

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is the central focus of the image. She is wearing a white, sleeveless top with a delicate lace or eyelet trim along the neckline and armholes. She is also wearing a dark, possibly black, skirt. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a solid, dark color, likely black.

Temptress

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

KHLOE SUMMERS

Tempress

Rugged Mountain Ink

Khloe Summers

Summer to Publishing



Copyright © 2022 Summer to Winter Publishing

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by: RebecaCvrs

Editor: Link Phoenix

www.authorkhloesummers.com

Chapter One

Violet

Growing up, I was taught to question everything. My mother calls it necessary hypervigilance. My father calls it common sense. Either way, it's become a way of life, a mantra that I live by, a part of my DNA that's so ingrained that I'd say it's a detriment.

For instance, yesterday was a bright, sunny day. The temperature was perfect. I had a great song stuck in my head... you know that new one by Jason Aldean. Well, I'm singing the chorus over and over, and then there's this woman. She looks to be pregnant; I'd say five months. Long brown hair, light eyes, a pierced nose, and a tattoo on her left arm of a dragon. Anyway, I watched a man follow her through every aisle of the grocery store. He was watching... waiting. She didn't notice a thing. I figured I had two choices. I could follow the woman out and tell her about the guy, or I could assume I was a neurotic lunatic and let the woman be on her way.

I chose to follow. Turns out, the man was her husband. They were arguing, and she didn't appreciate the intrusion.

That's not where it ends, though. In a crowd of people, I've been trained to notice every noise, every movement, every person coming in and out of a space. I don't have a filter either. I can't choose to stop just one source of this vigilance. It's all or nothing, and despite the fact that my parents meant well with raising me like a veteran CIA agent, I'm exhausted.

I park my truck at the corner of the hiking lot and hop out, grabbing my backpack from the cab before making my way toward the truck parked on the other end of the lot. It's a black pickup truck which looks typical for the area, but I'm guessing it's a rental. I'm expecting a man I've been talking to for the last couple of months.

Yes, we met online.

Yes, I know it's not safe to meet him alone.

Yes, I realize I probably shouldn't have agreed to take him on a guided hike without telling anyone.

These are the answers I give my brain as it questions my decisions in a slow circle of mind-numbing interrogation. Before I can talk myself out of it, the man cracks his car door and steps out.

My breath hitches. He's going to look different. I know he's going to look different. Every photo I've seen of him has been flawless. I'm talking God-like flawlessness. I'm talking 'why would he talk to me' kind of flawlessness. I guess it's fine if he looks different. Looks aren't what matters, but he would have lied about it, and I guess that counts.

Okay, head, stop spinning!

"Violet." The man's voice is deep and brooding as he steps from his truck. His voice is the same soul crushing deepness it was on the phone. My heart patters with excitement as he steps out from behind the door and leans in toward me for a hug.

He smells like the woods after a campfire. Like fresh cut cedar or pine with a musk I can't define but want all over me. That, and he's tall. Taller than I expected. I'd guess six foot four inches, and the muscles look as defined and strong as they did in the photos. His eyes are a dark brown that are both warm and inviting and his hair is strung with salt and pepper. He's hot, maybe even hotter than the pictures.

"Thank you for rescheduling so many times. I was afraid you'd think I was a weirdo or something after the third time."

I shake my head, disobeying the internal voice that's sending alarms to run. Nothing about this is right. First off, he could do better than me. Second, he did reschedule multiple times, which is weird. Third, he obviously doesn't need a guide for this trail. He's dressed like an avid hiker in worn boots, camo pants, a black tee, and a camel pack for hydration. Most people that hire my services come dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Heck, sometimes they come in sandals. Those people I *believe* need a guide. This guy... no way. Truthfully, though, I

can't let my stomach get to me. I need this to be a good trip, a break from the norm, a chance at whatever this business was building to be.

"He's given you no reason not to trust him," I say to myself, as I tighten my backpack in place. *"In fact, you've had nothing but good conversation since you started talking three months ago. Hell, at one point, you thought he was going to ask you on a date."* I let out a heavy sigh and look toward him, happy when the pep talk I've been giving myself is over.

"It's no problem," I finally say, unsure if I'm lying or not.

He smiles, resting his hand on the butt of a handgun that's tucked into a holster on his waist.

It's not uncommon for folks up here to carry guns. In fact, most mountain folk would think you were crazy for not carrying, but something about the whole thing makes my stomach turn again. Maybe I should listen.

"Shut up, Violet!" I chastise myself under my breath. I wonder what I must look like to him, having a conversation with myself as he stares back at me politely. Maybe he's more scared of me than I am of him.

"I hope this doesn't make you uncomfortable." He slides his hand over the silver magnum in his holster. "It's for protection. I hear there are a lot of bears up on the mountain this time of year. People say they aren't afraid of anything up here."

It's true, they aren't. Most bears in the area are so used to hikers, miners, and fisherman that they'll walk right up to you out of curiosity, but I'm not sure that's reason enough to bring a gun. Maybe that's just my mountain upbringing, but I've always known to stay away and avoid the trails they use.

"Not at all," I lie again. "I have one too, just in case of emergencies." I pat my backpack as though I have my gun in tow, but I don't. I was taught to shoot when I was three, but I don't like carrying it. Instead, I bring bear spray, which I'm not sure will have the same effect in any situation against a gun.

Hawk laughs. “Got it. Sorry if I scared you. I was hoping our meeting would be smooth.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” I say, doing the people pleasing thing I do in order to hide the million things I’m truly thinking about. “My parents own a private investigator firm in town, so I’ve seen it all.”

He nods and trudges up the hill beside me, our boots suctioning mud side by side. “What? You never told me that. That must have been a fun way to grow up.”

I laugh. “*Fun?* More like paranoid. I spend more time worrying about a situation than I do enjoying it, and as a last-ditch effort, I started this business. Fingers crossed that coming back to nature will undo the years of training I’ve been taught.”

Leaves rustle against the wind and a few branches snap as we walk. “I could see that working.” He smiles, flipping his ballcap backward. Why did he do that? He’s trying to turn me on. He wants me excited. “I could also see how tiring an upbringing like that could be. I grew up with a marine as a dad and he didn’t know how to compartmentalize anything. We’d be having family dinner, and he’d tell us all about some raid he did or firefight he got into.”

Maybe he does understand. “Is that why you went into photography?”

He looks toward me long and hard before answering, as though something is on the tip of his tongue, but he can’t find it. “Yeah, I suppose.” He stops there, and I’m a little surprised. On the phone, he’d been chattier.

Maybe he doesn’t like me. Maybe he’s planning my murder. Maybe, he’s committed some kind of awful crime and he’s going to ask me to help him hide it.

Ignoring the ridiculous ramblings in my head, I turn my attention to the cedar and pine that stretch high overhead. Birds sing in the distance and a brook is babbling to the west of us. It’s a beautiful scene, and one that brings me back to center.

“We’re right on the edge of snowfall,” I say. “I think some parts of the mountain have already seen it.”

He grins softly and looks toward me. “That’s what I heard in town. I got here last night and stayed at the Mountain View Lodge. It’s a great place with a nice hot tub overlooking the mountains. I almost gave you a call, but I was already nervous enough for our meeting today, and it was around midnight before I was settled.”

“You should’ve called.” I brush my fingers back through my hair, wondering how last night could’ve gone if he’d called me sooner. “I could’ve brought over some maps and we could’ve gone through them for today’s hike.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know what a nerd I am.

Can I take them back? No? Okay, thanks for nothing.

Thankfully, Hawk laughs off my comment. “That would’ve been nice. I collect maps, mostly vintage ones. I frame them or use the pieces for wrapping these guitars that I build. A nice clear coat over them and they’re in place forever.”

“Do you sell them?”

“Nah. I just make them here and there for friends and family. What about you? What do you like when you’re not showing strangers around the woods? You said on the phone that you worked at the country bar for a while. Do you still hang out there?”

I shake my head. “Haven’t been back since I quit. It’s not my scene. I like hiking, reading, and quiet.” I laugh. “My favorite thing is to come up here all alone and sit by the river making up stories or reading someone else’s.”

“What kinds of stories do you like making up?”

I’m not sure he realizes how invasive a question that is. I shrug. “I don’t know, just stories.”

He grins. “About...”

“About...” I sigh, and my face turns red. I’m not telling him what kinds of stories I make up! “Stuff.”

He stays silent for a moment, then laughs. “Okay, okay... I think I get the picture.”

I fold my arms in front of my chest and look toward him with downturned eyes. “Yeah? What picture is that?”

His voice drops an octave, and he looks toward me as he says, “You’re a naughty girl! You come out here, you sit by the river, and you make up... *stories*. Have I gotten a role in any of these fantasies?” He’s grinning, and he’s probably joking, but I’m suddenly shy and not sure what to say. Either that, or my weirdo meter is going off and I’m shutting down to conserve energy for when the inevitable kidnapping begins.

