

An Excerpt from *The Silent Woodsman*, by Cat Treadgold

Joe had to get a grip. Tapping Ali's arm, touching her shoulders, holding her bare feet as if he had a foot fetish. Was he losing his mind? They were pretty feet, long and nicely shaped, with clear, unadorned nails. Had she believed he worried about her cold toes? Weirdly, yes. Her fawn-colored skin glowed like mobile art lit by candles.

Twenty-four years old. Somehow she seemed younger. She was back to sitting at the table, hands folded, obedient. Now that he knew about her dead brother, he recognized a kindred spirit, one brought low by misfortune. Vulnerable. He wished he could tell her not to be so trusting. She was lucky she'd landed here. She was also lucky that thoughts didn't equal actions, because his were the wolfish kind and did not match his polite exterior.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

He sat down next to her to write, "Not long. Don't live here full-time."

She raised her eyebrows. "Vacation?"

"Sort of," he wrote.

"Can you tell me?"

"Worried about writer's cramp." He gave his fingers an exaggerated shake. "Not important. Tell me about you. Want to talk about your brother?"

This time she spoke without emotion. "Terrorist attack. Hamas. Jerusalem."

Now she was speaking in fragments too, as if following his lead. He wished she'd just out with the whole story. He was dying of curiosity. He wrote, "No TV. You're my entertainment. Don't make me beg. Hard on the fingers. It's not even lunchtime. Too early for bed." She blushed, and damned if he didn't blush too.

He lifted the sheet of paper, filled on one side, and elaborately turned it over, earning a lovely, shy smile. At the top, he wrote, "Talk away. Like listening to you. Want whole life story." Seeing her consternation, he drew a smiley face and added, "Kidding. Talk. You'll feel better. Working on Charades technique."

She blew out a shaky breath and sat, cross-legged, on the bearskin rug, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders.

"I like the rug," she said, petting it in a way that sent a dart of desire straight to his loins. "There was a bearskin rug in the troll house I had as a kid. Molded plastic, like the rest of the cabin. This place is great. It's yours?" He shook his head. "Your family's?"

He made a "sort of" gesture. He did *not* want to tell her the story of the illegal cabin, built by his manager Linc's family. It might lead to questions about his identity. He pointed to the rug. "Bear died of

old age,” he wrote. He slashed a finger across his throat and let his tongue loll out. Her laughter made him absurdly happy.

“Will you ever speak again?”

I'll speak again, he thought, *but will I sing?* He didn't write it down. Instead he nodded and smiled, then gestured for her to continue.