandered the wagon trail long enough. Or they'd starve. Either way, it was the least of his problems.

He glanced at the things scattered on the ground, his thoughts going back to the woman inside the wagon. What was he supposed to do with her? He braced his hands on his hips. Leaving her would be the smart thing to do but she'd be dead within days. It was hard living on the mountain. If the weather didn't kill you, a starving animal would unless you took them out first and he doubted the screaming woman he'd seen in the back of that wagon was capable of defending herself. The three saddle bums who'd cornered and were close to raping her told him that much.

He shook away an onslaught of images trying to fill his head again. He focused on the woman, ignoring the voices he lived with daily. He didn't want to be responsible for her. As much as he hated the thought, he had to take her to Silver Falls. He couldn't leave her out here regardless of how badly he wanted to.

He sighed and cursed under his breath. So much for well-laid plans.

The trek back up the hill to grab his pack caused the muscles in his thighs to burn. It was a steep climb and coming back down with all his gear nearly landed him on his face. He rifled through the items thrown from the wagon to see if anything would come in useful, then did the same inside, careful not to rouse the woman. She was still breathing, the gentle rise and fall of her chest reassuring him of the fact.

Jumping back to the ground, he unhooked the small shovel tied to his pack and spent long minutes clearing the ground of snow where the man he'd shot had fallen, the ground stained with blood. He gathered kindling and had a fire built and one of the skinned rabbits he'd killed earlier in the day spitted and cooking in less than an hour.

The sun was sinking behind the mountain before he wondered how long the woman would be unconscious. That bastard who hit her must have knocked her silly for her to still be out. He wondered again who she was and why she was out here alone. This wasn't the sort of place one wanted to find themselves getting lost. They didn't call this Devil's Peek for nothing.

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He was still there. Victoria leaned up enough to peek over the box sitting along the back of the wagon. The man was tending a fire and the smell of cooked meat filled the air. Her stomach growled to the point of pain and she ducked, hoping he hadn't heard it.

Her heart still pounded hard enough the sound was deafening as blood rushed through her veins and thundered past her ears. The men who attacked her were nowhere to be seen but it was the burly brute sitting by a fire at the back of her wagon she was more concerned about at the moment.

Seeing him step into view while being attacked had caused a new terror to form. All she saw was dark brown fur and instantly thought—bear—but the gunshot she heard told her it was man, not beast. When all was quiet and he'd looked into the wagon at her, the adrenaline rush had been too much and she'd welcomed the darkening world that consumed her when she blacked out. Now, she wanted that oblivion back.

She peeked over the box again and studied him as he sat there turning the meat he had roasting over a fire. Her stomach growled again. How long had it been since she'd eaten anything not dried and hard to chew?

He shifted and she lowered her head enough to still see him but not be seen. The coat he wore was brown fur and if she had to guess, she'd say it was fashioned from a bear pelt. It was bulky and made him appear huge. The same material covered his head in a large hood of some kind, and it hid most of his face. What she could see of his hair appeared to be black and other than a full beard, shadows obscured the rest of his features. She'd never seen anyone like him. No one back home in Chicago looked so wild and untamed.

“Rabbits nearly cooked if you want to come out and eat.”

She jolted when he spoke and ducked her head. Had he seen her? She sighed. Of course he had. Who else would he be talking to? Tilting her head up, she peeked back out at him. He wasn't looking her way, instead, he was cutting pieces off the cooking meat and laying them on a blue plate she recognized. It was from the cook box the men had thrown off the back of the wagon. Long minutes passed before he finally looked her way. Their eyes met and her heart skipped a beat.

“I'm not here to hurt you. If I had wanted to do that, I would have done it already.”

She glanced down, noticing the blanket for the first time. He'd covered her, a fact she was grateful for when she remembered her torn dress and the men who'd tried to—

Tears burned the back of her eyes as the horror replayed in her head again. Images of her life over the last several months flashed across her mind and nearly every one of them took her breath. A sob escaped before she could stop it and she bit down on her hand to keep from crying again. She'd had nothing but heartache for months on end and all the tears she'd cried had gotten her nowhere. Grieving for things she could not change would do her no good now.

