

The background of the cover is a photograph of a man with a beard and a black baseball cap worn backward. He is looking down and to the right. He has large, intricate tattoos on his chest and arms. He is wearing a black button-down shirt that is open at the collar. The background is a sunset over a landscape with mountains and a road.

*Riding*  
**WICKED**

RUGGED MOUNTAIN MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**KHLOE SUMMERS**

Riding Wicked  
*Rugged Mountain MC*  
Khloe Summers  
Summer to Winter Publishing



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# Chapter One

Oakley

Six Weeks Ago

Booths nestle against smudged windows overlooking the sights of Main Street and the woods that surround it. There's a long counter with stools equally spaced and people talk and laugh as forks and plates scratch against each other. This diner is known for its mile high apple pie and people come from far away to get a taste. I, however, can't get enough of the strawberry rhubarb pancakes with cinnamon swirl icing. It's an indulgent treat, but given I'm six months pregnant, I figure I've earned it. If nothing else, I'll give my baby boy my taste for the sweeter things in life.

"Can I fill you up, sweetheart?" The waitress is a twenty something whose family relocated to Rugged Mountain for an escape. Apparently, I frequent the diner enough to make friends. I know everyone's life story.

The cook, Arnie, is an older veteran who used to feed a battalion of soldiers. He's in his late forties and I think he's got a twin brother out in Whiskey Falls. From what he's told me, he's never been married and doesn't plan to be. *I respect that.* The other waitress I see all the time is Leanne. She has three kids at home. Her husband ran off with some flight attendant from the Springs. She moved out here for a fresh start.

May, the long-haired server I usually see, settles down in the booth with me and blows out a breath. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

She rolls her eyes. "Well, that MC guy isn't here with you, but your bag is, and it's stuffed to the gills." Her brows narrow sympathetically. "Please stay. I could get you a job here. We could bake together and—"

"Thanks, but my father was really clear about me going back to Amarillo."

“No offense,” her face contorts, “but I’d pick that MC guy over my dad any day. Have you seen his abs?”

I laugh under my breath. May has good intentions, but she doesn’t know who my father is. Disobeying him isn’t an option. Not unless I want everyone around me to suffer. “Knight is pretty great. Hopefully, we’ll catch up again one day.”

Her thin brows narrow. “Great isn’t really the word I’d use to describe Knight. The man has the body of a god. And what do you mean... *someday*?”

I take a bite of the sticky sweet pancake and chase it down with some decaf. “*Someday*. As in... a day in the future.” I know she understands what I mean, but it’s probably best if I speak vaguely. The less she knows, the better.

Her eyes roll. “You’re killing me here.”

“Sorry. I probably should’ve done the whole disappearing thing, but with all the pancakes I’ve been downing the past few months, I figured I owed you a goodbye.”

“So it’s true? You’re not coming back?”

I shrug. “There’s no reason for me to stay. The baby’s father is out of the picture and I’m...” I run the tip of my finger along the outer rim of the cup. “I’m homesick.” It’s a lie, but it’s also a path to the least number of questions.

“What about Knight? Does he know?”

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I left him a note.”

She laughs. “A note? Have you met the man? He’s going to go after you. What then?”

“He won’t come after me. He’ll be relieved. Trust me. I’m a pain in the ass.”

“That’s not what he’s telling people around town. Arnie said he’s into you.”

“Yeah, and I’m on my way to the moon.” I rub my stomach. “I don’t think *this* is attractive to a man like Knight. Besides, we barely spoke. He was busy with that lodge build, and I was busy hiding. I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear I’m out of his hair.”

She huffs out a heavy breath. “Yeah, well, he and Arnie are getting pretty close now that he’s going to work nights at the lodge.”

“Why? He’s not happy here?”

“It’s not until November. Our business dies down come winter and we close early. Arnie’s going to cook for all the tourists up on the hill.” She slides up from the booth as another family walks in. “Please think about staying, or at least coming back. I promise you Knight won’t let this go. All those MC guys are protective as hell. And me,” she grins, “what about me?”

I chew the inside of my cheek as she walks away. I’m going to miss her most. Our morning chats over coffee and carbs quickly grew to be the best part of my day. Though, her most recent information about Knight being interested in me is a clear ploy. He’s at least fifteen years older and he could have his choice of women. Even before the pregnancy, I was extra ‘*curved*’ and now I may as well have someone tip me over and roll me back to Amarillo. I can’t believe I have months of this. *How big will this baby be?* With my luck, the baby will be six pounds zero ounces, and the rest of me is pancakes.

I grab my bag, slide out of the booth, and head out the back door. It’s best to avoid some big goodbye with Arnie and May. What I’ve said is enough already. Besides that, there aren’t enough words in the world to describe the relationship I have with my father. Up here, in Rugged Mountain, the ranchers are all like family. They help each other out. They give and take. It’s a community. In Amarillo, ranching is big business, and big business is dirty. So dirty, that my pregnancy causes trouble, and no matter what I tell my father, he’s convinced that adoption is the only option.

I stand in the warm sunshine and stare up at the cloudless sky. The mountains rise and fall in the distance and there's a crispness in the air that screams autumn. For a second, I consider running after Knight, asking for his help, begging him to hide me a little longer. But the hard truth is, my father would find us. He'd find us, he'd take the baby, and he'd have Knight killed.

That's a future I couldn't handle. As much as I love this child growing inside of me, I need to do what my father is asking of me. Besides, maybe he's better off with someone else. I know I would've been.

# Chapter Two

Knight

Present Day

*'Visiting family. I'll be back soon.'* That note was left six weeks ago. Six weeks and two days, to be exact. I should be patient. Oakley had talked about going back to Amarillo to visit her father, and she even texted me when she got there. There's no reason for me to run off and chase her. She owes me nothing. My prerogative was to help her until her baby daddy and his men were taken care of. That was finished months ago. She has no reason to stay.

"Where you at, man?" Axel is on the other line. He's the last person I thought I'd hear from. We're not that close, but it's a big day for the lodge, and I'm sure Tex or Diesel put him up to the call.

"Ah, I'll be back in a few days. Everything alright there?"

"Not really." His tone is gruff, though it always is. "Diesel's pissed. He needs all hands-on deck for tomorrow, so you better get your ass back here."

Turning back now isn't an option. I've been holding watch for the last twenty-four hours. My bike is surrounded by peanut shells and piss. There's no way I'm leaving until I get a glimpse of her. One smile and I'll know she's okay. That's all I need.

Wide open pastures sprawl out with dried-up creek beds winding through. Brambles and bushes of wild berries and rows of fencing hold back livestock. Mostly cattle and horses, but there look to be a few pig pens in the far distance, closer to the barn.

I lift my binoculars and stare out at the scene. From here, I can see clearly through three back windows of the house. Lucky for me, out here in the middle of nowhere, no one has bothered with curtains or shades. The living room has been vacant for days, though the house is big enough that I'd



bet there were a few rooms for living. The other two rooms available to my sightline should garner me some luck. The kitchen and an upstairs hallway. Yet, twenty-four hours have passed, and I've seen a woman who looks to be a house hand and a large man whom I assume is her father. Still, I haven't seen Oakley.

Maybe she's not here. It has been six weeks. She could've moved on, gotten a job somewhere in town, *found a boyfriend*. The thought of another man touching her sends a crackle up my spine. Again, it shouldn't. She has no ties to me. I'm just a guy who helped her out in a time of need. That's a creed the MC uphold, and it's nothing new. Besides that, we didn't get much time to talk with everything going on at the lodge, though that doesn't mean I wasn't thinking about her.

"Bro... care to finish this conversation?" Axel's tone is irritated. I don't blame him. He and the guys are going to have to pick up my slack when the furniture is delivered tomorrow, and it's a big delivery.

"Sorry, man. I need to finish up a few things here. I'll be back in town as soon as I can."

"No." His tone is harsh, and it's annoying the fuck out of me. "You need to come back now. I know you're in Texas. We can't be out there. That's Death Ranger territory, or did you forget how all this works?"

"I said I'll be back when I—" The back door opens, and Oakley walks out. One hand covers her face, the other on her expanded stomach as she lowers herself to the ground.

I disconnect the line and tuck my phone into my back pocket, twisting the knob on the binoculars to clear my focus.

The large man I've seen multiple times this week follows her out the door. I can tell he's yelling by the way he waves his arms and grips her up from the ground. He's harsh and heavy with his movements and I have every right to aim this pistol right now and put him out of his misery.

A wave of disgust flickers through me as I try to be patient. I assume this man is Oakley's father. There's a code I

have to follow to protect her, but the more I focus the binoculars, the more tears I see streaming down her face. The more tears I see, the angrier I get. The angrier I get, the less I'm able to stand still.

*I need to get to Oakley, and I need to get to her now.*

# Chapter Three

## Oakley

Roosters peck at the bits of grass poking through the dusty earth in the yard and the clop of horses' hooves sound behind the squeaky back gate. My father's farmhouse sits on an ungodly number of acres in North Texas. The rocking chairs on the front porch lead folks to believe the ranch is welcoming.

*It's not.*

Wind blows and I tip back on the rocking chair, following the line of ants that make their way across the stairs and back onto the grass. I've always envied ants. I watched this documentary once where this little ant family worked together like a tribe. One would fall and the others would go for him. They worked together for a common cause and, for the most part, they did it without drama. I'm not sure I know a single person who could make that happen.

The back screen door swings open and closes with a thump. My father is behind me. I feel his heavy boots weigh on the wood boards as he steps closer. My heart rate jumps at least ten beats. He's always had this effect on me—immediate panic.

“Quit your sulking.” His tone is low and there's frustration buried in his throat. We had another argument earlier. Well, he was arguing with me. I was trying to get away.

