



Pidino
WILD

RUGGED MOUNTAIN MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Riding Wild
Rugged Mountain MC
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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 reasonable 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 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.

Chapter Two

Axel

I pull into the space straight in front of the diner, still unsure of why I'm here. I don't need a woman. Hell, I'm not even sure if I *want* one. The last time I let myself be vulnerable with relationship shit, I ended up depressed for months, with a million questions of what went wrong. For the record, I still don't have the answers.

Every woman I meet wants the same thing. They want a man who does the grunt work and doesn't speak unless it's to say '*yes, dear*' with a smile. They want a man who will give them the world, while asking for nothing in return. Sorry ladies, Alex's no one's puppet.

I drag in a deep breath of fresh night air and climb off my bike. The pine is faded down here, masked by the scents of fried food and baked goods. I can't say I hate it, just wish some of these places were open. This time of night, the only shops with lights on are Rugged Mountain Ink and Mullet's bar. Neither make a great first date, but in a small town like this, you work with what you're given.

The bike leans to the left and I toss my gloves in the side saddle before returning a call I felt buzzing in my pocket on the way here. I don't see anyone waiting for me and I'm half hoping the call is from the dating agency. Maybe she wants to tell me this whole thing is called off.

Fuck, that would be a relief. No awkward conversations about why I'm here. No intimate interrogations over why I'm single. No uncomfortable silences because my answers don't fit what she's already determined is the reason I'm alone.

I close my eyes and send up a prayer, hoping to someone, anywhere, that this date is a no show. It was a mistake to come here. I'm a big enough man to acknowledge my mistakes and move past them. Chalk it up to a moment of weakness.

I pull the phone into view and stare at the screen. The call wasn't from the agency. It was from my buddy, Doc. He's been rebuilding an old Harley. I'll bet he's looking for advice on a part.

I dial him back. "What's up, man?" I tuck my hand in my pocket and wander down toward the darkest part of Main Street. He might not be the call I need to get out of this mess, but I'm thankful for his distraction from the incoming train wreck everyone sees coming a mile away.

"Not much." He clears his throat. "You're heading out on that date tonight, right? Just wanted to wish you luck and to tell you not to fuck this up."

"Okay. I was hoping you'd called for advice on the Panhead."

He laughs. "Nah. I'm done with that. I'm taking her for her first ride tonight. Thought I'd check in on you beforehand. Gotta make sure you don't bail on this date like you did the last one."

"I didn't bail on the last one. She bailed on me. And for your information, it wasn't my fault."

"That's not how I remember it. You called me when she stepped out, ripping off excuses. She was too mature. She wasn't mature enough. She had a nose ring. Blah, blah, blah."

"Okay, well, we're going to agree to disagree on this, buddy. Besides, you're one to talk considering you haven't been with anyone in years yourself."

"I'm content the way I am. You're not. If you were, you wouldn't have signed up for that site."

This is a small town and I know news travels fast, but I haven't told anyone about the dating website, so I have no clue how he'd know.

"How'd you find that shit out?"

"I didn't until now." He laughs. "I saw an advertisement in the *Penny Saver* and wondered if you applied. Now I know. Good luck with that."

“The *Penny Saver*, huh? You’re showing your age, man.”

He clears his throat. “Everyone in town reads the *Penny Saver*. How else are we going to get coupons for the diner? Free pie with meal purchase.” He chuckles under his breath. “Anyway, I’m just fucking with you, man. I’m happy you’re putting yourself out there. I’m gonna get out on this ride, but call me afterward.”

I snap out a quick remark of luck for his first ride on the Panhead and disconnect the line, stuffing my phone back into my pocket. Doc and I have been friends for nearly ten years. We met through the MC, and he’s been my go-to guy for most everything. We’re similar in the way that we’re both single, and we’re comfortable in the fact that our friendship doesn’t require much more than advice on bike parts and bullshitting. Believe it or not, that’s not easy to find. Most people expect engagement in a friendship. They want you at their kids’ birthday parties or they expect you to text back within a reasonable time frame. I’m not that guy. Never have been, never will be. It’s not that I don’t care. I have quite a few people I care about, and they’ll be reminded of that once a month when my phone alerts me to call.

I drag in a deep breath of the unique pine-fried scent on Main Street and make my way back toward the diner where a woman now stands shadowed in the street. She’s wearing a short pink dress and an apron. Her hair is long, maybe blonde. It’s hard to see in this light. Though, her curves are unmistakable. Her breasts curve out and her hips curve in, but only slightly before her round ass pops out.

Fuck.

Okay, maybe this isn’t a complete train wreck. I study the woman for a few moments longer, watching as she draws her phone away from her ear and tucks it into her pocket. Her gaze draws up toward me, and though I can’t see her clearly, I know she’s gorgeous. *So gorgeous I’d bet she requires more than one text a month.* I’m doomed before we start.

The closer I get to the streetlamp, the easier it is to see her. Blonde hair, brown eyes, and a gorgeous face. I take in each piece of her individually, memorizing what I can about this meeting. Suddenly, I'm in a fucking rom-com wondering if I'm meeting my future wife. If I am, I need to remember every detail of this moment.

I step in toward her and lean in for a hug, breathing in the soft floral scent on her skin. *Floral with a hint of garlic.* Strange, but I don't over think it. Maybe she likes to cook. I'd love a woman I can cook with.

Fucking hell. Listen to me. I need to calm my ass down. I don't even know this woman yet.

"Hey, I'm Axel." I follow the hug up with a handshake, holding my hand out for a greeting. I'm working backwards here, but the flow is the flow, and I'm not overthinking things.

She hitches her hip up and laughs. "I know who you are, Axel!" There's sarcasm in her tone and it takes a second to sink in. *How does she know who I am?* This was supposed to be anonymous. The point was to know nothing about her. Neither of us have any information on the other, but we're matched based on our interests. The woman continues, "It's me, May."

"*May?*" My jaw clenches and my stomach turns. First of all, for the way I was just ogling her. Second, I've obviously gotten the wrong woman. "Sorry. I, ugh, I'm looking for someone. I thought—"

"Are you here for the matchmaker hookup?" Her grin is beyond telling. *Fucking fuck.* I knew this was a mistake. Her arms fan outward. "Tada..."

"I know this town was small, but this... *this* is fucked up." I tip up onto my heels and swipe my hand down over my beard. "What the hell are you doing on a dating site?"

She gasps. "What am *I* doing there? What are *you* doing there? I thought you had pride, and you didn't need a woman." She beats at her chest with a mocking tone like a gorilla as she says, "Me... man. Woman... needy."

Remember?” A laugh bends her over for a solid ten seconds before she’s straight again. “Sorry. I promised I’d be nice.”

“Who did you promise you’d be nice? I don’t need some charity date.”

May huffs under her breath and turns toward me. “It’s not a charity date. Calm down. We were matched.” Her tone is still sparkling with sarcasm. She’s not the kind of woman who likes a man like me. I don’t think there are any women who like men like me. We’re a dying breed. The one’s that want to be strong and kind, just not walked all over. This is a mistake.

“We should head inside.” May twists her hair onto her shoulder. “There’s some lasagna we can heat up and the apple pie is still fresh, assuming you like Millie’s pie.”

“You want left over lasagna and apple pie? I was planning to take you... *someone*... to Mullet’s.”

“You know he just fries up mozzarella and pours sauce out of a jar, right? Arnie made the lasagna fresh this morning, and Millie’s pie was handmade with love. *Love, Axel*. Isn’t that what you’re looking for?” She bites back a grin.

Have I said this is a mistake?

Then again, I don’t expect a twenty something to understand what a pain in the ass she’s being right now. I contemplate leaving. I’m sure I’d be doing us both a favor, but I’m already out here and I’m starving.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I glance toward May. “Lasagna sounds good. Let me know what I can do to help.”

