



RUGGED  
MOUNTAIN INK

*Kidnapped* FOR  
CHRISTMAS

BALSAM CREEK LODGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

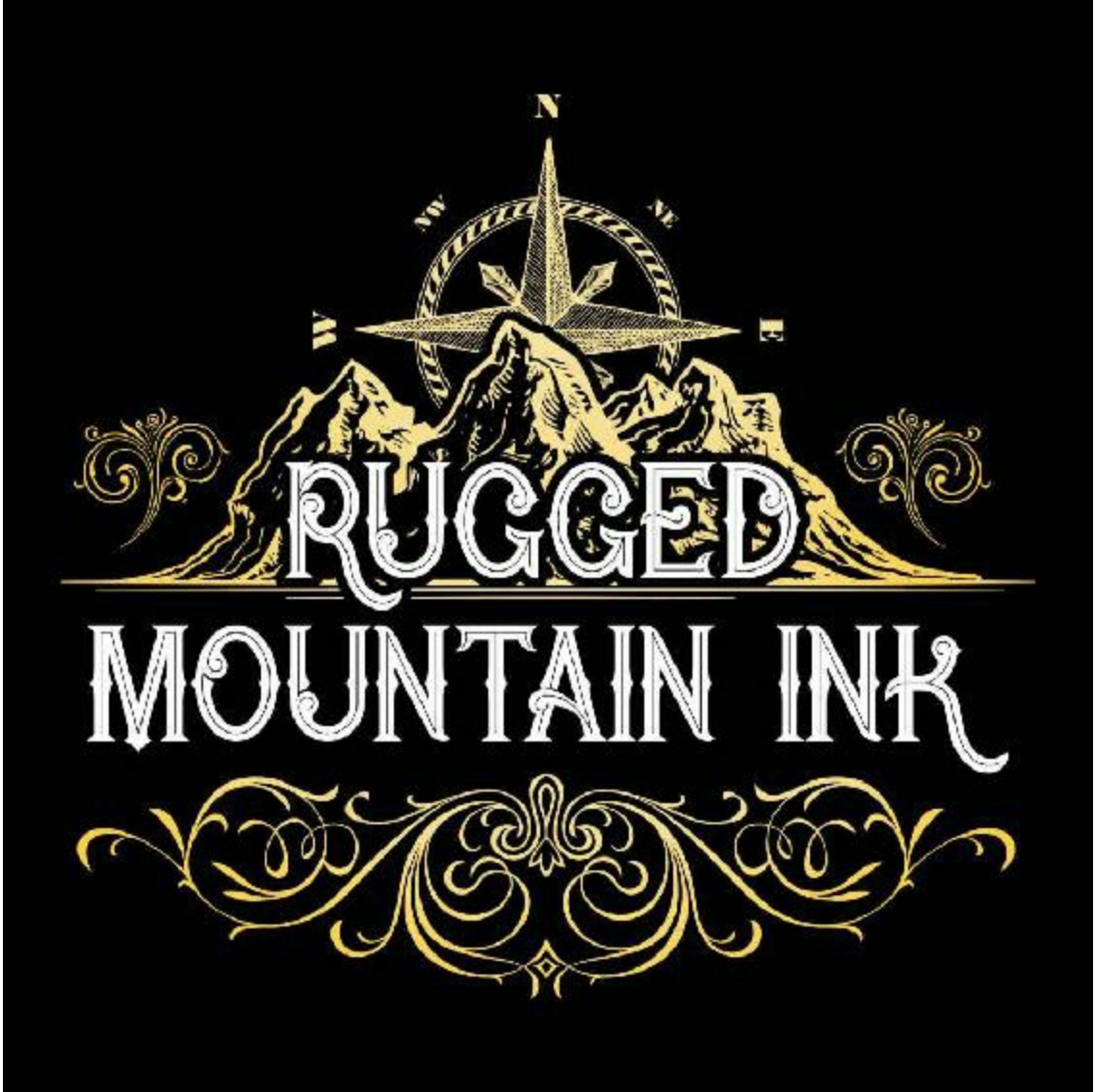
**KHLOE SUMMERS**

# Kidnapped for Christmas

*Balsam Creek Lodge: Rugged Mountain Ink*

Khloe Summers

**Summer to Winter Publishing**



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# Chapter One

Grace

The secret to making good gingerbread is how long you chill the dough. Some people swear by an hour, but I've tried that, and the cookie always ends up soft. I'm looking for crisp, hard edges. A sturdy Christmas cookie that can hold up to all the icing and candy kids will be piling on top.

"How many trays do you have left?" Arnie scrubs his hand down over his beard. It's been a long day. We should've left the lodge two hours ago, but it's crunch time. The motorcycle club spent almost a year building this place. Now it's our job to make Balsam Creek Lodge a destination people look forward to coming to.

I blow out a heavy breath. "I still have to finish these two trays and there's another four to go in. I'll be here another few hours. You go ahead home."

He lowers his head and stares at me with the downturned look of a dad who knows better than to leave a single woman alone on the road at night. "I'm not leaving you here. We had an inch of snow fall already and there's more to come. I'd feel better if I stayed."

I shake my head and peek into the oven. The cookies are puffing, and the scent of ginger and cinnamon fills the room. "This isn't about the snow. You're worried about Jack showing up. I told you he's all talk, and no bite."

Arnie is the cook for the lodge, and though he's in his late forties and I'm only twenty-six, we've found an odd friendship in each other. He looks out for me, and I cause him a never-ending train of headaches. It's our thing.

I roll my eyes and open the oven door, letting the heat blast my face warm as I pull the sheet pan. "Seriously, I'll be fine. Go get started on your weekend."

"Oh..." Arnie laughs under his breath. "Well, if it's that easy, I guess I'll leave you here to do your thing." I know he's being sarcastic.

I settle the tray on the counter and slide the next two into the oven. "You know, we shouldn't focus on me so much. What we should be doing is looking for a date for you."

I think this is one of the conversations that causes him so many headaches. I can't figure why he's single. A big guy with loads of tattoos that

likes to listen to your problems, you'd think he'd have been snatched up years ago.

"I don't need a date. I told you and everyone else here that. I'm good being single. Besides, my plate is already full. My daughter just came back into my life, and I barely have enough time for her as it is. The last thing I need is a love life to figure out." He smiles. "Not to mention, you don't make it look that appealing."

"Not everyone is like Jack. Jack is a special case."

"I think a man who takes you out of town and leaves you at a rest stop is more than a *'special case.'* He's certifiable." Arnie has been upset about this since it happened two weeks ago.

"He's a hot head. That's all."

"You're making excuses for him."

I grab the spatula off the counter and transfer the baked cookies to the cooling rack. "I'm not making excuses. I feel dumb."

Arnie grabs a piece of broken gingerbread from the counter and groans with delight as he bites into the warm morsel. If he wasn't twenty years older than me, I'd be into him. Aside from the fact that he's hot as hell, he's the most emotionally in tune man I've ever met. Sure, he has his moments of barbaric nonsense, but for the most part, Arnie's age brings him a wisdom that men in my dating pool don't have.

"You're not dumb." His big, rough hand lands on my shoulder. "You trusted someone. You're human."

"Human? That seems like a really low bar." I blow out a heavy breath and stare down at the cooling cookies. "Do you think I made enough?"

"I'd say so. There's wha—"

"Gracie," a deep voice interrupts. I recognize it immediately and lift my gaze to meet Jack's. He's standing in the back door of the kitchen in tight black jeans and a black hoodie. Dark shadows line under his eyes and the scent of alcohol spilling off him overpowers the sweet scent of ginger in the air. "We need to talk. You've been avoiding me."

Arnie steps between us, widening his shoulders. "There's nothing to talk about. Leave." His tone is deep and harsh. It's a version of Arnie I don't usually experience, but I hear the built-up rage in his tone and I'm not sure I've ever felt so protected.

Jack steps forward, tightening his fists.

Alone, Jack is a big guy. I'd say he's six foot two and maybe two

hundred and twenty pounds. Tattoos cover his arms and neck, and there's an air about him that's dark and dangerous. As sick as it is, that's what drew him to me in the beginning. But next to Arnie, Jack may as well be a toddler.

Arnie steps forward, towering over Jack in both height and stature. "I said, leave."

Jack stares up at Arnie, then back toward me. "Gracie invited me here, old man."

"I didn't invite you here." I step forward, sliding between the two men. I don't want Arnie getting into trouble. Jack has connections all over the Springs. I know his dad is a big federal defense attorney and half his family works for the police department up there as well.

Jack grins. "The last time we spoke, you told me to stop by and see you."

"That was before you left me at the rest stop." I blink hard multiple times, trying to make sense of the crazy that's spilling from his lips.

He laughs. "You're so dramatic. I didn't *leave you* at the rest stop. I told you I was leaving, and you refused to come."

"You what? *No!* I told you I needed more quality time together, and you stormed off."

"Storming off is a pretty big indicator that I'm going to leave." He laughs.

I stare at him, wondering how I ever looked past his way of thinking for nearly six months. "I think we're good here. You can go."

His grin gets wider and reaches around me, taking a perfectly crisp gingerbread off the counter. "I'm not going anywhere."

I'm not sure what I'm angrier about. The fact that he's ruined a perfectly good cookie, or the fact that he's so arrogant.

Arnie's big hands land on my shoulder and he carefully moves me to the side before stepping toward Jack. His fists are balled, and though I reach forward to stop him from doing anything he'll regret, he continues with his punch regardless.

Jack is unphased. He wipes blood from his cracked lip and chuckles. "An old man that can throw an actual punch. I'm impressed. Why are you fighting for her, though? You two have something going on?"