“I need the fresh air. I'll be in soon.” My stomach turns as I speak in slow whispers that seem to soften him in a way I don't expect. Most folks would think he was trying to be nice, but I know better. This is manipulation at its highest form.  
*Care.*

His heavy body bends down next to mine and his arm anchors over my shoulder without permission. He smells like cigars and hay from the field. He shouldn't. I can't remember the last time he was working in the field, but I suppose you can't yell at the help without getting close to the source. “You

know, Oak, this baby is better off with that family next door. What do you know about being a mother, anyway?"

I pinch my lips together in a soft hum and slide away, but my father squeezes my shoulder tighter, holding me in place. I hate this man. I hate him with a loathing that's beyond words, but I don't know what to do or where to go. After things went south with my first and last boyfriend, I'm not trusting myself a hundred percent in the decision-making category. That's on me. Anxiety has me believing that familiarity is comfort. It's funny what your brain tells you when you're in survival mode.

"I mean it, Oakley. You saw what your mother did. You don't think you have the same sensibilities? You carry her blood." He laughs and another piece of my heart shatters out onto the porch. I wonder if I crawled around collecting all the shards, I could put myself back together.

At this point, I doubt it.

I clear my throat and stand from the porch. I'd come out for an escape, and this isn't it.

His hand grips my arm, inflaming the bruise he'd made earlier in the day. "Be ready to go at seven in the morning. These people are trading good land to me for that baby." The way he speaks of my son like a trading card makes me sick, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that any life my son has away from my father will be better than the life he'd have with me.

The couple that's adopting him own neighboring land. My father has been trying to get it from them for years. Fortunately for him, he discovered a way to exploit them, too. He found out that they've struggled with infertility for years and all their money is tied up in their land. He's preying on a basic, biological need to get what he wants.

*My stomach turns.*

After the adoption, the family is moving to a ranch up in Wyoming. It's better this way. Everything is. But as much as I know doing what's right helps my son, it doesn't help me

sleep at night. In the quiet hours, I have fantasies where I run off and disappear without a trace. Sometimes, I go back to Rugged Mountain, and I imagine myself living out a life with Knight. Believe me, I know how ridiculous that sounds given the fact that we barely spoke the entire time I was there, but there was something about him. He was always around, like a presence. You could see that he was watching me at all times... not that I'm complaining. Having an enormous man around that's easy on the eyes is always welcome.

I shake the daydream free from my head and flinch away from my father, nodding in approval of his request for a morning meeting. The visit is only an ultrasound and I need it done anyway. I still have time to think the details through.

With my father looking pleased at my concession, I blow out a heavy breath and head back inside to grab a book off the shelf in the sitting room. I'll pretend to read until he's asleep. Then I'll go down to the horse barn and talk to the animals like I have most every night of my life.

Zilly, a seven-year-old German Shepard is the best listener. She's supposed to be guarding the ranch, but she sits by the horses and listens to me ramble on about life as I scratch between her ears and feed her bits of cheese I swipe from the kitchen.

The porch door slams shut, and my father locks up for the evening. "Maybe when you're done with this whole baby ordeal, I can set you up with one of my friends. Taylor Evans is looking for a bride. He could take care of you for life, you know? You wouldn't need to be here, listening to my bullshit."

I should nod and continue with my reading of the encyclopedia of Greece, but I make the mistake of replying. "I don't need help dating. Thanks."

"You obviously do. You were seeing that asshole Johnathan." Johnathan owed the biggest ranch in Amarillo, and he won out on more than one land deal my father wanted. I should've known he'd be an asshole too, but I guess the familiarity of his actions comforted me in a *'I need therapy'* kind of way.

“Johnathan was a mistake. I—”

“I’d say he was.” My father laughs. “That’s why I should set you up.”

“Yeah...” I blow out a breath of exhaustion as he starts to tighten his face.

“You’re getting smart with me, girl, but Taylor could set you up real nice.” He climbs the wooden stairs toward his bedroom. “Seven. Don’t make me come looking for you.”

I follow his frame as he ascends the steps one by one and turns the corner into his bedroom. The good thing about him is that once he’s upstairs, he won’t come out for the night. Between the television and his CPAP machine, he’s dead to the world. Unless... the dogs start barking. His brain is wired to jump at their alert, but that almost never happens. They don’t bark unless something is array. Even then, they’d have to be feeling threatened to alert, and most folks know better than to mess around this ranch.

The second my father is locked away, my stomach unclenches, and I swear even the baby begins moving more freely. I hold my hand over my belly and use the other to push up from the couch to make my way outside. It’s at this time of night that I start to feel thankful for small things about my father. The first being his lack of education when it comes to technology. He’s so protective of this ranch, but he’s convinced himself that anyone can hack security cameras, so he avoids them at all costs. These nighttime walks are the only freedom I get from him.

This time of night, mosquitos buzz freely, frogs croak, and crickets rustle in the distance. It rained last night, and the earth is still damp. My feet sink into the mud as I move, but I love the way the squish feels between my toes.

The barn stands a few hundred feet away from the house with tall double doors and a horse emblem displayed above. Huffing breaths and the swish of a tail sings behind the walls. I may not like my father, but I love the ranch. I always have. The prickly, sweet-smelling timothy hay, the muffled

thump of hooves, the slosh of water, the cry of an eagle as he passes over head. The land is perfection.

I round the corner and pull open the barn doors, wondering why none of the dogs have come to greet me. Usually, they hear the back door open and follow me to the barn every night. I never feel unsafe here, not with my father in bed, but the dogs do keep me company.

Maybe one of the ranch hands locked them up in the barn by accident before they left. I slide open the door, flick on the light and jump back, holding my stomach as I scream a loud, blood-curdling scream.

All six dogs are sitting perfectly obedient and they're staring at a man I haven't seen in weeks.

# Chapter Four

## Knight

My intention wasn't to scare Oakley, but judging by the look on her face, that's what I've done. Her brows lift and she holds her expanded stomach. She's beautiful as ever, glowing even.

"Um, hey..." Her tone rises and falls as though confusion has taken over. "What's up?"

I toss another piece of steak toward the dogs and glance back up at Oakley. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?" Her tone drops as she says, "You've got the dogs answering to you like circus animals and you're about ten hours from home. I think you know what you're doing."

It's true. I do know what I'm doing here, but I'm not sure how to say it. I nod. "I saw what your dad did to you earlier."

Her brows narrow and her gaze drops. "What?"

I drag in a deep breath of sweet alfalfa and let it out slowly. "Your father hurt you."

"No. I know that's what you think you saw." She lets her eyes wander around the barn. "*How* did you see it?"

Telling her that I've been watching for days doesn't sound as mentally stable as it did when I was alone up on the ridge. So, I choose my next words carefully as I say, "I was passing through and I—"

"*Passing through?* You were passing through and you ended up in my barn with a pocketful of steak?"

This is the shit I'm not good at. *The talking. The rationalizing. The making sense of the overwhelming urge I have to protect and own this woman I have no right to own.*

*What the hell is wrong with me?*



I drag in a deep breath, trying to bite back what I know I'm about to say, but the longer I see that purple bruise on her arm, the more infuriated I get.

“Do you need anything from the house?” I grumble out the words as I stalk toward her. I realize she's been controlled by too many men in her life and if I want her affection, I should slow down and let her choose what happens next, but sometimes you have to help people help themselves, and this is one of those times.

She licks her soft lips and pinches her brows together. “I'm sorry, what? I can't leave. Whatever you saw is only the tip of the spear, and you can't throw raw meat at my father to quiet him down.”

My chest rises and falls as I force the barbarian bubbling out back inside. Though, it's not much use. I am who I am, and there's no way I'm leaving without Oakley.

She seems to have other plans. Rolling her eyes, she crosses her arms over her chest. “Seriously, Knight. Thanks, but—”

I bend down and lift her into my arms, cradling her frame gently against my chest.

“What are you doing?” She shrieks and slaps my back with little effort. “Let me go!”

“You're not thinking straight. You need help, so I'm helping you.” I slide out of the barn and close the door with my free hand, allowing the dogs out first.

“Why does everyone act like I can't think for myself? Clearly, I can.”

Staying quiet helps me avoid stupidity, so I continue with that.

“Let me go!” She kicks and hammers my back with her small fists, and I know a nice guy would set her down and move along with his life, but I've never been a fan of nice guys. What does being nice get you?

“If you really wanted me to let you down, you’d be screaming a little louder. Don’t you think?” Sure, she’s making noise, but it’s far too quiet to cause alarm to anyone but my eardrums and the dogs. Maybe that was her point.

One by one, they trot out of the barn, baring their teeth. One dog in particular seems personally offended by my caveman behavior. She stood out earlier because her coloration is different from the other dogs. She’s white with the smallest black diamond on her forehead, which is odd for a German Shepard.

“Zilly will kick your ass,” Oakley says, giving up on the kicking and screaming. “She’s a trained attack dog.”

“Well then, I’m going to have a fight on me because I’m not letting you go.”

The dogs bark louder. One after the other, riling each other up like a pack of wolves, though something tells me if I set Oakley down, they’d stop immediately.

“My father is going to hear them,” Oakley whispers. “Seriously, put me do—”

A gunshot rings out a hundred yards away, and then another.

“You could’ve told me your father was crazy.” I laugh and settle Oakley onto the ground, holding her hand tight in mine.

“Ha. Ha.” She stares up at me with wide eyes through the silver moon sky. “We should make a run for the pond.”

“The pond? Will the pond make his gun disappear?”

Her eyes roll to the side. “It’s not a real pond. It’s a pool. We can hide under the waterfall.”

*The waterfall?* I’ve been watching the property for days, but I don’t remember seeing a pond or a waterfall. Then again, I had my eyes on more important targets.

Our hands lock together tighter as she turns back toward the dogs. “Go home.” Her command is low, and they listen instantly, whimpering as they dart back toward the

house. The immediate threat is gone, but the gunshots still fire into the air.