She adopts a high tone and a southern accent as she swings the door open and says, “Why you don’t have to do a thing, sir? You just sit yourself down and relax. I’ll grab our dinner out of the oven and serve you like the king you are.”

I shut my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to quiet the parts of me screaming to call it a night. I could go home, sit in the recliner, and catch the end of the baseball game. The Rockies are going to the playoffs. I could catch up on the lures I’ve been making to take fly-fishing next month. I could sit out on the front porch in complete silence and think

about nothing. All of these options are good, but when I open my eyes again, there she is... beautiful as ever, holding a plate of steaming lasagna and a slice of apple pie.

If I decide to stay now, I'm a hypocrite... right?

Chapter Three

May

Doubting the man is handsome would make everything else I think about him disingenuous. The truth is, he's hot as hell. It's hard to believe he hasn't been swiped up yet. Tall, inked, muscular in all the right places, and his voice has a timbre that sends a shot of electricity straight through me. If he'd agree to never speak again, I think we could have a lovely marriage. Thankfully, that's how most of dinner has gone... silent.

On the plus side, Arnie did a great job on the lasagna and the pie is spot on. It's much better than the peanut butter and jelly I'd have made for myself. I'm thankful the owners are okay with me popping in for a late dinner every once in a while. They're a lot like everyone else in town, really laid back. Well, *almost* everyone else in town.

"We should get these questions out of the way." Axel slides away his plate and glances up toward me quickly before looking away again. "Dinner was great. Thank you."

Nora didn't mention anything about questions. "What are you talking about?"

"The questions in the app. We have to ask each other and confirm we finished them before we can be set up again."

I purse my lips and drag out my phone, pretending to scroll through an app I clearly don't have. "Totally. Let's do it. I'll go first. What, umm... why do you want to be married?" I lean back in the booth after I've shot the question out, acting as though I don't give a damn what answer he gives, but if I'm being honest, my ears are perked. For the life of me I can't figure out why a handsome guy like Axel hasn't been pulled off the market by now. Sure, he's stubborn and set in his ways, but what man his age isn't?

He draws in a deep breath and sighs. "This is stupid. What other questions do you have?"

I laugh and glance down at the imaginary list. “It’s that or your sex life. I figured marriage was a good place to start.”

He rolls his eyes. “This was a mistake. I’m leaving.”

“*Really?*” My tone drops. “You’re going to be *that* cliché?”

“*Cliché?* How am I cliché?”

“You ate dinner in silence and the first second I ask you anything real, you bail? The question stuff was your idea, remember?”

He drags another sip of beer and stands from the booth, lifting our plates from the table. “I’m sorry for this. It was my fault thinking I could date.” Dishes in hand, he makes his way to the back of the kitchen. I can’t see him anymore, but I hear the sprayer and the clanking of our plates. At least he picked up after himself. That’s not something a man usually thinks about. *At least not the men I know.*

I’m happy the night is finally coming to an end, but Nora is going to kill me. As pissed as I am about this entire thing, I promised her a good performance, and I’m being a snarky, little bitch. Granted, it’s in my blood. We come from a long line of women who are... free with their words.

I stand from the table and make my way to the kitchen. This part takes a lot because, little known fact, snarky bitches don’t like to apologize.

“Hey.” I lean against the door frame and stare toward him. He’s wearing a black, rolled up, long-sleeved button down that shows his dark ink tattoos and black jeans. In this light, the man looks like a small-town god, albeit an evil one. “I’m sorry if I pushed too hard. Maybe you should go first... with the questions, I mean.”

A wide smile brightens his face though I don’t get the vibe. It’s not a friendly grin. Instead, it’s awkward and clearly forced. “I appreciate your apology, and if I’m being honest, there’s no denying you’re gorgeous... but we both know this is a waste of time.” He wipes his hands on the towel near the sink and brushes past me. I’m not sure why I drag in a breath

as he moves, but when I do, I regret it immediately. He smells like cedar and pine personified. It's rugged, wild, and draws me much further in than I was planning on it pulling.

He glances back at me. "This is my fault. Can I walk you to your car? It's dark."

A walk to my car, how gentlemanly. "Oh." My voice cracks. "Yeah, I guess." I grab my sweater off the hook and wrap myself up as I follow Axel out the door, locking up behind us. Nora is going to kill me for not going further with this. We barely walked into the date before we were walking out again. That said, I can't make the man talk to me. He's obviously got problems and I don't have the time or the mental capacity to figure any of them out.

"Look, could you also give that dating agency a good rating? I know the girl that runs it and she's just starting. A bad review could really drag things down."

He laughs and turns toward me in the cool night air. It's the first evening that the night has been crisp like this. I'm not looking forward to the temps dropping at all.

"You know her and you still let her set us up?" His giant hand swipes down over his beard and his jaw tightens.

Shit, did I say that out loud? "I know her, but I didn't know about this. Not until it was too late." Technically, that *is* the truth.

"Well, no. I'm not giving her a good rating. She obviously doesn't know what she's doing."

I huff and twist toward him in the dim light of the evening. "You really can't one star her. We didn't even give this a chance."

"We didn't have to." He chuckles under his breath. "We've done this before. Don't you remember the lodge? We couldn't even hang a few pictures together. You like things a certain way and I suck at listening to people. It was doomed before it started."

"Did you really think this would be any different with anyone else? And for the record, I don't like things done a

'*certain*' way. I like things done the *right* way. Besides that, it was one day, Axel. You're going to judge me over one interaction?"

He laughs. "You did the same damn thing!"

Okay, he's got me there. I shouldn't be asked to have emotionally charged conversations after a ten-hour shift.

We turn the corner into the back lot behind the diner. It was nice of him to walk me out here, but it would be even better if he'd stop running his mouth.

"You know," he says, straightening his back, "I'm sure dating would be a lot easier if you knew what your faults were."

"Ha! Please. You wanna know your faults? You think you're bad at listening to people, but the truth is you're afraid to open up. That marriage question, for example. The second you feel cornered by anything real, *even if you came looking for it*, you run away."

"I can tell you my faults until the cows come home, but you don't seem to think you have any. Plus, I'm hardly running away. I'm walking you to your car, while continuing to listen to you rant about what a piece of shit I am."

"No one said you're a piece of shit. I said you run from everything real. There's a difference. A piece of shit wouldn't be walking me to my car." I hit the key fob to unlock the door. Axel takes hold of the handle and opens the door slowly, drawing that sarcastic grin up again.

"We're even going to fight over whether I'm a piece of shit. That's fun!"

"Okay then, if you insist... you can be a piece of shit."

He laughs. This one seems genuine.

"Okay, well thanks for the lesson on pieces of shit. I'll be sure to keep that in mind going forward." I draw in a deep breath. "Back to the rating conversation. My sister is really banking on—"

"*Your sister?*" he grumbles.

Damn it. I really need to pay more attention to what I'm saying out loud. In my defense, it's been a really long day. "Yeah," I exhale. "Nora's my sister but she's not... this isn't what you think."

He laughs under his breath, but again it's not a funny kind of laughter. It's an... on the edge, might murder someone, kind of laughter. "Oh, I'd love to hear it."

"I... She..." Nothing I say is going to fix this. "Look, she tried matching you with someone, but she couldn't. So here I am, trying to pinch hit." I realize what that sounds like once I say it, and even though I can't stand Axel, I feel guilty immediately. "She couldn't match you, but her database is small right now. She's new and she's still expanding. It's just a problem with timing."

He nods and stares down at the pavement. "You better get home. Looks like a storm is coming."

I stare up at the clear night sky, then back at Axel. I may have been born a snarky bitch, but I still have a heart. "I can be a handful, and tonight I was—"

"You don't owe me anything. You were here to do your sister a favor. End of story." His tone is curt. I don't blame him. "Get in your car so I know you're okay before I take off."

