



RUGGED
MOUNTAIN INK

Fifty, DIRTY
CHRISTMAS

BALSAM CREEK LODGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KHLOE SUMMERS

Filthy, Dirty, Christmas

Balsam Creek Lodge: Rugged Mountain Ink

Khloe Summers

Summer to Winter Publishing



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Chapter One

Poppy

“He’s got fuck me eyes.” I stare at my friend Mae and wait for her to burst into laughter.

She doesn’t. Instead, her eyes widen, and she nods slowly. “He really does, but we should click away. We don’t want to like this picture by accident.”

“Oh God. I did that last month and I nearly pissed myself.”

Mae huffs out a sigh and pinches her lips together as she crosses the small cabin floor toward the kitchen. We’ve been friends since grade school and we’re about as different as two people come. I’m not sure how we’ve sustained a friendship as long as we have. Maybe it’s the whole opposites attract thing.

Where Mae loves everything and everyone with a passion, I prefer to stay isolated and remove myself from the public as much as possible. Where she loves parties and drinks with friends, I love a quiet night indoors, nuzzling under half a dozen cozy blankets with a good book.

“So, is this what you’re going to do? You’re going to sit here and stare at Bodie forever?”

“Staring is all I have left. It’s a twelve-step process.”

She laughs. “What step are you on?”

“Bargaining, I think.”

“Oh, you’re serious.”

“Yes!” I bite back a laugh of my own, realizing how ridiculous I must sound.

“You need help. Let’s get you help! I know a guy who knows a guy.”

My eyes roll back into my head playfully. “I’m sure you do. I’m fine, really. I’m doing so much better than I was a month ago.”

“Right. You look totally fine, drooling over pictures of him. *My bad.*” She twists her hair to the side and grins. “This is totally normal behavior for a twenty-four-year-old woman. We all lust after older men we can’t have.”

“Look at him!” I point the screen toward her. “He’s everything. Big, inked, tall, the nose to chin ratio is golden, plus his voice... have you heard his voice?”

“The sooner you quit obsessing, the sooner you’re going to bump into some other guy who, one... may be age appropriate, and two... will be into you in return.”

“How do you know Bodie’s not into me?”

She huffs. “This sounds like denial, not bargaining.”

I twist my lips to the side. She might have me there, but I don’t remember which one means I’m further along.

“Denial implies I don’t realize what I’m doing. I do. I know how this whole thing sounds... and looks.”

“Okay, so it’s bargaining because you know how the denial looks?” She smirks and pours herself a cup of tea. “Last time I talked to the guy, he was kind of a dick.”

It’s true. To most people, Bodie is known as the guy who *‘tells it like it is.’*

“He’s honest.”

Mae laughs. “Right. So, he’s a dick?”

“No, he’s straightforward. There’s a difference.”

She grins. “So, what you’re telling me is, you like it.”

“What? No. I don’t like jerks. I’m not that girl. Trust me, it’s—”

“*Trust you?*” Her laughter is more like cackling. “You said you were over this guy in the seventh grade, yet here we are, still wrapped up in him. I mean, what’s wrong with Adam? He’s our age, and he’s nice. I mean, the man is volunteering for the animal shelter as we speak. He’s also got a huge crush on you.”

Adam is, in fact, one of the nicest guys, and he is very into me. Every time we bump into each other in town, he looks for a conversation to have. Last week, he started up about sweet potatoes in the cereal aisle and the fascinating story behind those beautiful starches. They're actually the number one most nutritional vegetable, at least that's what Adam says.

"Come on," Mae starts. "I know he'd jump at the opportunity to go with you to that Christmas party your family is having."

"No! I'm not bringing some guy I barely know to a Christmas party... with my family!"

"Oh, good Lord. Relax!" She sips the tea she's poured and settles into the armchair by the fireplace. "This is what people do, Pop. They invite people to things and see where it goes."

"Not to a family Christmas party."

"This is a small town. People bring folks to parties. Besides that, you get to know him really fast and that's what you're looking for, right? You said yourself you wanted a fast track to marriage."

I roll my eyes. "I said that as a joke, not because I want to throw myself at the first person you mention."

She picks up her cell phone and starts texting.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm texting him. You'll thank me later. He cleans up nice."

"No! What are you doing? I said I've got it figured out."

Her gaze drops to mine. "Do you remember last year when I told you I didn't want to go out with Jonny Tinley, but you insisted I do it?" There's a curtness in her tone that's sort of playful, sort of not.

"I do remember that." I sigh. "Is this payback or something?"

“No. I’m paying it forward.” She grins. “I wasn’t ready to date again, and you pushed me into it. Sure, it didn’t work out between us, but going on that date got me out of my shell. I needed that. If you hadn’t made it happen, I’d still be elbow deep in green mint chip ice cream watching sappy holiday movies.”

I blow out a heavy breath. “Yeah, but this is different. I’m—”

“He replied. He said he’ll meet you there at seven. Tonight, right?”

A lump thickens in my throat as Mae starts talking again.

“You’re holding onto Bodie because he’s not real.”

“What do you mean that he’s not real? He’s real.”

Mae huffs as though she’s getting annoyed with me. “That’s not what I mean. Of course he’s real... but not really. I mean, to you, at this point, he’s a fantasy, and holding onto him only lets you keep believing in a life that isn’t going to happen. And if you believe that, you don’t have to go into the world and meet real people and do real things with them. Which is what you really want, right?”

She stands from the chair and sets her mug on the counter.

“So, you’re a psychiatrist now?”

She nods. “The bill is in the mail. Now shake your head or blink twice if you agree and I’ll finalize these plans with Adam.”

I pinch my lips and try to rationalize all that she’s saying. The truth is, if I really think about it, she might be right. Bodie is nothing but a fantasy. In reality, he’s way too old for me, my brother’s best friend, and his straightforward attitude can be off-putting. As hot as he is, it might be time that I let my bargaining turn to acceptance.

Oh! Accepting was the last step. Did I just transcend?

I blink twice toward Mae. “If this goes bad, I’m blaming you.”

“As you should.” She smiles and steps out onto the front porch, closing the door behind her.

My stomach turns the second I’m alone.

A date. I have an actual date.

A real life, down to Earth, factual date.

I should call my brother and let him know there will be a plus one.

I pull out my phone to text him, and stare down at the screen. I’ve already missed two calls and there are three texts waiting, though that’s really nothing new. We talk a million times a day.

Wayne: Hey, what do you want to drink tonight? I was thinking of some kind of holiday martini, but I know you don’t like gin.

Wayne: Never mind, Bodie said you liked tequila. How did I not know you liked tequila?

My heart jumps in place. How did Bodie know I liked tequila?

Wayne: Problem solved. We’ll see you tonight.

We’ll see you tonight? My mouth goes dry. What the hell? Maybe it was a typo, or he meant ‘we’ as in the family. Yeah, he probably meant it like that.

I hope he meant it like that, because one thing I’m sure I can’t handle is seeing Bodie, especially with some other guy standing next to me.

Chapter Two

Bodie

I stand behind the kitchen counter mixing liquor and soda into a punchbowl with a few cherries and a sliced lime, though I'm not sure if I want to be here. I know I should be. Wayne hates doing this shit alone. But if I were thinking about myself, I think I'd be back in the Springs, looking over paperwork that needs finishing after the holidays.

Wayne stands on the opposite side of the counter, laying out his version of snacks onto a platter. I'm all for a healthy snack, but carrots and salsa for a Christmas party don't sit right with me. "Thanks for helping out, man. I appreciate it."

"Ah, glad to be here. You'd do the same for me." I keep my snack thoughts to myself. Wayne and I have been best friends since grade school. I was there when his parents died, and I watched him take on the role of caregiver with Poppy. Aside from a few estranged family members that keep their visits surrounding holidays, I'm all he has.

"You ever think about moving back out here?" He adds a bowl of guacamole to the tray. "You still dress the part."

I stare down at my cowboy boots. I'm made fun of quite a bit in the city for dressing like a *'redneck,'* but it's all I know, and I work best when I'm comfortable. "To what end? I spent years here trying to make it work. I never wanted to leave, but you know me. I'm always looking for the next challenge."

I grab a carrot from the tray and take a crunch filled bite, allowing myself a second to choose my words carefully. How do you tell someone that you've thought about it a million times, but you don't feel like you fit in the Rugged Mountain tapestry? In my heart, I'm a businessman who was raised on a farm. I can't be myself on a tractor or working out of a tattoo shop, but I also don't want to insult those who do. We all have a path in life. Mine just drove me to the city...

even if I miss all the other good things my mountain home has to offer.

“Besides, all you ranchers need bankers. Who’s going to loan you money when everything goes to shit, or you need a new barn built? It’s good to have someone on the inside who knows that you’ll pay your debts rather than someone who’s never been up here and is only coldly running the numbers. Essentially, what I’m saying is you can all thank me later.” I laugh and grab some solo cups from the cupboard behind me.

“Seriously, man. The town is changing. Opportunities are growing here every day. I mean, look at the lodge that was just built. It’s massive and will drive a lot of interest and work to the area. With your background, I’m sure they would love to have you.” He shoots me a grin as though he just thought of the perfect bait for his hook. “Plus, your reputation still proceeds you around here. I think we still have some teachers who use you as one of the examples on what the local kids can do with their lives.”

Well played, Wayne. That praise lure does look really appetizing.

“They need everything right now, including the general manager for the whole thing. If you’re looking for the next big opportunity, being able to put your stamp on the biggest thing to hit Rugged Mountain in decades sounds like a challenge to me.”

A job like that up here would be a game changer. When you grow up with the woods, the mountains, the lakes, the streams, with the small-town life surrounding you, it becomes a part of you and every second you’re away from it is like a lie you’re telling yourself. It would really be the perfect combination of both of my dreams.

“I thought Henry was going to be in charge?” Henry is the guy who owns Rugged Mountain Ink and most of the land out here on the mountain. He’s an old-timer now, but the guy literally moved mountains back in his day.

“It’s temporary. He’s been actively looking for someone for a while now. I could call him and get you a

meeting. You know his family, and you're one of the smartest guys around. I'd be shocked if at the very least he wouldn't interview you."

For a second, I let myself fantasize about a life back here on the mountain. I may not be a natural rancher, but just like everyone who grew up here, a cabin and few horses still pull at your heart strings... but this isn't something I should be dreaming about just yet. I swallow hard and nod, carrying the punch bowl into the living room. "It's a thought. What about you? What are you doing lately?"