“I think he’ll look in the pool.” I drag her toward the left. “Let’s make a run up the hill for my truck. It’s parked just beyond the light on the other side of the ravine.”

“I thought you rode a bike?”

I narrow my brows, wondering how this is an appropriate time to have this conversation. “I do. I rode it here, but I rented a truck to take you home in. You’re pregnant. It’s not safe for you on the bike.”

Her frame softens. “That’s nice.”

“Yeah, so maybe we head up there.”

The gun fires again.

She shakes her head and tugs me harder back toward the pond. “No. This is closer.”

I have a half a mind to pick her up and carry her away again, but the gunshots are getting closer, and we might not make it up the hill in time at this point.

“Okay, well, I guess you don’t value either of our lives.”

Another gunshot.

She lets go of my hand and runs, sinking into the water without pause, swimming toward the back of the pool and toward a waterfall that comes into view the more my eyes adjust to the night. “Hurry up!” She glances back. “I promise there’s a good hiding spot.”

In the dark, the pond doesn’t look like much of a pool, but maybe it’s planned that way. Broken branches lay half in the water and trees grow along the shore as bubbles from the waterfall send out a ripple. At the furthest edge, a large overgrown magnolia tree hangs, blooming with large white flowers that shadow in the night. Water splashes and the buzz of a mosquito circles.

*Fucking hell!* I sink into the warm water and follow Oakley toward the shadowed backdrop, sinking under the waterfall as two more shots ring out. This one is followed by yelling, though it's muted by the sound of rushing water that hides us from the night.

“Are you going to apologize to me now?” Her tone is sure and cocky.

My brows wrinkle. “Apologize for what?”

“For showing up here thinking you know best! Look what you've done! Even if he goes inside, he's going to check my room. When he sees I'm not there, he's going to call people in from everywhere to search. This won't end well.” She pushes wet hair back away from her eyes and stares toward me in the pale light that bounces off the fading spotlight on the waterfall. “When he stops shooting, you should make a run for it. I'll play dumb like I went for a late-night swim.”

“And what's the punishment for that?”

She shakes her head. “Stop. It's the best solution for everyone.”

“No, it's not. He stops shooting, then we both run. End of story.”

“Have you seen my stomach? I don't exactly run. I waddle. I won't make it.”

*Another gunshot.* Someone needs to take this guy out of his misery.

“Okay, so I'll carry you.”

I can't see much in this light, but the eye roll shines bright. “You can't carry me up that hill. You were heaving carrying me across the field.”

Okay, now I'm pissed. “I wasn't heaving.”

“You were heaving. It's not your fault. I'm a lead weight.”

“If I was heaving, it’s because you were punching and kicking, which I hate to say is the reason all this drama started.”

“Oh, you’re right. I should’ve held your hand and let you kill both of us.”

“There’s no telling you anything. This is just like the whole Johnathan thing. I spend all day keeping you safe and you—”

“Keeping me safe? Like you are now?” She glances toward me in the dim light and shakes her head. “You’ve got an answer for everything.”

“If you would have let me keep you safe, you wouldn’t be here to get into trouble again, would you?” I look away, then back again. “You know what, though, you seem like you need the confidence boost. If you need to think you saved me tonight... go for it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Why are you here, anyway? Be honest. We were together for *months* and you barely spoke to me. I figured you had better things to do. Why aren’t you doing them?”

“You mean going to work and hunting for dinner? Those things are part of life. It’s going to be a real shock to you out here in the real world.” I’m deflecting. I know what she means, but it would be hard to explain everything right now.

“Whatever. You’ve got an answer for everything... except for what happened to Jonathan. I asked everyone for months what happened to my baby’s father and all I heard was some cryptic MC slang for *don’t worry about it.*”

I hold back a laugh. “Because you couldn’t handle knowing the truth.”

She bites the inside of her cheek. “You’d be surprised at the things I’ve seen. I can handle it. Tell me!”

All this smart mouthed talk is fun and all but there’s no way I’m spilling that information. When Oakley’s with me, I’ll shelter her from the world. “It’s complicated. As you know, he

pursued his *fiancé* to Rugged Mountain. The problem is when he got there, the MC was ready for him. When he was presented with his options, he chose the one where... he's not going to be a problem to you anymore."

"You know that Jonathan's *fiancé* was news to me when I found out." She lets out a brief but forceful breath. "If you're telling me that I don't have to worry about baby daddy drama, and that's the bottom line... fine. I'm used to controlling assholes." She laughs under her breath. "Well, Knight, that doesn't explain what you are doing here. My father thinks he's the king of Amarillo, and a lot of people agree. What he wants, he gets, and he'll hurt whoever he has to in order to get it."

"Okay, what's that have to do with you?"

"I'm an asset right now, and you're trying to steal it. He wants a neighboring land, and he's going to trade my baby to get it." The words are strained as they slide from her lips and I'm not sure where to go with what she's said. I didn't think about how maybe she'd *want* to give the baby up for adoption.

I ask the next question without judgement. "What do *you* want?"

"Yeah, I don't think it matters. My father gets what he wants."

"If he wasn't a part of the picture, what would you want?"

"Of course I'd want my baby, Knight. Jesus!" She snaps out the words with a rawness that I probably deserve. "No wonder you're still alone!"

I shouldn't love this sparring as much as I do, but there's something about her smart little mouth that I want to quiet with mine.

"Why are you alone?" She holds the rocky edges of the pool as she floats.

I shrug. "That's an annoying question."

Her brows narrow. “What? How?”

“Well, I could ask you how you got knocked up by an asshole like Johnathan... but I won’t.”

Her gaze darts away, and though it’s dark, I know annoyance when I see it.

Another gunshot. This asshole has to be running out of shit to shoot at.

“For the record, I didn’t know Johnathan was an asshole when we started seeing each other. Most guys don’t come with a warning label like you.”

This one has me laughing. “Okay... okay. I deserved that.” I swim toward her as she stands against the cool stone of the back wall. “For the record, I didn’t choose to be alone.”

“So, you’re saying you repel women? I believe that.”

I can’t believe I denied myself this for months. Imagine how far we’d be by now. Maybe arm wrestling over klondike bars or making bets over who makes the best pie in Rugged Mountain. Most people think it’s Millie, but in my opinion, Josie cranks out the best of the best.

“Women are complicated. I haven’t figured them out yet.”

“We’re not that complicated.” She shuffles her feet, wading in the deep. “Feed us, say nice things, and give us space to be crazy sometimes.” She grins. “Oh and let us have all the animals.”

“Really? It’s that simple?”

“No one said it was simple. I said it wasn’t complicated. That’s what’s wrong with men. Y’all lose the meaning in the nuance.”

My gaze catches hers and for a long moment, too long a moment, we’re stuck on each other and the overwhelming urge to own her returns. I step into her space, my hand resting on her shoulder before it rises and lands gently on her throat. “He never should’ve touched you.”

“And I suppose you wish you were there to beat them off like the hero you are?” Her tone is still aggressive, but there’s a softening.

“Maybe,” I stare toward her in the dark shadows drawing my thumb over the soft pout of her lip as another gunshot rings out, “but most of me wishes I was there to kiss you.”



# Chapter Five

## Oakley

The rough scent of pine and cedar swallows me up as Knight leans in. I'd forgotten how big he is. Well, that's a lie. His size has crossed my mind a lot. I guess I forgot how it felt to be next to a man this big and strong. A man who uses his strength without malice, which is why what he does next is such a surprise.

Knight rests his hand like a predator on my throat, but his gaze is soft and drenched in care. Why is this so hot? Why do I want him to take me over, and own me right here and now despite the gunshots singing in the distance?

*This is the part where I need therapy again.*

Truthfully, I've imagined this a dozen times, probably more, though I was sure it would only ever be a fantasy. *I'm still not sure if it isn't.* Maybe I tripped and fell on my way to the barn, and this is my body's way of trying to jolt me to life.

I have to say, imagining a big strong man about to kiss me might do the trick.

The last gunshot was at least thirty seconds ago, though that doesn't mean my father is done with his scare tactics. Usually, when he's throwing out warning shots, he'll go through five rounds and shoot off five more on the opposite side of the house near the storm cellar. It's dark over there and he's always been a little uneasy about the area. That fact always made me laugh. A man who's cheated people out of their homes and abused his family is scared of the dark.

Either way, he doesn't seem to be coming closer toward us, which is good considering what's happening in this cave.

Knight grips my hips and pulls me away from the wall a few inches until I'm free floating before him.

"I can't touch the bottom. Stop!"

His eyes never leave mine and his breath is warm against my lips. “Kick your legs.”

*“What?”*

He has me cornered at the furthest edge of the cave, my arms around his to keep from drowning. He’s planned it this way. He wants me tucked into this corner with my only salvation being his touch. I should tell him to stop... but I’m not sure I can.

*When am I going to learn?*

My clit throbs and his lips angle in toward mine, sweeping against me with a hungry, delirious kiss that spins the darkness and lights me on fire. Maybe there are noxious gases leaking into the cave. There has to be for this to be happening.

He grunts into my mouth, and I sigh, kissing him hard. The rough edges of his beard bristle against my cheeks and with every touch, I surrender a bit more.

*God, why am I this easy?* I should hold out. I should make him beg me. I should play hard to get. Yeah, that’s what girls do to keep guys interested. They play hard to get, though I think my big, pregnant belly might tell another story.

My brain attempts to push him away, but my arms cling tighter.

“Fuck.” He groans against my neck as I kick my legs gently to stay above water. I’m pretty sure he’s still touching.

I’m pinned against the cool, wet rock and his size is pressed against me to the side, allowing my belly space. Whatever sense of gentleness he had has been replaced with roughness, which is fine by me.

I need him harder. His hands. *His teeth.*

What’s happening to me? Please dear lord, let whatever’s poisoned us keep working. I need to know how this plays out.

