

A scenic landscape featuring a log cabin, a river, and mountains. The cabin is on the left, surrounded by trees. A river flows through the center, with daisies in the foreground. Mountains are in the background under a blue sky with clouds.

NEW
GIRL IN THE
FALLS

ELLE GRAY

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New Girl in the Falls

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PROLOGUE

Spenser Song leaned against the pillar outside Mercy General watching traffic go by on the street. Horns blared, people screamed at one another from their cars, and standing there, she saw more than one middle finger being thrust out open windows. New York had a life and a vibrancy that was unlike anywhere else in the world, and she loved it. There was just an energy and a frenetic pace about the city that had always appealed to her.

She glanced at her watch and then turned her eyes skyward. The night was dark, and the breeze carried the hint of a chill, telling her summer was mercifully drawing to a close. Spenser had long hated summer. She had never been a fan of the heat or the humidity. But then, winter in New York was a different kind of horrible. Still, at least it wasn't hot. She could deal with the biting cold, the rain, and even the snow better than she could stand the heat.

Spenser turned to see a man with hair so blonde it was almost white and eyes bluer than glacier ice coming her way. He was tall, lean, and looked like a man who worked hard to keep himself in shape. He wore a black, long-sleeved t-shirt underneath blue surgical scrubs, and on top of that, he wore a black hoodie. His black backpack slung over one shoulder, he stopped a few

feet in front of her, letting his eyes slide up and down her body, and favored her with a wide smile.

“Well, hey there, handsome,” Spenser said.

“Hey, yourself,” he replied.

“Heading home?”

He nodded. “Yeah, my wife is expecting me.”

“I think you should make her wait a little longer.”

“I would, but she carries a gun,” he told her. “She works for the FBI and she probably wouldn’t take too kindly to you flirting with me.”

“FBI, huh? She sounds like a real ballbuster.”

“Yeah, she really is.”

Spenser squealed with laughter and playfully slapped him on the arm. Smiling wide, he pulled her into a tight embrace and gave her a passionate kiss. She melted into him and let her husband hold her for a few minutes. She finally let go but couldn’t resist giving him another quick peck on the lips. She ran her fingers through his hair and pursed her lips. He looked tired. Of course, given the crazy hours he put in as a trauma surgeon, that was pretty par for the course.

“How was your day, baby?” she asked.

“Long. Exhausting. But not bad overall, I guess. We saved a little boy’s life, so that’s good,” he replied. “How about you? Catch any bad guys today?”

“Not today. We’re still doing the legwork on a case right now, but we have to wait for something else to happen before we can make a move.”

“But you can’t tell me what that something else you’re waiting for is, right?”

“Sorry, babe. Them’s the rules.”

He grinned. “I know. I just worry about you.”

“I’m a big girl. But I appreciate your concern.”

Spenser linked her arm through his and together, they turned and started off down the street. She leaned her head on his shoulder as they strolled, content and happy in that moment. They’d been married for a little more than five years now, but to her, it still felt like they were on their honeymoon.

She loved that his was the last face she saw when she drifted off to sleep at night and the first she saw upon waking. Spenser was as in love with Trevor today, some five years later, as she was from the start.

“What do you think? Should we grab some dinner here in the city?” Trevor asked. “Or just wait until we get home?”

Spenser shifted her thoughts and looked about. There was a greater diversity of food here in Manhattan than there was at home in Secaucus. Living in New Jersey had a lot of benefits over living in the city. For one thing, it wasn’t as congested—and it was only a twenty-minute trip across the bridge. And they had a home with a backyard. But Secaucus wasn’t quite as ethnically diverse and if there was one thing Spenser loved, it was being able to try any of a hundred different ethnic cuisines whenever the mood struck her.

“Let’s stay here,” she finally said. “There’s an Ethiopian place down the street I thought we might try.”

“I was kind of hoping we’d have Pho tonight,” Trevor replied. “I thought you might want to enjoy the food of your people.”

She squealed and slapped him on the arm as she laughed. “You are terrible. Awful. Do I really need to explain the difference between Korean and Vietnamese food to you again?”

