

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a shirtless, muscular man with a full, dark beard and mustache. He is looking down and to the right. He has a large tattoo on his right shoulder and another on his left arm. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his muscles. In the background, a full moon is visible against a dark sky.

Riding
SAVAGE

RUGGED MOUNTAIN MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KHLOE SUMMERS

Riding Savage
Rugged Mountain MC
Khloe Summers
Summer to Winter Publishing



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Chapter One

Nora

I stare up at the dark night sky, watching the silver light of the moon shine from behind a few clouds. I've been sitting out here for hours listening to coyotes howl. I'm sure sooner or later they'll come to investigate. For now, I'm pretending to be on a camping trip minus the food, water, shelter, and ability to move.

Leaning down, I tighten the t-shirt that I've tied around my leg and blow out a heavy breath as I scan the gravelly patch of dirt for anything resembling a weapon. I'm going to need something to keep the animals away tonight. I'm sure they can smell the blood on my leg for miles. At least that's what the hundreds of episodes of survival television have told me. I laugh to myself at the irony of it all. I should be home watching *Alone and Afraid*, not *being* alone and afraid.

In the distance, an owl hoots and tall trees creak in the wind. I'm only two miles from town, but I may as well be in the middle of nowhere.

So, let's do the math. Last I checked, Rugged Mountain was home to a few thousand people. I'm on the only road going west, but there's nothing west of town. It's also after midnight. That all adds up to no one being out here until morning.

If they're smart... unlike me.

Coyotes howl again. They sound closer this time. Then again, it could be my imagination. It's always been a little wild.

I spin my head as far as it will go in both directions, trying to see as far into the night as possible. But given the fact that I'm not a cat and the only light out here is the glow of the moon, there's not much I can see but the shadowed valley floor, some sagebrush, and a few hunting birds that seem far too interested in the unmoving human on the side of the road.

Gripping hold of the biggest rock I can find, I hold the sharp edge outward. It's not going to do much damage to anyone, but at least I have it. Holding firm to the rock, I stare out into the nothingness and try to calm my mind.

I always thought life or death situations were supposed to bring someone clarity. Sure, I'm broken and in shock, but the effects of that are supposed to make me appreciate my life in a new light. Instead, I'm circling the drain of regret. Where my friends put time into dating and relationships, I poured everything I had into work. First, it was the realty business and then it was my dating agency.

Realty was never my dream, but it was a doorway to entrepreneurship that I learned a lot from. The dating app was where my heart has always been. I want to help people find love. Real love. Not the fantasy-fairytale kind, but the real, gritty, life is hard sometimes kind. The kind where things can go wrong, and people stay and work it out.

That's not easy to find. Not in today's world. Today, people fall in and out of love because the toaster broke. I want more than that for my clients, so I developed a program which requires rigorous testing of both parties before they're accepted into my service. Too bad I can't seem to pass the test myself.

My chest tingles and tightens as a wave of nausea washes over me. I'm not dizzy per se, but I'm feeling off.

What if I die like this? Found on the side of the road with no shirt on and my leggings torn to pieces. What if people find me surrounded by those wild birds? What if this is it for me and I'll never know what it feels like to be touched with love, to be looked at with adoration, to care for another human being? What if tonight is my last night on Earth?

The lightheadedness I felt a few minutes before turns into dizziness and my fingers go numb as I repeat the same thing over and over. "This isn't happening. No. *I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.*"

The only reprieve from my insanity is the light that catches the corner of my eye. At first, I wonder if I'm seeing

things, but the closer it gets, the more real it becomes.

Loud rumbling takes over the sound of my own voice and the light temporarily blinds me. It's a biker coming inward toward Rugged Mountain. Normally, I wouldn't recommend flagging a stranger down in the middle of the night. Right now, I think I have a good excuse.

I wave my hands as fast as I can, hollering and shouting, but I'm convinced that whoever's driving is going to miss me.

They can't miss me!

"No! No! No!" I scream out with the last bit of strength I have and tear off my white bra, whipping it in circles, hoping it reflects some sort of light and grabs the biker's attention. It's a random thing to do and now my tits are screaming out for pervs far and wide, but here I am, trying to keep from being eaten alive.

I'm not sure what does the trick, my bare tits or the bra swirling in circles, but the person slows to a stop and props the bike.

"Oh my god! Thank you!" I scream out, but my voice is cracked and ragged. "Thank you!" My thoughts scatter from gratitude, to fear, to shame, and back to appreciation again as the biker makes his way toward me.

This close, I realize the biker is a man. Not a normal man, but a giant man. Tall and wide, he strides toward me, one heavy footstep after another. His beard is long, and he's covered in dark black ink. I should be relieved that he's here, but my stomach knots as I reassess the new dangers in front of me. The reality that my chest is bare sets in, and I throw my arm up, covering what I can as the man draws closer.

Maybe this is how I go. Death by biker. I think I'd have rather taken my chances with the coyotes.

"Nora?" The man's heavy brows narrow as he steps into focus.

"Doc?" Elation returns and the fear that knotted my stomach releases and replaces itself with warmth. "What are

you doing here?” Doc and I don’t have a long history, but we have a safe one. He’s part of Rugged Mountain MC and we met about six weeks ago.

“I don’t remember teaching you this.” He laughs, bending to my side to study my leg. “In fact, I think there was a whole section we went over in biker school about not getting naked and crashing your bike.”

A smile lifts onto my face. “Is that what you’re calling it now? Biker school? I thought it was a few lessons behind the diner. We drove around bales of hay, and you showed me how to signal.”

He unbuttons his flannel and wraps it around me, trying not to smile as he works. “You must have fallen asleep during the keep your clothes on speech.”

“Yeah, well, you stopped.”

He grins widely. “I did stop, didn’t I?” Though Doc and I are twenty-five years apart in age, I can appreciate the fact that the man is gorgeous. Not in an *‘oh my god, I have to have him’* sort of way, but in a sexy, older man kind of way.

His big, rough hand grazes my shoulder. “I’m going to help you up onto my bike and we’ll get you to the hospital. If I call for help, it’ll take ages, and you see that storm rolling in too, right?”

I glance toward the west, where the dark night is only getting darker.

“It’s pretty bad. I’ve been trying to stay ahead of it, but we need to get moving. You can’t be out here getting soaked. We’ll stop back at my place, get my truck, and head up to the Springs. That’s the only hospital that can handle the x-rays you need.”

At first glance of those storm clouds, I agree. We need to move, but I’m a little confused about how all this is going to work. “My leg is broken. How am I going to get up on your bike?”

“We’ll figure it out.” He bends down and lifts me from the ground like I’m a light little feather that dropped off one of

the hunting birds that flew away when he arrived. “If we move fast, we’ll be back at my cabin in twenty minutes.” Given that Doc spent his career working as a military medic, I decide to turn off the meter I have that’s usually desperate to give my very vocal opinion about whatever’s happening. Right now, I need rescue and he’s here to save me.

I’m going to be thankful, despite the fact that my leg throbs like a son of a bitch when he settles me down on the seat of his bike.

“You alright?” His tone is deep and graveled. “I’ll apologize in advance for how redneck all this is going to be.”

“Redneck? *Redneck* how?” Around here, the term redneck is endearing and usually a ‘*redneck project*’ means using everyday objects in a way that they normally wouldn’t be used. Like Mr. Matthews, who lives a few cabins down from me. He’s convinced me that the best way to mix cookies is with a whisk attached to a drill. It’s pretty genius. The batter is always nice and smooth.

I blow out a deep breath and inhale another one as Doc pulls the rope from the side saddle of his bike. “What’s that for?”

“To tie you in with. This and some strong branches will hold your leg up while you’re riding.” His face is straight when he speaks, as though what he’s saying really makes sense.

“What?”

He narrows his gaze and leans in with the heavy gauge cord, tying it around my ankle. It’s now that I notice the hair on his bare chest and the heavy scent of motor oil on his skin.

“Where are you coming back from?”

He glances up at me. “This is going to be invasive, but I have to snug this rope up into your thigh. Are you okay with that?”

He’s avoided my question, which only makes me need to know more, but I go with the flow. He’s a smart guy and

there's a storm behind us. Given he's a medical professional, touching my anything in a situation like this is understood.

I nod and redirect my gaze toward my bike laying sideways in the field. I couldn't see where it went from where I was sitting. I bet my phone is somewhere near there, too. It's probably broken and crushed. It's not important. I can come back on a recon mission later. Hell, I'll bring my sister to help. Right now, I need to focus on—

“Oh!” I glance toward Doc as his very large hand slides between my legs. He's tucking the rope into place inside my thigh, and I can tell he's trying to be careful, but his hands are so big, it's impossible. And without trying, his fingertips graze over the top of my covered pussy in the most delightful of ways.

“You okay? Am I hurting you?” He glances toward me, and for a second, there's an awkwardness that I can't describe. Maybe it's because his touch is the one *good* feeling I've had all day. Or maybe it's because he's really creeped out. Either way, the eye contact is uneasy.

“Yeah. I'm good. Do what you have to.” I spread my legs wider, but the pain is excruciating.

Doc reaches his hand to my outer thigh and pushes my legs together again. “You're okay where you were. Don't cause added stress.”

I swallow down a heavy lump in my throat and let his words warm me as he slides the rope and sticks into place against my thigh, trying his best to avoid my most private areas. For the most part, he does well, but as he tightens the rope, his fingers graze my slit inadvertently, and I bite back a tiny moan.

What the fuck is wrong with me? First of all, that wasn't that big a deal. Second, I'm a grown ass woman. I've been touched before. I shouldn't be as shocked by a few big, rough fingers grazing my pussy.

With the rope in place on my thigh, he wraps the cord around my back and climbs onto the bike, looping it around

his stomach before hooking the end onto my ankle he started at. It's redneck ingenuity for sure, but it just might work. The pressure is off my leg, and I'm pressed up against his back and locked in place. I'm not going anywhere.

Thunder rumbles and sprinkles of rain begin to fall.

"How's the pain?" He starts up the bike and begins to roll forward as my ankle rests on his knee.

The pain is like needles piercing and shooting, surrounded by a dull ache that's nearly overwhelming, but the memory of Doc's hand grazing my slit is all I'm thinking about. Must be my brain was shaken loose out there. "No worse than it was," I lie.