He draws in a deep breath. "What isn't going on? I talked to Mullet down at the bar a few weeks ago. I'm thinking about buying the place, maybe breathing new life into it." He tips his head to the side and laughs. "Oh, did you hear about the massive bear that's coming into town?"

"Massive?"

He nods and laughs. "Supposed to be hibernating, but a few shop cams caught him in town last week going through trash bins. Not safe to have an animal that big so close to people."

I miss news like this. Bears getting into cars and raccoons destroying attic wiring. It's so much better than the violence in the city. That said, I realize that's not the reaction Wayne is looking for.

"So, when was the last time anyone saw him?"

"Mrs. Robinson said she saw him up on old Mill Road yesterday. We're going to send a group of guys out to look for him, hopefully scare him off before he gets too comfortable."

"I don't get it. Why wouldn't he be hibernating? Seems counter to his internal programming."

"I thought so too, but Google told me that as long as food is available, they don't. And right now, this whole town is full of food." He laughs. "A smorgasbord really, especially given he's the biggest guy around."

I draw in a deep breath. "Okay... so what you're telling me is, if I move up here and take the GM job, I'll have

a bear to deal with too?”

Wayne laughs. “Hopefully, we’ll have him taken care of before then.”

The doorbell rings and Wayne heads toward it, leaving me with my thoughts of bears, the lodge, and what it would be like to live out here again. Every part of it sounds like a fantasy, though it negates the reason I’m here. Hell, part of me didn’t even want to come tonight because of the darkness I have hidden away.

The door opens slowly, and my gaze draws upward, following long legs to thick thighs, a short black skirt, a little red sweater, and long blonde hair.

It’s Poppy. She’s smiling with crimson lips, holding a tray of Christmas cookies that she’s no doubt spent hours decorating herself.

My cock thumps against my zipper, and I’m reminded that I’m a piece of shit. A piece of shit who shouldn’t be here.

I look away and step back into the kitchen, attempting to gather myself.

Don’t look at her, don’t think about her, don’t have feelings for her. Don’t look at her, don’t think about her, don’t have feelings for her. Under no fucking circumstance should I have feelings for her.

A man’s voice I don’t recognize filters in behind hers, and my ears perk. She giggles in that polite way she does when something isn’t at all hilarious, but she doesn’t want to hurt someone’s feelings.

What the fuck? Who is she pretending to laugh at?

I step out into the hallway to see a man helping her with her jacket. He’s tall and clean shaven, and he wears a sweater vest over the top of a button-down shirt. I’ve seen this kid before, but I can’t figure out from where.

Truthfully, he looks like a nice, young boy. The kind of boy I can imagine would be very good to Poppy. I’m sure he’d pull out all the chairs, open all the doors, and pay for every

meal. I'm sure he'd hold her hand, keep her warm, and remind her how smart and beautiful she is on days when she's struggling... but I can't help but wonder if he'd touch her like I could. Would he make a necklace with his hand on her throat and bite her skin until she's jumping and sighing, coming hard all over his cock?

I swallow hard. Settle down, darkness. Not tonight.

Blowing out a heavy breath, I step forward, holding out my hand like some psycho who wasn't just thinking about how I could please a twenty-four-year-old better than her age-appropriate counterpart. "I don't think we've met."

"Oh, hey." The kid's voice is still squeaking. "I'm Adam. Are you Poppy's brother?"

Might as well be, which is another reason this little crush I have on her is so fucking awful. I've known the girl forever.

"No. Friend of the family. That's her brother Wayne."

"Oh, sorry. Tonight is kind of our first date."

I laugh and choke at the same time. "*First date?* At a Christmas Party? Wow! Young people do things different nowadays."

Poppy rolls her eyes and smacks my arm as she walks by. "Be nice."

She smells like winter berries and freshly fallen snow, if that's a thing. Either way, that light tap was enough to prompt a fantasy about grabbing her thick waist and pulling her back into my arms.

Instead, she walks by, setting presents under the tree. "I didn't get you anything, Bodie. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were coming."

"Of course. Not a problem. How are ya?"

She drags in a deep breath and struggles to put on a smile. I've always gotten the impression that she doesn't care for me much. "Yeah. I'm good. Very good. Things are good." Her stammering response should be my inclination to step

away. Instead, I take another moment to compare every other girl I've ever met to her.

No one compares to Poppy. They don't even come close. That's the pain of it all, the reality that I'm destined to spend my nights jerking off to pictures of her rather than touching her. I'll never know what it's like to run my hand over her smooth skin. I'll never know what she tastes like, or what she sounds like when she's crying out in pleasure. Hell, I'll never even know what it's like to hold her and keep her safe from the world, or what her innermost thoughts about life are.

"You, ugh, you still working down at the Country Dairy?" I brush my hand down over my beard as I talk.

She nods. "Every day." She's more curt tonight than usual.

I nod and take a pull of the bourbon I'm drinking way too damn fast.

"I didn't know you were at the Country Dairy." Adam steps in from the side, holding a can of ginger ale. The kid doesn't drink either. How appropriate of him. "I volunteer there a couple times a month. I'm surprised I haven't run into you."

Of course he fucking volunteers. I swallow hard and turn back toward the kitchen, desperate to compose myself. They can have their stupid conversation about fucking cows or whatever the hell they're talking about.

Why the hell did I come here?

Though I'm not entirely listening through the breezeway, it's hard not to hear the awkward conversation they continue to have.

Poppy isn't saying much to him either. Maybe she's in a weird mood tonight. I know the holidays are hard for her and Wayne.

Adam, however, doesn't quit. "Did you know that dairy cows produce six to eight gallons of milk a day?"

Oh my god! This guy has no idea how to talk to a woman, let alone a woman on a first date. Ask her about herself. Compliment her. Say... anything that's more exciting than dairy cow facts.

I resist the urge to show her how a real date should go, because again, I'm an old man and they're young people, doing what young people do.

Shaking my head, I sit at the dining room table as the doorbell rings again. I'm sure I should go out there and talk, but I need a second.

I'd prepared myself to see Poppy, but I wasn't ready to see her with another man.

The kitchen door swings open, and like a warm breath of air, she's standing alone with me in the kitchen. Her eyes are wide, and her lips are pursed. "Where's that bottle of tequila?"

"Fridge."

She nods and swings open the door, her round ass pushing out as she bends forward. She's fucking gorgeous.

I watch carefully as she pops open the bottle and swigs, her long hair draping down her back as her throat moves.

"Rough day?"

"Nope. Rough month, maybe. Rough life..."

"Well then, drink up."

She takes another swig. "I don't know how I got roped into this."

"Into what?"

"A date with Adam. He's out there explaining how light bulbs work."

I stand from the table and grin. I want to look concerned, but I can feel my truth radiating from my eyes. I'm happy she isn't into him. "I'm sure he's a nice guy."

“He’s nice alright. What about you? Why are you here? Doesn’t your family have some big, huge Christmas party this weekend? How long are you in town?” It’s more words than she’s said to me in ages.

“Not this weekend. They do it closer to Christmas. I’m here through January and then I go back to the city.”

“*The city...* how’s all that going?” Her pretty lips wrap around the bottle, and she chugs another sip.

“Still trying to take over the world. I’d say I’m halfway there.”

“I bet that outfit is really throwing your city friends for a loop. *Wasn’t he supposed to be some genius businessman?*” She bites back a smile.

“Okay, now you’re hurting my feelings.” I take the bottle from her hands. “That’s enough for you.”

“Oh no... hand it back. I’ve only taken two sips. That’s less than a shot. I need more if I’m going to get through tonight.” She reaches out but I hold the bottle up, playing keep away until she’s backed against the kitchen wall, reaching up high. I’m so fucking close to her that my cock could reach out and touch her. I could lean into her lips, as I brush her soft hair off her shoulder.

Her voice cracks as she says, “One more sip, then I’ll go back to the party. I promise.”

I stare at her for a long while, holding her gaze, then lower the bottle to her smooth lips and tilt slightly, watching as she suckles down the clear liquid.

Fucking hell, I’m going to burst. I’m going to fucking burst.

She swallows and our stare never breaks. Second by second, every inch of my body lights on fire and my palms ache to reach out and touch her, hold her, show her what it’s like to have a man’s hands on her skin.

“You guys coming or what? The house is filling up.” Wayne’s head peeks into the kitchen and we both scatter away

from each other like dandelions in a strong wind.

“Yeah, coming.” Poppy smooths her clothes down, brushing up against me as she moves, her glance on me as she slides by.

I’m not sure what just happened, or if I can make it happen again, but holy fucking hell, I need more of it.

Chapter Three

Poppy

Christmas music. You either love it or you don't. I used to love it. Now, I'm not so sure I'll ever be able to listen to it again.

Jingle Bell Rock... more like fuck my life.

I blow out a heavy breath and stare toward the twinkling lights of the tree as Adam rattles on about the special chocolate he uses in his banana bread. I get it, banana bread is delicious, but I was trying to talk to him about this pin my mom had. It was a sapphire angel that she used when she was saying her prayers. I know it's in the house somewhere. I've been looking for it since she passed like ten years ago now. Christmas always gets me thinking about it again.

I shake my head and attempt to come back to reality. That pin is long gone. Maybe it took my senses with it. Judging by my latest interaction with Bodie, I'd say so. That's what ruined *Jingle Bell Rock*.

I'm sure he was playing around, but all I wanted was for him to grab me by the throat and make me his good girl.

That, of course, is a fantasy that is best shared... never.

Though, the way Bodie is staring at me now has me wondering if he's having the same fantasies. Or more likely, contemplating what a jerk I am. Why did I tell him Adam wasn't for me? I should've kept that to myself. I shouldn't have brushed up against him on the way out. I was drunk. *I am drunk*. He knows I'm drunk, right?

Suddenly, my lungs are tight and I'm heaving for air. It'd be nice if the guy next to me noticed, but he's turned to talking to my aunt about the velocity of wind and how it's used to propel energy. He is very smart, I'll give him that.

I draw in another breath, trying to calm myself, but it gets stuck, and instead of air, I suck in spit and choke. *Of course, I do.*

Adam finally turns toward me. “You okay? You need water?”

“No, she needs air.” Bodie’s deep voice vibrates through me, creating calm. I didn’t even see him walk over here. He glances toward Adam. “Finish your conversation. I’ll take her out.” His big, rough hand lands on my back and he guides me toward the back door. Too bad he doesn’t know he’s the reason I can’t breathe.

I don’t look back to see Adam’s reaction, but I do hear his voice continue on, so I guess he’s okay with all this.

“You alright?” Bodie guides me out the back door. “You’re not acting like yourself.”

My eyes widen as I turn toward him. “I see you watching me! I was starting to think I had something on my face.”