“I’m just teasing you, baby,” he said with a laugh then kissed her on the cheek. “I just like getting a rise out of you. Besides, you’re only half-Korean so I don’t feel like we’d be able to call it the food of your people anyway.”

She laughed. “You are such a brat. A horrible brat,” she said. “Fine, Pho it is. I did choose last time anyway, so I guess it’s your turn.”

“Yes, it is. And I appreciate you letting me have a turn. I’ve heard you’re a notorious ballbuster,” he said and flashed her a mischievous grin.

Spenser laughed and squeezed his arm extra hard as they walked down the street together. They crossed at a light and made idle chit-chat about their days as they cut through one of the city’s many small greenbelts. As they walked through the little park, an uneasy feeling descended over

Spenser. She looked around and realized that she'd been so caught up in talking with her husband that she hadn't paused to mind her surroundings.

The first thing she noticed was that all the lights along the path they were walking had been broken out. She could see the jagged shards of broken glass littering the walkway, glittering in the moonlight. The second thing that caught her eye was the fact that the park was empty. They were the only ones moving along the path which was lined by trees and thick bushes. And the last thing was the sound of twigs snapping and foliage rustling.

She held her hand out to stop Trevor in his tracks. Her eyes widened and her hand flew to her hip where she normally kept her Glock 17. But knowing that Trevor wasn't comfortable around firearms, whenever she met him at the hospital, she always unclipped her holster and stowed it in her bag.

"What is it?" Trevor asked.

"Quiet," she whispered. "Somebody's out there."

"What? What do you mean somebody's out there?"

"We're being stalked," she growled. "Now, be quiet."

Spenser dropped to a knee then took her backpack off her shoulder and set it down at her feet. She quickly unzipped it and thrust her hand into the dark opening, fumbling around for her service weapon. But then she saw a man dressed in black from head-to-toe break cover, rushing out of the bushes and moving straight toward them. The hoodie he wore was pulled low, his face lost in the shadows, but Spenser wasn't looking for a face. She couldn't take her eyes off the dark maw of the gun that was pointed right at them.

But then a sound like an explosion shattered the evening air and a gout of flame spat out of the gun's barrel, looking like a dragon breathing fire. Trevor grunted and in her peripheral vision, she saw him being thrown backward by the shot. She turned and looked at her husband as a second shot tore through his body, quickly followed by a third. Trevor hit the pavement on his back with a wet thud and a pool of dark, viscous blood spread out from under him. His eyes were wide, fixed, and unseeing as

Spenser pulled his head into her lap and stroked his hair, flinching at how cold and lifeless he was growing.

A raw, powerful scream was torn from Spenser's throat, and she remained on her knees, staring at the lifeless body of her husband. The tears that raced down her cheeks blurred her vision, and she held her hands over her mouth as she shook her head, trying to deny the reality of what just happened. Moving slowly, Spenser turned back toward their attacker. Shadows within his hood still kept him hidden from her sight and as she stared down the barrel of the gun, she watched as a thin tendril of smoke rose from that dark maw and floated upward.

It was then that Spenser knew she was going to die. She knew these were the last breaths she was going to take on this planet and this was the last thing she was ever going to see. As terrified as she was by it, that certainty also came along with a sense of peace. If nothing else, she took comfort in the fact that she would be with the love of her life once more.

"Go on," she snarled. "Do it. Get it over with."

The eerie chuckle that drifted from the darkness within the hoodie made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. Her stomach clenched and although her mouth was bone dry, her palms were practically dripping with sweat. Spenser looked down into the wide, sightless gaze of her husband. Of her one, true love. As the tears streamed down her face, a scream of pure, primal agony burst from her throat, echoing into the night air.

She raised her gaze to their attacker, her vision blurred by her tears. Spenser stared at him for a long minute, the rage building inside of her blending with the grief. Her heart slowed as she sneered at the man holding the gun.

"Do it!" she screamed.

The crack of the shot, sounding as loud as a cannon, rang in her ears a moment before Spenser saw the flash of fire spitting from the muzzle...

...Spenser sat bolt upright in bed, a scream bursting from her mouth, and immediately regretted it. Pain ripped through her stomach and chest, making her wince and double over, groaning in agony as the last remnants of

the dream floated away like cobwebs on a breeze. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, willing the pain that racked her body, making it difficult to even breathe, to subside. She gripped the sheet in a tight fist, waiting for it to pass.