The man stood and she scrambled away from the back of the wagon, pulling the blanket with her as he approached. He laid the plate on a box near the back and looked her in the eye. “There's more if you finish this.”

He turned and walked back to the fire as the scent of roasted meat filled the interior of the wagon. Her stomach growled again. She craned her neck to look back out at the man and saw him sitting by the fire. She watched him for long minutes before scooting forward and snatching the plate and retreating further back away from him. She gave him one last look before raising a shaking hand to the meat, picking up a chunk of it and putting it in her mouth. Her eyes watered the moment it hit her tongue. It was hot, but it was the taste of it that brought the tears. It warmed her entire body as she chewed and swallowed, her empty stomach craving more the longer she ate and she was glad no one could see her as she crammed it into her mouth as fast as she could get the last piece chewed.

When the plate was empty, she licked the juice from her fingers and closed her eyes. The tears still fell and she wiped them away, wincing as she pressed against her battered face. She could only imagine what she looked like. Her left eye was swollen. That she knew without even looking. The lid was so puffy she could barely see past it. Her lips felt three sizes too big and she'd tasted blood when she awoke from her fainting spell.

She shivered as the memories came back and she pulled the ripped remains of her dress back up over her breast. A look around the strewn remains of her belongings brought the heartache back. Her life had changed so drastically since she'd left home she wasn't sure who she even was now.

A long sleeve shirt lay near her feet and she snatched it up before slipping it on over her ripped dress. The material still held Thomas's scent. She closed her eyes and sighed. They'd made so many plans for the future. She realized now how foolish she was to have believed them possible.

Movement outside the wagon drew her attention. The man was walking around again. She held the blanket to her chest and squeezed back against the wagon seat and the sideboard. The canvas covering the wagon gave slightly as she leaned against it. The material was cold and frozen, the snow falling heavy enough now to soak through, the wind strong enough to freeze the moisture in place.

The sun sank so low over the mountain that shadows crept along the trail, the trees blocking off most of the light now. It would be full dark soon. Would the man stay? Fear he would caused a knot to form in her throat. Surely he wouldn't save her only to rape her himself. Would he? He hadn't so far. He said he meant her no harm so—why was he still here? As he moved out of her line of sight, a new fear formed. Was he going to leave her out here alone? And if he did, how would she ever survive?

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She wasn't coming out. Not that it mattered. He wasn't sure what to do with her if and when she did.

Gideon glanced at the wagon again, seeing her dark shape pressed against the canvas side. The small glimpse he'd seen of her when he set the plate of food in the wagon showed her face beat all to hell. It was swelling in places, dark bruises forming over one whole side and he wished he wouldn't have killed that sorry bastard who'd attacked her so quickly. He should have suffered, long and painfully for daring to lay a finger on a woman in violence. So did the two who ran off.

Dark thoughts filled his head and he pushed to his feet, dispelling old memories he liked to keep buried. He plated up the rest of the rabbit and placed it on the back of the wagon for the woman still cowering inside and cleared out a spot near the fire to lay his bedroll. He built the fire higher, stowed his gear close at hand, along with his rifle, and laid down, releasing a weary sigh. This day had gone from bad to a miserable failure. His traps were all empty and he'd killed a man and probably doomed two more to death by them running off in nothing but threadbare coats on. Not that he wouldn't do it again. Those worthless bastards deserved everything they got. Any man who laid a hand on a woman like they'd done to the one in that back of that wagon deserved nothing less. He only wished he'd come upon them before either had a chance to cause her a moment of fear. He'd seen that look in her eyes before and it scraped his heart raw to see it again.

The sound of movement from the wagon drew his attention. She was moving about. He hoped it was to eat the rest of the rabbit. He hated wasting good meat. Thoughts of what to do with her filled his head.

They'd leave at first light. If they trekked hard, they would make it to shelter before nightfall. A glance up at the night sky showed nothing but darkness. Not a single star shined down at him. Clouds were moving in, the light snow flurries falling now enough to make him worry about the fire going out. Freezing to death wasn't the way he wanted to go.