He scoffs. “You should be glad I was watching, or Mr. Talks-a-lot would be shoving water down your throat.”

I stare up toward him, desperately trying not to get lost in the chocolate of his eyes. God knows there’s no search party coming if I do. Nope. If I get lost right now, I’m gone for good. My twelve-step process down the drain.

“Yeah. Well... thanks I guess.”

He huffs out a sigh and tucks his hand into his pocket. I realize he’s in the city all day doing big, city people things, but looking at him here, I’d say he was just as country as the rest of us. “You’ve always got a chip on your shoulder with me,” he says gruffly. “Did I do something?”

My eyes roll. “*What?* I don’t have a chip on my shoulder. Well... you did take my drink away from me a bit ago.”

“I gave it back, didn’t I?”

“On your terms. Maybe I wanted the bottle.”

“Maybe you did, but you didn’t need it.”

“Right. Just how you knew I needed air and not water. Maybe I wanted Adam to get me water. Maybe all his little facts are growing on me.”

“Did you?”

I stare toward Bodie, trying to swallow down the dry lump in my throat. “No, but that’s not the point.”

“What’s the point, then?”

I blow out a heavy breath and turn away, crossing my arms over one another. It’s not particularly freezing tonight, but it’s not warm either. “What’s the point of what?”

“Your attitude! You’ve always got one. Cut it out.”

I laugh and twist back toward him. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me, knock it off. You’ve had an attitude with me forever and I’m tired of it.”

“Is that right?” I step toward him, my gaze locked on his. “And what are you going to do about it if I don’t?”

Bodie straightens his back. He’s so big. So, so big. He towers over me and the width of him is easily two of me combined, maybe two and a half.

I swallow hard, desperate for him to teach me every lesson I’ve *never* been taught.

His fingertip lands under my chin and he holds me there in place. “You wouldn’t want the kind of punishments I give, little one.”

My chest tightens and I’m lost, speechless, void of all communicative ways. Words are no longer an option and even thoughts are fleeting.

Little one? Why does that sound so provocative? It’s probably because I’m a sick person. Maybe I heard him wrong. I hitch my hand up on my hip and roll my eyes toward him.

“You’re giving me punishments now? What are you... my dad?”

His gaze flickers and I swear he leans in.

“Everyone is opening gifts if you two want to join.” Aunt Linda pokes her head out the back door. “Everything okay?”

Why do people keep interrupting us? It’s probably for the best. If that had been Wayne again, he’d for sure think something was up.

I blow out a heavy breath and move past Bodie, glancing up at him quickly. I realize I don’t have all my faculties, but I’m pretty sure I was just flirting. Anymore of that and I’ll be humiliated come morning.

“Wait. What’s wrong?” He’s so intense.

“Nothing. My stomach, and I’m tired. I shouldn’t have drunk that tequila.”

“Which is why you can’t go. You’ve been drinking.”

“Adam will drive me home.”

“I’m not letting Adam drive you home in this storm.”

“What storm? It’s perfectly clear.”

“It’s winter on a mountain. There’s always a storm coming.” He says the words as though they make perfect sense.

“Okay, so everyone has been drinking and there’s an imaginary storm coming. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you wanted me to stay.”

He glances away and back again, scrubbing his hand over his salt and pepper beard. “I want you to be safe. It’s dark, there’s some massive bear running around the mountain, there’s ice everywhere, and you’ve been drinking. I’m just saying... go upstairs and take a breather before you go anywhere.”

“No! I want to leave. I want to go back to my cozy little cabin and read.”

“There are books on the shelf in the hallway. Grab one and go upstairs.”

“Oh, is that right? How have I gotten along so well without you all these years?” I turn toward the back door, but he holds me in place, his big hand on my arm. God, I’d stay here forever if I could. Him bossing me, me denying it all like a little brat who’s desperate to be put in place.

“You’re not leaving this house, Poppy. End of story. So, go upstairs, take a break, wash your face, take a nap, whatever you need, but you’re not leaving.”

“You can’t make me stay, Bodie. You’re not my—”

“Have I not looked out for you since the dawn of fucking time?” There’s a bit of a growl in his tone, low and seething. Why do I like it? Why is my clit throbbing? Why do I want him to sink his teeth into every part of my body?

“You have,” I squeak, “and it’s time you stop. I’m grown.”

“Grown and drunk. I’m looking out for you. That’s why I’m here tonight.”

“Oh... your sole purpose tonight is to look out for me?”

Bodie nods. “That and to keep your brother from going crazy. He needs you here tonight. Get it together and get back in the living room.”

Bodie has always been protective of me, but he’s never been so direct.

I like it... *a lot.*

Unfortunately for him, I like defying him more. I like the thick vein in his neck that thumps when I disobey him. I like the tension in his forehead and the squaring of his jaw. I like the way he looks when he’s about to lose control.

Good Lord, I want this man to lose control.

“I’m not going to listen to you, Bodie.” I take a step toward him, my gaze on his as I open a box I shouldn’t open. “Not unless you make me.”

He growls under his breath and leans into my ear, rumbling low like a wild animal about to come untethered. “You’re playing with fire, little one. Are you sure you want to do that?”

I hold my breath and open the back door, biting back the words... *‘I’ve never wanted anything more.’*

Chapter Four

Bodie

Fucking hell. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I crossed all kinds of lines, yet didn't cross them enough. Why am I so desperate to ruin tonight, my friendship with Wayne, and my whole fucking life? I lean against the back wall of the house and suck in the cold winter air.

"Everything okay?" Adam steps outside, straightening the cuffs on his button down.

"Yeah." I glance toward him then back out at the wintery scene. We have a few feet of snow left from the storm that hit last week and the wind is whipping it around pretty good.

"You like her, don't you?" Adam pulls a few sips of the ginger ale he's been nursing.

I snap toward him. "No! The fuck kind of question is that?"

He laughs. "I've liked a girl before. I'm not totally blind to how that whole thing works. But if you're denying it, that's cool."

His question has me wondering what's obvious and what's not in Wayne's eyes.

"What the fuck, man? Thought you were inside talking about the origin of aluminum foil or something."

He laughs. "I've got to find something to talk about. There's obviously no room for me here."

"Okay, man. Whatever you've gotta tell yourself."

He laughs. "Seriously, how long have you liked her?"

"I said fuck off..."

He holds up his hands. "Look, you do whatever it is you've got to do. But if you're trying to hide the fact that you have a thing for Poppy, you're doing a shit job at it."

I gotta say, the kid's got balls for coming out here. Thus far, he didn't come off like the type who'd confront a bee, let alone a grown ass man. That said, I can't let him get away with it.

"You ever think maybe you're the reason Poppy was hanging off me tonight?"

He laughs. "She wasn't hanging off you, bro. *You were hanging off her.*"

"Is that right?" I play it cool, but inside I can't help but wonder if he's simply stating the obvious. If he is, does Wayne see it to? Does Poppy see it?

Fuck!

Adam grins. "I'm going to take off, but if it's any help, I see the way she looks at you. I don't think she'd turn you down."

I bite the inside of my cheek and watch as he crunches through the snow toward the little Corolla he's parked on the opposite side of the driveway.

Whatever I feel or don't feel for Poppy can't be this obvious and pursuing it has never been, and will never be, an option. The one and only choice I have is to care for her, which is what I was doing tonight. Wayne sees that, and he appreciates it. He's mentioned that a few times. To him, it's nice to have another set of eyes on his sister's well-being. There's trust in that. Trust that I can't under any circumstance break. The man is like a brother to me, and that's all someone like me should ask for.

Regardless of whatever I'm doing tonight, Wayne is my best friend. I can't date his little sister.

I draw in a deep breath and step back inside the house. Wayne is in the back corner by the fireplace talking to folks and laughing. A couple of other people have gathered by the tree holding eggnog. And Poppy, who I thought was upstairs, is sitting in the corner of the room with her head buried in her phone.

This is the part where I should find someone else to talk to. I should make use of myself in the kitchen and find snacks that aren't vegetable based. Instead, I wander toward the girl in the corner.

"I saw your date left."

She nods slowly. "He stopped me before he went out the back door."

"He tell you why he was leaving?" My heart walls thicken as I wait for her response. The last thing I need is to explain away his observations.

"Nope. He said he was tired. This is a mess. You know that, right? Mae set me up with him because I needed help getting over—" She huffs. "Whatever."

"He wasn't your type, anyway."

"*My type?* You know my type?" There's sarcasm in her tone.

I grin. "You like... big guys, right? Big guys with beards, tattoos, and—"

"I like *nice* guys. Guys who treat me *nice*. Guys who say *nice* things and want to be *nice*."

"No, you don't! You like guys who tell you the truth. Guys who say it like it is."

She stands from the chair. "Are you like bullying me or..."

"No. This is me making you feel better for ditching a guy who wouldn't be a good fit."

"Right. Well, *no one* seems to be a good fit. So..." She turns away and walks back into the kitchen.

I shouldn't follow, but I do.

She reaches for the bottle of tequila on the counter. "What is it about the holidays that makes people think about love?"

“Seeing everyone together and happy I guess.” I take the bottle from her. This time, she’s handing it toward me.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“No. *Fuck no!*” I take a drink and pass the liquor back. “Not in the cards for me.”

“Really? You don’t want a family or a wife or anything?”

“Certainly, but I’m holding out for perfection. I need to be with that one person who will fit into my chaotic life.”

She clears her throat. “So, you have a person in mind?”

I take another sip of tequila. Fuck I hate this shit. “I’m vetting someone. She’s pretty great, but there are always obstacles.”

“Sounds special. Do I know her?”

What the hell are we doing? If Adam was right, and Poppy does like me, not telling her that she’s the girl I like would hurt her, and that’s the last thing I want to do. Also, telling her will change the course of our relationship forever and I can’t have that.

I hop from the counter and grab the box of Christmas cookies she brought. Perfect golden snowflakes with white icing and glittery sprinkles.

“You make these?”

“Today. They’re your favorite, with the—”

“Lemon cream cheese icing. You make the best sugar cookies, Pop.” I sink into one, groaning as the sweetness hits my tongue.

“I figured I had to do something for you once I found out you’d be here.”

I nod and grab a small box wrapped in blue paper from my coat that’s hanging by the garage entry. “I grabbed this for you. It’s just a little something but—”

She bumps me with her shoulder and grins. “You got me something? Why?”

“It’s something you’ll like. Just open it.”

She takes the small box in her hand and unwraps it quickly as I finish off the sugar cookie.

