



Savage
PROTECTOR


MOUNTAIN GOLIATHS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Savage Protector

Rugged Mountain Goliaths

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Summer to Winter Publishing



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Cover design by: Bookin It Designs

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Chapter One

Bailey

Wooden stools butt up against a brass foot rail at a high counter. A TV is affixed to the wall and a football game is set without the sound. There's no smoking allowed, but the scent of cigarettes and cigars from days gone by lingers in the air with the beer that's on tap. Mullet stands behind the counter serving drinks. I suppose he has a 'real name,' but everyone in town calls him Mullet because of the Kentucky waterfall he sports under his hunting cap.

"Another shot?" He nods toward me, and I give him the okay. It's only my second, but I'm already feeling buzzed. Whiskey does that to me.

He slides a fresh glass toward me, and I shoot back the gulp and ask for another.

"Damn, girl. Break up or dead dog?" The man next to me passes Mullet a twenty-dollar bill. "Her drink is on me, and I'll have the same."

"Guess I should ask you the same question."

He laughs and studies me closer. "Hey, aren't you that game warden?"

I glance toward the man and squint before sucking down my fourth shot. I should stop here. Ten minutes from now, I'm going to be a mess. "And you're one of those Alaskans who've come to save us all." My tone is sarcastic. "If I'm honest, you're pretty brave for coming to the bar on a Friday night. You're not very liked around here."

"Oh, I like a challenge." He smirks. "Name's Rowan, and I thought small towns were supposed to be nice."

"We are nice!" I know I've seen him up on the mountain since they got here, but he looks familiar. Like I know him from somewhere else, but I can't place it. Maybe that's the alcohol talking. There's no way I could know this

guy. I'd remember a nearly seven-foot-tall giant with thick arms, wide shoulders, and ink covering his body. I scan down to his big, rough hands. I'd remember those too.

For a second, I wonder what it would be like to have them all over me.

This has to be the alcohol talking. There's nothing attractive about a man that comes into town and takes over like he owns the place. Though, in his defense, his whole family is the same way.

I glance away, willing away the ache that's growing between my legs. *I need help.* I always get horny when I'm drunk, and Rowan looks like the kind of guy you don't want to mess around with... if I were even the messing around type, which I'm not. Hell, the reason I'm here is because I'm not the messing around type.

Though, maybe it's time that era ended.

I shake my head in an attempt to gather some sense, but an image of the giant Alaskan bending me over the bar flashes into my mind.

Okay, no more shots. I'm officially gone.

"People here don't seem that nice to me. My brothers and I have been getting shit everywhere we go." His tone is low and graveled.

Good Lord, he's hot.

It takes my brain a second to comprehend why he's said this, considering I've lost every thread of our conversation and replaced it with him bending me over the counter, pulling my hair, and smacking my ass.

Finally, it dawns on me that he's talking about how people in town don't like his family... *I think.* "That's because you're causing trouble everywhere you go. This is a sleepy town. People like order and kindness. We look out for each other."

"And y'all invited us here, so..."

"So?"

“So... you should treat us better.”

“Treat you better? We welcomed you in, gave you a cabin to stay in free of charge, and everyone I know has dropped by with food and gifts to welcome you. How much better could you be treated?” I twist my stool toward him with every intention of being angry, but his tattoos have me salivating before the anger has a chance to boil over. This wouldn't happen if I were sober.

My eyes scan down over his arm. He's covered in symbols of some sort, maybe Viking. It's hard to tell in this dim light. Part of me wants to roll up the sleeves on his flannel and look closer, but I divert my drunken stare to the trucker hat he wears that's frayed along the brim.

Why did I have that last shot? This man is clearly eons older than me, he's a jerk, and he's unliked by everyone I love. No pair of jeans or oversized biceps could make up for that.

“You've been sending threats through everyone you know.” He laughs under his breath.

“So, is that why you're here? Your family sent you to take me down? Because I'm doing my job, Mr. Laskin. That's all. And right now, I'm having an end of the week drink. So, if you'll excuse me.” I turn away, but the man continues.

“More like end of the week *drinks*... and no, you're not doing your job. Your job is to warden the hunters. We're here to save the town from a menacing bear. We are allowed advantages.”

I laugh and spin off my stool, standing in front of him. Even while he sits, he's bigger than me standing. “Mr. Laskin, I appreciate your dedication to bullshit, but I plan to annoy the hell out of you and your family until you follow the rules of the hunt.”

“When an animal becomes a menace, all means necessary should be used to take him down. That bear could've killed someone at the lodge on New Year's Eve.”

I hitch my hip and lay into the sarcasm. “Someone left the door cracked to the kitchen and the *bear*, who likes to *eat*,

came to get some *food*. It's a bear. It didn't get the rule book on what food was acceptable to eat and what wasn't."

Rowan stands, towering over me. Lord, he smells good, like he's rolled in pine and cedar. "Right," he grins, "and I suppose he didn't get the memo about running into traffic, messing around in the trash, or that car he broke into last weekend... *in broad daylight*. There were children playing in the area. What would you feel if something happened to one of them?"

I huff and roll my eyes. "You know that would be terrible. All I'm asking is that you stay on the west side of the mountain and capture him. That's why we called you guys. You're supposed to be expert bear trappers."

He closes his eyes and blows out a heavy breath before looking toward me again. "For the hundredth time, we need access to the entire mountain. You don't govern everything. The landowners do."

I know he's right about some of that. "I can't imagine anyone in town is giving you permission to hunt on their property."

"People in town want us gone, so we're getting a lot more cooperation than you'd think. Dad thinks he has the bear tracked over to the Keller property. If we can lure him out of the caves up there, we should be good to go, and we'll be out of your hair in no time. What bone do you have to pick with us doing our job on private property, anyway?"

I laugh under my breath and stand from my stool. "You know who the Kellers are, right?"

"So far, they've been the most hospitable folks in town."

"Yeah, well, I'd rethink that if I were you. Thomas Keller is the father of June... the girl your brother has been creeping on. Besides, are you sure the tracking evidence is real? I could see Mr. Keller as the kind of guy who'd mess with all of you. You know, hunting accidents happen all the

time. Private land is a good place to teach a bunch of out of towners who are messing with his daughter a lesson.”

Rowan shakes his head. “You’re crazy. June is a nice girl, and my brother likes her. That’s all. And Mr. Keller is an honest farmer who doesn’t want an eight-hundred-pound grizzly on his property threatening his animals. The end. You should really get home and sober up. You’re starting to sound like one of those conspiracy theorists.”

I huff out a heavy breath. “Whatever you say. Just trying to help. I’ve lived up here my whole life. I know these people like the back of my hand.”

He stares down at me with dark brown eyes and a half smile. I want to slap it off his face and taste him all at once.

“Thanks for the help, princess. We’ve got this covered. Alaskans are some of the most private people on the planet. I can read a room.”

If he could really read a room, he’d know how badly I needed him to touch me right now.

“Don’t call me princess.”

“*Queenie?*” He laughs.

“How about you call me Bailey, considering *that’s my name?* Better yet, call me Ms. Barone.”

“*Barone?* That’s my buddy’s last name. Maybe you know him. He’s a cop in town. Geno Barone.”

My heart swells and sinks to the bottom of my stomach. “Your buddy? Geno Barone is your buddy?”

“One of my best buddies. We go way back. He used to bring his family out to Alaska for big game hunting before he took a position out here. Turns out, small town cops don’t get much of a break.”

“What? Why didn’t you ever visit?”

Rowan’s heavy brows wrinkle. “Personal investment? You know this guy?”

I blow out a heavy breath. “He’s... my father.”

Rowan's face contorts into various shapes before he finally speaks. "*Your father?* How is Geno your father? I'd remember you."

"Yeah. Well... it's really not important, is it? My father is a police officer in town and I'm the local game warden. So... you're doing this hunt by my rules, Mr. Laskin." I grab my jacket off the hook beneath the bar and pull it over my shoulders. "The end."

I turn and walk toward the door, desperate to scrub this man from every fantasy I've been having.

He holds me by my arm. "What's this really about?"

This is really about a lot of things, but I don't say any of them. Instead, I laugh and pull my arm away from his grip.

He stares at me as though he's uncovering the years and trying to place the truth. "Fuck! You grew up fast."

"Okay..." I wave goodbye to Mullet before glancing back at Rowan. "I'll be in touch."

His weight comes up behind me, but I keep walking through the bar, twisting sideways to avoid people as I make my way toward the front door. Hot or not, I can't want a man who's friends with my father, especially a man who just noted how fast I grew up.

Gross!

Then again, would my father have to know if we spent a single night together? Rowan is the perfect man to take my virginity. He's big, rough, covered in ink, and he's leaving town the second this bear is caught. There's no pressure to say hi to him on Main Street when we're both grabbing groceries and we'll never bump into each other at the diner.

My thighs ache, and while I try to convince myself that this doesn't make sense, the alcohol keeps giving me reasons that it could work.

Jake left me because I wouldn't screw him. I know that for a fact. He screamed at me and listed off my prudish ways for me to absorb earlier this evening. We spent months

together, and I had no desire to touch him, let alone have sex. I thought there was something wrong with me until I got here tonight, and Rowan sat next to me. Maybe I just needed alcohol all along. Whiskey does make me horny.