A screech from an animal echoed through the trees. Eaten by wild animals wasn't a good death either. If he was lucky, nothing would smell the small stash of fresh hides and meat he'd hunted for over the last several days. He pulled his rifle closer. If something came down that hill, he hoped he saw it before he became the hunted.

Maybe he should have crawled inside the wagon. He raised his head and looked at it, then dismissed the thought. The woman was frightened enough as it was. If he joined her inside, it was hard to tell what she may do.

Turning to his side, he faced the fire and stared at the flames, shutting out the memories still trying to take hold. Finding this woman would play havoc with his orderly world but damn it all, he couldn't leave her. His conscience wouldn't let him. He just had to get her back to Silver Falls and as far away from him as he could get.

## Chapter Two

He was leaving. Victoria watched him pack his gear, some of which were her own things. A few of her plates and mugs, the silverware and cooking pots. He was taking everything he could fit inside his pack.

The snow was falling harder than it had been the day before. The air was bitterly cold and she'd pulled on every one of Thomas's shirts, and even slipped on a pair of his trousers and hidden the fact underneath her skirts. Her cloak was thin but it helped hold in her body heat. It was enough. For now.

The man moved out of her range of sight and her heart thumped. Was he leaving? She leaned over to try and see out the back of the wagon.

"Storms coming in," he said. "If you're coming with me then get a move on. I'm not waiting for you." He peeked around the corner of the canvas and she shrank back against the side. His gaze met her own and held for long moments. "Did you hear me?"

Her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth. That coat he was wearing made him appear huge and the sight of him caused her stomach to twist into knots.

He blew out a breath and raised a hand, scratching at his jaw. "Suit yourself. If the storm doesn't kill you, something bigger than you

lurking out here in the woods will. The choice is yours. Either way, I'm leaving."

As quickly as he came, he stepped away from the wagon and she could hear his footsteps crunch in the snow as he walked away. The sound grew distant before she slid to the open end of the wagon. She peeked around the corner, searching for him in the falling snow. It took her a few minutes to spot him and her eyes widened. He really was leaving her! He was halfway up the embankment to her left.

She looked at the fire pit he'd dug. The embers were cold now, the juicy rabbit he'd fed her gone. What would she do now? The wagon wheel was broken and she'd never be able to fix it. She had no weapon to hunt with and the dried meats they'd brought with them had been eaten by those horrible men or tossed onto the ground. She was stuck here. If the cold didn't kill her, starvation would.

Victoria looked back up the hill. He was still visible but the falling snow made it look as if a huge brown animal moved instead of a man. She bit her lip, fear twisting her gut until tears burned her eyes.

What if she followed him and he hurt her, or worse?

What if she didn't and she died because she was too afraid to accept the help he seemed to be offering?

Neither was an option she liked but she was out of choices. If she had any chance of surviving now, she'd have to follow this stranger and pray she wasn't making the biggest mistake of her life.

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Gideon slowed his steps, the trail he'd followed countless times still visible in the falling snow. The girl was reaching the top of the hill and she was too far back for his liking. He didn't have time to coddle a woman but found himself stopping all the same and turning to look at her. She paused and met his gaze. She was a big girl—or so he thought. When she adjusted her cloak he saw the added bulk was layers of clothing and some sort of satchel bag draped across her chest. Smart thinking. Maybe she knew what was in store for her out here after all.

They climbed the hill for most of the morning. His legs burned, the muscles aching from the steady ascent. He kept glancing back at the girl every so often, surprised to see her still back there but she was slow. He could tell by the way she panted for breath that climbing a mountain wasn't something she'd ever done. Most hadn't, but if she was on the mountain, he assumed she knew the terrain and would be able to handle it.

He stopped to let her catch up, lowering himself to the ground and sighing as his aching muscles relaxed. Digging through his pack for the dried meat, he leaned back against a tree and waited for her. He ate in silence, staring into the trees until she was close enough to see clearly. She stopped a few feet away. Her face was flushed and a few strands of her hair dangled against her cheek. She was panting for breath and

collapsed not far from where he sat. He let her catch her breath before standing and walking her way.