Why did he stop being mean? The mean was making it easy to overlook how hot he is.

Being that I have a heart that's easily influenced, I consider telling him what I've thought about all night. The parts about how it makes no sense that he's single, how hot he is, and how his personality will fit with the right person, *at some point*, but all of that would sound trite now. He'd probably think I was only trying to butter him up so he wouldn't one star Nora.

Feeling the weight of my stupidity, I climb into my car, and turn the engine with plans of making a few trips around the block before heading to the west end of the parking lot for the night. But as I turn the key, there's a weird noise.

Good fresh hell, of course something else is going wrong.

I try to turn the engine again, but the car only putters and moans.

“What’s going on?” He steps toward me.

“I’m fine. It’s fine. The car is fine. You get going.”

“You’re not fine.” His tone is deep. “I heard that noise. Your car’s not starting.”

“It is, though. It’s starting. This is a thing it does when I...”

“Pop the hood.” He stands in front of my little corolla. At this angle, he looks like he could lift the car into his hands and play with it like a toy.

I do as he’s asked. Maybe it’s a quick fix.

For a long moment he leans behind the hood doing whatever men do when they’re trying to fix things. “Looks like someone took a few spark plugs from your engine. Was it running this morning?”

“Yeah.” My stomach turns as I think over who could’ve been messing with my car. We should really have security cameras out back. Then again, this might be the one and only time anyone’s bothered anyone in this town. And if I’m honest with myself, I know who it was.

“Okay, well, you’re not going anywhere in this thing tonight. I’ll give you a ride home.” He closes the hood and turns away. “In the morning, I’ll grab you some plugs at the shop, and we’ll get you all fixed up. Let’s go.” There’s that take charge attitude again. The one where he didn’t ask me what I wanted. He *told* me what he was doing. It’s the pictures at the lodge all over again.

“I think I’ll call Nora. You go ahead and get home.”

He shakes his head and turns back to lean against my car. “I’m not leaving you out here in the dark to wait for somebody. Where do you live? It’s not a big deal. I was going to go for a ride, anyway.”

I draw my gaze up toward him, trying to stop the spinning in my stomach. I can't well say, *'hey, no big deal but...I'm living in my car.'* No one would take that news lightly, especially not a man like Axel. With all that testosterone, he'd have to prove he can fix any problem.

I hang my head and stare at the cracked, yellow lines of the parking lot. Nora is the only call I have. I work constantly. There's no time for friends, and the one person I did know, my ex, is now fucking with me every chance he gets. I'm sure he's the one messing with my car.

"I'm going to tell you something and I don't want you to freak out or try to fix it, okay?" I blow out a heavy breath. "Promise me."

"I don't promise you. Sorry. What's going on?"

"I can't tell you if you're not going to promise me that you can listen without trying to fix it."

He stares toward me, harder this time. His frame is big and strong and he's so close now that the pine scent he carries fills the air around us. It would be easy to let him fix things. I'd bet he does a great job at it, too. I'd bet everything this man fixes is solid gold afterward. How could it not be with those big, calloused hands?

I shake my head and draw my gaze up toward him. "Look, I don't want you to do the thing your alpha male code says you have to do. I'm going to tell you something and I want you to turn around, leave, and know that I'll be fine out here, like I am every night." I drag in a deep breath and waver for a second before finally saying the five words I've been holding secret for months. "I live in my car."

He stares at me for a long while, studying my face mostly, though he does glance toward the car and the woods surrounding the lot. I can't imagine what he thinks of me now. I liked the image I had when I was a snarky bitch, not this one who's weak and defenseless.

"We can talk about this later, but you're coming with me for tonight."

“No! I’m most definitely not going with you. I’ve been sleeping here for a few months. I’ll be fine.”

He shakes his head as though I’ve lost my mind. “Someone took something from your car. Something that it needs to run. Now I’m just a country boy, and my detective skills wouldn’t hold up in a court of law, but I’d guess you’re in danger and I’m not leaving you here.”

Before I get out my next rebuttal, he opens the door and lifts me into his arms.

What the hell is happening? First, how is he lifting me? I’ve never been lifted like this by any man, not since childhood anyway. Second, why am I relieved? I have no idea where we’re going but there’s an overwhelming sense of safety in his arms.

He settles me onto the back of the bike and glances toward me. “Do I need to go back for anything or are we good?”

I keep anything of value tucked into my locker at the diner, so I’m not worried about losing something, but I’m also not conceding.

“You can’t just pick me up and move me around like that.”

Axel smirks and climbs onto his bike, starting up the engine. “I think I just did.”

I should be repulsed by his show of dominance. I should put up a fight, wiggle myself away, and make a run for the diner.

Instead, I let my panties cream like the simple little girl I am.

What the hell? I’m not supposed to like men who think they know better than women. I’m not supposed to turn into a pile of mush because some man asserted his dominance. I’m an independent woman who’s figuring life out for herself.

So then, it’s shocking as hell that with every rumble of Axel’s bike between my legs, I feel my walls come crashing

down.

Chapter Four

Axel

“Give me a list of the people you think would be after you?” I settle into the recliner near the fireplace and stare toward her. May is relaxed on the couch, refreshed from the shower she insisted on taking the second we got here.

It’s strange having company. I don’t remember the last time someone was over. The MC usually meets over at the lodge, and besides them, there’s not a whole lot of people I entertain.

She twists her wet hair to the side and tucks one arm into my old t-shirt. Thank God. Her nipples have been like hard spears since she got out of the shower and thin cotton doesn’t hide a thing.

I hand her a cup of cocoa with fresh whipped cream sprayed on top. I’m sure it’s mean to try and relax her, though. I doubt there’s a relaxed version of May in any dimension.

“There is no list.” She sighs. “There’s one guy, and he’s not interesting to say the least. We dated and it didn’t work out so...”

“What happened?”

She narrows her gaze and shakes her head as though the question is annoying. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’s relevant given the circumstances.”

“It’s not. It’s dumb, it doesn’t matter, and the sun will come up soon and we’ll all move on with our lives.”

“No, we won’t. How’d you two break up? You steal his spark plugs or something? Hey, maybe this is some sort of kink I’ve never heard of.”

Her gaze deadpans. “Ha. Ha. No, Sherlock. If you must know, the guy wanted to have sex, but I... I didn’t want to.” She shrugs. “So... we broke up.”

My stomach knots as she talks. “It seems a bit excessive to steal some spark plugs because someone won’t sleep with you. He from around here?”

“You wouldn’t know him. He’s just some asshole who lives out in Whiskey Falls. I met him at Declan’s club outside of town.”

“Is this guy the same reason you’re homeless?”

She narrows her gaze. “I’m not homeless.”

“You’re living in your car.”

“It’s the same thing as people who live in RV’s. It’s fine. I use the bathroom in the diner, and I shower up at the campground. Sometimes I even sleep there. The car is comfortable.”

“I don’t think many people would agree that a car is ideal housing.” I hold my gaze steady trying not to be judgmental, but I’m feeling pretty judgmental. A young woman shouldn’t be living in her car. No one should be. “Is this another part of your kink?”

She shakes her head. “No. I was taking care of my mom for about two years. She had muscular dystrophy, and her well-being became my full-time job. We were always close, but that made us so much closer.” May looks away. “When she passed in March, we had to sell the house to pay for medical bills, and I didn’t have enough money to find anything of my own.” She glances back, letting go of a heavy breath. “I’m saving though, and being so close to the diner really helps. I can pick up all the shifts.”

Fucking hell. “I’m sorry about your mom.”

