

A man with a grey beard and a plaid shirt is the central figure. He has a large, detailed tattoo on his chest depicting a dog's face. The background is dark with bokeh light effects.

# Hunted & KEPT

MOUNTAIN GOLIATHS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**KHLOE SUMMERS**

*Hunted and Kept*

*Rugged Mountain Goliaths*

Khloe Summers

**Summer to Winter Publishing**



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Cover design by: Bookin It Designs

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Photographer: Golden Czermak

# Chapter One

Ruby

I used to love that tv show, *'Surprise Delivery.'* Not because I enjoyed the heartwarming stories of all the lovely people that were having babies, but because they were somehow nine months pregnant and managed to hide it from everyone.

*How did their closest friends and family not notice they were eating like an ox left out to pasture? How did they not notice their bellies expanding to the size of planet Earth? How did a close friend not pick up on a major hormonal shift?*

Turns out, it's not that hard to conceal. An oversized hoodie, a pocketed comeback to serve in a timely fashion, and staying away from everyone as much as possible. Yeah, that'll do it... and no one is the wiser.

I drag in a deep breath and lean back in the oversized library chair whose stuffing is supposed to make it more comfortable, but in reality, only makes the chair impossible to get out of. It's a mistake sitting here, but my feet are killing me, and this is the only option. Well, I guess I could go to the office and sit in the swivel chair, but then I wouldn't be front and center to help the asshole I see making his way toward me.

Hudson Laskin. The man is at least six foot and seven inches of hairy, pure, Alaskan, goliath nonsense. I swear the man wakes up in the morning to piss people off.

"I saw you at the grocery store yesterday and the diner last night. What's your deal?"

He laughs and brushes his hand down over his salt and pepper beard. *God, this man really is full of himself.* "It's a small town, little girl. Don't flatter yourself."

*"Little girl? I'm not a little girl."*

He cocks a brow. "You look pretty little to me."

“So, what do you want today? I don’t have time for this.” I think about struggling up and out of this chair, but I fear the embarrassment, so I stay put.

“You. A librarian of an empty library doesn’t have time to help me, even when I made an appointment?” His tone is deep, but arrogant. Why is that turning me on? I scan his broad frame quickly, noting the trucker hat he wears with a tractor on the front and the flannel he keeps rolled to the sleeves despite the fact that it’s freezing cold outside. He’s probably showing off all the ink.

If he were even a hair less attractive, I wouldn’t even speak to him. But he’s hot as fuck, so I guess I’ll do my job.

“I forgot about the appointment.” I shimmy to the edge of my chair, trying to balance my weight and also lift myself up without a scene, but I fall backward into the pile of fluff again before I’m able to stand. It’s not pretty. This is where my crimson cheeks make their entrance.

He laughs. “You need help?”

I narrow my gaze. “Do I look like I need help?” Wrong thing to say. “Don’t answer that. I’m fine. This chair just...” I push up in one final shove and make my way to a standing position. “It sucks you in, is all.”

“Right, well, I’m here for maps. I need a full, detailed version of the mountain with all the property lines clearly listed. We don’t want any more trespassing trouble.”

I roll my eyes and waddle past him, dragging in the scent of cedar on his clothes. He smells like he was chopping wood this morning.

Why does that excite me?

*Hormones. Hormones. Hormones.* I repeat the reminder to myself as I pull the map from the drawer. “You’re never going to get that bear. He mocks everyone in town.”

“All due respect to you and everyone else here, we’re used to taking down big, menacing game. We get into the animal’s mind. We learn their tactics and we take them out before they know what’s coming.”

I shouldn't belly laugh right now, but I do. "You get into their mind? Are you a Jedi? You sound ridiculous. Bears like Koda don't make plans and keep them. They're erratic and unpredictable. That's why he's not hibernating."

"You named the bear?"

"Yeah." I shrug. "People name things. So what?"

"You do know that *Koda* means little bear, right?"

I roll my eyes. "Well, if the bear has a problem with that, he can bring it up with management."

Hudson drags in a deep breath as though *I'm* the most annoying person on the planet, when it's clear as day that *he* is. When his eyes are done rolling in sarcasm, he takes the map from my hand, and lays it out on the nearby counter. His huge, rough hand lands on the drawing like sandpaper, scuffing across the sheet as he traces a line. "We think he moved after the storm and he's in this territory over here." He circles a spot on the map near the mines. "We need to lure him off private property and into the forest so we can get a shot without more drama."

"I know the folks that own that land. They'll be willing to help. I'm sure of it."

"No." He glances toward me. "No more private property. It's messy." He scans me up and down. "Who's that guy that was in here yesterday? The one that was yelling."

My jaw drops and my eyes widen. "What? Why were you here yesterday?"

"I was walking by, and I noticed a guy. You were having a heated discussion. Who is he?"

I gasp. "You *are* following me! I knew it. You—"

"*Following you?* Following implies this is a habit, little girl. It's not. I saw something yesterday on my way back to my truck is all."

"And the other day at the diner? And at the bakery?"

"It's a small town."

I can't help but laugh. "Are you serious?"

He stares back without a word.

*Okay, now I'm freaked out.* "You should go."

He leans in, bringing the woodsy scent of the forest with him. "Not until you tell me who that man was."

I roll my eyes and back away, though the subtle aggressiveness of all this has my clit throbbing like some wall licking, mental patient. "If you were so concerned about it, why didn't you come in and ask?"

"You seemed to have yourself handled. I waited until he was gone before I left."

"So... you are watching me?"

He smiles and rolls the map up in his sandpaper hands, tapping the edges on the counter to even the twist. "You're funny. Take care, little girl. You shouldn't let assholes talk to you like that. You ever need help getting rid of him, call me." He walks out the door, wide and strong, tall and sure of himself. But above all else, arrogant as fuck.

My thighs ache and my nipples grow hard. *What the actual hell just happened?*

## Chapter Two

Hudson

I should be hunting the bear. Instead, I'm hunting Ruby. Usually, she gets off work, grabs dinner at the diner, and heads home, though sometimes she does stop for pizza instead. Tonight, she evaded me somehow. *How the hell did I let that happen? How can I pride myself in being the best tracker in the north if I can't even track a predictable woman? Maybe that was my downfall. I assumed she was predictable.*

I drag in a deep breath as I sit behind the row of trees near her cabin and watch. She has to show up at some point. If she doesn't, I'll know the piece of shit that was hollering at her in the library had something to do with it. If this were my town, I'd have taken him out right then and there. But it's not, and the people here already hate my brothers and I. It's time to play the long game. Take it slow, draw the asshole out, and get him to start something so I can finish it.

My phone buzzes on the dashboard and I reach up to answer. It's my father, Sergei, and he's not a patient man. No, this man is more the militant type. I'd love to say he adopted the behavior after some horrible accident or tragic life event, but the man was born with a chip on his shoulder and I'm pretty sure he'll die that way.

"Yeah."

"You're not here, and we need those maps." His tone is low and gruff.

"I've got a thing to handle. I'll be back by morning."

"Morning?" he scoffs. "We're not here to fuck bitches and cause trouble. We're here to catch a bear, Hud. Get your ass back here. We need to map the plan for tomorrow."

Well, I never thought I'd hear my old father say '*fuck bitches and cause trouble*' but there it is.



“The plan is to run the bear off West Canyon Road and into the forest behind that. If he’s not there, we’ll reassess.”

He coughs before he speaks. “What makes you think he’s on West Canyon Road?”

“Rowan said he saw him last on the ice out at the lake, moving west. There are caves all along the property line by the mines. It’s logical that he’d end up there with a full belly. Like I said, I’ll be back by morning.”

My father laughs under his breath sarcastically. “Boy, I don’t know what the hell you’re doing, but I swear if you cause this family anymore trouble here, you’re in for it.”

My brothers and I are here with my father on a mission to hunt this grizzly. We aren’t being paid and there’s no barter. This hunt is solely because my father enjoys the thrill of a good hunt. He’s known all over the country as the man who could hunt Ghost, an elusive mountain lion causing damage to property out in California. The cat even killed two men.

Dad was the one to take the lion out. People called him a hero. They have a plaque for him at the trailhead where the lion was downed. I don’t need that praise. I’m here out of obligation to the family. So, I don’t know what *‘in for it’* means, but the old man better watch his mouth.

“Got it. See you in the morning.”

He mumbles something under his breath as the line disconnects.

I suck in a deep breath and contemplate why the hell I feel any obligation at all when Ruby’s truck shines into the driveway. Until now, it was too dark to see the little cabin set out before me. I haven’t been here yet. I probably shouldn’t be here at all.

The headlights on her truck show off a small log cabin with a quaint front porch and two rocking chairs. There’s a row of half-grown pine just before the house and a red birdhouse hangs between them.

The truck stops and the lights go out as Ruby hops down and makes her way inside. She’s gorgeous in any light

with her long red hair and curved frame, but the light of the moon is especially flattering.

I watch her round frame move as I contemplate my next step.

Lights flick on one by one. The entry, the kitchen, the living room. Each space of the house lights up like a silent movie. She sets a box on the counter and makes her way to the living room, stripping off clothes as she moves. I should look away. A good man would. Instead, I stay glued to the windows of the house like an owl watches a mouse scurry.

Her pants shimmy down off her legs before she lifts her hoodie and exposes a perfectly round belly.

*A perfectly round belly.*

A pregnant belly. A very, *very*, pregnant belly.

How is she pregnant?

I stare at her bare frame. Swollen breasts, hard nipples, gorgeous curves.

*Why is my cock hard? I shouldn't be fucking hard.*

I've never seen a pregnant woman naked, but I can't imagine anything more perfect. She's so amazingly curved, and as she bends to pull a nightgown from the drawer, her long silky hair moves with her. Holding the fabric to her face, she breathes in the fresh scent before lifting her arms and pulling it over her head. Her little cotton panties fall to the floor, and she tosses them in the washer before pulling out another pair, sliding them on carefully as she leans against the counter for support.

All of this is wrong. I shouldn't watch, but I can't look away. I don't *want* to look away. I want to look at her forever.

I rub my hand against my jeans and over my cock, trying to tame my erection, but it only insights more excitement.

