

The Darkest Winter
Bonus Ending Scene
Elle

The next morning I meandered the property, too wound up to sleep. Our unexpected *guests* had gone back to the prison, leaving the eight of us in an odd situation. Ross and Bert hadn't just inherited Jackson's five companions when we'd arrived, but a mess of twisted truths as well. We all did. Genetically engineered viruses. A mad general. Sophie and I had been *kidnapped*. I sighed, wishing it felt more like a hazy bad dream than our impossible reality.

And yet, staying in Whitehorse felt right, settling into a much-needed sense of normal for as long as we could. Even if there was a niggling uncertainty that left me far too restless to remain in the cabin the six of us were staying in a moment longer.

So as the morning mist settled in the trees, I wove my way deeper into the forest, away from the lodge, our current safe haven. Fleeting, I wondered if it wasn't smarter to stay close rather than wander off on my own, but then I smiled, small but content as it was. The fire inside me was a comfort I was still getting used to. It was a paradox—an unfamiliar whirl I couldn't ignore, yet it was an innate part of me, too. The heat. The simmering, pulsing power. It was becoming second nature, and it helped ease the frenetic parts of me, just a little.

Could the eight of us build a home here and make it our own? Could we really start new lives after so much heartache? I wanted to think so—no, I *needed* to if I was going to help the kids, Alex, and Sophie move on from all they'd lost. If I was going to be there for Jackson. As I thought about Jenny and the regret eating away at me after everything we said and didn't say before she died, I knew I needed to grasp onto hope for myself too.

I zipped my jacket higher to stave off the cool morning, not because I was cold so much as I knew I should be. But my thoughts diverted as slow, heavy footsteps crunched the forest floor behind me, and I knew instantly it was Jackson.

“You snuck out,” he said, his voice a low rumble in the crisp air.

I peered back at him with a waning smile. His hair was rumpled and loose around his face, and he had an apprehensive gleam in his eyes as he approached.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

I shook my head. Now that we’d acknowledged whatever this was budding between us, the tension I felt around him was of a different sort; not taut with everything unsaid, but humming with a subtle sense of excitement and ease.

Leaning back against a tree trunk, I crossed my arms over my chest and peered into his eyes. Though I hadn’t realized it until now, I always found reassurance there. “Are we doing the right thing, staying here, Jackson?” It dawned on me that it might be more selfish than smart. “I know we said it’s not safe for the Ranksins, especially now that we know about the General, but maybe—” I shrugged. “Maybe we need to think about this more. What if Woody is a bullseye we don’t need? What if . . .?” My thoughts drifted as Jackson listened intently.

Even if he and I were still figuring each other out, I recognized Jackson’s determination well enough. He was serious last night, decided, and resolved to stay. “How would it be safer to leave?” he asked, but it wasn’t a real question, at least, not one I had an answer to, and Jackson knew it. “At least we have Woody’s intel if we stay in Whitehorse, and this place, hidden away—removed from innocent people like the Ranskins.”

“But Jackson, *we* are innocent. What we said last night is true. We aren’t soldiers. We aren’t fighters.”

“Aren’t we?” he countered calmly. “Look how far we’ve come.” He crossed his arms over his chest as well, his stance widening as if he was settling in for a debate. “And unlike the Ranskins, we can protect ourselves,” he reminded me and tucked a dark strand of my hair caught in the breeze behind my ear. His hand lingered by my cheek as his eyes shifted over my face. Despite the cool air raking through my hair and over my exposed skin, I didn’t shiver.

Jackson was right. Of course he was. We weren’t helpless, not like Jade, Del, and Took would be if any of the General’s genetically altered goons came for them. And we had Woody—the strongest of us all. “I keep forgetting it’s not just the six of us anymore,” I realized aloud.

Jackson took a step closer, closing the distance between us. “We deserve this, Elle,” he said. His voice wasn’t pleading or reassuring but simply stating a fact. “The kids, us—you showed me that. It’s what you’ve been working for since the day you met them, a second chance. A new life. A safe one with people who care about them. With a family.”

My chest tightened as I realized how badly I’d always wanted those things, and how difficult it seemed for me to remember I had that with all of them. Exhaling, I leaned my head against the tree trunk. “I know you’re right,” I admitted. “I guess it just feels strange to stand still, is all.”

