

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is the central focus of the cover. She is wearing a blue top with a pink and white floral pattern and white polka dots. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera, with her hands near her hair. The background is dark.

Bookworm

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
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Bookworm

Rugged Mountain Ink

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Summer to Winter Publishing



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Chapter One

Ann

Just look at him. I can't keep myself from staring at the man in the window.

He's tall. Probably six and a half feet. Tall and inked. His tattoos strategically placed to tell a story of mystery and power. Plus, when he walks around the kitchen in his jeans after a long day, he does more than whet my appetite.

So, let's summarize. Tall, inked, mysterious, hot... and totally uninterested in me.

He *must* be my type.

Why do I do this to myself? This isn't some sticky-sweet romance novel. It's real life. The handsome rancher doesn't fall for his curvy caregiver. That's a trope. A trope that I'm not living in. In the *real world* trope, people like me don't end up with sexy men like Holt. People like me, do their job, then quietly disappear to their room at night to read books about love and romance they'll never have. It's reality. And as granny likes to say, *'The sooner I let reality in... the better.'*

She's an eloquent woman.

I check Earl one last time and splash some water on my face in the hall bathroom, then head toward the kitchen for a drink. Usually, I'm at the library part-time, but I've taken a break to help here. Granny says it's a personal favor to her. She knows Earl from her rodeo queen days. I didn't ask questions. She's had more romances than a library, and I'm sure the details would depress me.

"You're up late." Holt's deep voice knots in my stomach as he steps into the room. I've only been here for three nights, but I've tried to be out of his way by the time he comes in, so I haven't seen him much more than a few minutes here and there. "Everything okay?" He takes off his Stetson and hangs it on the hook by the door before kicking off his boots.

What is it about a big, giant of a hard-working man that gets me all hot and bothered? *I need help.*

“Sorry, I was just heading to my room. There’s a plate for you in the fridge. I wasn’t sure when you’d be in. I can get it for you if you want.”

“You’re not my maid. You’re here for Earl. You didn’t even have to fix me dinner. Thank you.” His voice is low and graveled, and his big hands pull the cellophane off the fried chicken I made an hour before.

“Sorry. It’s probably soggy now. I can fr—”

“You can sit down and keep me company.” He pops open the door to the microwave and slides the plate inside. “Dinner smells great. How was Earl today? If he’s a pain in the ass, just tell me. I’ll put him back in line.” His tone is gruffer than it was a moment ago and I wonder what kind of connection the two have. I know a lot of fathers and sons have strained relationships, but Earl is living here, so it can’t be that bad. Maybe they had an argument recently.

“He’s not a pain at all.” I run my fingers back through my hair, suddenly nervous, as Holt pulls the dining room chair out to sit. He’s a massive man, but here in the house with normal people utensils, tables and chairs, he looks even bigger. “He’s getting around great with his walker. If I were comparing, I’d say he’s doing much better than my Granny was after her hip replacement. She was down for weeks.”

Holt grunts and bites into the fried chicken with a groan. “Don’t give him too much credit. He’s a stubborn old man. Stubborn old men can make themselves do just about anything.”

There’s an awkward silence for a moment where I’m not sure if I should ask what happened between them, or see if he needs another beer, but he beats me to it. “Do you want a glass of wine? I’m sure you need it after dealing with him all day. I should probably double your pay.”

“I’m good on the wine.” I fumble with a piece of paper on the table, folding the corner into an accordion. “You two really

don't get along, huh?"

He takes another bite of chicken and follows it with a gulp of beer. "The man doesn't deserve to be here, let alone having a sweetheart like you taking care of him."

Sweetheart? I try not to take the compliment personally. He's comparing me to the father he hates. I'm sure anyone would be a sweetheart in his head.

"He's really been very kind to me. He even told me a few stories about you. Good ones." I look a glance toward Holt, then down at the paper again, unsure of how he's going to respond.

"Well, I reckon I'm going to have to get you outside for some fresh air tomorrow, cause you're starting to hear things. That man doesn't have a good story in him. I know that for a fact."

I smile. "He did, though. He said when you were young, you taught your horse to side pass."

Holt wipes his hand on a paper towel and chuckles. "Yeah. He tell you what a sissy I was after that? That man hated that I wanted to teach my horses everything, even soft movements. He thought I was dimming the family line of big, strong, mountain men." Holt's arms tense as he puts his beer down. "His way of managing anything was... break something down until it's obedient, run it into the ground, and then discard it when it's no longer useful." He clears his throat. "It was especially bad with the horses."

"I guess he left that part out," I say with a smile, "but I'd like to see all the things your horses can do, though. The only experience I have with horses is in books. I read this one novel that was this love story between two horses." I grip my chest. "It was the most beautiful thing. They were separated by neighboring farms for years and they were depressed and sad when they were apart, but when they were brought back together, it was like magic. They remembered each other."

He laughs. "I'm not sure what to address first. The fact that you live up here and you've never met a horse, or the fact that

you read a romance starring two horses.”

“Is it that pathetic?” I pinch my lips to the side and look down at the solid oak table that looks like it’s been worn over time.

“That’s an easy fix. I’ll take you riding tomorrow.”

I shake my head. “I’ll pet one. But riding, that sounds dangerous and I’m not big on taking unnecessary risks with my life.” I get the feeling he’s going to ignore my apprehension.

“What time does Earl get up in the morning?”

“Seven-thirty. I usually get him breakfast, help him wash up, then play cards with him while we watch you do chores.”

Holt laughs and crumples his napkin up on his empty plate. “You’re watching me do chores?”

I stand from the table and grab him a cupcake from the glass dome on the counter, then sit back at my chair, and watch as he stares toward me with a softness I haven’t seen in him yet.

“Did you make these while you were watching me, too?” He laughs.

My eyes stay on his and energy passes between us. “Something like that. Your dad says you’ve run the ranch on your own for almost a year now. Aren’t you tired?”

He bites into the chocolate-raspberry cupcake and closes his eyes like he’s savoring the taste. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so appreciated. “Tired is an understatement. More importantly... holy fuck. These are good. I’m starting to think I’m holding you back from some big chef career.”

“If following a recipe makes you a chef, I guess I should be going then. Seriously, though, how do you manage everything? You’re out there from sunrise until way after sundown.”

He crams the rest of the cake in his mouth and dark red crumbs drop down from his lips, into his beard, and over the

button up flannel he's wearing. *How is it that he's made wolfing a cupcake sexy?*

“Not trusting anyone helps.” He stands from the table and tosses his dishes in the sink. “Meet me out by the barn tomorrow after the old man goes down for his nap. I’ll show you around.” He steps closer and locks eyes with me. “And don’t do these dishes. I’ll get them in the morning.” He takes a pause, and I wonder if he’s seeing his gaze is melting me into the floor. “Dinner was incredible, but you don’t owe me a meal. You’re here for Earl.” He nods toward me and turns down the hall, disappearing into the dark, while I sit in the kitchen wondering what the hell just happened.

Chapter Two

Holt

I shouldn't be thinking about Ann for many reasons. First, she's at least twenty years younger than me. Going after younger women is my father's thing. Second, she's working here. Sure, my father hired her, but technically, it's me cutting the check for her service. Boss-employee relations aren't professional. I think there's a rule book about that somewhere. Third, I've got enough to deal with without throwing a taboo romance into the mix. So, leaving the kitchen as quickly as possible was in both our interests. I don't even know why I invited her to the barn. It's been so damn long since I've noticed a woman. Why do I have to notice this one?

The shower runs cold, and I reach for my towel on the rack behind the door, noticing my phone is flashing with a missed call.

Fucking hell. It's ten o'clock at night. This shit never ends. I could ignore it, but the call is from Waylon. He owns one of the biggest ranches on the mountain range and runs the rodeo in town. He's quickly become one of the biggest deals in the area and the go-to guy for all things ranch related. If I'm short on hay, he's got some to sell. If I need an extra hand for the day, he's got a cowboy that he doesn't mind sharing. Truthfully, I probably owe the man more beers than I have time left to buy him. At the very least, I guess that warrants a callback.

"Everything alright?" I let the towel fall to the closet floor and weed through my dresser for a pair of boxers as I talk.

"Not really." He's more somber sounding than usual.

The floors creak outside the door. I snap my boxers into place and peek into the hall, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ann from where I'm standing, but instead get a whiff of my father's terrible cologne. He must have gone to the kitchen. If he's getting around fine, I'm not sure why he thought he needed help. Probably so he could get a little eye candy with his recovery. *God, that man needs help.*

“Jake got bucked off Bruno during the rodeo tonight. He did some pretty bad damage to his neck. Doctor says he’s gonna need a few months of recovery time.”

“Okay...” I stand in the hallway beside my bedroom door, waiting for Earl to head back to his room. I don’t know why, but it’s good to know he’s in his bed before I go to sleep. Maybe it’s because I don’t want to trip on him as I work through the pitch-black house on my way to the barn in the morning. “How can I help with that?”

“Well,” Waylon’s voice rises an octave or two, “I was hopin’ you’d take over for him. At least until he’s healed up. There’s a good pay package if yo—”

“I’d love to help you, man,” I rub my hand against the back of my neck, trying to loosen the muscles that have bundled, “but I’ve got my hands full here. With the ranch and Earl, I’m barely keeping the training sessions straight. Two of these horses are supposed to go to the Baxter farm for their grandkids, and I’m not sure they’re ready. Besides, I’m an old man, Waylon. I fall off once and I’m done for.”

Cups clank against one another in the kitchen and water runs. The old man is getting himself a drink. Can he make any more noise? He’s going to wake up Ann, and the last thing that girl needs is no sleep after dealing with him all day.

“Think about it,” Waylon argues. “I’ll bump the pay up. Two grand a week until Jake’s back. Let me know by the end of the week.” The call ends and a plate crashes, followed by a series of curse words that remind me of a childhood Sunday morning. The kind where Earl had been up drinking all night and Mom was trying to get him sober enough to head to church, which only resulted in an argument. She deserved better.