With the small, velvet box opened in her hand she looks toward me and bites her bottom lip. “What is this? Is this my mom’s prayer angel?”

I nod. “Yeah, I found it a couple of days ago when we were cleaning. Wayne said I could take it down to the jeweler and have it set for you. I hope you like it on the chain. I just thought it would be a good way to keep track of—”

Her jaw drops. “Bodie! I... this is the most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me! I—”

“It’s no big deal.” I look away and grab a carton of milk from the fridge. Tequila isn’t going to pair with sugar cookies the way milk does. “Don’t make a thing about it.”

When I turn around, she’s there. Her sweet little frame, her light blonde hair, a tear on her cheek. “Thank you.” She reaches up and wraps her arms around me, laying her head against my chest. I don’t think we’ve ever been this close. Sure, she’s hugged me before, but we didn’t hold on for so long.

My hands wrap around her waist, and I hold her close against me, drinking in the moment, her breath, her touch, her everything.

I drag air into my lungs and let it out slowly, but it arrives as an unintentionally low growl in her ear.

“Are you okay?” She leans up and her gaze meets mine. Every inch of me knows I should hold it together. I should stand tall, strong, and unwavering against this tiny emotional gesture. I should nod and walk away. I should go back to the living room and help Wayne entertain the guests.

I don’t do any of that.

Instead, I lean into Poppy's lips and crash against her frame, kissing her slowly. My hand on her face, the other on her hip. The last bits of thought I have spread somewhere on the kitchen floor.

I'm not sure what I expect. I'm too busy tasting her lips, feeling her body, listening to her soft moans as she embraces every second of what's happening.

Fuck, this is wrong... really fucking wrong.

My heart races, my palms are sweaty, and I know any second, Wayne can come bursting through the door. Still, I can't stop. I can't let go of her.

Her small hand wraps around my back and I feel her struggling to tip up high enough on her toes to reach me. I scoop her up in my arms, and settle her on the kitchen counter, running my fingers through her hair, landing my lips on her neck, kissing my way across the delicate bones of her shoulder and back again.

"What are we doing?" She pants against my neck as I kiss her harder, licking my way up toward her ear.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No! Never!"

I kiss behind her ear as my hands wander her soft hips and land on her stomach, pushing up toward her breast. She takes my hand in hers and guides me there, letting me know she wants it.

She wants me.

Fuck! I can't do this. I can't be here. I can't, but I am. I am, and I can't stop.

"That girl, I can't stop thinking about." I clear my throat, and cup her face in my hand. "The one I compare to everyone," I hold her gaze in mine, "is you, Poppy. It's always been you." I thumb over her mouth and watch as her perfectly plump lip wets my finger. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, everything about you. The way you spar with

me, your eyes, your thick thighs, the way your pretty hair falls down over your shoulder. I—”

“I... I like you too, Bodie. I have... for so long.” She pants while she speaks as though she’s desperate with need. “Touch me, please. Please don’t stop touching me.”

I squeeze her breast and run my hand between her legs, losing my fingers deep in her thighs.

Her head leans against my shoulder and the sound of Christmas music and laughter echo through the house. We’re alone in the kitchen, but we’re only a few feet away from someone walking through the door and ruining all this for both of us. That realization should be the reason I stop.

Instead, my fingertip swipes against the soft cotton of her panties. She’s soaking wet... *for me*.

I draw two fingers over the center of her slit and rub softly, closing my eyes as she moans in my ear.

Over and over again, soft and steady with the brilliance of a symphony, until I press in further, pinning the cotton against her swollen clit. I want to sneak behind the curtain and touch her silky sticky juices, but I don’t want to go too far too soon. I’ve only just gotten her against me. I need to go slow, keep her aching for me.

I rub in small circles through the fabric as she aches and moans against my touch.

Her small hand lands on my cock and she begins stroking it through my jeans. We’re like two horny teenagers who’ve been left alone for a second. We can’t control ourselves. Hands are everywhere, lips are everywhere, and with every soft moan, I’m determined to go further.

What the hell is wrong with me?

My teeth scrape against her shoulder and sink into her flesh as I work her clit through soaking wet panties.

“I need you, Bodie. Please! I need you so bad!” She’s breathless, desperate, needy, aching.

Every action drives a stake straight through me, and the urge to satisfy her becomes overwhelming.

“Fuck,” I growl into her ear and scrape my teeth against the lobe as I scan through possibilities in my head. I could take her upstairs. We could tuck into the closet. We could go outside and fuck like animals in the shed. None of it is good enough.

The kitchen door squeaks and flies open. “I need some help with the horses. Gypsy got—” Wayne stares toward us, his jaw slacked, his face redder and redder by the second. “What the fuck is going on?”

Poppy looks back, her gaze wide as she hops from the counter. “I, ugh, I had something in my eye, and he was helping me.” It might sound believable if she weren’t so out of breath and her skirt weren’t tucked into her panties.

Wayne stares toward me, his fists clenching. “Were you doing what I think you were doing?”

I’m a lot of things, but a liar isn’t one of them, especially where my best friend is concerned. *This... this is on me.*

I glance toward Poppy. “If you’re asking if I was kissing her... I was.”

Without hesitation, he punches me square in the jaw.

“Stop!” Poppy shouts, pushing Wayne back. “I like him! I wanted him to kiss me.”

“What? No!” Wayne plants his feet and looks at Poppy, his index finger pointing in my direction like divine judgment. “You’re twenty years younger than him. What the fuck, Pop! I get that you’re lonely, but you’re not making sense.” He shakes his head and looks toward me. “I’ve seen you two making eyes, and I wondered if something was up, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

Apparently, everyone saw this but us.

“There’s nothing going on, Wayne. He kissed me. It was a mistake. We’re drunk.” She points toward the bottle of

tequila on the counter. “What’s wrong with the horses?”

I get what she’s doing but I won’t go where she’s going. It wasn’t a mistake. It was the first real feeling I’ve had in... forever.

“What happened just now, wasn’t a mistake for me, Poppy.” I turn her toward me, staring down at her pretty blue eyes. “I meant what I said about you.”

She shakes her head and laughs. “We’re drunk. We’re not making sense.”

“I’m far from drunk. I’m a big guy. It would take the bottom of that bottle before I started doing things I didn’t want to do.”

She glances back toward Wayne. “The horses?”

He sighs and blows out heavy air. “No, we’re settling what’s going on here first.”

“If Gypsy is out, he’ll be halfway to town in ten minutes. We have to go after him.” She notices her skirt and pulls it into place. “We can talk about this later.”

Wayne has been drinking. You can see it in his eyes. It’s probably to offset the terrible friend I’ve been tonight, leaving him alone in a room full of relatives he didn’t want to be alone with.

I don’t know if we can repair this. I’ve really fucked up.

“Let’s go.” I step past Poppy and toward Wayne, holding her against my chest for a long second as we move through the kitchen. I don’t care who sees anymore. Touching her even for a second is the best feeling I’ve ever had in my life. As wrong as it is, I know now where I belong. There’s no going back from that.

Poppy must not see it that way. She brushes me off and follows Wayne outside, talking with him about something as they approach the truck. As Wayne opens the driver’s door, I run out to stop him. “Not like this, buddy. You’ve had too many. Get in on the other side.”

Poppy gives me a half smile and I can see she's relieved. I'm sure she would have been fine, but I couldn't have lived with myself if I was wrong.

Snow begins to fall heavy, and as we inch down the driveway with the horse trailer, I get a glimpse of what life could be like with her at my side. A late winter night, wrangling our own horses in with her breath on my windshield. I wonder if she's imagining the same, or if she's still trying to figure a way out of what's happened. Judging by her silence, I'd guess the latter.

At the end of the driveway, I park and hop out of the truck, watching as Wayne tosses the rope half a dozen times. He's tipsy, and the horse is wound up. We could be out here all night long.

“Why don't you let me help? Toss me the rope.”

He laughs. “Let you help? I let you help, and you fucked my baby sister.”

“Woah. No. That didn't happen.”

“You want to, right? You're fucking sick! She's a kid!”

I want to debate his facts. She's most definitely not a kid. She's in her mid-twenties, but now doesn't seem like the time to argue numbers. That, and I understand the thought he's going for. “Hand me the rope. I'll help.”

He tosses it again this time landing it around Gypsy's neck. “I'm going to take him up to the barn. I'll meet you guys back at the house. We should probably shut the party down. It's been a long night.” His tone is gruff, and I know now that it's going to take more than a conversation to get through to him. It's going to take time. Lots of time.

I'd rather have it out here and now, but given the holidays are right around the corner and there's still twenty people inside waiting for our return, I decide it's best to just climb up in the truck with Poppy.

She holds the engine on idle and turns toward me. “I heard him.”

I stay silent because I can't fix what he said.

"What happened with us, can't happen." She runs her fingers through her hair. "You know how I feel about you. God, I've felt this way forever, but I can't hurt Wayne again."

"Really? We could rip this Band-Aid off, once and for all."

She smiles and puts the truck in reverse, watching in her rearview mirror as she backs up. "I remember being a little girl, watching you, imagining you were my husband, and this was us. A truck, Friday night, a riverbank. Hell, you're the reason I don't move on, the reason no other man seems good enough." A tear slips down her cheek. "And in my head, this all makes sense. You, me, and Wayne... a all the family someone could need. But that's fantasy, isn't it? Look at him..." She parks the truck and nods toward the barn where her brother is relocating the horse. "He's crushed. We're the only two people in his life. If we betray him, he's got nothing left. I can't do that to him. And I know deep down, you don't want to either."

She's not wrong. I'd never want to hurt Wayne, but denying what I need is unbearable, and I'm not sure how much longer I can put his needs in front of my own. There has to be a time where I stop living a life where all I do is chase jobs to fill a void I'm forbidden to fill.

"He'd come to terms with us. It would take time, but he would."

"That's the thing, Bodie. What makes you think there's an *us*? What if we hurt him and then we don't work out? What if all the energy between us is because it's taboo? What happens when it's not?" Her brows raise and she looks away. "I'll tell you. It's awkward forever and everyone got hurt in the process. I can't be that selfish."

I draw in a deep breath and reach for her hand, holding it tight in mine as snow piles on the windshield. "What if it turns into everything we ever dreamed of? You're not even leaving room for the possibility that we get everything we've both wanted."

She laughs sarcastically. “Do you know how badly I want to say yes? Do you know how bad I want your hands all over me? God, Bodie. I dream about it constantly.” She blows out a breath and turns to jump out of the truck. “I’m going to say good night to everyone.”

“You’re not leaving, are you?”