"Good. I'm sure you're going to feel pain when we move. Stop me if it gets really bad, but we need to get out of the storm fast. You ready?"

Thunder rumbles behind us and a flash of lightning lights up the sky as a cold breeze pushes the sagebrush back and forth.

This isn't how I saw my trip back from California going, but I'm done questioning things. Right now, all I can do is lean in, wrap my arms around Doc, and hold on tight.

Chapter Two

Doc

Fall brings on cooler weather and changing leaves, which gets everyone excited on the mountain. It also dumps rain, ice, and sometimes snow. Most of the time, the storms pop up out of nowhere and a seemingly nice day turns merciless at a moment's notice. Today is that day.

I hold Nora's leg in my hand as we ride, increasing speed. "We're almost there," I holler back, but I'm not sure she can hear me through the whipping rain and wind. I hate that she's exposed like this, especially in her condition, but at this point, the option to continue is the best one. We're less than a mile from the cabin and it's the safest place to be. I hold on to Nora tighter and increase speed, driving into the marble sized swathe of hail now falling around us. Fucking hell. This is insane. Thankfully, the overhanging pine softens their assail, but the pain is still noticeable.

I need to get Nora inside.

When the cabin is in view, I pull up the stone driveway and park under the overhanging garage as more hail hammers against the tin roof.

"We should stay here until this passes," Nora shouts over the falling sky. "I'm exhausted."

Hailstorms don't usually last that long. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to take her in, clean her up, and get her fed. When all this shit settles down, we can take off.

I untie the rope connecting us and climb off the bike, carefully setting her ankle on the seat as I move. "Okay, but you have to promise me you'll do as I say."

"*Do as you say?* Have I not been listening? I don't really have a choice right now, do I?"

"Nope."

She smiles. *What is it about that grin that gets me thinking about more?*

Heavy hail bombards the mountain, leaving behind quarter size balls of ice. This is going to do some serious damage to the area and the apple trees that are ready for harvest.

I untie the remainder of the redneck sling and lift Nora into my arms, carrying her inside through the back door connecting the house and garage.

She's exhausted and her head leans against my shoulder. This is dangerous. Not the storm, not her leg, not the ride back here... *but this*. As her head lies, I can hear the soft sighs she makes, feel her warm air on my neck, and the touch of her delicate hand on my skin.

I lay Nora on the couch and tuck her beneath a knit blanket my grandma made for me before I went off to war. It's white and blue with an anchor crocheted into the center. She worked on it for nearly a year, wanting every stitch to be perfect. That's why I never had the heart to tell her I was in the Army and not the Navy. Truthfully, it's better like this. It puts me right back to when she was making it, and it keeps her in my thoughts always.

"I'm going to start a fire and get dinner started. Oh, and I'll grab a clean sponge and warm water. We need to clean this up to see how bad things are."

She nods thoughtfully, tucking her head against the soft fabric of the pillow. She's exhausted, and she deserves to be. The bruising she has on her legs and arms is congruent with road burn, but there could still be significant structural damage underneath. Honestly, she's doing pretty well, all things considered.

I start a kettle of tea and pull the bread and a can of soup from the cupboard. Grilled cheese and a can of soup isn't the most nutritious meal, but it's comforting, and I think that would go miles right now.

As that heats, I fill a pot with warm water, dish soap, and a washcloth, before grabbing some peroxide and making my way toward Nora. "Come on, Cookie. Let's get you cleaned up."

She stirs and glances toward me. “*Cookie?* Why am I a cookie?”

I grin and pull the ottoman close to the couch, squeezing the washcloth until the excess water drains. “Are you kidding? You’re definitely a tough cookie. You rode out to California on a bike that you owned for less than two weeks, and you managed to flag someone down without trouble when you needed to. Besides that, you survived that crash with only a few bruises. I’d say that makes you tough.” I tear her leggings to better see her gash as we talk. It’s swollen, but the bleeding has stopped. “How’d it go out in California, anyway?”

She shakes her head and leans back on the pillow as I wash her bruises clean. “I got the endorsement.”

“Why don’t you sound happy about it?”

“I am.” She perks for a moment, then lays back again. “I really am, but I don’t know. I was on the side of the road being all sulky and it got me thinking about my life and what a mess I am, you know?”

I reach for the peroxide and pour a generous amount into the washcloth as I talk. “How are you a mess?”

She huffs out a sigh and stares toward me. “Why aren’t you married? Why didn’t you settle down?”

If this distracts her while I clean out these wounds, then I guess I can keep talking, though it wouldn’t be my first choice. My first choice would be making that sandwich while ignoring every personal question asked of me. I blow out a heavy breath and land the cloth on her cut. “I suppose I’ve wanted to, just never found the right person.”

She winces when the bulk of the peroxide is on her wound and I feel a sarcastic reply coming, but I welcome it if it means she’s gaining vigor. “In fifty years? Surely someone in fifty years fits the bill for you.”

I grin. “Actually, they haven’t. It was a well laid out plan on my part. Work, then work, and finally more work.

With all that, there's no time left for feelings." I laugh. "That's what normal people do, right?"

She laughs as I examine her leg further. "Your leg doesn't look as bad now that we've gotten it cleaned. No bones sticking out and no signs of internal bleeding. I would say it's possibly a hairline fracture or a bone contusion. The reason you can't move it at this point is the swelling. That should pass before too long, but we should still get you to the hospital for x-rays to confirm it's not something that needs to be professionally set."

"Okay, well, I hope you're right. I really don't have time for a broken leg."

I smile and stand from the ottoman, making my way back into the kitchen to flip the grilled cheese and pour the tea. "What about this revelation you had out on the dirt?"

"Yeah... I don't know. I was on the side of the road, alone and cold, thinking coyotes were going to eat me for dinner and I wondered who the hell would even care." Her tone is raw and broken.

"Fuck." I pour the tea and load the tray, carrying it into the living room. "That's heavy. What about your sister?"

"That's not what I mean." She sighs. "You don't ever feel sad that no one will care if you die?"

I glance at her, biting back laughter. "Wow, dragging me into this too? Maybe I'll take that dinner back to the kitchen and make you earn it."

She smiles as she bites into her sandwich. "I'm sorry. That was rude. It's not what I meant. I mean... don't you ever think about life and want something more, like a partner?"

"Yeah." I nod and go back to scrubbing her legs as she eats. "I do. I'd love someone to spend the days fucking around with, but—"

"Are you lonely?"

"Why are you asking about me? Are you... lonely?"

She lifts the teacup and sips slowly before answering, “Yeah. I am. I mean, what’s all this for if I don’t have someone to share it with, you know?”

I nod, continuing to move the cloth back and forth on her soft leg. “For sure. It’s hard. You should use your app. You believe in it, right?”

“I do, but it wouldn’t make sense for me to use it. Besides, I’m looking for something most people aren’t.” She looks away, then back toward me. “I should be rubbing your back. You got bruised from the hail. I’m so sorry you didn’t have a shirt on. Where were you coming back from when you found me? You never said.”

I check my shoulder for bruising I hadn’t noticed. Sure enough, there are quite a few welts, but they’ll heal. “I had to pick up some dinner plates for the lodge. Apparently, we’re sticking with the classic white with gold rims. A little fancy for my taste, but I think they’re calling the place *rustic chic*.”

“So clean, but dirty looking?”

I laugh. “Something like that. We’re pretty much finished with the place, just a few details now. Should be open by November. You’ll have to come out and stay. We’re planning a bunch of holiday festivities.”

“You guys pick a name yet?”

“Balsam Creek Lodge. It’s about as clever as a bunch of bikers can do. If you build a lodge next to Balsam Creek, everyone pats themselves on the back when someone suggests Balsam Creek Lodge.” I smile and glance up toward her as she continues to eat. It’s good to see her enjoying a meal. “You never finished your sentence earlier. What are you looking for that doesn’t exist?”

Her gaze widens as she glances toward me. “What if you used my dating app? You said you’re lonely.”

“We’re talking about you right now.”

“I’m fine.”

“A second ago, you were having a crisis.”

“Well, I’m a lost cause. You, though, you have a lot to offer.”

“What? No, I don’t. People my age don’t go starting new relationships. People my age are supposed to have figured this part out already.”

“You couldn’t. You were saving people’s lives and becoming a valued member of society. All of that has left you with a lot to offer. Trust me.”

I scrub my hand down over my beard. My ego likes this conversation, but it’s imbalanced. “You have a lot to offer, too. You’re smart, gorgeous, tenacious, and you go after what you want. Most people are content to only dream big, but not you. You’re making it happen.”

Her gaze holds on mine for a few solid seconds before a grin creeps onto her face. “You think I’m gorgeous?”

“Yes. I also said you’re smart, tenacious, and motivated.”

“Right, but gorgeous?” Her smile is wider now. “No one’s ever called me that before.”

My brows wrinkle. “How has no one called you gorgeous?”

She shrugs. “Have you seen my sister, the blonde? The curvy, little blue-eyed bombshell?”

“I have,” I clear my throat, hoping my next thought doesn’t get me into trouble, “and I’d wager to say that you’re the prettier of the two of you.”

“What? She’s beautiful. You can’t deny that.”

“She is, in a straightforward sort of way, but you... you’re gorgeous. The second I saw you at the diner I was...” I bite my lip and wonder if I should back pedal out of this conversation. I don’t want to come off as the creepy old dude who’s only noticing her soft lips, long hair, big breasts, and thick thighs. “You’re pretty. More than pretty, you’re stunning. And if people aren’t telling you that, they’re stupid.”

She looks away and twists her hair onto her shoulder. “Thank you. You’re pretty handsome yourself.”

Suddenly, cleaning her smooth leg is starting to feel wrong, so I drop the cloth back into the pot. I’ve gotten the most of it, anyway. “You never did tell me what illusive thing you were looking for in a relationship.”

“Oh, well, that’s cause it’s ridiculous. I know my standards are way out of whack with reality.”

“Try me.”

Her gaze holds with mine for a second. “The list is too long.”

“Let’s hear it.”

She grins slightly and clears her throat. “Okay... I mean you’re going to make fun of me.”