For a second, I let my mind go to a place where I have her bent over that kitchen counter. My hand on her stomach,

my cock buried deep inside of her, drops of milk leaking from her tits as I watch, desperate to lap it up.

*Fuck!*

I unzip my jeans and tuck my hand inside, stroking my dick as I watch her pretty little frame move, imagining further the way I'd suck her hard nipples and watch her bounce on my cock.

My mind wills my hand to stop, but it's no use. I stroke faster, desperate to come before she's dressed again, but the flashing lights of another vehicle pull into the driveway and stop me in my tracks. It's the same truck I saw the asshole from the library climb into.

*Who the fuck is this guy?*

I assume now he's the baby's father. He looks like the kind of douchebag who'd knock a girl up, then talk a bunch of shit. He parks his truck and hops his skinny ass up onto the porch to bang on the door.

Ruby tosses on a long, oversized t-shirt and peeks out the window before rolling her eyes.

Don't answer it, little girl! Don't fucking answer it!

A second later, the front door opens, and she stares the man down as her arms fold over her chest, covering her pebbled nipples.

The man stands before her, saying something I can't hear. I contemplate hopping from the truck and making my way to the porch to knock him the fuck out, but he hasn't done anything yet and my father's voice is nagging in the back of my head. The family has had problems since we got here. The last thing he needs is someone else coming after us before we get this bear. Given his age, this might be his last hunt. I don't want to be the asshole who ruins it unless absolutely necessary.

I drag in a deep breath and watch with my chest tight as Ruby and this jerk have a conversation on the porch. All seems to be going well until he waves his hands back and forth

and she tries to close the door. He blocks her from doing so and pushes his way inside.

My jaw tightens as I tuck my gun into my jeans and hop from the truck. This is the permission I needed and I'm not going to waste it.

## *Chapter Three*

Ruby

I know before I see his face that the giant man stalking through the dark toward the cabin is Hudson. What I don't expect is the thrill I get when my asshole ex sees the giant behind him.

Hudson grabs the back of Dave's jacket and throws him up against the outside cabin wall, then glances toward me. "Do you want him here?"

I shake my head and Hudson lands his fist against Dave's jaw. I'm not sure I've ever heard a punch in silence before, but there's a wet cracking sound that turns my stomach before blood flows from Dave's lip.

I wasn't expecting that. Then again, I wasn't expecting any of this.

Dave glances back toward me. His teeth are bloody. "Is this who you left me for?" He glances toward Hudson. "She's a fucking bitch. You know that, right?"

Hudson punches him in the face again. And while I shouldn't be happy about any kind of violence, Dave kind of walked into that one.

He cups his jaw and stumbles off the porch like a wounded coyote who's been in a fight with a bear. "You're that fucking Alaskan, aren't you? You're going to pay for this shit. I promise you that. My family owns this mountain."

Technically, Dave's family does own this mountain. He's the second cousin of Henry, Maddox, and Julie Baxter who really own this mountain. That said, the second they hear this story, they'll punch him themselves. Blood means a lot up here, but so does community, and I know Henry well enough to know he wouldn't like the way his cousin is acting.

Hudson diverts his attention to me. "I was out for a ride, and I saw him here. I—"

“Convenient.” I step away from the door and back into the kitchen, hiding behind the counter. Maybe he hasn’t seen my stomach yet. “Why are you following me?”

“Can I come in?” He stands on the threshold, waiting for permission. Why would a man who’s been following me ask permission to enter my home? Aren’t guys like this supposed to take what they want and ask forgiveness afterward?

It’s probably a mistake, but I nod.

Inside my cabin, he’s even bigger. My doorway looks too small, my chairs are like doll furniture, and the countertop height barely meets his waist.

“Why are you following me? Be honest!” I hadn’t thought over how he could be *more* dangerous than Dave until right now. He did show up out of nowhere, punch out another man, and now he’s a giant towering over everything in my cabin. If I live through this, I really need to see someone about why intimidation turns me on.

He looks down at the ground and then toward me. “Can I rinse my hand off?”

I glance down at his hand. His knuckles are dry, and they’ve split open on the punch. He’s bleeding, and he’s also got Dave’s blood on his hands. I want to be a bitch and tell him to use the hose outside, but instead I nod toward the bathroom and hightail it toward the dryer to grab another hoodie to cover this stomach. I’m sure if he’d seen it, he’d have mentioned something by now. Besides that, I don’t need these big puffy nipples poking through my shirt.

The water runs in the bathroom for a minute, then stops before the weight of his frame creaks against the floors as he makes his way back toward me.

*Why do I want him to pick me up, land me on his lap, and hold me? Why do I want to tug down his jeans and see if his cock is as big as the rest of him?*

I’ve read about third trimester hormones. That must be what’s going on right now.

“So... I need an answer.” I stare at him with my eyes wide and my heart pounding. He’s so imposing.

His throat clears and he says with that rough, deep voice that only a giant could have, “I’m not following you. I told you I was out for a ride and—”

“Bullshit. Tell me what’s going on or leave.”

“Why are you hiding your pregnancy?”

“*What?*” I gasp. “Why would you say that?” My mouth stutters uncontrollably, “Stop. I’m not pregnant.”

He laughs. “I saw you. You’re most definitely pregnant.”

“Really? Maybe I really like taquitos. Did you think of that?”

He lowers his head toward me as though I’m insane. “Come on. If we’re being real with each other, let’s be real.”

“The only one *being real* is me. Why are you following me?”

He blows out a heavy breath and lowers his gargantuan frame down on the stool at the kitchen counter. “Following you assumes I go everywhere you go. I don’t.”

“Okay then. Why are you *sometimes* following me?”

“I’m *sometimes* looking out for you because of that asshole that won’t leave you alone.”

“Right.” I roll my eyes and brush my hair with my fingers. “So, your investment is what? You can’t stand the thought of random women being taken advantage of?”

He shrugs. “Seems that way. You’re so mouthy I should’ve assumed you’d be fine, but I don’t know... there was something about you I wanted to help.”

“Well, I’m not the damsel in distress you’ve been looking for. I’m just an idiot who got herself knocked up by the wrong guy.”

He stretches out his big hand and retracts it to a fist again, as though he's stretching his fingers.

My clit throbs. I've never thought hands were so sexy.

I should write a book about all the hormones that rage through your body when you're pregnant, or maybe just read one because I clearly have no idea what to do with them all.

"Why are you hiding the baby?"

"I'm not hiding." That's a lie, but he doesn't need to know everything.

"Oh, so I can tell everyone in town then?"

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm happy for you. Everyone should be happy for a new life."

I roll my eyes and laugh. "You tell anyone and you're going to have trouble. Dave, the guy you just punched, he's hell bent on me giving this baby up for adoption."

The Alaskan narrows his thick brows. "Okay, but why do you have to keep that quiet?"

"His family is like royalty here. If they find out he wants to adopt the baby out, they'll lose their shit, and his plan for living a carefree life is over."

"What do you want?"

"Oh, I'm keeping my baby. There's no doubt about it. That's why we're arguing."

"I don't get it. Can't he sign ownership to you and everyone moves on?"

"*Ownership?*" I bite back a smile. "You mean parental rights?"

"Yeah, whatever. You know what I mean. Why can't he sign it over to you?"

"Did you hear me? I said his family wouldn't let him. Everyone knows we were together. If I show up with a new



baby, people will know it was his, he'll be riddled with obligation, and his life will be ruined. *His words, not mine.*"

"So, you're helping an asshole do a stupid thing?"

I huff out a breath. "I appreciate the barrage of questions, but you do realize I'm not an idiot, right?"

He holds up his hands. "Just asking."

I sigh, biting back a miserable grin. "My parents are ultra-religious, and they'll die if they find out I'm pregnant out of wedlock. You happy to know all my business now?"

"No. I feel like I need to help you."

I laugh. "Help me do what?"

He stands and makes his way toward me. Giant is not the word for this man. He's a goliath. *A beast*. An abnormally sized human that's both tall and wide. A creature in a fantasy book written about the perfect man from the land of perfect males. Maybe I should run off to Alaska.

He leans against the counter near me, his eyes on mine as though he's about to say something serious. "I've been lost before. I thought I had to shut everything in and stay away from everyone. But when I talked to friends, everything made more sense. What if you opened up? I could help you. I'm only here until this bear is gone. You don't have to worry about me blabbering."

I laugh and roll my eyes, dumping the drink into the sink. "I don't know what your angle is, but I don't have time for games. Stop following me."

I walk past him and open the front door, letting the cold breeze in much longer than I'd like.

Hudson catches the drift and readjusts the hat on his head before making his way toward me. That one single move has me tempted to slam the door, mount him like a mustang, and ride into the sunset... but I hold strong.

"Thank you for the visit. You know where to find me if you need help."

I nod and watch as he creaks down the porch steps, disappearing into the dark night, crunching over snow and past the line of trees.

When he's too far to see, I close the door and lock it tight, making my way to the fireplace to warm up before bed.

My hand goes to my stomach and my heart slams against my chest. Am I really craving touch this desperately that I'd get the hots for the creepy, aggressive, stalkery Alaskan everyone hates?

*Apparently so.*

I scrub my hands together next to the fire before I head back to the bedroom with a giant lie rattling around in my head.

You know, the one where I tell myself I'm not going to rub one out thinking about the goliath that just left, when we all know I will.

## Chapter Four

Hudson

“Where the fuck have you been?” My brother Atlas hits my shoulder as he leans back on the couch. “Dad is pissed!”

“He’ll get over it.”

“No, he won’t. We missed another day of hunting. He’s fed up.”

I sit on the couch, avoiding the spring that pokes me in the ass on the far left. “The maps will help. We’ll go over them in the morning.”

“Right.” Atlas tugs at his beard. “Did you meet someone?”

I glance toward him, then back at the television. There’s a black and white sitcom on from the old days but I don’t know which one. Something about a small-town kid and a dog. “No.”

“Then where are you going every day? If you’re not careful, you’ll end up like Rowan, married off and destined for a life of hell.” Rowan is our brother, and while I appreciate that he fell in love and married a girl in a shotgun wedding, that’s not for me.

“I’m not that guy. You know that.”

Atlas laughs. “Yeah, well, there’s a version of you back in Alaska that wouldn’t have missed a strategy meeting to save his life.”

