



RUGGED
MOUNTAIN
PROTECTORS

PROTECTED
BY THE
MOUNTAIN MAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Protected by the Mountain Man

Rugged Mountain Protectors

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Chapter One

Lark

Clive stares at me from across the room. He's easily the biggest guy here. Tall, inked, strong. His shoulders alone rival the width of the doorway. If he were looks alone, it would be easy to compartmentalize whatever feelings I'm having, but this man is more than a handsome face on a giant frame. This man is everything. He's smart, he's thoughtful, he's funny, and when he walks in a room, everyone knows who's in charge. It's in the way he carries himself, broad and confident.

He pulls back a sip of beer. It must be the last drop because he leaves the can behind and walks toward me.

Me? Why is he walking toward me?

His jeans are tight, but his white t-shirt is tighter. The flannel he wears over the top is rolled up at the sleeves, showing off the dark ink that rings around his forearms.

I let out a heavy breath as he approaches. My heart is pounding, my cheeks are hot, and my brain is on a channel only playing static. I assume this is how I'm protecting myself from disappointment. Ya know, the one where I want this man to throw me over the bar and fuck me like he owns me, when instead he's probably here to indiscreetly whisper how much toilet paper I have on my shoe.

I glance down to double check. Nothing there.

Maybe I left my car lights on, or I have marinara sauce on my face from the mozzarella sticks I just downed. Literally every conceivable thought is more likely than the epic fucking I'm hoping for.

His dark eyes stay locked with mine, and my heart beats faster and faster as he approaches.

The bar is busy tonight, crowded with folks who've come down from the mountain to hear the up-and-coming country band that's playing on stage. We don't always get

great talent, but when we do, it's all people talk about for months. Tonight is proof of that. I'm pretty sure the bar is over capacity.

I glance away for a second, noticing the bartender is pouring a bottle of whiskey out on the countertop.

What the hell? Sure, it's bottom shelf, but why is he pouring it onto the counter?

When I turn back, Clive is in my space. His hand moves toward my throat, and his lips land on mine, heavy and hot.

What's happening right now?

The music dulls behind me as he bends me back onto the small round table. His big, rough hands move over my frame and my clit throbs at the gruff sound of his voice as he whispers low in my ear, "You need to be fucked, don't you?"

My entire body heats until I'm overwhelmed, and my heart is slamming so hard against my chest I worry it's going to stop, but somehow, it finds a way to beat harder.

Clive lifts his large body against mine, tugs down the top of my dress, and squeezes my breast with his rough hand. His tongue follows suit and so do his teeth. He scrapes over my nipple and bites down, forcing my body to lift and jump against his.

This can't be real.

His hand drifts between my thighs and lands against my mound. He rubs over me, grinding the heel of his palm against my clit until I'm sufficiently soaked.

He groans as he says, "I need to know what you feel like, little girl. You want me inside of you?"

I moan out some sort of reply that's a cross between yes and *fuck yes*.

A grin spreads wide across his face. "Good girl."

He spreads my legs wide, rests them on his shoulder, and unzips his jeans, pulling out his massive cock.

There are people everywhere, but no one seems to pay attention to us. At least not that I notice. That said, I'm a little distracted.

I watch as he jerks his length a few times before angling it toward my seam.

He's not worried about protection or regret or anything. He's only thinking about fucking me, and I like that.

"Tell me if this hurts." His tone is low as he says, "I know this is your first time."

How does he know it's my first time? We've only talked half a dozen times, and when we do, it's always about Cody. Which makes sense, considering Cody is his son, and up until a month ago, we were dating. That said... this doesn't make sense at all. Cody wouldn't tell his dad I'm a virgin. He has no reason to. Besides that, last I checked, Cody couldn't stand me. I'd bet he's looking for all kinds of reasons not to think of me. That and he and his dad don't really have that kind of relationship. Cody is aloof and only into skateboarding and smoking weed. Clive, on the other hand, spends all his time working the land and trying to prepare for the future.

My virginity wouldn't be a topic of conversation.