“I’m not going to make fun of you. Okay, maybe I’ll make fun, but you’ll just have to find out.” I laugh and stretch my legs out in front of me.

Her dark eyes move around the room as though she’s formulating her thoughts. “I don’t know. I want an old-fashioned kind of love. It’s the premise of what I started my business on, you know? The kind of love where things go wrong, but people stay and work it out. The kind of love where a guy is naturally protective and both partners put each other’s needs first.”

“That doesn’t sound hard to find.”

She snorts out a laugh and gathers herself again, tugging her long hair to her left shoulder. “You’re more out of touch than I thought. The last guy I dated came home miserable and only cared about his day and what he was doing. Oh, and any emotion I had was strictly prohibited.”

My brows narrow. “Okay, that sounds like a bad experience. How long were you together?”

“Embarrassingly long.”

“How long?”

“Almost a year.” She gasps. “*A year!* I spent a year with a guy who didn’t respect me at all. *Why?* Why did I do that?”

I can’t imagine why a woman like Nora would ever put up with anything less than perfect. She deserves it. My tone drops as I say, “Why did you do that?”

“Desperation, maybe.” She shrugs. “He was this ex-military guy who I made all these excuses for. He had some good qualities, but they weren’t enough to make up for how he made me feel.”

“When did you break up?”

“Oh, God, almost two years ago now. He moved up to Eagle Crest to open up a tactical shop.”

My chest tightens as the words spill into the air. There aren’t many people up here, even less tactical shops, and only one Eagle Crest. “What’s his name?”

“Mike Teagan. Come to think of it, he’s a little older too. In his early forties.”

Well, fuck! Of all the people she could be talking about, why did it have to be my shitty, fucking half-brother? When my dad went off to start his second family, I hated him and his new kids. As an adult, I tolerate that side of the family, but we’re not particularly close. In fact, I’ve gone years at a time without talking to Mike. Unfortunately, we’ve been back and forth lately because he’s selling a boat trailer and I’d like to get my boat out of the water before the freeze.

“Anyway, isn’t it weird that men used to go to war to protect women and children, and now they can’t be bothered to open a door, pull out a chair, or say anything kind at all? I mean, my grandpa wrote my grandma love notes all the time. When he was at war, he’d send her these long, elaborate letters and she cherished every word. I still have them under my bed.”

“You still read them?”

She laughs. “When I need a reminder that good men exist. Though, it usually ends in tears, a pint of ice cream, and

a ton of sulking. Did you ever send anyone letters while you were away?"

"Do letters to my mother count?"

A sweet smile lifts onto her face. "Yeah, they do. I'm sure she still treasures them."

"She did until she passed away a few years ago."

Nora gasps. "Oh, I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"Trust me, you're good. She lived a long and happy life, and I was lucky to get to spend the time with her that I did." I stand from the ottoman and take her tray of finished food. "Any chance you feel up for heading out to the hospital? You really should get your injury looked at."

"Actually, do you think my leg will be okay overnight? I don't think I can hack the long drive and drama after everything today. My eyes are so heavy all of the sudden."

I glance out the window. I've been so involved with our conversation, I forgot about the storm that's still pounding down. The hail has stopped, but the rain is still heavy. We could go down the mountain tonight, but it wouldn't be the safest option. "I've got some antibiotics and pain killers left from when one of the guys at the MC got hurt a while back. I'll set you up for the night and we'll reassess in the morning."

I've barely finished my sentence before she leans into the corner of the couch and falls asleep cuddled up with a pillow.

She's so fucking cute. I blow out a heavy breath, trying to avoid the sweetness, and take the tray into the kitchen with the pot of cooled water. I should've told her I knew Mike. I should've told her that he's my half-brother. I should've told her that I haven't been able to stop thinking about her. I should've told her that the reason I went out for a ride tonight was because I knew she'd be driving back, and I didn't see the bike in her driveway. I should've told her I was doing a run between here and the next town for hours, just to make sure she got home okay.

I should've told her because despite the fact that I find pride in my self-control, when it comes to Nora, I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out.

Chapter Three

Nora

Big, rough hands land on my shoulder in warm comfort as I drag in the woodsy scent of the forest. Doc is on top of me with his hard cock pressed to my crotch. He's big and heavy and everything about him screams, manly. I've never felt so safe and hungry.

"Don't move." His tone is deep and rough like usual, but now there's something different in his eyes. Famine, desperation, a determined ache that rattles his voice when he talks.

My clit throbs as he leans in toward me, his warm breath on my ear.

"Do you want me to make you better, Cookie?"

I mutter out a simple moan of approval as my uterus and brain work together against me. Doc might be older, but he's hot as hell. Wide shoulders, ink traveling up and down both arms, a beard that's begging to be ridden, and an empathetic nature that's eagerly performing for my ovaries.

God, what's wrong with me? They write books about women like me—girls with daddy issues. First Mike, now Doc. Apparently, I can't help myself with older men. Maybe that's the mistake.

It's not like they all have life figured out. Mike was a complete idiot who had no idea how to talk to a woman, or better yet, how to treat one. Age isn't everything, and I shouldn't assume because Doc is older, he knows what he's doing.

Yet here I am, in the comfort of his arms, with his warm breath on my neck and his big rough hand on my face.

He leans down and scrapes his teeth against my hard nipples, each growing with every bite.

I jump and squirm beneath him suddenly realizing I'm naked and so is he. *How did this happen? When did this*

happen? Where did all the pain go? And where did he get that rope?

My questions seem relevant, but I ignore them in favor of his tongue slipping into my mouth. God, he feels good. His lips pepper my neck, down over my breasts, my stomach, and my wet, throbbing core.

I've never been more excited in my life. I squeeze my thighs together as he begins to tie a labyrinth of knots around my ankles and wrists. His gaze meets mine with each pull of the rope. A shock of electricity shoots between my legs and forces a panting like I'd just run a mile. Why is my body responding like this when I've done nothing but lay here and let this giant of a man tie me up?

“Are you my tough, little cookie? Can you handle all this *rough* rope?” He narrows his gaze as he works the knots tighter, guiding me down on my knees before him.

His cock is long, thick, and waiting. I lean in and open my mouth, taking his length into my hot lips as he slants a heated look toward me and runs his fingers through my hair.

How am I here? How is this happening?

The rough fibers of the rope sting at my skin but I like the abrasion. In fact, I want him to pull tighter.

With his fingers in my hair, he moves me to the speed he desires, thumping into my mouth impatiently as though his needs have taken over and I'm the good little girl who's going to satisfy him.

I can't figure out why this is getting me off. I've never been one for BDSM or rope play. Hell, I've never even messed with dominance of any sort. Though, I guess the thought of a big, hairy man telling me to suck his cock never turned me off either.

A tear streaks onto my cheek as I gag on his cock. I'm not sad, so I don't know where it's coming from, but it only makes me want him deeper.

He wipes the salty expression away and licks it off his thumb before tying my wrists and tossing me onto the bed.

“You like to gag on my dick, Cookie?”

I nod, breathless and aching, needier than I’ve ever felt.

“I’m going to bite this pretty little clit and see how much you can take before you start squirming.”

My breath hitches and I feel like I can’t catch it. *Breathing isn’t a thing humans need to do, right?*

His thumb nudges my hard nipple, and his teeth scrape gently against my clit.

I’m going to die. I’m actually going to perish right here in this bed surrounded by things I don’t recognize. Cedar walls, a bear skin rug, a lamp made from antlers. *Where the hell am I?*

I push away the thoughts racing through my head as he bites down harder. My clit is engorged, and he’s making sounds I’ve never heard another living creature make. It’s powerful and hungry, desperate even.

“Come on my face, Cookie. I want your pretty little pussy juices all over me. Then, I’m going to fuck your tight ass. I want you so limp from coming that you’re begging me to stop.” He nips at my clit again and I squirm beneath him, breathless and ragged.

I could lay like this forever, held suspended in a space where he’s devouring me and I’m letting him, where the anticipation for him is still aching and loud. The space between real life and whatever this is. This is where I want to be.

But as hard as I try to hold this feeling, a sharp pain stabs me right below my knee.

Ignoring it seems like the best bet, so I go with that for as long as I can, but still, I can’t focus on the pleasure. The pain is too excruciating.

My eyes close and everything goes black. When I open them again, I’m in a bed I don’t recognize with Doc hanging over me.

“Cookie, are you okay?” The hunger he had in his eyes a second ago isn’t there. Instead, he’s got a wrinkled expression of worry. “Do you need water?” He hands me a bottle and sits me up in bed. *His bed.*

“How did I get here?”

“I carried you in. You passed out on the couch before I could give you anything for the pain.” He turns toward a small closet in the back of his room. “Don’t worry. I’ve been out on the couch. I just heard you screaming, so I came in to check on you.”

Screaming? What kind of screaming? Oh, God. Was I dreaming? Did I dream all that? Did he hear me calling out for him?

I clear my throat, avoiding eye contact with the man I shouldn’t be dreaming about. Not like that. He’s my... friend. I guess that’s what you’d call it.

I draw in a deep breath, count to four, and blow it out slowly. “I don’t think I need any pain meds right now. Thanks, though. What time is it?”

“Nearly six in the morning. How are you feeling? That scream was pretty loud.”

I’m tempted to ask him to describe the noise, but I’m too afraid of what he might answer with. Besides that, now all I can imagine are his teeth scraping against me. Good Lord, I need help... or an orgasm. Either would do at this point.

“I’m okay. A little warm. I think I might take a shower, actually. Something cold and refreshing. What’s my leg looking like?” I push the sheet off and pull my leg out for him to see, realizing that it’s much more mobile than it was yesterday. He’s probably right about it not being broken.

“Well, you’re moving it, so that’s good. The swelling has gone down a lot, too. We should still take you to the doctor for some x-rays. I’ll call when they open and make an appointment so we’re not waiting around.”

“Oh, you don’t need to take me. I can call... someone.”

“Someone.” He laughs. “*Someone who?* Your sister is gone this week with Axel. They’re doing the babymoon thing, right?”

I forgot he knows so much about me. “Yeah. Sorry. I guess you’re my only hope.”

He laughs. “I like being your only hope. Do you want me to help you into the shower?”