As I’m thinking over that scenario, and possibly making it way dirtier in my mind than it needs to be, I study the cries and screeches that birds make in the distance and the crunching and snapping of leaves and branches under our boots. I try to ignore the wild scent of his cologne that wafts toward me in the breeze, but it’s impossible. He’s intoxicating. I knew it the moment we started talking, but the more I see of him, the more drunk I get.

Why is a man this handsome out here all alone? There has to be more to it than the freedom. And why Rugged Mountain? There are hundreds of great mountains in Washington and Oregon that would’ve been much easier for him to get to for a little rest and relaxation.

I swallow hard, then tip up onto my toes and back down again. I should ask him why, but my stomach is turning for some reason. If I were listening to my mom’s endless advice, that would be my subconscious telling me something, but I ignore it and push past.

“So, why Rugged Mountain? You have so many beautiful places to hike out west.”

His response is quick... too quick. “I’ve seen all those mountains. I wanted something different. Besides, once we started talking online, I had to see you. You seem a little worried, though. I hope I didn’t make it awkward with that weird fantasy joke. I—”

“No. Sorry. My dad is a retired detective out of San Francisco, and my mom is this crazy sleuth who spends every free second solving random crimes.” I sigh. “So, you can imagine the types of mental illness that’s given me,” I laugh, saying the words with a light heart.

“Oh, I get it. As I said, my dad is a retired marine, and my mom is a writer. She loved hearing his stories, and he loved telling them. It was a match made in heaven... for them. For me, it was... interesting.”

“And you became a photographer? How do you mix a military father and a writer mother to get a photographer?” I realize how rude the question is after I say it, but that detective part of my brain is always on.

Thankfully, he laughs it off. I’m put at ease until we hear a snap neither of us are expecting from deep in the woods.

I glance toward him, studying the trajectory of the sound. It’s too large to be a squirrel and not big enough to be a bear, but it also stops like a human would.

A human. There’s only one human I know who lives on this side of the mountain, and he’s not a wanderer. Not only that, but hunters aren’t allowed in this area, and I didn’t see any permits for other hikers. Which means whoever is up here, is up here illegally.

“Must be a woodchuck or a raccoon,” Hawk says, holding his position.

In the moments that we’re paused, there is no more noise. In fact, there’s no sign of life at all. The mountain is still, which I would normally be grateful for. But there’s an eerie feeling crawling through my stomach that I can’t ignore this time.

“I think we should go.” I turn back and face the opposite direction, expecting that he’ll follow down, but he doesn’t.

He looks toward me, his gaze more discerning than before, more definite. “Nah, let’s keep going.”

I shake my head and the heavy weight that had been on my shoulders sinks into my stomach as I look into his eyes.

“No. I think we should go.”

He stares at me, his dark eyes wide as he settles the heel of his hand on the gun at his hip.

Hairs on the back of my neck stand as I slowly begin to regret every decision I’ve ever made in life.

This handsome man isn’t who I wanted him to be, and this certainly isn’t playing out like one of the fantasies in my head.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says, “but I need you to guide me up this mountain. Do you understand?”

I swallow hard and stare back at him, my throat tight with fear. Something tells me, he’s not here for pleasure, and I’m about to become one of those cautionary tales moms tell their little girls.

Chapter Two

Hawk

She's clever. I'll give her that. And beautiful... *too beautiful*. It's a distraction. Her big brown eyes, that thick waist, and round ass are all too much. That, or I'm simpler than I thought. But this woman is perfection. She's short, delicate, and steeped in an innocence that makes me excited to explore her further.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Who are you?" Her voice is firm and confident, though I can sense her fear as though it's a primal instinct. A wild heathen part of me wants to pin her beneath my frame until she's thrashing and whining. It's a dark excitement that steals me away to a place I shouldn't be going. A place where I make her mine, and every other decision is out of the question, despite how wrong it is. Hell, she's got to be close to twenty years younger than me. Not to mention, a thousand times better person. I don't deserve her.

"It doesn't matter who I am," I grunt, reaching back for her hand as I hop over a boulder on the path. "I just need your help getting to the first cabin. When I'm there, and everything is good, you're free to go."

She narrows her brows. "What does that mean? *If everything is good?*"

I debate how much to tell her. If she were to break free and run, she could jeopardize everything. Then again, if she knows what's going on, she might stay closer... if she believes me.

"Are you going to kill me? I'm just curious because I've watched about eight million crime dramas and I thought you seemed sketchy, but I—"

"If I were going to kill you, would I be listening to you ramble on about crime dramas, or would I have done it already?"

She looks away and shakes her head. “Well, it depends what kind of killer you are. Some of them like to play with their victims. Others like to do it fast.”

“I’m not going to kill you,” I growl, studying her pretty face. “In fact, if it’s up to me, not a hair on your head is harmed, but I need you to listen.”

She narrows her brows and looks toward me with rigid shoulders and a heaving breast line.

I hold her arm gently. “Can you promise that you’ll stay with me until I give you permission to leave?”

She sucks in a sharp breath and stops dead in her tracks, staring blankly ahead as though she’s seen a ghost.

I follow her eye line into the darkening woods, but there’s nothing there.

“Did you see something?”

She narrows her brows and turns back toward me. “I thought so. I thought I saw a man... but he was wearing a black hood. I think I read about this. It’s psychosis. People who’ve been through a traumatic event experience it. If you let me go, I promise not to tell anyone you’re up here. The rangers are going to be looking for me in two days, anyway. Probably sooner if my parents don’t get a call tonight.” She’s rambling. “My mom is relentlessly overprotective. You don’t have a chance. Either you let me go, or you’re going to end up in jail... or worse. People up here take vigilante justice seriously.”

She’s not wrong about that one. I did read about a bunch of locals going crazy on a drifter for skipping out on his diner check. But if I tell her all the details of what’s going on, she’s going to run right back down this mountain and into the house of a retired detective and a mother who has an affinity for crime. Nothing good will come of that.

“I told you,” I run my hand over her arm in comfort, “I’m not going to hurt you. So long as you stay by my side, you’re safe.”

“And when the man in the woods comes after us both, am I safe, then?” She’s shaking and that’s not what I want.

Why am I letting myself get so attached, so involved?

“How much further until we get to the cabin?”

She squeezes her eyes shut, then opens them slowly and tears make a salty path down her cheeks. “A mile. Maybe two. There’s been a lot of rain lately.” Tears bubble up until her shoulders are hunched forward and she’s shaking.

Fuck, this isn’t how I wanted this to go. I was hoping we’d be able to ignore the reason I’m here and enjoy each other’s company, and maybe get closer than we’d been on the phone, but I realize now how unrealistic that is.

“He’s not with me,” I say, cradling her against my chest as I try to calm her tears. “Let’s get to this cabin, and I’ll tell you everything.”

She wipes her face and stares up at me. “And I’m just supposed to believe you? I told you I study crime, right? The first mistake people make is following their captor to a second location.”

“Technically,” I smile, “this is our first location.”

She shakes her head. “Our first location was the trail head. If I follow you to the cabin, that’s our *second location*, and then *I’m* a dumbass.” Her eyes dart and move, searching for an out, desperate for a place to run, but I can’t let her go. Her thick curves bend into a plant on the right side of the path with dark purple berries that cluster together with tiny green leaves. She pulls a bundle off and slides the fruit between her full lips, then passes me a few. “They’re goji berries. They’re usually a summer plant. This one made it under the radar, I guess.” She hands me a few. “They make you feel calm.” I’ve spent enough time in the woods to know that she’s right. “You hired me to help you to the cabin, but I’m not going any further. So don’t ask.”

I nod and stare back at her as the bittersweet goji berry explodes against my taste buds. Maybe I was lying when I said I could let her go at the cabin. Hell, I know I was lying. She

knows too much about the mountain, and I need her expertise. Then again, maybe I just need more time to prove that I'm not the man I'm acting like.

Chapter Three

Violet

I've seen the cabin by the river's edge a thousand times, maybe more. It used to be my favorite place to retreat. The building itself is nothing fancy, but the surrounding babbling brook, cedar, and pine lend a sense of magic to the space that can't be reproduced. At least it was all of that, until some psycho dragged me here against my will.

The worst part of all this—I knew better. I had a bad feeling about him at the base of the mountain. Heck, if I'm being honest, I had a bad feeling about him when he changed his appointment multiple times, but I didn't listen.

Why didn't I listen?

"This is nice," Hawk says, striking a match against the logs and kindling already waiting in the fire. It's custom for the previous tenant to leave a bundle of wood for the next. I doubt Hawk will be as kind. Aside from his looks, he's a giant disappointment. A handsome face and a bunch of muscles... nothing else.

I shouldn't have stepped inside, but apparently, I'm an idiot all around today. My mom is going to be so disappointed when she finds me in a shallow grave below this place.