“No. That last bit of tequila was too much to drive home. I’ll sleep on the couch tonight and head out in the morning. Maybe I can apologize to Wayne enough times that he’ll forgive us both.”

I stare toward her in the dim light of the Christmas lights twinkling off the house, my lips aching for hers. “I’ll tell him that I shouldn’t have kissed you, and I’ll apologize if that’s what you want... but I will never say it was a mistake. Touching you will *never* be a mistake, Poppy.”

She shakes her head and looks back toward me before making her way toward the house. Wayne is close behind. He doesn’t acknowledge me. *I wouldn’t either.*

I’m not making good choices tonight. Trouble is, I don’t think I’m done yet.

Chapter Five

Poppy

The cabin is quiet, and the family Christmas party is finally behind us. Though, I'd sort of redo the day over and over again if it meant Bodie touching me like he did.

I dial Mae. I need to talk to someone, and she's already texted me six times with messages about Adam flaking. I assume he texted to let her know how terrible everything went and what a horribly awful date I am.

Truth be told, he has a point. I could have shown a little interest in the making of light bulbs or the history of caramel apples. Instead, I was drooling over a man I've been in love with for years. A man I was supposed to be over.

Who am I kidding? Getting over Bodie isn't possible. There's no doubt in my mind that he's who I'm supposed to be with. Every cell in my body knows that. I ache for him daily. Who does that? Who aches for another person so consistently that they can set the time by it?

"You really couldn't even make it through the night?" Mae's voice is strained. "What happened? Adam wouldn't tell me anything."

"What didn't happen?" I stare up at the ceiling fan as I lay back on my brother's bed. He said he wasn't going to be able to sleep and insisted I take it. Even when I'm an ass he's taking care of me.

"Okay, you're going to have to be a lot less cryptic." Mae sighs. "It's late."

"Bodie and I... kissed, and... I think he likes me back."

Silence rings out like a scream on the other end of the line. "Are you sure you didn't pass out and imagine the whole thing?"

"I've asked myself that question a few times today, but I think it happened." I blow out a breath. "Trouble is, Wayne

walked in on us, and I saw quickly how unaccepting he would be of the whole thing.”

“So? You’ve wanted Bodie forever. Like for-ev-er. You have to see where this goes.”

I draw in a heavy breath. “I want to, trust me, but what happens when things go bad?”

“Ya know, sometimes I worry about you.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’ve wanted Bodie for years, you finally get him in your clutches, and you’re already worried about things going bad?” Her tone lifts. “Enjoy it while you got it, girl. If it fails miserably, at least you got it out of your system.”

“And then what? What about Wayne?”

“Come on. Do you really think your only brother will stop loving you if you do something he doesn’t like? It’s time you stop with that.” She sighs into the line. “You have to do this. You’ve uncorked the bottle. What do you have to lose at this point?”

“No, I explained the whole thing away. It’s fine. He’ll wake up in the morning, assume we were all drunk, and it will melt into the ether like it should.”

“Pop,” she pauses dramatically, “how are you going to look Bodie in the eye knowing what you know? It’s going to eat you up inside. You’ll go crazy.”

It’s only been three hours since we kissed and it’s already eating me up that I’m not lying next to him, so I get where she’s going with this.

“I know, but I have to figure out how to compartmentalize it all.”

“Right.” Her tone is curt. “You’re so good at compartmentalizing. Can I remind you of the twelve-step process you were on a few hours ago? Which step is this?”

I bite back a laugh because I have to admit, that’s funny. “I think this is the step after acceptance.”

“Oh... so kissing him is accepting the fact that you’re over him.”

“Yeah. I got it out of my system so... you know... I’m good now.”

She sighs heavily and I figure a lecture is coming.

“Please don’t.”

“I’ll have to talk you into loving the man you love tomorrow. My pain in the ass boss is calling me at eleven p.m. He’s such an asshole. You know this guy wants me to work on Christmas day? He’s like Scrooge on steroids.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s pretty bad, but you’ve always been hot for bad boys, right?”

I think I hear her eyes roll through the phone. “Hot doesn’t mean anything. I gotta go. I’ll call you later.”

The phone no more than disconnects before I hear the bathroom door squeak open in the hallway. There’s a washroom downstairs, so I doubt my brother came up. Besides, I didn’t hear the floorboards whine on the landing. That means that Bodie is ten feet away with his cock out, taking a piss.

This also should not be something I’m thinking about. Yet here I am, wondering if he’s also thinking about how many feet away I am. Truth be told, he’s probably focused on the stream of urine leaving his body, and not me.

Maybe we did have too much to drink. I did swig a lot from that tequila bottle, and sure he’s a big guy, but I wasn’t babysitting him all night. He could have had more than he let on too. There was punch and eggnog, and his breath smelled like bourbon. Maybe he wasn’t drunk-drunk, but he couldn’t have been thinking straight. Maybe he’s regretting ever touching me now.

I blow out a heavy sigh. That’s the most likely scenario. This whole night was one big tipsy mistake that *will never* and *can never* result in anything real. The yearning I’m feeling is most likely one sided—as usual.

I roll to my side and shut my eyes.

That's the truth. All of this will disappear in the morning.

That should be a relief, but it aches a little to even think it.

I try to focus on anything but the faucet running in the bathroom, but my brain fixates on each move Bodie makes. The light flicking off, the door opening, the creak on the boards as his heavy body steps down the hallway. The sigh and patter of his feet as he turns left toward his room... then pauses.

The sound of his bedroom door closing on the opposite side of the hall should come next, but it doesn't.

My heart stills and I hold my breath as I wait for him to keep going. Maybe he got a message on his phone that couldn't wait. Probably some hot, age-appropriate woman who has her shit together and isn't afraid to go after the things she wants.

I shake my head and toss a pillow over my ears, hoping to drown out the sounds he's making or not making in the hallway.

Unfortunately, the feathers don't do much to block the noise and soon the creaking returns, following a line back toward the bathroom. Maybe he forgot something.

I tell myself to stop listening, but suddenly, I'm like a dolphin feeling the sounds before I hear them.

A knock hits my door. *What the hell?*

Blood rushes toward my heart then drops out all at once, leaving me with a bottomless feeling that spins my head. I shoot up from the bed and smooth my hair, then lay down again, messing it up. I can't look like I'm ready. I have to look surprised, like I was fast asleep, not at all thinking about him.

The door knocks again, softly. "Poppy, you awake?"

"Yeah." I swallow hard. "No. I mean, yeah. I am now. Come in."

A small sliver cracks through the door before it opens fully and Bodie's giant frame slides inside, closing the door behind him.

There have been a few occasions on which I've seen Bodie with no shirt on, but here, in the dim light of the room, with us alone, in his tight boxer briefs, I'm not sure I've ever seen him like this.

He steps toward me, bending his giant frame onto the edge of the bed. "Can we talk for a second?" His tone is low and raspy.

Wayne is downstairs, and if I heard the floorboards, so did he. I'm sure of it.

"What's wrong?"

Bodie drags in a deep breath. "I can't sleep."

I swallow hard, hoping he says everything exactly like the script I've written out in my head. Which, if I'm honest, kind of plays out like porn.

"Why's that?"

This is the part where he lays me back and tells me how hot I am, how he can't stop thinking about me.

Instead, he drags in a deep breath. "You're probably right about Wayne. I, ugh, he's going through a tough time right now at his shop and if you and I were to get together, it would be a mess for him to figure out."

I want to snap and ask him why he's woken me up to tell me this, but he continues.

"That said, I'm lying in bed and all I can think about is how you felt in my arms."

My toes curl. "What?"

"You aren't denying that everything tonight with you and I felt... *perfect*, right?"

"No. I'm laying here thinking the same thing, but it doesn't change things, Bodie."

“Okay,” he reaches for my hand, swallowing me up beneath his rough palm, “so what if I look for a job out here? Balsam Creek Lodge is hiring. They need a general manager. I’ve been looking for the past hour and I saw a really great ranch for sale on the north side of the mountain. It wouldn’t be but a ten-minute drive from the lodge. We could move up there, get some horses, drive in the—”

“What? Bodie... what are you even saying? Are you drunk?”

He stands and paces the room. “No! I’m not drunk. I’m in love with you, Poppy. I’ve been in love with you for as long as I can remember, and tonight was the first time in a long time that I felt like myself. The first night I felt like I was doing something that gave me a spark... something to work towards that I really want.”

My mouth opens and closes again. “We talked about this, though. Wayne and—”

Bodie’s hand lands on my cheek. “What if we don’t do this? Then what? I see you every holiday, every trip back, wishing and hoping I could touch you, knowing what we could be, but never even tried?”

“You see me when you see me, and we act normal like normal people act.” I don’t know if that’s possible, but it feels like something I should say.

Bodie leans in toward me. “You’re really okay with not knowing what this could be?”

“No!” I shout. “I, ugh, I don’t know. Sometimes people love each other but life gets in the way, you know?”

He looks away and stands from the bed. “I shouldn’t be stressing you like this. I’m sorry. I know you only have your brother. I don’t want to—”

“That’s the thing, Bodie. I do have him... but that moment,” I drag in a few staggard breaths, “I’ll remember the way you touched me tonight, forever. Every single second of it. Your hands, your heart, this necklace. You’re all I’ve ever wanted and not pursuing you is probably the biggest mistake

of my life, but I can't hurt Wayne like this. He's taken care of me forever."

He turns back toward me and sits on the edge of the bed. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"What's there to say? You're twenty years older than me, and your best friends with my brother. Why didn't *you* say anything?"

He nods his head. "Same reason, probably." His weight shifts on the mattress and his hands reach out for mine again.

My entire being is aching for him, and I want reprieve. I want his hands on mine, his teeth on my skin, his everything all over me. It's like I can't see anything else, like there's no other option. "So what do we do, Bodie?"

"What if we take these moments and we appreciate them? What if we allow this, these seconds together, these small moments that are inconsequential to anyone else's life but mean the world to us, to continue?"

I laugh. "So... we lie? We get all wrapped up in each other and then we lie?"

He sighs. "I don't want to lie, Poppy, but I don't want to lose you more." His mouth crashes into mine and his hand weaves through my hair.

Inch by inch, he follows the curve of my frame with his big hand, touching me as though he's never touched another woman, as though he never wants to again. I can't satisfy him in the shadows, in secret. He'll find someone else who he can see in the daylight. They'll fall in love, and I'll be old news. I'll just be the girl who couldn't say yes.

"You'll go back to the Springs, and you'll meet somebody, and I can't do this. I'll worry every second of every day that you're messing around with someone and I—"

His finger tips under my chin as he draws my gaze up toward his. "You are all I want. No one else compares to this... to you. Do you hear me?"