My clit throbs as the thought of what that would look like. His hands on my waist. My naked body against his. His hard cock pressed against my back. *Maybe it would slide in.*

“Yeah, actually I could use a little help I guess.” Why did I say that? Okay, obviously I don’t know what the hell I’m saying anymore.

He stands from the bed and helps me up. “Do you think you can walk or do you want me to carry you?”

I glance up toward him and I’m not all together sure this isn’t a dream. Or maybe this is one of those dreams with a dream inside of a dream. Regardless, I can feel my eyes writing checks I’m not sure my bruised body can cash.

Reading between the lines, Doc lifts me into his arms, and carries me toward the bathroom like the gentleman he is. But me... all I can think about is how his lips and ropes would feel on my skin.

Chapter Four

Doc

As desperate as I am to strip Nora bare, shower her curved frame, and make her feel good... I can't.

"Let me grab you a bench. One second." I set her on the edge of the tub and rush out into the living room, returning with a small pine footstool that will give her enough stability for independence while she's trying to get clean.

"Thanks," she squeaks, swinging her legs into the tub before pulling the curtain closed. "I'll be out in a second."

"Holler if you need help. Towel is on the rack with some clean clothes." I mean for my reply to be more pleasant than it is, but my cock is aching at the thought of her ten feet away, soaking wet, and naked. Hell, my cock has been giving me trouble since she started moaning and screaming in her sleep.

I let out a heavy sigh and consider masturbating quickly in the back room. It's not a classy thing to do, but I'm not above it. Not with an ache like this. An ache like this only causes bad decision making, and I'd hate to ruin what little Nora and I have with all this dick energy.

I rub my dick over my boxers and will it to go down, but it only grows harder as the water splashes and the sounds of her sighs echo in my head.

Fucking hell. This is so fucked up. She's young, really fucking young. That and she's my half-brother's ex.

My phone rings in the living room and suddenly the reality of what today was supposed to be rushes back to me.

Fuck!

I answer the phone with an unintentional grumble. "Hey. What's up?"

"Nothing. Just on my way with that trailer, so I thought I'd give you a call and see if you want some coffee from the diner." Fuck this guy. From what Nora said about him, he's a

piece of shit who doesn't deserve my fucking money. I always knew I had a good reason to hate that family.

I bite the inside of my cheek and suck in a ragged breath. "I've had something come up. I need to get the—"

"What's... man...hear... going through...tunnel. I'll... minute."

This is a cruel joke. A movie. A skit. A terrible play I didn't know I'm a part of. This fucker got everything. Dad, then Nora, and he's still trash. What a cruel world we live in. Where the fuck is karma when you need it?

The shower turns off and my chest tightens.

"Hey, Doc? Are you right there?" Nora's sweet voice echoes from the bathroom and I make my way toward her as I work through some sort of explanation to give on my way. Unfortunately, the few feet I've walked didn't give me enough time to think of anything.

"Yeah?" I crack the door open. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, kind of, but I need a little help. My towel fell and I can't reach it."

My heart races and my cock threatens to embarrass me. I'm not sure what I'm walking into. Is she going to be naked? Will I see the tight little pussy I inadvertently ran my fingers over last night? Am I a sick fucking old man who won't be able to control himself if it's all of the above?

Yes. The answer is yes. That one is a given.

When I push behind the door, she's sitting on the edge of the tub naked. Her arm covers her breasts and the towel and clothes I'd left sit on the floor out of her reach.

"I'm sorry. I put weight on my leg but it's not ready for bending yet."

I try not to make eye contact. "Of course. That's what I'm here for." I reach for the clothes and hand them toward her, my gaze on the back wall.

She giggles. “You must be used to seeing people naked working in the medical profession, right?”

“That was a long time ago and none of them looked like you.”

Her laugh gets louder as she throws the towel down and reaches for the clean flannel. “Yeah right. I’m a mess.”

“You are most certainly not a mess. You’re gorgeous. We talked about that yesterday, remember?” I hate that it’s Mike who didn’t treat her right. Mike who didn’t make her feel beautiful.

“I’m all set. You can look.”

I turn toward her. Soaking wet hair lies on her shoulder and fresh bright eyes stare up toward me from the edge of the tub. I grab the brush off the counter and hand it toward her, resisting the urge to brush her long dark hair myself.

“Thank you.” Her gaze meets mine as she reaches up toward me. I’m assuming she wants to stand.

I lean in, wrapping my arms around her frame as she lifts from the edge of the tub, holding the brush in her hand. Our bodies press together, and our gaze meets.

Her lips part and my cock starts making demands again.

“You’re so big,” she says under her breath.

I’m sure she means my height, right?

“You’re so small.”

She looks away for a second then up toward me. “No one ever thinks I’m small.”

“You’re small to me.”

She’s a perfect vision. Her beautiful body in my arms and her hard nipples pressing through the flannel onto my bare chest. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she wanted my lips against hers... but that isn’t what this is. She’s in need, old man. Restrain yourself.

“I should get breakfast started. You’re probably hungry.” My tone is low, and though I’m talking about breakfast, I haven’t moved an inch.

She nods. “I am hungry,” her nose wrinkles up as she holds my hands in place on her hips, “but I also like your hands right where they are.”

Okay. She said that. I’m sure she said that.

As my head attempts an unscrambling of all that’s happening, a heavy knock lands on the front door. “Coming in, Doc.” The door swings open and heavy boots land on the wood floors.

Nora looks toward me with her mouth open, but this time her eyes widen in shock. “Is that Mike?”

I nod slowly. “Yeah. He, ugh, he was supposed to help me with something today.”

“*What?* How do you two know each other?”

My throat tightens. This isn’t how I wanted today to go. Hell, it’s not how I wanted any day to go. Ideally, she’d have never dated Mike and the two of us would be cuddled up in bed reading a book together or taking a nap. This... this is the kind of stuff nightmares are about. The woman of your dreams standing in front of you, and the asshole who ruined her opinion of men at the door.

“Oh. That.” I exhale and glance down the hallway and into the kitchen where my useless kin is pouring himself a cup of coffee. I should really start locking the doors. “Mike... Mike is my half-brother.”

“Wait, what?” Her face goes pale. “You two are related? Why didn’t you tell me that last night?”

“You were tired and injured. I didn’t think it was relevant at the moment.”

“You didn’t think it was relevant to tell me the man that I hate more than anything is *your brother?*”

“Half-brother, and last night was not the time. You had much more pressing matters than his stupid ass. We go years

without talking and he's only here because I'm buying something from him, like I would any stranger."

"Oh." She leans against the sink. "Well, if you decided it wasn't important, then..." There's a shift in her demeanor and I know I've said the wrong thing.

"It is important, Nora." I land my hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her, but she's lost in her thoughts. "Look, I liked where this was going just now. If he hadn't walked in, we'd be—"

"He did walk in, and you lied to me."

"Lied? Look, I'll tell him to leave, and we can figure this out."

"Hey what's going on back there?" Mike laughs as he talks. "Oh fuck, bro. Do you have someone over?" He doesn't have the courtesy to ask and leave. He has to investigate for himself, and he does it so quickly that I don't have time to close the door or block Nora from his view.

Instead, she turns her head away as Mike's face goes from curiosity to insanity.

Chapter Five

Nora

I haven't seen Mike in two years, which is much longer than I expected considering how small Rugged Mountain is. He lives on the north side of the mountain and doesn't come down to town much. I stay on the south side, near the village. It works. It has worked. It was working.

"What the hell are you doing here? Why the fuck are you half naked?" His gaze darts between Doc and I as though he has a right to be confused.

"I'm visiting a friend." I don't owe him an explanation.

"Visiting a friend?" He turns toward Doc. "Why didn't you tell me you were seeing Nora, fucker?"

"I don't owe you a fucking explanation."

Mikes face turns crimson behind his beard. "Not a lot of friends I know like to hang out together naked."

Doc turns toward him, forming a wall between the two of us. "She's not naked, and you're too upset for seven in the morning. I tried to tell you I had something when you called, but you had to be childish... like always."

"No way, man. I need to know what's going on. Why is she here? She ruined my fucking life. Did she tell you that? Did she tell you all the bitchy things she did to me?"

I want to scream out in defense of myself, but I don't. It's not because I don't have it in me, I do, but wasting my breath on Mike isn't worth the trouble. I wasted my breath on him for far too long and he never gets it. He's a revolving door of emotional ineptitude.

Doc widens his stance and steps toward Mike. "Unless you want your blood on the outside of your body, get the fuck out. You can't be talking about her like that."

"So, you don't want to know the fucking truth? You're going to fuck around and find out."

“I’ll take my chances. Get out of my house.”

My heart squeezes at his defense of me.

All my life, I’ve been independent. My dad passed when my sister and I were young, and my mom was sick for most of my childhood. In that time, I learned that the only person I could truly trust... was me. Sure, I had my sister for some things, but the only person propelling me forward was myself. If I was going to make my dreams happen, it would be with myself at the reins. I became my number one advocate and my own best friend. But now, could I really trust that it would change? Is Doc someone to allow in?

I hobble up from the edge of the tub and hold the wall as I make my way down the hall of Doc’s small cabin, running my hand along the knotted pine walls as I move. I didn’t take much time to admire the cabin last night when I came in. I was so exhausted. But now that I’m rested, I can truly see how beautiful the place is. A natural stone fireplace sits on the back wall with a live edge mantle that’s stacked with books and trinkets. Beyond that is a small but modern kitchen with a butcher block counter and stainless-steel appliances. The whole space is a nice mix of modern and rustic charm, sort of like the lodge Doc is working on. Glancing up, I see Doc standing in the front door waiting for Mike to leave, but Mike is still yelling something from the driveway.

“She’s a fucking mess, bro. You’re going to regret this.” His truck finally starts and the rumbling travels down the driveway, popping rocks beneath the tires.

Doc turns toward me. “You shouldn’t be moving around this much. Come with me, please.” His hand lands on my hip, and when his big, warm body is next to mine, I feel like I deserve all the good in the world.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Cookie. You shouldn’t have to deal with that. I... I should’ve told you I knew him.” He looks down at the ground as though he’s gathering his thoughts.

Deep down I know he didn’t mean anything by holding information back from me, but that doesn’t change the fact

that Mike is Doc's family. His flesh and blood. That's never going to change.