Blah! I need to get a grip.

I pull open the bar door and a gust of cold wind blows in with it. Good. That's just what I need to get myself in check.

"Hold up," Rowan's deep voice calls from behind me.

I turn back in the dim light of the night and stare up at him. He's so big. A goliath. A huge, inked up monster of a man that I want to touch me everywhere.

My breath catches, and though I'm repeating the word 'stop' in my head over and over, I lean up onto my toes like the feral girl I am and kiss him.

Lip on lip, I kiss this man like a wild heathen who has no respect for rules or order.

His big hands land on my shoulders and then my waist. He lifts me from the ground, and I wrap around him as he carries me toward his truck. I've never been lifted so effortlessly in my life.

My clit throbs and my heart hammers. *What the hell is happening?*

I should want him to stop. I shouldn't have started. He's my dad's friend, he's not at all age appropriate, and he's about to make a mess of the town I love.

Yet here I am, hoping with all my heart that this man does bad, bad things to my father's daughter.

Chapter Two

Rowan

“How much have you had to drink?” I stare toward the woman in black who’s leaning against the inside of my truck door like she wants to devour me. This isn’t something that happens regularly, so I’m not sure how to react.

“It doesn’t matter. Touch me!” She sighs and grabs my hand, running it over her smooth thigh.

Fuck.

I like to think I’m a good man, but right now, I’d like to ignore every righteous sound rattling through my head and let my hand wander up between her legs.

I groan under my breath. “Oh, I want to, princess, but something tells me you’d regret all that in the morning.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” She slides closer to me and tucks under my shoulder. “We don’t have to tell anyone. I just want to get this out of the way.” She sighs and leans against me. “You know, like a no strings thing. What do people call it?”

“A one-night stand?”

“Yeah. One of those.” She nuzzles into my neck. “It’s no big deal. You’re leaving town soon, anyway.”

Thoughts of tying her little wrists to the posts in the barn conjure, but I push them in favor of something less... aggressive. “Do you have something going on? Why’d you come out tonight and get so drunk?”

She snuffles and pushes away a few tears before sliding over to the other side of the truck bench. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? So, this is normal for you? Around here the game warden for the area comes into town on Fridays, gets loaded, and hits on random guys until she can’t stand?”

She glances toward me, then away again. “What does it matter if I do?”

“It doesn’t, just wondering if I’m special or if you do this on the regular?”

Her eyes roll. “You’d love it if I said you were special, wouldn’t you?”

I shrug. “Kind of.”

“Well, you’re not. My stupid ex called me a prude this morning and I’m done with it. You’re the first guy I saw.”

I laugh. “Not true. You saw lots of guys at that bar. You singled me out.” My tone is playful, and it’s clearly pissing her off. For some reason, I’m getting off a little on that. “Why are you a prude?”

She drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I’m a virgin. An illusive twenty-four-year-old virgin.”

Fuck. I clear my throat. “Okay... and what... you were going to seduce me into popping your cherry?”

Her eyes roll. “God! Who says ‘*popping your cherry?*’ I’m glad I’m coming to my senses.”

“Me too. I’m not the kind of guy you want *deflowering* you. I’m rough and—”

“Ugh. Just stop. *Deflowering?* No. No. No. I’m sorry for this. I’m going to call for a ride.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re already here. I’ll take you home.” Why am I a little bummed that I’ve fucked up this imaginary scenario where I slide into Bailey’s tight little pussy for the first time? *Because I’m sick, that’s why.*

Snow falls heavy on the windshield as Bailey’s shoulders lower. “Actually, that might be nice. I can’t call my parents. They’re out of town on an anniversary trip until tomorrow and my friend Ruby is babysitting her niece tonight. God, this is embarrassing.”

“What is?”

“That I have no friends.”

I bite back a sarcastic comment on how that’s not the most embarrassing thing of the night. “Where’s your cabin?”

“Up on Echo Ridge. It’s about an hour from here.” She shifts her gaze out the side window. “Are you sure you could even do it? I don’t think we could be on more opposite sides of the mountain and the storm is moving in.”

“Are you suggesting I leave you here?”

She glances out the window. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’ll find someone going my way. Maybe he’ll take my payment.”

“Knock it off.” I start up the truck and crank the heat before flicking on the windshield wipers. “Buckle up. I’m not going to leave my buddy’s daughter drunk at the bar to fend for a ride.”

“So that’s what I am to you, your buddy’s daughter?”

“Should you be more?”

“I’m the game warden,” she looks at the dash and back again, “who’s made a complete idiot of herself tonight.”

I flick on the blinker, pull out onto Main Street, and into the incoming storm. “It can be our secret. Besides that, everyone is allowed a freakout at least once a year. It was your turn.”

“It’s January. I’m not sure I can hold in the crazy for eleven more months.”

“Well, you got it out of the way early. That’s a positive. And by the sounds of things, you ditched some dead weight. Sounds like this guy you were dating was a loser. If you didn’t want to touch him after three months, that’s a sign that things weren’t headed in the right direction.”

“What about you? I need some dirty laundry to even out this conversation.”

“Don’t have any. Squeaky clean Alaskan right here.”

“Right. I’ll believe that... *never!* You’re a giant. Women love that. They must be throwing themselves at you all the time.”

“Like you did?” I laugh.

“Again, why am I talking?”

“Did you not throw yourself on me?” Snow falls heavier as I drive up the mountain. This storm is coming in fast.

“I’m drunk, so it’s different.”

“Different how?”

“Different in the sense that all my reasoning is clouded, *obviously*. Anyway, you were saying.”

I huff out a heavy sigh. “Women don’t throw themselves at me. In fact, you’re the first to do that.”

She narrows her brows. “You know, my mother always taught me that liars get their mouths washed out with soap. Is that what you want?”

“It’s true. Women stop and look, but they don’t approach me.”

She grins. “So... you’re going with the intimidation angle. Interesting. That must be so hard to be stared at for being big and handsome. I wouldn’t know what that’s like.”

“You want to be stared at for being big and handsome?”

“Ha. Ha.” She stares at me and rolls her eyes. “No, but being stared at a little would be nice.”

I grin. “I was staring at you when I came in... before I realized you were the game warden.”

She glances toward me. “Whatever.”

“I was.” I grin. “You’re worth a second glance.”

“That’s super. Thank the Lord I’m worth a second glance.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Isn’t that what you wanted to hear?”

“So, you’re simply telling me what I want to hear?”

I can feel my eyes growing wide and my nostrils flaring as I say, “This is why I stay away from women.”

“A second ago, the women were staying away from you. Which is it?”

I glance toward her, then back at the snowy road that's curving up the mountain. I grew up in northern Alaska. I'm used to shit roads, but this storm is putting up a pretty good fight. "Enough about me. Tell me more about this virgin thing. What made you decide to save yourself?"

She scoffs at my question and crosses her arms over her chest. "Well, I'm stupid for one."

"What? No, you're not. It's... admirable."

"*Admirable?*" She glances toward me, and though I can't look back, I feel the heat of her stare on my frame. "It's not admirable. It's a ridiculous concept that I should've ditched with the rest of my friends in the tenth grade."

"No, I really do think it's incredible that you're saving yourself for the right person." My mind shouldn't wander to the place where I fantasize about how tight she must be or how soft and silky smooth her skin is. I shouldn't go to the place where I think about sliding into her for the first time and making her mine. I shouldn't go there because that place is for fucking perverts and that's not who I am. "You should be proud of it."

"Proud of the fact that I can't do the one thing everyone else does without thought? I'm not. I want it off my mind. Honestly, I just want to get it over with."

"Yeah." I stare out the front window, watching the snow fall through the darkness as the headlights guide the way. My mind should be on the road. Instead, it's lost somewhere in thoughts about holding Bailey close and showing her what it's like to be touched for the first time.

"Yeah, what? Are you suddenly willing to help me out?" She's still drunk. If she wasn't, she wouldn't be asking.

"I'd like to more than you know, but we both know deep down that's a mistake."

"How? You're a man, so you must be horny, and I'm a cute little virgin who wants you to touch me." She bats her eyelashes and lands her hand on my lap. "What man doesn't

want that? You help me out tonight, and come morning, we never talk again.”

“Except... we have to talk again. You’re the game warden, and you’re up my ass about everything, remember? That... and your dad has been a lifelong friend of mine.”

“Or... you forget we ever figured that out and you put a girl out of her misery.”

A vehement yes screams from behind my zipper, but my brain is still shutting the whole idea down. No good ever comes from casual sex, but she’s not wrong. I’m not in town forever and her father doesn’t have to know. Hell, we barely see each other anymore. *What would one night change?*

“Sorry.” She scrubs her hand down over her face. “I’m a complete mess. I probably sound like such a loser throwing myself at you.”

“You’re not a loser. I get it. I just... what if you regret it? We should wait until morning and reassess when you’re sober.”

“How many people have you been with?” She pulls the question out of nowhere.

“Oh. I, ugh, I don’t know. A few. Not many.”