I drag in a staggered breath and grip the edge of the table as he presses into my seam. The ache to feel his massive size against me is unrivaled by anything I've ever felt. It's a yearning, a desperation, a thirst that nothing else can quench.

His gaze is intensely locked with mine, and his cock is pressing in when a glass shatters behind us and I'm suddenly drenched with liquid.

What the hell?

My eyes flick open, and my best friend Dolly is beside me, shaking me awake.

Disappointment fills my body. I'm not sure if it's because I know I'll never feel Clive against me like I've been dreaming of, or if it's because I'll never get that dream back. Either way, my night is ruined.

“Who falls asleep at a bar?” Dolly is a tall blonde with curves in all the right places that men notice. Me, on the other hand, I went so unnoticed that I fell asleep and decided dreams were my best bet at a good time.

“I wasn’t asleep. I was resting my eyes,” I lie in hopes of some mercy.

She shakes her head and grins. “I saw Bobby talking to you earlier. How’d that go?”

I roll my eyes. “Date tomorrow night. Should be... interesting.”

“Give him a chance! He’s a decent guy.”

I pinch my lips together and nod. “Yeah right.”

The flat look on her face tells me she’s tired of my pessimism. I don’t blame her. Every guy I’ve tried dating since Cody has been deficient in one way or another. If I’m being honest with myself, I’m probably not giving them a chance.

“I ran into Clive earlier. He’s going to give you a ride home.”

“Wait, what? Clive is here?”

“Yeah, everyone is here.” She flips her hair behind her back. “I know you guys had a good relationship, so I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Panic rumbles through me like an out-of-control train. “What about you?”

“I’m staying with the girls for a while. The band is just getting started.” She nods toward the door, where Clive is leaning against the front counter of the bar. He’s wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, ink covering both arms and his throat. “He noticed you were sleeping and asked if you wanted a ride home. I figured you did. Should I tell him you don’t?”

I think about her question as though it’s the final exam on a test I’ve been studying for all semester. I’d give just about anything to be alone with Clive, but given the fact that my panties are still soaked from the imaginary fucking we were just doing, that might not be the best idea.

Clive walks toward us, his thumb hooked into the loop on his jeans, his giant frame walking toward me like the answer to every problem I ever had. “I’m heading out. You ready?”

My panties soak... *again*. He’s barely spoken. He hasn’t done anything, but the timbre of his voice alone has my body reacting.

I’m pretty sure I need a psych eval. Who obsesses over their ex-boyfriend’s father like this?

Weirdos... that’s who. Lonely, weirdo girls who have nothing better to do with their time. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen a poll somewhere. I should look it up when I get home. I bet it would help me put this whole thing into perspective. Lord knows I need it.

Dolly brushes my arm and reaches in for a hug. “I love you. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“You have a driver, right?” She smells like alcohol, and while I know Dolly is responsible, I still worry.

“Yes, I have a driver.” She kisses my forehead. “Leah is taking me home.”

Leah is a thirty-two-year-old single mom who never gets a night to herself. I’m sure she doesn’t want to play designated driver to a bunch of drunk twenty somethings tonight, but she’s always been a caretaker like that.

Clive looks down at me. “Let’s go then. I’ll give you a ride back.”

“Are you sure? I can call around.”

His thick brows narrow. “I’m driving right past your house, so we’re going. Come on. Besides, you’re drunk. I’m not leaving you here alone. I’m sure your parents wouldn’t appreciate that.”

My parents. Of course, he’s concerned about what my parents would think... because the man is their age. He’s not thinking about bending me over a table or touching me in any kind of way because I’m literally a child to him. Besides that, I

used to date his son, so I'm sure that puts me in a whole other category. A category that doesn't leave his dick hard.

Why couldn't I have been born twenty years ago?

"Okay. Yeah. Sounds good," I finally say, following him out the front door into the cool night air.

In the breeze, the scent of pine wafts off him and carries back toward me.

My clit throbs and I squeeze my thighs together in an attempt to quell the urges, but it does no good.

Clive opens the truck door and helps me inside. My hand sinks into his as I climb up, and for a second, I wonder how many women he's helped up into this truck.