"You don't owe me an apology. It's all good." I reach out toward him, squeezing his shoulder gently in comfort. "I should get this leg checked out."

"We can use Doctor Thorpe for some of the imaging, but if you want a full look, we should probably take you to the Springs."

"Let's just go locally. It's not as high tech as the Springs, but it'll do the job. I really just want to confirm this isn't a break and get home. I'm sure my plants are missing me." I force a smile as though I'm happy to leave, but the truth is if Mike hadn't shown up, I'd be climbing all over Doc. My brain may be reeling with weird thoughts of how this would all work, but my clit is still full steam ahead.

His giant hand lands on my thigh. "We should talk about this Mike thing. I don't want awkwardness between us. We were having a good time together."

"Yeah." I stare down at the floor and drag my gaze up toward Doc. He's got this vibe that's somewhere between a biker and a cowboy. A rough, rugged man and cinnamon roll who truly wants to take care of me... which is why I need to walk away now before any of this gets more complicated. "There's nothing to talk about. We're good."

He looks toward the front door, then back at me, scrubbing his hand down over his beard. "You'll talk to me in the truck on the way to the doctor then." He lifts me without another word and carries me out the front door and into the covered garage where his truck sits waiting.

This is the rough, rugged part of him. The part that just lifted me like a candy bar and carried me a hundred feet like it was nothing. No one has ever done that. *Ever.*

When I'm settled into the truck, he leans against the door frame and looks back at me. "What do I have to do to get us back to where we were before Mike showed up?"

I stare toward Doc, desperate to pull his firm body in toward me and devour every last inch of him. Desperate to make him feel good for helping me, for holding me, for feeding me, for defending me. But the truth is, we would never work, not with Mike in the picture.

“Maybe we’re only meant to be friends, Doc. Good friends. I’m busy all the time with this whole app thing and...” I blow out a heavy breath. “It’s hard. Everything is so hard.”

He steps in toward me, his big, rough hand now on my face, the woodsy scent of cedar in the air. “Nothing feels hard with you, Nora. It hasn’t since the day I met you. And if you believe for one second that I’d choose Mike over you, you’re wrong.”

Everything he just said is right. Really right and the temptation to strip down and let him have me is stronger and stronger, but that’s only going to cause me more drama.

“Look, I like you... *a lot*. You’re easily the nicest guy I know, but I don’t want anything to do with Mike. And if we try this... he’ll go crazy. I mean, you just saw.”

“He’s all talk.”

“No! You don’t get it. It’s not like that, Doc. It’s not as simple as that.” I draw in a deep breath and stare out the front window wondering how much I should tell him. My relationship with Mike was a steaming pile of insanity. I should’ve left after the first red flag went flying. Instead, I stayed an extra six months hoping things would change. “Mike... he... he knows things that...” I exhale hoping the stress goes away but it’s still there in the pit of my stomach like a heavy lead weight. “Do you mind if we just go?”

He leans in, thumbing away a tear before it rolls off my cheek. I didn’t even cry after the accident. I can handle physical pain. That’s nothing compared to this. This kind of pain stings in places that can’t be healed with anything but time.

Doc locks his gaze on mine. “Did he hurt you?”

I hold in a ragged breath as I stare toward Doc. I don't want to say anything that could change his relationship with his family. It's not my place.

“What happened between you two?” He presses again, his jaw tighter this time. “If he hurt you, Nora, I swear to God I'll fucking kill him.”

Another tear ripples down my cheek.

Doc catches it. “We'll get you checked out, but I need to know what the story is here. Okay?”

I nod in agreement, but I have no plan to follow through. Sometimes the past is the past for a reason. And right now, history is a subject I'm not interested in teaching.

Chapter Six

Doc

Small towns are great for community and comradery. Medical care, however, isn't one of the highlights. Rugged Mountain has one small office with two doctors and two nurses. The doctors can handle most simple injuries and illnesses. If there's something slightly more serious going on, they'll call the paramedics in to help, but for the most part, if something needs intensive care, the Springs is the way to go.

"Nora?" Nurse Beth says before trying to help her patient up from the waiting room chair. Beth is known and loved by most. She's a single mom who works long shifts at the clinic and spends her weekends helping with choir practice up at Hickory Church. Every free second the woman has, she's giving away to a fault. Sometimes, people need to know when they've spread themselves too thin. "Let's get some images of you so the doctor can see what's wrong." She tucks her arm under Nora's and helps her toward the back room.

"Oh, I can carry her. It'll take the weight off her leg." I lean down to help but Nora's hand rests on my shoulder as though she's about to protest.

"No. You can go. Thank you for bringing me here, and for the rest last night, and the food, and... essentially everything." More tears gather at the corner of her eye, and I can't help but wonder if they're for me.

I wrinkle my brows. "I'm not leaving you here."

"Please go. I'll call someone to help me from here." Her tone has gone dry and there's a noticeable curtness that wasn't there before. I know something happened between her and Mike. Something more than a breakup.

"It's okay." Beth smiles. "We've got her from here, Doc. I don't mind running Nora home. I bet she has some squash she can trade me with that big garden she has up on the hill."

Nora snuffles and turns toward Beth with a forced smile. “You know, I do have squash. More than I know what to do with. You’re welcome to as much as you want!”

“Oh, that’s great because the kids are eating them and making all these crafts with the dried shell. Did you know you can feed the seeds to the birds, too? We never waste a thing!” She has a slight southern accent that makes me wonder where she’s from originally.

“See?” Nora glances toward me. “I’ll be more than fine. Go!”

I draw in a deep breath before glancing out the window then back toward Nora. “I’ll take a walk, but I’ll be back in what...” I squint toward Beth hoping she gives me an idea of the time.

“An hour or so should do it, depending on what’s wrong.”

“Good. I’ll be back in an hour. And if Beth still wants squash, we can drop it off to her later.” I don’t wait for a reply because I know I won’t like it. Instead, I head out into the brisk fall air toward the tattoo shop at the end of the street.

If I’m lucky, Raven will be in today. Her husband, Gage, took over the shop a while back and she hangs out with him whenever she’s free. I used to think it was because she loved her guy so much, but I quickly realized it was a combination of loving him and hearing all the gossip around town. Turns out, the tattoo shop is the place to go for town news... and I could really use some right now.

“Raven!” She’s standing at the front desk in a black and white dress with her dark hair tied up in a red ribbon. I’ve known her father, Henry, for ages and I swear the girl could be his twin...minus the beard.

“Hey, Doc! What’s up? You here for an appointment? We’re pretty booked up, but I can talk to Gage and see—”

“No. Not today. I came to talk to you, actually.”

She grins. “Me? Of course you did! Everyone comes to talk to me!” Her grin gets wider. It’s hard to believe she’s old

enough to have her own kids and family now. Where does time go? “What’s up?”

I glance toward the new girl behind the counter. I don’t know what her situation is or who she talks to, but I’m not interested in making more drama than need be. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

Raven’s face goes from happy to concern. “Yeah, sure. Follow me to the back.”

The tattoo shop is packed. I see my buddy Brick over with Gage getting what looks to be an anchor tattoo and a few other locals all adding to their sleeves or shoulder pieces. This shop is the reason Rugged Mountain is on the map. The talent here is exceptional and people come from all over to get inked.

Raven opens the black door to the break room and invites me in. “So, what’s up? Is everyone okay?”

I nod and suck in a heavy breath. I don’t know how to ask her what I’m about to ask, but I’m hoping she has some details for me. “You know Nora, right? The woman that started the Mail Order Marriage app? She used to be a—”

“Realtor, yeah. Is she okay?”

“Yeah, great. Well, not great exactly. She fell off her bike last night out on the outskirts, but... that’s not why I’m here. Do you remember when she dated a guy—”

“Your brother?”

“Half-brother.” My chest tightens. “What do you remember about that?”

“Why?” She crosses her legs and leans in toward me. “What’s going on, Doc?”

I drag in a deep breath, holding it for a moment before finally releasing. “I need Nora in my life. When she smiles, everything in my world makes sense. *Everything*. I was out in Arizona doing work on a few projects we had while Nora and Mike were together, so I missed the whole thing. She told me something happened between them, and I’m hoping you heard what.”

Raven's brows lift and her lips pinch together. "I only know what happened at her mom's funeral."

My throat closes at the mere thought of what Raven might say next. "*Her mom's funeral?*"

"Yeah," Raven's tone lowers, "Mike showed up drunk and totally humiliated her. He stood up during the eulogy and called Nora a selfish bitch, then threatened to tell everyone what a terrible person she is."

"What the fuck?" My heart is tight, and my fists are coiled. I'm going to fucking kill him.

"Yeah, Nora is like the sweetest woman alive. She grows all those vegetables and shares them with everyone. Hell, even when she was showing houses, she was trying to hook people up because all she wanted was for folks to be happy. Mike tells people she tried to '*change*' him." Raven's brows lower. "None of my business, and I know he's your... half-brother, but the man needs changing." She blows out a breath. "Anyway, she told everyone what a drunk he is after that. I think it was a warning to all other women who hadn't heard what he did to her. When Mike found out she was telling everyone, he threatened to have a buddy hack into her dating app and ruin everything."

"Who the fuck does he know that could do something like that?"

Raven draws a deep breath. "Seriously? He gets a lot of folks up at that tactical shop. I bet someone he knows could do some damage if he really wanted them to. Nora stopped talking about him after that and sunk herself into work. I mean I know the Mail Order Marriage app is her dream, but she used to dream about more. A family, a ranch, a life of her own, you know? I think Mike took that from her in a way. She couldn't trust anyone after that."

Kin or not, I'm going to kill the man. I'm going to drag him up to the quarry and I'm going to bury him in heaps of heavy rock.

My jaw tightens and my teeth grind against one another.

“I’m sorry, Doc.” Raven stands from her chair and glances up at the clock. “I can’t leave the new girl up front for much longer. She was nervous as hell about starting today.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

She nods and heads toward the door as Brick walks in. He’s got his arm postured like he’s showing off his new ink.

“Looks great!” Raven smiles on her way past him. “Of course, I’m partial to the guy drawing all over you.”