“Is everything okay?” Ann questions as her bedroom door opens. “I thought I heard a noise.” She steps into the hall, wrapping a thin black robe around her waist tightly. The woman’s gorgeous. There’s no doubting it. Long, thick curls bounce on her shoulders and her plump lips part. She looks

toward me, scanning me up and down before her cheeks turn pink, and she looks away.

“Fuck. Sorry.” I’m still in my boxers. I tip back into the bedroom and grab a pair of sweatpants from the drawer. “I was getting out of the shower when I heard the noise, then I had a phone call, and—”

“No. It’s your home. You’re okay. I’m going to see if your dad needs help.”

I reach for her arm. “No, I’ve got it. You’re not on call twenty-four seven. He’s a handful and you need your rest.”

“Actually, I am. Your dad hired me for round-the-clock care.” She sets the paperback she’s carrying on the dresser inside her room, then rushes down the hall. Her voice is sharp as she sees him. “Earl, you’re bleeding!”

Bleeding. Of course, he’s bleeding.

I follow behind Ann and make my way into the kitchen, where she’s rinsing the old man’s hand off in the sink. “It’s just a small cut. A Band-Aid will do him fine.” I hate that she’s up taking care of him. She should be asleep, or resting, or reading, or doing whatever it was she was doing before she was interrupted by his idiocrasy.

When she has the Band-Aid in place, she bends over to pick shards of glass with me. Earl stays leaned against the back counter, his hands shaking. That’s new.

“I’ve got this,” I say, standing quick to grab the hand sweep in the pantry. “Why don’t you head back to bed? I can get him to his room.”

We’re kneeling together, eye to eye, our breath mingling like a late summer storm about to take hold of the farm. I need to get out of the same space, or my imagination is going to take over.

“Are you sure?” Her lips move softly, remaining gently parted.

I nod. “I want to talk to him for a few minutes, anyway.”

“Okay.” She stands from the floor and smiles gently toward me, then my father, squeezing his hand as she walks past. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I roll my eyes and finish sweeping the smallest of the shards. He wants that squeeze. He likes it. I need to have a talk with him and let him know she’s off limits.

Footsteps creak down the hall and the heavy wood door to Ann’s bedroom closes gently. I turn toward my father, pressing the pad to the trashcan to empty the glass from the dustpan. “What are you doing out here?”

“Being self-sufficient.” My father turns and reaches for another cup from the cupboard, lowering it to the counter before opening the fridge for the pitcher of orange juice. “I figured Ann needed her sleep and God knows I can’t ask you for anything.”

“Please. I’ve been dragging your dead weight around since I was a kid. You could’ve asked me for a drink.”

He successfully pours his orange juice and shrugs. “Well, I didn’t... so sue me.” He grabs his glass off the counter and carries it toward the hallway, without another word.

“Woah, woah, woah.” I circle to the front of him and stare down at my father. We live together, but it’s been at least a few weeks since we’ve had a real conversation. For the most part, I avoid dinner, and stay in the barn until early morning—by choice. This close, it’s startling how much he’s aged. His face is long and wrinkled, dyed by the sun, and the rim of his hair is silver where his hat used to sit. This man isn’t my father. He’s a version of the man that was supposed to be my father.

“What do you need?” he snaps, clearing his throat. “My shows are about to start.”

His shows? I remember how this man preached every time he saw me watching TV, laying into me with stories about how it would rot my brains, and then find a new chore that immediately needed to be done.

“What were you thinking hiring that girl?”

He narrows his thick brows. “I was thinking the first five women I’ve had all quit. This one seemed to have some stamina. What’s it to you?”

He’s playing coy, as usual, and it’s pissing me off.

“Ann is sweet. Don’t do anything stupid.”

He shakes his head and grins. “And what does that mean, son? Is that another dig at me for your mother? It wasn’t my fault she got sick.”

“It was one hundred percent because of you, but that’s beside the point. Ann is off limits. Do you hear me? No lingering looks, no ass grabs, no flirty comments. Leave her be.”

“You like her.” He grins wider, as though he’s just figured me out.

He hasn’t.

“No! She’s a young girl. Hell... how old is she? Twenty? I could be her—”

“Twenty-four. She’s a part-time librarian, and in school for teaching, I believe. You should talk to her, she’s a nice gi—”

“She’s here until you’re getting around better. Which, by the looks of things, seems to be any day now. So, I’m not sure there’s a need for us to talk.”

I don’t mention that I’m meeting her at the barn in the morning. He doesn’t need to know everything. Besides, he’ll blow it out of proportion.

“Right.” Dad smirks and walks slowly down the hallway. “Well, you should get some sleep, son. You’ve got a big day tomorrow with all the *chores* and all.” The way he says chores makes me wonder what he thinks I do out there all day.

If it were up to me, the man would be in a nursing home an hour away thinking about all the shit decisions he’s made in his life, but it’s not up to me. He took that choice away when he spent the rest of our damn money.

I swallow hard and head back into the bedroom, passing by Ann's door slowly. I'm not sure why. I'm only torturing myself. She's listening to a soft bluegrass instrumental, maybe twisting a single curl around her index finger while she imagines the romantic scenes playing out in her book. The thought of her only a wall a way sends a shock of electricity straight to my dick.

Fucking hell. I can't turn into the old man.

Chapter Three

Ann

The beds at Misty Oak Ranch are exceptionally comfortable. A firm mattress with thick, luxurious bedding, and the temperature in the house is set low, perfect for sleeping. So then, it makes no sense why I was up all night long twisting my brain in circles, wondering why Holt held eye contact with me so long in the kitchen.

Maybe he hates me. Maybe he hates having someone else around the house. Maybe that's why he stays out in the barn so late. Maybe *'tour of the ranch'* really means Holt is going to fire me or persuade me to leave. He did leave the kitchen exceptionally fast after he'd finished eating, then kicked me out last night after Earl fell.

I pour Earl another cup of coffee and fiddle with the sugar jar in the center of the table. It's an old, teal-stained mason jar that looks to be older than the house itself, but it's charming. I love old houses like this. Ever since Granny and I moved to Rugged Mountain, I've fantasized about owning an old farmhouse with chipping white paint and an American flag flying out front.

"What's bugging you this morning, dear?"

I stare at Earl. He has the same eyes as Holt. Brown with flecks of green. Though, Earl's eyes are surrounded by dark circles and the lines of a life well lived. He reminds me of Clint Eastwood. Older, but still attractive in his own right.

"Oh, nothing." I redirect my gaze toward him. "Can I get you another biscuit? You didn't eat much for breakfast."

He shakes his head. "You know, I've lived a lot of years. I probably have advice for you, whatever your dilemma." His tenacity reminds me of my granny. She's been known to plunk herself down in the kitchen with a pot of applesauce stewing on the stove behind her, a bushel of apples in front of her, and then demand to know all your secrets. There's no sugar coating to her. She's intense. I'm sure by modern standards,

people would say it's borderline mean, but everyone in the family opened up to her. And to her credit, she always has the best advice, no matter what your problem.

But Earl isn't my granny. He's Holt's father, and I'm working for him. I don't think he'd find pleasure in knowing I thought about his son all night long, tossing and turning to fantasies of his hands all over me.

Nope. That's weird.

"Thank you," I finally say, "but I'm fine. It was a busy night for you. I'm sure you're excited for your nap today."

"A little." He yawns and lifts his coffee cup to his lips. "When you get old like me, the caffeine stops working."

"I don't think you have to be old for that to happen," I say, standing from the oak table to help him from his chair. I know he doesn't need the help. He's getting around pretty well on his own for just having surgery five weeks ago, but still, I offer it. "I drink two cups in the morning and I'm still yawning all day. What does that mean?"

"It means you needed three cups." He laughs, and we make our way down the hall toward his bedroom, which is more like a little apartment. There's a sitting room inside, fitted with a couch, and a wall mounted TV. There's a separate bathroom and a bedroom just off that. In its heyday, I'd bet the house was the fanciest on this side of the mountain. "You should go out and see Holt if you're not napping. I'd bet he'll show you around the farm if you're interested."

"Oh! He invited me out there already. I thought I'd head on down after I settled you in."

Earl looks back at me and raises his thick brows in the air. "Well, I'm settled. Go down there and let him show you the ropes. The man is impatient." He glances out the window and down toward the red barn ranch that sits on the bottom of a hill. Holt is on the phone, pacing back and forth.

"He looks busy. Maybe I'll wait for a bit."

"No." Earl scoots himself into bed and lifts his good leg before slowly raising the other. "He will stay busy if you let

him. You're helping his mental health. Go say hello."

"We'll see," I say, pulling Earl's blanket up over him. "I'll be back in a few hours. You rest well, okay?"

"I'll rest better knowing you're down there getting him out of trouble." He grips my arm in his and looks up at me with a pleading gaze. "Holt is a good guy, but he's terrible at people. It would mean a lot to me if you could get him out of his head for a bit."

Wow. No pressure.

"I'll see what I can do." I smile kindly, then make my way out of the room before Earl can make any more demands. If anything, I feel like Holt needs to know that his dad truly does have good intentions with him, but it's not my place. It's also not my place to interrupt his call. Who knows what business he's working on? The man trains troubled horses that go to ranches all over the country. I'm sure whatever his phone call is about, it's more important than me.

Then again, he did invite me, and he has an idea when his dad takes his nap. Maybe he's just killing time until he sees me leave the house. I pull back the sheer white curtain in the kitchen and look out at Holt, still talking. He's standing right by the barn door, and he does keep looking up, as though he's expecting me. Maybe I should go outside.

I chew at the end of my thumb and pace back and forth in the kitchen, my heart thumping wildly against my rib cage.

I'm going to go, right? I should go. I'm going to go.

I grab my coat off the hook and check my hair in the mirror, ruffling it back, then to the side, then back again before opening the front door.

What's the worst that can happen? He says he's busy? I'm just doing what he's asked. I'm showing up on time. I'm punctual. That's a positive thing.