Arnie hauls back and punches him again. This time, Jack lands on his back, sliding against the tile floor with a heavy thud.

I'd love to say he's learned his lesson, but the man is still laughing.

Arnie stalks toward him, gripping the back of his collar before tossing him out of the side door and locking it behind him.

“I’m so sorry. Are you okay?” I reach out for his hand as I run the warm water in the sink. He’s split his knuckles with the punches. “I’ll get the gingerbread out of the oven, and we should head out for tonight.”

“You’re not going home.” Arnie’s gaze meets mine with more seriousness than I’ve ever seen from his gentle eyes.

I smile and grab a towel from beneath the sink, blotting the water off his cracked hand. “And where am I going?”

“With me.”

“With you where?” I laugh. “Your cabin? No, I’m fine. Jack was drinking. Couldn’t you smell it all over him? He acts stupid when he drinks.”

“The man acts stupid all the damn time. I don’t care what made him come here. I’m not letting you go home alone.”

I twist off the sink and leave the towel wrapped around Arnie’s hand. I appreciate his concern, and while I agree Jack is a complete psycho, I don’t think he’d follow me home. He’s had the opportunity to come after me for weeks now and he hasn’t.

“You’re sweet, and I appreciate you, but we have this gingerbread contest in two days. I need a good night’s sleep.”

“Nope.” He slides the first two cooling racks into the fridge. “I’m off the next two days, and so are you.”

“Technically, but I should come in to bake since I still have thousands of cookies to finish.”

“You can bake at the cabin.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“It’s going to this time.”

I’ve only known Arnie for a few weeks, but in that time, he’s only ever been a cinnamon roll. This is... weird.

I laugh. “What do you think is going to happen? I don’t even think he knows where I live.”

“He could follow you.”

“Okay, so he follows me. Then what? I’ll see him behind me and I won’t go home.”

Arnie sighs as though this answer isn’t the one he was looking for. “Do you have anywhere else you can go tonight? Maybe some friends or family?”



I think over the list of people I'd call. I have my sister, but she's out of town with my mom. They took a trip to California in celebration of my sister's thirtieth birthday. I was supposed to go, but being this is the first Christmas season for the lodge, I decided to hold back. And friends... *what friends?* The few I do have aren't going to be up for my crazy this time of night. I can't impose on them.

"I'm good... honest. Obviously, I don't want anything to happen to me." I laugh under my breath as I tidy up the rest of the workspace and grab my coat off the hanger by the door.

"Yeah, well... I appreciate that you can take care of yourself, but I can't let you go home alone."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Dead serious. A piece of shit that'll show up at your place of business isn't the kind of guy that knows boundaries. You're safest with me. We'll recalibrate a plan in the morning."

"I told you I have to work tomorrow." I smile as I talk, though there's conviction in my tone. I'm sure he doesn't really expect me to go back up to his cabin with him. This is what nice people say, but it ends there.

"We'll figure all that out in the morning." He tosses on his jacket and unlocks the back door, holding me back with his arm as he draws his gun and surveys the dimly lit area.

It's snowing lightly and there's a frigid chill in the air that bites at the exposed skin on my neck. I'd question his use of a gun if I weren't used to every person up here carrying. Truthfully, I've thought about getting myself acquainted with a firearm multiple times. Now it's starting to feel more like a necessity.

When Arnie believes that it's safe, he turns back toward me and narrows his gaze. "You have two choices. You get up in my truck willingly, or I buckle you in myself."

I laugh. "Oh... is that right? You're kidnapping me now?"

"If that's what it takes."

*Is this a game we're playing? Is he flirting with me? What's happening right now?*

"Let me get this straight. Your plan is to take me up to your cabin and what? You going to hold me hostage until winter is over?"

He continues to scan the area. "I don't like being out in the open like this. Which one is it? Am I carrying you, or are you coming willingly?"

My jaw drops a little. Maybe this isn't a game. "I'll catch you in a couple of days." I step around him and walk toward my little white car that's parked at the far end of the lot. I make it three steps before I'm swept up off my feet and hurled onto Arnie's shoulder.

I can't believe he can actually lift me. I'm not light by any means. I push against his giant frame. "What are you doing? Put me down!"

He doesn't listen... and I can't figure why this show of dominance has my pussy soaking wet.

# Chapter Two

Arnie

Grace stares at me with bright blue eyes. Her hair is twisted to one side, and she's wearing a scowl that could set the cabin on fire.

"This is the first time I've kidnapped someone. You'll have to forgive me if I'm doing it wrong. Can I get you a water or a cup of tea?"

She raises her brows and stands from the couch. "You're kidding me, right? I don't want a cup of tea, Arnie. I want to go home."

"Tea it is." I make my way into the kitchen to heat the kettle over the stove top. "The way it's storming now, it's not safe to travel back down the mountain tonight. Maybe tomorrow we can work something out."

She draws in an audibly deep breath behind me. "Arnie... what are you doing? This isn't like you. You know how important the bakery job is to me. I can't disappoint everyone."

"We won't. The Christmas festival doesn't start until Monday. We have two days to figure this out."

"Figure what out? There's nothing to figure. Jack is gone and you're the one who's kidnapped me."

"You're free to leave."

She glances out the back window and back toward me with a downturned gaze. "Yeah. Okay. I don't think it's snowed like this in years. Please tell me you have the basics for baking."

"What do you need?"

"Oh god." She blows out another sigh. "You should know this. You cook all day."

"Baking isn't cooking. Cooking is forgiving. I add a little extra garlic and then it's okay."

"Flour, sugar, ginger, cinnamon, eggs." She folds her arms against her chest.

I open the fridge and rummage through the cupboards. It's not ideal to cook offsite, but given the storm, I don't think Henry will put up a fuss about it. "I'm out of eggs, but we should have some by morning. The chickens are nice and warm in the hen house."

The kettle sings and I pour hot water over two mugs that sit on the

edge of the countertop with tea bags hanging loose. “Drink this and I’ll set you up in the bedroom for the night.” I hand her the hot cup of tea, holding her gaze for far too long.

It’s been a while since I’ve had a woman in my cabin. Suddenly, I’m self-conscious about everything. I should’ve thought this kidnapping through. *Is this floor clean enough? Does it smell okay in here? It’s a little musty. I can’t remember the last time I did a good cleaning.*

I glance away. It shouldn’t matter what it smells like. Grace is young, very young, but there’s nothing happening here other than a person looking out for another person. So, it doesn’t matter what she thinks of the cabin, or me, or this terrible tea.

Holding the hot mug in my hand, I turn to head down the hallway.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” She reaches out for me, her hand brushing my flannel covered arm before I get too far away. *Why does it send a jolt of electricity straight through me?*

“You’re my guest. You’re not sleeping on the couch. Besides, this thing is in terrible shape. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.”

“But you’re going to sleep on it?”

I nod. “I’m the one who kidnapped you. I should at least offer you the bed.”

She laughs. “A *kind* kidnapper? How... progressive. Are you planning to take my breakfast order, too?”

“I was planning for bacon and eggs. Hopefully that works.” Before my gaze gets stuck again, I pace out of the room and into the back, where the bedroom isn’t much better than the rest of the house. I really need to get better at cleaning.

I toss the dirty laundry lying on the ground into the closet and tear the dirty sheets off the bed, replacing them with a fresh set. I’m not sure it helps much, but it already smells better in here.

“We should both sleep in the bed.” Her voice echoes in from behind me. “We’ve both been on our feet all day. Yes, you kidnapped me,” she smiles, “but I wouldn’t be able to sleep knowing you were cramped up on that sofa.”

*I glance back at her. Is this a test? Does she want to hear me say I won’t sleep next to her? Because on first blush, the idea sounds awfully spectacular.*

“No.” I shake my head. “That’s not right. You should have the bed. I

don't mind the couch. Like I said—”

“I sat on the couch for twenty minutes and my back is killing me. I know you aren't going to hurt me, Arnie. As barbaric as your approach is, I appreciate you looking out for me tonight. We don't need to make this weird. It's a bed.” She sits on the edge. “A big bed. I trust you.”

Given I've just lifted her onto my shoulder and driven her up the mountain, I'm not sure she *should* trust me, but she's not wrong about the day. It's been hellish and my feet are aching.

“I'll grab you something to wear. Feel free to use anything else you need.”

She nods and stays sitting on the bed while I rummage through the closet for an extra flannel.

“You know what's funny?” she says with a rise in her voice. “We've spent the last few weeks working together and you haven't really told me about your life at all. I mean, I know you like to cook, how frustrated you get with a dirty fridge, and how you apparently like to keep women safe, but nothing personal about you. Tell me about the *real* you.”

I spin back with a black checkered flannel, handing it to her. It's a mistake. I know it the second her hand brushes mine. Seeing her curves swallowed up by my shirt is going to be torture, as if lying next to her wasn't going to be difficult enough already. Though, I'm sure this is only one of the hundreds of mistakes I'm about to make. Either way, she needs something warm tonight. Even with the fire going, there's still a draft in the cabin, especially with a blizzard blowing outside.

“Not much to tell.” I brush my hand over my beard. “I, ugh, I spent years in the military, met a girl, and got honorably discharged to be with her. But in the time it took for me to get my release, we had a falling out. We were too young to make the distance last. So, having no prospects and no relevant work experience, I got a job at the diner on Main and worked there until the lodge opened and the guys offered me a chef position.”

“And don't forget about Jewel's appearance.”

I smile and look down at the ground before glancing up again. “How could I ever forget that one? It's not every day that a man is approached by an adult daughter that he never knew he had.”