May wipes away a tear. “Thanks. I’ll be fine. I’m working hard, saving up, and soon I’ll have a cabin of my own. *Please don’t tell anyone.* Nora doesn’t even know.” She holds up a hand. “And it’s not because I’m embarrassed. It’s because I’m proud.”

I threaten to remind her that the two go hand-in-hand, but instead I grab her a tissue and settle onto the couch next to

her. “So, what’s with the guy then? When did he start bothering you?”

“I met him after my mom passed. Obviously, I wasn’t making the best choices back then.”

“So, you wouldn’t have sex with him and he started stalking you?”

She looks away and her voice cracks. “Sort of, yeah. He was very controlling and had this ridiculous hero complex... that came with a price. He wanted to help me after my mom’s passing but only if he knew where I was, what I did, where I ate.” She laughs. “You know me, I wasn’t having any of that. Anyway, when I officially stopped talking to him, he started showing up at the diner, and then he’d find wherever I was parked for the night.” She smiles. “As you know, there are not a lot of places in town to hide without going into the mountains and I’m not doing that. So, I decided to sit in plain sight. This is the first he’s messed with me in weeks and the first time he’s done anything more than being annoying. Most of his threats are just notes.”

Maybe I’m getting soft in my old age, but the thought of this young woman taking care of her mom until she passed, losing everything to medical bills, and then living in her car is bad enough. When you throw an asshole ex into the mix, it leaves me with the overwhelming urge to blame the asshole for everything and leave him at the bottom of the quarry.

“What’s the guy’s name?”

“No. I appreciate your need to go feral, but bringing me up here for the night is plenty. That shower felt great and sitting on a soft couch with all this space, is even better. I’m not letting you get involved with the other weird shit I have going on. It’s my—”

“What’s his name?”

She pinches her lips together and snaps her gaze toward me. “What’s it matter? I’ve been saying this whole time I hated how controlling he was. I need you to dial it back if you want me to keep talking. Plus, what’s in this for you?”

You hate me. You couldn't wait to leave tonight. Hell, you couldn't even answer one single question earlier."

I huff out a sigh, then look away and back again. I know I need to give her something if she's going to let me help. "The marriage question scared me. I've spent all my life out here doing my own thing, and day to day it's fine. I keep busy with the horses and building up at the lodge. Lately though, I come home, and the silence is overwhelming. I can turn on the TV, hear the dogs barking, but it's almost like the quiet is screaming at me, you know?"

"What changed?"

I glance back toward her, avoiding the hard spears of her nipples again. "Age maybe. That or I'm a fucking idiot who couldn't see until now how growing old alone affects a person."

Her head tips gently to the side as her gaze softens. "I'm sorry you're feeling lonely. I think that's one of the worse feelings there is." Maybe her heart is softer than it presents.

"Nah, the worst is helplessness—knowing you could've changed something or helped someone somehow, but as hard as you try or as much as you want to, there's no fix."

"Who do you wish you could've helped?"

Holding her gaze, I draw in a deep breath, and decide to change the subject. I realize we're being open and sharing, but talking about the day my brother fell off a horse out on the range and I couldn't get to help fast enough, isn't how I'm ending this night. "What's your second question?"

I expect her to push back, but she must see something in me that drives her forward.

She glances down at her phone. "Are you sure? This is another deep one."

My brows narrow and I swear a bead of sweat gathers at my hairline, but I've already decided to keep going. "Shoot."

“Okay,” She wrinkles her nose. “How do you feel most loved?”

“Shit. These questions are hard. There isn’t a what’s your favorite cookie on there?” I stroke my hand over my beard.

She laughs. “Nope. I’m dying to know now, though.”

“Chocolate chip. You?”

“Classic. I pegged you for an oatmeal raisin guy. I don’t know why.” She smiles. “I’m a chocolate and peanut butter girl myself.”

“All of those sound good, really. I’m not too picky when it comes to dessert. Love, though, I have no idea how to answer that question.”

Her arm tucks out of the t-shirt and her hard nipples are on display again, making it even harder to think. “What if you looked at it like something that makes you feel cared for?”

I scan my brain for an answer but the only thing that returns is ridiculous. “Work maybe?”

“*Work?* How so?”

“I’m usually really busy, so when Doc drops by with dinner or one of the guys gives me a hand on the ranch, I guess that’s when I feel most... cared for.”

A slight smile climbs onto her face as she nods. “So, like if I made you dinner and apple pies, or if I fed the horses so you didn’t have to.”

“Yeah. I like that you inserted yourself into the equation.”

Her cheeks turn pink. “Well, I was just... it was an example. I’m not saying I would. I—”

“I’m teasing. What about you?”

Her face turns upward in a sweet innocent smile. “Oh, that’s easy! Praise! Praise, stability, touch... that’s probably too many.”

“I don’t think so, but what does that look like in practice? I need step-by-step notes.”

She smiles gently and opens her mouth to speak, but closes it again, before standing from the couch and walking toward me. “Maybe it’s easier if I show you.”

Fucking fuck. She stands before me with bare legs and breasts that sway freely. Her long hair drapes down her shoulder and every curve of her frame taunts me. Maybe I should say no. Lord knows there are enough reasons. She’s young. She’s inexperienced. She’s been through a lot. She could realize in the morning what a horrible idea this is. Then again, maybe I’m jumping to conclusions. Maybe all she wants is to show me what her trifecta of love looks like and that’s all. Maybe it’s that innocent. Maybe...

“Yeah, show me.” I will my hard cock to disappear, but before he does, she’s sat on my lap with both thighs straddled against mine. Her head leans forward and her hand glides down my arm, lifting it toward her frame.

Fuck.

She leans into my lips and grazes them gently. “Touch me like you want me, Axel. Touch me and tell me you’re happy I’m here.”

I move my hand over her hip, up her chest, and onto the back of her neck. “I want you, May, and it’s amazing you’re here.”

She whines and grinds her hips against my lap. “Really?”

I nod. “Really. I’m so fucking glad you came back up here with me. I know I pushed too hard, but I wanted you to feel safe... because you deserve it. And now that you’re on my lap, I’m convinced that this is where you should be.”

She sighs and leans into my neck, working her hips against the hard ridge in my jeans.

“So, if I held you like this and stroked your hair while I told you how strong you are, would that make you feel loved?”

She sighs and lifts my shirt off my frame. “It would.” Her fingertips file through the hair on my chest and her lips meet mine. This time she goes in with intent. Tongue on tongue, we massage our lips against one another until I’m so fucking lost in the moment, I forget every reason I had to stop this.

I pull her bottom lip into my mouth and suck, lifting her shirt off her curved frame. “You’re fucking gorgeous.”

She squeaks under her breath as I trail my lips onto her neck, over her shoulder, and land on her hard nipples. “You feel so good, Axel.”

I groan under my breath as I suckle her nipples. “You’re a good girl to tell me what you like, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” she purrs and arches back to give me more space with her beautiful round tits. I hold them in my hand and squeeze gently, licking and sucking on each spear before scraping my teeth across them. It’s a soft move at first and I’m not sure what’s come over me but when she jumps back squeezing her thighs tight around mine, it’s incentive to bite again. This time harder.

She jumps again with a squeal that turns into more purring.

“You like that, my kitten?”

A smile warms her face as she presses against my frame, her fingertips lost in my beard. “*Your* kitten? I’m not sure which part of that I like more.”

“Yeah? You’re a good kitten, aren’t you? You going to let me touch your soft body and eat that pretty, little pussy?”

She sighs and meets my gaze. “I don’t know. I can see a different side of you now, and you’ve helped me out so much today. I kind of want to do something just for you.”

My hand fists into her hair and excitement shoots through me in anticipation of what she could possibly mean. “Like what?”

She grins and slides from my lap, rubbing her hand over the hard ridge that's been trying to fight its way out of my jeans. "What if I made you feel loved by getting some work done for you?"