Stepping across the gravel driveway, I make my way toward the barn at the bottom of the hill. It's snowed the last few days and there's a heavy blanket of white on either side of the path, but I step where Holt had stepped earlier, avoiding as

much cold as possible. I have no idea how many acres this place is, but the land seemingly goes on for miles with stockade fences bordering different pastures and a crimson red barn sitting at the front of it all.

Holt's giant body leans against the open barn door. He waves when he sees me.

Thank God! My shoulders relax. He does want to see me. He's been waiting in the doorway the whole time.

"I'm hurrying," a female voice says from behind me.

My head snaps back and my stomach falls to the ground.

Oh God. Holt wasn't waving at me. He wasn't waiting for *me*. He was waiting for the gorgeous girl making her way toward him.

In fact, from this angle, I bet he hadn't even seen me coming.

"Hey." The woman's voice is soft and sweet. "You must be Ann. Earl has told me all about you."

My brows wrinkle unintentionally as I try to gather what's happening. I want to hit her with a *'really, cause I've heard nothing about you,'* but I choose the high road, and reach out my hand. "Great to meet you! I love caring for Earl. I was just heading down to see if Holt needed anything for lunch."

"Oh, I didn't realize a caregiver took care of everyone in the house." She flips her long hair back and smiles sweetly. I hate her.

"It's not a requirement. I'm just being polite." My words are curt and probably too short. I should think of something else to say. What if she's Holt's girlfriend? I don't want to make any more of an ass of myself than I already have.

Of course, he has a girlfriend. He's a massive, handsome rancher. Men like that don't last long around here.

"Dakota, this is Ann." Holt clears his throat. "Have you two had a chance to meet?"

I nod, and Dakota hands a folder of paperwork to Holt. “I won’t keep you long. I just wanted to hand this off to you. My uncle says he needs the final papers signed by the end of the week, if you’re interested.”

“I just got off the phone with him. He’s going for a hard sell.”

The pretty blonde nods and winks. “He knows how good you are. I’ll be back to pick up the paperwork on Friday. That is unless you don’t sign. But... we both know you’re going to sign.” She grins wide, showing off perfectly white teeth before heading back down the driveway.

It doesn’t seem like they’re dating. I guess that’s a relief. Though, if Holt is hanging around women this beautiful and not dating them, what are his standards like? I’m overthinking this.

“You ready for that tour?” His thumb is hooked into his belt loop, and he nods toward the interior of the barn as a horse whinnies. “They’ve been waiting all day to meet you.”

I step into the barn, my heart sandwiched somewhere between my throat and my stomach as Holt opens a stall and lets a black and white beauty out. I have no idea what kind of horse she is, but she’s gorgeous. She’s already wearing a saddle.

I look her up and down for any imperfections. She seems sturdy enough. Maybe this won’t be so bad. That is... until I see the ominous name above her stall.

“I’m not riding a horse named Lady Lightning.” I wave my hands back and forth dramatically, biting back the nervous grin that’s formed.

Holt laughs.

“You know, if I get thrown off, you’re going to be the one taking care of your dad.”

“Ah.” He grins. “Old Earl will have to take care of himself, or we’d end up duking it out like a couple a country boys fighting over a property line. Come on now. I’ll boost ya up.”

As much as my body wants to repel the gorgeous animal clomping and hawing in front of me, my heart wants Holt to boost me up even more.

I reach toward the horse and hold firm on the nose of the saddle like I've seen cowboys do on TV.

“Shit! You're a professional.” He grips my waist as I hook my toe into the stirrup. My entire body vibrates with excitement. His hands are big and warm, and I'm desperate for more.

God, I'm pathetic.

“Good girl,” he says, running his hand down over Lady Lightning. At first, I think he's talking to the horse. She's stayed still long enough to allow me to climb on. But when I see Holt's eyes on mine, I can't help but wonder if the praise was meant for me.

Chapter Four

Holt

Ann is a natural. Most folks pull too hard on the reins, but she holds them loose and lets Lightning do the work.

“You’re staring! Am I doing something wrong?”

“Quite the opposite,” I say, leading the way down into the open pasture. “I figure we’ll trot down there and have a snack by the river while the horses get a drink of water. Unless the cold is too much for ya?”

She shakes her head and glances toward me quickly before looking out at the pasture again. “I’m good. It does look like it’s going to snow again, though. I’m not sure how much more we can handle. I think the roads were just cleared from the last storm a few hours ago.”

“Isn’t that the truth? When it stays bad like this, you struggle to keep up. The second you finish checking all the batteries on the farm and making sure they’re all turning over, you start worrying about the snow that’s accumulating on the roof. There’s no shortage of work when the weather cooperates. When it doesn’t, mother nature makes sure you give her all you’ve got each day before you go to bed. The good thing is I have a couple of horses going out this week that have been a handful and that will free up some time. How’s Dad doing this morning?”

“*Dad?* You didn’t call him old man, or Earl. Last night must have been the bonding conversation you both needed.”

“It wasn’t. I don’t know how you stand him.”

“He’s kind. He talked about you again this morning, actually. I think he wanted me to come out and keep you company. He worries about you working all these long hours.”

“Well, he had ten people working the ranch with him. I take care of everything myself.” I tilt my head back and forth. “Granted, I occasionally get a cowboy or two from up at the

Waylon Family Ranch. Have you been up there? The place is insane.”

She shakes her head. “I hear a lot of folks talking about it now that the rodeo is in town, but I’ve never been up there.”

“I’ll have to take you over there one day. It’s massive, just under two thousand acres. If you appreciate open land, you can’t miss some of the views he has.”

“You’ve got some pretty great views right here. Have you been out at this ranch your whole life?”

I nod. “Born and raised. Rode the rodeo whenever it came to town. Waylon asked if I’d be interested in riding again. I guess I’d be filling in for a guy who’s out with an injury. That’s why Dakota stopped by. She brought all the disclaimers to sign.”

“That sounds dangerous. My granny was rodeo queen, two years running back in the fifties. She still talks about all the injuries people had riding.”

I reach out for Ann and run my hand down over her curved frame as she swings her long leg over Lightning and hops to the ground. “Dad got himself into some heavy debt back when he was running the ranch. I’ve been struggling to keep things afloat since I took over. Waylon’s offering to pay me top dollar to ride for him. Enough that I could pay off the rest of the debt in three months of riding. If it weren’t for this old body, I’d jump right back up there. But damn,” I laugh, “I’m old. My body doesn’t recover the same.”

We crunch in the snow toward the edge of the river where there’s an old picnic table set out in the sun.

“You shouldn’t mess with your body. What would happen if you ended up getting hurt? You’d have to hire people to take on work and then you’d be even further behind the eight ball. Besides, I’m not sure how I’d care for two stubborn men.” She smiles.

“So, you’d take care of me, too? I’m not sure that’s in your job description.” A breeze blows between us as we stand at the edge of the river, face to face. The horses are a hundred feet

away drinking and for all intents and purposes, we're alone. I can't remember the last time I was alone with a woman like this. Maybe a decade ago, probably longer. Before the ranch, I was focused on the rodeo. And I'm not so sure I can say I've ever been alone with a woman who said she'd take care of me if I were hurt.

"Of course, I'd take care of you too," she nudges my shoulder playfully, "but I hope it doesn't come to that." She smiles and looks down at the river, pushing back her long locks before glancing up toward me again. "What happened between you and your dad, anyway? If you don't mind me asking."

I suck in a deep breath and blow it out hard as I stare toward the river. "How long do you have? The man is a narcissist to say the least. I know he seems all sweet and kind now, but he cheated on my mom every chance he got, spent money he didn't have, and couldn't find the time of day to spend with my brother and I when we were young. Now, he's all old and pathetic and he wants sympathy, but I don't have any for him. Ya know what I mean?"

"That must have been rough for you all."

"I managed, but my brother and mom weren't so lucky. My brother left for the military the second he got old enough. He had a lot of anger to work out. He lives in Ohio now outside the Air Force base. He's got his life turned around, even has a couple kids." I chuckle a little under my breath. "Since he left, he's never looked back. I guess it's just easier for him. He knows I love him, but that's enough. Every time we talk, I know he comes right back to his time on this ranch, and it pains him all over again."

"You said something about your mom. I've been too anxious to ask where she was." Ann shifts her gait as though she's afraid she's pushed too far.

"Mom passed away a few years back. She was old school. No matter what Dad did, he was her husband, and she forgave him." I shake my head. "I struggled with it for years, but she would always smile and tell me she knew what she was

doing.” I catch myself laughing. “That was my mom. She loved with her whole heart. It never mattered to her if the other person deserved it or not.”

As we stand in the cold breeze, I can’t help but feel I’ve overshared. She asked me if I got along with my dad as some sort of positive, and then I dragged her through our family drama. Nice going, Holt.

Ann gives me the warmest smile. “She sounds lovely. There are worse things in this world than being too kind or forgiving.” She brushes a strand of hair behind her ear. “I can relate to your story. My dad left when I was young. He didn’t do anything wrong. He just left my mom to do everything that wasn’t children.” She laughs. “Until he met another woman and then, poof, just like magic, he had all the desire in the world to raise a whole litter. I’m not sure I’d be the same forgiving saint as your mom if he tried to come back into my life after all these years. It would feel like a betrayal to my mother. She’s been gone so many years now. I couldn’t do it.” There’s pain behind her eyes when she talks, and a need passes through me. It’s carnal and savage, like nothing I’ve ever experienced before in my life. I hate that anyone has hurt Ann, and every part of my body aches to protect her.

“Where is he now?” My tone is deep and suspended.

She shrugs. “No clue. He tried getting in touch a few years back with this weird Christmas card. He signed it with love from his new family.” She shakes her head. “I have no idea what that was about, but I didn’t respond. Maybe he wanted to rub it in my face that he was happy with his new children. I don’t know. It’s strange to think I have half siblings I’ve never met, though. I mean, my mom never had more kids so my father’s children would be the only family I have left outside of Granny.”

Shit.