Her eyes widened as he reached her and she shrank back. "I'm not going to hurt you so you can stop being afraid of me." He held out the water canteen and dried meat and stared at her until she took them, then he walked away, searching the ground for falling limbs large enough to use for a walking stick. It took nearly ten minutes to find something suitable. When he turned back to face her, she was breathing normally, her skin once again a creamy pale porcelain. Well, except for where her face was bruising. What had been a slight discoloration last night was now a muted bluish purple. It would be near black by nightfall.

He walked back toward her and held the stick out. "This will make the climb a bit easier." He turned and looked up the hill. "We have to make it to the top of that ridge and halfway back down the other side before we can stop. There's a small hunting cabin near a stream where we can rest. We'll have to hold up there until the storm passes."

Her eyes widened with every word he spoke. He could only imagine how scared she was. She'd yet to speak a word to him and he was beginning to wonder if she even could. He'd met a man in town when he was younger that couldn't talk. He'd found himself on the wrong side of an Indian raid and lost his tongue in the process. He doubted this girl was missing a tongue but one never knew.

She never reached for the stick so he laid it by her feet and straightened, walked back to his pack and shouldered it again. Glancing

back at her he said, "Let's get going," and started the trek back up the mountain.

As he'd figured she'd do, she picked up the walking stick and followed. He just hoped she could keep up.

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*This is a mistake.* The words whispered through her head on repeat as she followed the man up the side of the mountain. The snow was falling harder now and her thin boots weren't made for snow. Her feet were near frozen, each step more painful than the last. She was ready to give up when she saw him stop. He turned and motioned her forward and she climbed the last few feet that separated them and stopped. Then gasped.

They'd reached the top of the hill. She took in the small valley below. A small stream or river snaked its way through the trees. Another rise, taller than the one they were on now, loomed in the distance and snow covered everything she could see. The trees were naked of leaves, low-lying clouds skirted the top of the mountains, and the wintery landscape was the most magnificent thing she'd ever seen.

"The cabin is there," he said, pointing down the slope. "It's by the stream. If we don't make it there before nightfall, we'll break our necks trying to get there in the dark." He looked up and studied the sky.

“Hopefully the storm holds off a bit longer.” He nodded down the hill with his head and said, “let’s go.”

She waited a few moments more, looking out at the sea of snow covered mountains and wondered again how she’d ended up here. Nothing was as it was supposed to be. Lifting her walking stick, she planted it back on the ground followed him. The mountain was steep on this side. Going up had been hard but going down was taking every ounce of strength she possessed. She panted, stopped to catch her breath, and watched the burly shape of the man as he climbed down the hill with ease. Planting her stick again, she trudged on and tried to remain upright and not topple down the embankment head first.

This side of the mountain was easy to descend but as the day wore on, the sky darkened with clouds and the snow fell heavier. When the sun started to set, fatigue caused her steps to slow. The man looked back at her every so often but didn’t appear to be worried about her. If he only knew this was the first trek through nature she’d ever been on, he’d be praising her efforts.

The light grew faint and dark shadows crept into the valley as they finally made it to level ground again. The stream wound through the trees like a serpent, the sound of trickling water over rocks oddly comforting.

“It’s not much further now.” He pointed to the right. “The cabin is up there a ways. We’ll cross over the stream here and follow it through that thicket of trees.” He refilled the water canteen and handed it to her.

She drank her fill and handed it back, watching him drink, his throat moving as he swallowed.

The heavy fur hood still covered his head and hid most of his face. She couldn't tell his age but she didn't think he was overly old. Not much older than Thomas had been. Her heart gave a tight pinch at the thought of him. She wanted to blame this whole ordeal on him but she never once discouraged him when he said they were heading west. She'd been so caught up in the thoughts of finally having an adventure she'd not said a word in protest. Her current situation was as much her fault as his.

The man caught her looking at him and she turned her head. Where was he leading her? she wondered. She wanted to ask but fear kept her quiet. She wasn't even sure if she was still in Montana. She'd been lost for weeks. It was hard telling where she'd ended up. Was there a town nearby? Was that where he was taking her?

“Let's go.”

She followed him along the stream and hesitated when he crossed it. There wasn't a bridge and her feet were near frozen now. Stepping into the water would be like knives against her flesh.

“There's no other way across it.”