I should really stop torturing myself.

When he rounds the truck and climbs inside, I stare toward him, watching as his biceps move and his hand swallows the shifter. It's an old Chevy. I don't know the year, but it reminds me of a work truck that's been fixed a dozen times over.

"Sorry it smells like diesel in here. Product of the repair I did." His tone is so low that whatever jargon he just said sounded sexy.

I drag in the scent of pine and oil, memorizing every note. Normally, I wouldn't think of the two as complimentary to each other, but somehow, Clive and this beat up Chevy make it work.

"You okay?" He starts up the engine and flicks on his blinker.

"Yeah, why?"

"You're sighing like something's on your mind."

Something is on my mind alright.

"I'm fine," I lie.

He pulls out onto the street. "You're clearly not fine. If this is weird for you, I apologize. I know I'd be weird too if I

were with my ex's dad."

"Oh, no. It's nothing. I'm not weird, I'm good. Just living life, ya know? One day at a time. I don't even miss Cody. He wasn't for me. Not that you asked, but, ya know, if you were curious. Not that he's not good for someone... because he is, I'm sure. But, ya know, he's just immature for me, and I'm not right for him. I," I suck in air as though I'm running low, "I'm talking too much."

Clive laughs. "Cody is a pain in the ass. I always thought you could do better."

I freeze in place. I'm sure the words mean nothing in reality, but in my twisted mind, they mean everything.

"I shouldn't have said all that. Cody's a good guy. We're just not made for each other, ya know?" *Why do I keep saying 'ya know' like a sixteen-year-old valley girl? Next, I'll be twisting my hair and blowing big, pink bubbles. Thankfully, I'm fresh out of bubble gum.*

Clive nods and laughs as he pulls onto the road that leads up the mountainside. "You forget I know who he is. I was there when he cheated on you, Lark. I know that had to hurt. You didn't deserve it. He and I had a lot of talks about that." He clears his throat. "Not that any of them sank in."

I glance away and back again. "I figure he did me a favor. Better I know now that I'm not his thing than two years from now."

"Still," Clive says, "it was wrong. I'm sorry about that."

"You don't have to apologize. You didn't do anything."

"I raised him to know better. Feels like a failure on my part." Clive clears his throat. "I saw Bobby talking to you at the bar tonight. How's that going?"

I laugh. "He wants to go out tomorrow night."

"Is that why you were napping?"

"Was it that noticeable?" I grin. "I've never done that before, I swear!"

He shakes his head and strokes his beard before glancing toward me. “Where is he taking you?”

“Who? Bobby?”

His eyes are on the road again.

“I don’t know. The quarry, I think. There’s some meteor shower tomorrow night that we’re going to watch.”

“At the quarry?” His tone is judgmental. “That’s not a date. There are all kinds of assholes up at the quarry. It’s not safe to be up there at night. You should tell him that.”

“Will do,” I say, ignoring the warmth in my heart that’s spreading. I’m sure his protectiveness is only because he’s older and he feels some kind of parental thing over me because I used to date Cody, but still... it feels good.

“Really,” he continues, “you shouldn’t go up there. If you want to see the meteor shower, there’s a place out near the lake that’s safe. I’ll text you the address.”

I resist the urge to climb over the seat and maul him with the pent-up affection I’m desperate to spread.

He flicks on his blinker and turns into my driveway. “Your parents up this late or do they leave the lights on for you?”

My parents. I still live with my parents. How embarrassing is this?

“They leave the lights on for me,” I manage. This is a lie too. My mom waits up for me every single night like I’m still a fifteen-year-old girl, not a twenty-two-year-old woman with a job and a full-time college workload. “I want to move out, but I can’t afford my own place yet.”

He nods. How does this man get hotter and hotter by the second? “I can show you some cabins up on Eagle Rock if you’re looking. They have some rentals up there that are really affordable.”

“I’d love that!” The words come out before I think them through. In reality, I’ve seen those cabins. They’re the cheapest on the mountain, but they’re still too expensive for

me. Truthfully, I'm stuck with my parents until I graduate college. Even then, it'll probably be longer still as I look for a job.