Knight’s fingers twist into my hair and tug gently as his teeth scrape against my shoulder.

My perked nipples brush against his chest and my entire body goes raw. I've never wanted anyone's hands on me more.

"Tell me you don't want this, and I'll try to stop." His tone is rough and ragged in my ear.

*"Try to stop?"* I pant between words, desperate for him to keep pushing. If he gives me an option, I'll have to stop him, and I don't want to.

"I don't think I can." He growls and bites my cheek gently as his hand slides between my legs.

*I might die in this man's arms tonight... and I might be okay with it.*

In the water, I'm buoyant and my pregnant frame moves easily. I tuck my legs around his and hold on tight as he palms over my pussy. There's an actual pulse between my legs, and despite being drenched in water, I moan as the slippery swollen insides soak my panties.

I have so many questions. *Why is he really here? Why is he touching me? What does this mean? What happens after this? Can we live under this waterfall forever? Will he slide his fingers inside of me? Will he make me come?*

Leaning my head back against the rock wall, my body settles against his shoulder as his finger hooks beneath the seam of my panties. Thank God for nightgowns.

He slides the thin fabric to the side and palms over me again before sliding two rough, thick fingers into my pussy. This is the part where I die. The part where I bury my face into his shoulder and ride his hand as hard as he'll let me.

Water splashes up gently as he sinks his teeth into my neck and presses his thumb against my clit, twisting slowly.

His hand spreads me wider and every stroke of his finger delves deeper into my core with precision until he's landed on a spot I've never felt touched before.

"Please don't stop." I reach between us, holding his thick wrist as he thrusts inside of me over and over.

“Be a good girl and come on my hand.”

My heart rate picks up. No one has ever talked to me like that before. Moan after moan drips from my lips until I’m muttering words that are incoherent even to me.

He grips my hips tighter and thrusts in harder, scratching at the spot that sends a shiver through my body.

“You’ve got this,” he groans. “Be good. Give me your come.”

He’s a magician and I’m a trick, ready to shock the world with two simple words. *‘Be good.’*

Pressure builds in my core and soon I’m coiling into his arms like a rattlesnake, hissing for relief. His teeth scrape against my skin, biting gently again at my shoulders, my cheeks, my neck.

My father could be standing three feet from me, aiming his shotgun, and I wouldn’t notice. I’ve gone blind to everything. All I want is for Knight to never stop. *Is that too much to ask?*

“I’d bet you’re a tasty little cupcake, aren’t you?” He groans, rubbing faster. *How is this man alone?* If he’d led with the Midas-like finger fucking, I’d have gladly followed him to his truck beyond the ridge.

I’m sure this should take longer than three minutes, but as he pins me against the back wall of the cavern with his hot breath over me and his thick fingers thrusting inside, I can’t help myself. I stare up into his eyes and uncoil, straightening my legs as an orgasm rips through me like wildfire.

He pulls from within me slowly and grips me against his chest, not saying a word as Zilly pokes under the waterfall.

“What the hell? What are you doing out here?” *And how long has she been there?*

“I saw her spying on us a few minutes ago, but I couldn’t stop you.” He kisses my forehead. “You looked too damn good. We should move, though. I haven’t heard shots in a while.”

An empty pit opens in my stomach and reality sinks back in. I'm still on the ranch. I'm still being hunted by my father. I'm still carrying the baby he wants to sell for land.

Knight glances down at Zilly who's swimming with a smile as though this is the greatest night ever. "I know you want her to come, but she can't. She's probably got a tracker —"

"She does, but how do I tell her no? I mean... look at her eyes." We glance toward Zilly together and I can't help but break in half. She's the only soul that's ever understood me on this ranch for the last eight years, and those big round eyes aren't helping. "She's so proud of herself for finding me. I can't leave her."

Knight grips my arm in his hand, resuming the classic alpha male attitude he had previous to the fingering thing. You know, the one where I do whatever he says, or he'll do it for me. That's not as attractive as his Midas touch. We need to recalibrate. "One foot in front of the other, cupcake."

I'm not sure where cupcake came from, but I should really say something about it.

"Isn't there a way we can mute the tag somehow?"

He narrows his brows as he drags me out of the pool carefully. "I don't even know what the tracking capabilities of this chip are." He stops and stares toward me. "But I know one thing, we don't have time to go back and forth. We're out in the open. We'll come back for her, I promise."

I know that's as good as it's going to get, and I should be happy that I'm getting myself and the baby out of this situation, but watching my sweet puppy stare at me as I command her to stay and walk away is breaking my heart. For eight years she's heard every secret I've ever had. The only time we were ever separated was the few months I was in Rugged Mountain hiding away from Johnathan and every day I wished I could call her and see how she was doing. She's not just a dog. She's my family.

Tears roll down my face as Knight lifts me from the ground and carries me toward his truck. I don't fight it this time. Between the argument with my father earlier, the surprise in the barn, and the exchange under the waterfall, I'm exhausted.

"See, I'm not heaving for air," he says proudly.

*God, I don't need another arrogant man in my life... even if he does work his fingers like a jack hammer.*

The truck is parked beyond the hill on the darkest part of the property, and his bike is strapped up in the back. It was thoughtful of him to rent a truck. I'll give him that.

The problem is, it doesn't answer *why*? Why was I so important to come after?

My mother told me once, '*When something's going good, you shouldn't ask questions.*' It's one of the few things I remember her saying to me before she left. I wonder how much of that is true or if what's happening with Knight is actually good.

Knight sets me on the ground, opens the door, and helps me into the truck. "It'll be some time before we can stop and change. You might want to strip down and throw that flannel on. It'll be a wet ride back regardless, but at least you'll be warm." He nods toward his shirt hanging over the back seat.

I hold back the millions of dirty jokes that swirl in my head, mostly because his face is doing that grumpy-miserable thing again. The one where I can't tell if he's glad he was fingering me a second ago or if he wishes he were at home in his recliner with a beer. *Have I said I have terrible taste in men... because I do. I have a terrible, awful, life wrecking taste in men.* Actually, it's worse than that. My taste in men is like the people who go to an ice cream shop, and despite a hundred great flavors, choose pistachio. *Pistachio.*

"I'll be back. Don't go wandering off." Knight disappears into the darkness, and I do as I'm told and change into the dry flannel he's left for me. I could be stubborn and

ride wherever we're going sopping wet, but he's probably right about the cold thing, and I need to think of the baby. What I'm not expecting is the holy scent of goodness that emanates from the fabric. Cedar, balsam, and campfire smoke. The shirt smells like *him*.

My clit throbs again and my mind is tugged back to the waterfall where life stopped for a few minutes. Where time stood still, and I lived in the moment. In twenty-five years, I've never done it before. I don't want it to end despite the fact that he's probably a double scoop of *'fuck your life.'*

As I button his shirt in place, a heavy thud weighs in the bed of the truck followed by a soft knock at the back window. I twist back to see my Zilly panting.

What the hell? Maybe she jumped in. Sometimes when I take a horse out for a ride, she'll tag along. She's also the only dog to come in with me at night. The other dogs stay put in the shed or find a spot under the porch, but not her. She's always right beside me.

Knight opens the side door and slides in, starting the truck up before glancing toward me. "The tracker was easy to find."

"Wait, what? You cut her?"

"It was in her left leg, just under the skin. I could feel it with my hand. I'll toss it somewhere outside of town."

*"You removed her leg? She must need a vet! She'll bleed to death! You—"*

"No." His hand rests on my bare thigh. "I only made a small cut and removed the tracker. She's fine. I tied a towel I had in the truck around her leg, and it's already stopped bleeding."

I'm not usually speechless but here I am, struggling for words. He knew what I needed, and he made it happen. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

"You said girls aren't complicated. Feed 'em, listen, and get 'em a dog." He clears his throat. "There's a granola

bar in the glove box. Eat it, then lay on my lap. It's a long ride back to the mountains."

That wasn't the exact translation of what I told him but I'm sure as hell no man has ever been closer.



# Chapter Six

## Knight

“What are you doing, man?” Chap and Axel stand in the hallway of the lodge. Their arms are crossed, and their expressions let me know how unhappy they are with my choice to bring Oakley here. “We’re not open yet. This is a construction zone.”

The guys are both big brutes in their late forties—typical biker dudes. Tattoos, beards, and cutthroat attitudes... but there’s a fun dichotomy when these two are together as Chap is the voice of reason for the club and Axel is the exact opposite.

“I know,” I close the door to the room I’ve tucked Oakley into and meet the guys further down the hall, “but the rooms are furnished now, and the place is guarded most of the day with guys working. It’s the best spot for her.”

“The rooms are furnished because we all busted ass to get it done while you were out playing hero.” Axel’s tone is biting as he leans against the wall and pulls out his phone. He’s either searching for something or texting. “Is this that pregnant girl you were watching before? What happened?”

“Her father wants the baby. I’ve got to figure a way to get him out of the picture or keep her hidden.”

Chap’s brows narrow. “What do you mean he wants the baby?”

“He’s trading the baby for some land he’s wanted.” Oakley sighs as she steps in behind us. “God that sounds awful out loud. Seriously though, I can take it from here.” Zilly is at her side panting. “The border isn’t far. I can disappear in the mountains somewhere and we’ll be fine.”

“We’re always here to help,” Chap says, stepping forward to scratch Zilly between the ears, “but unless you want your father...” He blows out a breath avoiding the word he wants to use. “Can you just go to the police?”

She glances up toward me. “We can’t go to the police. He has ties everywhere. He’ll come after me and... *please!*” There’s a pleading in her tone that wasn’t there before.

“You’re all set.” Axel leans up from the wall and tucks his phone back in his pocket. “While y’all were bullshitting, I ran everything by Diesel and Kane.”