“Not many, like six, or not many, like forty?”

“*Forty?* No. Not forty. A handful, but it’s been a while. I told you, I don’t do the whole casual sex thing. And at this point, I’m looking for something real.”

“What does *real* mean? Like a family?”

“Yeah. The whole package, you know? I’ve fucked around my whole life. I thought I wanted to be alone, but now I realize I need more. Unfortunately, I probably realized all that too damn late.”

“This is my place.” She points to a little cabin set back in the woods with white lights twinkling on the front porch. Smoke billows from the chimney as snow continues to fall. When I’ve officially parked, I tell her to stay in place while I come help her out of the truck, but she doesn’t listen.

“Nope.” She pops open the truck door. “I’m not some ‘*open the door for me*’ kind of girl. I’m an Annie Oakley kind of girl. Guns blazing and shit, ya know?” She hops from the truck and goes down to the ground immediately.

Silence.

When I reach the other side, she’s on her back, staring up at the snow as it falls onto her face. My brothers are going to die when I tell them I’ve spent the night counseling the drunken game warden. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” She sits up and attempts to stand, but falls back again.

I reach out to help, but she pulls away in favor of the tire of the truck. “I’m fine. I can help myself up.”

“Right, well, you might want to do it sooner than later. You don’t need frost bite on top of everything.”

When she’s standing, she hobbles to the door, and lifts onto the porch with a limp like she’s hurt her ankle.

“Are you okay?”

She nods. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem fine. You’re walking like you’re hurt.”

“Well, I’m not hurt. I’m perfectly fine, so... we’re good. You can go now. Thank you for your help, and for the conversation. If you change your mind about helping me out in *other* ways, though, I’m ready and willing.” Her words are slurred.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to check your ankle before I leave.”

She glances toward me and unlocks the front door. Inside, the scent of cinnamon and vanilla fill the small cabin. There’s a gentle glow from the fireplace, and though small, the cabin is decorated and designed to make the best use of every bit of space.

“How long have you lived up here?”

“Two years. My dad built the place for me. Someday, I’m hoping to add to it or maybe expand the little ranch I’ve started. Right now, I only have a few chickens and a goat, but I’m hoping for horses. Anyway, I’m fine, really. You can go. Thank you for bringing me home. Do I owe you gas money, or do you take other *forms of payment*?” She smiles a cute, mischievous grin, like she’s speaking in a code I may be able to figure out.

“Sit down and let me look at your ankle, please. I’d feel like an ass if I left and you broke it.”

“It’s not broken, but if you insist.” She grins. “Is this some kind of foreplay? If it is, I’m down. The doctor thing has always gotten me off a little.” She sits back on the couch and slides off her boot, giving way to the darkest shade of purple I’ve ever seen on human skin.

“*Shit.*”

“Well, that’s not what you want to hear from Dr. Feelgood.”

“This is going to hurt like a bitch in the morning.” I press on her ankle, feeling for broken bones, but she doesn’t wince, and I don’t feel anything out of place. That said, I’m not a doctor.

“It’s just bruised. I twisted it a little when I went down, but I’m fine. No reason for concern.”

“Really? Okay, well...” I stand from the edge of the ottoman and make my way toward the kitchen to grab a cloth for ice cubes.

“You really don’t have to do this. I’m okay. Besides, the storm is getting worse. You should go if you’re going. Getting around this mountain in a snowstorm like this is a death sentence.”

I set the ice on her ankle and grab my phone out of my back pocket. “I should call my dad and let him know where I am. My brothers were at the bar so I’m sure they saw me leave with the game warden. If I don’t get ahead of this, everyone

will create their own story of how I'm fucking everything up. You okay for a second while I check in?"

She nods and lifts her own phone, scrolling through it casually as I step out on the front porch. The wind whips the newly fallen powder across the field and swirls in front of the porch.

"Hey."

"Where are you?" My father's voice is curt and dark. I'm a forty-five-year-old man, but we're here to do a job, and I know he's pissed I'm not there with the family. "Atlas said he saw you taking the game warden home from the bar. You shouldn't be messing around with her."

"It's not what you think. She was drunk and she needed help. I just brought her home."

"And you're stuck there now. They just closed the roads. No unnecessary travel."

I laugh under my breath. "Well, I didn't have a choice. So, everything's fine."

"No, it's not. The people in town already hate us. We need to follow the rules. You're stuck until they lift the ban. You know your brothers look to you for answers. If you start being a shit head, they'll follow suit."

"I don't think that's the case. I think they'll do what they want." Honestly, I need to think of a good reason to leave this house tonight. If I stay here, I'll be the one making bad decisions. There's no doubt about it.

"Do you hear me?" my father groans into the phone. This is the part where working with family is tough. "That bear is probably tucked away right now, and there's nothing out there to track. Get rested, don't fuck her, and we'll catch up in the morning."

I don't make a comment to the '*don't fuck her*' thing because I know he's right. "Copy. Call you in the morning."

He disconnects the line and I head back into the warmth of the cabin, bringing with me a whirl of snow.

Bailey is leaning over her ankle, pressing on the swollen parts as though she's assessing herself for damage. "I can move it, so that's good, right?"

"It's good you can move it. From here it looks like a bad sprain. We'll keep it up tonight and ice it. In the morning, I'll take you to the doctor in town."

"No, that's fine. I've sprained my ankle before. I can rest it for a few days. Besides, that's a long drive back here for you in the morning. If I need the doctor, I have friends nearby I can call."

"Actually, it won't be a drive because I'll be here."

"What?" Her face pales. "Why? Did you decide to take me up on my offer?"

"They closed the roads."

Her breath hitches. "Well, this is good news. The roads were bad on our way up. Now you don't have to worry about that."

"I can sleep on the floor or out in my truck. I know it's not ideal. I'm sorry."

She drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "You're a massive man. You can't sleep in your truck, and I'm not letting you sleep on the floor."

"I'll take the couch then."

She laughs and stands from the sofa. "This thing wouldn't hold one of your feet. I'll sleep out here, and you'll take the bed. A good portion of your legs might hang off, but at least you'll be mildly comfortable."

"Thanks, but I can't do that. It's your bed, and you're injured. You need your sleep if you're going to get better."

She looks down at her purple ankle, then back up at me. "Okay, you're probably not wrong. So, sleep with me."

"You're an aggressive little thing, aren't you?"

"Not usually. Whiskey gives me wings."

I laugh. “Well, sleeping with you would be a horrible idea.”

“Why’s that?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

I scrub my hand down over my beard and glance away. “Well, your offer is very tempting, and while I know it’s right to wait this out, I don’t trust myself alone with you... in a bed.”

She sinks her hand into mine and drags me toward the back of the cabin. “Which is exactly why you’re sleeping there.”

Chapter Three

Bailey

I've never actually slept with a man. My ex and I didn't do sleepovers and I've never been close enough to anyone else for it to matter. How sad is that? I'm nearly a third of the way through my life and I haven't even had a man lay beside me in bed until now.

Thank God for whiskey or I may not even have this. Well, thank God for whiskey and for Rowan. Rowan didn't have to go along with any of this tonight, but he did. There's something about having a goliath of a man sleeping next to me that makes everything a little bit better. He's warm, and though he's stuffed a pillow between us, the heat from his body surrounds me.

I cuddle into the blanket and try to force away fantasies of pleasure, but Rowan is all I can think about. His broad shoulders covered in ink, his solid, hairy chest, the way he talks like he's so sure of himself. His big, rough hands and the way he touched my ankle so gently. I sigh and close my eyes in an attempt to think of anything else. Trolls, dolphins, the amount of shoveling I'm going to have to do tomorrow, this ankle and all the pain that's creeping up my leg. Maybe I should see a doctor.

I should definitely see a doctor, but not for my ankle. Maybe for an MRI or a CT scan, whichever is the one that checks your brain functions.

Rowan shifts beside me. His weight moves the mattress and shifts all the bedding. I've made such an idiot out of myself tonight. And though I love that he's here, the pathetic nature unto which I've gotten him here is just... weird. I should probably steer clear of all alcohol in the future. Then again, a little more and maybe I'd have gotten him all the way.

Damn it, girl... no! That's stupid and irresponsible.

The rhythm of Rowan's breath is steady and slow. He's fallen asleep. I wonder if he's dreaming about me. If he is, it's probably a nightmare. A terrible, awful nightmare about a woman that kissed him without permission and lured him into her bed during a snowstorm.

This is who I've become. Who can I thank for this? The church? My parents? The books I read about the evil that would happen if I broke my chastity outside of marriage?

I close my eyes and try and imagine anything but Rowan's lips on mine, but I'm only diverted by his hands on my waist. He leaned into that kiss. Maybe he wanted to kiss me too. Then again, maybe I shouldn't trust memories I had while I was drunk. These thoughts spin continuously until I'm drifting into darkness.

I don't know what time it is when I wake up, but when I roll over, Rowan is awake too.

I open my mouth to talk, but his fingertip lands on my lips. "Do you still want this?"

I nod breathlessly, my clit throbbing, my heart pounding.

"Then do as I say." He lays back and moves the blanket away from his giant frame where his thick cock stands at attention.