She chuckles. “You never know. I mean, maybe you've got a lot of mystery kids running around out there. Jewel was born twenty-four years ago. There could be a whole team of mini-Arnie's somewhere.”

I'm not sure I like the fact that she's reminded me how close in age she is to my daughter, but I ignore that in favor of the other part of her statement. "Now that one I know for sure. Since the fallout with Jewel's mom, I've been content to just live a peaceful life on my own. I haven't really been looking."

"Why not?" She stands and tugs her jeans down over her thick hips as though we're two girls in a locker room. Maybe I should take this as a sign that we are. She doesn't see me as someone she needs to cover up in front of. Then again, her t-shirt is long, covering her panties as her jeans slide to the floor. Maybe that's why she isn't fazed.

I should tell her it doesn't matter. I'm still a sick old man who's most certainly aroused. I turn away, closing off the darkness before it starts to eat me alive.

"I don't know. I get along fine on my own and I figure why complicate things if I don't need to."

She laughs. "Umm... because you could make your life better with someone you loved." I hear the fabric from her top hit the bed and then the scratch of the flannel slide over her skin. "What do you think?"

I turn toward her, scanning her thick frame from top to bottom. I was right. This was a mistake. A lump forms in my throat. "You look great."

Her cheeks blush as she looks up at me. "Not about my outfit, weirdo. I'm talking about you letting someone in."

*Oh god.* Of course, that's what she's talking about. It's literally the conversation we were having.

I clear my throat. "I think everything is more complicated in practice than it is in reality."

She laughs under her breath as she sits on the bed, and the mattress squeaks. "It's complicated because you make it that way. Having someone to love is only a benefit."

There are words coming out of her mouth, and I'm sure they're smart, well thought out sentences, but the only thing I can focus on is the curve of her hips, the sway of her tits, the way her hair lies on her shoulder.

*I can't fucking sleep in here. That's official now.*

As bad as I know my back will be in the morning, lying next to this woman I've had zero pure thoughts about will only lead me to trouble.

"I really think I'll be better off on the couch," I say as kindly as possible, though I feel a weird rage starting to bubble. I'm not sure what it's

about. Maybe it's because I know how badly I'm aching to lie down next to her.

“Seriously! Come on! I won't be able to sleep thinking you're out there struggling.”

I glance back toward her, my feet heavy with indecision, until all at once I snap. “This is a kidnapping, remember? I make the rules, and you follow them.”

I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me. That wasn't the reaction I wanted to have, nor was it a part of me I ever wanted her to see, but here we are, in the thick of it. Behind this solid wood door, we're both a hell of a lot safer.

# Chapter Three

Grace

I roll away from the door and stare out the window. There isn't much light, but the snow reflects the moon and gives the essence brightness. It's still snowing heavily. If it weren't, I'd take my chances down the mountain in the dark. With no snow gear, it would be a death sentence, but it would still be better than whatever just happened.

*What's with men? Even Arnie? One second, they're nice and you think they understand what you're thinking. The next, they're back to acting like wild animals, barking out orders and hollering over nothing.* The truth is, I'm giving Arnie too much credit. He lifted me up onto his shoulder *without my permission*, took me back to his cabin *without my permission*, then refused to act like an adult and sleep in the same bed as me. *We aren't friends. Why did I let myself think we were?*

I close my eyes and draw in the scent of the sheets. It's a clean smell, like laundry soap with the smallest hint of cedar on the surface. Arnie smells like cedar. Like a Christmas tree that's just been cut and left to dry outdoors.

*A Christmas tree.* I don't remember seeing a tree in the cabin. I scan through my thoughts, trying to remember the date. I've been so busy with the lodge that I've lost track of time. That, and everyone here starts celebrating Christmas promptly after the Halloween decorations come down, so it's easy to get lost in the season. Then again, why does it matter if he has a tree or not? Obviously, I read him wrong. He's a train wreck. A barbaric caveman who has no impulse control.

*Why am I still surprised?*

If he wants to sleep on the couch and be in pain all night long, so be it. I shouldn't be personally offended. Kidnappers don't sleep with their captors. I'll gladly lay in this comfortable bed and not at all imagine what it would be like to have his heavy frame lying next to me.

*Yeah. That's exactly what I'll do.*

I close my eyes and drag in a deep breath, attempting to filter out any remnants of him, but this is his bed, and it's nearly impossible. There are notes of him everywhere. It shouldn't matter as much as it does, but here I am, drinking in his scent, wishing I was tucked away safe in his arms.



*Why, though? Why am I thinking like that? I've only known him for a little while, and yeah, he's been great. Kind, attentive, caring, protective. And yeah, he's tall, dark, inked, and hot as hell, but that doesn't mean anything... right?*

I tell this to my body over and over again as the scent of cedar threatens my sanity. Thankfully, my phone interrupts the crazy parade going on in my head.

Arnie really needs to work on his kidnapping skills. He didn't even ask for my cell.

I'm sure it's my friend Poppy. We both work late shifts and we check on each other every night before bed. She knew I was working extra late tonight.

I reach down for my phone and answer her call. "Hey."

Her tone is groggy, as though she's already lying in bed. "Did you get home okay? I'm about to pass out."

I could tell her the long story of how I ended up at Arnie's, but I know I'm not in any serious danger and explaining everything will take too long. "Yeah, I'm in for the night. You get some sleep."

"Wait." Her response is slow. "What's that mean... you're in for the night? Are you home?"

"I'm, ugh, I'm not home, actually. I'm up at a friend's cabin for the night. Hopefully, one night, unless the storm gets worse."

She laughs. "You're being awfully cryptic. What's going on? And FYI, the storm is supposed to get worse. They're calling for twenty-four inches by morning."

"What? *How?* It's too early in the season for snow like that!"

"Doesn't matter! The universe knows Santa needs snow to land his sleigh." She laughs. "Where have you been? No, better question... where are you?"

"I'm with Arnie tonight."

She pauses as though she's figuring out how to respond. "*The cook?*"

"Yeah."

"Okay... he's like a million years older than you and isn't he like your mom's friend?"

*Oh my god.* I forgot my mom is friends with Arnie. They met at the diner years ago, and though our paths never crossed until the lodge, we did discuss the fact that he knew my mom more than once. Maybe I blocked it

out for sanity purposes.

I nod my head. “Yeah, they are. I ugh... that guy... Jack showed up at work tonight and Arnie wouldn’t let me go home, so he’s holding me captive.”

“Ohh... well, I guess that’s nice of him then. I’m glad you’re safe.” She yawns as she talks. “Since you’re not in danger, I guess I’ll go to sleep. Call me tomorrow. I will listen to all the dirty details on what an asshole Jack is. Plus, I have to fill you in on all the Bodie drama.”

“What Bodie drama? I thought you were letting him go?”

“I am... but he’s back in town for the holiday and,” she blows out a breath, “every time I see him something crashes and burns inside of me.”

“Sounds painful. I’m not sure love is supposed to feel like that.”

“It’s not love.” She laughs. “Trust me, it’s not love. It’s some weird chemical response that...” She sighs again. “He’s a drug, Grace. A terrible, awful, addictive drug and I need him.”

“You need sleep. We’ll talk soon.”

She sighs. “Fine. Good luck being kidnapped. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

When the line is disconnected, I put my phone onto the nightstand and stare up at the ceiling.

Okay, so something is wrong with me. I’m lusting after a man who’s friends with my mother. I’m pretty sure that makes me a terrible daughter, and probably solidifies the fact that I most definitely have daddy issues. I guess that makes sense considering my father wasn’t a part of my life at all. Though, I’m sure there are lots of women with similar upbringings. They don’t all go running for their mom’s friends.

I suck in Arnie’s scent again and let my clit twitch like a fucking psycho. That’s the last time. I swear.

No more lusting, no more thinking about his muscled arms, or his big rough hands. No more wishing he were lying next to me in bed. Arnie helped me out. He’s being kind. The end. That’s all this is.

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly, but I’m interrupted by the door squeaking open.

“Did I hear you on the phone?” Arnie’s tone is curt. Why do I like this part of him too? This more aggressive, possessive version. It’s just as hot as the cinnamon roll he’s got baking inside.

“Yes. You’re a terrible kidnapper. That’s not my fault.”

“Is someone coming to get you?”

I roll my eyes, an attempt at acting annoyed by his presence, even though I’m more than elated he’s standing in front of me again. “They would be, but the storm is too bad. You’re stuck with me now.”

His shoulders relax as though he’s relieved. “You shouldn’t be calling people.”

“So, you’re going to take my phone away?”

He looks down then back again. “Do I need to?”

“Maybe.” This is the weirdest flirting on Earth. I want him to come and take this phone from me. I want him to wrestle it out of my hands.

He huffs out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry I got upset about the bed thing. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“Why *did* you yell?”

“I was frustrated.”

“Why?”

He swallows a visible lump in his throat then blows out a breath. Something is agitating him.

“What is going on? Are you pissy?”

“I came to apologize for yelling.”

“No, you came to tell me to stay off my phone.”

His eyes close and his lips go flat. “If you’re going to be difficult, I’ll tie you up for real.”

My thighs squeeze together. I’d love for him to tie me up. Maybe I’ll keep being difficult. “Oh, will you?” I stand from the bed and step toward him. He’s huge. “I’d love to see you try.”

He laughs under his breath. “Is that right? You’d love for me to take your pretty, little wrists and tie them over your head? Then what?”

Now I’m the one swallowing a lump. We’re so close, my nose is nearly touching his. And while I realize a second ago, I’d decided I have daddy issues and this man is obviously off limits, I’m currently standing in front of him with soaking wet panties. *I mean, he said my wrists were pretty.*

“Then, you do whatever it is you’re trying to do.” I wet my lips, my gaze on his.