"You're at your cabin. You said I could go." I turn toward the cabin door, but he steps in front of it, blocking the passageway with his oversized frame.

Of course, nothing is that easy. Though, it's expected.

"About that..."

"About nothing. I'm leaving!" I protest, trying to shove him out of the way, but he doesn't budge. "I did my part. You're here. Now let me go!" I hold back from crumbling into a ball of wretched tears, but it's not working. I feel them working up my throat.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

“The man in the woods,” he says, leaning against the door frame. “The one you saw earlier, he’s Alaskan.”

“Okay...” I clear my throat, trying to dismiss the knot sitting at the base. “So you Alaskans are all breaking the rules. Sounds cool. What does any of this have to do with me?”

“You know the mountain. I thought you just knew direction, but you know the foliage as well. I need help finding a plant.”

“Too bad!” I bark, lifting my arm to push him away again. I can’t help but notice he’s not restraining me. He’s not even shoving me back. He’s just letting me go off while he stands like a statue in front of the door, unphased.

“You’re okay, honey.” His voice is almost soothing. He’s sick. “You’re safe here. I can explain everything. I just need you to calm down first.”

“*Calm down? Honey?*” I push him harder, but he isn’t budging. “You’ve lied to me since the second we met. I bet you don’t even like hiking. Do you? All that talk was just a ploy to get me out here, so you could...” I roll my eyes and lean against the back wall of the cabin, exhausted with shoving.

“Good girl,” he says, his voice deep as he grips my arm. He’s dragging me somewhere, I think toward the fireplace, but I don’t care. My body goes on a rampage again, flailing and kicking, more violently than I had before.

The motion still doesn’t phase him, and sickly enough, even in his firmness, he’s careful, oddly gentle, holding me against his chest as he moves me. He’s hot, his throat beating wildly as he lowers me into place. “Fucking hell,” he sighs. “You’re a feisty one. If you’d calm down for thirty seconds, I could tell you what’s going on.”

“It’s all lies anyway,” I spit, feeling my eyelids begin to swell. “You’re a criminal. I should’ve seen it. I’ve prepared my whole life for this, and I didn’t trust myself.”

“My name is Special Agent Hawk Crowley.” He pulls out a gold badge and hands it to me to study.

For a second, I believe him. He's said it so honestly. Not only that, but he's kind of bad at the whole captor thing. I've seen it done quite a few times in movies and documentaries. I'm supposed to be tied up, and he's supposed to be a whole lot rougher.

"Twenty-two years in service," he says, sitting on the floor next to me. His large body lowers with a thud. I want to believe him. If I believe him, that means my instincts aren't wrong, which would've been a total blow to my self esteem as I died a slow death in a shallow grave.

"Why are you here?"

His gaze rakes over my body, almost as though he's hungry.

My body responds, though it sickens me a bit to think I'm turned on by this asshole. Then again, maybe this is my opportunity. My chance to use my feminine wilds for the betterment of my situation. Maybe this man is simple. Maybe he'd be turned on by me. Maybe I could lure him in like some indecent proposal situation. We just skip the money part, and I make him think I'm going to have sex with him until I'm close enough to take his gun. Then, I run like hell. Too bad running like hell isn't my strong suit.

I stare back at him, wondering how far I could get with my temptress ways, but the longer I stare, the longer I realize I'm insane. This man is a god, and I'm... not. He's probably looking at me like a hungry wolf because he's literally going to eat me... and not in the sexy way. My father is a retired detective. He would do anything to solve a case. I'm sure back in the day, flattery wouldn't have been off the table. I'm sure that's all Hawk is doing. The few kind things he's said to me have all been a ruse to get me to help him solve whatever crime he's trying to solve.

When my seduction plan fizzles out in my head, I look around the cabin, searching for something that would come in good use, but it's bare, intentionally so. The shack is only meant to be a small reprieve from a storm for hikers who need a break. There aren't any amenities except for whatever food

the last person has left behind and the logs in the fire. Even the log poker is too worn to use as a weapon.

When my eyes finally drag back to his, he's dialed on me, watching me, studying my every move.

"What?" I run my hands back through my hair. My skin is hotter than it was before. *Why?*

"You're thinking about leaving," he says. "You're planning it. I saw you doing it on the path as well."

"No. I'm waiting for you to tell me why you're here, Special Agent Something or Other."

He lets out a heavy sigh and straightens his back, setting his broad shoulders wide before pulling his phone from his pocket and swiping a few times. He hands the screen toward me. "Have you seen this man?"

I study the photo of the black-haired man. His beard is grungy, and he has a tattoo on his left temple of a snake that wraps around his neck. "No. Who is he, and why would I know him?"

"He's the guy I'm looking for." He takes his phone back and tucks it into his pocket. "What about a plant called morning glories? It's a late season blue flower that grows on vines with heart petals."

My brows narrow. "Yeah. Historically, people here used their seeds as a hallucinogenic. Fortunately, modern people stay away from them because they taste terrible, and they aren't really cost efficient since it takes a fair amount of seeds to get most people where they want to go." I give him a snide smile. "Is all of this because you're trying to get high?"

He pokes at the fire with the long stick and sparks fly up the flume. "I need you to take me to where it grows in the morning."

"You didn't answer my question. Why do you want to go there? It's not worth anything, trust me."

His shoulders rise and fall slowly. "There's a guy up here from Juneau. His name is Jeramiah Wilcox. He's been

traveling to this area for years, collecting the seeds and bringing them back to Alaska to replant.”

“Okay,” I say as my voice rises and falls sarcastically. “Is that a crime? If it is, it seems it would be Rugged Mountain’s axe to grind.”

Hawk shakes his head. “It’s not that simple. This guy has built a cult around the worship of this flower. He believes that it’s a conduit sent by a higher power and that the hallucinations bring him closer to that force, which gives him and his people the answers to whatever is ailing them. Except the answers aren’t coming from the flower, they’re coming from him. He’s mass producing the seeds and gaining followers, mostly young women who believe every sick thing he’s telling them.” He lets out a sigh. “That’s who you saw in the woods. He’s here for more seeds. Despite his attempts to grow the same strain in Alaska, they don’t do as well as the ones grown natively here. It could be the soil or the climate, but it keeps him coming back as he tries to gather more followers. I’ve been tracking him around Alaska for months, but he moves. The only way I knew for sure I could get him was here, in the one spot this particular strain of morning glories grows... on Rugged Mountain.”

I stare blankly toward the handsome man in front of me. I study his firm, square jaw, and the slight dimple that dots the center of his chin. I can’t deny my attraction to him. Even in this stressful scenario, I notice him in a way that’s unbecoming. That said, he’s full of shit. This is a small town. People would know if some psycho cult leader were hiking into our mountains to harvest hallucinogenic seeds... right?

We would know. Hawk is lying. Even if he’s not, I don’t want to be mixed up in some chase for a man who’s smuggling hallucinogens and brain washing people. I need to run. Hawk hasn’t been honest with me. He could be lying again. I can’t trust him. In one quick motion, I stand from the chair where I’ve been sitting and make a mad dash toward the door, pulling it open only to be pulled back into the cabin by Hawk’s strong arms.

“This isn’t pleasant for me either,” he growls. “I don’t want to kidnap you.”

“Oh really? Then why don’t you let me go!”

“Trust me,” he spits, “I want to. But apparently, I enjoy the torment.”

“You’re being tormented?” He’s leaned me back against the cabin wall and pins my wrist above my head. “I’m the one being held against my will.”

“For good cause. Jeramiah Wilcox saw you. You said so yourself. Do you know what a man like that is capable of?” He looks away, then back again. “One of the women tricked by Jeramiah was my teenage niece. She wanted to believe that there was a fast track to happiness after some rough years in high school, and he was going to be able to take her there. The night that it came across the radio that she overdosed... was the most difficult day of my life.”

I stand still for a moment, letting my lungs catch up with my racing heart. That can’t be true. Fuck him and his stupid lies. “So what if he saw me? He’s long gone by now, I’m sure.”

Hawk shakes his head, and his voice is strained as he says, “He’s not that humble. The man believes he’s the messiah. He won’t back down. He’s convinced himself that he is the vessel for which others gain help. I can’t let you go back down that mountain alone.”

“You were never going to let me go once we got up here, were you?” I cross my arms in front of my chest, relishing in another of the lies he’s told me. I should’ve known better.

“None of that matters now.” His eyes are on mine, heavy and hot. His hand rests on my shoulder with strength. I’m not sure why it’s sexual. It shouldn’t be. I hate him! He lied to me, over and over. He dragged me out here. He physically stopped me from leaving. But still, when he touches me, I light on fire and my entire body screams for more. “What matters is... I need your help,” he continues, brushing his thumb under my chin, “and I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Part of me wants to believe him. The other part knows I'm full of shit and probably needs some major therapy. Either way, the detective in me has a feeling, I'm staying put. Meanwhile, the aching between my legs says, I just might like it.