Oh God, what's happening?

My thighs ache and nothing else in the world matters. Not my ankle, not the snow, not the fact that he's my father's friend, nothing. I want him, he wants me, and that's all there is to it.

"Take off your little panties. I want to see your pussy."

I'm panting as I stammer, "Yes." I slide the thin cotton down over my legs and get onto my knees for him. His big hand palms over me and a thick finger slides in, pumping in and out of my core as he stares straight at me.

“Good girl. Now sit on my face. Ride my beard. I want to feel you on me.”

Maybe I should hesitate, but I don't. I climb up onto his face and mount his beard as I bend down and suck his giant cock.

I'm not sure what I like more, his tongue against my clit, or his dick pushing against my cheek. He moans and growls against me as though he can't get enough. I sigh in response over and over again, taking all of him in until my thighs shake against his beard.

“You're soaking wet, princess. Turn around. I want to see those pretty tits while you bounce on my cock.” His tone is so deep and raspy that I nearly come all over him right then and there, but I do as he asks and sit on his dick. Slow and steady, I lower myself down as he spreads me wide.

I've never felt anything like this. He's so big. He's so, so big.

I blow out a breath and take more of it as he growls, “Good girl. Good fucking girl. Spread your little pussy over my cock... just like that. Take it all. Take my cock like a good girl.”

I've barely gotten the first quarter of him in when he rubs my clit with his fingertip and groans. “You're soaked for me.” His free hand grips my breast and pinches my nipple as I continue to lower onto him and bounce.

I should take longer. I should enjoy every sensation. His rough skin, his giant body, the way he holds me, the way he growls, the way his coarse palms feel against my skin. Instead, I rock harder against his cock and his hand, close my eyes, and come. Explosions detonate in my head and sparks break the barrier between time and space until I'm lost in a universe I can't describe.

Rowan holds me from behind and — *behind*? Why is Rowan holding me from behind? I was just riding him.

My eyes open, my hand is between my legs, and I'm sighing out loud.

“Bailey, are you okay?” Rowan’s deep voice grits into my ear. “You’re moving around a lot. I think you’re having a nightmare?”

We both know those noises weren’t the sounds of nightmares.

I stop all movement like a possum playing dead. Dear God, what do I do now? How do I explain this away? I’ve just given myself an orgasm in my sleep. Who the hell knows what I said? What did he hear?

“Are you okay?” he asks again. He sounds a little groggy. Maybe he was asleep. Maybe he didn’t hear anything, or he can’t make sense of it anyway. “It’s time to get up. I’ll go make some coffee.”

Coffee? I could use coffee.

His hand leaves a cold space on my skin before he rolls away and his weight lifts from the bed. As the shades bend open, he yells, “Fuck!”

I roll onto my back. “What?”

“There’s like five feet of new snow out here.”

“Five feet? Really?” Desperate to prove him wrong, and change the subject completely, I ditch the concern about my dream and stand from the bed, hopping toward the window where I see at least five feet of fresh powdery snow. “Shit.”

“Yeah. I’m going to be here for a while. We should get comfortable. It could be a week before they have the roads clear to town.”

A week? I don’t have enough food for a week.”

“Well, good thing you have me then. I have my hunting and fishing gear in the truck. I’ll get outside after coffee. After that dream you had last night, sounds like you could use some time alone anyway.” He smirks.

He smirks! He knows it wasn’t a nightmare.

My face heats and I’m sure it’s a shade of crimson the world has never seen. “What? I was dreaming about bears.

They were being trapped and—”

“Yeah, me too.” He holds back a perfect smile, glances down at my hard nipples poking through my t-shirt, and walks toward the kitchen.

I’ve never felt so seen, and unfortunately, that’s not a good thing.

Chapter Four

Rowan

I'm on the ice next to a drilled hole with my pole in the water, waiting for a bite. I'm not sure how many days we're going to need fish for, but I assume it's going to be more than one, so I'm going to be out here for a while.

It's probably for the best. If I go inside and see her puffy nipples poking from under that shirt again, I'm going to turn into an animal and that's not good for anyone. Besides, she seemed rather embarrassed. I've been drunk before. I know how hard the next day can be. Space will do us both some good.

My phone rings in my pocket. It's my father with an earful, I'm sure.

"How's it going over there?" He doesn't sound as irritated as he was last night, but that doesn't mean anything.

"Good. Fishing right now. Looks like the roads are going to take a few days to clear. What about you? You guys have everything you need?"

"Oh yeah. We're stocked here for months. We'll probably be giving this stuff away when we get this bear in the next week. How'd last night go?"

"Last night?" A flash of Bailey's nipples pebbled under her shirt stiffens my cock. "Good. No issues. I'll be out of here as soon as the plow comes through."

"Great. Hudson has been in touch with the local librarian. He's hoping to get some maps so we can get the area surveyed in case the tip with the Keller property doesn't pan out."

Usually, I'm the one who's giving everyone direction. It's hard to be so far away from the job. Then again, I can't wait to go back with these fish and stare at Bailey for the rest

of the night. The view is much better than the one of my brothers back at that cabin.

“Sounds like you guys have a good handle on everything. I’ll be back as soon as the roads are clear.”

“Stay well.” My father groans and hangs up the line. He’s never been an overly talkative man, but he does have a way with people that makes everyone feel at ease... everyone but his children.

A tug comes onto the line a few minutes later and I reel in my first catch of the day. A lake trout. He’s on the smaller side, maybe around seven pounds. A few more of these and we’ll be set for a few days. I can always come back down if we run low.

I fish for another few minutes before my phone vibrates again. This time I don’t want to answer. It’s my buddy, Geno, Bailey’s father. I contemplate what I’ll say, but nothing sounds good enough, so I let the call go to voicemail... only for him to ring again. God, maybe he knows something.

What’s there to know? We didn’t do anything.

All I’ve done so far is protect her from the elements and make sure she’s safe and sound here at the cabin.

“Hey, buddy. What’s going on? Everything okay?” He’s a cop, so I’m sure he senses the tension in my voice.

“Ah, yeah. I’m stuck out on Ridge Road. Was on my way up to check on Bailey and the snowmobile quit on me. I swear I do more work on this thing than riding it. I was wondering if you had anyone in the field that you could send over to help.”

“I can make a call. We’ve got a couple of guys who might be able to help you with your sled. As far as your other concern, I’m actually over at Bailey’s right now.” My heart stops as I talk.

“You are?” His tone stiffens as he says, “Why? Didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“We don’t, really. She needed a ride home from the bar last night, and by the time I got us back here, the storm had kicked in. We’re waiting it out now.”

He pauses, then speaks with what sounds like anxiety, “Fuck. Well, at least I know she’s safe with you. I was worried about her. She gets freaked out in the storms when she’s snowed in. Don’t ask me why a girl with a fear of being alone decided to live out in the middle of nowhere, but she did.”

“Ah well, she’s not alone now.” *Why did I say it like that?* “Anyway, I can call the old man and see if he has anyone available where you’re at, but I’m thinking he called everyone in with the storm.”

“If you can. I think I’ll start walking in the meantime. I know a guy a few miles away who can help out that doesn’t have a cell phone, but I was trying to avoid the whole deep snow thing.”

“Why don’t you let me call you a rescue?”

“Too dangerous. It’s my own fault. I dragged myself out here, so I can get myself back. Thanks for keeping an eye on Bails. I’m glad you’re there.”

I haven’t done anything wrong, but guilt settles in anyway. “You got it, man.”

“Oh, and she likes playing cards. If she starts to lose it, that might help.”

If Bailey were here to listen to this conversation, her eyes would be rolling back in her head. Something tells me that girl doesn’t want to play cards. “Got it. Send me a text when you’re back home.”

“Will do, man. Stay safe.”

“Same, buddy.” The line disconnects and I go back to pulling fish out of the water while I contemplate every thought I have running through my head.

Bailey’s nipples, the sounds she made last night, the way her lips felt against mine, the innocent way she asks to be touched, the guilty look on her face this morning when she’d

dreamt about us together. She didn't confirm it, but I'm not sure she needs to. I had the same dreams. The same feelings. The same ache between my legs. That said, if it wasn't clear before, hearing Gino's voice confirms my thoughts. She's off limits.

The ice cracks and a cold breeze blows across the lake. I glance up to gauge the direction of the wind from the treetops, but there in front of me is something much more pressing.

Fifteen feet away, standing on the ice is a grizzly bear, the one we're here to hunt. The animal's mouth opens, its teeth bare, and a growl releases loud and hot.

I pick up my gun from the ground and stare at the creature, aiming to kill.

This is what we came here for. This oversized, menacing beast. He's presented himself to me as though he wants this to be over too.

"Don't shoot. Please!" Bailey hollers from the house and the bear takes his attention toward her.

Fucking hell!

"Please don't shoot," she repeats, slower this time.

"Would you rather I wrestle him down?"

"No. Maybe just let him go." Her voice is trembling.

What the hell?

"Let him go? He's going to kill me!" I'm still staring at the bear as I talk, though in reality, he seems less interested in me and more interested in the fish in my bucket.