How do I make all this better for her? How do I make up for years of heartbreak and childhood pain? How do I tell her that I want to keep her safe and somehow also do the dirtiest, filthiest things to her? How do I get a grip before I make a

fucking idiot of myself? I'm a sick man. She's twenty-four years old. I'm forty-five. I shouldn't want to touch her the way I do. I shouldn't want to hold her and care for her the way I do. I should be able to control myself.

I whistle toward the horses.

Ann looks up at me with a big, round, innocent gaze, that just about kills me.

Fuck. I want to take her pain away... now! I can be her family and kiss her until she feels better. I can lay with her in bed next to her soft curves, long hair, gentle hands, enormous tits, and tell her all the things it would take for her to never want for anything ever again.

I'm sure she's confused as to why I'm ending the tour early, but I made a mistake inviting her out here. I need to get the hell out of this pasture before I say something stupid and make a god damn fool of myself.

Chapter Five

Ann

I sit at the edge of the bed and stare down at the line of selfies I've just taken, then send two of them to my friend Morgan. We've been best friends since high school and she's the best at talking sense into me.

Me: <selfie>

Me: Does this look casual enough that I don't look like I'm trying, but nice enough that if I were to see a certain someone, I'd look hot?

Morgan: Girl... you're hot as hell.

Me: Also a little trashy, right?

Morgan: Ha! That's not what you're going for?

Me: No! I was going for casual sexy. Like... just got off work, hair in a loose bun, kind of vibe.

Morgan: Tie that t-shirt up a little, or *accidentally* tuck it into the back of your panties. That will really get him going. Is this for that old man you're caring for? If so, we should talk.

Me: No! God! What do you take me for?

Morgan: Well, who's it for then? Does he have a sexy nurse you're trying to persuade?

I realize quickly that Morgan may think Holt is old. If I were guessing, I'd think he were in his mid-forties. To most in their early twenties, that's ancient.

Me: Something like that. I don't know what I'm doing! HELP! I'm not even sure he likes me. He keeps ending our conversations early, but we have this weird connection that I can't explain.

Morgan: He likes you.

Me: How do you know?

Morgan: Cowboys are like that. They get all bottled up with their feelings and overcomplicate everything. You have to

lay it on thick, so he knows he isn't going to get himself hurt. Wear a long t-shirt, casually get a drink, lift your arms when he's looking, give him full ass, and he won't be able to resist.

Me: You think?

Morgan: You must really like this guy. You're usually not this... free.

Not this free? Am I being free? I guess I'm about to pretend I don't hear him out there and prance around in a short band t-shirt while reaching for a glass on the highest cupboard, so he gets a glimpse of my panties, and hopefully ravages me right there in the kitchen.

I laugh at myself. This plan is ridiculous.

Maybe I'm less free, and more desperate.

Thing is, there's something about Holt that makes me wild with urges I've never felt. Not firsthand, anyway. I want him to know I'm interested, but maybe this is too far. Maybe I should just wander into the kitchen in my flannel sleep pants and see what happens.

Me: You're right. I'll scale back.

Morgan: No! That's not what I said. Go for it! You're there, you like him, so let your freak flag fly. Just text me right after and tell me every detail, including more about who this guy is. And if I don't hear from you until morning, I'll know you're a dirty slut. ❖❖

I text her back a heart and take another look at myself in the mirror, before sucking up the rest of the confidence I have, open the bedroom door, and make my way down the hall toward the kitchen. If he rejects me, that's fine. I can leave Rugged Mountain and start a new life on the other side of the world.

I'm sure Russia needs teachers.

God, what am I thinking? This t-shirt is barely hanging on. What kind of respectable woman pulls this kind of thing?

I try to remember Morgan's pep talk, but I'm interrupted by a deep voice.

“You’re up late.” Holt clears his throat and stares down at his plate before glancing up at me again.

Oh God. The *thought* of doing this, and the *reality* of doing it, are two completely different events. I cover myself up as best I can. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize anyone was out here.”

Lies! What kind of monster am I? No. I have to own this. What would a romance heroine do? Would she cower, or would she take the man she wants?

“Don’t be sorry.” Holt pulls out a chair beside him. “Sit and keep me company. I’m driving myself crazy with indecision about this rodeo thing. I need to get out of my head. By the way, thank you for dinner. It’s delicious. I don’t know what I’m going to do when you go back to your real life. I’m getting used to these fancy meals.”

“It’s just crock pot stew. You don’t need to get excited... but thank you. Your cabin really feels like a home to me.” I trace my finger along the edge of the sugar container still in the center of the table and stare toward Holt. Do people have *security objects*? If they do, I call sugar container.

His eyes gaze toward mine as he bites into the apple hand pie that I wrapped for him. “Well, I have to say, it hasn’t felt like a home in a long time. I think it might be you making it feel that way.”

My heart swells and warms. I’d do anything to be that hand pie right now. Wrapped up warm in his big, calloused hand as he angles me into his mouth. My clit throbs, and my nipples harden at the thought of it.

Why does he have to be so handsome? He’s not built like he spends hours in the gym. He has the body of a working man. Strong shoulders and bulking biceps from hauling feed bags and bales of hay. I wouldn’t mind being either of those as he tosses me across the mattress and has his way with me.

I laugh to myself at the thought. I really need to get a grip. He’s clearly complimenting my food, not my eyes or the shoulder I have hanging out.

“I saw you reading a book last night.” His voice is low and graveled, and the sound alone sends a shock of arousal straight through me. “Anything good?”

“It was a romance novel. I swing from everything geeky to everything romantic. It’s an obsession. I love being at the library so much. I get to see all the books people choose. Do you do any reading?”

“Does the back of a feed bag count?” He grins and runs his big palm over his beard. “Not much time for reading these days. I’d like to hear more about your book, though.” His eyes are on me so intently, that I think they may be burning a hole in my face, but I like the heat and I stare back at him, sparks flying everywhere.

I hope he feels them, too.

Howling winds cut through the eaves of the house and my eyes go to the window of white in the kitchen. The storm picked up. I’d bet we have another foot or two of snow on the horizon, but the storm could be a world away as I focus on Holt’s energy.

I inch my hand toward his. It’s a subtle move, but one that I figure could double for anything. I could be reaching for his plate to clear it, or I could be getting him a fresh glass of milk. It could be anything... but it’s not. It’s not anything. I want my hand in his. I want our bodies against one another. *I want him.*

Holt’s massive, inked hand rests on top of mine, his gaze still on me hard and heavy. “Did you wear that out here on purpose?” His voice is deep. “Did you want me to see you like this?”

My heart slams against my chest and I nod, biting my lower lip, completely unsure of what I’m getting myself into. His question is so poignant and I’m not sure how he means it. He could be insulted that I’m dressed so scantily in front of him.

He stands from the table, unfolding his body until he’s towering over me, reaching for my hand. I’ve never been this

close to him. From here, he smells like cedar and bales of hay.

When I scan his body for the source of his musk, I begin to feel our size difference. I'm not a tiny thing, but standing next to him, I'm dwarfed. It's only now that I realize how strong he must be.

A second goes by, maybe two. He bends down and grips the back of my neck and kisses me hard. His tongue dives into my mouth and he growls out inside of me as though he's an unchained animal taking what he needs.

I love it. I want to be taken. I want to be needed. My panties soak and my clit throbs hard.

He leans me back on the clear end of the table and bends over me, touching my throat, my breasts, my stomach, and my thighs. His touch is heavy and rough, but careful and focused.

"You wanted me to see all this soft, pale skin... didn't you, trouble?" He bends down and pulls my tits from the break in my t-shirt, palming his big hands over each one before bending into run his tongue over the tips.

"Trouble?"

He groans into my neck. "That's what you are, right? A sweet, little ball of trouble? I've been trying to deny whatever it is I'm feeling, but you're out here enticing me, aren't you?"

My clit throbs as his warm, heavy breath tickles my ear. Why do I like being his *trouble*? Why do I want to hear him say it over and over again? Preferably while he's thumping inside of me and spreading me wide.

"Maybe I am." My hips rock against his and for the first time the hard ridge of his cock is apparent. This is real. He's real. He's turned on by me. The hottest man I've ever seen is somehow turned on by me. How does that happen?

Should I touch him? Should I run my hand over his cock? Should I tell him how desperate I am for him?

He groans out and backs away before I get a chance, lifting my bare legs to his shoulders. He kisses the inside of

my thighs.

“It’s wrong of me to think about all the things I’ve been wanting to do to you.” His rough beard brushes against my legs as he creeps his way up toward my upper thighs.

My eyes shut as tingling pleasure runs through me. “Why is it wrong?”

He groans. “Your age. The fact that I’m your boss. Pick your poison.”

“If this were one of my books, you’d push past those thoughts. Right into this tight, virgin pussy.”

I don’t know who I am right now. I’m delirious, pumped with hormones and emotion. Desperate for him to touch me. Desperate to come. Desperate to feel his big hard cock spread me wide. I’d have to be because I’ve never in my life talked like this.

“*Virgin?*”

I regret saying it the second he repeats the word.

“It’s not a big deal. I just thought you should know before we...”

He stares at me long and hard. This momentary pause makes my heart tighten. I’ve ruined the moment. He’s going to retreat. I’ve scared him away. *Of course, I have.* What grown man wants to mess around with a woman who has zero experience?

Definitely not a man that looks like this.

“It’s okay,” I say, sitting up from the table. “I’ve made things weird. We can just forget this ever happened.”

He grins and leans into my lips, his hand between my legs, cupping my mound, as a single finger glides along my panty covered seam. “Do you really want me to stop? If you do, I will.”

“No,” I squeak. “I never want you to stop, but I thought the virgin thing would be weird for you.”

He groans and pauses for a second. “I didn’t realize I was such a sick man.”

“Sick, how?” I’m panting, losing control of my breath.

“Sick,” he groans low into my neck and pushes my cotton panties to the side to pet my bare pussy, “like it turns me on to know I’m the first to touch this sweet, innocent body of yours.” Warm breath grazes my neck as he slides his finger inside of me.