Chapter Four

Hawk

I can't blame her for being afraid. I didn't go about this the best way possible. I could've been upfront from the beginning, but if it had gotten out that I were coming after Jeramiah, the people of Rugged Mountain would have gone on their own witch hunt. I've scoped out the area enough times to know how the people are here. They're steadfast and take charge. They're a community above all else. They protect their own, and their land, at all costs.

"Thanks for the food." Violet leans against the back wall of the cabin near the fireplace. Her legs are stretched out and I can see a new exhaustion on her that hadn't been there earlier. I'm probably evil for loving it. But there's something sweet about the way her head keeps dipping onto her shoulder with a half-eaten granola bar still in her hand.

"I brought you a sleeping bag. I can roll it out for you. We'll sleep for a few hours, but I'd like to move in the dark if at all possible. We have the advantage then."

Her breath hitches and she pulls out her sleeping bag. "You know this terrain isn't easy to navigate. And in case you didn't notice, I'm in shape for novice hikes, not full-blown scaling the side of the mountain type jobs."

Her blue and gray sleeping bag splays out on the hard floor, and she looks up at me, with slightly parted lips, that wake-up parts of me I didn't know existed. "Are you really a cop?"

"True and blue," I say. "Are you really a hiking guide?"

She sighs. "I think today might be my last day."

I laugh, and lay back on my own sleeping bag, staring toward Violet in the flickering light of the fireplace. She's beautiful and strong. She's gathered her sleeping bag up to her neck, and she's staring at me, her eyes drooping with

exhaustion as she glares, as though she's afraid to take them off of me.

"You really are safe with me," I say, reaching my arm out for her.

She flinches back at first, then calms, but the violence in her eyes is still there and I know it's a promise, not a threat. The truth of it is, I don't blame her.

I pull my hand away, not wanting to make her uncomfortable, but my palms ache to touch her again. Fuck. What the hell is wrong with me. She's young, and I've kidnapped her. None of this is romantic, but it doesn't change how I'm feeling, what my body is saying, what I need.

"Wait," her voice is small and muffled, so much so that I'm not sure what she's said. "Wait," she says again. "It doesn't make sense, but that felt comforting." She rolls her eyes. "In a *Beauty and the Beast*... fall in love with your captor type of way."

I can't help but laugh. "We're falling in love now? *Wow!* That escalated quickly."

She sighs and turns away from me. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm just... I'm scared. And for some reason, it felt good to have you next to me. Even if you are a liar."

The liar part stings. "I didn't mean to lie to you." I wrap my arm around her and pull her close. "Most of the things we talked about weren't a lie."

"Please tell me that thing about your niece was the truth."

"Every word. She's okay now, but it's been a hard road back for her. She trusted someone, and he let her down." The irony of the statement hits me like a ton of bricks. Am I just as bad?

"So you really do love mountain berry pie?" She hides a grin. "And your mom sang you *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* backwards when you were growing up?"

I can't help but grin at the details she's remembered. Maybe I'm not the piece of shit I'm thinking I am. Maybe she

does have room in her heart for me.

“All true. Just like... whatever is happening here. I... it’s real. For me, anyway. I want to hold you.” My voice cracks when I speak because I’m not used to talking so emotionally. I’m afraid of how she’ll respond, and I’m afraid of how my body will react. This wasn’t part of the plan. I never intended to want her so desperately. And I should’ve known when we were talking online that seeing her in person would only make those feelings grow stronger. The way she’s sitting under that sleeping bag now, with her head all tucked low, and her tits heaving beneath, it’s inevitable. I have to have her.

“Do you want to fall in love, Violet?”

She balks at my question. “Not with you!” Her words say one thing, but her body says another. There’s a pulse in her eyes and they widen gently.

“I think you’re lying,” I say, slowly inching closer.

She clears her throat, and her breaths are quick and shallow. “You’re the liar, not me.”

I smile at her comment and brush a silky strand of hair from her face. “I’ve spent a lot of years analyzing people. And you... you’re holding back with me.”

She rolls toward me, resting her head on her palm. “Imagine that. Holding back with a guy who lied to me for months.”

“Yet here we are, lying next to each other, our bodies proving what we can’t admit.”

She stays still for a second, then leans in slightly, her voice a soft whisper. “So, what are you going to do about it?” Her breath hitches, and her scent is warm and excited. She’s making a monster of me. Those curves, and those lips. She unzips her sleeping bag and rolls on top of me, her gaze dilated, ready, nearly black.

She wets her lips and squirms, looking down at me from above, her legs straddle my waist, and my cock jumps with excitement.

I should stop her. I know I should, but I can't. She's testing the bond, and I'm relishing in every sensation.

A soft moan escapes her lips as she rocks her hips back and forth. "You're the one who's needy, aren't you, Special Agent? Do you want me? Do you want this tight little pussy, and my thick hips pressed against you? Do you want my soft lips on your cock, and my silky hair spread over your stomach?" The way she says the words is almost rhythmic, like a snake charmer, luring me in. I go blank and my dick goes hard. It's working.

She could do anything from this point forward, and I'd be at her mercy. Happily. Willingly. Fully.

Chapter Five

Violet

Men are simple, I learned that when I worked at The Barnyard. It's a country night club that caters to locals and out of towners alike. It seems all it takes is a little sexual interest and suddenly men are at your feet, ready and willing to please you however possible. At least that's what the women did at the bar. I'm not sure what kind of deals they were making, but I saw them using their sexuality to get it.

Then again, I might be as simple as Hawk. Despite the fact that he's holding me against my will, I'm attracted to this big, inked, burly cop laying beneath me and with every word that slips from our lips, I genuinely want him more.

I suck in a deep breath. *God, he smells good.* It's like a walk on a late fall day after a campfire. My plan was to tempt him with something naughty, lull him into a sense of safety, then dart. But now, staring down at his big brown eyes, as his cock presses against me, all I can think is how bad I want to touch him. I wonder what he'd feel like inside of me, what I'd feel like on top of him, what his hands would feel like on my throat, on my stomach, on my skin.

"I need to touch you, Violet. I don't think you understand what you're doing to me." His voice is deep and brooding, almost pained and I want to relieve him.

"What then? I'm a virgin," I choke, nearly whispering. "We fuck, and then what?"

"I don't want to fuck you," he growls, his eyes flaring with some kind of spark I've never seen. "It's deeper than that. I want to know when I have you, you're mine... for good. And it's been a long damn time, Violet. I'm just as scared of all this as you are."

"Please. I'm really supposed to believe that a guy that looks like you, isn't giving it to every woman that asks."

He laughs and turns his head to the side. “And I’m supposed to believe you’re a virgin? You’re talking like you got an education on seduction. Valedictorian, I’m sure.”

My clit throbs as I change positions ever so slightly. His hard cock lays lengthwise in his jeans, hard enough to press against my mound as I move. “Good thing I don’t care what you think,” I say, lowering toward him. I’m not sure what I’m doing, or why I’m doing it, but my body takes over like it knows best and though a part of my rational brain knows I should be stopping, I don’t. I keep moving down until his lips are on mine and my thighs are begging for friction.

I rise and fall to chase the touch of his hand on my back, as an aching whisper escapes my lips.

“You need to stop, if you’re playing with me,” he growls into my ear, sending a low rumble of tingles down through my spine and into my groin.

I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know why I’m doing it. Well, I did... but that’s long gone out the window. Now, this isn’t to run. *I want him*. I want the torment to be over. I want him to spread me wide and hold me close to his chest.

“I’m not playing with you, Hawk.” I manage the words breathlessly as I cling to his shirt.

He draws his hand up and lands it on my cheek. “Then lay back. I need to taste you first. I need to hear beg me for relief.”

“Now who’s talking like a valedictorian seducer?”

He grins and rolls me back, taking control of the moment. I can’t help but wonder if this is my first mistake. That letting him have control even for a moment will put me at risk for whatever he may have planned. But right now, I don’t care. The thought is brief and buried beneath hormones the second I catch sight of his glassy eyes as he dips and pulls at my leggings. I can’t help but ache for more. I’ve lost the battle against myself.

I’m not sure what I expect from the big, burly man, but he takes his time with me, gently drawing out the torture of his touch. His fingertips graze across my needy skin and his eyes

take over me like he's holding a prize, like he needs me, just as badly as I need him... maybe more.

My body isn't as patient, and I feel my hips rising, searching for his face. When he finally buries his beard against my mound, my insides scream, and I let out a sigh so deeply held that it makes him groan. For a few moments, he devours me, like it's been his life's mission to come here to this place and touch me. And in this moment, it's hard to believe I ever thought he could hurt me. He's so gentle.

How is it that a man I've known for less than twenty-four hours makes me feel ways I've been desperate to feel for as long as I've longed for love?

I'm soaking wet, embarrassingly so, but he seems to like it. He laps me up and slides two fingers deep inside, stretching me further than I've ever been stretched.

I cry out, aching as a pinching burns with his touch.