He rattles off his number and I type it into my phone with shaking hands and a tight stomach.

“Let me know how your date goes tomorrow. I'm here if you need anything.”

I glance toward him, my heart slamming against my chest, my stomach buzzing with butterflies and warmth. I will most definitely be texting him tomorrow.

Chapter Two

Clive

Lark is gorgeous. I don't know what the hell Cody was thinking when he let her go. She was by far the best thing that ever happened to him. She's smart, isn't afraid to speak her mind, and she's got her shit together. That's more than I can say for women my age, let alone at twenty-two. The last woman I dated, albeit ten years ago, couldn't regulate a thought through the time it took to eat a sandwich.

I lay back in bed and stare up at the ceiling, pushing away every sick thought that comes to mind. Lark lying next to me, her head against my chest, her hand in mine, our lips intertwined. What I'd give to know she's safe, taken care of, appreciated the way she should be, touched like a woman should be touched.

Fuck!

These aren't thoughts a man should be having about his son's ex-girlfriend, or a woman twenty years younger than him. I know that. I've known that for months. And while they were together, I resisted every thought that pushed into my head. But now that he's left her alone and confused, the urge to pick up her pieces is overwhelming.

I pull out my phone and settle on a video of her I'd taken up at the river last summer. I hadn't meant for the images to become the sick fucking mess they are today, but here I am pulling out my cock to jerk off as I stare at my son's ex-girlfriend in a two-piece bathing suit that shows off her thick curves and round ass.

This isn't my thing. I don't get hard over young women, and I especially don't get hard over whoever Cody drags home... but Lark is different. Her heart is beyond her years. That's probably why Cody didn't like her. She challenged his bullshit, and that's the one thing he hates the most. Anyone who has the gall to prove him wrong is a menace to his sensibilities.

I stroke my cock as I play the video.

Lark is on the edge of the boat, brushing her hair back as the wind blows it forward. The sun is shining, and the lake is placid. There are a few boaters out, but overall, it's a quiet day. I'd suggested the fishing trip as a way to get to know Lark better. I convinced myself at the time that it was good parenting. That I needed to know my son's girlfriend. Now, I realize it was probably more.

A fish jumps in the distance and she bounces up and smiles, inadvertently shaking her big, round tits as she moves. God, she's heaven. Every thick curve moves with purpose as she springs up and down, riding the waves. Her small hand grips the handle behind her and her smile beams as the little red bikini top she wears threatens to slide.

My cock is hard, nearly exploding. I stroke faster.

Her long hair is tangled in her fingers as I slow the boat so she can watch, but a wave hits unexpectedly, and she's thrown off the edge. A second later, she resurfaces, a wide grin on her face, and the top to her bathing suit is gone. It takes a long second for her to notice.

The video fades to black as I drop it into my lap and look away, but for a fraction of a second, her bare breast is there for me to see. Hard, erect nipples, heavy and perfect. Her sweet, pink lips parted. Her soft skin, tight and wet.

I jerk harder and harder to the thought of my teeth scraping against her nipples, my cock sliding into her tight little pussy, my hand fisted into her hair as she moans out. With this thought, I explode in a flurry of disappointed relief.

If I hadn't done this a dozen or more times, I'd spend time convincing myself that the guilt I'm feeling isn't warranted. I'd tell myself this is an innocent mistake, that I'll do better next time, but that ship has long since sailed. That video has been watched so many times, the images are burned into my skull. And the more I watch it, the more I need Lark in my arms. The more I need her in my arms, the more I think about what happened after the video cut.

My son is a twenty-two-year-old guy. He doesn't think things through before he speaks. The second Lark's top came off, he made a comment about how much weight she'd gained recently. I'd have punched him in the throat if he weren't my son. That night, I gave him hell. In the moment, all I could do was comfort Lark. I helped her out of the water, wrapped her in a towel, and showed her how to steer the boat. I'd hoped that was enough distraction to keep her mind off the comments Cody had made, but I saw the tears roll down her face.