“And there’s a version of you that wouldn’t be offering your services to single moms, but I saw you talking to that woman at the market yesterday.”

“I’m a contractor. We’re here for an indefinite amount of time. I’m trying to make some extra money.”

“You’re giving her a discount. Was that part of the plan, too?”

He bites back a smile. “Whatever, man. Just watch yourself. Dad doesn’t look good. I don’t know what’s going on with him. He was rattling off something last night about this being the last big hunt with his boys.”

“What?”

“You know dad. Could’ve been a guilt trip. Who knows? I’m just saying we need you here.” Knowing my father, I wouldn’t doubt that he’s amped up the melodrama. He’s old school, so applying guilt to get your kids to do something is definitely a tool he likes to use.

Wind whips against the side of the cabin and the scent of stew from dinner is still in the air. I should eat, but it’s been a long ass night and I’m ready for bed. I stand from the couch, tell Atlas good night, and make my way upstairs to my room at the end of the hall.

The cabin we’re occupying is large but run down. The floorboards groan and ache with every step, there’s a draft in every room, and there are a few rodents that have made their way into the food supply. That said, this place is still a luxury. On most hunts, we sleep in the bush without running water, no heat, and the closest bathroom is a nearby tree.

I pass by my father’s room and listen to his cough. Part of me wants to question him about his dramatics and put him in his place. The other part of me wants to ignore the drama for tonight and head back up to bed and find a way to text Ruby. When I notice the light off in his room, I give myself permission to skip the lecture.

I’m not three steps away from my bedroom when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Thinking it must be Ruby, I jump up from the bed and pull on my jeans while redialing the number.

A man picks up and before he says much, I know who it is. “How much do you want?” The man’s voice is low and metered.

“You’re bribing me?”

“Everyone has a price. I need you to keep your mouth shut.”

I laugh. “I’m not taking your money, Dave.”

He scoffs. “So, you’re big and you’re dumb.”

The man is brave over the phone.

I don’t respond, so he keeps talking.

“Stay away from Ruby. Once this baby is out of the picture, we’re going back to the way things were.”

I laugh. “You discuss that with her yet?”

“Don’t need to. She knows where she belongs.”

“Right. You seem like a dreamboat.”

He pauses and groans low, like an idiot wolf who’s been cast off by his pack. “I gave you a choice. Now you’re going to stay the fuck away from her and keep your mouth shut... or else. Bullets don’t get ambushed like I was earlier.”

I laugh and grip the phone tight as I climb up into my truck. “You know, I met a piece of shit like you once. He’s eating dirt right now. Keep fucking around and I’ll make sure and get the two of you together.” I disconnect the line and take off toward Ruby’s cabin. I don’t care that I’ve only just left, or that my father is going to lose his shit come morning. Right now, the only thing that matters is making sure I keep Ruby safe, and I can’t do that from the other side of the mountain.

## Chapter Five

Ruby

My vibrator buzzes against my clit and I sigh. I don't know who thought putting a massager against their pussy was a good idea, but I wish I could personally thank them. This vibrator has single-handedly gotten me through my pregnancy, no pun intended.

Now if I could stop thinking about Hudson while I touch myself, that'd be great.

First off, he's a jerk. A top grade, do what he wants, tell it like it is... jerk. Second, he's over twenty years older than me. Sadly, that doesn't stop the insatiable urge I have to ride his massive body into Valhalla.

I press the vibrator tighter to my clit and let it hover, arching my back and sighing with each aching pulse.

*God this feels good!*

Imagining Hudson's big rough hands on my skin and his hot breath on my neck, my thighs tighten.

*Why do I want him so badly?* This has to be hormones. I barely know the man. I'm sure as soon as I come, I'll feel a whole lot better—

A knock at the front door disrupts my fun. It's late. It's really late and I can't imagine who the hell would be out here at this time. Last I checked, I'd successfully pushed everyone away. I suppose my parents or my sister could be stopping by, but this late? Probably not.

Panic rushes through me. My dad always warned me about living out in the middle of nowhere. *'It's gorgeous,'* he says, *'but you have to watch out for the drifters. They'll take advantage of a nice girl like you.'* I've lived out here for the last four years and I haven't seen a drifter once, but maybe tonight is my lucky night.

I climb up from the bed and slide into my slippers, grabbing the gun that rests by my nightstand as I make my way toward the door. There's a chance it could be Dave, but something tells me after the argument with the beast, I'll be fine for a while. I'm hoping it bought me at least a couple weeks.

Truthfully, I should be gone by then anyway.

Heart hammering, I peek out the side window and stare toward the man on the porch. It's not a drifter, Dave, or my family. It's Hudson. He's still wearing flannel, tight blue jeans, cowboy boots, and his trucker hat. A fog of air releases from his mouth as he waits.

*Why is he here so late? He just left.*

Maybe I had my orgasm and fell asleep right afterward, and this is the reward my body is giving me for having so much stress lately.

I wonder if I let him in, will he fuck me and put me to sleep in my dream too? Maybe hold me close and kiss my neck slowly as he explores every bit of me.

I consider these thoughts carefully before opening the door. Whatever the reason for him being here, I need to know where this will go. When the cold air hits, I realize I'm only wearing a sports bra and a pair of little white panties.

His eyes widen. "Woah. Bad time?"

I try to cover everything I'm insecure about, but my arms don't reach into my soul, so I get snarky instead as I say, "Well, it's almost midnight, but you know... welcome back, I guess."

Dear God, I'm going to need strength. So much strength. He smells like the woods and towers over me like a colossal beast who's crawled in from the night to ravage me.

*Okay, I inferred that last part.*

"Sorry to bother you." He swallows hard and redirects his gaze away from me, though he filters back once or twice to take me in. In my wildest dreams it's because he likes what he

sees. In reality, I know it's probably the shock of seeing such an enormous belly.

I'd run to get a robe, but then I'd have to turn around, and I'm not doing that.

"Why are you here?"

He wets his lips. "I got a call from Dave, and I hated that you were alone."

"Oh, okay. Well, I live alone so... I'll be fine. Next time you could call. What did Dave want?"

Hudson broadens his shoulders. "He's in the mood to play phone tough guy, but he did mention a gun. So, I figured I'd at least make sure you were prepared."

I laugh. "Of course." I tap my trusty revolver against my hip. "I'm surprised you would think me so helpless."

"You want me to grab you a robe or something?" Hudson looks away.

Of course, he's sick by the sight of me. Me drawing his view to my thighs must have sealed my fate. I should've covered up sooner. That said, now that I'm standing here exposed and sick of his attitude, I don't want to be told what to do.

"No, I'm good."

He narrows his brows. "Okay... aren't you cold?"

"Are you?"

"I'm fine, but you're nearly naked and covered in goosebumps."

"No need to worry about me. I'm fine." I'm definitely not fine. I'm, in fact, shrinking more and more the longer his eyes stay fixed on my bloated frame. "Is there anything else you need?" I try to hold my gaze steady with his in an attempt at false confidence. I don't know if it's working.

"I came to watch you."



“Except this time, you’re telling me about it. That’s not like you.”

A perfect smile lifts his cheeks. “You’re a smart ass tonight. I like it.”

I cross my arms over my chest, then drop them to my side. “What about hunting?”

“They’ll be fine tomorrow on their own. I left my map and the plans. I won’t be able to focus on anything knowing your up here all alone.”

I shake my head. “Why are you doing this? I don’t get it. I mean, why do you care if my ex comes here and does whatever? You just met me.”

He looks away. “You’re a young, pregnant girl up here all by yourself. Someone should be looking out for you.”

“So, you have a savior complex?”

“No, I have a hero complex. Get it right.” He kicks off his boots and walks past me toward the kitchen, grabs a beer from the fridge, pops the top, and takes a long, hard swig before looking back at me.

“Well, help yourself ‘hero,’ but then you should head home. I’m leaving in a few days, anyway.”

He stares toward me with narrowed brows. “Where are you going?”

“It’s a secret.”

“You don’t know, do you?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, I know. What kind of person would run off nine months pregnant with no plan?” *It’s me! I would... but I keep that part to myself.*

He takes another pull from the bottle and settles it on the counter before stepping toward me. “You don’t need to run away. You can talk to me. I can help you and we’ll figure something out.”

He’s so close that I feel the heat radiating off his body. I imagine this is the urge a criminal feels when they’re about to

do something wrong. Unfortunately, I'm not a criminal. I'm a horny, pregnant girl that lives alone in a cabin. I think there might be different names for women like me.

"For the last time, I'm fine." I turn away, but he reaches an arm out for me. And before I've thought through what's happening, I'm pressed against his giant frame and my head is against his chest as though that's where I was meant to be.

Warmth radiates through me as his big hand rests on the side of my face. "You don't have to be tough all the time. You can talk to me."

My clit throbs and my heart slams against my chest. I'm fine to stay right here for the better part of forever. So, for those looking for an end to my story... this is it. *Ruby sinks into his chest and lays there for all eternity. The end.*

"Come on. Let's get you back to bed." His hand lands on the small of my back and I reluctantly take his lead, walking back toward the bedroom in hopes that this somehow turns into a cheesy porno. Sure, I don't need a big, bad protector, but I do need to get off. And given the fact that I'm about to leave town, one night with this giant man couldn't hurt me, right?

We've barely turned the corner into the bedroom when I see the vibrator still sitting on the edge of the bed.

My heart stops. Dear God, the last thing I need is for him to see what a complete horndog I am. Then again, maybe it would be a good conversation starter to get things moving in the right direction.

No, it wouldn't be. I break free from his warm grasp and cover the massager with the sheet before sitting on the edge of the bed with a guilty smile. Half of me still hopes he saw it. I'd love to swap dirty stories right now.

"What did you want to do with your life when you were little?" He sits on the edge of the bed.

*Okay, this isn't the dirty talk I had in mind.*

"What? What does that have to do with anything?"

He shrugs. "I just want to know."

"Okay, but it doesn't matter."

"Does to me. I want to know who you are."

I swallow hard as I look toward him. I can't catch his angle. "What did *you* want to be?"

"You know you have an awful habit of answering questions with questions? I hope you don't teach your baby to talk that way."