"Fuck, you weren't kidding," he groans. "You're so tight."

I lick my lips and stare down at him. "Yeah, virgin... remember?"

He nods and stares back at me. "I should stop. I don't want you to remember this as your first."

"If you stop, I'll run," I snap, staring back at him with heat.

He grins coyly and dips back between my legs, pumping his fingers in and out gently, as he works my clit between his lips and tongue.

Nothing about this is right, but it feels too good to stop.

I rock my hips against his face as he works my body. Tiny little sighs and moans drip from my lips as energy builds in my groin. I should be repulsed. This man lied to me. He dragged me up here. He refused to let me leave. But for some reason, that only makes my pussy grow wetter.

"Are you going to come for me, honey?" His voice is so deep. It's velvet. "Or should I tie you up first? That's why you like this, right? You're my captor?"

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to feel. He licks up my slit, and stands from the sleeping bag, grabbing a strip of fabric that's tied to the end. He tears it off with one fast motion then turns toward me with a darkness in his eyes that's both soft and possessive.

My pussy clenches. I'm letting him have control. I'm not sure I'm ready. I'm not sure what that means. He could be playing me. *I was going to play him.* If he's going to tie me up and keep me here, this was his best way of doing it.

I want to call him out, but when he lifts my sweater off, and exposes my hard nipples to the room, I lose interest in hating him again.

"I don't hear any objections," he says, wrapping my arms behind my back with the smooth fabric. He's gentle in touch, carefully tying a knot as he kisses the nape of my neck.

My heart races as I stare back at him. Heat stirs between us and his eyes flicker with desperation, an urge, an animal instinct so obvious that my body can't help but react.

"You like the power being taken from you, don't you?" His voice is deep and resonating throughout my body.

"No," I gasp, tugging against his restraint. "I liked being in control." The words leave my lips, but even I know they're a lie. My pussy is dripping wet. So wet, that when he pulls my thighs apart again, there's an audible suction.

He groans and scowls as though my excitement as somehow offended him. "I think your body is telling a different story. Your body says you like the idea of me being in control." He circles his large fingers along my inner thigh as he talks, then moves his hand over my stomach and onto my bare breasts, flicking each nipple before moving between my legs once more.

He rubs his thumb over the top of my clit, tracing circles. He's teasing me and I'm trembling, desperate, aching to come.

"I need to taste your cock," I whine. "I need you to spread me open."

He growls low and smiles, clenching his teeth tight as he looks back at me. “So needy. I’m not sure there’s room for me in that tight little body.”

My clit throbs again and my nipples harden. I stare toward him as he goes back to work between my legs. I struggle against the restraint, desperate to touch him.

“You’re going to come for me first, honey. I need to taste your excitement and relax that little pussy so you’re good and ready.”

He leans into my thighs and licks at my clit, thrashing wildly between my legs with no finesse. He’s hungry, starved, desperate for me.

My thighs lock and squeeze around his head as he works.

“Look at me,” he growls, only pulling up slightly. His eyes lift and he stares toward me, as though he’s as desperate for the look on my face, as he is for my come itself.

His free hand wraps to the knot he’s tied behind my back as his other holds my outer thigh and rubs me gently. The dichotomy of touch sends a chill down my spine and within seconds my body convulses and stiffens all at once as he continues to lap up my juices.

I don’t want it to be over, but as I look down at him, my excitement shining on his beard, there’s a look in his eye that’s turned soft and caring, rather than hungry.

He kisses the inside of my thighs and then my stomach, working his way up to my lips. “Get some rest my sweet little captor”

“What? No. I need you!” I pull free from the knot he’s made behind my back without much effort, and lay on his chest, stroking his hard cock.

“Not tonight,” he says, moving my hand onto his chest. “This needs to be special. You feel relieved, right?”

“Kind of,” I nod, “but also still pretty desperate for that dick. And what about you?”

“Aching,” he groans, “but something tells me you’re worth the wait.”

My heart swells as I lay back in his arms, staring up at the knotty pine boards. This wasn’t about capturing me. He genuinely wants me to feel special, and it’s working.

Chapter Six

Hawk

My eyes close and all I can smell is her sweet juice on my beard.

Fuck. She's everything. I know it without a shadow of a doubt. I need this woman in my life, and I could lay like this forever.

I'm not sure how long we've been laying here, but I'd guess it's been about four hours, which puts it at roughly around four a.m. It's time to get moving, except she's breathing gently against my chest, her hair is draped down over my shoulder, and I've never felt so content in my life.

I need to get my shit together.

I move my arm from beneath her head and stand from the ground, arching my back as I try to readjust my spine.

"What's wrong?" Her voice is soft and sweet. "Are we leaving?"

I clear my throat. "I am. You're staying here."

I expect relief but instead she offers defiance. "No! Why would I stay here? You needed my help to get around the mountain, remember?"

My jaw clenches. It's true. I did need her help around the mountain, but now, I'm feeling things would be better if I went alone. Not just for her sake, but mine too. She's a distraction. A sweet, pretty diversion that I know is going to throw me off rather than keep me focused, and right now, I need to get back on the trail. "I'd feel much better knowing you're safe, and I think I'd get more done if I weren't looking at your ass the whole time." I smile and pull her close. "Besides, I thought you were happy to be let go. You wanted freedom. I'm giving it to you."

She quiets and rolls up her sleeping bag, tucking it into her pack without saying a word. I'm guessing she's frustrated,

though I can't figure why. If I'd asked her to stay back yesterday at this time, she'd have told me yes without question, and probably taken the opportunity to tell the town what an asshole I am.

Maybe last night meant something to her too. I want to ask, but I'm too nervous I'll hear something I don't want to hear, like her vehement distrust in me again. I'm not sure my ego can take it.

"We can stop by my friend Walker's place. He's the only one that lives up here. Maybe he's seen something."

"You have a friend up here?" My brows narrow. "Where?"

"Less than a mile up stream. He lives completely off grid, so I'm sure he has seen something. Though, he's a bit of a hermit so... maybe not. Either way, I'm sure he can help us."

I don't tell her, I plan to leave her there, where I know for sure she's protected. Instead, "Hustle up. We're wasting darkness," escapes my mouth.

She darts me a look of disapproval for my strange use of expressions then tosses her bag up onto her back as I hold open the cabin door.

It's a crisp morning, and the sun hasn't even started to rise. Violet makes her way westward out of the cabin and into the forest of cedar and pine that we hadn't explored yet. She's carrying a flashlight and waving it back and forth as she steps, crunching over fallen leaves and sticks.

"I know you're leaving me with him," she says, turning back, "but I'm not going to let you. He's going to help us. Walker is a veteran. He's seen some of the craziest stuff. You should hear his stories. One time, he told me about this land mine that almost took out his entire battalion."

"How'd you two meet?"

"I was up here hiking one day and he was fishing. He caught a rainbow trout and subsequently had it stolen by a grizzly. I had to stop and laugh. We've been friends ever since. Well, friends in the way that we've had a few conversations, but mostly just wave from a distance. He's not a social guy."

I nod and stare out at the dark forest in front of us, watching as her silhouette moves through the trees. She's careful and steady, even in the black woods. I should ask her now what she thought of last night, and if she regrets what we did, but she turns back first.

"You know, if you want to go solve your case, you should go. I can find my way to Walker's cabin. I'm sure he's up and getting ready for a hunt, anyway."

"No, I'm not letting you take off in the dark alone!" I reach out for her arm, hoping to talk some sense into her, but she flinches away. "*Just go!* Please. Walker's cabin is right around the corner."

"And then what?"

She shrugs. "Then I guess you got what you came for, right?"

"What is this about? I came here for Jeramiah, but I was excited to see you. Hell, last night meant everything to me. I could've laid there with you for the rest of my life. But I have to get this guy so I can move on. And I have to make sure you're safe while I do it. That's all."

Her gaze relaxes, and she moves toward me, her voice soft. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm worried about you now. You're going to be all alone in the dark and who knows what this guy is capable of. My mom has had me watching true crime for twenty years. The cultists are the weirdest of all."

I land my hand on her cheek. "I'm going to come back to you, and we're going to pick up right where we left off last night. Okay?"

She sighs and leans back against a pine tree, staring up at me with tears welling in her eyes. "You better, or I'll have the mountain up here looking for you."

"Fair enough." I kiss her forehead and linger in the moment, breathing in the soft scent of flowers in her hair. *How does she still smell so good?* "Just promise me you'll stay put at Walker's. I need to know you're safe. How far are we from his cabin?"

She nods to the left, and through the trees I see the edge of a small log cabin that looks sturdier than the one we've been staying in, at least from what I can see through the pale light of the moon. "That's his place."

"Okay," I say, kissing her once more. "Let's go get you settled."

She nods, but she turns away before I can kiss her again, and a pit grows in the bottom of my stomach. I know she isn't going to follow directions. That's not who she is. And I'm not sure, I'm in any position to blame her for it.