Diesel and Kane are co-founders of the MC. They frown on getting involved in other MC zones unless absolutely necessary. I was hoping to leave them out of this for as long as possible and I’m pissed Axel took it upon himself to make plans without talking it over.

“What’d they say?” My tone is rougher than it needs to be.

“Tex has an old contact with a Death Ranger, so Diesel’s gonna reach out and see if there’s anything they can do to scare him a little.” Tex is a buddy of mine. He used to run with the Death Rangers but transferred out here with hopes for something less... brutal.

“I don’t want him to get hurt!” Oakley wipes away tears. “He’s a bad man, but he’s still my father. I... I don’t want that on my conscience.”

I glance toward Axel, unsure of what to say. We both know the Death Rangers don’t give warnings. They finish jobs the same day they start them. They’re the reason her ex was *‘handled’* so quickly.

I wrap Oakley in my arms. She doesn’t need this stress right now. She didn’t need it yesterday either, or the day before, or at all. Yet that’s all she’s gotten is stress after stress. First with her ex, and now with this. All I want to do is make it better. “Let’s get you back to your room.”

“No! I need to know what’s going on.” Her hand rubs over her stomach.

Axel stands straight, tucking his thumb into his back pocket. “No offense, lady, but if my father were going to take my baby for personal gain, I’d want him dead. Come on... use your head.”

The comment isn't wrong. It's what I've been thinking all night, but I don't like the way Axel's talking to Oakley. I step toward him and widen my stance. "Apologize."

He laughs under his breath. "For what, being reasonable?" He shakes his head and grins. "No. You're looking at her with rose-colored glasses and you're not using your head." Axel looks away and back again. "You talked for three minutes and anyone with half a brain knows there's no good solution here. He's a massive asshole who won't stop until he gets what he wants at any cost. If there was a good solution to any of this, we wouldn't be having this fucking conversation."

"Enough," I growl and back him toward the stairs. If he weren't so damn right, I'd punch him square in the jaw.

Chap steps between us. "The guys will be here any second to work. Let's think this through and we can talk again at lunch."

Seething, I stare toward Axel. I know he's not the problem, but he's the one standing here running his mouth.

"Seriously... move!" Chap continues. "She can stay here until this is sorted out. After that, I reckon a new place will do best for everyone. Got it?"

I drag in a deep breath and try to simmer as I twist toward Oakley. Her face is pale and there are heavy rings under her eyes. She's exhausted and I should probably take her to see a doctor soon, though I'm not sure how to make that happen given the current climate of things.

Once the men have dispersed, Oakley stares up at me, her brown eyes round and questioning. "Do you think that guy is right about my dad? Should I want him..." She swallows hard and looks away.

Here I am again, sucking at emotions, unsure of what to say other than some smart-ass comment about what a piece of shit Axel is, but I know that doesn't make any of this easier.

I pull Oakley against my chest and guide her toward the room. "We can talk about this later. Right now, I think you

need some sleep.”

# Chapter Seven

## Oakley

The lodge is gorgeous. Stripped pine walls, wood plank floors, heavy custom furniture, and every fixture looks carefully chosen to blend with the forest we're buried in. I slept through the ride up here, so I don't know how far into the mountains we are, but judging by the view through the window, we're in the middle of nowhere.

Mountains rise and fall, standing firm against the light blue sky. Each craggy silhouette displays like a tapestry as a low mist rolls in beneath the sunlight. I was in Rugged Mountain before, but this view is unreal. I see why they're building a lodge here.

I roll into Knight and lay against his chest, pulling the small blanket up over my shoulders. "Are you awake?"

He clears his throat. "Nah, I'm fast asleep. You?"

"Same."

"That's good." His tone is groggy and his rough fingers dance in circles on my bare shoulder. "What are you dreaming about?"

"I think I'm dreaming about what life will be like when all this is over."

He sighs. "That's nice. What'd you see?"

I twist the hair on his chest and snuggle in closer. I have a million fantasies I could ramble off but maybe he can't handle all that. We never talked about what happened under the waterfall. Maybe he's regretting every detail of that now and this whole lying in bed together thing is some weird obligation he feels to help the sad, pregnant lady.

"You first. What are you dreaming about?" I prod smiling up at him.

He rolls to the side and our gaze meets. "You don't want to know what I'm thinking about, cupcake."

He's called me cupcake again. That has to be a good sign... *right?*

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you more when you were here before." He sighs and scrubs his big hand over his beard. "I can be impulsive, and I didn't trust myself with you." He kisses my forehead. "Judging by that waterfall thing, I think I was right."

My eyes shut and open slowly.

He's still studying me. His hand lifts, and he brushes a strand of hair from my face. "Is it too soon to say that when all this is over, I hope we're lying in bed together with a healthy baby boy and another one on the way?"

My pulse beats hard in my throat and my nerves tickle beneath my skin as I hum in approval. "In your fantasy, where are we?"

"Here in the mountains. You have that little flower stand you used to talk about. You still want that, right?"

I nod. "How do you know about that?"

"I overheard you and May talking at the diner one day."

"Oh." Was he listening to all our conversations? Was he indirectly trying to get to know me?

"Is that weird?"

I grin. "A little, but you're right. I have always wanted to sell home-grown bouquets and handmade Christmas wreathes."

His eyes light up as though the dream were his own. "You could run it right off the ranch. I'd build you a spot. When the baby isn't with you, he could come with me and help out in the barn. At night, we'll make dinner together, listen to the radio, and—"

"Dance in the kitchen."

He grins. "Dance in the kitchen. I'll hold you close, and I won't let you go, cupcake. Not now, not ever. You'd be

safe with me.”

For a second, I let myself feel his love, and it makes my heart happy. Maybe for the first time ever. Then, I remember where I am and why I’m here.

I lean up and rest my chin on Knight’s chest, my gaze on his as I say, “Do you think Axel’s right about my father?”

“Honestly?”

I nod.

“Yeah. I do. I hate that I do, but I do. Your father is a dangerous man. He’ll most likely hunt you down to get what he wants. And after seeing the way he handled you earlier, I’m not sure I believe he’d hold your life at much value.”

I swallow hard and roll onto my back, stare up at the ceiling, and try to stop my brain from spinning out of control. “You know all about my weird childhood, but what about you? How’d you grow up?”

“Me? *Shit*. My parents were both in the military, so I rarely ever saw them together. When my father was gone, my mother took over and vice versa. In between, I suppose I had an average childhood. Baseball cards, chores, loads of bike rides, etcetera. It didn’t get bad until they divorced, and my mother started seeing this guy from the Springs. He was into heavy duty drugs and my mom had seen some things overseas she was trying to escape from.” He looks away. “Nothing was right after that. She overdosed two years after they met. The last time I saw her she wasn’t the person I knew.”

“I’m sorry. Is your dad still—”

“No. He gave his life in combat. No one told me how or why, but if you knew him, it was because of his broken heart.” He lets out a sigh and shifts his weight in the bed. “I know because I joined the Army shortly after his passing and tried to do the same. I felt like I had nothing, and I put myself in increasingly risky situations in the hopes that I’d die doing something meaningful... and the pain would go away. But despite my best efforts, I survived tour after tour. Fortunately for me, I met the MC guys on a drunken bender during a two-

week R&R, and they showed genuine concern for me. So, I didn't re-up after my final tour and Rugged Mountain MC became my family." He rolls his eyes and smiles. "Enough about me, though. What about you? I only know the basics."

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly, staring toward Knight. I've never talked to anyone about my childhood out of shame, but he's shared so much with me, I feel compelled to share back. "Well, you know my father. Imagine that but you're five and you need a hug." I laugh out of anxiety. "The one thing that's always bothered me is that my mother took off when I was eight." My stomach turns as I speak. "Well, at least that's what I was told. He said it was my fault she left and that I needed to straighten up and act right or he'd leave too." I bite the inside of my cheek. "But when I think about those days, I remember my mother was soft and kind. She loved me, Knight. I don't believe she would have left without me. I don't believe she'd have chosen to leave me with that man."

Knight's brows raise. "What are you saying?"

I pinch my lips between my teeth and meter my thoughts, deciding how big a leap I want to take. I glance toward Knight. "I've wondered for years if my father *made my mother disappear*." Putting the words into the universe sends a shiver through me. I may have pondered that thought but I've certainly never said it, and saying it is a whole lot different from thinking it. Tears stream down my face. I try to ignore them, biting back the harsh reality of what my past may be, and who my father really is.

Knight holds me tighter. "What's your mother's name?"

"Morgan Mayfield. Why?"

"Axel is an asshole, but he used to work for the Feds, and he still has connections with some *interesting* people. He may be able to look your mom up and see if she's alive somewhere."

"I don't know if I want to know. I mean," I swallow hard, "what if she is? What if she really left me with him? I



couldn't forgive her."

He looks toward me. "Based on what you've said, I doubt she'd do that."

"Maybe... but she could have changed her name and was never found."

"Could have, but what's the likelihood of that? Your father didn't tell you he was out looking for her. By the sounds, he wanted her gone and we both know he's had the power to find her."

"Right, so if she didn't want to be found, she'd have changed her name."

"I'll let Axel know it's a possibility." He sweeps his arm across my shoulder gently. "But honestly, even when someone is using an alias, they can still track the person down. It's not as easy or clear cut, but it's not as hard as you would think. Should I have him check?"

I bite my lip and stare up at the ceiling. Knowing would change a lot of things, but maybe it shouldn't. Maybe I should want my father... gone, regardless of what happened with my mother. He's the reason I can't keep the baby. Not only because of land but because I don't want a child growing up in a world where my father has influence. That by itself should be enough for me to pull the trigger.

Knight squeezes my hand. "Don't feel press—"

"I want to do it." I wet my lips as my chest tightens. "Give Axel the green light to look. I want to know what happened to my mother. But... I don't want to wait for that to come back before we deal with my father." I glance down at the bruise on my arm. It's not the first one he's given me, and certainly not the worst. "I think you should have the Death Rangers do their thing. I have a little nest egg. I can pay them what they need."