She looked up. He was on the opposite bank, a frown turning the corners of his mouth down.

“It's just water.”

Bone chilling cold water, she imagined. Her kid boots weren't made for this sort of weather. Why had she not bothered to buy a sturdy pair of work boots instead of wearing this useless decorative pair? She sighed. Because she didn't think she'd need them. Why would she? Thomas had promised her once they made it to Montana, her life would be as it always had been. Privileged, with nothing but the finest. How stupid she'd been. The life she led before this was now over, changed forever by impossible dreams and foolish ambition.

She glanced at her boots again. The silk was beyond repair and she was missing a few buttons on her right foot. They were ruined. Water couldn't hurt them at this point.

The man hissed out a curse and stomped back into the water and headed her way. Her eyes widened as he glared at her. He was mumbling under his breath. She only caught a few words—something about women and not having time—as he stepped up on the bank.

He came at her and she flinched, her heart slamming against her ribcage seconds before he grabbed her. She bit back a scream as he hoisted her into the air as if she weighed nothing and pulled her against his chest, looking her in the eye. “This is the last time I coddle you,” he said. “It's a long damn walk to Silver Falls so you either keep up or get left behind. Got it?” He glared down at her and didn't wait for a reply before he started back across the stream. His feet hit the water hard enough a few fat drops splashed into the air to wet her face. When he

reached the other side, he put her feet back on the ground and walked away as if she wasn't there.

She studied his retreating form and blinked. Why did he seem so irritated with her? If she was such a burden, why did he tell her to come with him?

And why did one look into his grey eyes make her heart race to the point she felt dizzy?

## Chapter Three

The need to turn and see if she was behind him burned through his veins but he kept his gaze locked on the cabin. Why had he brought her along? She's slowed him down, caused unneeded worry and the responsibility of taking care of her weighed so heavily on his shoulders it felt as if he was carrying that broken down wagon of hers instead of his pack.

He pushed through the snow banks until the steps to the cabin came into view. The door was slightly ajar. He stopped and turned his head to look behind him, held up one hand to stop her from coming closer. He lowered his pack and pulled the rifle from its straps, shouldered it and toed the door open hard enough it smashed into the wall. A furry brown blur raced by his foot and he bit back a curse as he watched it scurry away. Turning back to the cabin, he peeked inside, then lowered the rifle. "It's clear," he said, picking his pack up and carrying it inside.

He tossed his things to the floor and crossed to the fireplace built into the back wall. There was still wood left from the last time he'd been there and he spent the next ten minutes stacking it in the fireplace and lighting it, waiting to make sure it stayed lit before standing.

The girl stood by the door, her back against the wall. She looked around the room, then turned her gaze to him. Her eyes were green. The color was rich and vibrant like the summer grasses that covered the fields near Silver Falls when the snows melted. She wasn't overly tall. The top of her head barely reached his chin. A few long golden-brown curls of her hair lay against the bruised side of her face. Her lips were blistered red from where she'd licked them and the chill in the air chapped them raw. His gaze lingered there. The fullness of her lips made him think things he had no right thinking but once the thought was there, he couldn't push it away.

He cleared his throat and turned to his pack and opened it, taking out the dried meats and tossing them to the table. He hung the water canteen on one of the nails hammered into the wall and grabbed his rifle and turned back to the door. "I'll go gather more firewood and see if I can find something fresh to eat. Come sit by the fire and warm yourself." He didn't wait for a reply, just crossed the small space between them and slid past her back out into the cold.

The storm was moving in—the snow falling more heavily now and the frigid bite to the air was enough to clear his head. Having her here was messing with his peace of mind. He'd been so long without the company of another—especially a woman—she was distracting him and the fact she was, annoyed him—and made his heart race with possibilities he didn't want nor need.

He stomped back across the stream, water filling his boots for the third time. He shook his head. Why had he carried her across instead of making her walk? He should have never touched her. He'd done his best to ignore her most of the day but then he'd went and picked her up, held her close to his chest—her small arms wrapping around his neck in the process—and he couldn't get the sensation out of his head.