Chapter Seven

Violet

Walker answers the door straight away, which I'm grateful for. I've heard enough haunting urban legends about Rugged Mountain after dark to keep my heart racing walking around here at night.

The ghost of miners that didn't make it through their expeditions. The wolf shifters that hunt and prowl for a mate out in Saddle Creek. And then there's the unforgiving tale of the night Mrs. Richardson was abducted and ravaged by some kind of purple aliens up on Whiskey Pass. She went into pretty intense detail as she retold the story at Mullet's bar downtown. I didn't hear a lot of it, but from what I gather, there was something about seven-foot-tall aliens and giant dicks that did all kinds of crazy things. Truthfully, it was a more intriguing story than most of the books I've read lately.

Walker rubs his eyes and stares at me blankly. I'm sure he's not used to having company at all, let alone this late. "*Violet?* What are you doing out here?" He holds out his arms, as though he's afraid for me. I lean into his massive chest and hug him hello. We don't talk much, but he seems like a long-lost brother to me.

"It's a long story," I say, rolling my eyes. "I need your help."

"What kind of help?"

"Long story, remember?"

Walker's jaw tightens. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head. "No, nothing like that. I was helping this detective guy. He dropped me off here a second ago, and now he's out and looking for some cult leader and I'm... I've got to help him, but I don't know how."

"A cop?" His voice cracks. "Looking for a cult leader?" There's a nervousness in Walker's tone that sets me on alert,

like maybe he's been up here all these years for a reason, but I don't question him. Instead, I just keep talking. I know my radar has been off, for a while apparently.

“Yeah, I don't know all the details. He's trying to catch this guy off guard.”

“And you're going to help? How?” Walker sits on the edge of his rocking chair and looks back at me like I've lost my mind. “Sounds like he wants you to stay here, while he does his work.”

“Yeah, but I can't do that. I need to help him. He doesn't know these mountains. He doesn't know the terrain.”

Walker runs his big hand over his long beard before making his way toward the stove to start a pot of water. I assume it's for tea when he pulls down two mugs. I've never noticed how well he keeps the place. He's put a lot of effort into making the space his own. There's a set of handmade bookshelves framing the hallway with a hand carved deer in each corner. And the countertops in the kitchen have been sanded and stained to match. The space even smells good, like fresh baked bread and cinnamon.

“I know you love this kind of shit,” he says, settling two tea bags into the mugs, “but I think you need to rest here tonight and wait for your detective to come find you. It sounds like that's what he wanted.”

Every ounce of me wants to scream for him to stop and take me seriously, but I know better. He'll only laugh me off with that kind of reaction. I need to move slow if I'm going to get his help.

“You're probably right,” I say, “and that would make total sense if this were just some random case I was chasing. But this isn't the grocery store thing, or the time I followed that old man down to the riverbank because I thought he'd stolen from the diner. I care about Hawk. I don't want anything to happen to him.”

Walker narrows his gaze. “What do you mean you care about him? Didn't you guys just meet?”

“We’ve been talking for a few months online and I don’t know... when I saw him in person... everything just clicked. Then last night we—”

“Spare me,” Walker smiles, and hands me a steaming cup of tea. “If I were to help you, what did you have in mind?”

My heart races with excitement at the thought of maybe getting his help. “I was hoping we could use your ATV. I think we can catch up with Hawk and you have guns. We could use them for backup.”

“I can’t get mixed up with the law, Violet.”

“You don’t have to,” I say, relieving him of the stress of telling me whatever he’s been through. “You can remain anonymous. I just need a ride and a gun.”

Walker shakes his head. “I’ll help you... under one condition.”

“Whatever you want.”

He pauses for a long moment, then stares back at me. “I’m lonely up here.”

“You want me to visit you more? I’ll visit you more.”

He laughs. “No. Not like that. I want to meet someone. Someone I can talk to and—”

“Oh.” I grin. “You want a girlfriend. You want me to set you up with someone?”

“Maybe not a traditional setup, but help me meet someone who has the same interests.”

“I’m not sure a woman who won’t leave her house and has no interest in people is going to want to leave her house to meet someone,” I say with a laugh. “But I’d like to try.”

“Similar interests then,” he says, grabbing the keys to the ATV from beside the door. “Just someone I can talk to is fine. Hell, I can talk to her online. That way we can chat without a lot of pressure.”

I open his gun cabinet and swing a rifle over my shoulder, then grab a case of bullets from the drawer beneath. “Do you

get internet up here?”

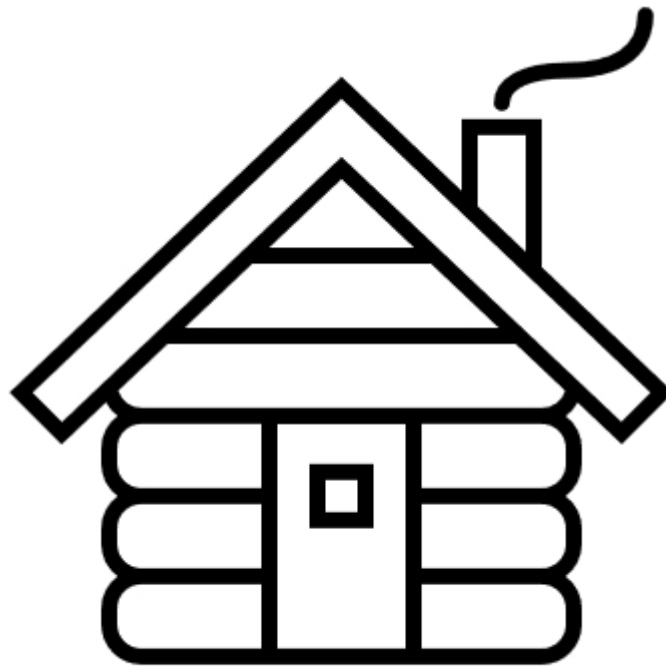
“Nothing. I’d have to come into town, but it might be worth it.”

“Yeah,” I say, opening the front door. “I’ll help you.”

“And I’ll help you,” he says, locking the cabin up behind him. “Truthfully, I’d have helped you anyway.”

I know he would’ve, but I don’t mind helping Walker find someone to spend time with. I can’t imagine how lonely he is up here. I consider myself introverted, but he takes it to the next level.

Walker starts the ATV and a loud rumble shakes my stomach as I hold on to the bars on each side of the machine. It won’t take us long to catch up with Hawk, but he will hear us coming, and I’m not sure how happy that’s going to make him.



Speeding along on the four-wheeler is fast and efficient, and for a second, I close my eyes just to feel the wind in my hair. It’s rare that I get to ride trails quickly like this. I didn’t think I’d care for it. I rode the back roads with my dad when I was a kid, but I haven’t been on a four-wheeler in years. I figured you missed out on too much of the good stuff. The

pine needles, the spongy grass, the soft crunching of leaves, and the bright colors. It's all part of the beauty. But moving quickly has its advantages too. Like right now, when I need to know that Hawk is safe.

"I think I see him," Walker shouts back, pointing toward a shadowy figure in the night.

I bend around Walker's large frame and see Hawk in the headlights staring back at us, gun drawn. I should've thought this part over.

"It's me," I shout, waving my arms in the air as we slow the vehicle at his side.

I'm not sure what I should do now that I'm here. *Should I run to him? Should I play it cool? Should I show him my gun and tell him I'm here to help?*

Walker kills the engine and leans forward off the ATV, climbing off. I follow his lead and step toward Hawk, a smile on my face like I'm proud of what I've done. It's unintentional but seeing him has me feeling warm and fuzzy. I reach out for Hawk, desperate to feel the warmth of his arms again. But when I step forward, the ground beneath me disappears and suddenly, I'm falling and screaming, trying to figure out what the hell is happening. Soon, the falling stops, and I'm met with the heavy reality of the ground as the world goes black.

Chapter Eight

Hawk

Looking at Walker, I know he's hiding something. Call it professional intuition, but something about the guy isn't on the up and up. Thankfully, it's not my responsibility to give a shit. I'm here for one guy and one guy only... Jeramiah Wilcox.

That said, the only person in the universe that really matters right now, is a girl. A girl who's laying at the bottom of a trench, motionless.

"Violet!" I yell down, calling out for her. She doesn't answer. I yell again, my stomach in knots as my brain runs a thousand miles an hour trying to figure what to do. "Violet, please!"

"I have ropes," Walker says. "I can run back and grab them."

"I have to go down there," I say. "She could be hurt."

Walker readjusts his stance and stares at me as though I've lost my mind. "How are you going to do that? You could fall and hurt yourself or land on her and do more damage. Just sit here until I get back." He talks like he's had a high position in the military. Having listened to my father bark commands all my life, there's an unmistakable cadence to their speech.

As much as I want to argue, I know he's right. I'd guess the hole is about six feet wide and eight feet deep. It was covered by branches and leaves. It's a trap, usually built by hunters, but this isn't for animals. This was built to stop people. It's a wonder I didn't fall in myself.