*What am I doing?*

Arnie and I have never spoken like this. He’s always been sweet and kind. I think the one and only argument we had was about who was stealing the spatula from the kitchen. I swear that thing has legs of its own.

He turns me around and leans me against the wall, holding my hands above my head as he leans his giant frame in toward me. “So I tie you up like this... and I do whatever I want to you?”

*What the hell? Is this happening? Does he realize what he’s doing?*

I stare up at him, thighs shaking, heart pounding, clit throbbing. He’s massive. Massive and strong. Massive, strong, and he smells so damn good.

“What... what would... what would you do to me?” The words spill from my lips like a scared schoolgirl who’s never been touched. To be fair, it’s sort of the truth.

He stares at me for a long while, his breath so heavy that his chest rises and falls with effort. He’s clearly frustrated with something.

My heart pounds harder and a bead of sweat drips from my forehead. Every ounce of my being is desperate for him to say dirty, filthy things then lay me down and fuck me hard. We don’t have to tell anyone. It can be our secret.

He huffs out a heavy sigh and growls under his breath. “Get in bed.”

I don’t move. Neither does he.

My chest moves with my rapid breath, and every bit of anxiety I thought I had before amplifies to a million. I don’t want him to let me go. Not in the slightest. I want him to lean me back on that bed and show me what it feels like to be touched by him. I want his hands all over me. I want his mouth on mine. I want the rough edge of his tongue to slide across my thigh and back again.

*What’s wrong with me?*

I sigh and look away, hopeful that he somehow gets off on reluctance.

Instead, he moves his arm and paces back toward the door. “Go to sleep.”

“Yeah, sleep.”

“I figured we can do some Christmas decorating while you’re locked up here. I don’t have anything in the house, but we can always go into the woods and cut down a tree. We could put it up and maybe make some garland.”

I glance up toward him, his hand on the doorknob. Cutting down a tree is random and not at all what I wanted out of the night, but I guess I’ll take it. “Okay. What, ugh, what kind of tree do you like?”

“No idea. Never had one.”

“You never had a tree? *A Christmas tree?*”

“Not since I was a kid. What kind do you like?”

“Wait, so you don’t have ornaments or—”

“Nothing. What do you reckon is best?”

“Well, I mean, it’s all personal preference, but I like the sparse trees, you know? The ones that look like they could use some love. And for ornaments, homemade is always best in my opinion. We could make them from lures or something. You must have some around.”

He nods. “I do. That sounds nice.”

I smile so wide that it’s probably strange. “Okay. That sounds fun!”

“Afterward we can come in and work on your gingerbread. I’ll help.”

The day sounds like a dream. “Thanks, that would be nice. I have to ask though, what do you do for Christmas without a tree?”

His brows raise and he turns back to me. I should’ve let him leave. He was trying to leave. Why am I asking him so many questions?

“My daughter, Jewel, had her baby a few months back, so I’m going to stop by their place Christmas morning and then I’ll probably reheat some soup and call it a day.” I haven’t met his daughter, but I know he didn’t know about her until a few months ago when her mother died, and she came looking for a dad that never knew she existed.

I also know she isn’t much younger than me. I ignore that part and continue on. “Why aren’t you spending the day with them?”

“Ah, they have their own life and family.”

“You are their family.”

“Not really. I mean, they just had a baby. They have their own memories to make. Besides, we’re closer than we were before, obviously, but we’re still getting to know each other.” He fidgets with his beard for a moment before saying, “What about you? Any plans?”

“I’ll be with my mom.” Oh shit! I mentioned her. I can’t decide if that’s good or bad. Either way, I keep going. “You two are friends, right? I forgot about that.”

He sits on the edge of the bed and brushes his hand down over his beard. “We are. She’s a nice lady.”

“Right.” I look away. God, he thinks my mom is nice. He’s probably into her. She makes much more sense for him, anyway.

“She is,” I finally say. “I’m lucky to have her.” I rub my eyes and fake a yawn. “Well, it’s pretty late. I should get to sleep. So should you. If you want to crawl into bed, I’d be cool with it. Honestly.”

*I never understood the saying 'Your mouth is writing checks your ass can't cash' until right now.*

He shakes his head. "No, it's... I'll sleep on the couch."

I laugh. "You will not sleep on that couch. Come lay down. We can be adults. Besides that, you're doing me a favor. I don't want to be alone tonight."

Arnie opens his mouth and closes it again. "Did he put his hands on you? Ever?"

I look down and fold my hands together. I've never talked to anyone about the way Jack was with me. It's too embarrassing. "I mean, he grabbed me a few times, but it's nothing I couldn't handle."

Arnie's eyes widen. "He grabbed you? How?"

"Just like... my arm. It wasn't anything. I'm good. It's over now."

Arnie blows out a heavy breath and frustration knits back into his brows.

"Come on, get in bed. I like knowing you're here with me."

He stares at me for a long while then stands and rounds to the opposite side of the mattress. Slowly, his large body lays back on the bed. And for the first time all night, I'm right where I want to be.

# Chapter Four

Arnie

I lay awake, staring at the ceiling fan as it whips in circles.

Grace has been moaning for the last two minutes. It's a soft sound that's painfully loud. I contemplate leaving the room again, but I know any movement on the bed will wake her and she needs her sleep.

She moans again, this time turning to her side, lobbing her arm over my chest. Her round and large breast springs free from the top of my flannel. Her hard nipple pokes through, delicate in the dim light of the moon.

My cock springs to life and my heart begins to race. I need to touch her.

*Fuck. What the hell is wrong with me?*

Grace is twenty years younger. Not only that, but her mother is my friend. I can't mess around with a friend's daughter. Not in any world is that okay.

I blow out a heavy breath and roll away from her, hoping to catch reprieve, but the movement prompts Grace to move as well, and within seconds of my turn, she's against my back with her nipple poking me again. A soft sigh escapes and echoes into my ear.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

I'm going to lose it.

I should try to wake her.

Drawing in a deep breath, I let it out slowly and turn back. "Grace, I think you're having a bad dream."

I shake her lightly. "Come on, wake up."

Her eyes slowly open as the back of her hand swats across her face. She's more groggy than awake.

Her throat clears, and she sits up from the bed, her tit still out.

Fucking hell. This isn't getting any better.

I nod toward her, gesturing as politely as possible to let her know her breast is still out, but she's not fully awake yet.

Her response is to lean toward me. She climbs on top of my frame, straddling my waist.

"Grace." I say her name again and again. "Grace... it's okay. You're

okay. Wake up.”

She moans again, leaning into my chest before sinking her lips against mine.

Fuck! I want to touch her. I want to take her against me and give her all that I have. I want to touch her small body and feed my cock to her like a fucking psycho, but this isn't permission to do that.

I turn my head away from her kiss and say her name again. “Come on, Grace. You're still dreaming. Wake up.”

Her hips scrub against my hard cock, back and forth, over and over.

I shouldn't be hard... but I am. *Rock fucking hard.*

She giggles and moans again, her eyes closed. She's somewhere between sleep and reality. I wonder who she's with, who she's thinking about as she touches me.

My palms itch to reach out for her, desperate to scrub across her soft skin.

*I need her.*

I blow out a heavy breath as she grinds against me. Even through my boxers I can tell how soaking wet her panties are.

“Okay, princess. Come on.” I lift her off me and land her on the bed again, but not without a fight. She claws and whines, playfully pulling her frame back toward me. This time it's weak, and soon she settles on the bed, moaning beside me. Her eyes are closed, and she still looks like she's lost in dreamland.

I drag in a deep breath and reach down to touch my swollen cock. It's a quick brush at first, a need that's involuntary given the cold that's left from the space where Grace's warm body was a moment ago.

But the second I lift away, the urge to come is overwhelming.

I exhale, trying to rationalize away from the touch. She's two feet away. She could wake up any second. I'm a sick, old man. It's a fucked-up thing to do... masturbate next to a sleeping woman.

There are a million reasons for me to stop, but my hand tucks under my boxers and begins to jerk. Slow and steady, hard and fast, as the memory of Grace touching my lips, my cock, my skin echoes over and over. Her long brown hair falling against my shoulder. The way she moaned so fucking soft in my ear. The touch of her nipple against my back and chest.

The way she brushed against my cock.

*Fuck.*



I jerk harder and harder, memorizing her scent. It's some kind of flower and berry. This is so fucking wrong.

I consider stopping, but the moment passes so briefly as my thighs tense and pleasure shoots up into my cock, erupting over the top of my hand like some horny fucking teenager who can't keep it in his pants.

I knew I should've slept on the couch!

I stand from the bed and make my way to the bathroom, half expecting that Grace will wake up and see the load of come I'm carrying with me.

*What the hell?*

Instead, she stays sound asleep, and I disappear into the bathroom shower to wash away all my sins and talk myself out of any and all feelings I've developed for the girl, except the warm water only has me wanting her more, and the sound of her moans still echo in my head until my cock is hard again.

I blow out a heavy breath and scrub shampoo through my hair and over my beard, desperate to erase every thought and feeling that's snuck inside of me.

'*She's not that great,*' I tell myself over and over... but I know it's a lie. I know who I've been with her. I know what we are. There's no debating that. I see it when we're working together at the lodge. And if I'm being honest, I've imagined what her skin would feel like against mine for a while now. Her soft skin, her long hair, her sweet breath.

*Fuck!*

I stroke my cock. This was supposed to be me forgetting her, not revving the engine again. I pump out a few strokes as I imagine her hips grinding against me.