My cock stiffens harder as I swallow down a lump in my throat. She's so pretty looking up at me from between my legs. "Work?"

She unzips my jeans and works my cock out, holding my length in her small hand. I should stop her, but fucking hell this feels good. The warmth of her skin on mine. The feather like touch of her fingertips. "I want you to come on me. Come on my tits." She smiles a Cheshire grin. "Let me enjoy working on your cock, Axel."

I'm not sure I've ever been this turned on before. My body is overheating with need. My cock is pulsing, aching, desperate for her mouth on my tip. I should be a gentleman. I should push her away. We should build something stronger before we go to this place, but the second her tongue lands on my balls, I'm a man I don't recognize. A wild man desperate for whatever insanity is coming.

She licks my balls and drags her tongue up my shaft and over the head of my cock, lowering her hot mouth down over me as she sucks.

My eyes roll back in my head and my fingers weave through her hair until moan after sweet moan escapes her lips. I might die right here and now. She's got some serious skill with that tongue. "You're a good little cock sucker, aren't you, kitten?"

She pulls her mouth off my cock with a pop and grips me in her hand before glancing up toward me without a word.

These small moments of connection while she works my cock drive me insane. I've had blow jobs before, embarrassingly ages ago, but I don't remember anyone ever wanting it so badly. There's a need, a desire in May's eyes as she sucks my cock, that causes me to groan out in approval at the warmth of her tongue on my skin. The pressure of her hand

as she works my shaft. The touch of her hair as it falls down on my thighs.

“You feel so fucking good, kitten. Purr for me. Purr on my cock.” I try not to lose control, but my head is already heavy and dizzy. I can’t remember the last time I felt so good. I think I’d remember something rivaling this. “Just like that. Right there.”

Her hand wraps around the base of my cock and she works her hot mouth over the tip, moaning as she works. Moaning like she’s enjoying my dick. She works my shaft slowly then takes me all in, sucking it tight against her tongue.

I dig my hands into her hair, sucking in a breath as I try not to explode, but fucking hell that’s going to be hard.

She dips in further, taking me into the back of her throat as she gags and pulls up quickly. That shouldn’t get me as excited as it does, but I’m rock fucking hard like a goddamn psycho. Slurping up her spit, she drags and pulls on my ridge, twisting her tongue against every vein as though she’s savoring the taste.

Her phone buzzes on the coffee table as though there’s an incoming call. The rattling forces it off the pine carved stand and onto the ground. The distraction is enough that a few slivers of guilt rattle through me. I don’t want her on her knees. I want her on my lap. I want her tight little pussy choking my cock. I want her eyes on mine. I want her wetness spread on my face.

She goes deep on my cock again, pulling me out of the guilt and back into the pleasure. Sucking and gagging over and over again, she purrs on my cock.

I fist into her hair, driving her head down onto my dick as she sucks. Hard nipples brush against my leg and her hot, heavy breath on my thighs sends me over the edge. I come hard and fast, growling out in approval for every bit of work she’s done. “You’re a good girl,” I howl. “Take it all, kitten.” Years of repressed pleasure and pent-up emotions spill into her hot mouth.

Her tongue teases my shaft, and she continues to suck as I push back, sensitive to touch.

I think the show is over, but it's not. She stares up at me with her sweet brown eyes and opens her mouth, sticking her tongue out as come rolls off her lips, drips off her chin, and lands on her hard nipples.

I'm not sure I've ever been more turned on in my life. I could take her again and again, and I'd never tire of a single moment.

I pull her up onto the couch and bend her back, diving between her legs to taste the sweet, sticky pleasure she's been making for me. Her clit is swollen and pink, so when my tongue rolls over the top, she jumps back and grinds into my face. I grip her ass and hold her up as she continues to rub her pussy against my beard.

Licking and sucking, I devour her. Having her lips on my cock, and the incredible show afterward was unbelievable, but giving her pleasure, feeling her squirm... that's where I'm meant to be.

"What's that noise?" May lifts her shoulders from the couch. "Do you hear that? It sounds like Nora."

I'm not sure why the hell she'd be hearing her sister right now. Maybe I should be insulted. "I don't hear anything."

Her brows narrow. "Sorry. I'm losing it." She leans back and I continue, scraping my teeth against her clit as she moans. I'm desperate to slide a finger inside of her, desperate to know how tight she is.

"Get the fuck away from me!" The voice echoes out and this time I hear it too.

May sits up. "You didn't hear that?"

"I did. Your phone dropped a few minutes back. Someone was calling. I wonder if it picked up by accident." I lean down as I talk, searching for the phone until I find it tucked under the sofa. Sure enough, Nora's name is on the screen. She's been on the line for the last nine and a half

minutes. “You should make sure she’s okay. That was a terrible sounding scream.”

May takes the phone from my hand and puts the phone on speaker. “Nora? What’s wrong? Hello?”

Nora doesn’t respond, but there’s a definite struggle happening. There’s a man’s voice, and then a hard, heavy crack.

May glances up toward me. “That’s my ex. Why would he be with Nora?”

“Doesn’t sound good. Where does she live?”

“About ten minutes from the diner. Up on Big Bend.”

As much as I want to lean into her pussy and finish her off, I realize we’ve now got more pressing things. I grab my t-shirt off the floor and clean my come off May’s chest before standing from the couch. “You grab us some fresh clothes from my closet. I’m going to get the guns ready. We’ll meet at the door in five minutes.”

“The cops. Maybe I should call the cop—”

“We’ll get there faster than the police and when we show up, we don’t have any rules. Trust me.” I squeeze her hand and kiss her forehead. “The faster we get out there and get this taken care of, the faster I’m back on that sweet little pussy of yours.”

She swallows hard and tips up onto her toes, kissing my lips gently. “Just promise me no one gets hurt.”

“I promise to keep you and Nora safe. The asshole... I can’t promise anything about him.”

May sits under my arm as I speed through the gravel of the quiet dark road. When the sun is up, barbed wire fencing lines the wide-open countryside, holding back grazing cattle and scruffy brush. In the moonlight, there’s nothing but darkness, shadows, and the grumble of cows in the distance.

The back window is open to the truck, and a gentle breeze blows through. I prefer it on a warm night over the air conditioner. May doesn't seem to mind either. Her long hair blows in the breeze, brushing against the hand I have tucked around her shoulder.

"That was great back there. I... it's been a while since I've..." I clear my throat and squeeze her closer. Given the circumstances, talking about sex seems ill timed, but we had to leave so quickly, I can't let things go without telling her how much I enjoyed myself. "I hope I didn't freak you out with the praise stuff. I—"

"No! It was perfect!" She scoots in closer until there's not a breath of space between us. "I'm sorry we had to stop. I don't know why the hell Trent would be messing with Nora."

"My guess is he was watching you tonight. Or, he couldn't find you and thought Nora would know where you were."

She snaps her gaze toward me then redirects toward the road where someone is bent over a bike near a big pine at the curve.

What the hell is going on tonight?

As we inch closer, the headlights shine on a clump of weeds and a few crows picking at roadkill. Beyond that, my buddy Doc is leaning over the top of the seat.

I completely forgot he told me he was going for a ride tonight. Looks like things didn't go so well.

Fuck! I should've checked on him. It's an old bike and these builds go wrong all the time. God knows all these guys would rather sit on the side of the road trying to fix the damn thing than call anyone for help.

"I gotta pull over for a second. This guy is like a brother to me."

May nods and slides toward the passenger door. "Of course. You think he's hurt? He's not looking so good."

I thought he was working on a wheel, but the closer we get, the more I see what May sees. There's a trail of blood and his shirt is crimson.

God damn it!

Leaving the engine on, I hop from the truck and round to his side. The night has gotten cooler and up here in the hills the scent of pine and cedar is strong. "Fucking hell, man. What are you doing out here? You look like shit."