Fucking hell. It should be me down there, not her. I should've never brought her out here to begin with.

I study the vines sticking out from the edges of the hole. They aren't perfectly spaced, but they look strong. I doubt they'd hold my weight for long, but I think they might get me down there. Besides, Walker has at least a mile back to his

cabin and a mile back. That could take twenty minutes or more. I can't leave her down there that long. What if she's bleeding, or hit her head?

Without more thought, I hop down the shaft and into the hole, skipping the roots as best I can until I reach the bottom. With the light from my flashlight, I look Violet over. For the fall she took, she looks to be in okay shape, aside from the fact that she's knocked out. Then again, I can't see inside of her. I splash water on her face. I know better than to move her immediately in case of a break.

"Come on, sweetheart. You're okay."

Nothing.

I splash water again, hoping and praying that this time she wakes.

"Come on, honey. Just open your eyes for me. Please."

"*Hawk? Where are we?*" Her voice is shallow and crackling as she sits up in a hurry, frantically pulling herself to my chest. "Where are we? Did they get us? Did Jeramiah get us? Where's Walker? It's my fault he's out here." She twists around in a circle, easing my heart that there isn't any major damage, though I'm sure once the adrenaline wears off, she'll start to feel the pain.

"He went back to get some ropes, but I think we can climb out of here if you're up for it. What hurts?"

She looks toward me. "Nothing. I'm okay. Well," she rubs the back of her skull, "I think my head is going to be sore for a while. Am I bleeding?"

Carefully, I move her smooth hair to the side and shine the light toward her head, gently feeling for any injury. "No. The leaves and sticks must have acted like a spring when you fell. You may have passed out from the shock. Can you move everything okay?"

She bends her knees and elbows, then lands her hand on my chest, and stares toward me the same way she did last night. "I'm sorry. I think I just made this worse."

I wrinkle my brows. “That’s not possible. Anytime you’re in my arms, looking up at me, I have a feeling everything will be okay. I do wish you weren’t hurting, though.”

She leans into my lips slowly, pressing into me with gentle pressure and my world starts and stops all at once. This woman is everything, and if we weren’t sunk in the bottom of this hole with God knows what lurking, I’d take her here and now.

“You need some help?” a voice calls from above. The man staring down at us, is the man I’ve been looking for. The man with the long dark hair and a beard that looks like it may be hiding birds.

Violet clutches my arm, and a streak of anger rushes through me that I’ve put us in this mess.

“We’re good,” I holler, playing dumb. “Got a guy on his way back now. He’s bringing a rescue team.” I’m lying, hoping Jeramiah doesn’t know I’ve come for him.

“It was for wild pigs, not people,” he shouts, throwing down a rope. I saw you fell in on one of my cameras.

Cameras. How the hell does the dude have cameras up here? I don’t bother asking. I only stare at the rope he’s dangled in front of us, knowing that I’ve still got fifteen minutes before Walker gets back and I’m not sure I can hold Jeramiah off the scent that long. If I don’t grab the rope, he’s going to know I’m up to something. Then, who knows what he’ll do.

I turn toward Violet. “You stay here until I’m at the top. Once I’m up there, I’ll see what he has for weapons, and I’ll pull you out once I’ve stabilized the situation. Okay?”

She looks toward me, a tear in her eye as she leans into me and lands her soft lips on mine once more. The motion is soft and slow and there’s so much emotion behind it that I feel torn away from her.

“The second we get off this mountain, you’re tying me up again, and finishing what you started.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I kiss her forehead gently. “I’d love nothing more.”

I grip hold of the rope, using the same vines I’d come down on to climb back up. The closer I get to the top, I see Jeremiah is leveraging the weight around a tree, no gun in sight.

Truthfully, I’m shocked. Shocked that he has no gun and shocked that he doesn’t recognize me. Though, it’s dark.

“See... saved.” He laughs. “Now let’s get your girl.” He turns toward the hole.

“Jeremiah Wilcox, you’re under arrest for drug distribution and trafficking.” I reach for my gun, but it’s gone.

Fuck. I knew I’d get distracted. It must have fallen when I jumped into the hole. I should’ve checked.

The man laughs. “You followed me all the way here? And now what? I saved your life. You—”

The click of a gun sounds into the night and then Jeremiah flies forward into the pit.

My eyes snap down searching for Violet, but she’s gone.

“Right here,” she says, her hand on my shoulder, her soft lips pouted in the pale of the night.

“What the hell?” I turn back toward the hole, and see Jeremiah lying flat, and Violet holding a pair of guns in her hands. “How the hell did you do that?”

She grins. “I pulled your gun off you when we kissed, and I pulled his from his holster while you two were talking. I figured I’d come up from the hole the same way you got down here. And I figured if neither of you had guns, no one would get killed. You can thank my mom someday for teaching me the ninja skills that kicked him into the hole.”

I’ve never been more turned on. She hands me my gun back and I tuck it into the back of my slacks as Walker pulls up on the ATV, a smile on his face as he sees Violet standing next to me.

“You’re above sea level,” he jokes, pulling her in for a hug. “I radioed down to the sheriff and rescue, just in case. I thought you’d be broken to pieces.”

“Not even close,” she laughs, “and I got the guy we were looking for. He’s in the hole.”

Walker looks down. “Oh, fuck. Good for you.”

“Who knew ending a cult would be so easy?”

I twist back toward Violet and pull her against my chest. “I’ll wait here for the local police department. I want to see this guy get dragged away and there’s a lot of jurisdictional paperwork to figure out. Why don’t you head back to Walker’s cabin and warm up. I’ll be back there in a bit and then we’ll get you home where you belong.”

She looks up at me teasingly. “You seriously don’t believe I’m leaving you here, do you?”

I nod. “I expect you to. You should get warm, take a nap, have a snack, and I’ll meet you back when I’m done.”

“No way! I have to be here to protect you!” she teases, nudging my shoulder playfully. “Plus, you’re not my daddy.”

I growl low and dip into her ear. “Is that so? Because I could be your daddy... and I could make you mind.”

She grins. “Good luck.”

“Well then, get back to that cabin and—”

“Okay,” Walker shouts, covering his ears as he walks back to his ATV. “I know I can’t take any more of this. Either I’ve been lonely too damn long or I’m just repulsed by romance but it’s time for me to leave.”

Violet grins and kisses my lips. “I’m not leaving you, so I guess you’ll have to punish me later.”

“Last chance,” Walker says, starting up the ATV. I have a feeling he doesn’t want to be here when the cops arrive.

“I’m staying,” Violet says, hooking her arm into mine. “I’ll set you up with my laptop next week. We’ll find someone for you to chat with, no doubt. Then again, I think Nicole at the

bakery is single. Maybe I could have her drop you some muffins?”

Walker shakes his head and smiles. “I’m glad you’re okay. Hit me up when you can.” The machine rumbles as he drives back down the path he came.

I look toward Violet, holding her in my arms against the base of a cedar tree. Soon, this will all be a memory, and we’ll have a story to tell. Until then, I’m going to hold my girl, just like this, and never let her go.

Chapter Nine

Violet

It's late in the day when we're finally back in town, and I know when I wake up, Hawk will have to go back to Alaska to properly book Jeramiah and figure out the details of the case. Truthfully, I don't know when he'll return, or if he's even coming back. The whole night feels like a dream. I'd say a nightmare, but Hawk is still next to me, and whatever brought us to this moment can't be so terrible.

I stare toward him, a figure on the opposite side of the room, freshly showered and naked, his hard cock pointed out in front of me.

My entire body shivers at the thought of finally having him, and despite how draining the day is, I can't end it any other way.

"How hard should I go?" His voice is deep in the darkness.

I swallow hard. "What do you mean?"

"Should I tie you up again? Should I take control of you?"

His words alone send a shiver straight through to my groin and every nerve center in my body lights with excitement at the thought of my wrists tied with his knots.

When I don't answer, he steps toward me. It's now that I see how large he truly is. And while I've never seen a dick in real life, I'd guess Hawk would win the blue ribbon at some county fair with this behemoth. It's at least seven inches long and wider than what seems to be humanly possible.

He reads the arousal and excitement on my face and lifts the oversized t-shirt I've been wearing up and over my shoulders, exposing my bare body to his.

"You have one minute to tell me you don't want to be tied, then I'm going to assume you want it."

I stare up at him, lost in the urges I see swimming in his gaze. “I want to be tied,” I whisper.

He stills before staring down at my feet, dragging his eyes up slowly, then reaches for a necktie that’s been tucked in his suitcase.

My blood heats as he bends into my mouth and kisses me gently.

“Arms behind your back,” he growls.

I do as I’m told, and relish in every second his large body leans into mine as he ties a simple knot around my wrists.

I struggle against him a bit, but it’s for play. I like that he’s in control.