Brick gives her a nod and grin combo before heading toward me. “You hear about this damn bachelor auction shit?”

I don’t have time for this conversation. I need to find Mike, kick his ass, and get back to the clinic for Nora. I’d like to say she gets a choice in whether or not I’m there, but she doesn’t. I’m not letting her catch a ride home. That’s not happening. I stand from the chair. “I’ve heard.”

“It’s shit. You participating?”

The auction is for bachelors. I’m not sure I qualify as such anymore. Even if Nora doesn’t want me, she has my heart, and that’s that. “Nah. I’m... I think I’m seeing someone.”

“You think?”

“I’m in a hurry, man. I don’t know about the auction.”

Brick stands straight, crossing his arms over one another. The anchor on his forearm really pops. I didn’t realize until now he has a bull hanging off one of the edges. Questions abound regarding that, but again, I don’t have time.

He doesn’t take the hint. “Yeah, it’s just not my thing. A bunch of lonely women all buying men for the night. Fuck that.”

Brick is the kind of guy that’s rejected commitment at every angle. He doesn’t want a woman. He doesn’t need a woman. He’s a lone wolf and he’s fine with that. “It’s for

charity. Just do it. It's a good way to meet people. Plus, it's a requirement of the MC. All bachelors have to participate every year. I did it last year, and it wasn't so bad. I spent the evening with Mrs. Robinson. She made me pasta and strawberry pie. You don't want to do it, get with someone before next month, and you're good to go."

"Yeah." Brick grins as though he's halfway into a plan. "What the hell are you in such a hurry about, anyway?"

I push past him and toward the door. "Unless you want to fuck someone up with me, I'm going to have to fill you in later."

His grin grows even wider as he turns toward me. "Now you're speaking my language. We're brothers in arms, man. Let's go."

Chapter Seven

Nora

I didn't find my phone out on the road, but thankfully Beth didn't mind taking me into town for a new one. Unthankfully, Doc has called at least half a dozen times since yesterday. I don't want to talk to him. *Not now, not ever.* What's the point in torturing myself with someone I can never have? Nothing he says can change who Mike is. A psycho. A maniac. A destructive bastard who should be exiled from the mountain on pure stupidity alone.

"You shouldn't let Mike hold you back, Nora. He's an asshole. The more space you give assholes to asshole the worse they get." Beth and I became quick friends on the way home from the clinic. I didn't expect Doc to show back up. I practically pushed him out, but I was kind of shocked he didn't. "Seriously," Beth sighs, "Doc is great. Don't miss out on something perfect because of a moron like Mike."

"He's more than a moron, Beth. He could ruin everything I've worked for. He knows so many people." I dig my hand into the popcorn bowl and pull up a buttery handful of goodness. "Besides, why would I ever ruin Doc's family. They're blood. I can't do that."

"Doc has called you twelve," she picks up my phone and stares at the screen, "no, thirteen times in the last twelve hours. At least give the man a chance to explain. You'd be coyote food right now if it weren't for him."

I know she's right in more ways than one. Not only would I be puppy chow, but Doc also saved me from myself. He woke something up in me that I haven't felt... ever.

Beth passes me the phone. "Please, call him."

"What if he's calling because he wants to tell me I'm right? What if he wants to—"

"You know that's not why he's calling. No one calls fifteen times because they want to tell you that *you're right.*"

“The number of times he’s called keeps going up.” I laugh.

She grins. “It’s for dramatic effect. Call him!”

“No! You call him! You’re single, and you think he’s great. I bet you guys would be cute together.”

“Yeah,” she shakes her head, “I’m not into the MC guys. They’re so... alpha.” She says it like it’s a bad thing. “The look is hot, but the whole ‘rebel’ thing is pretty dated.”

“What? You don’t like a man who takes control?”

She shakes her head. “No. I like to make all my own decisions. I let a man take control once, and he fucked me over. But we’re not talking about me. If I were to guess... I’d say deep down you know that Mike can’t ruin what you’ve built. He might make it difficult, but you know he can’t take it away. You’re worried about getting hurt again. That’s why you won’t call Doc back.”

A truck rumbles outside, and a door shuts heavily.

Beth and I glance toward each other with wide eyes then peek out the front window.

“Oh fuck. He’s here.” She stands from the couch and offers me a quick hug. “That’s my cue. I have to get back to the kids, anyway. You’ve got this. Don’t close yourself off to love. You deserve to be happy.”

Deserving to be happy and allowing myself to be happy are two completely different things. Allowing myself to be happy would require that I trust another human being and I’m not sure I’m there yet.

Beth grabs a basket of veggies we picked earlier from the garden and jogs off the front porch past Doc. I’ve seen him with all kinds of expressions but this one is new to me. It looks like serious, tinged with anger, and a slight dollop of hunger.

He climbs up the steps one heavy boot after another, his gaze never leaving mine. I see now that he’s holding a rope. It looks like the same rope he tied around us after my accident.

What the hell is going on?

I expect him to greet me, wait at the door, offer me a hug or at least yell at me for not answering the phone... but he doesn't. Instead, he pushes past me like he owns the place and grabs an oak dining chair from the table, dragging it to the center of the room.

"Sit." His voice is low and commanding.

And while I realize I should be repulsed by this behavior, I'm turned the hell on.

"What?" This has to be for show because on any other day, I'd do whatever this man tells me.

"I've called you a million times. You don't answer your phone so now I'm here. Sit."

"No!" I'm saying it with little conviction, hoping what he hears is, *'Yes, you big, bearded man. Please pick me up, then tie me down.'*

When I don't budge, he lifts me from the ground and lowers me into the chair, tying my ankles to each post as he growls under his breath. "You know all this could've been avoided if you'd called me back."

"Whatever," I mumble. "Why are you here?"

"How's your leg?"

I lick my lips and look away from him, glancing back a second later. "It's just a lump and a bruise. Nothing rest can't fix."

"I'm sorry I didn't make it back to the clinic. I got wrapped up in something." He clears his throat. "I know what Mike did to you. I talked to Raven."

It wasn't a secret what Mike did. The whole town was talking about it for nearly a year. "Okay... so you know. Feel better?"

Doc clears his throat. "I did, after I punched him in the jaw, and gave him a piece of my mind."

"What? Why? It's over."

“It’s not over. He was threatening you and that’s not okay.”

“So what? You slayed the dragon and came back to claim your prize?”

“You’re a prize to be claimed, I’ll give you that. But the dragon hasn’t been slayed. I wish I could slay him but... Chap took him out to California to this rehab center his sister runs.” Doc tightens the ropes at my ankles. “Most people choose salvation when they’re given the option.”

I’m not sure how I feel about Mike getting help. Mostly because I have doubts he can stick it out, but right now, he’s gone, and Doc is standing before me with a look on his face like I’m all he wants, and I like being wanted.

“Look me in the eye, Nora.” My clit throbs and a shock of electricity runs through me. “You’re out of excuses. Tell me you want this. Tell me that dream you had last night was about me.”

I swallow hard. I knew he heard me moaning. “No.”

“Be honest with me, Nora.” His tone is so low that I feel the vibration in my stomach. “Tell me the truth.”

My heart races and my stomach is tight. *How am I here? How is he here? Am I dreaming right now? Will I wake up alone in bed? God, I don’t want to be alone in that bed.*

“Yes, I want you,” I mutter. “I want you and your hands all over me.”

“Good girl, Cookie. I know that was hard.” Even in his demands, he’s gentle, understanding. Shaking, I close my eyes as his big, rough hands land on my thighs and his warm breath tickles my ear. “Tell me what your dream was.”

“I, ugh, I dreamt you tied me up and...” My words trail off as he drags the rope up and over my frame. Pulling down my dress, he loops the rough gauge around my breasts and stomach, tangling the ends in a knot that looks as though it could be art. I study his hands as he works.

He growls under his breath. “Are you going to do what you’re told, Cookie?”

I drag in a staggered breath. “Possibly.”

“Good girl.” Our gaze meets. “Unzip my jeans.”

My heart pounds as I nod and do as he’s asked, excited to see the giant cock he’s been hiding behind those jeans. And Lord, is it huge. My dream didn’t do it justice. With his shaft thick, long, and throbbing, I bend forward and take him into my mouth. He wants me. He needs me. This is rock solid proof that can’t lie. This man wants me as badly as I want him.

Groan after groan leaves his throat as I stroke his cock and suck, pumping back and forth. I’ve never wanted a man more. I’ve never wanted anything more.

My clit aches as my nipples pinch hard beneath his heavy hand.

“Stop.” He pulls his throbbing cock from my mouth and bends to the floor, untying enough knots to separate me from the chair, before lifting me up.

I’ll never get over how easily he moves me.

I suck in a breath and bend onto the couch as he positions me forward. My arms aren’t tied, but most of my body is, the rope dangling behind me like reins awaiting his command.

“I’m going to touch that soft little pussy and you’re going to moan for me, so I know you love it.” His rough hand grazes over my soft mound and everything inside of me is on fire. He hasn’t tucked himself inside my panties yet, but his finger rubs at my clit through the fabric, and I feel myself soaking his hand.

“Fuck me! Please, fuck me!”

“I’m going to fuck that pretty little pussy, and your tight little ass, but first you’re going to come for me. I want you soft and ready.”

I gasp for air as he works my clit, but each breath is harder and harder.

I'm soaking wet, drenched with silky-sweet juices that I'm desperate for him to slide into. Slowly, two thick fingers press behind my panties and into my core, thrusting in and out over and over until I'm moaning out in desperation.

I need to come.

"Come for me, Cookie."

His huge body presses against my frame from behind, his teeth sinking into my shoulder, his hand beneath me at an angle I've never felt before, the rope scratching at my skin as he works me over.

Energy builds in my core and every ounce of reserve I have left pools in my stomach before exiting all at once.

I scream out and smile as my thighs press together and squeeze his hand. "Oh my god, Doc! Don't stop!"

He rubs me harder, thrusting into me faster, deeper. "I need your come, Cookie. Give it to me."

I convulse, shake, and disintegrate before him as I collapse forward. He takes the ends of the rope and holds me in place as his cock edges against my soaked pussy.

I hear a soft wet sound and a pop as he slides his cock into me. "That's my girl." A heavy groan leaves his throat. "You feel so fucking good. Do you know how bad I've needed to fuck you?"