My head arches back and I moan again and again. “You’re not sick, Holt.” I take a deep breath. “I want you,” escapes my mouth between groans.

One finger becomes two.

I moan out in approval, and he commends me for my noise.

“That’s right.” He brushes his hand back through my hair and watches my face as he thrusts his fingers in and out, over and over, sliding through my juices.

The world is hazy and I’m dizzy with heat and a fever I’ve never felt before. “Fuck me, Holt. Please... fuck me hard. I want to feel you all over me.”

A low rumble in his throat emanates as his teeth bare. He bites into my shoulder and kisses my arm, sucking intermittently as he makes his way between my legs. “I will, but first I want a taste of that sweet little cun—”

A loud crash echoes outdoors and our attention is diverted to the sound. A sound that I have a feeling is going to change the trajectory of the night.

Chapter Six

Holt

It's times like these I realize I need a break. A break from farm life, a break from the ranch, a break from responsibility. Though, I can't imagine what I'd have to do to make that a reality. Not now, anyway. I owe too much damn money to the bank, and now with the barn roof half caved, I'm going to be even further in debt.

"I'm so sorry, Holt. Maybe I can call around and see if someone can help you fix it. Everyone in town is always happy to help wherever they can." Her small hand is cupped in mine while we stare at the damage. Thankfully, it's only the back half that collapsed. The front of the barn, where the horses are, still looks stable. Though, I'm going to have to call Waylon tonight and see if he can house them temporarily until I get it fixed. It's not safe for them to stay there overnight and it's too cold to keep them out in this storm.

"I should've been up there shoveling the snow off today. It was accumulating, and I knew this roof wasn't the best. Let's get you inside. I'm going to call Waylon and see if he can get someone to come help me."

Ann glances up toward me with sweetness and a tinge of guilt in her eyes. "Text me Waylon's number. I'll call him and have him send some people over for you. Then I'll get dressed and help you."

For a long second, my brain stalls. *She wants to help? Outside? With the ranch work?* I haven't met a woman yet that would leap into action so quickly, and I know it's not because emptying a horse barn at ten p.m. is her dream. She's doing it because she wants to help me.

"You sure? You don't have to."

She twists her hair to the side of her shoulder and looks up at me in the tiny little t-shirt I was going to tear off a second ago. "I want to help you, Holt. I'm going to help."

I bend down and lift her from the cold ground, realizing she's run out in her bare feet. "You're trouble. Do you know that?"

She grins. "You like it."

Her smart remark has my cock on the rise and for a second I consider the thought that the barn can wait. I need to feel her against my skin again, taste the juices she was working up for me, press into her tight virgin pussy, but the sounds of cracking behind me filters me back to reality.

"You're right." I set her down on the kitchen floor of the ranch house and kiss her forehead. "Grab some of my clothes from the closet. Their warmer than whatever you brought, I'm sure."

Another bright smile lifts onto her face and somehow, the collapsing barn doesn't seem so bad. Though, I'm sure the horses inside would beg to differ.

I run down the path, through the heavy snow and toward the barn, opening each stall quickly as the roof creaks overhead. The horses know well enough to run into the side pasture when they're released and they're intuitive enough to know something isn't right, so they hustle. I'm not sure how long it takes, but I effectively have all the horses away from the barn by the time Ann makes her way from the house. She's dressed in a pair of leggings, an oversized flannel, my work boots, and a smile on her face as wide as Colorado.

"What do you think?" She spins in a circle showing off her attire and I have to hold myself back again from biting at her neck and tackling her in the snow.

"I think I want to take you inside and strip all this off." I lean into her and nuzzle against her warm neck, sucking in the soft scent of lavender in her hair.

Fuck. I need to be alone with her. I need to devour her like the last cookie in the jar.

Headlights and the clanking of horse trailers interrupt my thoughts. It's Waylon and the cavalry.

"That was fast! Does he live close by?"

“Just around the corner. He’s probably got ten guys on payroll just waiting for some shit to go down. I owe this man a lot.”

Waylon hops from his truck, leaving the engine on and the headlights running. “Fuck, man, that barn has seen better days.” He wanders down the path and stares toward the mess. “I can send a few guys over to build you a new one. No charge. We’ve got old wood up on the ridge and I’d bet Henry has some tin lying around we can use.”

Henry’s family owns the mountain, but Waylon is second to the crown.

“I can’t take anything from anyone. Y’all have your own shit to worry about.”

Waylon hammers his hand onto my shoulder and lowers his voice as he says, “You’d help me if I were struggling, right?”

“You know I would, but I’m not taking handouts.”

“It’s not a handout. It’s a gift.”

Waylon’s a nice guy. One of the nicest. He’s also a businessman. A shrewd businessman. The kind of businessman that doesn’t run around doing favors for everyone. I’m lucky to have him on my side. I have to bite the bullet and do the rodeo run.

“You still looking for a guy to ride this weekend?”

Waylon nods. “You sure you’re up for it? I don’t want to guilt you. You don’t owe me anything for the barn. I’d still pay you for your time in the ring.”

A few weeks of riding won’t kill me. Hell, it might be good to get back up on a bull again. “I’ll do it for half pay and I’ll come train your horses for a month as thanks for the roof. Deal?” I hold out my hand.

“You know you don’t have to do any of that.” Waylon adjusts his hat.

I pull Ann into my side, and hold her against my waist, rubbing her arm up and down as the wind catches us from the

side. Waylon looks toward us, confused at what's happening.

“Who's this? I didn't realize you were seeing anyone.”

I glance toward Ann, then back toward Waylon. “This is Ann. She's been helping Earl and well... she makes a damn good apple pie.”

Waylon grins. “That'll do it. Does every time.”

I'm not sure what to call Ann and I, so I don't put a label on it. Though if it were my choice, I'd call her my wife right here and now. I'm not sure she'd agree.

“Well let's get these horses loaded up. We can talk details in the morning.” Waylon unchains the back door on his trailer and lets down the ramp. “This storm is picking up something awful. You're lucky you didn't lose the whole roof.”

Luck isn't the word for it. Those horses are like family. I can't stand the thought of losing any of 'em.

“Is that your dad?” Ann's voice contorts with confusion as she turns toward the pasture. Her eyes squint into the darkness.

“Can't be. Why would he be out here in the storm?”

“That's him.” Ann takes off into the squall of white, sprinting toward him.

I follow behind.

“We've got this,” Waylon shouts. “I'll call you in the morning. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I wave back toward Waylon, thankful that one problem is solved. But leave it to my father to amp up the drama. If there's one thing he can be counted on for, it's to do exactly the worst thing at the worst time.

Chapter Seven

Ann

“What am I doing out here?” Earl’s voice shakes when he speaks. “Ann, dear, did you bring me out here? You’ve forgotten my shoes.”

I look down at Earl’s crimson red feet and a shot of panic streaks through me before glancing back toward Holt. “He’s going to need help getting back into the house. Can you lift him?” Deep down, I’m sure Holt loves his father, but right now I’m sure this isn’t what he wanted to deal with. It’s been a long day. An insanely long day. A day with more problems than most people have in a month.

Regardless, he bends down and lifts the frail man from the ground and carries him into the house. Calm and stoic, not a word spoken. I imagine in his day, Earl was a big man as well, though now he’s flimsy by comparison to his son. A man that could probably lift both of us at once and not break a sweat.

“What’s going on with you, Dad? Why are you out here?”

I’ve seen this behavior before, in my grandad a year or two before he passed. I was too young to remember a lot of details, but he started forgetting things, and wandering off without remembering where he was going to. The doctors never diagnosed him with dementia because he never went to see a doctor. Most people up here repel the thought of modern miracles. They prefer a simpler way. Pops believed forgetting was a part of old age and started wearing a bell around his wrist, so we’d know when he was up and moving. As the years went on, there were bells on the doors and windows too. It worked for us, but for a lot of people, I can’t imagine that being the case, especially a busy guy like Holt.

“I was inside, and then I was out,” Earl says, his voice shaking.

Holt kicks open the back door and carries his father inside, wrapping him up in a blanket on the bed while I put another log in the fire. “You have to stay in the house at night. You could freeze to death out there. Understand?”

Earl nods and a pang of guilt hits me in the chest as he looks up at his son. I know they’ve had their differences, but there’s pain in Earl’s eyes to make up for those years. Sure, maybe he doesn’t deserve mercy, *but do any of us?*

“We’re going to head back to our rooms. You call us if you need anything.”

Earl reaches for Holt, gripping his shoulder. “I have something to give you, son. Can you sit for a minute?”

Holt looks back at me, his jaw clenched. He’s frustrated, rightfully so. His barn just collapsed, he found his dad wandering in the snow, and he was busy with day-to-day chores until well after nine. It’s a little much to ask for a conversation after all that.

Holt sits anyway, staring at his father from the edge of the bed. I’m not sure what kind of stare it is, but if I were to guess, I’d say it’s something along the lines of... obligation.

“I’ll go get some tea—”

“Stay.” Holt reaches for my hand and looks toward me. “Please.”

“Yes, dear,” Earl says, opening his side drawer. “You should hear this, too.”

As he sighs and opens his mouth, I dread what’s going to come out. Something tells me Earl’s about to ramble on with words that don’t make much sense at all. I wonder how I can convince him to see a doctor in the morning.

“Open it, son.” He hands Holt a crisp white envelope.

Thick lines form on Holt’s forehead as he pries open the letter. Inside, is a blue and white check. Holt’s gaze darts back to his father. “What’s this?”

“It’s a check with your name on it.”

“I see that. Why? How? I’ve been fighting off debtors for almost a year now. Where did you get this money?”

“When your mother was alive, God rest her soul, she was my angel. I did everything I could to drive her away, but she wouldn’t leave my side. She was the best person I’ve ever met and saw things in me even when I was lost. She believed in me no matter whatever piece of shit mess I got into, and I owe her.”

Holt looks back with a blank expression. “So, you’re buying her forgiveness?”