Bailey hollers again, "He's just living his life! Please don't!"

So that's what this is about? She doesn't want us killing the bear at all?

Why the hell do I want to listen to her? Why do I want to let this big bastard go? I shouldn't. We're here to do a job. Everyone in town wants us gone. So, then why do I want to listen to her? Why don't I want to shoot this animal? Why do I

want to go back inside and hold her knowing I did what made her happy?

No. I came here to shoot a bear, so I'm shooting the bear.

I cock my gun and aim, sucking in a deep breath before I pull the trigger.

"Please!" she shouts down from the house. "Please!"

The bear, who couldn't care less what threat I am to him, ambles over to my bucket, and carries it off as though I've fished just for him. Three lake trout and a side of live bait lost.

"Fuck!" I throw my gun over my shoulder and make my way toward the house with no food, my auger, my pole, and a rumbling stomach.

The worst part is, I kind of like her convictions. The backwards way of her thinking. The part where she's a fucking game warden who doesn't want me to kill a bear that's terrorizing the town. They should write about her in psychology journals. The woman who agrees to hunting, but only *certain* animals.

I have so many things I can debate regarding this, and when I step up on the front porch, I do. "What makes that bear's life any more important than the elk in my freezer?"

She opens her mouth and closes it again. "Elk aren't protected. Grizzlies haven't been seen in Colorado for years, and—"

"Right... because they're dangerous and people shot them. If I had a couple of kids playing out back today, I'd like to know there wasn't a grizzly bear lurking around. Wouldn't you?"

She sighs. "You're twisting my words around. That bear hasn't hurt anyone. He's just hungry."

"He should be hibernating."

"But he's not. Maybe he's special."

“Special? He’s special alright. You can’t tell anyone this story. I’ll get ripped apart.”

She bites back a grin and pretends to zip her mouth closed. “I made you something to eat.”

My brows wrinkle. “You said you didn’t have food. And what are you doing up on your ankle? You should be resting.”

“I live in the middle of nowhere. Of course, I have food. Not a lot, but some. And my ankle is fine. I still need to move.”

“Then why did you tell me you didn’t have enough food?”

She twists her long hair to the side and sits at the table she’s set. “If we’re stranded for days, I don’t have enough. You’re the one that ran outside like you were on fire.”

I stare down at the meal she’s made. Tomato soup, sandwiches, and she’s even got a coffee cake set on the counter. Now that I’ve warmed up, it’s hard to miss the savory sweet scent circulating in the small cabin.

Leaving my boots and coat at the door, I settle at the table with a huff. “What’s going on?”

She dips her sandwich into the soup and takes a bite. “What do you mean?”

I laugh under my breath. “Protecting this bear isn’t going to work for long. My brothers don’t have a thing for you. They won’t be as forgiving.”

“You have a thing for me?”

Fuck. That came out without trying. I drag in a deep breath and take a big bite of food, keeping my mouth full as long as possible. The less time I have to speak, the better.

Bailey smiles. “When did that happen?”

I shake my head. “I misspoke. I’m here to protect you from the elements and yourself. So... I have a thing *with* you. *With* you.”

Her grin grows wider. “No. You said you had a thing *for* me. Which also explains why you ran out this morning.”

“I ran out because you had some creeper dream about losing your virginity and I was the star.”

“Oh, *you* were the star?” She smiles and looks away. “I think maybe *I* was. It was me doing all the sucking and riding so...”

“Dirty words for a sober girl. You put whiskey in that soup?”

She shakes her head. “Nah, just figure I may as well shoot straight. We’re stuck here, you admitted you have a thing for me, and I’m still desperate to lose this v-card I’ve been carrying around. So...” Her lips purse.

This isn’t happening.

I look down at the food on the table and stuff another bite in. I’m not even sure what it tastes like as every drop of consciousness I have has gone to my cock. “You’re playing with fire, princess.”

“Am I? What happens when I play with fire?”

My cock is uncomfortably hard, and it’s taking every ounce of energy I have not to tie her up and make her mine. “Keep going, you’ll find out.”

She takes a long sip of water and stares toward me. “I want you to tell me. Every detail.” Her back is straight in the chair and her nipples are hard and poking.

Fuck!

I swallow hard and sip down a gulp of water before glancing back toward her. “You’re sure you want to know?”

Her lips part as she nods.

“What if it’s rough? I don’t want to scare you.”

“I think I’d like it rough. I fantasize about it that way.” Her tone is breathy, and she resituates in the hard wooden chair as though she’s uncomfortably aching for release.

“Well, I had a dream last night too.”

“What about?”

“You were naked in front of me. Those big, heavy tits hanging for me to suck. Your pretty pussy out for me to touch.” I hang onto the words and watch her expression unfold. She’s excited. She likes the dirty talk.

“What happened next?”

“I told you to get on your knees for me.”

“Did I?”

I nod. “You did. You put your soft lips on my cock, and you sucked me dry while I held all that pretty hair back.”

“You came in my mouth?”

I nod. “And then you let it drain off your tongue and spill all over your pretty little body.”

Her cheeks are pink and the tiniest of sighs releases. “Then what?”

“I needed more. So, I stood you up and I tied those little wrists to the corner of the bed, and I massaged your clit with my lips.”

She sighs, louder this time, rubbing her hips in small inadvertent circles I’m not sure she even realizes she’s making. “I like that!”

“Yeah? You’d like it if I ate your little pussy?”

She nods. “I would.”

This is dangerous. I’m so fucking hard and desperate for her that I’m going to make bad decisions. There’s no doubt about it. How can I come back from this? Why did I start this? Whatever made me think rattling off fantasies would be a good idea?

“What happens next?” Her tone is still breathless, her lips wet and parted.

“Well, I eat that little pussy until you’re wet and slippery. Then I put you on your back at the edge of the bed

and I slide into your warm little center, wrap my hand around your throat, and fuck you hard until you're coming on my cock like a good little girl."

She stares at me unblinking, and I wonder if I've gone too far. A lump moves down her throat. "I need to come, Rowan."

I blow out a heavy breath and force myself to think of the obstacles, but none of them work. First and foremost, her father. Then the age. Then the reality that I have to leave for Alaska when this bear is caught. "What if I don't want you for one night?"

"What do you mean? We have however long the storm keeps us in."

"Maybe that's not enough."

"What? You can't stand me. We're complete opposites. Don't make this more than it has to be."

"Look at me." I stand from the table and move toward her, reaching for her hand until she's standing with me, staring up as though she might explode if I don't touch her.

"What?"

I swallow hard and lean into her lips, brushing mine against hers gently before pulling away again. "You're not the kind of girl someone fucks and walks away from. You're different."

She sighs. "I'm tired of that. I want you to fuck me hard. And then, I want you to walk away and keep me in the back of your head like some tawdry little memory you had with the virgin in the mountains."

I shrug. "I can't do that. I want to know you better. I want to—"

A heavy thud hits the door and we both glance toward it. No one should be here. There's no unnecessary travel, and even if folks could, they wouldn't be getting far with the amount of snow on the ground.

Bailey looks toward me. “I think that’s my father. Why would my father be here?”

My chest tightens and I let out a slow, labored breath, unsure of what to say. I have no fucking clue, but I think today is about to get even more awkward.

Chapter Five

Bailey

My father sits on the couch with one leg crossed over the other. The black flannel he wears everywhere is wrinkled up on his chest and the t-shirt beneath it is stained with what I'm guessing is breakfast syrup. My father loves his pancakes. He and Rowan shoot comments back and forth like they're old friends.

I guess they are.

What the hell? Why does losing your virginity have to be so complicated? I thought women were supposed to have some kind of power over men. Maybe I don't have it. Maybe I'm the one woman on Earth that men *can* resist. Makes sense considering I've been throwing myself at Rowan for two days now and I've gotten nowhere.

Maybe it's good my father showed up. I need a solid dose of reality.

"Sorry to show up unannounced like this, cupcake. Did Rowan tell you about the snowmobile trouble I was having?"

I glance toward Rowan and then toward my father. "No. What happened?"

"The motor went out again on my way up here. Barry gave me a ride on his sled and your cabin was closer than mine. So, I thought I'd drop by and keep you guys company. It would have been an hour back and forth for Barry to take me back to my house."

"Yeah... of course. You're always welcome. Any word on when the roads will be cleared?"

"Not until the weekend by the sounds. Though, I know they called a couple of plows in from the city to help out." My father rubs his hands together in an attempt to heat them up. "How are you two doing? Funny how you ran into each other. Sorry I didn't mention knowing Rowan sooner. You two

could've hooked up beforehand and made a plan to get this bear." Dad looks toward Rowan. "My girl here is the best game warden this mountain has ever seen."

Rowan grins and glances toward me. "That's what I hear." I'm thankful he doesn't rip into me again. "The people in town aren't our biggest fans, but hopefully we'll be in and out of here quickly."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Dad brushes his hand down over his beard. "Usually, these families are real welcoming. I think a few of your brothers got off on the wrong foot with some farmers regarding land access. Folks are real sensitive about that in these parts, but you know how it goes."

Rowan nods. "Yeah. I think it was a mistake on their part. They've tried apologizing but people are pissed."