It took a couple of minutes, but Spenser was finally able to unclench her jaw and her fist as she took a deep breath. Like the sun burning away a bank of dark clouds, the pain slowly evaporated and while she didn't feel good, *per se*, she felt better. Relatively speaking anyway. As they did whenever she woke up, Spenser's eyes drifted to the other side of the bed. The side Trevor should be sleeping in. Tears immediately welled in her eyes and though she tried to sniff them back, they fell anyway as they had since he'd been taken from her.

It had been a couple of months since the attack that left her husband dead and Spenser terribly wounded. She'd taken a bullet to the stomach and the chest. The only reason she was still alive was that a beat cop had been in the area and heard the first shots—the shots that had taken Trevor's life. The cop had come running and chased away the shooter before he could put an end to Spenser, too. Her wounds were grave though, and it was only by some miracle she'd survived them at all. But she spent most of her time since then wishing she hadn't.

At first, the police believed Spenser and her husband were the victims of a mugging gone bad. She knew from the start there was more to it than that. But the cops had been unmoved and clung to the idea it was nothing more than a robbery. The agents in her field office picked up the case though, and they started hunting the killer. And what they found had left her in more pain than being shot. The man they'd taken into custody for murdering her husband and very nearly killing her as well, hit far too close to home. It had shattered her heart into a million pieces. And she was still struggling to understand why.

The moonlight slanted in through the window. It was a clear, cold night outside and Spenser flinched when the heater kicked on with its customary clank and rattle. It was one of those things Trevor said he would get around

to fixing that he never got around to. And now, he never would. On the bed next to her lay one of Trevor's old t-shirts. She picked it up and held it close to her chest as she inhaled deeply.

The shirt still smelled of her husband. It was the only spot of comfort she'd found in the dark, emotionally turbulent days that followed his death. And it was only going to get harder. This would be the first Christmas she'd spent without him. They loved Christmas and had a thousand and one little traditions they shared. Now she had nobody to share those traditions with.

She wiped at her tears and inhaled the scent of him again. Spenser noticed the smell of her husband was beginning to fade. It wasn't as strong as it had been yesterday. And Spenser knew it was only a matter of time before Trevor's scent faded entirely. As she lay down, clutching the shirt to her tightly, she wondered how long it would be before even his face faded from her memory, leaving nothing but a blank spot where he should still be. Just like the blank spot in the bed next to her.

Spenser's loud sobs echoed throughout the house, growing louder than the heater. She cried until eventually, sleep claimed her once more. It pulled her down into its comforting depths and gave her a brief respite from the pain. It gave her a moment of peace in a world that had suddenly grown tumultuous all around her.

It gave Spenser just a little bit of grace.



CHAPTER ONE

One Year Later...

“All right, we’re home,” she said. “Go get some water, girl.”

Spenser walked into the house and took the harness off her Great Dane, Annabelle, who made a beeline for her water dish and drank deeply. With a white chest and paws, she was a blue merle—the fur on her body was predominantly gray but had black spots all over. At just six months old, she was ninety pounds and full of energy. Spenser sometimes had a hard time keeping up with Annabelle’s wild puppy energy.

She was glad to have the big dog in her home, not just for the protection she offered—even at her young age, Annabelle’s size and deep, gruff bark could scare the piss out of just about anybody. It made Spenser feel safe. More than that though, she was grateful she’d found Annabelle for the companionship she offered. Annabelle was incredibly affectionate and when she wasn’t running laps around the house, she was perfectly content.

Spenser felt so alone rattling around in the house she'd once shared with her husband and was grateful to have the big dog galloping around the house and wrestling with the couch cushions when she was laying down. Annabelle was incredibly affectionate and rarely failed to make Spenser laugh. She was grateful for that. Laughter and joy had been in short supply for the last year, but in the big, goofy dog's presence, she couldn't help but feel a lightness in her heart she hadn't let herself feel since Trevor's death.