"Ah. I hit something and got tossed off the bike. I rolled my ankle and got my side cut up, but it's nothing. With a few stitches and some Tylenol, I'll be fine." As usual, Doc doesn't sound the least bit concerned. "You guys mind if I ride back with you? I was trying to get this back wheel spinning again, but I don't think I'm going to make it out on the bike tonight."

"Do you need a hospital?" May takes to his side, inspecting the gash. "You need to see a doctor. You—"

"Appreciate it, but I've handled things like this a hundred times." He glances toward me then back at May. "You must be the date. It's... pretty late. I guess this means things are going well?" Doc is an older guy in his early fifties, and he's had his share of shit. The man spent close to two decades as an Army doctor, and if you sit and listen to his stories, he's got some doozies. He told me once about a guy who he carried straight across a battlefield dodging landmines. The guy lost his leg, but his life was saved thanks to Doc's medics. He's also full of pride... and stubborn as hell when it comes to receiving any sort of help. Honestly, I'm surprised he didn't start walking back through the woods tonight. His ankle must be pretty bad.

I swing my arm around him and help steady him toward the truck, sliding him in after May. The sweet scent May had lingering in the truck is replaced by the stench of road tar and dry grass. How the hell long has he been out here?

"You really should see a doctor," May continues. "You're bleeding pretty bad. What about infections and—"

“I appreciate it.” Doc says, tightening the shirt around his side. “What would help is a distraction. Why don’t you tell me how your date is going.”

“Now you’re just being nosey,” I grunt. “Don’t tell him. He’s got a reputation for gossip. I swear the man needs a knitting circle.”

May laughs and twists toward him. “Or you could tell me the grimmest story you have about Axel.” She shrugs and glances toward me. “And don’t tell me he can be an ass. That’s kind of growing on me.”

A flashing image of my come dripping off her lips less than an hour ago takes over my nerves and quiets my mind as she and Doc talk. Something tells me whatever story he’s going to tell will distract her mind as well.

“I think the worst story I could drag up about Axel is last year’s Christmas party.”

“Oh... tell me everything!” May’s tone lifts. Her eyes are on Doc, but her frame is pressed against mine.

“We were having a charity event for some unfortunate kids from the Springs. Sledding, wide open spaces, sleigh rides, Christmas trees, hot cocoa, presents, you name it. Well, your guy oversaw the sleigh rides. He’s got the horses hooked up, and he’s ready to go when a bear strolls out in front of us. Mid-day, fresh snow, and this bear must have been six hundred pounds. The guys and I are getting the kids inside, you know, trying not to traumatize them, but Axel goes full cowboy and pulls his gun.” Doc bursts into laughter. “The bear runs away at a single shot and the kids got more action than they ever saw in the city.”

May glances toward me. “Is that how you’re going to be with our kids? Not our kids, but kids. Kids... you know the kids you’ll have with someone that’s not me. Well, maybe me. But not now, of course. I mean...”

I land my hand on her thigh and glance toward her. If Doc weren’t sitting next to us taking notes of everything for his future TED talk, I’d tell her right here and now how much

I want my babies inside of her. Instead, I go with a thigh squeeze and a soft smile. “It’s okay.”

“Weird to see someone at the diner so late,” Doc says, leaning forward to note the commotion happening out front.

“That’s Nora, and that’s Trent.” May grips my shoulder and stares up at me, fear in her small hand as she holds tight. “Promise me you won’t get hurt.”

I park the truck in front of the diner, leaving the headlights on high, hoping they disorient the asshole long enough to give me an edge.

May nudges me again. “Promise me.”

I glance toward her. “Stay in the truck.”

Chapter Five

May

I didn't think Axel was the kind of guy I'd ever like. He's big, cocky, and so sure of himself that I was convinced he never once stopped to think about anyone else. Tonight has proven me wrong. If he hadn't carried me out of here, who knows what Trent would've done to me. I should've taken the note he left at the diner more seriously.

Axel grips him by the throat and drags him around the corner, nodding back toward me as though telling me it's okay to help Nora into the diner. She's breathing hard, but she doesn't look hurt. *Thank God*. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself had anything happened to her because of me.

"Why don't you start a pot of coffee?" Doc says, helping Nora into a booth tucked in the back corner of the dimly lit diner. He's careful with her, soothing. It's obvious he's done this before and I'm beyond thankful he's here. My mind is stuck on Axel who's out back doing God knows what.

I drag in a deep breath and start the coffee maker before heading into the back for some day-old donuts that Arnie keeps in the back fridge in case of emergency. Usually, the *emergency* is an annoying customer we need a break from, but I'd say this counts.

When the coffee is finished, I stack three hot mugs onto a tray beside the pastry box and meet Doc and Nora at the table. I'm desperate to ask her the details of everything that's happened but she still looks shaken, and I don't want to pile on too much too soon. Besides, there's still pressing matters with Axel out back, and as much as my brain is trying to convince me of how big and strong he is, I can't help but want to run to his aide.

"I've got to run to the bathroom quick. I'll be right back. You guys get started."

Doc glances toward me. "Don't go out the back door. Axel is fine."

“How so?”

“We’re commonly sent out to help people in danger. Axel knows what to do.”

“What if Trent knows what to do, too?”

“He won’t. He’s no threat to Axel. Trust me.”

I’m learning more and more tonight.

“Trust you? That sounds a little more ominous than your bear story.”

“It’s not something we talk about.”

“Well, maybe just this last one?”

Doc sighs. “There are some parts of the MC that aren’t for public consumption. It requires certain *skills* to resolve problems. Axel handles those situations better than most.”

“Is this something I should be worried about?”

“Nope.” Doc states the word clear and flat. “Axel is capable of controlling himself. You just need to let him do his work. By the way, who is the poor, unfortunate soul on the receiving end?”

“He’s an ex who stalks me... kind of. I’ve been living in my car and—”

“You’ve been living in your car?” Nora gasps and snaps her gaze toward me. “What? Why? How long? I thought you were up on the ridge.” She shakes her head. “I knew it was weird you wanted me to wait until you were finished decorating to see the place. May!”

“I didn’t want you to worry. I’d already put so much of Mom’s stuff on you. Besides, that’s not the problem. The problem is Trent. He’s crazy. He left this letter in my car a few days ago saying how much he loved me and if he couldn’t have me, no one could. I didn’t think it was weird at the time but now...”

Doc glances up toward me. “Sit down and eat something. Axel will be in when he’s done.”

My heart pinches and the room spins. Do I have such terrible taste in men that I only like stalkers and people who thrive in violence?

Apparently, I have a thing for bad boys.

But there is one distinction here. Trent was hurting Nora. All bad boy turn-on's aside, there are lines no one gets to cross. That's the rationale I let take over as I excuse myself to the bathroom, stopping at the security closet for the loaded pistol the owners keep tucked away in case of emergency.

I grew up around guns, so shooting isn't new to me, but usually, my target is a piece of paper stuck to a bale of hay. I'm not barreling out the back door of a diner to threaten a man I'm not sure I have the nerve to shoot, but I can't let Axel do this alone. He might need me.

I drag in a deep breath and push open the back door, staring out into the dark night. There are barely any lights back here and my hands are trembling.

"Get back inside," Axel growls. He's ten feet from the door behind the dumpster. Trent is on the ground with a gun pointed at his head.

"No. I can't let you do this. It's my problem. I can get rid of him." In my head, getting rid of something means scaring him away, not murder... but I don't tell Axel that. I hurry across the parking lot with the pistol aimed toward Trent.

"Get back inside," Axel grumbles again, this time with more harshness in his tone. "You shouldn't see this."