“Damn it,” he muttered, stomping into the forest. “Stop thinking about her.” She was destroying his otherwise uneventful routines and he didn't know what to do about it. He had to get her to Silver Falls, but what did he do with her in the meantime? “I'll just keep ignoring her. Once the storm breaks, I'll take her to Silver Falls and let her be someone else's problem.”

Satisfied, he slowed his steps, listening for the tiniest of sounds. This is where he was most comfortable. He was used to being outdoors, spent most of the daylight hours out on the trails trapping animals and spent his nights preparing the hides for sale. He could avoid her. He'd just stay out here until the storm forced him back inside, then he'd ignore her as if she wasn't even there.

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When the gruff mountain man told her there was a hunting cabin out here in the wilderness, she'd expected something a little different than

this. His cabin was nothing more than a small shack. There wasn't even a window.

Victoria turned and shut the door, closing off the chilly air wafting in and took in the small room. She crossed to the rock fireplace, counting her steps as she went. "...nine, ten, eleven, twelve." That wasn't many when you were closed in with a man you knew nothing about.

Her gaze slid to the single bed against the wall on the right-hand side of the fireplace. It was so small she didn't know how the man slept in it. Surely his feet would hang off the end. Maybe he slept on the floor.

That single bed brought a ton of questions flooding into her mind. Did he expect payment for helping her by sharing his bed the first on her mind? And if he did, would he leave her out here in the middle of nowhere if she refused? Or would he take what he wanted whether she liked it or not?

She sighed and pushed her hair back out of her face. She couldn't think like that. If his intentions were dishonorable, he would have made them known when he killed the man who attacked her. Of course, bringing her along may have been a ruse to get her to trust him so he could take advantage of her later but for some reason, she didn't think that was the case. Why would he bother? Besides, he seemed too irritated at having to help her. Him stomping across the stream to carry her across evidence of that.

“Stop thinking so much, Victoria.” She shook her head to clear her mind and tugged off her cloak. The one advantage to the small one-room shack was, it heated quickly. The extra shirts she’d put on were tugged off and laid aside, as were the trousers she’d slipped on underneath her skirts. When she was down to her dress and undergarments, she felt better and was able to move more freely. Her hair had falling down over the course of the day. She lifted the loose strands, twisted them up, and tucked them back into the pins. A hard brush over the wrinkles in her skirts did nothing to smooth the material so she turned to stare at the empty room.

Now what?

She glanced at the walls. Nails were hammered into the planks, a few pots and cooking utensils hanging from them and other than a small table and two chairs, there was nothing else. Nothing that said this place was home to anyone. It was no more than a simple shelter.

Reaching for one of the chairs, she pulled it away from the table, turned it to put the back against the wall and sat down, her gaze drawn to the flames flickering in the fireplace. The wind howled against the shack, the sound hypnotic. Her eyes grew heavy the longer she sat there. She leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes for a moment as thoughts of the last several weeks played inside her head. The disaster that was her life now whispered how foolish she was and as much as she wanted to deny it, she knew that voice was right. She had been so naive and foolish and now she was paying for those mistakes.

The soft crackle of firewood burning and the warmth settling into her bones lulled her, drowsiness causing the noise to fade into nothing as her mind went blank. A loud thump brought her head up as the door opened. Her rescuer was back, his large form blocking the doorway before he came inside. As he turned to shut the door, she caught a small glimpse outside. It was nearly dark. She'd only closed her eyes for a moment—or had it been longer? Judging the shadows outside, it was longer than she'd thought.

He paid her no attention as he walked toward the fireplace, propping his rifle beside the jutting stones that lined the hearth. He hung a leather string several rabbits were dangling from on a nail in the wall and tossed the hood attached to his coat off his head, shrugged out of the heavy fur and let it drop to the ground.

He wasn't at all what she'd been expecting.

She'd thought him to be a huge man the first time she'd seen him but that wasn't the case. He was larger than Thomas had been but the bulk of his coat had been deceiving. She let her gaze roam across his back. His shoulders were wide, his waist slightly tapered. His hair was a dark brown-black, worn long and curling around his collar and a full beard, clipped short covered his jaw. He grabbed the string of rabbits and spent the next ten minutes spitting them and putting them over the fire to cook, all the while acting as if she wasn't even in the room. She shouldn't care, but for some reason it made her feel invisible—as if she didn't matter. But then again, why should she? She was no one to him.