I roll my eyes and look away before snapping back. "You've got an awful habit of following me around. Is that what you wanted to be when you grew up? A stalker?"

"I wanted to be a detective. Instead, I learned to build things and joined the family business." He looks down and away. "It's a living, but in another life, I'm chasing down criminals."

I nod slowly. "Yeah, I could see that for you. There's still time."

He laughs. "No. I'm too old now. Too old for a lot of things."

"Like what?"

"Like a career change, a family..." He sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly. "That's not what we're talking about. I asked *you* a question. What did you want to do when you were little? What's your dream?"

I stare up toward him. No one's ever asked me what my dreams were before. I make a mental note to talk about that with my children daily. I want to know what their passions are, what they love, what makes them happy.

"I always thought I'd grow up and..." I bite my bottom lip. "It's stupid."

"No," he nudges my shoulder, "it's not. Keep going."

"I always thought I'd grow up and live on a little farm where everything was self-sustainable. Like I could go to the garden and pick the vegetables we were making for dinner. My

husband and I would do chores together and teach our kids simple values. My parents and my sister would be around for birthdays and Sunday dinners, and we'd have love because love is all we needed. It's nothing big, and probably boring to someone like you. Your detective dream is way better."

His giant hand lands under my chin and he draws my gaze up to his. "How does leaving make that dream come true? If you run from this, half of that dream dies."

I swallow hard as he holds his gaze with mine. "It doesn't die. It changes."

"I know you're strong and I know you can do anything you set your mind to, but that dream you had involved your family. And as much as you might believe you can replace that feeling with another one, you can't. Flaws and all, they're yours, and you should give them a chance to prove you wrong."

"You don't know my family." I stand from the bed and pace in front of him. "They'll lose their minds, and on top of that, Dave will pull some shit. I know it."

"Maybe at first, but I'd bet the second they see their grandbaby, they'll change their minds. And Dave... Dave's a little bitch. I'll take care of him before I leave town." He says the words as though he has total conviction, whereas mine sound like something a child would write in a diary.

"I don't know." I sit back on the bed. "It's not that easy. I mean, you know... some dreams just die."

He tucks my hair behind my ear. "So maybe you stay here and figure things out with your family. In the meantime, maybe I look into becoming a cop or see about starting a family."

I'm not sure if it's the hormones, reality, or the way Hudson makes me feel like anything's possible, but three seconds after his mouth closes, I'm leaning into his lips like a desert rose into the rain.

I should be afraid of rejection, but there's something passing between us I can't explain.

*Maybe it's what he felt in the library that made him want to protect me. Maybe that's what he feels right now that makes him want to be here with me.* I don't know. Either way, I let it happen. I lean up into his lips and I swear he leans down into mine, and soon we're pressed together, his hands weaving through my hair with need.

His kiss moves to my neck and onto the lobe of my ear, where his deep, raspy voice huffs, "You sure you want to kiss me like that?"

I sigh and swallow hard. "Why wouldn't I?"

He laughs under his breath spreading heat against the lobe of my ear. "Because I know right now, I won't have any self-control with you."

"Do you need self-control?"

"I need to be a gentleman. You're in the middle of a lot right now. I don't want to confuse you more."

"With a one-night stand? That won't confuse me. I understand what this is."

"I don't want one night with you." He groans under his breath, as he continues to kiss the nape of my neck and his rough beard scrapes against my skin. God, I want more of this.

"Okay," I manage to breathe out. "What do you want then?"

"I want to know you, to hold you, to take care of you. Just tonight won't be enough."

I've never been talked to like this. God knows Dave's primary objective was to fuck, and he's really the only experience I've had with sex. This is a completely different situation. Hudson is confident and warm. He touches me like he knows where he wants his hands. He owns my body in a way I never could've imagined a man owning me.

I swallow hard. "How do you know you want me for more than tonight?"

He leans into my neck and scrapes his teeth against my shoulder. His tone's low as he says, "How does that bear know

to keep moving?”

I shrug my shoulders as his big hand runs down over my chest.

His teeth lightly nibble my collarbone. “Instinct.”

His palms cup my breasts and tug my sports bra down. My nipples are hard and puffy as he bends forward, licking and biting gently. “You’re like an instinct, little girl. A sweet little urge that I need more than anything else.” He kisses my expanded belly and stares up at me as he palms over my panties, rubbing my clit through the thin cotton. “I could leave right now, but I’d be back in an hour. You could run, but I’d always find you.”

I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m done questioning things. He could be full of it. He could be a complete liar sent by Dave himself to mess with my head, and I’d still want his big, rough hands all over me.

“Lean back,” he groans before kneeling between my legs, sucking in my scent before nibbling the lips of my pussy through my panties. His tongue swipes over the wet fabric and I jump, swallowing hard as he slides my panties to the side and pushes a finger inside of me.

My fingers weave through his hair and I lose myself in his touch. I’m enjoying the moment, but my mind is reeling with all the things I need from him. His hard cock, his mouth, his weight against my frame.

I lift my hips and grind against his face, thumping and sweeping upward against his beard as his tongue works my clit.

“Good little girl,” he groans. “Come in my mouth. I want your juices on my tongue. I’ve been thinking about it for days.”

The thought of him sitting in his truck somewhere watching me and touching himself makes my clit throb harder.

“I almost came earlier thinking about you,” I mention through panting lips.

“What did you think about?” he growls into my pussy, sending vibrations through my core.

I swallow hard and lick my lips. I’m not good at dirty talk. It’s a fantasy I have, but the thought of doing it is intimidating. *What if I sound stupid?* That said, I brought it up, so I have to say something.

“I imagined I was sitting on your lap, bouncing for you. You were watching my tits move. I saw the way you looked at them earlier. I know you like them.”

He deepens the thrust with his finger. “I love these thick pussy lips, little girl. Come for me, and then you’ll come again on my lap.”

I bite back a moan and grind against his face as an orgasm rips through me, tingling my frame from head to toe. My neck arches back as Hudson bites my clit and growls.

*He bit my clit!*

Pleasure that once was amazing, turns to euphoria and I jerk against him violently as though I’m having a seizure. I’ve never felt anything like this.

He grips my hips in his big hands and holds me tight against his mouth, lapping me up, teasing the last bits of excitement out before kissing my thighs and making his way back up onto the bed next to me.

His tone is low as he says, “Fucking hell, little girl. You taste so good.”

His leather hand lands on my face, and he rolls toward me. I want his cock. I want him so fucking bad.

“Don’t leave.” His tone is much lower than it’s been. “Stay here with me. I’ll take care of you.”

I look toward him, and that sense of safety and warmth stays steady. “I love that fantasy, but you have to leave too, remember?”

He sighs heavily. “You don’t feel what’s happening between us?”

I'd be a liar if I said I didn't. "This feels great, but it's not real. Real life is complicated and shitty, and people are mean and unpredictable. Eventually, we'll be a mess like the rest of them. Then what?"

He brushes his thumb back and forth on my cheek, staring toward me like I'm missing the biggest piece of the puzzle. "The real stuff is what I want. If it's not messy and shitty sometimes, then it wouldn't be worth it."

The light in the room is dim and I can't see well, but I stare for what seems like forever. It's not until the sudden release of warm water between my legs that I look away.

*Of course, I just pissed myself! Fucking great!* I read about this in pregnancy books, but I didn't think it would happen to me, especially since we didn't actually have sex.

"You okay? What's wrong?" He's noticed my face change. He studies me as he starts feeling the sheet between us. "You're soaked. Did your water break?"

"What? No, I'm weeks away from delivery." My face heats and I look away. "The baby pushes on my bladder sometimes and I—"

"No, this is more than that. I think your water broke."

While I'd love for that to be the conclusion to this horribly embarrassing moment, I know it's not. I'm just thirty-six weeks pregnant. I have four weeks left, and I still have to find a place to settle before the baby comes. It's not time. As I tell myself this, pressure increases in my abdomen and my stomach tightens.

I glance toward Hudson. "I can't be in labor."

His lips land on my forehead and he stands from the bed. "I'm going to call the emergency line and grab what we need to deliver just in case. I need you to stay here and don't move, okay?"

I nod in agreement, but I don't agree. All of me wants to jump up, grab the suitcase I'd packed, and head for the door, but the pain pushing down on my stomach is enough to keep me in place.



*How did this happen?* There were no warnings. I was having an orgasm a second ago, and now I'm in labor. If this is some sick lesson from the universe, I've heard it loud and clear. I shouldn't be having fun.

*Fun is not for me.*

Pots and pans clank in the kitchen as I grip the sheets and resist the urge to push.

"I put some water on to boil." Hudson sits next to me on the bed. Again, he's immediately comforting. "I'm going to look down there. Are you okay with that?"

Given he was '*down there*' thirty seconds ago pleasuring me, it's beyond humiliating, but I don't have much of a choice.

"Do what you have to."

He nods and spreads my legs gently, sliding two fingers into my pussy for inspection. "The ambulance is on their way, but they've still got about an hour drive up here. I can feel the baby's head. You won't make it an hour."

"Comforting," I say, my tone sarcastic as I attempt to control my breathing. I should've watched more internet videos on the topic. Turns out, breathing isn't as easy when you're pushing a human being out of you.

"I've delivered enough calves and foals that I think I can handle it until they get here. Just do what I tell you, okay?" There he is with that confidence again.

Usually, I'd have a snarky remark to spring back at him, but the urge to bear down becomes agonizing and I have to push.

Hudson sits before me like a baseball catcher, his hands against my thighs, his eyes bouncing between mine and the baby, which he says is crowning.

*How is this happening, and why am I glad he's here?* This is how I get into trouble. This is how I end up alone. I invest in the wrong guys. I get all attached and I wind up regretting it.

In my defense, I was supposed to be having an orgasm, not delivering a baby. This was supposed to be one night of fun, not childbirth.

“Almost here! You’re doing great, little girl. Keep pushing.” His big hand reaches up for mine and he holds me close as the pressure begins to subside, and I feel my baby slide from within me.

“A baby boy,” his deep voice calls as he announces my son to me.

Tears streaming from my face, I reach down and grip my child until he’s against my skin, taking his first breaths.

Hudson covers him with a clean blanket and together we listen to him cry like a song we’ve never heard before and know already we want to hear over and over again. “What are you going to name him?”