Aside from that, though, Spenser had spent the six months after Trevor's death laying in the same spot on the sofa, wallowing in her misery. Spenser had barely moved from that spot. As somebody who worked out regularly—staying fit was essential to her job—it left her feeling sluggish and gross. So, she'd eventually peeled herself off the sofa and tried to begin working out again. It was her best friend, Marley, who'd suggested getting a dog who could keep up with Spenser on her runs.

Thinking it was a good idea, Spenser spent time researching dog breeds. A Great Dane hadn't been on her list of possibilities, but she'd stumbled onto a website that had a live camera feed of a litter of Dane puppies and Spenser had immediately fallen in love with the puppy that would become Annabelle. She'd contacted the breeder and started the adoption process. About a month after that, she was bringing Annabelle home. And although Trevor's death left a hole in her heart that would never be filled, for the first time since that night, Spenser was able to smile. She felt her heart lift and thought maybe the healing process had finally begun.

She lifted the lid off the treat jar and a moment later heard Annabelle's heavy gallop as she dashed toward the kitchen. The big dog pulled up short and sat down in front of Spenser, her big, chocolate-brown eyes fixed on the treat in her hand and a long streamer of drool hanging from her bottom lip.

"That's really gross, sweet girl," Spenser said with a chuckle. "We're going to need to teach you to wipe your mouth."

Spenser's cell phone rang so she gave the treat to Annabelle who took it from her fingers gingerly then turned and galloped out of the kitchen. Spenser waited for a moment then heard the telltale thump of the big dog

jumping onto the couch and laughed. She grabbed her phone, connected the call, and pressed it to her ear.

“Spenser Song,” she answered.

“Spense, how are you, hon?”

A smile stretched across her face at the sound of Marley’s voice. She and Marley had been best friends since they were kids and even though she lived on the other side of the country and had taken a different career path, they’d managed to remain close. Marley had gone to medical school with Trevor while Spenser had gone to the FBI Academy. Marley and Trevor were good friends and she was the one who’d introduced Spenser to him.

“I’m hanging in there, thanks,” Spenser replied. “How are you doing out there?”

“Things are good. Keeping busy at the hospital and all,” she said.

“That’s good to hear. Seeing anybody new?”

“I was seeing a guy for a little while, but it didn’t work out.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Spenser said.

“It’s for the best. I don’t think we were compatible in the long-term anyway,” Marley said with a small laugh. “I couldn’t name every major character in the Star Wars universe, and he never let me live that down.”

Spenser laughed as she fished a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. She quickly twisted the top off and took a drink. Marley fell silent and an awkward quiet descended over them giving Spenser the idea that there was more to Marley’s call than a simple hello.

“What’s going on, Mar? Like really going on?” she asked.

“I just... I know you’ve got some big things coming up and I wanted to just give you a call and check in with you. I wanted to see how you were holding up,” she replied. “I may be out here on the left coast, but I still worry about you.”

“Yeah, I know. And I appreciate that.”

Spenser took another swallow of water, trying to moisten her suddenly dry throat. Setting the bottle down on the kitchen counter, she blotted her damp palms on her running pants and bounced side to side on her feet. Her

heart raced and her stomach roiled as she thought about what she had to do tomorrow. Shifting the phone to her other ear, Spenser tucked her hair behind her ear and frowned. She drew in a deep breath and silently counted to ten, trying to soothe her jangling nerves before speaking.

“I’m doing all right. I’m good. I’m really good,” she said, cringing at how weak she sounded, even to herself.

“You don’t sound good. You sound stressed out,” Marley said.

Marley knew her better than anybody in the world. Other than Trevor anyway. But Marley always knew when Spenser was going through something and was never afraid to call her out on it. Marley had always been able to read her like a book. It was sometimes frustrating, but deep down, she enjoyed having somebody in her life that knew her so well.

“Yeah, I suppose I am a bit stressed out,” Spenser admitted.

“Sounds like more than a bit to me,” Marley pressed.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

Tomorrow morning, she was scheduled to go before a panel in the Office of Professional Review. Among the topics on the agenda was the disposition of the situation with her former partner, Derrick Ricci. That alone had her tied up in knots and even all these months later, in a state of disbelief. The mere thought of that man inspired feelings of rage and hate inside of her. But it also made her sad. He’d been her friend. At least, she’d always believed that he was her friend. Just something else in the long string of assumptions that had turned out to be wrong.