"They don't charge us. We exchange..."

"Acts of violence?" My arms tense and a heaviness drops into my stomach. *What am I doing?*

“We don’t hurt people unless we have to.”

“So that’s it? We just tell them, and they take care of everything?” Part of me wants to ask for details but I know this will be the Jonathan thing all over again.

It’s for the best. I believe that now. Whatever the Death Rangers do to my father is nothing compared to what he’s done to everyone around him.

“They’ll send some guys out to the ranch and—”

“Never mind. What happens to the animals on the ranch?”

“We’ll send someone to get what we can, but we can’t take too much. We don’t want to give anyone a reason to look at us funny.”

I nod and reach for Zilly, scrubbing my hand into her soft fur as she sleeps beside me. I’m so thankful he figured out how to bring her along.

Knight lifts his phone from the bedside table and sends a text off before rolling his hand over my expanded stomach. The baby kicks, and for the first time in six months, I allow myself to think of this little boy as mine. “We’ll take care of you, Oakley. Both of you.” Knight lands a kiss on my stomach and warm calmness washes over me.

I didn’t ask for this life, and I don’t want to hurt my father. But if the choice is my baby or my father, I choose my son.

# Chapter Eight

## Knight

The dining hall isn't supposed to be open, but Arnie has been here cooking all week. He's making a menu for the new lodge and we're on the lucky end of his labors.

"Now be honest with me. These are the last two dishes I'm debating." He sets two platters down in the center of the table, both of them stacked with meat. Rib eye, and smoked BBQ chicken. "They're part of the chuck-wagon dinner we'll have here every Friday night. I'll go get the sides. You guys get started."

The guys load up their plates and dig in, but I hold off and wait for Oakley. She should've been downstairs by now. The last few days have been weird with all the stress surrounding her father, but we've tried to transition as best we can. I spend days working on the lodge and she spends time planting flowers in the garden or helping out in the kitchen until lunch time.

I even took her into town for a checkup. It was a risky move, but the visit seemed imperative after all the stress she's been under. Thankfully, the baby is growing right on target and we're a little further along than originally thought—seven months tomorrow. I've never seen an ultrasound live like that before and I'm not sure I've ever been more amazed. *How is it that I already feel an immense desire to protect this boy like I do his mother?*

I stand from the table and nod toward the guys who are all scarfing down the meal as though it's their last. "You guys are monsters." I laugh. "I'll be right back."

No one seems to care much about what I'm doing, and as Arnie sets the sides down on the table, I wonder if there will be any food when I get back. He might have been the single best decision anyone's made when building this place. Locals and tourists alike are going to drive up here just to eat.

As I make my way up from the table, I realize Axel is missing too. My stomach rolls and drops before my chest tightens. I can't imagine he'd take it upon himself to tell Oakley any news without me, but the guy is a live wire.

My mind goes crazy with everything that could be going on. He could be telling her a shitstorm of things about her mother, the gruesome details about her father, or convincing her that she needs to leave the lodge. He wasn't happy she was here all week.

I chew at the inside of my cheek, trying to stop my teeth from grinding together. If this fucker is running wild again, I'm going to lose my fucking shit.

Sure enough, three feet into the hallway, Oakley is sitting in a chair by the window crying and Axel is leaned against the wall beside her.

If anyone ever described me as a kind, gentle man, they were wrong. I do my best to play by the rules, but it's a lot of effort. Unfortunately, what comes easy is rage and vengeance against those who hurt my family.

I grab Axel by the back of his shirt and slam him against the back wall. My nostrils flare, my lips flatten, and my pulse races through me at top speeds. "What the fuck are you saying to her?"

"She saw the—"

"It's not her, asshole. It's you. What the fuck are you saying to her?"

"It's my fault." Oakley stands from the window seat and reaches out for me, softening the jagged edge of intensity that's coursing through my body. "I saw he left his laptop out and there was a note flagged about me." She cries harder, backing onto a bench as though she can't stand anymore. "It was wrong, but the need to know overwhelmed me, and I..."

My mouth goes dry as I turn toward her, my attention no longer on Axel who *maybe* isn't as bad as I thought. "What's going on? What did you find?"

She drags in a deep breath and looks toward me with a glassy gaze. “My mom died seventeen years ago. It’s public record. Nothing is hidden.”

Fucking Christ. “Was there a reason of death listed?”

Oakley buries her face against my waist and cries harder. I glance toward Axel.

“We were coming to tell you, man. I was just trying to get her stable. This all happened less than five minutes ago.”

“What happened?” My tone is biting, and though I know in reality none of this is Axel’s fault, I hate that I wasn’t here for Oakley when she got the news. “What’s the cause of death?”

Axel stiffens and crosses his arms over his shoulder. “Maybe Oakley should—”

“No. I can’t even say it,” she mumbles as she buries her face into my shirt. Fucking hell. If her asshole father wasn’t already on the chopping block, I’d go out there and kill him myself.

Axel stares down at the ground, then glances up at me. “Cause of death was blunt force trauma. Records say she fell down a flight of stairs heading into a canning basement... accidentally.”

Oakley cries harder and I wrap her tighter.

“Thanks, man. Go ahead for dinner. I’ll—”

“That’s not all.” He swallows hard and looks away, biting the inside of his lip. “When I was doing an address search, a new death certificate populated.”

My brows wrinkle. “What?”

Axel blows out a breath. “Her father. About a week ago, he was outside shooting his gun off and tripped, falling into the same canning cellar. They’re thinking he was out late and was discovered the next morning by staff. He suffered the kind of wounds that you would expect from a car crash on his way down.”

Maybe relief shouldn't be washing over me, but it is.

Oakley stares up at me, blows out a heavy breath, and stands. "That's why we didn't hear any more shots that night or why no one has coming looking for me."

"What are you feeling?" I hold her against my chest, desperate to make all of this okay again.

She stares ahead and then down at the baby boy growing inside of her. "I'm thinking that my mother sent you to me, Knight. I'm thinking that after all these years of believing she'd left me, she was there when I needed her most. She came back and made sure I had what I needed to raise this baby boy." Tears well in her eyes. "And what I need is you."

I lean down and kiss the top of her head, sucking in the soft scent of lavender in her hair. "All I need is you, cupcake. Should we get you something to eat or do you want to lay down for a bit?"

She blows out a heavy breath. "I think I'll lay down for a bit. I was sneaking food with May all morning, anyway. You should go try the street corn. It's so good."

"I'm not leaving you alone."

Axel lands his hand on my shoulder. "I'll bring some food to the room for you guys. You take care of your girl."

I drag in a hard breath and hold out my hand. "I'm so sorry, man. Thank you for everything."

"Yes, thank you." Oakley reaches toward him for a hug. "It's none of my business, but I saw another message on your computer. If you ever want to talk... we're here for you too."

Well, that opened up a world of questions but right now I don't have the patience to ask. I need Oakley naked, against my chest, and under the blankets with my arms wrapped around her so tight there's no chance of her floating away ever again.

# Chapter Nine

## Oakley

I sit in the window and stare out at the turquoise lake and white-capped mountains surrounding it. The lodge is a dream, and I'm going to be sad to leave.

"How are you doing?" Knight massages his big rough hands into my tense muscles.

"I'm okay."

"Really? I'm not sure I'd be. It's okay if you're not."

I cycle through a deep breath and hold my focus forward on the mountain scene in front of me. "I am, though. Now, my life is about moving forward and building a life with Morgan."

"You named the baby after your mom? That couldn't be more perfect." Knight kisses the top of my head and rubs his fingers on my scalp, waking up the nerve endings at the base of my skull upward. God this feels good. "I hope that life you're planning includes me."

"Are you sure you can handle me? I'm not always this broken, remember? I'm a pain in the ass, too."

He laughs under his breath. "Oh, I remember. That's a big part of why I like you so much."

I lean my head back and close my eyes as his fingertips tug through my hair. "What if I liked how dominant you were in the pool?"

He groans low. "Then I guess I'd have to dominate you again." His cock spears against my back. "Are you sure you're ready for all that?"

I never thought I'd ever want someone's rough hands on my skin with such controlling force, but the way Knight touches my body takes me away from all of life's problems. His strength is intense, but there's love buried inside of it. He wants to own me. He wants to care for me. He wants me to feel good.

I hum out in approval and twist toward him, holding eye contact as I unbuckle his belt and strip his jeans to the floor. His hard cock stands buoyant in front of me, and though I'd like to say I'm a lady who takes her time with these things, I'm clearly not.

Inch by inch I slide his hard girth into my mouth and suck. I want his come all over me. On my chest, on my face, on my tongue. My stomach turns with an ache to taste him, to make him feel good, to take him out of his world the way he's taken me out of mine.

Stroking his cock with one hand, I cup his tight balls with the other and work the shaft of his dick until he gives up a loud growl and slides his fingers back into my hair.

God, his hands are big.

With control of my head, he pushes me back and forth on his cock, positioning me in the right spot before speeding up the movement.

Why the hell do I love the way he uses my mouth for pleasure? The anticipation of his hot come all over my skin. The thoughts drive an immeasurable ache between my legs that only he can fill.

“You're a good little girl, aren't you, cupcake?”

I moan out on his cock, taking him in further until I gag.

He laughs under his breath. “Yeah, you are a good girl. Take my cock deep in that pretty little throat.”

I gag on his length again. He's so long, thick, hard, and ready. It's as though he'll burst any second.

My tongue swirls around the tip and he moves my head faster. I want this man to violate me in every possible way. I want him to own me, claim me, put more babies inside of me, and hold me tight forever.

“Bend that pretty pussy over.” His tone is demanding and though I'm aching for him to stretch me wide, the urge for hot come spilling onto my chest is strong.