"Knock, knock," a soft voice says from behind the door. "I'm sorry. I know you're in the shower, but do you mind if I pee quick? I drank all that tea before bed and it's an emergency."

"No. Come in." I let go of my dick and go back to scrubbing as the door swings open and the toilet lid goes up. The porcelain top hits the back of the tank and she sighs as she sits and pees. "I'm so sorry. This is weird and super embarrassing. I wouldn't have—"

"You're fine." I swallow hard and dig into my hair even harder.

When she's finished, she flushes the toilet, and the water goes inferno hot against my back. I deserve it, so I stand beneath the flaming hot water and

listen as the door closes again and the sound of her voice echoes in thanks.  
I need to get my fucking act together.

# Chapter Five

Grace

I sit on the leather chair near the fireplace and stare into the flames thinking about last night.

My dreams were insanely real, and though I know well enough to know they were dreams, I can't help but wake up this morning desperate for Arnie to touch me.

What is it about a dream that does that to a person?

Sometimes, I'll dream about cupcakes and suddenly, I spend the next day searching for a red velvet. Or, if I dream someone cheated on me, I'll spend the next day angry at them. So then, it makes sense that if I have the most realistic sex dream I've ever had, that I'd spend the next day wishing I was on Arnie's cock.

I blow out a heavy breath as he steps into the room. It's early, but he's already dressed for the day. Dark jeans, red flannel, big wool socks. His hair is brushed back into place and his beard is shining, still wet from the shower.

He nods toward me and makes his way toward the coffee maker. "You sleep okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I, ugh, I slept some." He pulls down the grounds of coffee and pours them into the back before filling the machine with water and flicking the button on. His cabin isn't modern by any means, but it has its charm. This morning, it's easy to see why he chose this spot.

Huge picture windows line the back wall and give way to the most insane winter wonderland I've ever seen. The valley below lights with fire as the sun rises.

Balsam and pine, mountain peaks, and all that fresh snow. It's a scene from a movie or a Christmas snow globe.

"Did you build this place yourself?"

He nods. "Took me a few years."

Okay. I guess I expected him to elaborate a little. Maybe he's not a morning person.

I glance toward the clock. It is only seven a.m.

"Are you excited to cut down a tree today? Where do you think we

should go? Is there a go-to tree cutting spot around here?"

He nods again. "There's a spot to the west of here that'll be good. You want coffee?"

"Yes, please." I stand from the chair and make my way back toward the kitchen, leaning against the butcher block counter as he hands me a mug brimming with hot liquid. "Everything okay this morning?"

His gaze darts mine and now I know something isn't right.

"Yeah, everything is good." He sips his coffee. "Why don't you go get changed. I left some clothes for you on the edge of the bed."

It's none of my business if he's having a bad morning. I mean, maybe he's irritated that he brought me here. I'm sure he didn't plan on keeping me for days. The storm kind of messed that up. Then again, maybe he's quieter at home than he is at work. I get like that sometimes. Too much socialization makes me exhausted.

I pinch my lips together and head toward the back room, taking note of the oversized sweatpants and flannel waiting for me. He's even set a pair of snow pants out, which I appreciate.

"Heading out," he hollers into the back. "I'll meet you on the west side of the property."

Considering I failed geometry or math or history or whatever class was teaching directional knowledge, east and west means nothing to me. I holler back, "Is that left or right?"

"Left."

What's going on? Did I really expect he was going to wake up with the same desperation to fuck me that I have for him? Did I think he was going to wake up obsessed with me and eager to touch me everywhere?

I blow out a heavy breath and slide on the clothes he's left out. Maybe I should rub one out before I get out there. I'm sure it wouldn't hurt to get rid of a few of these urges.

I sit on the edge of the bed fully wrapped in his scent. His musky, woody, hot fucking scent.

I could tuck my hand into these pants and spin circles around my soaking clit until I come against his pants.

I've all but decided to lay back for a quick orgasm when a heavy thump hits the side window.

I glance up to see Arnie staring back toward me through the slats in the shades. He's not peeking through them, rather he's knocked twice and

backed away. He must need something.

I make my way over and pull up the shades, cracking the window so I can hear him. A cold breeze blasts inside.

“Grab the sled from the barn on your way out.” His tenor is brash, and again, I wonder what the hell is going on. He’s never like this. *Not ever.* Hell, I don’t think I’ve ever seen the man in a bad mood. He’s always happy. Last week he dumped an entire pot of spaghetti sauce on the floor ten minutes before dinner service and he pivoted last minute, made an alfredo one, and laughed about the whole thing.

Before I can answer his question, he turns away and heads out toward the west... east... left side of the property. Then again, I guess he wasn’t really asking me a question. He was telling me what he needed.

*Good Lord... I wonder if he’s like that in bed.*

I shut the window and let my mind wander to a place where Arnie has me pinned against a wall, barking out orders. Maybe he wants me on my knees, on my back, bent over so he can take me hard like an animal.

I bite back a sigh and blow out a heavy breath as I make my way out of the cabin and into the snow. I need the flash of cold air to remind me I’m something other than a sex doll. Right now, that’s all that’s on my mind. It’s a sick cycle of desperation, need, and yearning piled on top of more desperation.

Outside, the world is a thick white blanket of snow, and the oversized snow pants swish as I walk. I’d say we got at least two feet of fresh powder. The pines are heavy with white, and the earth is quiet. That’s the beauty of this area.

I trudge through the path Arnie made out to the shed this morning and grab a red sled that’s leaned against the door. There’s a frayed rope tied to the ends, and I tug it behind me as I walk. This might be the only time all day I’m reminded of anything wholesome, so I soak it in.

The quiet forest around me, the slick sound of the sled sliding over the snow, my boots crunching into the powder... every bit of this moment reminds me of childhood. It’s what I love about Rugged Mountain. It’s the one place on Earth where peace and quiet still exist.

Following through Arnie’s footsteps, I make my way to the forest where the snow is less deep, and the trees tower overhead. The second I see him, my childhood memories fade, and every bit of sexual instinct comes back like a boomerang, destined for my clit.

The whole thing is torturous.

How does he look more handsome outside in the woods? Even amidst trees, he's huge. An axe in hand, he stands over an already cut tree, his breath a fog surrounding him as he brushes his arm against his forehead.

*An already cut tree?* He cut the tree already!

"What the hell?" I'm not sure why this upsets me so much. I storm toward him, crunching through the snow. "You didn't wait for me! I thought we were going to pick one together!"

He barely looks back at me. Instead, he grabs the rope from my hands and pulls the tree toward the sled, piling it on before tossing the axe down with it. "It's a tree. They all look the same."

"They *do not* all look the same. Some are sparse, and some are full. Some are tall, and some are short."

"Well, it's my cabin, so my tree... right?"

I huff under my breath. "What's wrong with you this morning? You're acting like an asshole."

He drags in a deep breath and pulls the tree up toward the cabin. "You wanted a tree. I cut a tree. You're supposed to be kidnapped. Do you think every kidnapper does this with their captives?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm not kidnapped, Arnie. I'm serious. What's going on? You never act like this."

"You can't leave, can you? I lobbed you over my shoulder. I brought you up here. I'm not letting you leave. Sounds pretty kidnapped to me."

I laugh. "I'm not kidding. What's wrong with you? You've had a chip on your shoulder all morning."

He blows out a heavy breath. "You don't remember last night, do you?"

My heart plummets as I blow out a warm breath, fog circling me. "Last night? What happened last night?"

Oh god! Please tell me I didn't scream out for him or something.

"You were, ugh, you were dreaming about someone."

"What? How do you know that?" My breath is heavy, and I can barely breathe.

"You, ugh, I tried to wake you up, but you rolled into me and climbed up on top of me."

My jaw drops and I stare out into the woods like I've just seen a bear. "You're full of shit."

“Okay. I’m full of shit.” He drags the sled forward, trudging through the snow as I stay locked in place.

“Wait. Okay, okay... let’s say that did happen. Why are you mad at me?”

He chuckles under his breath and stops, warm breath fogging the tip of his red nose. He adjusts his gloves before talking. “I’m not mad, Grace. Fuck... I’m the furthest thing from mad. I’m fucking frustrated.”

“Why? Why are you frustrated because I had a dream?”

He shakes his head and slogs on through the snow.

I’m not sure why I can’t take his silence. It’s not like there’s an issue with anyone being quiet, but there’s something about Arnie that drives me mad in all kinds of ways.

I run up behind him and take the rope from his hand. “Tell me what’s going on. Why are you frustrated with me?”

He rolls his head to the side and scrubs his gloved hand down over his beard. In this light the chocolate of his eyes is brighter. I wouldn’t hate it if he threw me down in the snow right now and taught me a lesson for frustrating him.

“You’re dragging that in? Fine. Prop the tree up on the porch before you come in. We need to let it dry out a little.” He turns away and walks toward the house.

“I’m serious. I’m out here, and I’m trying. What’s going on?” My tone is angrier than it was before, though I’m not entirely sure why. I just want him to talk and I’m trying angry on for size. Next is crying.

He glances back toward me, biting back a grin. “Who were you dreaming about?”

“What?” My breath picks up, and he stalks toward me through the snow.

His hand slides under my chin and he lifts my gaze to his. “Who were you dreaming about last night?”

I draw in a freezing breath, trying to calm my nerves. I could tell him that I was dreaming of him, but then what? What happens when he decides that dreaming of him means that I’m a weird, psycho, little girl that he has to run away from. I mean, I don’t even know if this man has a thing for my mom yet. He could be my stepfather in a few months.

I bite the inside of my cheek and prepare to lie. “Jack. I was dreaming about Jack.”