Until now, I didn’t know what I’d name this baby. I only knew I wanted a name that would be significant and great. A name that would remind me and the child of how far we came and where we’re going.

“I think I want to name him Koda.”

“Koda? That’s the name you gave the grizzly bear.”

I nod. “I learned today that bears move with instinct, and if this little guy can do that, I think he’ll be just fine.”

Hudson kisses my forehead, and for a single second, everything in my world is perfect. A goliath, a baby, and all the possibilities in the world.

A second later, the sirens from the ambulance whirl and doubt moves back in like a heavy lead weight desperate to take my dreams. Trouble is, I don’t think I ever had them to begin with.

## Chapter Six

Hudson

Ruby holds the baby close against her breast. She's been nursing for the last hour, and I've done my best to give her the privacy she needs but watching her in this role is beautiful. Her long hair falls down over her shoulder and her eyes are glued to the baby in a haze that can only be described as whimsical.

"I see you standing there." She bites back a smile. "I'm so glad the emergency crew didn't make me leave the cabin."

"Well, everything checked out so now we've just got to keep an eye on you."

"Yeah, that's what I wanted to talk about. My, ugh, my sister is stopping by with her kids. She's going to stay with me for a while and show me the ropes. You know...woman to woman."

"Woman to woman." My head is reeling because all I want is to be here next to her, protect her, care for her. "I thought you weren't telling anyone."

"I wasn't going to, but I can't leave the state with a baby this small. And now that I'm looking at him, I know you're right. He deserves to know his family."

*Okay, this is progressing in the right direction.*

A knock at the door is followed by the squeals of small children.

"That's her. Would you mind?" Ruby readjusts her nipple against the baby's mouth.

I stand from the bed and nod my head, making my way toward the door. On the other side is a woman in her early thirties. Short, with dark hair, deep brown eyes, and a seemingly permanent scowl. On her hip is a female toddler, and beside her is a slightly older boy. The kids are dressed to the nines, their mother not so much. Her hair is tied in a loose

bun on top of her head and her sweatpants are stained with both red and blue. This is the same woman I saw Atlas talking to in town. I don't remember her looking quite so exhausted.

"You must be the Alaskan." She holds out her hand. "Everyone is talking about you guys. I'm Peyton. Thanks for helping my sister. I've got it from here."

*Okay, so Peyton is the bossy type.*

I smile, biting back the urge to inform her that I'm not leaving. Instead, I wander toward the kitchen and pull down three mugs. "I was just making tea. You like some?"

She rolls her eyes. "Y'all catch that bear yet, because I think that's what you're supposed to be doing. *Hunting bears*, not playing midwife."

"Good thing I was *playing midwife*, or your sister would've been delivering alone."

"Or... she'd have called me sooner, and we'd have figured things out. Do I need to show you the door, or can you find it on your own?" Her tone bites as the kids toddle toward the television where she's changing the station to cartoons.

"You're here!" Ruby holds the baby close to her chest as she greets her sister.

Peyton stares at the baby for a second. "My Lord, how did I not know you were pregnant? Look at my nephew! He looks just like you, Ruby!"

It's true. He does have Ruby's ginger hair and button nose.

"I was just telling Mr. Laskin he can leave. I've got it from here." Peyton's tone is biting.

"I'm not going anywhere." I straighten. "Ruby needs me." My tone is low, rough, and more aggressive than it should be given that Peyton is her sister, but I'm not getting pushed out.

Ruby glances toward me, her head low before her gaze meets mine. "It's okay, Hudson. We've got it covered." She walks toward me, tips up onto her toes, and reaches up for a

hug. “You’re not what people think you are, and there’s no way I can repay you for doing what you did last night. But right now, you should go.”

I stand in the kitchen staring down at her for a long while. The softness in her eyes, the wisp of hair that scatters in front of her face, the slight pink that shades her lips. She’s perfection. Even twelve hours after birth, the woman is glowing. “What happens when Dave comes back? You know he will. What then? You two little girls going to fight him off?”

Peyton looks toward Ruby. “*Dave?*” She gasps. “Is Dave the father?”

*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... it slipped out.”

Ruby glances toward me then back toward Peyton. “He doesn’t want anyone to know. So, we’re keeping things on the low.”

“If he doesn’t want anyone to know, why would you worry about him coming back?”

“He wants the baby to go to another family. I know he’s got someone picked out. They’re going to give him a lot of money.” Ruby blows out a heavy breath. “I wouldn’t put it past him to take Koda if the opportunity presented itself.”

“If he did, you’d call the cops.”

“We live in a small town, Peyton. He could take the baby and go. Then what? How would we ever find him?”

Peyton reaches out in comfort. “You’re okay. We’re not going to let him take him.”

“See,” Ruby shrugs her shoulders, “we’ll be fine. You should get back to your father. I heard your phone blowing up when I was nursing. Have you called him back yet?”

“I haven’t, but that’s not my priority right now.”

“Call him.” She lands her hand on my shoulder. “Go home and check on everyone. We’ll be fine here. I’ll call you

if anything comes up.” She tips up onto her toes and kisses my cheek. “Thank you.”

I glance toward her, then Peyton. I don’t want to leave, but I can’t force her to let me stay. If she needs space with her sister, I need to respect that... but I won’t be gone for long.

## Chapter Seven

Ruby

“Wow, he’s intense.” Peyton sits on the sofa opposite me and stares down at the baby. “What the hell happened between you two?”

“Long story, but it doesn’t matter. Thank you for coming. I... I need to tell Mom and Dad, but I have no idea how.”

“Rip it off like a Band-Aid. They’ll be shocked that you were pregnant, but you’ve stayed away so much the last year I think it will put a lot of things into place. Plus, they get a new grandbaby out of the deal. Trust me, it’ll be easier than you think. I mean, I thought my divorce was going to send them over the edge but they’re really helpful.”

“How are things going with that?”

She glances toward the kids and in a pitched voice says, “Great!” Though, I know she means the exact opposite. “We’re working things out one day at a time. He’s just a really ‘friendly’ man is all, and you know how *friendly* men can be with other ladies.”

I reach out for her hand. “You’re doing well with everything. At least it looks like you are. I’m sorry I’ve been missing so long. I got so in my head about this pregnancy and everyone judging me. Dave reinforced that so often that I became an echo chamber of my own insecurities. It sucks. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not. I get it. I never told anyone, but Rick left like eight months before I announced it to the family, and I knew how *friendly* he was a year before that. Life is weird. I’m learning you’ve gotta roll with it... which brings me back to the Alaskan. You were looking at him like he was more than a guy that showed up and helped you deliver a baby.”

I glance out the window toward the marks his tires left in the snow. There’s an ache in my chest when I see them. “I

don't know what happened. I met him down at the library while he was looking for maps for hunting. After I gave them to him, he started following me."

She laughs. "Oh... so he's a stalker."

"I don't know. He was there when Dave was being an asshole and he beat him up the other night. It's terrible, but I was kind of glad for it. Dave hasn't bothered me since and he was on me every night before."

"So how did that translate into the looks you guys were giving each other?" My sister sips her tea and pulls the blanket she's cuddling in up to her chin. "Because those were some looks!"

"Yeah, I don't know. We just got to talking and there's an energy between us. I can't describe it."

"You can't describe it?" She bites a grin. "Did you guys fuck? I'm pretty sure that would describe it."

My stomach clenches again at the thought of his growl between my legs. At the thought of the orgasm that shot through me like wildfire. At the thought of him never touching me again. It's overwhelming. Everything is. "Not really. I mean, he like... he... ya know." I make a circular motion between my legs, and she gets the gist.

"Oh shit! You went for it. Was it good? I gotta say, everyone in town is talking smack about these guys... but they're hot, right? Like *really hot!*"

I laugh. "Yeah, I don't know what he wants with me, but yeah..."

"So... why didn't you want him to stay?"

I shrug. "He goes back to Alaska the second they find this bear, and then what? I follow him? I'd like to think I could, but the reality is, I'd miss Rugged Mountain."

"So maybe he'd stay."

I lower my head. "No. He's got his whole family out there. Besides, whatever we're feeling right now will wear off when real life hits. I mean, the man has never been tied to



anyone, ever. He'll get bored and leave, and I'll be left with a baby to raise and a broken heart."

She grins. "So, you'll end up like me. We can build a commune for broken-hearted women and talk shit about dicks all day. It could be the start of something great, but you've gotta get your heart broken first."

"No thanks."

She reaches toward me. "Look, I'm the first person to say avoiding love at all costs is the way to go, but I get to say that because I tried. You haven't yet. I see you two together. You need to try, or you'll regret it."

"Another time, another place... maybe. But right now, my focus needs to be on this baby. You're strong. You've always been strong. I'm... me. If I fall in love and my heart gets broken... I won't be okay."

"You're strong, too. You had this baby all by yourself. You've been pregnant for nine months all alone. Ruby... what if it works out? What if he's the best thing that ever happened to you?"

I glance out the window with my heart in knots. "Do you see that?"

She follows my stare. "If you're seeing Dave with a giant grizzly bear, then yes, I'm seeing that."

Folks in town have spoken about this bear for so long that I don't think it's registered how big he is.

"What do we do?"

She shrugs. "Let him get eaten?"

I narrow my gaze. "Seriously."

"Call the Alaskan, I guess. I'll fire off a warning. Maybe it'll scare both of them off."

She stands to grab my gun by the front door as I dial Hudson's number, because it turns out instinct is back at it again.

## *Chapter Eight*

Hudson

“Where the hell have you been?” My father coughs through his sentence. He’s definitely not feeling great, which is only going to add to his attitude. “I’ve been calling you. The boys have been calling you. We went out on a hunt yesterday and the maps were wrong.”

“The maps can’t be wrong. They’re maps. You must have followed the wrong trail. What happened?”

“You’d know if you were there. You get all the fucking out of your system so you can work? Maybe now you’ll think straight.” Whatever he’s got isn’t doing him any favors.

“Okay, so you’re not going to tell me how the hunt went?”

“Don’t have a bear strung up outside, so the hunt didn’t go well. You’re our tracker, Hud. The best one I have. You boys are all good at something, but you... you track the best and I need you out there fucking tracking!” He grumbles something under his breath and turns away from me. “Get your shit together. We’re going back out in the morning, and I don’t want any more problems.”