"I want to see this." I hold the gun down and point it at Trent's head. Axel has done the hard work of incapacitating him in the parking lot. Trent isn't going to be standing without help for a while. "What was your plan tonight, Trent? You thought you would come threaten my life again, and when you couldn't find me, you went after Nora. Am I right?"

He doesn't answer so I press the gun against his head harder until he nods.

"Good. Honesty is good."

“You having fun?” Axel grips my arm. “We don’t torture people. If we’re doing this, then we need to do this!”

“We’re not killing him,” I whisper to Axel. “You’re not taking a life for me. We can’t start out like that.”

“I know that, kitten,” he whispers back, “but go with the flow. He needs to know that he can’t be seen around here ever again.” He gives me a quick wink and I struggle to hide my grin.

A police siren whirls in the distance. “Oh shit. That must be the sheriff. Nora said she was going to text him. I need to shoot him now so we can hide his body before the sheriff arrives.” By the end of my lines, I can’t help but think I switched over to an old western accent. Acting is hard.

“We absolutely need to kill him, May. The cops will just question him and send him on his way. He’ll be out in forty-eight hours, and he’ll be more pissed than ever. Do it now, or I will.”

“I know you would, Axel. I thought you were this big, brooding prick, and I didn’t think we could be alone together for even a minute. You took me away and protected me tonight.”

Somewhere in the performance, my truth escaped. Our eyes lock, and I know he feels it too. “So, my love, let me protect you from having to dirty your hands with my mistakes.”

He drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Of course, kitten. Take your time. You never forget your first.”

As I push the gun against Trent’s head, I see the lights of the sheriff coming down the street. I guess that’s our curtain call.

Sheriff Woods makes the turn around the corner and into the parking lot. He’s a big guy with a round stomach and a handlebar mustache. He tips his hat toward us. “May... Axel. I see you’ve captured the assailant for us.”

Axel nods. “He tripped a bunch as he was trying to get away. That’s why he looks like that.”

The sheriff grips Trent's arm and lifts him from the ground before glancing toward me. "I can see that. He looks like the clumsy type. The good news is he can heal up during his visit to the county jail. He has enough priors from other women to keep him in for an extended stay."

Axel walks over and shakes the sheriff's hand. "Any chance you'll let him trip a few more times on his way?"

"He'll get his share." Sheriff Woods grins and nods toward Axel. "His new buddies don't take kindly to men who abuse women. It's the darnedest thing, but they seem to get it worse than almost anyone else."

Sheriff Woods closes Trent into the car, before waving back to us. It's nice to see this whole thing over without someone dying.

"How'd I do?" I ask, before seeing the state of Axel's knuckles. "Are you sure you weren't trying to kill him?"

He laughs. "I didn't want you to feel like you had a man's life on your conscience. You've been through so much with your mom dying, and then your sister got attacked. I knew I had to spare his life." He smiles ear to ear as he says, "But I had to make sure I got what would make me feel better, too."

"You're a caveman."

He grips my waist and pulls me close to him. "If that's the case, then why stop now? I still have your scent in my beard, and I want that little pussy, May." There's a growl in his throat as he backs me against the brick wall.

I laugh. "Are you kidding me? I just found out you're dangerous. Does the cop know about that?"

He shrugs and kisses my forehead. "I better straighten up and fly right."

I nod and bite my lip staring up at the giant in front of me. Maybe this whole night should make me sad, scared, or frustrated. Maybe I should be running back inside to check on Nora. There are a lot of reasons I should be doing a lot of things right now, but the only place I want to be... the only

feeling I want to have... is here with Axel. "Back to that caveman thing. How bad is this urge of yours?"

He growls under his breath and leans into my neck. "I got a taste of you, and I need more, kitten. I need you purring for me."

I swallow down a lump in my throat as my clit throbs against his palm. "Fuck me right here, Axel. Lift me up and fuck me hard."

"I'm feeling like a caveman, but I know you deserve more than a back-alley fuck. I want you to look back and moan when you think about the first time I claimed you."

I grin and hold his palm over my aching mound. "You don't think I'll remember a big guy fucking me up against a brick wall in the alley?"

He laughs. "I do. I'm just not sure you'll remember it positively."

My gaze dials on his. I'm not sure I've ever felt an ache this deep. He's protective, dominant, and respects my desire for independent thought... at times. His cock is so big it was gagging me and the way he ate my pussy, I could feel my insides coming undone.

Maybe those aren't reasons enough to love a man. Maybe I should ask more questions about his past or maybe I should want something soft and sweet. Right now, that couldn't be further from the truth. I want this... forever and always.

I tug my panties to the side and push his big, rough hand against the lips of my soft, wet pussy. "I'll remember this because it's the time I needed a man so badly I couldn't stand it anymore."

He holds for a moment, then relents, burying his beard against my neck as he kisses and nuzzles. His fingers rub against my clit and my hands work his belt. We're frantic and wild as the quiet night surrounds us.

I have no clue what time it is, but the scent of bread baking wafts through the air. Maybe it's my imagination or

maybe someone's getting started at the bakery nearby. Either way, it's a delicious smell that pairs well with the forest that's pressed up against me.

The ground is slightly uneven, and the pavement is cracked, but Axel holds me in place as he slides two fingers deep inside of me. Moan after moan escape my lips as he thrusts inside of me with a groan.

"You're tight and ready, aren't you, kitten?"

I hum under my breath, purring for him as I take hold of his cock and stroke his long, thick girth. There's nothing I don't love about this. The cool brick on my back. The night breeze in the air. His big hands all over me.

His thumb rubs over my clit. "I don't have protection. Are you okay with that?"

"I assumed a big man like you would want to fuck some babies into me."

He grins. "If you'll let me."

"If you promise you'll stay."

He groans into my neck again, this time scraping his teeth against my shoulder. I might die right here and now. "Once we do this, you're mine. I'm not letting you go, May. You're my kitten, okay? Tell me you understand."

I pant and grind against his touch. "I understand. Oh God, I understand."

"Someone sounds desperate. Are you ready for my cock?" He nibbles my throat as he waits for my response.

"Yes. I'm so ready. Fuck me hard, Axel. Don't hold back."

He hisses out a reply but I'm too distracted by the large head of his cock edging at my entrance to hear what he's saying. My thigh is lifted at his waist, and his oversized frame presses me hard against the wall as inch by inch he fills me up.

Soft, slick sounds and low sighs fill the air. The tangy-sweet taste of his shoulder thumps against my lips. I'm

holding on for dear life, clinging to him like everything I've ever wanted is inside his arms.

There's nothing to this world outside of this moment. It's surreal. His touch, his width, the pinch of pain as he slides in deeper. This is the warmth, pleasure, acceptance, and beauty I've always wanted... and I never want it to end.

Chapter Six

Axel

I want to tell her I love her, but it's probably too soon. Love and sex don't have to go together, and they probably shouldn't. I should make this moment special and follow it up with another special moment later. Maybe one that's not against a cold brick wall.

Then again, by the way her mouth hangs open and her head arches back, I'd guess she's enjoying herself. And she did say she loved me in front of Trent, but that could have been part of her character.

I thump into her tight core, feeling the stretch of her walls as I work in deeper and deeper.

"Do you want all my come again, kitten?" I hold her tight as she claws at my back and moans. "Are you a good girl who wants me to fill your little pussy?"

"Yes. I'm your good little girl. I want all your come. Fill me up, Axel!" She whines through gritted teeth as I hold her hip and lift her gently, plunging into her over and over.

"I'm close, baby. Are you? I want you to come on my cock." My lips press against her ear and the frenzy of pressure is back, deepening its grip on what's left of my reality.

Her pussy squeezes down on my cock tighter as she screams. "Right there. Don't stop. Please don't fucking stop!" Her tone is starved, raw, and desperate.