I nod, but I'm not sure I do. Bodie is exceptional, and I know what it's like to be surrounded in his presence. He's everything. Most women would do anything for a chance with a guy like him. Eventually, he'll give up on us, and there'll be a train of ladies waiting.

“But what if this is just a phase? You'll get sick of me, the novelty will wear off, and we'll be two people who made a mistake.”

“Is that what this is to you, *a novelty*? It's not a novelty to me. I'd take you forever right here and now if you'd let me. Hiding in the shadows is a compromise. I move out here, and we meet up when we can. Maybe that's all this ever is, or maybe we will figure out a way to make it work. But living without you... I can't do that. I can't live in a world where you exist and I'm not with you in some capacity.”

My gaze drops to his lips and up again, my reasoning beginning to waver. I wish there was something I could do or say that made sense of how I felt... but there isn't. My clit is throbbing, my thighs are aching, my skin is desperate to be touched. I'm not sure I've ever needed anything so badly.

I lean into his bare chest and wind my fingers around a strand of hair, kissing him over and over as I suck in the scent of pine on his skin.

“Okay... we'll keep this a secret. We don't tell anyone. And maybe, hopefully, someday... we'll make sense of everything.”

He kisses my head and then my cheek, before landing on my lips. His tongue wraps with mine and finally... relief.

I lean back and Bodie tilts on top of me, his big hands swallowing me up like he's mapping a world he's never seen before. Inch by inch, he studies me as though he's memorizing the curves and lines, kissing his way from my collarbone to my breasts and down my thigh. He's careful and slow, drawing his gaze up toward mine periodically to take me in.

I've never felt so adored.

I'm sure a sane person would have stopped by now, but I'm not sane. Not in the slightest. I'm one hundred percent crazy. Crazy for Bodie, crazy for whatever he wants to do to me, crazy for love.

His frame sits between my legs and there's a shock of energy that takes over and won't let go. He drags his hand over my covered mound and massages me again, as he had yesterday.

I squeak in surprise, and my eyes close as he tucks behind my panties and sinks his thick fingers into my pussy. His mouth joins, and his tongue swirls around my clit as he presses into me repeatedly.

My body is wound tight and I'm convulsing beneath him, thrusting my hips upward, scrubbing my clit against his tongue, his beard, his everything.

He licks my clit over and over, sending chills through me. I should tell him I'm a virgin, that I've never been touched, but I don't want him to stop. I don't want anything to change what's happening right now.

He nibbles my thigh and kisses my mound again, hungry and wild like he's losing his mind, like he's burning up and I'm the only thing that can save him.

The creak of the mattress sounds as we move and he tugs my panties off, tossing them onto the floor. My breath is heavy as his briefs follow behind.

Good Lord, he's huge. Every part of him. His arms, his legs, his frame, and his long, thick cock.

"You're never getting that inside of me," I whisper, tugging at his inked arm. "I guess I should tell you now that I'm a virgin."

He kisses my forehead and lies beside me, his cock stiff in the air. "We should hold off tonight, anyway. I don't have a condom, and if we're being careful, we shouldn't get you pregnant. That might immediately blow our cover."

I don't disagree with him there. "I don't want to stop, Bodie. You have no idea how bad I need you. My body is

aching.”

He rolls toward me and growls low. “I’m aching too, little one.”

Little one. My heart does the plummeting thing again, flushing all the blood from my chest. *Why does that sound so damn good?* That single word personifies everything Bodie is to me. He’s patient no matter how unreasonable I am. He lets me be as crazy as I need to be without calling me names or walking away. He defends me, even when he knows I’m wrong, and he’s beside me when everyone else is against me.

I flip on the fan that’s next to the bed and roll toward Bodie. “I’m not leaving tonight without your cock inside of me.”

This simple sentence seems to set the fire to inferno and a wildness flickers in his gaze that wasn’t there before. “Oh, I see how it is. You’re using me for my cock!”

I grin and lean forward on my hands and knees until my ass is in the air and my mouth is stretching around his dick.

His large palm smacks my ass gently, a playful reminder that I’m not following his direction.

Groan after groan leaves his lips as I pretend I know what I’m doing. “Just like that, little one. Good girl.”

Good girl. The nights I’ve spent desperate to be this man’s *good girl*, and here I am with his thick cock in my throat, hearing all the things I need to hear.

“Climb up on me, little one, just for a second. Let me feel that tight, little pussy.”

My heart pounds and butterflies fill my stomach. I hook one leg around his waist and lower myself carefully. My throat is closing, and my chest might burst, but sitting on his rigid cock is fucking heaven.

I ignore the pinching and the slight pain, then roll into him, rocking my hips back and forth as my hair splays down my back.

I feel him, every inch of him. His tip rocks against a part of me that I didn't know existed. He's deep... *so deep*. Our bodies grind against one another in an instinctual rhythm and the mattress squeaks between us gently.

I've never longed for anything like I'm longing for this man. I've never wanted another person, another soul, another feeling this badly.

I sway on his cock and give myself to him, moaning, aching, humming with an urge I can't describe.

"That's right. You stop when I tell you, okay? I can't come inside you."

I know that's the right thing. He shouldn't come inside of me. Getting pregnant would be complicated to say the least, but I'm not sure how I'll ever stop.

I lay my hand down over his chest, following the lines of his ink as my pussy clenches down over him. "That's a tiger, isn't it? Why the tiger?"

People probably don't talk while they're bouncing on cock, but the question slides out naturally.

He grins. "Freedom and exploration. You're going to have to stop, little one. You're so fucking tight and I'm going to lose it." His cock rubs against my inner walls and my breath is gone, lost somewhere in the ether with my senses.

"I can't stop. I'm going to come," I moan, still rocking. "I'm going to come so hard."

"Fuck," he groans. "Come for me! Soak my cock. I want all your sweet juices all over me." Bodie thumps upward faster. "Oh fuck. I can't hold it in. You're so fucking hot, those big tits, that hair...your tight little pussy." If I didn't have a praise kink, he's giving me one.

I know I should move. We don't need a pregnancy complicating things, but I need his come.

Breath after staggered breath echoes out into the room as I bounce.

His rough hands are on my skin, his eyes on mine, his growl low and breathy. I can't hold it in anymore. I'm slick and swollen and every ounce of my body is about to come.

Bodie stares toward me. "Fuck, Poppy." He barely gets the word out before someone is banging on the bedroom door.

"What the hell is going on in there?" It's Wayne. *Shit.* It's Wayne. Reality trickles back in rather quickly. *I'm in his bedroom, on his bed, with his best friend inside of me.*

Panic tightens my chest. "What do we do?"

"You sit still." Bodie keeps thrusting upward. He's going to blow. I see it on his face. He's not reasoning with anything yet. He's still a wild animal.

Truthfully, so am I.

I rock back and forth on his cock, desperate to take myself over the edge with him. Maybe tonight is all we get. Maybe Wayne hates us in the morning. Maybe I've just blown everything to hell, but I don't care anymore.

This moment with Bodie is all I need.

"Come. Come for me, Bodie." I bounce up and down slowly, swinging my tits, opening my mouth, rocking back and forth. "I want your come. Please. I need your come!"

The door bangs louder and Wayne's voice only gets angrier, but somehow we block it out, or at least I do.

I assume Bodie does too, judging by the glazed expression.

"Focus on me, little one. Tell me your mine." His tone is low, but he's going for it. Within seconds, I explode, wilting into a shell as the vibrations waving through me render me helpless.

I scream out in pleasure. "I'm yours! I'm yours, Bodie." I can barely see. The room is dark, and everything is spinning in the most enjoyable way as I come harder than I've ever come. Sex is so different from masturbation... *so different.*

Bodie thumps into me harder and harder until he empties inside of me and we're both left in a puddle of pleasure that I never want to move from.

Moments go by. I'm not sure how many. I've collapsed on top of Bodie, and the door has stopped knocking.

"You alright?" Bodie stares toward me his dark brown eyes like a compass of warmth I can't help but lose myself in. "We'll talk to him. It'll be fine."

I drag in a deep breath and kiss his chest, taking in the scent of sex and pine that surround us. Wayne is going to burn this bed come morning. "I'm really good, actually."

"Really?" Bodie smiles, his big hand trailing circles on my back. "That's a surprise."

"Yeah. I, ugh, that conversation is going to be hard in the morning, but we needed tonight."

"We did. And now that the cat's out of the bag, does that mean you're okay with this all being out in the open?"

I laugh. "I'm not sure I have a choice now, do I?"

"Probably not, but we could circle back to the drunk thing if you really want to."

I shake my head and close my eyes as I lay warm in his arms. "No, you were right. There's no point in hiding who we are. We need to give Wayne more credit. He loves us. He'll understand."

"No... he won't," Wayne's voice echoes in from the hallway. "You two are filthy and you deserve each other. Also, I have to move now."

"You love us! You know it," I say back, playfully.

"Or I'm scarred for life." If his tone weren't so playful, I'd go after him, but I think it's best that Bodie and I stay locked in this room for now. Heck, maybe it's best if we stay locked in here forever.

"I love you, little one." Bodie peppers a soft kiss on my forehead and pulls me in closer and finally, the ache is gone.

Epilogue

Bodie

Two Weeks Later

The lodge is decked out for the holidays. Balsam wreaths, pine boughs, fresh berries, and an overload of Christmas music. Guests seem to love it, and I've melted in seamlessly. Henry offered me the job right away.

Being a general manager wasn't part of my plan all those years ago, but there's nothing like being home, and you can find opportunities to grow anywhere... if you look. As Poppy and I walk the immaculate hallways of this pristine lodge, I just wish I had been open to trying to get everything I wanted earlier in life, rather than focusing solely on my job and letting my other hopes and dreams eat me up from the inside.

Henry even had a ranch for sale nearby that turned out to be perfect. Though, I think a blizzard would look perfect right now. It'd give me a reason to stay tucked inside with Poppy for weeks on end.

"You two make me sick." Wayne rolls his eyes and tucks a hand into his jeans. "Seriously? I already had to buy a new mattress and burn my sheets. I don't think eye transplants are a thing, so just stop." I know he's still working through this whole situation, but it's not as bad as we thought it would be. For the most part, he's been supportive. Of course, I got the *'don't ever hurt my sister or die thing,'* but that was never going to be a problem. My only goal is to keep Poppy happy and safe.

"You can't do that anymore. We're married. It's like... official." Poppy smiles sweetly and taps her brother on the shoulder.

"I know, but there's only so much therapy a man can take at my age."