I drag in a deep breath and leave the room, closing the door behind me. The man has been impossible to talk to my entire life. I don’t expect anything to change.

“Hey.” Atlas is standing in the hallway outside of the room. “He’s getting worse.”

“I see that. What the hell is going on? Should we call a doctor?”

“I called someone to come out yesterday, but he refused treatment. I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

The man is no spring chicken, though he works and hunts with the best of us. That said, it’s not a new thing for him to refuse treatment. He had a gash in his leg last year that

should've required stitches. Instead, he insisted on duct tape and whiskey. In his defense, they did the job, but I'm not sure whatever's going on now is the same thing.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and my heart stops as I pull the screen from my jeans.

*Ruby: The bear is here.*

I dial her number but there's no answer. So, I dial again.

"What's wrong?" Atlas stands with a wide stance in front of me. "Something wrong with that girl you've been seeing?"

"Not sure. She says the bear is on her property."

He grins. "So, you have been seeing a girl."

"Not now! She's up near the river bend. I don't think we'll make it in time to corner him." I knew I shouldn't have left.

My phone rings. It's Ruby calling back. I pick up right away.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah... we're fine. I, ugh, Dave was snooping around, and the bear went after him."

"He alright?"

"I guess. I don't know. Peyton fired a warning shot, and the bear took off. Dave ran in the opposite direction."

"So, you're all good now?"

"Yeah, I mean, I'm good. I just thought you'd want to know that the bear was here is all."

"Which way did it run?"

"West. Well, northwest. It's almost like he knows he's on private land."

"Honestly, I'm just glad you're okay."

She hesitates and there's a break as though we both want to say more but neither of us knows how to say it.

“Anyway... how’s your family? Were they mad at you?”

“Yeah. My father is pissed. Not looking to great either, so I’m going to have to make it up to him somehow. I should probably go track this bear tonight. You’re sure you saw him go northwest?”

“Definitely.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Since an hour ago? Hudson, I’m fine. Go. Do what you need to do. I just... I wanted to tell you about the bear.” Her tone is soft and lingering, tinged with the flavor of something more she doesn’t say.

“Okay, well, I’ll check on you later.”

“No need. I’m good. Just, ya know, do your thing.” The line disconnects and my heart sinks heavily into my stomach like I’m missing a part of myself I desperately need back.

“You’re going after the bear?” Atlas interrupts my misery. “You’re going to get yourself killed chasing after him on private land. You know how these people are.”

I swallow hard as my father coughs from behind the bedroom door. “I want to go after the bear, I really do, but she said her ex was lingering around and I can’t let him get near her.”

Atlas shakes his head. “Dad is going to lose it come morning, but you do you, man. I’ll tell the guys where the bear is, and we’ll try to get permission to go onto the lots in that area.”

I stare toward him with knitted eyebrows for a long while contemplating what going after Ruby means. Turns out, it doesn’t matter. All I know is, I need her and this time, I’m hunting for keeps.

# Chapter Nine

Ruby

The internet says that my hormones should've leveled off and that I shouldn't be desperate to be touched, yet here I am, clit throbbing, thighs aching, dripping wet, with thoughts of Hudson spinning in my head.

Someone once told me that your body will tell you what it wants. That your mind can be confused, but your body doesn't have that luxury. Your body speaks where your mind can't. I never put too much thought into that statement until now.

I hover over Hudson's number writing out a text.

*Me: I miss you. I don't know why. I shouldn't, but I do.*

My heart pounds as I erase the letters one by one. We aren't meant to be together, and that's okay. We had what we had. It was momentary, it was useful, and now we're both moving on... *like we should*. In reality, we're saving ourselves months of turmoil and heartbreak down the road.

A flash of light scans across the forest floor, reflecting off the wall, and my stomach tightens.

*Dave*. That piece of shit! I should've known he wouldn't be scared off by a grizzly bear. No, that man thinks he's above everything and everyone. Of course, he's still out in the forest lurking around like some asshole.

I contemplate firing off another shot, but the baby is sleeping, and unless this man is at my door, I'm not waking him up. For the most part he goes down pretty well but given that today was his first full day on Earth, there's still some learning happening.

The light flashes again, this time closer.

I stand from the bed and go to the edge of the window, looking out into the darkness. Unfortunately, my night vision hasn't come in yet so I'm really limited on what I can see.

Though, through squinted eyes, I notice the shine of a truck parked behind the tree line near the river. A truck that isn't Dave's.

*It's Hudson's!*

My heart squeezes and warmth ripples through me. *Is he out here watching me again? Is he protecting me even though he shouldn't be?*

I flick on the light and move toward the window, waving toward him like a lunatic as a rush of cold air pebbles my nipples. Who entices a stalker toward them?

*Me. I do.*

With the bright light of my room, the light from outside fades, and I no longer see the truck. Maybe I imagined the whole thing.

I let out a sigh, close the window, and flick off the light. My sister offered to watch Koda tonight so I could sleep, not so I could hang out the window and wave at phantom stalkers I wish were real. I made my decision. Hudson's gone. He's here to do a job, so he's doing it.

The cold air that came in with the night lingers in the room as I slide under the covers and close my eyes trying to think of anything and everything but the warmth of Hudson's giant frame. I had my chance to love him. Now, I need to move on.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two Weeks Later

"Is it weird that I never heard from Dave?" I nurse the baby while I eat a bowl of cereal and talk to my sister who's packing up to leave.

"I think it's stranger you never heard from your stalker again."

I sigh. "Please don't talk about him."

"Why? You clearly miss him."

“I don’t.” I swallow hard as though I’m literally choking on the lies I’m telling.

She tilts a brow toward me as though she sees through my bullshit. “I’ve known you my whole life, Ruby. You most definitely miss that man.”

“Well, he doesn’t miss me. He hasn’t called or texted. He’s just gone.”

She sets a suitcase down by the door and steps toward me as the kids put on their jackets. “Is there a chance that you, my beautiful, well-meaning sister, pushed him away? And that maybe, you need to make the first move?”

“No!” I bundle Koda tighter in his blanket as he drinks. “That man knows what he wants. He wasn’t afraid to come after me before. If he wanted me, he would be here.”

Peyton holds up her hands and kisses the top of my head. “I love you. I’m a phone call away if you need anything. Are you sure you don’t want me to call someone else to help?”

I appreciate all that my sister has helped me with lately. I couldn’t have done this without her. But right now, I need to be alone to process through everything. “Thank you, but I’ll be okay. I need to get used to this. We’ll be fine.”

She nods and slides on her boots before opening the door to leave. In my fantasy, Hudson is there, hand up, ready to knock. Instead, there’s just snow and more snow. So much snow that the tire tracks he’d left are covered. That forces an ache into my chest, but I ignore it and settle the baby in for a nap. He’ll sleep at least a couple of hours, which gives me time to take a shower and maybe paint my nails. I haven’t done that in forever.

I lay the baby gently in his crib and make my way to the shower. The water runs until the room is filled with steam and I climb in. I’ve always liked the temperature extra hot, almost scalding. There’s so much comfort in the warmth. Peyton left behind some herbal shampoo that I lather into my hair while breathing in what I’m guessing is eucalyptus and maybe pine.

Definitely pine. It's woodsy and immediately I think of Hudson.

The door creaks and my eyes flash open to see the wall of a man standing outside the shower door.

I scream at first and nearly slip, but his hands reach in and steady me before I fall. He's wearing flannel and jeans, and he's soaked to the bone, but that doesn't stop him from climbing into the shower and leaning his lips into mine like he never left.

He takes off his hat and lands it backward on my soapy head, kissing me hard and slow before pulling back to look at me. "I know I shouldn't be here."

I can't speak.

"I..." He swallows hard and massages the shampoo out of my hair. "When you waved me off a couple of weeks ago, I should've left you alone. I know that. I know I shouldn't be in here right now. I know that waiting for your sister to leave was a bad idea. I know I've probably scared the hell out of you... but I need you, Ruby."

I tip up onto the highest point of my toes and kiss his face under the rain of the showerhead. "I wasn't waving you off. I wanted you to come in. All I think about is you, Hudson. All day and all night, I wonder what life would be like with you. What we could've been if I—"

He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me from the shower and tosses me down on the bed. Water drips from his gargantuan frame as he strips his clothes off in a puddle on the floor. The flannel, his tight jeans, his underwear. Every inch of clothing that disappears from his body exposes more of him, and I map every inch. The dark ink on his arms, shoulders, back, and chest. The hair that covers his stomach and trails down between his legs. The massive cock that sits erect and waiting with need.

"I'm going to say something, and I need you to be honest with me," he says low with a growl. This is a side of him I haven't seen before. A wilder, untamed side.



I nod.

“I’m here because I need you in my life. Now, tomorrow, always... but I need you to say it to.”

“I need you, Hudson.”

He steps closer. The heat from the woodstove dries the house out fast and already he’s stopped dripping. “Good, little girl. Tell me how many babies you want me to fuck into you.”

I swallow hard and watch as he strokes his cock in his hand. “I want all your babies, Hudson. I want all of you.” There’s a whine in my voice I can’t control. An urge of desperation that swells every possibility back to my life.

He kisses my head gently and stands at the edge of the bed, looking down at me. I’m eye level with his cock and I’m desperate to put it in my mouth.

“Are you good at listening to directions, little girl?”

I swallow hard, clit throbbing as I whisper, “I am.”

“Good. Then suck my cock, hard.” The words alone have my pussy soaking wet with anticipation.

Taking his thick cock in my hand, I lick from base to tip, then take him in, allowing my tongue to swirl and move freely over his head.

He groans low and weaves his fingers through my hair, thumping my mouth over his cock in a steady motion.

My clit hammers and swells with anticipation.

Hudson reaches between my legs and scrubs my clit as I work his shaft. He’s careful, but rough. It’s the first time I’ve been touched like this since the baby was born, and while I’m half expecting everything to hurt, it doesn’t. My body knows what I need, and it’s prepared itself.

“I need you inside me,” I pant with my mouth still over his dick.