I suck harder, pumping when he stops moving me.

“What did I say, cupcake? Get up on the bed and bend over for me. I’m taking your sweet little pussy and that ass. Now move.”

My clit throbs and explodes with excitement. He’s huge and I’m not at all sure how he’d ever stretch into my ass, but considering I want him everywhere he can be, I’m not going to stop him.

I pull my mouth off his cock with a popping sound, before standing and twisting away, but he grips my arm and pulls me back. He lifts off the sundress he bought me in town earlier in the week. It’s a pretty yellow color with little white daisies dotted all over. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping to find it on the ground at some point.

“I need one second to admire that body first.” His gaze maneuvers down over my curves, drinking every part of me as though I’m something special to admire. Slowly, his rough hand follows the curve of my body downward as he angles in, sucking and scraping his teeth across my nipples.

His hand palms over my damp pussy and he leans me forward onto the bed. “Good girl. Spread wide for me.”

Dear God. His words are like lightning.

I bend onto the bed and let out an aching sigh as he presses in behind me. Rough and strong, his hands sweep over my skin as he angles into my soft core. His movements are wild and fast, and he thrusts with an eagerness that’s overwhelmingly powerful.

I grip the sheets and hold on tight as he drives into me over and over. My nipples scratch against the soft cotton and his hand fists into my hair as he bends forward and bites my shoulder.

A moment later, he’s groaning low as his arm stretches around to pinch my clit. I’m not sure how this man can be everywhere at once, but he is, and I’m here for it.

I squeeze my thighs together and bear down as he continues to thrust and circle my clit.

“Come for me, cupcake. I want your cream all over my cock.”

Pleasure rolls from inside of me and sparks across my skin in waves at his command. Again, he’s a magician. One single word and he pulls an orgasm out of me like a rabbit in a hat.

I pant and hold myself steady, though I’m about to collapse against the sheets. My pussy throbs as Knight turns me over and spreads me wide.

“I’m going to clean that little pussy out. Sit still.”

We both know I can’t sit still. He doesn’t afford me that luxury. When Knight is touching me, I’m a squirming mess, and I think despite his words, he likes it like that.

His tongue sweeps over my crease and he licks, sucks, and bites my clit, emptying what little juice I had left.

My fingers scratch through his hair and he licks me clean, biting my thighs, and pinching my nipples as he pulls me back onto my knees. This is the part I was nervous about. The part where he sinks into my asshole, and I have to beg him to stop.

His thumb brushes over the soft bundle of nerves at my backside and I jump. I may as well be a virgin because I’ve never been touched there before.

“Try to relax, cupcake. I’m going to make you cream again, okay?”

I highly doubt this is going to feel good, but I go with the flow. We’re having fun and I want him everywhere I can have him.

Slowly, he inches inside, stretching the small hole as his thick cock enters my depths. There’s a pinch and then pain.

I scream out.

“You want me to stop?”

“Not really. I’ll tell you when.” I pant as he presses in further. For a minute, I’m sure I want nothing more to do with

this and whoever thought anal was a good idea is a sadist. But the further he slides inside of me, the more I stretch. The more I stretch, the better it feels. Not only that, but the tip of his cock is hitting a spot that feels a lot like fucking heaven.

“You’re so tight, cupcake. I’m not gonna last long in this sweet little ass of yours.” That filthy mouth again! I love it! He thrusts in a little faster, gripping my hips as he works.

“I want your come, Knight. Come in my ass. Please!”

His body stiffens behind me, and every last bit of reason leaves my body as he hits the spot again and again.

Involuntary tightening stipples throughout my body as I moan out in relief. “I’m coming! Oh god, Knight. I’m coming!”

For once, I’m the one with the magic. He grips me tighter and growls out as he thumps with erratic movements, spreading hot come inside of me.

As he does, my heart slams against my chest and every nerve in my body explodes sending waves of euphoria spilling onto my skin until it hurts to be touched.

I flinch away and collapse onto the bed, immediately dead to the world.

Knight follows behind, lying next to me as he holds me in his arms. “Fucking hell, cupcake. That was delicious.”

“Yeah, a little bit of yum there.”

He laughs as my words stumble over one another and refuse to make sense. “You finally think you can sleep?”

I hum in approval and cuddle in next to him, dragging in the warm scent of cedar on his skin as I finally drift off to sleep.

## Epilogue

### Knight

#### Six Weeks Later

Axel sits on the back of his truck talking to Oakley. She's been trying to help him for the past few weeks, but the man won't budge.

"Do you really want a mail-order bride? I mean, there are so many women in town. May's been looking for a decent guy for so long. You two would totally hit it off."

Axel grumbles under his breath. "No. Trust me, I'm too fucking aggressive. I need a woman who'll love me because I paid for her."

I laugh. "I don't think that's how the mail-order bride thing works. I think you still have to fall in love."

Oakley shakes her head. "That email he got a few weeks back was from a legitimate auction." She laughs and glances toward Axel. "You're not aggressive. Okay... *you're aggressive*, but it means your passionate. And passion is close to love, so... you're almost there."

Axel hops down from the truck bed and fakes a grin. "This is all bullshit, anyway. You two are about to have your baby and I'm talking about buying a wife. I'm a fucking mess. Let's get inside."

"Let me introduce you to May. Please? She's really sweet and—"

"I've met May. She's not really sweet. She's got something to say about everything. I drank lemonade out of the fridge yesterday at the lodge and she yelled at me for fifteen minutes about sanitation and proper business practices."

"She works at a diner. It's what she does. I'm sure she \_\_\_"

"Thank you, Oak. I appreciate it, but I'm good." Axel jumps into the driver's seat, and I help Oakley out of the way.

She's about eight and a half months along now but the doctor said she could pop any day.

"You two love birds have a lot to celebrate. You just got married. Don't let me drag you down." Axel backs out of the parking lot and heads down the hill and away from the lodge.

"He's right, you know? We do have a lot to celebrate. In one minute, you'll have been my wife for two whole hours." I rest my hand on her stomach. "You know what that means?"

She smiles and shakes her head gently. "No. What happens at the two-hour mark?"

"Two hours in and I'm supposed to take you upstairs and make this official."

"And what do we do with all the people wandering around, expecting us to shake their hands and cut some cake?"

I pull her close to my chest. "They won't even notice we're gone. Have you heard that band playing? Late night bluegrass is where it's at, cupcake."

"I'll never understand the cupcake thing." She grins.

"You're smiling."

"Yeah, because it's ridiculous."

"Is it, though? You're a sweet little treat covered in my frosting. That seems like a cupcake to me." Getting a rise out of Oakley must be my favorite thing on Earth, outside of her and that baby that's nearly born.

She grins and tips up onto her toes to land a kiss on my lips. "Okay... that makes sense. I do like your frosting all over me."

My cock presses against my zipper, and while I know I should be good, I can't help myself. I back Oakley toward a towering pine and lean her frame against the trunk of the tree, losing myself as I press into her soft frame and pouted lips.

The afternoon sun is perfumed with the soft scent of wildflowers and a bumblebee buzzes somewhere off in the distance.

Oakley looks gorgeous in a simple white gown with her hair twisted up in curls, but if I'm being honest, I prefer the version of her that's naked in my flannel with her hair a wild mess from our love making.

"Is now a good time to tell you that I adopted half a dozen baby goats from the Baxter's?" She giggles under her breath and strokes my hard cock through the slacks. "I figured I'd sell some goats' milk soap at the flower stand."

"Goats' milk soap... *at a flower stand?*"

"Yes." She kisses me deeper. "Soap, milk, and anything else I come up with."

"You're going to have your hands full with twelve goats, a baby, and..."

She stares toward me, her big brown eyes hung open in suspense as Diesel meets me beside the tree with Oakley's wedding gift. "Oh my god, Knight! What did you do?" Her arms reach out for the pure white German Shepard puppy that I found outside of Whiskey Falls last week.

"I saw him when I went up to grab that part for the tractor last week. The family had a whole litter. This was the only one with pure white fur. I knew right then he was coming home with me. Plus, I know you were disappointed that the animals at your dad's ranch were all sent to live with his brother." It still blows my mind that Oakley wasn't listed on his will and testament. Every cent of what the asshole had went to his business partner and brother. A man who wouldn't even let Oakley back into the ranch to gather her clothes.

She nuzzles her face against the puppy's soft fur. "I can't wait to introduce him to Zilly! She's going to have a sibling again!"

"Well, you did say all a woman needs is food, a shoulder to cry on, and some animals. So... I guess I'm winning."

“Thank you, but that’s not *exactly* what I said,” she squints her eyes and twists her lips into a smile, “but it’s close enough. What is it that men need? I don’t think I ever asked you.”

I shrug and pull her close. “I don’t know what men need, but I know what *I* need.”

She smiles. “What’s that?”

“All I need is one, sweet little cupcake. Do you think you can make that happen?”

She nods and cuddles against my chest. “As long as you bring the frosting.”

Thank you for reading!