Spenser knew the other topic they were going to press her on was her status. She’d been off duty for a year while she recovered from her wounds, and they were going to want a decision about whether she was coming back to the Bureau or not. And Spenser still didn’t have an answer to that question.

“Do you know what you’re going to do about Ricci?” Marley asked gently.

“I’d pull the switch on him myself if I could,” she replied, her tone cold and harsh. “But I don’t want to talk about him. What’s going to happen is going to happen and there isn’t much I can do about it one way or the other.”

“But they want your input—”

“I don’t want to talk about him, Mar.”

“No worries,” she replied. “I’m sorry to have brought him up.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just—I’m sorry I’m so snappish. Derrick Ricci is still a pretty sore spot with me,” Spenser said.

“I understand,” Marley said. “But what about going back? Have you made a decision about whether you’re going back yet?”

A bitter laugh burst from Spenser’s throat. “Honestly? No, I haven’t. I don’t know if I can go back. But I’m afraid of what will become of me if I don’t.”

“Then don’t force yourself to go back if you’re not ready.”

“Ready or not, the Bureau wants a decision. Tomorrow.”

“If you’re hesitating and unsure, that should tell you something, hon.”

“I just don’t know. Working for the Bureau and living out here has been my dream since we were kids. You know that,” Spenser said. “But now... now it feels like it’s become a total nightmare. I just don’t feel like it fits anymore. Or maybe it’s me who doesn’t fit anymore.”

“I seem to recall somebody once telling me that when your dreams turn against you and you can’t see yourself in them anymore, it’s time to discard them and dream something new,” Marley said. “This person told me to seek out happiness and get rid of those things that aren’t serving me any longer.”

A wry smile twisted Spenser’s lips. That was advice she had given Marley when her marriage was in its death throes. Already unhappy at work, Marley then caught her husband with another woman and her marriage, as well as her professional life, seemed to be circling the drain. She was miserable. But fate seemed to intervene and out of the blue, she was offered a job out west. Spenser didn’t want to see her best friend go so far away, of course, but she felt like she couldn’t hold Marley back. More than anything, she wanted to see Marley happy, so she’d pushed her to take the job.

“You know it’s not nice to throw somebody’s words back in their face like that,” Spenser said with a small laugh.

“Good advice is good advice, no matter where it comes from.”

There was a pause on the line as Spenser tried to quiet her mind and put her thoughts in some semblance of order. She needed to decide what she was going to do with the rest of her life and as of yet, she had no idea how she was going to make that decision by tomorrow. She walked out to the living room and dropped down onto the sofa beside Annabelle. The big Dane looked up and sighed heavily, then laid her big head on Spenser's lap. She idly stroked the big dog's floppy ears with her free hand as she let her mind settle down.

"Hey, let me propose a radical idea," Marley said with a tone in her voice that made Spenser think they were finally getting around to the real point of her call.

"Lay it on me."

"Come out here," she said.

"I don't think I can ask for vacation time after being gone for a year."

"No, I'm not talking about a vacation," Marley said. "Move out here. To Sweetwater Falls. It just so happens that the town sheriff is retiring and they're going to need a replacement. I know the mayor personally and can make a recommendation..."

Spenser laughed. "No offense, Mar, but after living in New York so long, I don't know that I could live in a one stoplight town like Sweetwater Falls."

"We have more than one stoplight. We even just got a third Starbucks location. We are now officially big time," Marley replied with a laugh. "But the pace of life out here is definitely slower. Easier. Quieter. And seriously, it might be exactly what you need. It might help you find some much needed and much deserved peace."

"If there's one thing this past year has taught me, it's that I'm not very good with slow and quiet," Spenser countered.

"Just because you were laid up doesn't mean it was slow and quiet for you," Marley replied. "You have the chance to start fresh out here. To get away from all the pain and bad memories that are sticking to you out there."

"Not all the memories are bad. There are a lot of good ones, too," Spenser said then immediately cringed at how defensive and petulant she sounded.