“Far from it, son. I can’t atone for what I’ve done. I know that. But when I was out making a mess of our lives, she squirreled away bonds with any excess money. It was her way of keeping anything extra from going into a bottle or worse.”

Holt sits in silence. He looks over at me periodically as to ask if he’s dreaming or not.

“So, imagine my surprise when she shows me them all on her deathbed. The day that the Lord took her home, she looked me dead in the eyes, and told me it was for you boys.” A tear starts to roll down his cheek. “Son, I held the bonds in my hands so many times over the years, eager to change... anything. I lost my angel, and I wanted to feel good, but I couldn’t let her down like that. I wouldn’t.”

Holt waves the check back toward me with wide eyes. “It’s eight hundred thousand dollars.” He looks back at his father. “Even with just my half, I could pay off our debts, fix everything, and maybe hire some people to help me out around here.”

“Or you could sell everything and start fresh,” Earl says.

Holt places his big hand on his father’s shoulder. “See, that’s the thing. The thought has never crossed my mind. No matter what happened, this is the place I belong. I’ve met plenty of folks who chase money at the expense of their happiness, and I’m not going to be one of ‘em. Ranching, and the work involved, makes me happy.”

Holt glances down at the check again. “She really was a saint. But I gotta ask, if you were sitting on this, why didn’t you help me out sooner? I’ve been struggling with—”

“Truthfully, I always saw too much of me in you. Every morning, you come around the corner of the kitchen, angry as a hornet, and I thought you were just like me. Nothing was ever good enough and you took for granted anything good in your life.” Earl’s eyes reach out to mine. “That is until I saw you with her. That’s when I realized you weren’t me. You showed the kindness and attention that I wish I had given your mother all those years. So, I got right on the phone and the lawyer brought a check while you all were out on them horses.”

Holt looks toward me and squeezes my hand. His shoulders relax as he looks toward his father, then down at the check in his hands. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Earl says. “All I want to hear is that you’ll take that woman behind you out for a nice dinner.”

Holt turns back and swallows my hand in his. “I think I can make that happen.”

My heart warms, and for a second, I picture my life in this farmhouse. I imagine taking care of Earl, baking cupcakes and apple pies, helping Holt out in the barn, chasing children around, and dragging in fresh cut Christmas trees. I imagine casseroles on the stove cooling while I watch through a snowstorm for Holt’s giant frame to appear as he makes his way in after a long day’s work. And I imagine the two of us cuddled up in bed every night whispering sweet things and tickling each other slowly until he’s pressed me into the mattress with his heavy weight and soft kisses. It’s a fantasy, I know, but it’s one I can’t get out of my head. I can only hope Holt feels the same way.

Chapter Eight

Holt

By the time I get cleaned up, Ann is already curled up in my bed, her body hugging my pillow as though she's searching for my scent.

Why is this the hottest sight I've ever seen? A sweet, innocent woman naked against my pillow, in my bed, wiggling her ass back toward me as I make my way under the sheet.

"You're finally here," she groans as though she's sleepy. "I was starting to think you had another barn emergency."

"No more emergencies tonight, baby. Just you and me." My hand runs up and over her bare shoulder. She's soft, pale, and perfect. My balls tighten and my cock strikes hard against my boxers at the sound of her voice. She's so fucking precious.

"You and me, huh?" She rolls over, her nipples firm and erect against the cool air in the room. She brushes my chest and the hard tip of her breast hits me again and again, thumping my cock harder and harder.

I'm going to have to leave the room or ask her to marry me. I'm not sure which makes more sense right now. It's been a long, crazy-ass day, so I'm thinking I could get away with the latter, but I don't dare press my luck.

"You and me," I repeat. "What do you think about that big old check the old man just threw in my lap? Concerning or kind?"

I already know her answer. "Kind. People change, Holt. He's changed. He wants to make amends with you. He wants to do the right thing."

I look toward Ann, so innocent with her words. So kind, so understanding. If she listened long enough, I'm sure she'd find a way to forgive a bank robber. That's the good in her, though. It's why I'm falling for her. She sees people in a way I can't. She finds the pieces of grace and she lets that person shine.

“I’ll take the old man to breakfast in the morning and maybe I can get Jimmy on the line. I’m sure we could all use a good old-fashioned talk.”

“I like that for you.” She smiles and nuzzles into my chest, running her fingers through the hair on my stomach.

“And how do we fix *your* childhood? If anyone deserves a bag of money, it’s you.”

She narrows her gaze and lifts on top of me, straddling my waist. Her large breasts fall and sway with her movement. “Fix my childhood? What’s there to fix? I was loved, I had everything I needed, and I became a perfectly well-rounded, cutie-pie, that you can’t keep your hands off.” A playful grin lifts her face.

I smell her arousal, a scent that has me salivating like a fucking dog. My palms lift to cup her breasts and my cock goes harder.

“You cause trouble like this,” I growl, “and I’m going to have to teach you a lesson.”

She giggles and digs her hips into me further. “Oh! I like lessons! What have ya got?”

Why does her sweet banter get me so fucking hard? She’s innocent and bubbly. Sweet and kind.

“Are you going to come for me tonight?” I lick and suck the tips of her nipples, taking my time with each one as she squirms on top of me.

She nods. “I’m going to come so hard for you.”

Hearing those filthy words slip from her sweet lips is an out of this world experience.

Her small hand reaches beneath the sheet and grips my cock. She pumps my girth fast in her hand as she slides back slowly. I’m not sure where she’s going at first, then her head angles down on my dick. Her soft lips take me in as her tongue swirls haphazardly and her tiny fist pumps.

Fuck.

My hands weave through her thick hair and those sweet lips rock back and forth over the tip again and again.

“That’s a good girl. Take my cock.”

She whimpers with parted lips, taking me deep into her throat, gagging as I reach the back. It shouldn’t turn me on, but it does. The thought of grazing the back of her throat with my cock arouses me like I’ve never imagined.

I groan as her hollowed cheeks suck me hard.

I’m going to come if she doesn’t stop. Fucking hell, I’m going to come.

“Eyes on me,” I demand, tipping my index finger under her chin.

With my cock still in her throat, she gazes up at me.

“Do you like this? Do you like having my dick in your mouth? Does it turn you on?”

She nods, and sighs in agreement.

“Of course, you do. You’re trouble.” I growl out as she sucks me harder, bobbing her head up and down, over and over. “Okay, stop. I want you up here. Right now.”

She doesn’t listen at first. She keeps working, stroking my cock just right, sucking with ambition, desperate to taste me, but that’s not how we’re playing this.

I back away from her grip and she lets out a shiver. “Lean back on the bed.”

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and does as I’ve asked, leaning back. She’s dripping wet down her thighs, and her little pink mound is swollen and ready.

Fucking hell. I’m going to bust a nut just staring.

I lean into her core and brush my beard against her pussy, licking the tender flesh that surrounds her clit before pulling up a suction. My tongue swirls around the outside as she fists the sheets. Her hips rock upward unintentionally, desperate for relief.

“I need all of you, baby. Give yourself to me. Come in my mouth. Come for me.”

She moans with pleasure and tilts her hips in every direction, scratching herself against my beard.

Over and fucking over, that sweet pussy taste spreads against my lips, on my cheeks, in my beard.

Fuck.

There’s not a collapsing barn in the world that could stop me from this moment. “Come for me, baby. I need to taste your excitement.”

Her small hands thread through my hair and tug gently as I slide a finger in. In less than a second, she’s spilling sticky sweetness all over my lips, and I’m lapping her up like a melting fucking ice cream cone.

“I need you,” she begs. “Now! No more waiting!”

“Trust me, I don’t want to wait either, but I don’t have a condom.”

Her gaze drifts off to the side for a moment before she looks back. “I don’t need a condom. I want you, Holt. I want you so bad.”

“You know if I take you tonight, you’re mine, right? No going back. I’m going to fill you up, and you belong to me.”

“Fill me up, Holt. Fill me up!”

The anticipation of driving into her tight little pussy has my cock harder than it’s ever been. I want her body, mind, and soul. I want to give her my babies. I want to marry her. I want to have a life with her on this farm. I want her to have her dreams, and I want us to live happily ever after. I want it all. I want it all with Ann.

I lift her leg onto my shoulder and twist her to the side, sliding my cock in gently through her arousal. “It’s going to hurt. Tell me if I’m going too fast.”

She nods and I watch her face gasp and contort as I press into her.

I underestimated how tight she'd be. I move slow, stretching her half an inch at a time, until she's more comfortable with the feeling.

"You okay, baby?"

She nods and I land kisses on her forehead. "I'm sorry, honey. It'll be easier next time. You feel so fucking good. Like you were made for me."

Her eyes close and her head leans back. "You can go faster. I want all of you. Stretch me wide, Holt."

The further I go, the tighter she is. She's strangling my cock, and I love it. I love the lavender scent of her hair, the sweet musk of her pleasure on my beard, the soft touch of her skin, the way her sounds vibrate through me, and the way my cock feels thrusting inside of her wet and snug.

"Fuck... I'm not going to last much longer. You're so fucking amazing."

I cup her breast and thrust harder and harder, watching her lips widen as I thrust deeper and deeper. I don't have another second in me. She feels too good.

One last thrust and I orgasm, growling out in pleasure as I release inside of her welcoming womb.

"You're everything," she pants. "I've never felt anything that good."

I lean against her shoulder, sucking gently as I pull from within her tight core. I'm not gone a second before I miss her warmth.

"I'll be right back," I say, before grabbing a cloth from the bathroom. I clean her thighs and kiss them gently before collapsing next to her on the bed, holding her in my arms.

"I don't think I can let you ride in that rodeo now." She twists at the hair on my chest as she talks. "I couldn't bare it if anything happened to you."

"Waylon might be up for a new deal now that I have money. I'll have to talk to him in the morning."

She wraps me up in her arms and holds me close. “I just want you to be safe, Holt. Whatever you do.”