"What are you going to do when we start having babies?" Poppy says with a chuckle.

“Don’t talk about babies yet. I’m not ready for babies yet.” He looks away. “You two need to slow down. You’re doing everything at a lightning pace... and don’t say you’ve been in love forever because I can’t handle it.” Part of him is joking, but the other part is totally weirded out by this. “I just stopped by to see how the new job was going and to ask if anyone had seen the bear recently. The lodge seems to be where most of the sightings have been these past few weeks. I’m curious if the efforts to drive him out of town have done anything.”

“The cook, Arnie, said he had eyes on him late last night out by the storage shed, but no one has seen him since. I was talking to Henry’s brother Maddox and we’re thinking of putting up some humane traps to see if we can slow him down and point him in another direction. Thoughts?”

“What’s a humane bear trap look like?”

“I’d have to show you. It’s a tunnel like thing that they crawl inside for food. When they do, the door closes, and the tunnel is moved, and the bear is relocated. I think it would make everyone in town feel better knowing one that size was far away from civilization. I know it would make lodge guests feel better.”

Wayne nods. “Yeah, I agree. We’ll try it this way. If that doesn’t work, we’ll talk about calling in help.”

I don’t know what kind of help he’s going to call out for, but I’m sure this will work. We’ve had bears up here before and they usually run off quickly once people start showing interest.

Poppy drags in a deep breath. “Anyway... I have to go because Mae and I are having lunch in ten minutes. Arnie is making his famous lasagna and there’s like thirteen different cakes to choose from. You know I won’t be late for cake.”

She leans up and kisses my lips gently, this time without a peep from her brother. I glance back to make sure he’s still breathing.

“Wait, how is Mae? She still having trouble with her boss?”

“Yeah, so much drama. Get this... the only way he’s going to give her Christmas day off is if she goes to his family Christmas party as his fake girlfriend. I... don’t even know. I can’t believe she’s considering it.”

“Who is she working for?”

“That guy who is doing all the computer work in town. She’s been working for that IT company for a bit but everyone who meets her boss realizes he’s an asshole.”

“I hate business types. They’re such pieces of shit.” I smile and nudge Poppy playfully.

“Right! They’re all the same!” She laughs. “Maybe he’ll realize his small-town roots and buy a ranch, too. Then when he wears flannel, he won’t be faking it like all these wanna-be ranchers with their office jobs.”

I kiss her forehead. “One can only dream...”

In the midst of our playful conversation, Wayne disappears, which is fine because I’ve been dying to give my wife more than a peck since she got here.

I lean onto her lips and brush them against mine, losing my fingers in her hair as we kiss.

This is what I’ve needed. Forty-five years of nothing and then everything all at once. I’m not sure how it happened, and I know I couldn’t recreate it, but here it is... everything I ever wanted, wrapped with the cutest, fucking bow.

“As much as I want to drag you into my office and show you what us wanna-be’s are made of, you go have lunch with Mae. Tell her she can always ditch the job and come work at the lodge. We need plenty of help. We’re booked out to April right now and I’m not sure how we’re going to keep the place running with the staff we have.”

“Seriously? It would be amazing to see her get away from that guy.”

“Plus, having more dependable people around will give me more time to put a baby in that belly of yours.”

She leans into me, biting back a smile. “I love it when you talk like that.”

“Like what? Like how badly I want to fuck a baby into you? Is that supposed to be romantic? It sounds crude.”

“A little, but I’m really wet for it.”

I laugh and pull her closer. “So, if I told you that all morning I’ve been watching you in that little skirt, thinking about how cute you’d look bent over my desk, you’d like that?”

She sighs. “I would. What else?”

“Well,” I lean into her ear, “I’ve been desperate to put you up on my desk and lick you clean, just so I can dirty you up again.”

She swallows hard. “How... how would you dirty me up again?”

“Oh, I’d fuck that tight little pussy so hard that I’d explode and pump you full of come. Would you like that? Do you want all my come, little one?”

“Maybe lunch with Mae can wait.”

I grin. “I wish. I have a meeting in five minutes. By the time you’re done with your lunch, I’ll be free. Come on by then and I’ll have a nice big present for you. Does that sound fun?”

Her eyes light and her mouth breathlessly holds open. We’re in the entryway of the lodge, and though I consider myself a professional man, I’m standing with a full-on boner at my place of business.

Life is changing, and I have to say, it’s all for the better.

Poppy tips up onto her toes. “I’ll see you at one p.m. sharp! Don’t be late.”

“Trust me, I’m not going to be late for you. No one would be late for you.”

She smiles sweetly and lets go of my hand, looking back a few times as she wanders off toward the dining hall.

A month ago, I didn’t believe that any of this was possible. A love with Poppy seemed out of reach and something that only existed in my dreams, then a job that brought me closer to my roots and gave me the challenge I’ve always wanted. People may have said I was a success before, but I’ll always know, my heart didn’t start beating until the day I held her in my arms.

Thank You for Reading

[**READ MAE’S STORY HERE**](#)

Khloe Summers is the author of over one hundred short and steamy romance titles. Her books are written in many different tropes, but always contain growly older alphas, curvy women, and lots of steam.

Khloe lives with her husband, (who she affectionately calls Daddy) in sunny Florida. They spend most of their free time sinking their toes in the sand, eating too many pizzas, and hollering obscenities at the TV on football Sunday. (At least he does. She sits on the sidelines and quietly orders nonsense off Amazon.)

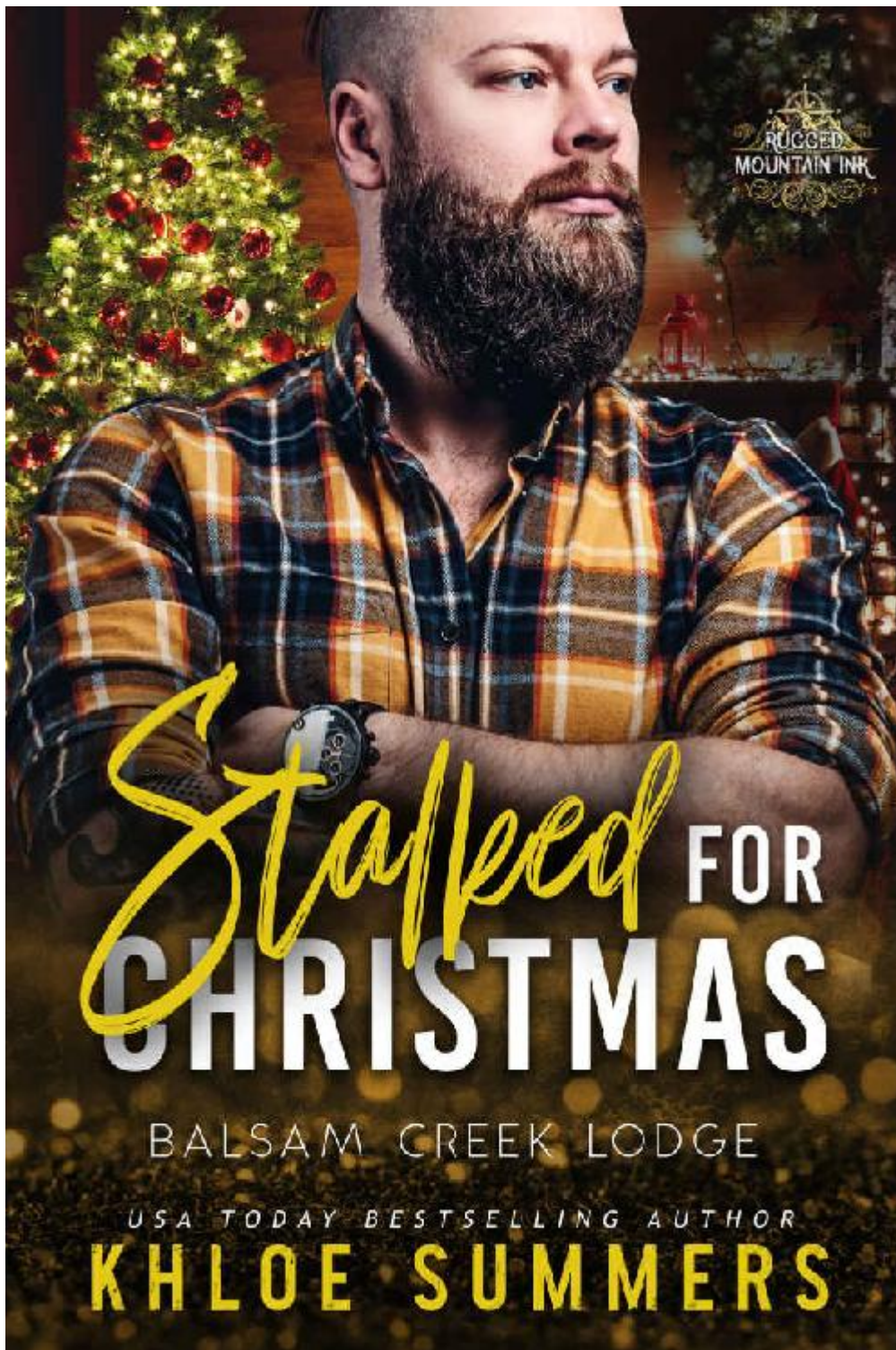
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Chapter One

Mae

He sits straight across from me at a desk with wide-open windows behind him, a view of the mountain range in the distance. He's big, inked, tall, and wide. The man could be a book cover model if he wanted to. I bet everyone would read the tawdry tale of the big, burly man who wears a suit coat all day and flannel all weekend. Well, they would as long as the author wrote a character that had the exact opposite personality of the cover model male I'm staring at.

Book-boyfriend Luke would have the same rugged, burly exterior, but he'd also have a heart of gold and a soft spot for cute little redheads that love Christmas more than any other holiday. He'd also want a big family, a little house out on the hill overlooking the valley, and he'd love to build said redhead anything she could dream. *Yeah, that would be perfect.*

I twist my hair in knots around my index finger and stare at my computer screen, trying to look busy, but I caught up on everything we need done a week ago. I swear at this point I'm only here to keep him company. I think Scrooge doesn't like to be alone.

"You don't look busy, Mae." His tone is rough and grumbled. It always sounds like this.

"I'm always busy! I'm adding all the advertisements Rugged Mountain Ink bought to the website." There's a bite in my tone, probably because I'm most definitely not doing what I said I'm doing.

"No, you're not. You're looking at shoes."

I glance toward Luke, then back at my computer screen, which most definitely showcases the cutest pair of red pumps I've been debating for the lodge Christmas Party. *How does he know that, though?*

"You're spying on me now?"