Holding steady with my movements, I study her face, desperate to see the moment when she spills over the edge into a maelstrom of emotion as she finally releases.

Her hips roll forward and she tightens her grip on my shoulders. "I'm going to come, Axel. I'm going to—"

The back door creaks open and Doc and Nora stand with dropped gazes.

I should stop. I know I should. This is fucked up. Continuing is fucked up. I will myself to hold back but I'm so

close to the edge that I continue to thump, losing track of what and where Nora and Doc have gone. I'm not even sure if May knew they were there. Her eyes have shut, her mouth has opened, and every moan that leaves her body is a prayer for salvation.

My muscles tighten as I watch wave after wave of pleasure buck her frame helplessly against mine. The erratic movements send me over the edge, and for some unknown reason, my hand cracks against her ass, leaving behind a print.

Fuck. I should've asked.

Her eyes flash open. I've ruined the moment. She's going to freak out. I have no idea what the hell I was thinking.

"Do it again!"

My cock drives into her harder. She liked it. My dirty kitten liked having her ass spanked.

"There's this vibration when I come. Do it again!" Her tone is begging.

I smack her again, and then twice more, holding a handful of her ass tight before letting go.

Fuck. I hope to die in a moment like this.

Her pussy grips down on me harder and I lose control, emptying inside of her, hugging her close, biting down on the side of her neck. I've never felt more out of control in my life, and I'd gladly do it a thousand times over. Her and I against every wall in town. I don't care who sees.

"You okay?" I hold her against my chest, leaning against the wall before pulling her on top of me. "That was rougher than I'm sure you were expecting."

Her face lights and she stares at me with dark, warm eyes. "I think you're going to have to carry me back to the truck with my head covered. Did I imagine Nora and Doc in the doorway or—"

"They were there. Sorry I couldn't stop. You felt so fucking good."

“No, I’m glad you didn’t. They shut the door fast, but now I’m embarrassed for life. So...”

“So, you have to come back up to my cabin and be my captor forever. Maybe you can hug some horses and I’ll tell you how gorgeous, smart, and perfect you are every day of your life?”

She stares at me. “Actually, I think I’d like that. Except for one thing...”

“What’s that?”

“Well, you don’t like being bossed around, and as sweet as I’ve been tonight, I’m still a snarky bitch.”

I laugh and bend to lift her from the ground. “You came out of the diner with a gun and threatened a man’s life. I’m not sure what part of that was sweet, but...”

She slaps me on the chest playfully. “Axel Carpenter, I am a ray of sunshine, and you know it.”

I grin and lean into her lips as we walk toward the truck. “Sunshine is boring. I’m looking for a thunderstorm, and you my kitten, you’re it.”

Epilogue

May

Six Weeks Later

Doc sits on the edge of the couch with his hands crossed onto his lap, facing Axel. “This is going to be good, Axe. If we can get the guys on board, we’ll have a horse and carriage up at the lodge every night for guests. That’s going to draw people in from states away. We could run a path through the woods by the waterfall and down around the lake.”

“You’re not wrong, but I don’t know who has time to run something like that. Diesel and Kane are busy with family stuff and Tex is wrapped up now. Maybe Chap?”

“I was thinking you. You ran the program last winter with the kids, and had it not been for that bear, you’d have done great.” He laughs. “Just promise you won’t pull any guns. We don’t want to scare people away.”

Axel glances back toward me and his eyes widen. I know he’s insanely excited to tell everyone the news we’ve been holding, but I’m not sure we’re ready yet. “What do you think? Could we tell him?”

“Tell me what?” Doc presses playfully. “You know I can keep a secret.”

I laugh. “You most definitely can’t keep a secret, Doc.”

“How so? When you two eloped, I told no one.”

“Because you didn’t know.” Axel laughs. “We lost ourselves in the mountains and had a private ceremony. Chap was the only one there.”

“Well, either way, I didn’t say dick to anyone.”

“You sure didn’t, man. This might have to wait, though. We’ll tell people when May’s ready. Besides, we only just found out a couple days ago. It’s crazy what they can do with technology these days.”

He nods slowly with a knowing grin plastered onto his face.

I glance toward Axel. “He already knows. We might as well tell him.”

“Go ahead.”

I smile wide. “We’re pregnant!” Doc is the first person we’ve told. Hearing the words out loud in a public space is so much different than saying them alone with Axel. There’s another layer to it now, making official news somehow more official. Excitement rushes through me. “Anyway... we’re due next May. If it’s a boy, he’ll be Hickory and if it’s a girl, she’ll be Petunia. Either way, we’re happy!”

Doc scratches his hand over his beard and stands from the edge of the couch. “Fuck, guys. This is fantastic!” He hugs me first, then Axel. “We’ll be having another baby shower. Seems like we’ve had a run of those lately.” He laughs. “Shit. This is great news.” He’s saying all the right words and I know deep down Doc is excited, but there’s a tinge of something else behind his eyes. A sadness, an emptiness I recognize, and it breaks my heart that Doc is in that place. He’s rough around the edges, but the guy is also a saint.

“Have you heard from Nora lately?” I change the subject hoping to lift him up a little.

“Nah. She wanted those riding lessons, so I helped her find a bike and taught her how to ride, then she rode off to California. I think she was looking for investors for that dating site. Have you heard from her?”

For a while, Axel and I had bets on Doc and Nora getting together, but before it turned into anything, Nora got hyper focused on her business and Doc pulled away again. I’m sure to avoid getting hurt.

“No, but now that you say it, I think her updated website was supposed to be live now.” I pull out my phone and click past the fourteen messages waiting for me from Axel. For some reason he texts me from wherever he is on the property. Sometimes he just tells me he loves me. Other times

he reminds me how proud he is. This one is praise for some chocolate chip cookies I packaged in a tin and left on the seat of his tractor.

“Looks like the site is up and running!” I turn the screen toward the guys showing off the flashy pink and gold home screen for *Mail Order Marriage*, the name of her business. Beneath that, a flashing button to apply for love. I glance toward Doc. “Maybe you should give it a shot. It worked for us.”

He shakes his head and holds up a hand. “Nope. Thanks. All good here. So good, I’m going to get going.” He hugs us both and heads out the door. I feel bad. It’s not like Doc to run off so quickly.

I glance toward Axel. “I upset him talking about Nora, didn’t I?”

“He’s going through a tough time. I’ll reach out to him tomorrow morning. Maybe we’ll go fishing or something.” He kisses my forehead. “Right now, though, I have something to finish.” He snags my phone from my hand and plunks down on the couch.

“What’s that?”

“I have a review to leave.”

“You really don’t have to leave a review at this point. If the site is up, she found an investor. She’ll get reviews.”

He shakes his head and pulls me down onto his giant frame.

My thighs straddle his lap, and my head nuzzles perfectly against his chest.

“Don’t care. This is the best business I’ve ever worked with, and they deserve the five-star rating.”

I glance toward him and smile. “Five stars, huh? You must be really happy with your experience.”

Axel kisses my forehead and holds his hand on my stomach. “I love you, May... and I’ve never been happier.”

Thank you for reading!
[Check out Doc'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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A close-up photograph of a muscular man with a full, dark beard and mustache. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly down. He is shirtless, showing his chest and shoulders, which are covered in tattoos. The background is dark with a soft, out-of-focus light source, possibly a moon, in the upper right.

Riding
SAVAGE

RUGGED MOUNTAIN MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KHLOE SUMMERS

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 for an hour. 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. Slowly, I repeat the same thing over and over out loud. "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 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 this is going to be."

"Redneck? *Redneck how?*" Around here, the term redneck is endearing, and usually when something is a *redneck project*, it means using everyday objects in a way that they normally wouldn't be used. Mr. Matthews, who lives a few cabins down from me, has 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 thinly 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 branches 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.

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