"Folks will come around. Give it time. When you catch that bear, they'll have a parade for you. He was seen downtown last night trying to get into the bakery. Mrs. Robinson made some '*Wanted*' posters with the bear's picture. Everyone loves Mrs. Robinson, and the posters are funny, but all this action is scaring folks. You guys will be heroes soon enough."

Rowan drags in a heavy breath and lets it out slowly, his gaze on mine. We both know what he's thinking. I messed up his chance to take down the bear and the whole town giving him hero status for it. Well, the joke is on him because I plan on stopping everyone.

I stare out the window, watching the early afternoon light fade as the snow begins to dissipate. My father and Rowan are talking about truck engines. Dad thinks Ford is the best, Rowan likes his Chevy. Is this what it's like having a boyfriend? Jake and I dated for months, and he couldn't bother himself with my family. Not even once. Granted, Rowan's situation is a little different and I'm clearly losing my mind thinking otherwise.

"I think I'm going to take a nap. My ankle is aching."

“Probably because you were up making that lunch. You should’ve been resting.” Rowan stares at me with intensity as though I’ve disobeyed him or something.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, well, that’s me. Never following orders.” I lean into my father and kiss his forehead, resisting the urge to do the same to Rowan.

Why is it so hard to resist? Why does it make me happy that he cares? I’m not supposed to be catching feelings for him. I’m supposed to be using him.

“No, cupcake. I’ll help you into the bed.” My father stands and flashes of the unmade bed come to mind. The sheets are wrinkled like there were two bodies lying on the mattress... because there was. Dad can’t see that.

“No! I’m fine.” I push my father away. “Really, I—”

“I’ll help you.” Rowan stands from the couch and hooks into my arm. I should stop him too, if not for the sake of my heart, at least for show. Why would I want Rowan helping me over my father? It won’t make sense to him, and if it does, he’ll overthink it all and assume Rowan and I are being inappropriate.

These are the thoughts that go through my head as Rowan walks me to the bedroom, his giant arm hooked with mine, his weight holding me up. I don’t need this much help. I hobbled around all morning on my own, and in reality, I’m only leaving the living room because I need to detach from whatever I’m feeling. Now here I am, feeling it more. I have his scent all over me and my clit is throbbing again.

“You need a replay of last night, or you got this?” Rowan stares down at me as I settle onto the bed. His gaze is narrowed and there’s a smirk on his face.

I drag in a deep breath. “You wouldn’t dare give me a replay with my father in the next room.”

He leans in and whispers low in my ear, “Dream of me licking that little pussy clean, princess.” His tone is deep and warm, leaving a chill on my spine that tingles down between

my legs. Good Lord, I need help. All kinds of help. The kind that gives me reprieve and saves me from myself.

Can I get that in a package deal somewhere?

“You’re evil,” I say, sliding under the covers.

He grabs a pillow and props my ankle up. “Rest. I’ve got things with your dad for a while.” The scent of pine fills my nose as he leans in and kisses my forehead. His beard is scratchy, and his breath is warm. “See... this could work out fine. Your dad would get used to this and I could too.”

“I thought we weren’t complicating this.”

“You aren’t complicating this. I am.”

“Why?”

He shrugs and sits on the edge of the bed, his thick fingers moving through my hair. I love it, but the door is wide open, and the cabin is small. A few steps to the left and we’ll be explaining a lot more than why we slept together last night. “I’m complicating this because I—”

“Everything okay in here?” Dad stands in the doorway staring down at Rowan whose hand is still on my face.

“What’s going on?”

Rowan holds his gaze on mine then stands from the bed, towering over my tall father and everything else in the room for that matter.

I miss his weight immediately. I should tell my father that I like him, but what good would that do? Rowan is going back to Alaska soon. Driving a wedge between my father and his friend for the sake of a *feeling* doesn’t seem right.

“I was... I have a headache,” I manage.

My father’s thick brows narrow, and he looks toward Rowan as though he’s questioning the validity of my statement.

Rowan sighs and glances toward me before stepping past my father and into the hallway. “I’m going to get some fresh air.”

Dad looks down at me, his gaze like a heavy weight.
“Was he being weird with you?”

I shake my head and watch Rowan move down the hall and out of vision. “No. He’s been so helpful.”

Dad doesn’t look satisfied with my answer, and thanks to Rowan’s weird exit, I don’t wonder why.

What is he thinking, and why do I wish he would come back and lay next to me?

Chapter Six

Rowan

There's a pair of snowshoes in my truck that I'm tempted to strap on and use. I could get down the mountain by morning. I'd bet the inn has some space for me. Then again, I could make a little igloo house in the forest and call it a night. At this point, I think I'd have better luck with a menacing grizzly than I would in that cabin. I've never been good at hiding my emotions. That's part of why I choose not to have many.

What do I do with them once I feel them? What's the point? Whatever I feel only muddles things, especially in this situation.

I lean back the seat in my truck and crank up the music before closing my eyes. I'm hoping to drown out my feelings but the song that's playing only makes it worse. I click the radio off and sit in silence.

People say snow doesn't have a sound, but it does. Even light snow like this has a sound. It's muffled and peaceful, like you're wearing an old set of headphones that hush the world with soft static.

I try to stay in the present. The way the light filters in through the trees, the way the truck smells, the way my jeans feel against my palms. Instead, all of those things only remind me of Bailey. The light is coming in through her window, I should've twisted the shades. The way the truck still smells like her, cinnamon and vanilla. My jeans and the way her small hands felt against my leg on the ride home yesterday.

Fuck!

I suck in a deep breath and blow it out slowly. I'd have told her father right then and there that I had feelings for her. We could've cleared this whole thing up and been free to move forward however we choose. But that's not what she wants, and I have to respect that. I have to respect that, in

spite of the sickness I feel about anyone else taking her virginity.

No one would be careful with her like I would. They wouldn't respect her. They wouldn't hold her afterward. They wouldn't appreciate the gift they were getting. They wouldn't feel for her like I feel.

What the hell is wrong with me?

When I realize that dozing off isn't going to do the trick, I pull out my phone and call my father to check in on the guys. He answers on the first ring. "Yes..."

"Checking in."

"Still snowing here, but the CB radio says there's a plow coming up your side of the mountain. You should be able to leave today. How are things with the game warden?"

"We're making do. Her father is here now, so I'll head out when the plow comes by." My chest tightens at the thought of leaving Bailey under anyone's care but my own.

"I'll have Hudson meet you down on Main Street with the sled. It's only a thirty-minute ride from there. You can leave your truck in the back lot at the diner."

I grunt out some reply of approval as the rumble of a plow echoes in the distance. "I hear it now. I'll be out of here in the next twenty minutes. Call you when I'm on Main."

"Copy that. Stay safe." He hangs up the line and I stare out at the road as the plow pushes through heavy piles of snow. It's slow moving and there's now a hard, heavy mountain of ice at the end of the driveway I should've anticipated. I would've had my heart not been lingering on how to say goodbye to Bailey.

I'll see her again. God knows she'll do whatever she needs to keep this bear safe, but there won't be another moment like this. A moment where we're so close to being real. A moment where our hearts are in the same place, and fate has pushed us together.

The heat from the truck has my eyes feeling heavy, and while I know I need to get out and shovel the end of the driveway, I close my eyes and lean against the window instead. A few minutes of shut eye will do me good.

What feels like a minute later, there's a heavy knock at the truck window followed by two lighter ones.

My eyes flick open quickly and I jump forward at attention. For a second, I'm not sure where I am or how I got there. It's dark outside and I'm in a snowbank. No, I'm hunting.

I turn toward my window and see Bailey's face. She's shivering, wearing only a long sleeve t-shirt and boots.

I'm at Bailey's. I'm still at Bailey's. What the fuck is she doing in the cold like this?

I open the truck door and help her inside, sliding over so she can jump in. "What the hell are you doing, girl? You shouldn't be out here with that ankle. You'll slip again."

She chuckles under her breath, but there's a serious look on her face. "My dad's asleep. I thought you left me."

"I must have fallen asleep out here."

"And he didn't come check on you?"

I shake my head. "Nah. That's not weird, though. Probably thought I needed some space. He say anything to you?"

She shakes her head. "No, but the way you stormed out, I figured he would've. What was that about?"

"Nothing. Didn't mean anything by it. How was your nap?"

She bites her bottom lip and looks away as though she's annoyed. "Lonely."

"Your dreams didn't keep you company?" My arm stretches out behind her as she looks toward me.

“No. I only had one dream.”

“What was that?”

“I dreamt that the snow melted, and you left.”

“Where’d I go?”

She shrugs. “Don’t know. I woke up sad, didn’t see you, and I panicked.”

My hand cups her face, my thumb scrubbing against her cheek. “You’re okay. I’m right here. You have your dad, too. He said you don’t like being alone.”

“It’s not about that, though.” She slides closer toward me. “I didn’t want to be without *you*.” Her gaze meets mine. “You’re bossy, you think you know everything, and you don’t listen to anyone, but you’re also sweet, kind, and you take care of me.” A tear rolls down her face. “When you said you had feelings for me, I lied. I have feelings for you, too. When I sobered up, I remembered those adventures we’d go on when my family came out to visit you and your brothers. Do you remember when you showed me how to snowshoe?”