There it is again, those words she doesn't have to say. The words I've never heard from another soul. *She wants me to be safe. She cares about me. Not because I've done anything for her, or because she's obligated to. She just cares.*

I kiss her forehead and lean on top of her, swallowing her up. “I think I'm falling in love with you, *trouble.*”

She grins wide and bites her bottom lip. “Then I think my plan worked.”

Leaning into her lips, I kiss her over and over again. In life, there's never much assurance to anything. The barn could collapse, your dad could be an asshole, you could be handed a million-dollar check, or a snowstorm could leave you stranded for days. But the way I figure, if I've got Ann by my side, I've got everything I need.

Epilogue

Ann

One Year Later

Holt stands at the edge of the pasture with Lady Lightning, and our newborn daughter in his arms. It's unseasonably warm for January, but the baby is still bundled in a snowsuit and a thick wool hat. I have a feeling she's daddy's girl already. The two have been inseparable since we brought her home from the hospital.

"You know," Granny says, bumping against Earl's shoulder, "I didn't see him taking to fatherhood so well, but he's a natural."

"Careful there, Granny. You keep touching him like that and people might get the wrong impression," I say with a smirk.

Earl looks down at Granny and smiles. "Trust me, I would be the lucky one."

"Yes, you would," Granny says. "I'm already keeping him off the street most days and giving you two peace and quiet." She chuckles. "If he wants anything more, he's going to have to earn it."

Earl blows out his lips. "If you're waiting around for me to impress you, I fear I'll be long gone before that happens."

"What are these two arguing about now?" Holt meets us at the top of the hill, Blossom peacefully sleeping in his arms. She's only six pounds, but she looks even smaller against his giant frame.

"Nothing," Granny says, leaning into him for a hug. "We're just heading out. I see Waylon just pulled up, though. You owe him another rodeo tour?"

Holt rubs his back. "Nah, the last one was good enough for me. I was lucky I didn't do any permanent damage. I'm not sure what he wants."

Earl kisses baby Blossom on her head and turns toward the truck. “We’ll see you two soon. Don’t wait up.” Granny rolls her eyes and grabs Earl by the arm to walk him away.

Before they get too far, Holt pulls Earl in for a hug. “See you later, Dad. Stay out of trouble.”

It’s only the second time I’ve heard him call Earl ‘dad’ and the first time I’ve seen them hug. Even at our wedding, they only waved goodbye to each other.

“Don’t read into it,” Holt says, glancing toward me.

I grin. “I already have.”

Waylon parks at the end of the driveway and walks up slowly, taking a survey of the property as he moves. He’s a tall man, covered in ink, with a long beard that he keeps trimmed just below his chin. I can’t imagine why he hasn’t found a woman yet. My friends are always asking about him.

“What do you think he wants?” I reach for Blossom, but she fusses when I touch her.

Okay... you can stay with Daddy.

“I’m sure it’s something about the cattle drive. He’s been looking for day labor or a few more cowboys. Maybe he’s wondering if we know anyone.”

Waylon tips his hat and greets Holt and I. “Nice to see you two again... and to meet this little girl. Everyone in town is talking about her. Granny says she’s the next rodeo queen.”

Holt shakes his head. “Not if I can help it. I plan to keep her locked up until she’s at least thirty. Even then, we’ll screen all her visitors. What’s going on with you? Everything okay?”

Waylon nods. “We’re all good here. I’m just hoping you could help a man out.”

Holt and I look toward each other with a narrowed gaze. Waylon is usually a straight-shooting man. When he wants feed, he asks for feed. When he needs help with a tractor, he asks for it. This cryptic conversation is new.

“What’s going on? We’re always here to help.” Holt shifts and readjusts Blossom in his arms as a cool wind blows across the driveway.

“Well,” Waylon stalls, “I need help with a girl.”

“Interesting, you old dog.” Holt nudges Waylon and grins wide. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

“That’s the thing,” he groans. “It’s a little messy.”

“Okay.” I’m desperate to tell him to spit it out, but the man is still a business contact, and I’m beyond curious why he made a special trip over here to tell us he’s met someone. “What’s the problem.”

Waylon rubs his hand over his beard. “She’s a friend’s daughter.”

“Are you serious?” Holt, who has no social decorum, let’s his voice slide into a weird criticizing tone that I have to clean up.

“Everyone around here knows everyone. Of course someone you want to date has a family you know.”

Holt looks over at me. “Baby, it’s because she’s also young.”

I look back and forth between the two bulls and you can see the air has changed. “We have a gap in *our* age. That isn’t a huge deal.”

“How bad is it, Waylon?” Holt rubs Blossom’s back gently as she coos. “I just got finished saying that I was locking this one up. If you’re telling me you’re here to take her, I would start running before I can draw.”

Waylon laughs, but I think Holt’s made his point.

“She’s not that young, and she needs my help. She’s got this shitty ex who won’t stop harassing her and I can’t help thinking I need to step in.” Waylon nods his head, as to justify what he’s feeling and what he wants to do.

“Well, I think it’s lovely, Waylon. You’ve been a good person to us always and to this town. If someone is lucky

enough to catch your eye, I say give it a shot.” I reach forward and give him a hug. “I know you’re not the kind of guy who would screw over anyone.”

Waylon nods toward us, his massive shoulders widening before they relax. “Thank y’all for listening. I know this will be messy, but I need to find out what this could be.” He smiles at us both and then rubs the top of Blossom’s head. “I’ll leave you be with your little one.” He turns and heads back down the driveway. “Oh, and I’ve got another rodeo run for you if you’re interested.”

“He’s good,” I shout. “We’ll be at Saturday’s show, though. I hear Jake is up and riding again. I can’t wait to see his comeback.”

Waylon smiles and takes off toward his truck, but I can tell the smile is strained. Maybe we should’ve invited him in and let him talk about his dilemma more.

“He knows what he’s doing. On paper, we aren’t that much different.” I place my hand on Holt’s arm.

“Yeah, but a friend’s kid?”

I laugh and shrug my shoulders. “Please, that isn’t even the most taboo thing I’ve heard all week.”

Holt gives me a look like I better talk fast.

I laugh out loud. “You see, I’m reading this book about a woman who falls in love with three men at one time.”

Holt rolls his eyes. “Well, by those standards, Waylon’s basically a saint.” He smiles and leans into my neck, nuzzling me gently.

“Just be careful, mister. I’ve been known to cause a little trouble from time to time.” [Check out a Bonus Scene Here](#)

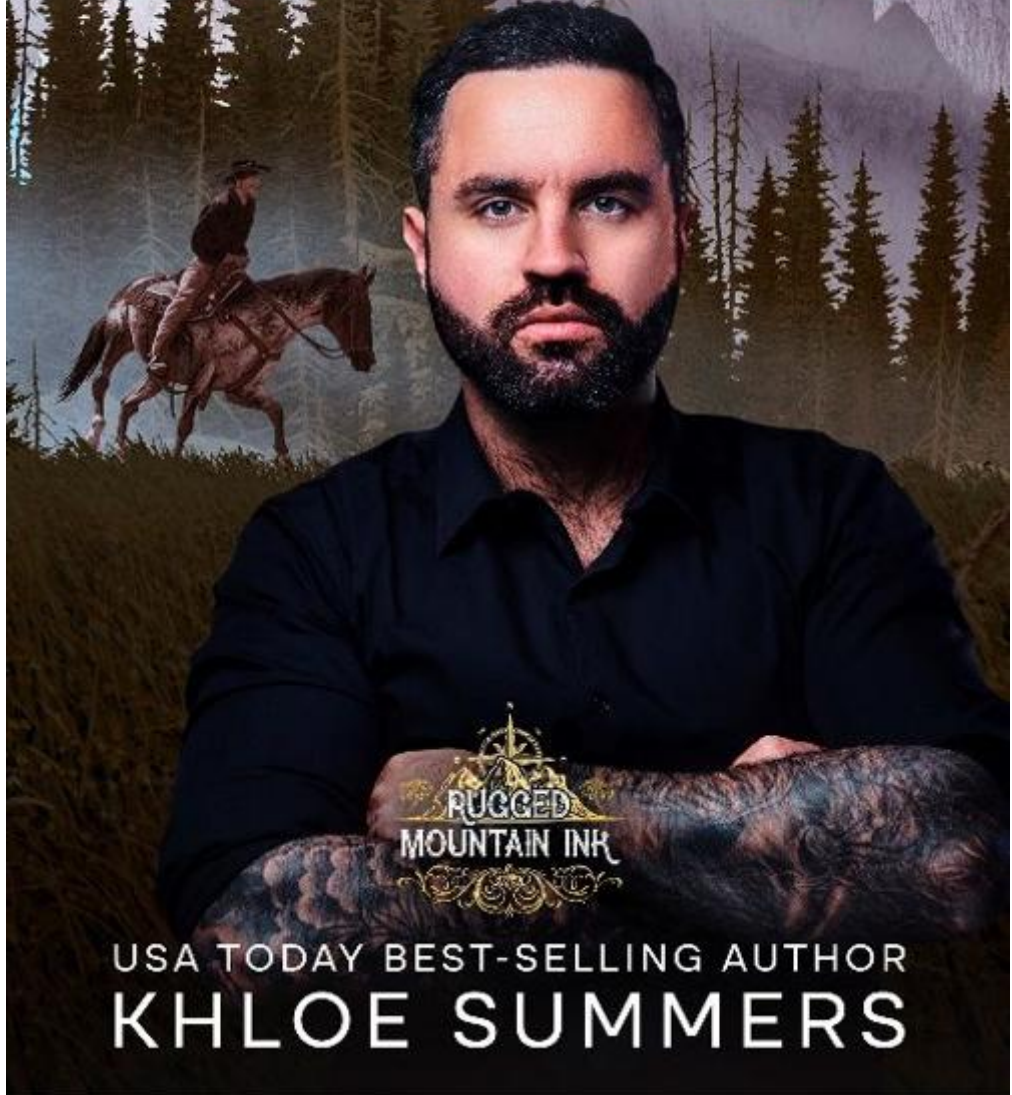
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RUGGED
MOUNTAIN INK

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
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Chapter One

Penelope

I've read every romance novel I can get my hands on. The long ones with the angsty, drawn out love that takes forever and a day to establish. The short ones with an instant attraction that seems too unreal to be true. And the super toxic stories, where the couple fall for one another despite one partner's penchant for murder. They're all good one way or the other, and I've related to them all at different points in my life. The toxic stories, less. But still, the happily ever after that infuses my blood with dopamine is enough to get me through the week.