It took everything within me not to wipe them away.

He didn't seem phased. He sat on the hull of the boat with his pole in the water, eating snacks, and drinking beer. I know I raised him better than this. I wonder if he was already seeing the new girl at that time. I don't know if I'll ever get through to him.

I roll my eyes and push to the edge of the bed before heading toward the bathroom to wash up. The mirror is the slap of truth I need. *I'm old.* Really fucking old. Compared to Lark, I'm ancient.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

As I turn off the faucet, my phone rings. It's my buddy Austin. He never calls this late, so I answer.

"Something wrong?"

"Ya busy?"

"Nah, man. Just getting ready for bed." I haven't told a soul what I feel about Lark, and I probably never will. "What's up?"

"I've got everyone together to help out at the bakery tomorrow. We've got a few walls left to put up, then some paintin' over to the general store. Gotta get some of this damage fixed from that damn bear."

"Bear or the Alaskans," I laugh. It's an inside joke at this point, but he gets it.

"Damn Alaskans!" he chuckles. "Can't trust 'em!"

We both laugh. The Alaskans came into town a couple months ago to help hunt a grizzly bear that had been stalking the area. Everyone in town hated having them. They were big, rough, and they kept trespassing. I think it was an accident, but some people up here aren't forgiving when it comes to their land rights.

Anyway, they got the bear situation handled, but ruined a few buildings in the process. Now, we're all trying to fix it at no cost to the owners.

"The Alaskans will be there to help, and so will a few guys from around town I've pulled together. You good for noon tomorrow?"

"I'll be there."

"Knew you would be." He clears his throat. "How's everythin' going on the ranch?"

"Good. Just got the barn built for the new horses. I've got a few foals coming in for summer. What about you? The rodeo treating you well?"

"Yeah, we're expectin' big numbers this year. You should ride again."

I laugh. "Never. Not sure how you still do it."

"Body gets used to it. Keeps ya young. Come on... one more ride!"

"Can't do it. Thanks, man. I'll definitely come watch, though." The last time I rode in the rodeo was about twenty years ago, and even then I wasn't good. Austin's family raised him to ride, and he's been religious about it since.

"Alright, well, I'll see you tomorrow then. Bring any extra wood you have layin' around. We might need it."

"Got it. See you tomorrow."

The line disconnects and I'm standing staring at the wall in the bedroom. My conversation with Austin should've pulled me out of my head, but it didn't. Every word from his mouth only made me think of Lark.

How she'd look with my tool belt on. How happy she'd be to help out on the project. How excited I'd be to look over and see her there next to me. How I'll never have any of those things.

It's late, but I toss on my jeans, grab a t-shirt from the closet, and head outside.

Splitting wood always gets my head straight, and right now, I could use all the straightening I can get.

Chapter Three

Lark

Dolly answers on the first ring. She sounds hungover. “Ugh... what time is it?”

“Five p.m. I was starting to worry about you.”

“Five o’clock? Like in the evening?”

I nod, though she can’t see me. “Yeah, I’m about to go on this stupid date with Bobby and I needed some details.”

“What kind of details?” There’s rustling in the background like she’s grabbing a glass from the cupboard. “I barely know him.”

“We went to school together. What are you talking about?”

“So, that doesn’t mean I know him.”

Bobby was quiet in school, like really quiet. “All I know is that he likes math and that he played the trumpet in band. I don’t think that’s enough to build a relationship off of.” I shrug. “Oh, and last night, he was rambling on and on about the details of some train car he’s into. I lost focus immediately.”

She laughs, and water runs. “Is that what put you to sleep?”

“Maybe. I don’t remember much after he left the table.”

“Other than Clive walking in. You have a thing for him, don’t you?”

“What? I didn’t even notice.”

She laughs and pills rattle in the background. “Whatever! I saw the look on your face when he showed up yesterday. You wanted to crawl all over him.”

“Stop! No, I didn’t. He’s Cody’s dad. That’s weird!”

I hear the grin in her voice as she says, “Is it, though? He’s available. You’re available. How was the ride home last night?”