My heart squeezes and I pull her closer. “Yeah. That was ages ago. You were young then.”

She nods. “Yeah. So, when I think about the things we did together when I was young, like you showing me how to use a compass or making me hot cocoa, I feel really weird about how much I like you now. It scares the hell out of me.”

I’ve never felt more disgusting in my life. “It scares me, too. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Me either, but it did. So, now what?”

“We figure things out, if you want to. If not, I understand.”

She leans in slowly, and I press against her lips, running my fingers through her hair as she pushes in closer.

My cock is hard, and I’ve needed relief for over a day now, but I’m not pressing anything. Especially not with her

father twenty feet away. Instead, I land my lips all over her body. On her neck, her collarbone, and on the lobe of her ear.

She kisses me back, moaning as she moves. “Why am I so desperate for you?”

I growl against her ear and drag in the vanilla scent on her skin. “It’s unbearable for me, too. We should stop. My cock is already hard, and I don’t know if I can hold back this time.”

She climbs onto my lap and tucks her sore ankle between my thigh and the door. The truck is still rumbling, and the heat that was once comforting is now too much. “Then don’t hold back. Unzip your jeans and let me sit on your cock.”

“Here? No! The first time we have sex won’t be in my truck.”

“Why not?” There’s a whine in her voice that I want to take away. “I don’t care where we are. I just want to feel you.”

I’ve held the animal in me back for over a day now, and I’m pretty proud of that considering how badly I want her, but the last bar on the cage is snapping and I’m about to lose it. “I want to feel you too, princess, but not here. Come on. Climb down.”

She grinds her hips against my lap and leans into my neck, kissing me, scraping her teeth against my skin.

Fuck! That was the last straw.

I growl and tear at her shirt, pulling her tits out to touch, kiss, suck. My brain has gone to static, and we could be anywhere. The windows are tinted so no one can see inside. If this is what she wants, I’ll gladly give it to her.

Scraping my teeth over her hard nipples, I let out a growl and tuck my hand between her legs, palming over her soaking panties before pulling them to the side. I slide my finger inside of her and watch her lips as they part.

“That feels so good. Go harder.”

“You’re so tight, princess. You’re so fucking tight.”

She leans into me, pressing her forehead against mine as she moans and thrusts against my hand.

Fucking hell! I need some relief. “You ready to listen to directions?”

She looks me in the eyes and sighs with an ache I’m desperate to cure. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

“We don’t have a condom. You okay with that, too? I’m clean.”

“I don’t care! Please... hurry!” she pants.

“Good girl. Slide back a little and unzip my jeans.”

She bites back a smile and does as I ask, pulling my cock out with her small hand wrapped around me.

My body stills in torment as she slides to the side and leans onto my cock, wrapping her pretty lips around my girth and sliding down slowly. I dig my hands into her hair and move her head gently as she sucks and swirls her tongue in a sloppy mess all over my cock. I can tell she’s never done this before but somehow that makes it better. She’s unpredictable and moves in erratic patterns that push me to the edge.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” I growl. “Lean back, princess. I have to taste you.”

“No. I’m not done here yet.”

“Yeah, well, any more of that and I’ll lose it. When I do, I want to be inside of you.”

The anticipation to feel her tight core is overwhelming, but we’re already rushing things in the truck. I can’t skip tasting her.

She leans back and props her sore ankle on my back as I lift her hips and flick my tongue against her swollen clit. “You taste so fucking good, princess.”

Her hips grind upward against my beard and I’m thankful for her movements because, while this truck is big, I’m big too and moving around freely isn’t as easy. That said, I don’t want this to end. I want her pretty little pussy

scrubbing against my face forever. I want her marking me like a fucking tree until it's clear we belong to each other.

Her thighs tense. "Oh my god. I think I'm going to come!"

"Do it. Be a good little girl and come on my face." I growl into her pussy and scrape my teeth against her clit as she works my beard.

She's breathing heavily, dragging in air as though there's a shortage. "Oh God, Rowan. Fuck..." The pitch of her tone gets higher and higher, until all at once she screams out, squirting her sweet juices all over me.

My cock aches with a pain that's nearly unbearable as she works her way down off the ledge, moving her tired, twitching pussy away from me as I lick up the come she's just gifted me with.

Reaching up, I pinch her nipple and stare toward her as she leans back against the opposite door of the truck. "How was it?"

Her cheeks are pink and she's still panting. "You're really good at that."

"You moved your body the way you need to move it. I just enjoyed myself."

She looks away quickly then back again. "Is it normal that I'm still aching for you to fill me up?"

I growl low and pull her closer. I'm not usually a guy who can come with my jeans on, all bunched up in a truck, though, I've never really tried. "Climb up here. I want you looking at me when we do this. Your eyes stay on mine, understood?"

She swallows hard and climbs into place. "I'm scared."

"We'll go slow. You're sure you want to, right?"

Her brows raise. "Oh, I'm sure I want to, but your cock is huge. Maybe I should've started out on something smaller."

"I like the ego boost, but it's not that big."

She grips my dick with her hand. “I can’t even get my hands around it. How’s that fitting inside of me?”

“We’ll go slow. Really slow.” I cup her face in my hand and kiss her lips gently as she edges my tip at her silky entrance. As her soft mound parts, taking me in, cramped up or not, I’m going to come in her little pussy.

Chapter Seven

Bailey

Rowan is big everywhere. His hands, his shoulders, his arms, his thighs, his waist. The man is gargantuan. His cock is no exception. Given the fact that I've been a church mouse until now, I've taken in a fair amount of porn to familiarize myself with actions and moves that might be helpful later.

That said, I've never seen a dick this big.

I slide onto Rowan, stretching myself wide until he's buried deep. I'm going slow like he said, but it still pinches and burns as I work myself down.

His eyes close and flicker open again. "Good girl. Take that cock, princess."

God, I love the way he talks to me.

"Take a deep breath." His voice is low and shaking like I'm doing things to him that he can't control. I never thought about this aspect of sex. For so long, getting rid of my virginity was about the action. But here, on top of this goliath of a man, I can't help but feel so much more than his cock spreading me wide. He's attentive and caring, and there's more than physical attraction moving between us.

Suddenly, I want to memorize the look on his face as he feels me for the first time. I want to learn the feel of his rough hands as they glide across my chest and onto my neck. I want to remember the way his voice sounds as he growls low in my ear.

"Bounce for me, princess. Let me see those nipples move."

His hand is on my throat and mine is hooked on the back of his neck as I bounce up and down, back and forth, moaning as the intensity of the friction overwhelms both of us.

"I need to come," he groans low. "Fuck! Tell me you want my come. Tell me you need it. Tell me you're mine."

The front porch light flicks on, and though I know it's my father and that should stop us both in our tracks, it doesn't. The windows are tinted. He can't see inside. At least that's what I tell myself as I continue to work Rowan's cock.

"I'm yours. Come for me, baby. I need you. I need you to come inside of me." I bounce harder and faster, desperate for everything he has.

"Good girl," he growls out. And within seconds, he's howling out an orgasm as heat fills my pussy with a flood of excitement.

I should stop bouncing. My father is crunching through the snow. I hear him... which makes me wonder if he could hear us.

"Okay, princess. Hop down. Your dad is right there." Rowan's hand is on my back, and he's leaned against my shoulder, exhausted as he talks.

I want to stop. I really do. "I'm going to come again. I need to come again."

Rowan lifts his head and looks up at me. "Fuck. Don't stop then. Get it. Come on my cock like a good girl. Like a dirty, little, good girl."

The tone of his voice and the desperation between my legs create an energy that takes me over the top, and almost instantly, a shattering orgasm is shooting through me, leaving me convulsing on Rowan's lap.

Nothing has ever felt so right.

At this point, my father is banging on the truck window, and I'm suddenly questioning how tinted the windows actually are.

I glance toward Rowan. "What did we do?"

His eyes are wide. "It'll be fine. No one can see through these windows. Button up and we'll tell him what's going on."

"You're going to tell him we were fucking?"

He laughs and buttons up his jeans as I slide off of him. “No. I’ll tell him we were talking about how to tell him what we feel. I mean, that is how this started... sort of.”

I nod and lean onto his lips, kissing him gently.

“You felt so amazing, princess. I’m sorry this is how your first time ends.”

“Don’t be sorry, ever. I wanted this. I’m glad we did it.”

His big hand sweeps over my forehead and onto my cheek. “We’ll tell your dad what’s up, and I’ll hold you all night long. Okay?”

I love how optimistic Rowan is about this. I don’t share the same positive energy. My father is a good man, but dating someone so much older isn’t going to go over well. The fact that the guy happens to be his friend is going to add gasoline to his reaction.

Rowan kisses my forehead again, and I slide down off him as he opens the passenger side door and climbs out.

There’s silence and then there’s more. A lot more.

I push the engine off on the truck and climb down into the snow, careful of my ankle as I move. “Dad! Stop!”