They're addicting, though. You get a high from the characters love, and when that wears off, your back like a junky, desperate for more. Wishing, hoping, praying, that one night you'll be lying in bed and a six-foot five Prince Charming will break into your house, admit his terrible fondness for robbery, and you'll fall in love with his dark brown eyes, massive muscles, and the giant cock that he can't even hide through a pair of jeans.

My love story went a little differently. I have the one where the girl misjudged a guy when she was naïve and doomed herself to a life of regret and disappointment. I say doomed with a sense of self-loathing because that's where I am right now.

Self-loathing, USA. It's a cute little spot by the river where white and gray ducks chase each other in a murky green pond. People gather round its edge to contemplate their life choices. I give it... four out of five stars.

There's the elderly man who sits slumped over the bench to the right of an oak tree. His frame is hunched over as he tosses tiny pieces of bread to the shameless ducks to rush out after. I bet he's lost someone. I imagine he and his wife came out to this same spot on Sundays. *No*, they went somewhere nicer, like the lake. The lake up near Whiskey Falls. He can't

bear the thought of returning, so he sits here now, reliving their sweet ritual to the hum of strangers' tears.

Poetic.

To my left is a woman. I'd guess she's in her late forties. Her hair is tied back in a loose bun and her gaze is set on the mountain range in the distance. She couldn't care less about me, or the ducks, or the pond, or anything else going on around her. She's focused on whatever's in her head. Given enough time, I could make up a story for her as well, but I see David in the distance, and my stomach turns.

It's funny the things you give passes for when you think you're in love. *Robbery doesn't count. Look at Aladdin.*

David's faults are much more nefarious.

I was never truly attracted to David, but I thought his sense of humor made up for it. Now, everything he says is like nails on a chalkboard, and the humor I once thought was hilarious, grates on my every nerve. How could I laugh with him after all the hurt he's put me through?

I glance back at the pond and stand from the bench, making my way up the gravel ravine toward my car, parked on the west end of the lot. I should've parked closer. The last thing I want is a confrontation with him. I have what my best friend Kate calls co-dependency. Apparently, that means I rely on others too much. And David is the one I've relied on the most. I'd probably need years of therapy to debunk all the lifelong trauma that put me in that place, but I don't have time for that. I need to be strong right now.

"You're running from me again, Pen. We need to talk."

Talk. I laugh to myself at the concept. I tried 'talking' to the man for months and he dismissed every thought I had with defense and criticism.

I keep walking.

"Seriously?" His voice gets louder, like he's jogging toward me. "You owe me a few minutes, at least."

I have so many things I could say to that, but I've read enough about co-dependency to know that turning around will only make things worse.

I'll state my case, he'll state his, and none of it will lead to the happily ever after I need to get high.

I pull my keys from the pocket of my jacket and press the fob to unlock the door, but his fingers grip the back of my wrist and pull me back.

"Come on, Pen. Talk to me."

If he didn't have a history of violence, I wouldn't overthink the touch. I've grabbed Kate's arm a hundred times and pulled her back from lots of things. *Another shot of whiskey, a date that didn't feel right, a mustard-colored dress that would undoubtedly invite ants.*

But when David looks at me, I know this touch is different. His jaw is clenched, his eyes are narrowed, and the flex of his fingers around my arm tighten.

"You owe this to me, Penelope."

I know it's not advantageous for me to laugh, but I can't help myself. The thought of me *'owing'* anything to a man that cornered me in a hallway last week to remind me how I ruined his life for the thousandth time is just funny, I guess.

"I don't think so." I chuckle and flinch from his grip, walking the last two feet to my car, but he grabs me again. This time, harder.

"It's your fault this shit is happening in the first place. *You* did this to us." There's darkness in his tone. Malice.

I don't answer. Answering only gets me in trouble. I'm proud of myself for staying, but he proves me wrong every time.

Turns out, silence gets me in trouble, too. He backs me up against the car door, his lanky frame hovering over me as his jaw tightens, and his teeth bare. I read about this in romance novels too, but it was never like this. Never with hate.

"Give me the keys," he grunts. "Now!"

“Penelope?” a deep voice interrupts from a distance. I’ve heard the tone before, but I can’t place the man’s face until David steps away and the man comes into frame.

Humiliation washes over me like a red-hot fever. It’s my dad’s best friend, Waylon. If I had to guess, the man is in his late forties, but he’s ungodly attractive. I say *‘but’* because I’m way too young to be ogling a man in his forties. Though, this guy is six foot six, covered in tattoos, wears a cowboy hat, and talks in a baritone that makes my pussy rumble.

“Hey.” I wave toward him as though David wasn’t just hunched over me threatening to take away my choice.

“Everything okay here? It looked pretty heated from where I was standing.” Waylon glances toward David, then back at me, his gaze turned down as though he already knew what was going on. Of course, he does. He’s not stupid. He runs one of the biggest ranches in Rugged Mountain. He employs nearly half the people in town between the ranch and his rodeo. You don’t get to be that man without knowing how to read people.

“I’m fine,” I lie, my hands still shaking. “David was just leaving.”

Waylon looks toward David and his shoulders widen.

“We’ll finish this later, Pen.” David runs off to his truck like a scared little puppy with this tail between his legs.

We really do live in the animal kingdom, don’t we?

I suck in a deep breath and twist back toward Waylon, my face still burning. “Wow. That was... embarrassing.”

He shakes his head and steps toward me, his large hand landing on my arm like a giant blanket of warmth. I try not to find comfort in it, but I do.

“Who’s that guy?”

I sigh and fidget with the hem of my cable-knit sweater. “My very recent ex, who apparently thinks we have unfinished business.”

“Do you?” Waylon’s gaze is directly on me, like he’s looking for the parts I won’t speak about.

“No,” I laugh, “I don’t. But he won’t take no for an answer. I broke it off last week and he’s been showing up at my house, at the park, wherever I go. I turn around, and there he is. It’s insane.”

Waylon looks up toward the west end of the lot, where David walked off. His truck is gone. “Tell me where he lives, and I’ll go teach him a lesson.”

It shouldn’t feel so good to want David to pay for what he’s done to me, but it does. Waylon’s words fill into the cracks that have split open my heart, and somehow, make me feel important. That said, I say, “No, thank you. I couldn’t let you do that. Besides, I think he’s harmless enough.”

That’s a lie. *I know it’s a lie. Waylon knows it’s a lie.* Hell, I think the man throwing bread to the ducks by the pond, who hasn’t listened to a word of our conversation, knows it’s a lie. Nonetheless, I stare back at Waylon as though it’s the honest to heaven truth.

He tips his head to the side and stares at me, his hand still on my arm, now moving up and down comfortingly. “He had you pinned against the car. You looked terrified, Penny. I couldn’t go back to the ranch, look your dad in the eye, and not do anything about this.”

“Oh, you can’t tell my dad.” My eyes widen, and I flatten my body toward him, my face more serious than it had been.

“Why?”

Waylon and my father have been best friends for as long as I can remember. My dad is Waylon’s second in command on the ranch and they run in all the same circles through the rodeo in town. It’s not going to be easy to ask him to keep this a secret, especially one that involves the safety of his best friend’s daughter.

“First off, there’s nothing to tell,” I lie again. “David is an ass, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly. Besides, you know how my dad is. He’ll go all caveman, wind up hurting David, get himself in trouble, pull me from my apprenticeship at the tattoo shop, and I’ll be destined to work at the diner or the ranch like everyone

else in town. And no offense... but neither of those are my thing.”

“Why would he make you quit the tattoo shop? David doesn’t work there.”

“No, but I met David there. He seems to think that hanging around people who cover themselves in ink is asking for a life of a degenerate.”

Waylon looks down at his arms and then toward me. “I’m covered. And I’ve known the man for eons. He’s never said a thing to me.”

I cock my head to the side.

“*What?*” he probes.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. You were going to say something, but you held back.”

I stare at him. “It’s nothing. Just... Dad always said that’s why you... why you’re single.”

He laughs. “Did he? Because of my tattoos? There are plenty of guys in town with tattoos and nice families. And what’s his excuse?”

I shrug. “Anyway, you can see how irrational the man is. I don’t want to stir things up with him. I’m begging you. If I thought I couldn’t handle myself, I’d reach out to someone, but I can.”

“And when the asshole comes back later? What then?”

“Then I handle him like I always have, and he leaves.”

Waylon looks toward me with a wary gaze, as though he’s trying to find the balance between respecting my wishes and safeguarding himself against possible fault. It’s a beautiful gaze, one that I’d like to paint and hang on my wall as the only man that ever took my wishes into consideration before acting.

“Fine,” he groans. “I’ll keep your secret,” he hands me his card, “but you check in with me every day, and you let me install a security system at your cabin.”

I consider his offer. A security system isn't such a bad idea. I'm not sure why I didn't think of it sooner. Not only does it keep me safe from the asshole known as David, but it would also be nice to know when a bear is snooping around out back. I walked straight into one last week just making my way to the car for work.

"Okay," I sigh, losing myself in his big, rough palm. "Sounds like a plan. I'll text you my address."

He nods and opens my car door, helping me inside carefully. My body lights. It shouldn't be lit. If anything, this is only proof that I've read one too many books.

"Text me when you get home safe. I know a guy that can install the cameras quickly. I'll have him stop by tomorrow morning. If I'm not with him, don't open the door. Do you understand?"

I nod and stare up toward Waylon as though he has all the answers, like he's Prince Charming, and I'm the girl whose panties are way too wet for chapter one.

[Continue Reading Waylon's story...](#)

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