I groan and close my eyes as his thick cock presses into me over and over again. "Your pretty little pussy has my cock gripped tight. You like it, don't you?"

Each thrust of his cock touches everything good about me. My heart, my soul, the back of my cervix... he's even rubbing my clit somehow.

Leaning forward, he pulls on the ropes and bites the back of my neck. "I need you, Nora. I need you always. Tell me you're staying forever."

I let out a struggled moan and open my eyes as his warm breath threatens my heart with what it wants, what it needs. "Harder. Go harder. I can take it."

“That’s not what I asked you, Nora...” His deep voice trails off as he thrusts harder, and I can feel my time on this plane of existence ending. My heart stops and my entire body leaves the room until all that’s left is a limp bag of bones that’s desperate to be used in every way possible.

Of course, I want Doc. I want him forever. I want to love him like no one’s been able to. I want to hold him. I want to help him. I want to lay in his arms and feel safer than I’ve ever felt... forever. But saying any of that out loud scares the hell out of me.

“You trust me, right?” He slows his thrust. It’s a well-made plan. He knows how desperate I am.

I shake my head. “Yes. Fully.”

“Okay, then tell me what I need to hear. Tell me you’re mine.”

I draw in a deep breath.

“Tell me you’re mine and I’ll come in that tight little ass of yours.” His thick finger traces the bundle of nerves at my backside as he thrusts into me deeper. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt anything like this before. Actually, I’m *sure* I’ve never felt anything like this.

“I want you, Doc. I want you forever! I’m yours!” I pant out every word as my pussy squeezes down on his cock.

“Good girl,” he growls as he pulls out of me. “Take a deep breath.”

I do as he’s asked and suck in a heavy breath as he tips his cock at the edge of my back entrance.

Saying I’m nervous would be an understatement. I’m terrified... but also excited. I want him in every part of me and I want it now.

He presses in and blinding pain wavers over my body.

“Okay... go slow!” I swallow hard.

Doc grips the ropes tighter and slides in further. He’s careful as he moves, and soon my ass is stretched wide and

he's thumping against me with intent.

Why does this feel so good?

"Oh fuck." He growls out and tugs at the ropes. "I'm going to come, Cookie." His cock somehow gets bigger, harder, reaching places I didn't know existed.

"Me too!" I pant and squeeze as the tip of his cock hits a place that sends a shooting pleasure that starts at the base of my neck and travels down quickly, spreading through my groin and into my toes.

"That's my girl. That's my good, good girl!" He's growling out the words as he tugs me in tighter. In a matter of seconds, we hit a seemingly simultaneous orgasm that locks us in this moment... forever.

"Fuck, yes!" His hand lands in a solid spank against my ass as he comes and then another and another as though he's unraveling.

With each bit of pressure, my frame vibrates against his cock and every crippling bit of goodness that's spreading over me heightens until I collapse.

Doc groans with pleasure and lowers next to me on the couch, loosening the ropes he's tied before pulling me onto his lap.

I lay against his chest and listen to the heavy beat of his heart as his rough fingertip runs circles on my back.

"You okay?" His tone is low and nearly a growl.

"Yeah. I'm so good." I smile and kiss him gently as his big hand lands on the back of my head.

"So, what do I have to do to get this every day going forward?"

I sit up and look into his dark eyes before scrubbing my fingers through his salt and pepper beard.

"You're already doing it, Doc. I meant what I said. I want you."

He leans in and kisses my lips gently, brushing the side of my face. “Good, because I didn’t have plans of letting you go.”

Epilogue

Six Weeks Later

Nora

“She’s got a lot on her plate, Brick. You can’t be messing around like this.” Brick stands in the doorway of the cabin. He’s a big guy covered in tattoos, and he insists on being right about everything. I can’t tell you how fun that is.

“She’ll agree to it once she hears my plan.”

“She won’t agree to it because I’ll make sure she doesn’t.” I smile wide and playful, but I’m dead serious. I won’t let Brick play fake relationship with Beth, so he doesn’t have to mess around with this charity auction thing. It’s not worth it. She’s a single mom, and she has a million things going on. That and Beth has been on my app for the last six weeks. She’s looking for real love, not whatever Brick is offering.

He grins and shakes his head, grabbing a beer from the fridge. “You can try, but I have my ways.” He leans against the counter and cracks open the can.

“What are you two fighting about?” Doc kisses my forehead as he passes by. He’s dragging his tackle box and fishing pole through the house again. It’s only been six weeks, and the ink has barely dried on the wedding certificate, but we’ve already had this conversation a dozen times.

“Can you set that stuff outside? It smells like fish and my stomach is so sick.”

“Fuck.” He kisses my lips and grabs the gear from the counter, setting it on the porch before swinging the door closed. “Sorry Cookie... old habits.”

“That’s okay. Hopefully this morning sickness ends soon. I can’t even walk by the bakery on Main without feeling sick.”

“What is it about the bakery?” Brick sips his beer as he talks.

“They make this ricotta chee—” I shake my head. “I can’t even say it without feeling sick.”

Doc rubs my back and holds me close. “It will be over soon, and we’ll be on to the best part of this pregnancy.”

He glances toward Brick. “What are you stressing her out about? Don’t tell me it’s this damn auction again.”

“It’s the damn auction again.” I laugh and lay my head against his shoulder as my hand sinks into his. “He wants to approach Beth with terms of a fake relationship so he can avoid the whole thing. Tell him how dumb that is.”

Doc shakes his head. “The MC finds out about that, and they’ll be pissed. Why are you so desperate to get out of this?”

Brick shrugs. “Doesn’t feel right.”

“A charity event doesn’t feel right?” Doc’s tone is sarcastic. “How so?”

“Look, last year I got set up with Victoria Peterson. Do you know her?”

“No.”

“That’s right because she came from five hundred miles away to cash in on a date with a big, rugged biker.”

I grin. “Sounds like a smart lady.”

“She was. Super smart. She spent the entire night telling me about ions and atoms and some bullshit about nuclear formulas.”

“Okay... that seems like a fine conversation for *charity*.” I bite back laughter.

“You only get one life. I’ll donate the money if it means I’m not dating a stranger. Beth and I have talked a few times. We can work something out.”

My stomach knots. I know deep down Brick is a nice guy. Last week I watched him help a guy change his tire in the middle of a rainstorm. He didn’t have to do that. Then again, he’s also the most extreme sort of loner I’ve ever met. I’m

surprised he even joined the MC. I picture his type nestled into the mountainside on a mission of solitude with a gun perched next to him.

Doc shakes his head and leans into my ear. “I’ll talk to him. Are you sure you don’t want to go fishing with us?”

“Yeah. I’m positive. I think I’ll stay here and work on the app. I have some emails from the developer I need to read. You guys have fun. Bring home anything but fish for dinner, okay?”

He kisses my lips gently and slowly as his arms hook around my waist. “What sounds good?”

“Besides you?”

Brick gags playfully in the background. “Okay... you guys are sick. I’ll be outside.”

“Finally, he’s gone.” Doc’s finger lifts my chin, and he leans into my lips again and again. “I don’t want to go anymore. I want to stay here and take you back to bed.”

“I want that too, but I think you need to go now. Brick has lost it. He can’t mess with Beth.”

Doc draws in a deep breath. “I’ll talk to him and figure out what’s really going on. You don’t work too hard today, okay? I want to come home to a rested Cookie.”

I gaze up at the man I’m so desperately in love with and land a kiss on his lips.

I never imagined I’d be someone’s wife, and I certainly never thought children would be in my future. But as I take in the soft scent of pine on Doc’s chest and feel his big arms holding me tight, I know this is where I’m meant to be.

Right here in the middle of nowhere, on a ranch in the mountains with the man that saved me from coyotes. A man that gave me a happily ever after of my very own.

Thank you for reading!

[Check out Brick’s story here.](#)



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

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

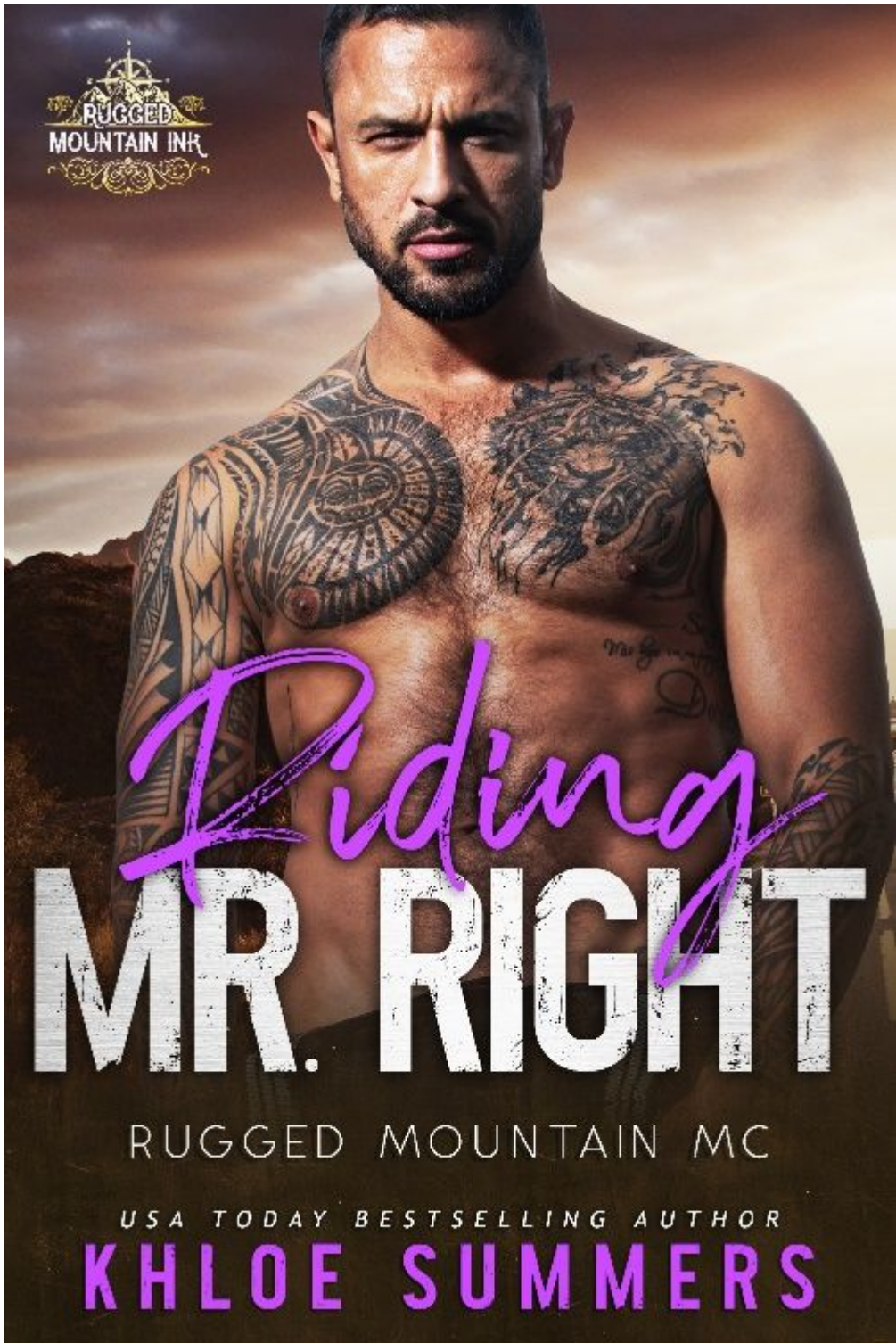
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Chapter One