He busied himself around the room, hanging his coat from a nail to dry, then cleaning his rifle and the pistols he carried in a holster around his waist, that she just now noticed, before sharpening a large knife hanging from his belt. All the while, he ignored her until the rabbit was cooked. He plated it and sat it on the table between them and gave her half.

They ate in silence, the wind whistling through the trees loud enough it sounded like painful moans and wails of some unknown creature lurking outside the shanty walls. She watched him warily as they ate. He didn't seem any more inclined to talk than she did and that was fine by her. She had nothing to say to him anyway. He was taking her to a town, or she hoped he was, and talking wasn't necessary.

When there was nothing left of the rabbit but bones he stood, gathered both plates and tossed what was left into the fire, grabbed an empty pot and carried it outside and filled it with snow, melting it until there was enough to clean up with. Bathing would have been heaven but she settled for washing her hands and face and moved her discarded clothes off the bed when finished. She was tired and wanted nothing but to sleep until this entire ordeal was over.

Carrying her things to the other side of the fireplace, she spread her cloak on the floor and folded the extra shirts she'd worn earlier into a makeshift pillow before sinking to her knees to lay it down.

“Take the bed.”

She looked up at his softly spoken words. He was unhooking the holster belt from his waist, his gaze still focused on the table.

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” he said. He looked at her then, firelight shining in his eyes. She swallowed to moisten her throat and nodded before getting back to her feet, grabbing her things and turning to the bed.

“I’m Gideon, by the way. Gideon Hart.”

She locked eyes with him again and the tight, constricting knot that had been squeezing at her chest since the night Thomas took his last breath suddenly let go. Her worried thoughts vanished and the constant case of nervous jitters calmed the longer she stared at him. Something in the way he was looking at her—she couldn’t explain it—said it would be all right. That she needn’t worry. She knew nothing about this man but for the first time in months, she was able to breathe easier, the tension she’d felt coiled tight in every limb of her body eased, and she took a deep breath before licking her chapped lips. “Victoria Stanford.”

He stared at her a few moments more, nodded, and turned away. She laid down on the bed, pulled her cloak over her body and watched him through slitted eyes as he fixed a pallet on the floor and laid down. For the first time in months, she drifted off to sleep feeling safe and protected.

\* \* \*

Victoria. The name suited her.

Gideon turned to face the wall, putting his back to her and tried to go to sleep but thoughts of her kept intruding his mind. Walking back into the cabin and seeing her without all those bulky layers on had halted his steps.

He'd been expecting to see the bedraggled woman he thought hid behind all that fabric, but instead found a woman slight in build. She wasn't wearing the same dress he'd found her in, the one those men had ripped. This dress, although wrinkled, was of fine material with silk covered buttons that ran up the front, not the homespun the few women he came into contact with wore. The dress fit snug enough to accentuate curves he wished she didn't have and a glance at her boots showed the most impractical footwear anyone could have on out here in the wild. Maybe that's why she hadn't crossed the stream. Those boots weren't made for slogging through water. Nor snow. Her feet were probably half frozen.

He knew she didn't belong here, especially when she spoke. It was only her name but he could still hear it whispering through his head. He'd barely heard her say it she spoke so softly, but the words felt like a soft caress, the tone of her voice almost musical.

Victoria Stanford was an anomaly. She didn't belong way out here in the middle of nowhere, Montana. Why had she been on that old mountain trail trying to bring a wagon up the narrow path? Where was she going? And why is she alone? He'd never know unless he asked but

it was the last thing he'd do. He wasn't getting involved in her life. He was taking her to Silver Falls and that was that. Who she is and what she's doing up here wasn't his concern. He didn't want it to be, either. He wasn't taking on the responsibility of another human life he'd just end up failing.

*You already have.*

The words whispered inside his head and he bit back a curse. He couldn't be responsible for her. He refused to be. He may be leading her to Silver Falls but that didn't mean he'd carry her all the way. She'd keep up, watch out for her own well-being, or he'd leave her behind. He wouldn't spend a single second more coddling her.

***End of Excerpt***

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