He shakes his head, his jaw tight. “That’s what I figured.”

The sled rope gathers in his hand, and he drags the tree back to the cabin. This time I don’t stop him.

Why would he be angry if I dreamed about Jack? It’s not uncommon to dream about your ex. And though I get that we all hate him, it’s a reasonable thing.

I follow behind, watching as Arnie reaches the porch and leans the short, sparse tree against the rail. He picked the tree he knew I’d like.

I blow out a heavy breath and bypass the cabin for the shed. I’m not ready to talk to him yet. *Why would he be mad at me for having a dream, and why would he cut down a tree without me, even if it was a tree he thought I’d like? Besides that, we’re going to need decorations for the tree, and I figure the shed has fishing lures or something I can use.*

Inside there are deer antlers, a saw, a car jack, an old truck, sixty thousand fishing poles, twenty-nine million fishing lures, and various other bits of nonsense that people use up on the mountain. I study the inside of the building for a short while in an attempt to get to know Arnie better. Thirty minutes ago, I’d have let him lay me out right on top of this work table, and part of me believed he’d like it. Now, I’m not so sure of any of that.

He’s carefully placed everything on its own shelf. Even objects that don’t have their own space are marked and situated neatly. He’s organized. I like that. Even though the inside of his cabin isn’t the cleanest, he’s organized in there as well.

To the left of a toolbox, there’s an array of lures spread out on the counter. It looks like he’s hand making some with fancy feathers and small silver balls. I don’t touch those. Instead, I dig through the old box on the floor for some that look like they haven’t been used in ages.

The fishing line is easily labeled above the box. I’m not sure yet what I’m doing, but it doesn’t take long to figure out a plan. I pull down some fishing line and start moving things around, an old flashy fish, a few feathers from another lure, a red and green bobber... and boom, I have an ornament. A shiny, flashy, perfectly fish shaped ornament. I think Arnie will appreciate it... if he ever gets over my dream.

Either way, it was safer to lie about that dream than tell him it was his body I was dreaming of. In the odd scenario that someday he is my stepfather, I wouldn’t need that hanging over my head. I did my mother and I both a favor.



When I've made an array of ornaments with fishing lures, I head outside of the shed, and into the nearby forest to look for some pinecones. It's been a while since I made a pinecone ornament, but I think I remember a variation that will work. Of course, that requires more fishing wire and maybe some glitter.

No! I'll pick fresh berries and string them onto a line and layer the pinecones in. Oh yeah, a garland. The tree needs garland!

For a second, I overlook that I'm 'kidnapped' and even forget that Arnie's mad. Instead, I'm a girl outside playing house. A girl excited to make ornaments for a tree I imagine is mine and Arnie's.

I suppose this is why Poppy checks on me before bed every night. Apparently, I'm susceptible to the romanticism in captor play.

"It's cold out here," a voice resonates in from the edge of the woods. At first I think it's Arnie, but the second I turn, I see Jack's jet black hair and I know the fantasy is over.

# Chapter Six

Arnie

Not being a complete asshole is probably the first step to creating a safe space for anyone, and that's what I want for Grace. I want her to feel safe. If she has dreams about her ex, that's on her. I have no fucking clue what made me think she'd ever have a dream about me.

The mere thought is ridiculous beyond any rational thinking.

I stir a pot of soup on the stove and set the lid over the top. The diner sells frozen soups as the winter nears and they're a time saver that I indulge in. A good base for venison and elk stew.

What I really need to do is get my fucking head on straight. Of course, she wasn't dreaming about me. Why would she be? She's a twenty-six-year-old girl with fantasies about men her own age. That makes sense. The part where I stormed off like a pouting baby doesn't.

With the stove on simmer, I make my way to the side window, watching as Grace stands in the forest with a basket of pinecones. I also watched as she disappeared into the shed a bit ago, probably to make ornaments from lures like she said she would. I should've gone out to help. Instead, I sat here like a jerk and felt sorry for myself.

I should apologize. I grab my coat off the hook by the door and tug on my boots. It's then that I hear a scream so blood curdling that the hair on my arms stands on end.

Instinct takes over, and I grab my gun out of the holder next to the door and dart out into the snow. Grace's basket is on the ground, reflective lures shining in the snow.

My gaze draws up, figuring she's seen a bear or wolf. It's odd for them to be out this time of day, but not impossible. Instead, I see Jack holding her against his chest with a big fucking grin on his face.

I don't see a gun in his hand, which proves to me he's a lot fucking dumber than I thought. No one in their right mind would come up on private property without a gun. Not around here. That's a fucking death sentence. Most people would've shot by now, and I'm still thinking about it.

I would shoot if I believed Grace wanted me to, but that dream she had last night has me thinking otherwise. He's obviously a psycho and I need

him out of her life, but I need to play this cautiously.

“I don’t give second chances,” I bark, firing a shot into the air. “Let her go, or I shoot on three.”

He laughs. “You don’t have the fucking balls.”

“Three.” I fire a shot into his leg, and he lets go, falling to the ground. I should have empathy for him. I’m sure he didn’t think things would turn out this way, but... fuck him.

Grace runs to my side, her arms wrapped around me as I hold the gun steady, aiming toward the asshole in front of me.

Okay, maybe I did the right thing.

“You realize you’re on private property so whatever I do with you is fair game.”

“You fucking shot me, man.” Jack whimpers as blood fills the snow like a frozen cherry treat.

“You touched my fucking girl,” I growl. The words spill out before I can filter them.

Grace grips me tighter.

“Your girl?” He darts his gaze toward Grace. “You’re dating this guy?”

“No,” she stutters. “I mean, I...” Her gaze drifts toward mine. “I want to. No. I...”

“Shut the fuck up,” I shout toward Jack. “You don’t get to ask questions.” *Also, did she just say she wants to? Maybe I should let the asshole ask more questions.* “Why are you up here?”

“To get her away from you, you dumb fucking redneck.”

I fire another shot in his direction and he squirms back. I don’t shoot often. Usually it’s only when there’s an animal I’m hunting, but I’m not finding a ton of guilt right now. Not after what Grace said about how he’d grabbed her, how he’d touched her wrong, how he left her at a rest stop all night long with no phone and no money. He could bleed out here and I wouldn’t lose sleep.

“I’ll call some help for you, but I have no idea when they’ll be here.”

I kiss Grace’s forehead in comfort. “In the meantime, there’s rope in the shed. Why don’t you grab it for me, then head inside, warm up, and help yourself to the lunch that’s on the stove?”

She does as I ask, jogging through the narrow path in the snow toward the shed and back again as I stare at the man I want to murder right here and

now.

I expect him to speak, to bargain, to plead, but he doesn't. He sits there like a sad little boy who fucked up and doesn't know how to make things better.

When Grace returns with the ropes, I gesture her inside, and make my way toward the asshole leaking blood.

"You're going to sit here in the cold because that's what you wanted." I tie his wrists tight and pull him against a tree before covering his mouth with my flannel and turning back toward the cabin. "Help will be here, but I don't know when. Good luck."

A good man would have guilt for this behavior, even under the worst circumstances, and I'm sure he wouldn't want a man to die. Me, I'm not sure what I want... other than Grace. The fact that he's hurt her in *any* capacity drives an immovable wedge between my kindness and brutal retaliation.

Inside, Grace stands next to the stove stirring the bubbling pot of soup. My flannel hangs down to her knees and her legs are bare except for the heavy socks she's still wearing. Her long hair is tied up in a messy bun and she's trembling, tears falling from her face.

"What did you do to him?"

"Does it matter?"

She sighs. "I hate him, but I don't want his death on me."

"It would never be on you. It's on me."

"I don't want it on you either!"

"He's not going to die. He's got a leg injury. And though I hate to say it, rescue is pretty fast around here... even in a storm. They come on snowmobiles. They'll get him fixed up. The worst he'll have is a little frost bite. Which, I think he deserves, considering. I'm sorry I wasn't out there with you. It's my fault this happened."

She swallows hard, stares at me, and then looks away again. "No. I lied to you, Arnie. I've been lying to you."

My heart hammers against my chest. *What the hell could she be lying about?* "How so?"

She licks her lips and glances up at me. "It's weird and I don't want things to be awkward for you around my mom."

My gaze widens and my brows narrow. "*Your mom?* She's great, but I don't know where you're going with this." What the hell is she saying? She's dodging around something.

“So, you’re not like... *into her?*”

“No! *What?* She’s my friend. I told you that.”

“It’s still weird.” Grace looks away.

“What’s weird?” I draw her gaze back toward me, my hand under her chin. “You can talk to me Grace. What have you been lying about?”

Her lips pinch together and plump before she opens them slightly. “I like you, Arnie. And last night... my dream... it wasn’t about Jack. It was about you.”

My cock throbs, my heart swells, and every nerve in my body wakes up all at once.

“Okay... why did you lie about that?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, I guess I thought if you were going to be my stepdad, I... I couldn’t be thinking those things about you, and now... if you’re not going to be, I... I guess it’s okay to tell you.”

“Your stepdad?” I laugh. “That’s the furthest thing from reality. Sorry.” A grin warms my face. “What else do you need to tell me?”

She sighs. “Maybe I don’t want to tell you. You’ve been weird all morning.”

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I was weird because after last night when you were against me in that bed, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I didn’t want to let go, and hearing you say that dream was about anyone but me crushed me.”

“But you were mad before that.”

“Because I didn’t know how to handle myself around you. I didn’t sleep last night after you were on top me. I, ugh...” This is the part where I either fess up to what a fucking weirdo I am or hold it in forever. Right now, I’m not sure which one is better.

“Oh my god. Did you jerk off next to me?”