[Check out Axel’s story here.](#)



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

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

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

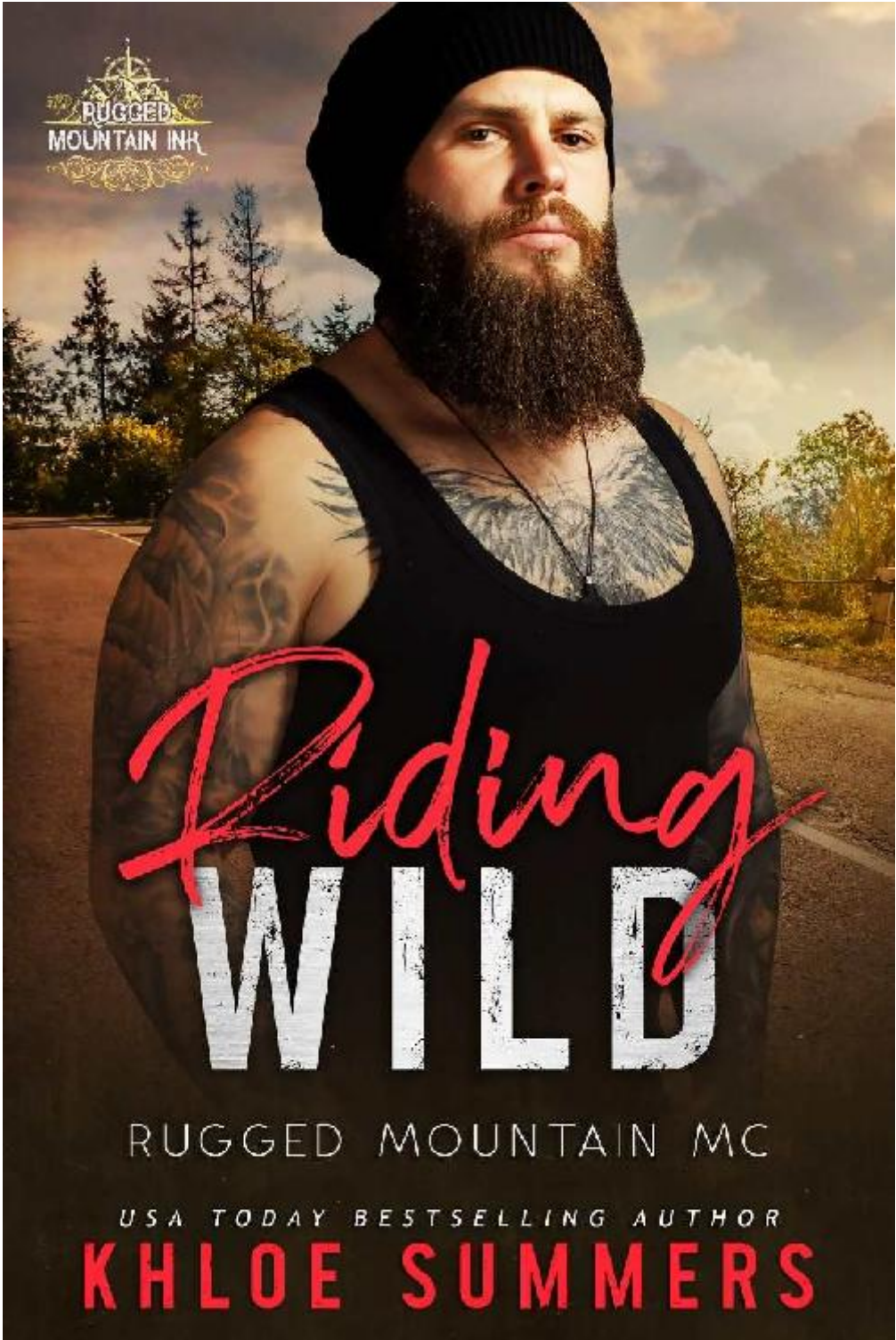
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**KHLOE SUMMERS**

# Chapter One

May

“I’m done talking about Axel. He’s bad news.” I line up the salt dispensers one by one on a tray and twist off the caps as I stare toward my sister Nora. She’s always been pushy, but lately she’s been overtly so.

“What? Why? The man is big, tall, inked, and he’s got a good head on his shoulders. That and he’s single, so...”

I roll my eyes and pour the salt over the smaller containers, dragging the box back and forth until the shakers are filled. “You do realize my standards are wider than large and inked, right? I’d like to find a man I can have children with, or possibly a conversation. Axel’s a barbarian. All those MC guys are. It’s not my scene.”

“Right.” Nora throws herself on the stool next to me and leans forward against the counter, squishing her face up with her hand. It reminds me of when she was a kid pouting to Mom for a bowl of ice cream before dinner. We both knew she wasn’t going to get it, but she gave the act her all. “You’re going to hate what I say next then.”

I set the salt box on the counter and stare toward Nora. “Whatever it is, you can fix it.”

She spins up from the chair and makes her way behind the counter. I suppose she thinks the closer she is the more I’ll understand her point of view. “You’re lonely. You spend all day at the diner, and you go home to a book and a cat.” She flattens her eyes and stares harder. “*A book and a cat*. Don’t you want more?”

“No! I don’t. I’m happy. I eat whatever I want for dinner. I don’t have anyone’s underwear to worry about and no one to bother me when I’m reading.” I grin. “Except for Petro, and I approve of his disruptions.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not what you were saying last week.”

I huff out a sigh and screw on a few of the shaker caps. They're not full, but good enough for now. "People get low, Nora. You were feeling like shit last week, too. Why don't *you* date Axel if he's so great?"

She pulls her hand down over her long, dark ponytail. "That would be a conflict of interest."

My brows narrow as I glance up toward her. "Okay, now you've got to spill it. How would that be a conflict of interest? I know all your relatives and he doesn't work for you. So..."

She sighs and looks away, dragging her gaze up slowly. "Yeah... do you remember that stupid idea I had about opening a dating agency?"

My feet shift in place, and I swear I feel a bead of sweat drip from my forehead. I know what she's about to say and I'm going to kill her. "Yeah..."

"Well, I did it. It's only an online thing, but Axel signed up."

"Axel? The big, brooding, motorcycle riding mountain man? He signed up for your dating service?"

She nods.

"Right, well, forgive me if that gives me more of a reason to believe how desperate the man is." I carry the tray to the counter on the opposite side of the diner, desperate to get as far away from her as I can. We've been closed for an hour, and I really need to be done with today.

"Just hear me out." She follows me as she talks. "He's my first, and only, client. Can you just listen for a second?"

I roll my gaze toward her, then down at my watch. I've walked nearly twelve thousand steps today and my feet ache like hell. All I want to do is go sit in my car and listen to music until I pass out. "You have three minutes."

"Okay. So, he's looking for a curvy blonde who loves the wilderness, is open to a family, and wants the ranching lifestyle. *That's you...* almost exactly."

“That’s not me. I have blonde hair and a big ass. That’s all. You know I hate hiking and ranching isn’t my thing. Besides that, the age range Axel’s looking for must be out of my window. He’s what... twenty years older than me?”

She pauses and stares down at her phone, scrolling through the answers to a questionnaire. “I’m sure that can be negotiated after he sees what a good fit you are. Besides, the man does not look twenty years older than you.”

I laugh under my breath. “Yes, he does, and we’re not a good fit. Remember the last time Axel and I were together? I offered to help out at the lodge, and we couldn’t even hang a picture without arguing. Is that what you want for me, a life of eternal misery?”

“It’s called sexual chemistry.”

I laugh. “Just because something is exploding doesn’t mean it’s chemistry.”

Her eyes roll to the side and back again as though she’s searching for a reasonable response. “Chemistry is all about explosions. That’s like a thing, May.”

“Okay. We can both see you’re out of things to say here. I’m politely declining whatever it is you’re offering, and now I need you to go. I want to close up.”

Nora twists her lips into a bow and scans the room as though she’s holding something back.

“Is there something else?”

She nods. “Kinda...”

I shift my weight onto one foot and lean against the counter. “Last chance, sis. I’m about to lose it.”

Her eyes narrow and her lips open, but nothing comes out.

Why am I terrified right now?

“Look, I know you’re busy.” She fidgets with a straw wrapper on the counter and stutters a lot as she says, “Okay... so... this thing, right?”

“Let me help. If the favor is a date with Axel, the answer’s no. I’m sorry—”

“It’s tonight! The date is tonight!” The words pop from her lips like a kernel of corn that’s been stuck behind the lid of a pot. She buries her face in her hands. “Look, I know. I know! I know! I know! I screwed up badly, but I *hate* working for Bobby Steiner at that stupid realty company. I show cabins all day long to people in the city who end up changing their minds the second they realize how far away they’ll be from Starbucks. Nothing gets sold and Bobby keeps giving me the lookers. I need buyers, May. *Buyers!*”

Okay, obviously she’s having a breakdown.

“I appreciate the little guilt trip train we’re on. The views are great, but I’m not going on a date with Axel. Not tonight, not ever.”

“Look, I shouldn’t have set this up, *I know that*, but look at his profile.” She shoves the phone in front of my face. “He’s so hot, and you’re everything he’s looking for! It’s one date. *Please!* He’s my only client. I don’t want a bad review.”

“I think the second you tell him that I’m his date, he’s going to leave you negative stars, Nora. You’re not hearing me. We’re like oil and water, the gym and pizza, politicians and honesty. We wouldn’t work.”

She throws herself in a pleading position against the counter and again, I see her begging for pre-dinner green mint chip ice cream. “Please! I’ve tried matching him with every woman in my database, May. No one is interested. You’re my last hope.”

“You’re really selling him. *No one* else wanted him, so here ya go... but trust me, he’s great?” I push away from the counter and grab my purse from under the register. “You’re going to need to work on your tactics if this is your new full-time business.”

She sighs and stands straight. “Fine. I didn’t want to do this, but you owe me.”

I spin back and laugh. “I owe you?”

“Yeah.” The pout is gone. “When Mom died, you begged me to do all the calling. You didn’t make one single phone call, May. You said that day you owed me, and I haven’t cashed in yet.”

Okay, she’s not wrong about that. I did temporarily lose my mind when my mother passed, and I did put almost everything on Nora. Looking back, that was a real asshole move.

I sigh. “Fine, but this means we’re even. I don’t owe you anything after this.”

She nods and bites back a grin as she gathers her things and heads for the door. “Yes. Full payback. I agree. He’s, ugh, he’s supposed to meet you outside at seven thirty so... please, please, please be nice. I really need a good review.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and glance down at my watch. It’s already seven. I have thirty minutes to forget every egotistic thing I know about Axel Carpenter.

Something tells me that isn’t long enough.

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