Jackson dipped his head in understanding, and I realized that in the seconds I’d been in thought, he’d drawn closer, and the air shifted between us as his eyes searched mine; their hazel depths shimmered with what looked like hope. “Elle,” he said, his voice a low rumble.

“Yes?” I breathed.

“This feels right.” I was nodding before he even finished, because it did. Completely and utterly right, and I couldn’t look away from him. For months we’d been companions in this new life, but for the first time, I was Jackson’s partner in whatever the future held for all of us.

He leaned in, his deodorant and minty toothpaste wafting off of him. And as his lips brushed against mine, I inhaled Jackson's familiar scent and kissed him back. It was slow and savoring, exploratory in a way I never would have allowed myself to dream about days ago.

When Jackson drew back, a slight smile lifted the goatee around his lips. "I could get used to mornings like this," he whispered, his thumb brushing my cheek.

I leaned closer, the overwhelming need to make up for lost time making my skin burn warmer than my blood. "Jackson—"

"What are you guys doing out here?"

We turned to find Thea clomping toward us in Beau's untied boots as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. The cabin was barely visible through the trees.

"Hey, munchkin," I said, clearing my throat.

"Thea!" Beau grumbled as he trudged his way through the trees with bare feet. "Those are my shoes!"

"Well," Thea sighed. "I didn't know where they were."

Jackson and I exchanged a quick look, silently acknowledging our reverie was over—for now.

"We were just scoping the place out," Jackson explained, lifting shoeless Beau onto his back. "Your feet will freeze off, bud. It's cold out."

"I know. Why are you guys up so early?" Beau asked.

"There's lots to do if we're going to make this place home," I told them. "We were just looking around and figuring out what to do next."

"Can we get a pony?" Thea chirped.

"A pony?" Jackson parroted.

I rumbled her hair. “We’ll see, munchkin. We have a lot to do before we can talk about that. For now,” I said with a chuckle, “wolves will have to do.” On cue, Rocky, Luna, and Little Foot came trotting through the woods.

“Oh, all right,” Thea grumbled, but as Beau wriggled down from Jackson’s back, Thea’s disappointment was immediately forgotten, and the two of them started after the wolves. “Wait for me!” she called.

“Wolves,” Alex said, and again, Jackson and I turned to find him and Sophie strolling toward us. “I’m sure one day it will feel completely normal to find a pack of them outside the door.”

“Seriously.” Sophie yawned. “What’s everyone doing awake? Beau and Thea were already bickering, and the sun is barely up.”

“Just figuring things out,” Jackson answered, and winked at me. I felt my heart flutter again. “I know we mentioned it last night, but what do you guys really think about staying here, making this our home?”

Alex and Sophie looked at each other, both of them shrugging. “We thought that was the plan all along,” Alex said, and Sophie nodded.

“Not if you guys aren’t comfortable with it,” I told them. “Especially after what happened yesterday.” I looked pointedly at Sophie. “If you don’t feel safe, then we don’t have to stay.”

With a sardonic smile, she tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear and wrapped her arms around her middle in the chilly morning. “Strange as it sounds, I feel like this might be the safest place for us, especially with the prison so close.”

Alex nodded in agreement. “I don’t know how I feel about Woody or Phil yet,” he said with apparent dislike, and after our kidnapping, I couldn’t blame him in the slightest. “But this is where we’ve been headed the whole time,” he said. “Why would we leave now?”

I realized that, in a round-about way, Alex was right. Jackson’s instincts were to come here from the very beginning, and through every obstacle, we’d somehow made it, and that alone seemed to soothe the last of my uncertainty.

“Good,” I said, looking at Jackson once more. “It’s decided then.” Knowingly, he dipped his chin ever so slightly.

As another brisk breeze whipped through the forest, Sophie shivered and I nodded toward the lodge. “Come on,” I said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder for warmth. “Let’s go in and wake up Bert and Ross.”

“Beau! Thea!” Jackson called. Their faraway banter halted, and the discordant sounds of footsteps, a panting pack of wolves, and a laughing Beau and Thea galloped toward us.

“We have a lot of work to do,” I said, meeting Jackson’s gaze. I squeezed Sophie closer to me as we headed toward the lodge. “We better get started.”