He growls low, landing his hand on my throat while he pulls from within me. “You’re a good little girl. You know that?” His eyes are on mine with a wild intensity that wakes up

even the sleepest parts of my heart. “I want you to ride me, but I’m aching to grab your hips and fuck your little pussy. Can you bend over for me?”

I swallow hard and do as he’s asked. The truth is, I’ve been desperate for him to bend me over since I first laid eyes on him. Bending onto the edge of the bed, I lift my ass in the air, grip the sheets, and close my eyes.

His giant hand palms over my pussy as one hand grips my hip. He slaps my entrance with steady pressure over and over again.

I clench and arch beneath his touch, my shoulders down on the mattress, my pussy thumping with anticipation. I never thought I’d like my pussy smacked, but I do. I want it over and over again. I want him to spank my little pussy so hard that I come in his hand.

Before I get the opportunity, the tip of his cock edges in slowly, and within seconds, he’s spreading me wider and wider.

I suck in a deep breath as the pain pinches and subsides. “Harder,” I beg, tightening the sheets in my hands.

He’s sinks deeper and deeper into he’s as far as he can go.

Involuntary movements take over and my pussy clenches down on his cock. I’ve never felt so good.

“You okay?” He leans down, cupping my breasts in his hands as he hums in approval low in my ear.

Milk drips from my nipples and embarrassment takes over. “Oh, God. I’m so—”

He pulls out quickly and flips me onto my back, tugging me forward to slide back in again. The entire motion is fast and effortless. His gaze on mine, he drags his index finger down over my lips as to hush me and buries his face against my leaking nipples, drinking in the dripping milk as though he’s desperate for the taste of me.

This is another first. An act I never thought I'd be excited for, but here I am, about to come as this man sucks the milk from my tit like a hungry giant.

My clit throbs and his cock sinks in deep against a spot that I didn't know was there.

"You taste good, little girl," he groans, milk dripping from his chin as he swallows and flicks his tongue against my nipple.

My pussy clenches tight and waves of euphoria crash down around me as I convulse and moan against his cock.

"Attagirl. Give me everything that pussy has!" He growls out the words as his teeth scrape against my nipple and he unloads inside of me. His orgasm is hard and steady as he thumps his cock against my pussy more slowly now.

The weight of his frame is heavier on me than it was when we first started. We're exhausted.

He rolls to the side and pulls me against his frame until I'm draped over his body and our sweat-slicked skin sticks to one another.

"You're mine now," he groans, tickling my back softly with the tip of his rough finger.

"I've been yours for a while now. We just hadn't said it out loud."

He smiles and squeezes my shoulder gently. "How are you and the baby? I've watched you two every day for weeks. It was hell not to come closer."

"I wish you'd called. I'd have told you I love you and I missed you." I roll onto my side to catch his gaze as he hears the words I've been desperate to say for weeks.

"I love you more, little girl." He kisses my forehead gently and hums low in his throat. "I guess we should plan out a green house and build a barn."

My brows wrinkle. "Why's that?"

“For the sustainable farm you want. That’s the dream, right?”

My heart swells. “Well yeah, but what about you? What about Alaska and your family?”

“You are my family.” He kisses my head again. “We’ll visit Alaska, but up here with you is where I belong. Besides, I’ve got one brother staying in Rugged Mountain already. It’ll be good to give him some company. And the way Atlas has been helping over at Peyton’s place, I’m sure it won’t be long before he’s relocating as well. Though, he’s a hard catch, so I don’t know.”

“Peyton is talking to your brother?”

I nod. “They’ve been talking. He’s starting some work on her house this week.”

My jaw drops. “Wow.” I make a mental note to harass my sister about how she lectured me for keeping secrets, but I return my attention back to the present. “I want you to stay, but what about your dreams? What about your dad?”

He rolls toward me, his gaze intense. “You are my dream, little girl. This, a family, the two of us. Dad might be here longer than he wants to be, anyway. He’s not feeling so great. Not sure he’d make the trip back anytime soon.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Not sure. He won’t let a doctor near him. That said, I know deep down he’ll be happy for this wedding like he was my brother Rowan’s. And you,” he squeezes my shoulder, “are free from Dave and his bullshit. Atlas and I went and talked to his cousin, Maddox.”

I laugh under my breath and sit up, twisting toward him as my heavy breasts continue to leak milk. I swear this is going to be a thing now. “You did what?”

Hudson sits up and twists toward me, licking off the drops that spill. My clit throbs again. “Is that a problem?”

“No. It’s great! It’s just that Maddox and the Baxters are kind of royalty here. They essentially own the town. He’s...

what did you say?"

"I told him what was going on and we stopped over to Dave's place. He's going to sign ownership," he clears his throat, "parental rights over to me if that's what you want. Maddox agreed to keep everything quiet for Dave's sake if he goes along. Not that he deserves it, but this is what I want if you do."

My heart swells and tears stream down my face as I roll onto the goliath next to me. "Yes, this is what I want. This is all I've ever wanted."

Hudson runs his big, rough hand up and over my chest. "Good. Then let's make sure we get this right. I want more babies in the works right now."

I smile and grip his cock, anchoring down onto him with a sigh as every single one of my dreams comes true all at once.

# *Epilogue*

Hudson

A Year Later

“Irish twins is what you call them.” Ruby’s mom holds my newborn daughter, Lisa, against her chest as Koda toddles toward us. “It’s when siblings are born within a year of each other.”

“Is Irish triplets a thing?” I kiss Ruby’s neck and scoop Koda up into my arms. “I don’t plan on stopping. We need a house full of babies to help on this farm.”

“That’s the truth,” her dad says, carrying a platter of cookies out from the kitchen. “How is everything going with that? You two have been quiet up here since the wedding.”

We have been absorbed in our own little world since the wedding a few months ago. I would’ve married Ruby the same night I snuck into her bathroom, but we decided to plan a little ceremony next to the river the same day I signed the adoption papers for Koda. She wore a simple white slip dress with lace around the edges, and though I would’ve worn better, she insisted I wear my faded blue jeans and the cowboy boots she loves so much. The day couldn’t have been more perfect.

“Yeah, we finally got the greenhouse up and we’re working on the barn now. Hopefully by spring we’ll have some livestock. Ruby wants highland cows and a few miniature horses. I’m not sure how they help us with sustainability yet, but she swears they’re cute.” I laugh and watch as Ruby hands our baby girl off to her father before tugging me into the kitchen. I glance toward her dad and call back, “Guess we will finish this up in a bit.”

He laughs and redirects his attention to his granddaughter who could sleep in a busy train station.

When we’re alone in the kitchen, Ruby stares up at me with a sweet grin that reminds me why I love her so much. “What?”

“Nothing. I just needed to be alone with you. My mom offered to take the kids tonight so we could do whatever. What do you think?”

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close. “I think that sounds wonderful. What did you have in mind?”

“Don’t be mad, but what if...” Her tone heightens as she says, “What if we go down to look into that private investigator stuff you were thinking about? We could have dinner, make a business plan, and see where it takes us.”

I look down and away before glancing toward my girl again. “I love you, sweetheart,” my hand cups her soft face, “but you know we’re busy as hell here. The kids, the farm, and I’ve got a house I’m working on out on the ridge. I don’t have time for that right now.”

She looks down. “I knew you’d say that. That’s why I already drew up the schedule. You could take cases in slowly and we could work together.” She raises her brows. “You do everything for me, Hudson. I really want you to have your dreams too.”

I draw in a deep breath and lean into her forehead, kissing her gently. “I know you’re trying to help, and I appreciate how much you care about me and my dreams, but I mean it when I say you’re it. You, this family, and what we’re building here... this is all the action I need. I promise you. Let’s have dinner tonight, then you can be the bad guy and I’ll cuff you.”

Sun filters in from the kitchen window and reflects off the red in her hair. She grins wide and tips up onto her toes for a kiss. “That’s a plan I can’t refuse, but I want you to know this other one is here too, if you want it. We’ll make it work.”

I tip her chin up and lean into her lips, holding the kiss for a long while before finally letting go.

I’ve let instinct drive my life, and so far, it’s working. Hell, if I hadn’t joined the family business or come out here to Rugged Mountain, I’d have never met Ruby, I wouldn’t have these two beautiful babies, and I wouldn’t be the happiest I’ve

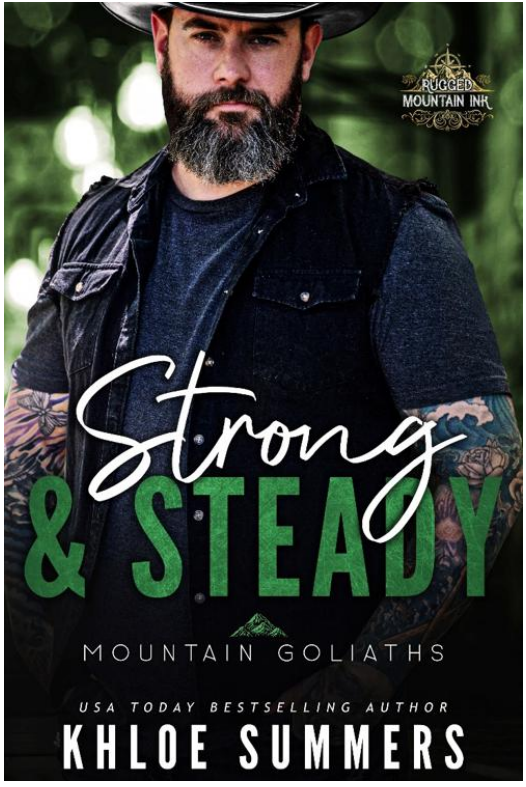
ever been. Sometimes, things don't make sense in the moment, but you know deep down you're doing something right.

Turns out, hunting Ruby was the best instinct I ever followed... and keeping her is only the beginning.

THANK YOU FOR READING

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RUGGED  
MOUNTAIN INFL

Strong  
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MOUNTAIN GOLIATHS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**KHLOE SUMMERS**

# Chapter One

Peyton

Atlas knocks on the window and cups his giant hands to peer through. He's a massive man, covered in ink, with a long salt and pepper beard. According to my new friend Lainey, I should let him do more than work on my roof.