With his hands on the knot he’s just tied, he guides me off the bed until I’m standing in front of it, facing away from him.

“Bend over,” he groans. “Let me see what that tight little pussy can handle.”

Excitement rushes through me as he drags his free hand down my spine and onto my ass. Once there, he pauses as I lean my face against the soft sheets. I’ve been to the Mountain View Lodge a million times, but never like this.

My pulse drums loud in my ears. I’m not sure what comes next, and I like it that way.

“Look at this nice ass. This nice... distracting ass,” he groans, rubbing over the top of the smooth flesh that’s out in front of him.

I’ve never been spanked. Hell, I’ve never done much of anything, but my entire body is aching for him to punish me. For what... I don’t care. Just punish me.

“I told you to stay put today, didn’t I?” he growls, running his hand over my ass. “Did you?”

“No, but you should be glad I didn’t. I got your guy.”

He laughs playfully. “You did get my guy... didn’t you?”

I nod.

“But you still didn’t follow directions. And in law enforcement, when someone doesn’t follow directions... there’s a punishment.”

“Do it!” I beg. “Punish me!” My throat is tight as his cock pokes up against my thigh from behind and suddenly his palm spans me.

“Hmm,” he groans, rubbing against the stinging skin he’s left behind. “Tell me you’ll be a good girl.”

“I’ll be a good girl,” I pout. “Just fuck me. Fuck me hard.” My hips rock toward him, my pussy dripping wet as I call out for him, desperate for his invasion. My heart thumps against my chest.

“Tell me you’re mine.” He tightens his grip on the knot behind my back. “Tell me you’re mine forever.”

“I want nothing more,” I cry. “Please... fuck me.”

“I love to hear you beg,” he growls.

“Then I’ll beg. Fuck me! Please! I’m aching for you!”

“We don’t have a condom. Do you want me anyway?”

“I want all of you,” I beg. “I want your come all over me. Inside of me. On top of me. Everywhere. Just spread me wide!” I’m panting as I speak, desperate for his touch, desperate for him, but he’s slow with me, teasing, like he had been at the cabin.

His hand reaches between my legs and he runs circles around my clit, wetting me before he begins to edge inside. The grip he has on the rope is steady and the pressure is gentle, though when he moves deeper inside of me, it takes a minute to acclimate.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he grunts, pressing further into my core.

A short pinch follows a longer one. I try not to scream out, but the noise of uncomfortable pressure escapes before I can stop it.

He pauses. “Are you okay?”

“Keep going,” I pant, pressing back into him. “Harder!”

I always imagined myself as someone who liked sex softly. Soft and gentle. I guess I thought that was loving. But with Hawk, I’m someone different. I’m someone I never imagined I could be. I’m wild and untamed. I’m a girl who likes a tight grip, and a harsh ragged response. I’m a girl who likes the feral animalistic chase. It’s magic.

I breathe hard against his free hand as it covers my mouth, the other still in the make-shift rope. He’s thrusting, hard. Pumping in and out, spreading me wider and wider as I whine with an aching pulse that won’t relent.

“Tell me you need to come,” he growls. “Tell me now.”

“I need to come, Hawk. I need your come too. I need it all. All over me.” I pant as I speak, barely able to form words as he stretches me wide.

“Good girl.” He presses into me deeper.

Harder and harder, his large body moves me and the bed forward until all at once every bit of pent energy I’ve been holding to, releases. I cry out and my eyes squeeze closed.

“Good fucking girl,” he growls, somehow deeper. I can tell by his voice, that my orgasm has pushed him over the edge. “You take this cock like a good fucking girl.” Any bit of gentleness he had is gone, and now, his big, bulky frame heaves against me with the purpose of a ravaging storm.

I love it. I need it. I need him. Always. Just like this.

His warm palm smooths over the small of my back as he releases inside of me. “You feel so fucking good, Violet. Like you were made for me.”

My heart warms as he slows his thrust and eventually pulls from within me with a sigh.

I turn back toward him, and lick his cock, desperate to taste the love we’ve made. As I do, he loosens the tie on my wrists and buries his hand in my hair, letting out a soft groan of approval.

“I love you, Violet.” His words are sure and steady. “I love you like I’ve never loved anyone. Tell me we can make this work.”

I pull my lips off his cock gently, swallowing down our sticky sweet juices before lifting to his lips. “You love me?”

He nods. “You’re mine, remember?”

“I love you too, Hawk. I never want this to end.”

“And it won’t,” he says, holding me against his chest with the grip of a man who means what he says.

For the first time in my life, I don’t question his motive. I take him at his word and I have a feeling, I won’t regret it.

Epilogue

Hawk

Six Months Later

I stand at the mountain's edge and look out at the town below. There's more snow on the ground now and there's a breeze picking up from the east. I'm betting more is on the way.

"Are you coming in?" Violet grips me from behind, wrapping her warm arms around my waist.

I turn toward her, fixing my gaze on my wife. My beautiful, smart, sweet, feisty wife. "I was studying the weather. I think we've got a big one blowing in. Did you let Walker know?"

She nods. "He's been busy talking to his new squeeze, so I'm not sure he cares, but yes, I told him."

"Someone he met online or someone in town?"

"Both," she says, coyly. "I'll let him tell you the details. I invited him to dinner tonight. I hope you don't mind."

I squeeze her against my chest. "Of course not, he's practically family." I don't know Walker's story and I haven't asked. For the most part, he's quiet and stays to himself. That, and we're the only two on this side of the mountain. We need to look out for each other.

"Well, thank you." She tips up onto her toes and kisses my lips as a light snow starts to fall. "Do you ever miss Alaska and all those big cases you were working?"

I stare down at her with all the love in the world. "Never. Being up here in this little cabin with you is everything I ever wanted. Plus, I think your dad likes all the fresh cop talk."

She leans against my chest as we walk back toward the little shack that we rebuilt to be our own two-bedroom retreat.

It's not perfect, but it has four walls and good insulation. We're still working on the rest.

"Really? You don't miss it at all?"

I shake my head. "Not for a second. The day I arrested Jeramiah, I knew I was done with that life. I love being here, in this little mountain police station, working for the people. It's like I'm really doing something, you know? Besides," I run my hand over her expanding stomach, "I would rather this life with you and our baby girl any day. Did we decide on a name, though, because I think that was still up for debate?"

I open the cabin door and we step into the warmth of the woodstove burning. "I think I'd decided on Gia and you decided on Nora."

"I vote for Poppy," Walker says, stepping in front of the open door before we close it.

Violet looks toward me. "I kind of like it."

She nods, tipping onto her toes to lean her forehead against mine. "Me too."

"As long as we all understand this baby is going to be the most strong-willed woman on this mountain, I think we're good," Walker laughs, stepping into the cabin with a fresh loaf of bread.

"Hey!" Violet says. "You better mean that as a positive!"

Walker laughs, but I wrap Violet into my arms and press a blazing kiss onto her lips. I never imagined that a cult would somehow bring me to the love of my life, but here I am, warm and content, standing in front of the most beautiful woman I've ever met. My wife, the mother of my child.

My hand brushes her cheek as I look toward her. "If I have a hundred children, as warm and brazen as you, then I've hit the lottery. No doubt about it."

As we sit down for our meal, I can feel myself being examined a little too closely. "What have you done?" my intuitive wife asks with her brows furrowed. God, she's good.

I look at her, unable to hold a solid poker face. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“You’re hiding something,” she says with a smile. “You only sit in your chair that way when you’re up to something.”

I let out a hearty laugh. “You never cease to amaze me.” I look over at Walker. “Can you believe this woman?”

Walker only shrugs his shoulders like he has no idea what’s going on.

“Last chance, Special Agent,” she says with a smile, holding her fork menacingly.

“Alright. I surrender,” I say with a chuckle. I step from my chair and head over to the couch. I drop to a knee and pull a secret box from underneath.

“Oh, what is that?” she asks with a squeal.

“Something for Nora,” I say with a laugh. “I’m pretty sure when you see this, you’ll let me name her.”

Slowly, I open the box and reveal our daughter’s first gift.

“Hawk, it’s beautiful.” I hand a homemade guitar built for a toddler to the love of my life. She scans it over slowly. “Is this a map of Rugged Mountain?” Her eyes start to tear.

“It is. I’ve been working on it for a while but finding a small enough map to fit was the hard part.” I reach for my wife’s hands. “I just want her to know that wherever she goes, this will always be her home.”

Violet wraps her arms around me and wipes her tears on my shoulder. “I’ll always love you, Hawk.”

“I love you more.”

Thank you for reading!

[Check out Walker’s story here!](#)



Lone Wolf

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

KHLOE SUMMERS

Meet Rugged Mountain's First Generation here!





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

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

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

HEA Guaranteed.

Read Bonus Scenes

at

www.authorkhloesummers.com

Did you know Khloe writes Dark Romance as Ava Quinn?

[Check out her library here:](#)