I swallow hard. “I did. I’m sorr—”

“No. Don’t be sorry.” She smiles. “Is it weird that it turns me on?”

“Probably, yes.”

Lights flash in the distance, and I see Bo and Ivan from the rescue team dragging Jack away on their snowmobile. I’m sure we’ll hear from Sheriff Woods later, but right now, all I care about is what’s happening right in front of me.

“So you’d rather I be mad at you for jerking off?” Her tone is low, slow, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say a little seductive.

This isn't happening.

"I think so. I'm sorry. I couldn't help myself. I knew it was wrong to touch you, so I touched myself."

"Did you come?"

I nod. "So fucking hard."

My cock presses against my jeans and a soft sigh spills from Grace's lips.

"What if you touched me right now?"

"What if?"

"I've never been touched, Arnie. Not ever." She pants as she speaks. It's as though she's turned up to the point that her words are about to fragment.

"Never? By anyone?"

She shakes her head. "I'm a virgin."

"A *virgin*?" I swallow hard.

"Yeah, is that weird? I don't want you to be weird."

"No, it's not weird. I, ugh..." I don't know what to say. I'm sure all the things I'm thinking are creepy as fuck. First and foremost, how tight she must be. How tight and perfect. An untouched gem that's just for me. I swallow hard. "I think we should wait."

"No. I'm not waiting. I want you. It's past that. I need you, Arnie." She wraps her arms around me and lifts her leg against my thigh. The scent of her arousal is in the air like a salty sea breeze. "Fuck me. Please. Tell me what you like and let me give it to you."

"And then what, you leave? I couldn't have that."

"So I won't leave then. I'll stay. I'll stay and I'll fuck you over and over again forever. Just promise me you won't let me go."

My cock throbs against my zipper. "I'm not letting you go, princess. If I press into that tight, little, virgin pussy, you're mine for good. I'm not letting you leave. This will be a real kidnapping."

Her small hand rubs against the rough fabric of my jeans, following the line of my hard cock as it grows against my leg. "Hold me captive. Keep me here. Make me your slave. All I want is for us to go down to the lodge together, make all the people happy with our food, then come home and fuck all night long. It's all I need. Now touch me!" There's so much desperation and need dripping from her voice.

"We don't have a condom. At least I don't."

She shakes her head. “We don’t need one. I want your come all over me, Arnie. In my hair, on my face, on my tits, in my ass... everywhere.”

It’s been ages since I had sex and even longer since I’ve had a woman want me this bad. Hell, I don’t think any woman has ever wanted me this badly.

I grip Grace’s hips and pull her against me, unbuttoning the flannel shirt slowly as her thick frame exposes itself to me. This time, with permission to look.

“And you’re okay with following direction?”

She closes her eyes and opens them again with a soft smile. “It’s who you are, and I want all of you.”

I nod and lean into her neck, kissing her slowly before biting her shoulder. “Good girl.” I lift her up onto the counter and spread her legs, kissing her breasts slowly, biting each nipple gently, touching every inch of her soft skin as I work my way between her thighs and onto her clit.

My tongue slides across her seam and my nose presses in as I bite and nibble at the swollen ball of silk that’s waiting for me.

Grace jumps and weaves her fingers through my hair. She’s so fucking sweet, so perfect, and she tastes even better.

I press my face between her legs and suck, lick, flick, and repeat. Her frame jolts and bounces as tiny little squeaks and moans spill from her lips. She tastes like heaven. A beautiful, sweet version of the ripest fruit ever made. Gripping her hips tighter, I lick deeper, desperate for every drop of what she’s made for me. Moment by moment, my cock grows harder, and soon the need to own her is overwhelming.

I lift her small frame from the counter, holding her pussy against my face as I walk toward the back room, tossing her on the mattress when we arrive. She bounces, her tits moving with the frame.

Fucking hell. Hopefully that release last night will help. Otherwise, I’ll be coming in seconds.

“I want to taste your cock.” She looks up at me with big round eyes. “Please!”

“You can taste me after I’ve soaked in that sweet little pussy.”

I drag my hand through her thick hair, taking in the soft scent of flowers and evergreen, and static fills my brain. She’s so fucking gorgeous and every inch of her has my heart pounding like a barbarian who can’t be held back.

“Please! I really want to feel your cock in my mouth.”

I blow out a heavy breath and swallow down the lump in my throat. I’m afraid to let her suck my dick. I don’t want to come too fast and I know that pretty little mouth on my cock will most definitely claim her prize.

That said, her gaze is desperate, and I don’t want to deny her.

I nod and hold her against me. “Promise me you’ll stop when I ask. I’m coming inside you.”

She giggles and nods, landing on her knees before me, tugging down my jeans before cradling the head of my dick in her mouth. She pulls it out with a pop. “This dick is so big, Arnie. I’m a lucky girl.”

I don’t want to be gentle anymore. I want to be rough. I want to growl out and thump her little head against my cock so fucking hard that I come, but I force myself to slow down.

Having never done this before, she’s still quite good at it. Her hand grips my dick at the base, and she pumps as she sucks hard.

I blow out a heavy breath, trying to steady myself. But as she swirls her tongue around the tip of my cock, I can’t help but press her little head against me, thrusting into her pretty little mouth as she moans and sucks.

Growl after growl showcases the caveman mentality I’m fighting, but that doesn’t stop her from whining out in pleasure.

“You need to stop or I’m going to fill your sweet little mouth, princess.”

She moans and continues to suck harder and faster.

*Fuck!*

I let go of her head and tuck my hands away. If I’m given an option, I’ll thrust her little head so fast on my cock that she’ll be filled with me. However, now that my hands have moved, I’m face to face with her plump lips stretched around my dick.

“Fucking hell, princess.” I pull her to her feet before I come, and she draws away with an audible groan. “On the bed.”

She smiles sweetly, wiping her face with the back of her arm. “I like when you’re demanding.”

“Is that so?”

She nods.

“So if I lay out and tell you to climb on top of me, you’d do it?”

“Anything you ask, I’ll do.”

I blow out a heavy breath and sigh. “Good girl. I want to watch your



tits bounce for me.”

# Chapter Seven

Grace

I'm sure I've never seen this side of Arnie before. This version is wild and untamed. It's almost as though an animal has been let free from his cage.

He lays back on the bed and I climb on top of him slowly, lowering myself as carefully as possible on his giant cock.

Seriously, it's huge. I'm not sure how I'm ever going to make it work. The man is big everywhere, so I probably should've expected this.

His eyes hold on mine and his arms reach out for me, helping me steady as my pussy slowly envelops his dick.

Inch by inch we moan and growl together. He hasn't said, but the way he touches me, I gather it's been a while since he's been with anyone.

There's a neediness in our gaze, in our touch that's sweltering hot. My pussy stretches to accommodate his size. And though I thought it would hurt, it feels good.

He bares his teeth and blows out a breath as I rest my hand in his chest hair and finish taking him in. I stay like this for a moment, allowing the slight pinch to dissipate before rocking my hips back and forth.

"That's my girl. Get that cock. You okay?"

I nod and bounce, sliding against him with ease as silk drips from my core. "You're so big and thick." I swallow hard and continue to move, my tits bouncing back and forth as Arnie watches me put on a show. Normally, I'm not much of a star, but right now, I'd do anything for this man.

"You know I like that pretty little pussy on my cock. Will you come for me? Come on my cock, princess!"

He's been calling me princess since this afternoon and I haven't said much about it, but right now it hits like a ton of bricks. *I want to be his princess.* I want him to come inside of me, and I want to come on him. I want him to look at me the same needy way he's looking at me right now forever.

Adoration, worship, love. It's like a fever. A hot, heavy fever that won't let go.

I rock back and forth on his lap, tipping my head back, touching my tits, running my fingers through his chest hair. I'm not sure if I'm doing any of this right, but it seems to be working. His face contorts and his gaze holds

with mine.

His hand reaches up toward me, landing on my lip, then in my hair, on my tits, and finally between my legs and on my pussy. He rubs my clit as I bounce.

“When you come on my cock, I’m going to turn you around and fuck that tight little ass too. Do you want that?”

My clit throbs and my heart races. I’ve only ever heard people talk about that. I’ve never even fantasized about it, but I’d let Arnie touch me anywhere. I’d let him come all over me. I want every drop of him. I want this moment to replay forever.

My pussy tightens around his dick, and I start to shake. I’m going to come. I’m going to do just as he asked.

*I can’t speak. I can’t move. I can barely breathe.*

Arnie grips my hips and rocks up into me, thumping his cock hard as I shatter on top of him. I’m sure moments are going by, but I’m not alive for any of them. I’m in some other realm where orgasms feel like sharp knives dragging across my skin in the most pleasurable way.

His cock is somehow harder than it was when we started. He’s so deep inside of me, and I’ve soaked him.

“You want more, princess?”

The idea of more right now sounds both insane and absolutely wonderful, but I’m a pile of mush.

“I can’t move,” I pant.

Arnie sits up and wraps me in his arms with an amused smile. His palms are rough and his hands swallow up even the thickest parts of me.

“That’s not what I asked you. I asked, do you want more?”

I nod slowly, laying my head against his shoulder.

He turns me around and bends me forward, stroking my pussy gently with one hand before sinking his cock into my ass.

The pain with this is different, and yet also pleasurable.

He bends forward, peppering my neck with kisses. “I want my cock everywhere, Grace. Tell me you’re mine.”

I sigh. “I’ve never wanted to belong to anyone more.”

“Good,” he growls, pumping into me harder. “Then tell me you belong to me. Tell me you’re mine.”