If this were a fantasy land where fantasy things happened, I'd agree. I should let him do all kinds of things to me. That said, we don't live in a fantasy land. We live here, on top of a cold, pine laden, rugged mountain.

I walk toward the window and lift up the pane, wrapping my robe tighter to block the cold air that's filtering in. "What's wrong?" I bite. "The kids are still sleeping."

He groans low under his breath as though I've annoyed him with my comment and he's working hard to keep pleasantries. "You've got mold on your roof."

"Okay... so take it off."

He laughs. "If it were that easy. You've had a leak up there for a while. The damage has spread to the attic. You're going to need a professional removal."

"How professional? Like expensive professional, because I tapped myself out to fix the roof. You never said anything about mold."

He closes his eyes and huffs. "No one could've seen the mold unless they looked in that attic and I wasn't looking at the attic. I was looking at the roof when I quoted you. I can fix it cheap, but it's still going to run you five hundred bucks for supplies."

"I can't afford that, so... leave it there I guess."

"Mold? You want me to leave black mold in your house? You know that shit spreads, right? It can make you sick. Don't you have kids here?"

“Is this some kind of guilt trip or something? I said I don’t have the money! And why are you talking to me through a window? The door is three feet away. You could come through the house like a normal person.”

He glances sideways at the front door then back at me. “Am I clearing the mold, or do you prefer to get your family sick?”

What the hell is this guy’s problem? He might make his money on guilting other people, but he can’t trick me. Though, it’s mostly because I couldn’t afford it anyway.

“I’ll fix it myself.”

“Boards and insulation need to be replaced. You’ve got that on your own?” His brows raise as though I’m some incapable woman. “You know I gave you a bottom barrel price, right? I’m not charging you for time, only for materials.”

“Why would you do that?” My tone is biting. I don’t need handouts.

“I don’t know, lady. I get it. You’re struggling. I just want to help. You wait on this and it’s only gonna get worse.”

My knowledge of black mold is limited, but from what I’ve heard, it’s not the best kind to have. That said, I have no clue how I’ll ever get through the month five hundred bucks short. The truth is, I won’t. I’d have to call my parents for help, and I’ve been raising these kids on my own for over a year now. I pride myself in not taking donations. Even if I took a loan from them, it would take over a year for me to pay that kind of money back. I’m not doing it.

To get an extra five hundred bucks would mean so many more shifts at the diner. I wouldn’t make the cash up in time to buy groceries for the month or pay the light bill. I don’t think they’d cut me off in the dead of winter, but even if they didn’t, I still have to feed the kids. I wouldn’t even be fixing the roof if it weren’t for the leak, and I wouldn’t have had the money for that either had I not tapped into the reserve I was saving for culinary school.

“What are we doing with this?” Atlas leans into the window with a groan. “I’m already doing the work as cheap as I can.”

He’s not bullshitting about that. I got half a dozen quotes on the roof before I met Atlas, and he was the cheapest of everyone. I know his profit from this job is small already. He might be a grump, but at least he’s a fair grump... I guess. “This is really the cheapest you can get it?”

He nods. “Bare bones.”

I stare up at the discolored ceiling and squeeze my eyes closed as though I know the words are going to sting. “Okay. Do it.”

The pain hasn’t subsided, but I flash my eyes open anyhow and glance toward Atlas who’s already pushing the window closed. So much for kinky roof man fantasies... unless the point of the dream is to have him take all my money before he ties me up. Something tells me that’s not happening.

I wish I had someone to talk to. A partner. Someone I could brainstorm with about solutions. Someone who help me figure out where we’re coming up with the extra money to pay for all this work.

“Mommy?”

I turn toward my son’s distraught voice. It’s not a hurt tone. It’s an *‘I did something wrong’* tone, which turns my stomach. The boy is only four, but you’d be surprised at the trouble he can get into.

“Yeah, what’s up kiddo?”

He pulls my cell phone from behind his back and hands it toward me, water dripping from the seams of the case. “I’m sorry. I was playing the gem game, and I accidentally dropped it.”

My eyes widen as I stare at my son. “Where?”

“In the toilet.” He pouts. “I’m sorry, Mommy!”

A better mother would know what to say here. I’m sure she’d punish her son appropriately for being on her phone

when he wasn't supposed to be in the first place. Instead, I wrap Jackson in my arms and hold him close to my chest.

"It's okay, bud. We'll get a new one. Thank you for being honest." In my head I convince myself that honesty should be rewarded, despite the crime. But deep down, I know what I really want is for these kids to like me. They're all I have.

Jackson kisses my cheek and runs back upstairs, leaving the drenched phone behind on the edge of the sofa.

"Wash your hands!" I holler out behind him.

I wonder if he flushed before or after he dropped it. I pick it up by the dripping edge and twist toward the kitchen in search of rice, but I'm startled by the giant in front of me.

"Wow. If my mother had let me off that easy, I'd have been a hoodlum by the time I was twelve."

I roll my eyes. "Your mother clearly didn't teach you to knock."

"You told me a minute ago to use the front door if I needed to talk, so I am."

"To knock on the front door. I said to knock." I cross my arms over my chest. "What can I help you with, Mr. Laskin?"

"Nothing. Just letting you know I'm heading out to the store to get supplies. I'll be back after lunch to finish up."

My heart tightens. The roof. Damn it! Where am I going to find the money to do all of this work and replace my phone now?

I stare down at the phone dripping toilet water onto the floor then rush into the kitchen and pour a bowl of rice, burying the toilet phone as deep as I can before washing my own hands. Could this morning get any worse? I need at least a thousand dollars now. I can't roll around town with no phone. I have two kids and it's the middle of winter. Just last month I had to call for a tow on the side of the road. What would've happened had I not had a phone? We'd have been walking through a blizzard to get help.

I close my eyes and lean against the kitchen counter before blowing out a heavy breath. There's only one place I know where I can make fast cash and I'm not sure if they're even looking for anyone right now, or how I feel about the subject of the work.

That said, I don't really have a choice.

I glance toward the Alaskan who's moved to staring at me in the kitchen. "Can I use your phone?"

He pulls his cell from his pocket and hands it toward me without hesitation.

Dear Lord, his hands are huge.

"Thanks." I stare down at the phone and wander away from the kitchen as I search the number for the club I used to work at on the other side of the mountain. Declan has owned the place for years. And while it's been a long time since I've run into him, I know he'll help me out if he can.

When I find the number, I suck in some air, and press call. Club reception answers and transfers me to Declan's office.

He picks up right away. "Peyton! How the hell are ya? Addie said she ran into you at the market last week. Said the kids are getting big." Addie is his wife. They have three beautiful kids and what I'd consider to be the perfect little family. His club, The Barnyard, got a lot of pushback when it first came to the mountain, and it's mostly visited by out of towners, but the place does well. I worked there briefly before I had the kids, and you could make some serious cash if you danced. One weekend a month, the honky-tonk turns country themed strip club. A weekend at this place and I can make up for all the cash I've lost and then some.

"Hey! Yeah, I'm good. Well actually, not so good. That's why I'm calling."

"Oh, what's up?" His tone rises with concern.

"I'm looking for work... temporarily. Something I can do for the weekend to earn some extra money. I had some things come up."

“Good timing. I’ve got a spot for you tomorrow night if you’re free. There’s a girl out on vacation and we couldn’t find anyone to cover.”

“I’ll take it!” I agree quickly, though I know deep down this is a terrible mistake. I haven’t danced in years. Well, except for the weird two-step shimmy I do with the kids in the kitchen while I’m making dinner, but I’m not sure that counts.

“I’ll put you on the schedule. See you tomorrow at eight.”

I thank Declan again and disconnect the line. What did I do? It’s not that I’m ashamed of stripping, I’m not. It was an honest way of living for a long time, but it feels different with kids. I have to think about how my choices reflect on them now.

I blow out a heavy breath and straighten my dress before heading to the living room where my son is describing every character in *Story Bots* to a very patient Atlas. This might be his one and only redeeming quality. He’s good with kids.

I hand him back his phone. “Thank you.”

He stands from the couch, looks down at my son, and ruffles his hair. “Why don’t you draw me a picture of all those bots, and you can tell me about them one by one when I get back with supplies for the roof. Okay?”

Jackson runs off upstairs with new vigor and Atlas draws his attention back toward me. “I see why you can’t punish him now. He’s cute.”

If my stomach weren’t turning from the horrible decisions I were making, then I’d probably be biting back a grin. Instead, I’m blank. “That he is. I, ugh, I can pay you at the end of the week. Is that okay?”

Atlas looks away and back again, stroking his giant hand down over his beard. “If you need more time, I can float you a loan.”

“I don’t need a loan. I’m perfectly good to do all this myself.”

“Even with your phone needing to be replaced?”

I stand taller. “I have pride, Mr. Laskin. I can take care of my family.”

He glances to the side then steps forward, leaning into my ear as though he’s going to whisper.

*Why the hell is he doing that?*

Why does he smell like the forest? Why do I want him to touch me with those big, rough, working man hands? From a distance, the man is huge. But up close, he’s a goliath.

My clit reminds me of how attracted to him I am.

I squeeze my thighs together in an attempt to hush her alarms, but she keeps throbbing. In fact, the squeeze seems to insight some wetness.

I need help!

Atlas leans in, his tone is low and graveled as he says in my ear, “I’ve been broke before. I can’t imagine doing it with kids. If you need a loan, I can figure something out.”

My chest tightens as I back away from him. He’s handsome, but clearly, he can’t read a room. “I’m not broke. I’ll have your money by Friday.”

He drags in a deep breath and shakes his head. “I don’t get it. If you’re struggling, it’s okay to ask for help—”

“I don’t need your help, Mr. Laskin. In fact, you should add more money to the total because I want you to get paid fairly for your time. So, what is it... like five hundred more?” I know damn well that I sound like an idiot, but working as hard as I do and being called broke doesn’t hit right.

He shakes his head and steers toward the front door. “Pride is only gonna get you so far, little rabbit.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and try not to come as I reconcile what he’s just said. I think maybe it was an insult, but I’m too lost in the little rabbit part to address any of it... which is going to be a problem.





**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.)

Before this life is over, Khloe would like to check everything off her sexy bucket list and visit South Africa to wrestle evil poachers into submission. (And maybe see some baby elephants.)

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