He turns back toward me. “No! I trusted this asshole! I let him take care of my daughter! He manipulated you!”

Being the only child, my father has taken care of me like a wounded baby bird who needs twenty-four-hour care. He’s convinced I can’t be alone, and he treats me as such. I should’ve spoken up sooner, but I knew I gave him purpose. And I guess, I was looking out for him too.

“Dad,” I shift toward him slowly, holding onto the edge of the truck as I move, “listen to me. Rowan didn’t manipulate me. If anything, I manipulated him.” I laugh under my breath as I think back on the moves I put on him last night at the bar. “I like him. He’s a good guy and he makes me feel safe.”

“So safe he’s fucking you in the truck with your father ten feet away?” Dad takes off his hat and throws it on the ground. This is escalating quickly.

Okay... so he heard us. That's humiliating.

Note to self: Don't do that again.

Rowan steps forward. "I don't know what to say, man. This wasn't planned, but I don't know how to stop it now. She's everything I—"

"She's twenty-four!" my father screams as a growl bubbles up his throat.

"I know." Rowan reaches out for my hand, steadying me in the snow. "It's weird, and it's probably fucked up as hell, but I can't stop it. I don't want to. She's perfect and I need her."

My father claps his hands together and looks away blowing heavy fog with his breath in the freezing night. "So that's it? You two are just doing what you're doing and fuck everything else? What happens when he goes back to Alaska?"

I hadn't thought about that in a while. I was going with the flow. "I don't know. We're still figuring out all the details, but I love you, Daddy. I'm falling in love with Rowan, and I need to see where that goes."

My father's eyes widen, and his cheeks turn dark red.

Rowan turns me toward him. "I'm falling in love with you too, princess." He kisses my forehead and pulls me against the warmth of his chest where everything is safe, and the world is perfect.

"Where's the keys to your car?" Dad says as he stares at me. "I need to get out of here."

"Wait! You're angry. Let's talk this over." I reach out for him, but he bounces up the porch and into the house, coming out with my keys before I can grab him.

"No. I'm not any good to talk to right now. I'll take your car. You have Rowan here if you need anything. We can talk later."

"Please. Don't go like this. We can figure things out right now," Rowan adds, squeezing me tighter in support.

“There’s nothing to figure out.” Dad opens my car door and looks back toward us. “You two feel how you feel and I’m going to have to get used to it. That said, it’s going to take time. And right now, I don’t want to look at the two of you together, so... I’m going home.” He climbs down into my car. It’s weird to see my dad in a car so small. Usually, he’s in the pickup truck the police station gave him.

“It’s going to be okay,” Rowan whispers in my ear as Dad drives away. “He’s a good man. He’ll come to his senses.”

I turn back toward Rowan. “Will he? He had a point about Alaska. You have to go back eventually.”

“I do? What if we stayed here together? We could put that addition on you were talking about and expand the ranch. I mean, I could hunt, fish, and build things just as easily here as I can up North.”

Heat swells within me at the thought of what the future for us could be. A house full of kids, a little ranch of our own, holidays with laughter and love. “What about your brothers?”

“We’d go back to visit. They’d come here. We’ll make it work.”

Tears streak down my face. “Really? You’d come all the way here for me?”

“Easily.” He leans down and kisses my lips gently before lifting me from the ground. “Now let’s get you inside and rest that ankle. I have more trouble I need you rested for later.”

I lean my head against his shoulder and fall into his arms like I never have with anyone. My dad will come to his senses, and we’ll iron things out. It’s what we do. But right now, I’m going to enjoy every second of falling in love because love with this giant, feels really damn good.

Epilogue

Bailey

Two Weeks Later

“Okay, these Alaskan dudes need to go home.” My best friend Ruby calls as I stare down at the plans Rowan drew up to expand the cabin. He’s spent the last week and a half putting them together and I love every single thing about them. Three additional bedrooms, a second bathroom, and an expansion to the living room and the kitchen. It’s plenty of space for us to grow into. “I get that you married one and you’re all in love and stuff, but the rest of them are assholes.”

“How so?”

“Well, the big one with the gray beard and the flannel came down to the library yesterday demanding maps of the mountain.” She clears her throat. “Demanding!”

“Did you have any?”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point. I don’t owe him anything!”

“Maybe he was just asking.”

“Okay... so you’re impossible to talk to now.”

“Sorry. I know they suck.”

She laughs. “You don’t have to fake it. I like Rowan. He’s a good guy. I’m sure they all are deep, deep, deep, deep down, but maybe they could show it. Did you hear about Hudson getting into a fight at the bar last night? Apparently, he got into it with Mr. Keller about trespassing. That’s why they want the maps.” She gasps. “Oh, not only the maps, but he wants a guide to take him out there and Mrs. Robinson suggested me, because apparently, I camp all the time?” Her tone is angsty. “Haven’t camped in years, and when I go, I stay at the park. I’m not... *no!* I’m just not.”

“I’ll talk to Rowan and see what he knows. I’ll call you later.”

“No, don’t do that. It’ll sound like I’m complaining. I’m not complaining, really. I know the bear needs to go and I’m thankful they’re here. I just... oh, your dad. He stopped me at the market yesterday to show off pictures of the wedding like I wasn’t there. Seems like he’s done a full three sixty.”

Ruby’s all over the place, all the time. I love it. It’s what makes her, her.

“Yeah, he’s feeling better... I think. He has his moments still, but he’s been really supportive for the most part. Why don’t I invite Hudson to dinner tonight? You can come too, and we’ll smooth things over and get you guys on the right track.”

She clears her throat. “Umm... nope. I think I’m good. There’s nothing to smooth over. Do you know the weird thing is, I think he’s following me.”

“What? Maybe you could’ve led with that?”

“Yeah, well, I saw his truck outside my house the other day and again at the diner.”

“Let me talk to Rowan, or at least let me tell my dad. If he’s following you, someone should stop him.”

“It’s fine. I’m probably crazy. Really, I don’t even know why I said anything. Shit! The delivery guy just got here. I have to intake these books. Call me later. Love you!”

“Love you, too. Text me immediately if he comes around again.”

She agrees and we disconnect the line.

“Everything okay?” Rowan meets me at the table.

“Yeah, I think so. What do you think about your brother, Hudson?”

Rowan’s brows wrinkle. “Why?”

“Don’t say anything but I think he might be following Ruby.”

“Really? Doesn’t surprise me. The dude is a little unhinged and incredibly obsessive. If he gets fixed on something, there’s no telling what lengths he’ll go to. He’s not dangerous, but of course I’ll talk to him.”

I nod and tip up onto my toes for a kiss. “I like the house plans a lot, especially this little spot in the bedroom for a spa tub. How long do you think it’ll take to finish?”

He rubs his hand over my stomach. “I reckon we can have it all finished by the time our babies are on their way.”

“Babies? We’re having babies?”

Rowan nods. “I was hoping, if you’re up for it.”

I beam and stare up toward him like he hung the moon. “I’d love that.”

“Good.” He lifts me into his arms and carries me back toward the bedroom. “Let’s get started.”

For years, I dreamt about love and marriage. I fantasized about a life with a man who adored me and wanted the same things I did. Now that I have it, life is better than I could’ve imagined. All thanks to a few shots of Rugged Mountain whiskey.

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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.)

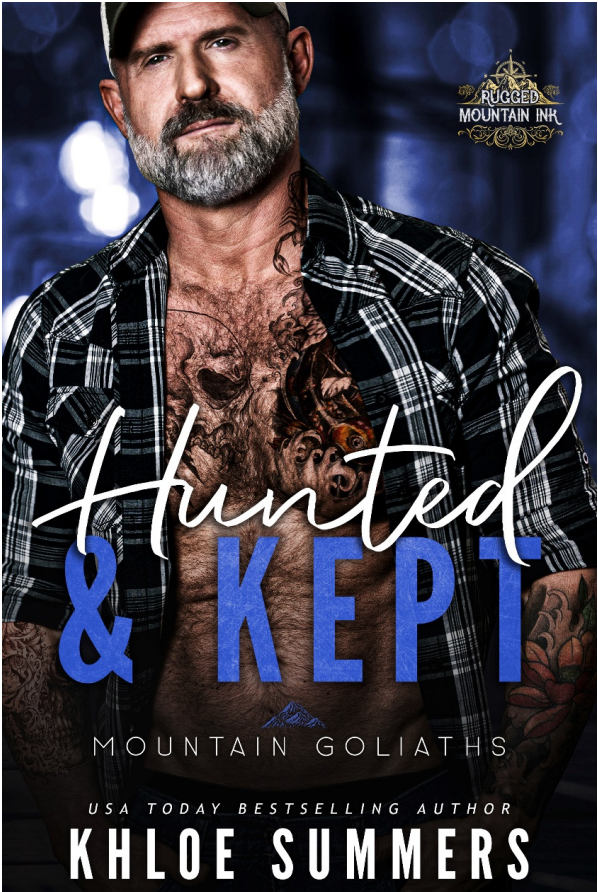
Before this life is over, Khloe would like to check everything off her sexy bucket list and visit South Africa to wrestle evil poachers into submission. (And maybe see some baby elephants.)

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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?*

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