I suck air in with a staggered tone as his cock fills my ass. “I’m yours. I’m yours, Arnie.”

Every inch he shifts is a new angle, a new pleasure center. He leans to my ear as he says, “Good girl. Good fucking girl.” He thumps faster. “I’m going to come so hard for you, princess.” His tone is ragged, and his frame is tight, like he can’t hold on anymore. Within seconds he’s coming and I’m sad that it’s over.

He pulls from inside me and we both land in some type of direction on the bed as I burrow into his arms. I don’t think there’s anyone in the universe that could pull me away from him right now. Not a single soul.

Arnie kisses my forehead and a rush of undefined energy charges through me. “You okay, princess?”

“Yeah, I’m fantastic.”

“You don’t hurt anywhere?”

“No.” I smile. “I feel great.”

“Good, I—”

A heavy knock hits the door and rattles through the small cabin. “Fuck, it’s Sheriff Woods. I knew he’d be stopping by.”

Arnie kisses my forehead softly and runs his rough hand down the side of my arm. “I need you to stay right here. He’s just got questions about Jack, I’m sure. I’ll settle everything and I’ll be back in bed with you before you know it.”

“No!” I shout out the demand as though he’s going off to war. “I’ll go with you. It’s my thing. I should explain it.”

He shakes his head and tucks the blanket up around my shoulders. “Your things are my things now, and I handle this kind of stuff. Got it?”

I’m not used to this kind of treatment, but when Arnie tells me I’m a good girl, every part of my reality transforms to some land where ecstasy is all that exists, and I need that.

“Okay,” I squeak. “I’ll stay put but promise me you’ll be back fast.”

He grins. “Sheriff Woods and I go way back. I’ll be back in bed in less than ten minutes.”

I nod and hold his hand until he’s too far away and the sound of the men’s voices echo through the halls.

Maybe I should listen. It’s probably important that I know what’s going on, but I hear a lot of laughter. Probably too much given the circumstance. Besides that, my mind won’t stop spinning.

Life has never been this good for me. I’ve never had a man treat me like Arnie does. A man who wants to lay next to me, but also wants to protect

me. A man who sees me and genuinely wants me. A man who's willing to kidnap me to keep me safe.

The front door closes, and Arnie returns with a smile. "All set. Jack will be fine, but Sheriff Woods is going to hold him on stalking charges until someone sets bail. At the very least he'll learn his lesson."

I reach out for Arnie's hand. "That's one thing we've got figured out. Now we have to tell my mom we're dating. That's going to be weird."

He drags in a deep breath and cuddles me closer. "One step at a time, princess. We'll figure it all out together. I promise."

The funny thing, I know he's right. Whatever happens, we have each other, and that's all I need.

# Epilogue

Arnie

Two Weeks Later

Grace looks like an angel. I realize everyone says that and it sounds cheesy as hell, but I mean it. Her brown hair lays like a halo as her white gown surrounds her thick frame. She's standing in front of me beneath the handmade elk antler arch I've been working on all week.

Chap is officiating the ceremony. He's a deacon and part of Rugged Mountain MC. We've been good friends for as long as I can remember. He stands tall in front of us, his hand pulling at his beard. "You can recite your vows whenever you're ready."

I drag in a deep breath, trying to remember everything I rehearsed, but I've decided at the last minute to speak from the heart. "My princess. My beautiful, little Grace. I promise to love you for an eternity and then some. I promise to give you a world filled with beauty and patience, a life drenched in love and acceptance, and I swear to be the man who lifts you when you fall and carry you when you need reassurance. Your love brought me to life, and with you, I know every day will be a day worth living."

Grace wipes away a tear, and then another. It's cold outside, but I'm glad we decided to have the ceremony up at the cabin. I want to walk outside and remember these moments forever. Every Christmas when we're pulling in the tree, I want to see the ghost of this ceremony out of the corner of my eye.

"Arnie," Grace starts, her gaze on me, "you locked me away and showed me what true love means, and for that, I'll be forever grateful. You're a protector, a lover, a fighter, a great cook," she giggles, "and my forever. I promise to love you, cherish you, be faithful to you, and honor you, all the days of our life. Also, I promise to stop by the diner every Sunday and stock up on frozen soups, and to stop stealing the spatula from your drawer at work." She smiles wide again.

"I knew it was you."

She grins and we exchange rings before turning toward the small group of people that we've invited up to the cabin.

Holly berries hang on a tight line of fishing wire, a homemade touch

that Grace worked on this week. She wants to put it on the tree later. I have to say, it's only been two weeks, but she's really made the place a home.

"You may kiss the bride," Chap announces. I lean into *my girl... my wife*, and hold her close. My lips touch hers and a simple peck turns into a deep, passionate kiss. Our tongues against one another, her hands on my face, mine on her throat. The world disappears around us, and for a brief moment, we're alone on the mountain once again.

We continue with this for some time until Chap clears his throat and we're brought back to reality.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brooks." Chap laughs and everyone claps.

At my age, I certainly never saw myself with a twenty-six-year-old woman. Hell, I never saw myself married, or even dating, but when you know, you know. And with Grace, I know more than I ever have.

"You two are beautiful together. Thank you for taking care of her Arnie." Grace's mom hugs us both as we make our way down the aisle. It was awkward when Grace told her about the two of us, but I think her mom wants her to be happy above all else. Plus, I think she's grateful that Jack is out of the picture. And though I didn't have everything to do with it, she's been very thankful to me like I did.

I hold tighter to Grace as we make our way to the end of the aisle and back into the quiet warmth of the cabin, excited for a second alone as husband and wife.

"I'm just leaving," a tiny voice echoes from the living room. "I'm sorry. I snuck in here for a break and watched through the kitchen window."

Grace and I turn to see her friend Poppy curled up on the couch flicking through her phone. "I really don't want to go back out there. What do I have to do to stay here? Is there a price?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Grace moves toward her friend, curling up on the couch next to her.

"Nothing." Poppy grabs hold of a branch on the Christmas tree, touching the sharp pine. "Just admiring your tree."

"You're not just admiring the tree." Grace laughs. "You're sulking, and you smell like you've had too many mimosas. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sulking!" Poppy snaps and stands from the couch. It's obvious now that she's had too many mimosas. "I'm gathering my thoughts before I go back into the party and try not to make an idiot out of myself."

"Why would you make an idiot out of yourself?" Grace helps to

steady her friend.

I join in. I don't know much of Poppy other than what Grace told me, but by the sounds, she's in love with her brother's best friend and has been for a while.

"I asked if you wanted me to invite Bodie. You said it was fine. I thought you'd moved past him. You gave me this big spiel about how he wasn't important and not even that hot..."

Her shoulders roll back. "Did you see him today?"

Graces brows narrow. "He was wearing flannel and jeans."

Poppy's tongue hangs out of her mouth. "I know! He's never looked better! And nice. He's so nice. He helped little old Mrs. Robinson up the hill, and he's been—"

"Stop!" Grace holds her friend by her shoulders. "You have two choices. You tell him how you feel, or you let him go. Which one is it?"

"I let him go! He's Wayne's best friend. I've known him since I was a kid... and while I get the whole age gap thing works for you two, in reality, my family would have a fit. Wayne and I are so close. I can't ruin my relationship with him."

"Okay, so it's over then, and you're letting Bodie go."

Poppy nods. "Yeah. Would it be weird if I headed out early? I know that's totally selfish of me, but I don't have anything left. If I make an idiot of myself with Bodie, I'll die, and I feel a real idiot moment coming on."

"You're not selfish." Grace takes her friend's hand and leads her to the back room. "We're going to spend the night down at the lodge, and you shouldn't be driving. Why don't you sleep in here? When you're feeling better, you can take off."

Poppy nods and snuggles into the bed, holding back tears.

If I hadn't met Grace and fallen so deeply in love with her, I might think Poppy were dramatic, but I get it. If anyone were to try and take Grace from me, I'd be a mess.

Worse yet, if I'd fallen for her and I couldn't have her, I'd be devastated.

Stepping out of the room, Grace and I head down the hall and back toward the front door. "Sorry about that. She's normally not so unstable."

"Ah, weddings are hard for people. It's not easy seeing everything you want within reach, but you know you can't have it."

Grace nods and tips up onto her toes kissing the tip of my nose. "I'm



so happy I found you, Arnie.”

“I’m not sure you found me, princess. I think I kidnapped you.”

She grins. “Would you do it again?”

I cup her face in my hand and lean into her lips. “No doubt about it. Next time, though, I think I’d use more ropes.”

“Ropes, huh? There’s an idea. Maybe tonight you can show me what that looks like.”

Pulling Grace into my arms, I kiss her forehead and close my eyes, my cock hard at the mere thought of tying her up and having my way with her. I don’t doubt that will ever change. In fact, if I have things my way, she’ll be tied up forever. In my arms, against my chest, in my heart... right where she belongs.

Thank you for reading.

[Read Poppy and Bodie’s story here!](#)



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

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

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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**KHLOE SUMMERS**

# Chapter One

Poppy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She laughs. “What step are you on?”

“Bargaining, I think.”

“Oh, you’re serious.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He’s honest.”

Mae laughs. “Right. So, he’s a dick?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No! I’m not bringing some guy I barely know to a Christmas party... with my family!”

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

“Not to a family Christmas party.”

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

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

She picks up her cell phone and starts texting.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m texting him. You’ll thank me later. He cleans up nice.”

“No! What are you doing? I said I’ve got it figured out.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, you’re a psychiatrist now?”

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

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

that I let my bargaining turn to acceptance.

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

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

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

My stomach turns the second I’m alone.

*A date.* I have an actual date.

A real life, down to Earth, factual date.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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