"It's not spying if you work for me. It's proper supervision."

"Right," I grumble, clicking off the screen and back to the website I'm working on. "You know if I leave, you won't

find anyone else to do what I'm doing for you, right? Anyone in their right mind would have run for the hills by now. There are plenty of jobs in town."

"Are there, though? I suppose if you want to clean lodge rooms, you could find something, but would they pay you what I'm paying?"

I draw in a heavy breath and let it go slowly, trying not to lose my cool. The truth is, he's not wrong. Luke pays double what I'd get anywhere else in town. Even if I wanted to take the cut in salary, I went to school for graphic design and computer tech. I don't want to waste that.

"It's nearly five. I'm going to pack up and head out. I have to take my son to basketball."

"Basketball is tomorrow night. Why are you lying to me?" He stands from his desk and makes his way toward me. The space isn't huge. We have a studio sized room at the back of the lodge. It's partitioned into two spaces. One for the ever-important Luke Mathers, and a tiny cube for me with a view of a side window staring out into nothing.

A vein throbs in my neck as he nears. Personality wise, I can't stand the man, but still, the closer he gets, the more my body reacts like a teenage girl about to confront the hottest guy at school.

He lowers his huge body onto the edge of my desk. "Why are you filling me with lies, Mae?"

"I'm not lying." I am, in fact, lying.

Luke laughs and picks up a framed photo on the corner of my desk. It's Josh and I up at the lake last summer fishing. "He's growing up."

"Yeah, and I'd really like to see him so..."

"So... what? You expect me to shut down early because you want to see your son?"

I look away and try not to laugh at the lack of awareness this man has. "It's one night. I've been here late

every day for weeks. My sister's been feeding him. I just want to have dinner with my kid."

"Feed him when you get home. Problem solved."

"He's six! If I fed him when I got home, it would be eight o'clock."

"Then feed him here."

I roll my eyes. "*Feed him here?* You would rather me bring my kid to work than leave early?"

Luke stands from the edge of the desk and makes his way back toward his office. "I need you here until eight. So, if you want to bring Josh in to sit with you, that's fine. Just get your work done. No more shoe shopping." His tone is curt and aggressive.

This should be the part where I revolt against everything and storm out the door, but I know how lucky I am to be collecting the paycheck. As a single mom, I need the money. I don't remember the last time I got a child support check and I sure as heck don't have a support system that I can fall back on. The only option I have is to show up, do this shit job, and hope I save enough money to transition once I've gained a little experience... or hope that something wonderful falls from the sky.

You know, because wonderful opportunities fall from the sky so often.

"I'm going to call my sister and have her pick him up. Is that allowed?" I say sarcastically as I stare toward Mr. Mathers.

"I told you to bring him here."

"I'm not bringing my son to this office and subjecting him to whatever grumpy bullshit you decide to sling out. He doesn't need to see his mother being treated that way. He'll have more fun with his cousins." I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Which brings me to Christmas. What would I have to do to get the day off? I'll work late Christmas Eve, but I need to be there for Josh in the morning, and don't tell

me to bring him here. I'm not telling him that Santa delivered his gifts to the lodge."

He leans back in his big leather chair and twists toward the mountains, studying the dark lit view before finally spinning back again. The man is insane, and I've probably just triggered an avalanche of crazy I'm not prepared to deal with. "What are you proposing?"

"I'm proposing you give me the day off because it's the right thing to do. We're IT. We don't need to be here Christmas Day."

"That's not true. Guests will be at the lodge. If the servers go down that day, we'll have ruined everyone's Christmas."

"I highly doubt the servers are going to go down on Christmas, and if by chance they did, they'd call us, and we'd come in."

He shakes his head and sighs. "What do you want? An hour in the morning?"

"No! I want the day. I want the day to spend with my son. *My small child*. He deserves to be with his mother Christmas morning, don't you think?"

"I think you should be here, at your desk, getting your work done."

"My work is done! *It's been done*. I've done most of next month's work, and I dove into things you wanted started in February. It's one day. I'll be here early December 26 and stay late the entire week if that's what you want. Just give me the day."

"Your job is important. I told you holidays would be part of the deal when you started."

"Yeah, like the Fourth of July and Labor Day, but not Christmas. You said nothing about Christmas."

"But it's important that you do as we agreed, so thank you. You'll be paid triple time for the—"

“I don’t want triple pay! I want the day off.” I stand from my desk, riled up and suddenly confident that if he doesn’t give me Christmas Day off, I’ll stage my own personal strike.

He rolls his neck in a circle and scrubs his hand down over his beard. I’ve never noticed the black ink peeking from his shirt cuffs before.

Good Lord, why is that so attractive? Why does a part of me want him to stalk toward me and growl in my ear? Why do I want to see the rest of his body? Why do I want him to touch me everywhere?

Well, that’s easy... because I’m sick. That’s why. I clearly need a break from work so I can go satisfy myself and remember that men aren’t worth the trouble, especially, the tall, dark, *toxic* ones.

“Look,” he groans, “I have a proposition.”

I glance down at my watch, letting him know that whatever he’s about to say is a waste of my time. “What?”

“If you want Christmas off, I need help with something.”

I sigh to show my displeasure. There’s always a deal to be made with him. He can’t do something simply out of the kindness of his heart. “What is it?”

“I need a date to my family’s Christmas party. If you go, I give you Christmas off.” He says the sentence as though he’s asking me to finish up on a design or code a new section of a website.

I can’t help but laugh. “What? No! I’m not... no.”

He shrugs and heads back into his office. “Suit yourself. We can have our own little celebration here over programming and cheesecake. You like cheesecake, right?”

“I don’t. I don’t like cheesecake.” My stomach turns. Maybe this is the only way out. Maybe going with him to some stupid Christmas party isn’t that big of a deal. What’s

one night in the grand scheme of things? Lord knows I've faked it with a man before. I could do it again.

I sit back down at the office chair and stare at the computer. "I want Christmas Eve off too."

He turns back. "Was this a negotiation? I don't think it was."

"It is now. You made a proposal, so here's my counter. You need something from me, and you must need it *pretty bad* to have asked. I think I may have more leverage than you on this one."

He laughs. "I don't need anything from you. Take the deal or don't. I won't lose sleep over it."

We both know he's full of it, so I press further. "I want Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off. I also want to leave on time tonight and tomorrow night. I want to be there at Josh's basketball game."

"No. That's too much." He turns back toward his office.

"Too much? You're asking me to go to your family's Christmas party and pretend to be your girlfriend, which shocks me, by the way. You don't strike me as the kind of guy who'd be nervous to tell his mom he was single." I laugh. "In fact, I think she might already know you're a lost cause."

"Nice, but it's not my mom I'm worried about."

"Then what is it? Did someone watch too many movies and tie your inheritance around you finding a wife? Or better yet, do you have a Christmas tree farm you can't take over until you've proven your heart isn't filled with darkness?"

He stares toward me as though I'm the one who's unhinged. "My daughter is worried about me."

I nearly choke. "Daughter? You have a daughter?"

He nods. "She's eighteen and worried to leave her father by himself." His throat clears. "I'm sure you know how much I value a good education. I need her to feel good about leaving, so I told her I had a girlfriend."

Laughing when someone is emotionally vulnerable is frowned upon, but for some reason, I burst into laughter. “Oh my god! You’ve been lying to your daughter about having a girlfriend? Didn’t you think she’d figure it out eventually?”

He wets his lips and leans back on his desk, staring out into the hall at me with a downturned expression. “Enough. I get it. If you want the day off, you do me this favor. That said, it has to look real. She can’t slack her first year of college just because she’s worrying about me.”

“While I admire your dedication to parenthood, I can’t imagine we’d fool your daughter. I’m sure she knows you well enough to see your true emotions.”

He narrows his brows. “I wouldn’t ask you if I didn’t need you.” There’s some kind of sadness in his voice, an edge I haven’t heard before. “Come with me and I’ll make it worth your time.”

“When is it?”

“This weekend.”

I bite back more untimely laughter. “This weekend? As in two days from now?”

He nods. “We should go to dinner tonight and talk things out a little. We need this to look as real as possible.”

“Look, I really need Christmas off, but this is ridiculous. Your daughter has spent her entire life with you. She knows who you are. First, she’ll wonder why you’re with a girl like me. Then she’ll see through the whole thing and know you’re a liar. It’s a mess in the making.”

“What does that mean, a girl like you?”

I sigh. “You’re going to make me say it?”

“Say what?”

“Okay, well, you are,” I blow out a breath, “traditionally handsome, and I’m... me.”

He looks away, then back again. “You’re you, and I asked you because I think we’d look good together.”

I'm a million percent sure this violates some sort of workplace sexual harassment policy, but I ignore it considering the way my thighs tingle when he talks about how good we'd look together.

Why am I considering this? Why does it sound good pretending to be his girlfriend? It shouldn't. In reality, it's all lies. Then again, I guess if Josh was going off to college and worried about me being alone, I'd consider a white lie to make him feel better about leaving.

It's that, or I'm completely delusional and desperate to accidentally touch this big, strong, mysterious, burly man. "I'm going to need New Year's Eve off too, and New Year's Day. No, all that plus next Christmas and three random days I can choose from whenever I want." I realize I'm fighting for normal workplace rights, but I'm doing what I can.

He draws in a deep breath and turns away. "I could agree to that, but I'd like to see a list of the dates you want ahead of time. And, like I said, this whole weekend has to look real. So, dinner tonight is a must."

"I have to feed Josh and I promised him we'd practice basketball tonight."

"So, I come over and I help with that. When we put him to bed, we talk details." Again, he speaks like we're formulating a plan for a business trip.

"I appreciate that, but I'll take care of Josh tonight. If you really need to talk, you can stop by at eight. I should have him in bed by then."

Mr. Mathers nods one single time and sits back at his desk, refocusing on his computer. "It sounds like we have a deal. I'll see you at eight."

I've agreed to a lot of ridiculous things in my life. Hell, I once jumped off a lakeside cliff on a dare and spent a week in the hospital with a broken rib. I should've learned my lesson, but I did the same thing that following summer. Thankfully, the second time I leapt without injury, but that doesn't change the fact that I shouldn't have done it.

I also married a man when I was twenty, believing it was true love. He left me with one great souvenir, a mountain of debt, and a broken heart. I've sworn off men since.

Deep down, I shouldn't even pretend to like my boss. He's rude, rough, and all he's focused on is himself. Yet here I am, walking out of the lodge with a fuzzy excited feeling in my stomach for what lies ahead.

Someone send help. I have a feeling I'm going to need it.

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