Jewel

Men never look at me, not like this. There has to be something wrong. I gaze to the left and back again before narrowing in on the computer, trying to catch a glimpse of myself on the screen. The view isn't as clear as I'd like, but my hair looks fine, there doesn't seem to be anything major dangling from my nose, and my teeth check out. Though, I did have the guy put extra basil on my pizza for lunch. Maybe that's stuck somewhere I can't see.

I turn away from the man whose eyes won't look away and contemplate pulling a mirror out of my purse or getting up to use the bathroom, but that would draw more attention to myself. There are at least twenty people in the shop, probably more, and ever since I fell off the stage at my fifth-grade production of *The Little Mermaid*, I've decided less attention is the better option.

"Excuse me," a deep voice says, startling me from the daze I've been in.

Oh God. I glance up quickly then away, gathering my thoughts. *It's him.* It's him, and this close, he's a massive man. Tall, wide, inked, and muscular. What is it about embarrassing yourself in front of someone so perfect that makes the embarrassment that much worse?

My cheeks heat. "Yeah, um, hi. Hello." *God, what am I even saying? Kill. Me. Now.*

"I need to pay." The man pulls out his wallet and stares at me. His features are dark and the ink on the side of his head is so wrong, it's right. "I think Gage said it would be eight hundred." He holds out his muscular forearm, showing off the sleeve he's been working on. "What do you think? Am I properly coated in ink, or should I keep going?"

I swallow hard and nod. "No. I like it. I mean, if you wanted more, you have space next to the shield." My attention

gets drawn to a unique aspect of his sleeve. “What do all those symbols mean?”

I roll my eyes to myself. *Why am I so impossibly basic?*

“Oh, it’s my Scottish family crest. I got into the ancestry thing a few years back with one of those online tests and it got out of control fast.” He grins and swipes his hand over his long beard as he waits for me to run his card.

“It’s funny you’re talking about ancestry stuff because that’s why I’m here. Well, sort of. Not a tattoo, but you know... the family part.” I swear I’ve never rambled this much in my life. “My dad. I’m here to meet my dad.”

His eyes widen and I’m sure he thinks I’m an idiot at this point. “Like *meet him*, meet him? For the first time?”

I nod. “His last known address was a cabin up in the mountains here. He doesn’t know about me.”

“Fuck.” The man pauses as though he’s thinking over the right thing to say. “What’s his name?”

“Arnold Brooks.” The second I say his name, the more my stomach tightens. *This is a small town. What if he knows my father? What if he tells him I’m here?*

“Arnie! I know Arnie! He’s a great guy. I’m sure he’d love to meet you!”

It’s official. I’m an idiot.

My stomach twists, knots, and drops all at once. I drag my gaze up toward the man in front of me. “No! Don’t tell him you know me. How do you know him?”

“Well, he’s a cook at the diner on Main. He’s right down the road here every afternoon. Plus, he’s been planning to come cook at the lodge the MC is building. Why don’t you let me take you to meet him? When do you get off work?”

A sudden blaze of heat flashes over me. The same blaze that’s flashed over me for days now. The blaze that buries me in more questions than answers and keeps my feet firmly planted at the little hotel I’ve been stuck at for weeks.

What if my father doesn't want a daughter? What if he doesn't like me? What if he hated my mother, and he curses me out for even looking him up? What if he has a family and I'm intruding on their life? The list goes on and on until I'm heaving in breaths as though the air has been exchanged with marshmallows.

“Hey...” The tall, inked up man makes his way around the desk and lands his big hand on my back. “You’re okay. It’s all good. Sorry if I said something to upset you.”

“No. I’m fine. Sorry. I made a mistake coming here.” I blink away the tears threatening my vision and try not to notice how incredibly safe it feels having him next to me, though I can’t figure why, other than his size.

“What if you didn’t talk to him? What if we go up to the lodge, had a meal, and you didn’t tell him you were his daughter?”

“The lodge is closed. I saw the signs for the grand opening all over town.”

He nods. “Like I said, my friends and I are building it. Your dad...” He clears his throat. “Arnie is working on perfecting the menu, so he’s up there every night for dinner. Tonight is lasagna, I think.”

“Won’t it be weird if I come? I mean,” I stare up at the man whose name I haven’t even gotten yet, “do I look like him? Will it be obvious?”

He studies my face carefully, as though he’s noting every line and detail. Part of me wants to look away, but I don’t. I stay locked with him, allowing him to pass judgment and decide my fate.

His breath catches. “I don’t see it. I mean... I guess you have his nose, but a lot of people have that nose.”

I run my fingertip over the straight line in the center of my face. For the entirety of my childhood, my father was a ghost. A man my mother refused to tell me about. No pictures, no names, no details. I assume that’s because she was hiding something. Maybe for good reason.

Blowing out a heavy sigh, I stare up at the man in front of me. “What’s your name?”

“Brick.” He holds out his hand and glances down at the name sewn into my shirt. “And you’re Jewel.”

My hand lands softly in the roughness of his palm. I’m sure there’s something appropriate I should say here, but instead, I’m only staring.

“I’m headed up the mountain right now. Dinner is in about an hour. You could stay up at the lodge tonight and save yourself some money. No one would mind.”

The card reader beeps, saving me from myself. Now I have a reason to let go of his giant hand and pull the card to return it. “Why would you do all that for me? I could be a crazy person.”

He laughs. “Nah. I know how high Gage’s standards are for employees. Besides, I’m due for a good deed or two. And once you meet Arnie, you’ll see he’s the least threatening guy around.”

“And what about you? How do I know you’re not crazy? I could climb up on that bike you have parked outside and end up on the news tomorrow morning as a missing person.”

“You do have a good imagination, don’t you?”

He hollers toward Gage, who’s cleaning up his station, “Hey, man. I need a character witness.”

If I thought my face was red before, it must be maroon at this point. I should have been clearer about how I hated making a scene.

Gage wanders over, pulling gloves off and tossing them in the trash beside the desk. He’s also a big, inked up guy, though his background is different than most of the guys here. Gage used to be a college art professor up in Colorado Springs before he married Raven, the original owner’s daughter. His art style is clean, and people come from all over because of his line work and shading. At least that’s what I gather from my weeks here.

“What’s up?” Gage crosses his arms and grins toward Brick. “You’re over here bugging my employees.” He glances toward me with a playful smile. “Is this guy harassing you?”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t think so. He invited me up to the lodge tonight for dinner and I was wondering if I could trust him. Can I?”

Gage drags in a deep breath and blows it out heavily. “Jeez. You’re asking a real complex question. If you’re trusting him with a ride up the mountain, he’s the first guy I’d ask. Dude can drive a bike through hell and back. I once saw him maneuver through a wildfire. But if you’re talking about a date,” Gage pauses and glares toward Brick with half a grin on his face, “I don’t know about that.”

“It’s not a date,” we say simultaneously. When I was going to say it, it made sense. When he says it, it stings for some reason.

“I’m just showing her around town a little. She said she’s new and—”

“Ah yes...” Gage grins sarcastically. “You and your humanitarian ways. That makes the most sense.”

“What? I’m helpful!” Brick takes on a playfully serious voice as he talks. I get the feeling these two know each other pretty well.

“Right.” Gage glances back toward me. “If you need to get off Main Street for the weekend, you’re safe with Brick. But fair warning, he can be a pain in the ass.”

I’m tempted to ask Gage to elaborate, but a customer walks in, and he redirects his attention.

Brick turns toward me. “You ready?”

Am I ready? That’s a good question. I’ve been here for six weeks, and I haven’t found a day I was ready yet. In fact, even now, at the very moment where this is the best possible solution I’ve come across, I’m still running the numbers. Long, complicated, over thought numbers. Equations, polynomials, word problems, it’s all a mess.

Bricks heavy hand lands under my arm as he helps me up from the desk. “You’re going to be okay. Come on.”

“I don’t know if I can go, actually. There are a million things that could go wrong. I—”

“Look, I don’t know you from anyone, but I do know you drove all the way out here, and you’ve stayed for a reason.” Our eyes meet as I stand. He’s enormous. My face barely reaches his shoulders. I’ve never felt so small in my life.

Why do I like this? Now isn’t the time to like this.

“Come on.” He links his arm in mine as though we’re old friends, people who have known each other for ages. “You’re in control. I’ll be there for whatever you need. We’ll come up with a code word.”

“A code word? Like what?”

He shrugs as we walk through the door arm in arm. “I don’t know. How about you tell me you have to feed your cat and we’ll head out.”

I stare toward Brick as we step into the cool afternoon breeze. How is he more handsome in the sunlight, and why does feeding my kitty sound so erotic when he says it?

I’m not sure what’s about to happen, but I know one thing for sure.

I need to get a grip!

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