“Okay, you can stop now. I have a date with an age-appropriate man in like ten minutes. How’d the rest of your night go? Run into Austin?”

She huffs. “Okay, I deserved that. He’s busy doing rodeo stuff and fixing up the bakery.”

“Ask him to go with you to your mom’s wedding next month.”

I can hear her rolling her eyes. “Yeah, I have the same issue you do. The man is full grown. He’d want nothing to do with me.”

“Break the ice for us both. I know you want to.” I laugh as the words leave my lips.

“Yeah, nope! Not feeling like embarrassing myself like that. But if I start feeling reckless, I’ll let you know,” she chuckles under a yawn. “I’m going to take a nap. Call me when the date is over. I need to know all the details. Love you!”

“Love you too, bestie!”

I don’t know how we became friends. We’re two completely different people. Dolly loves everyone, and she makes friends wherever she goes. I’ve always attributed it to her natural beauty, but it’s her personality too. She has this way about her that draws everyone in. Maybe it’s her smile.

I should smile more.

I look in the mirror and practice a wide grin, but I look more like a circus clown, so I soften and turn away. Maybe I’ve been scaring people away. Lord, hopefully I didn’t smile like this at Clive. I can’t imagine the nightmares he’d have about me if he saw this Joker grin.

I drag in a deep breath as a heavy knock hits the front door. I already know tonight is going to be a mess. It’s not that I don’t like Bobby, I do. He’s a nice guy. Straight A’s all

through high school, he volunteers at the humane society, and he's working his way through college by helping on his grandpa's farm. Around here, that's as good as it gets.

That said, the same way I feel Clive owning a room when he walks into it, I feel Bobby's disingenuousness. He hasn't done anything particularly that would make me think he's fake. There's just something about him that gives me that feeling. Maybe it's all in my head. It probably is. I'm probably forcing away all the good guys in order to keep the fantasy alive that someday I'll belong to Clive.

I laugh at the thought and open the front door, immediately erasing the horrendous grin off my face.

Bobby notices. "Oh! You look great, but is everything okay?"

I smile again, this time softer, though it still feels forced. "I'm good! Sorry, I'm currently overthinking everything. How are you?"

He drags his gaze up and down my frame before reaching out for a hug. "Better now! I've been looking forward to this. You ready?"

"You two! Oh, my Lord. You look adorable!" my mother's voice interrupts us from behind. She's got good intentions, I'm sure, but I'm already stressed. This is only going to make things worse.

I turn back. "Mom... we're just going to watch the meteor shower. It's not a big deal."

"Honey, this could be the start of forever. You want this moment documented. You'll thank me later." She pulls her phone out of her pocket and frames us up. "Okay, squeeze together. Real close now."

Bobby lifts his arm around me as my mother clicks for what seems like forever.

"Smile, sweetheart!"

If she only knew how aggressive that statement sounded right now.

I force a smile, imagining myself as the Joker, then spin away from my mother, and out the door quickly.

“Be safe and have fun!” she hollers out after us. I love my mother, I really do, but she’s extra about everything. I mean, I’m a twenty-two-year-old. I should probably have a little more privacy than I have, though I guess it’s my own fault. If I want privacy, I should rent my own place.

Clive pops into my head. The way he leaned forward against the steering wheel, rattling off his phone number, his shoulders were so wide they blocked out the window behind him. He wanted to show me the cabins up on Eagle Rock. I should let him. If nothing else, I’d get a few minutes alone with him and maybe there’s something I haven’t seen before that I can afford.

Bobby opens the truck door and helps me inside. I shouldn’t be thinking about Clive. I’m on a date with another guy. But even now, I’m comparing the size of Bobby’s hand to Clive’s.

I need help.

Bobby is a nice guy, and I should try to like him. I really should. Except the more I sit in this truck, the more I think about Clive. It’s like an out-of-control roller coaster that has no end in sight.

The ink on his skin. The diesel scent in the truck. The way his giant frame leaned against the door. The heat in his gaze as he glanced toward me.

My clit throbs just thinking about it.

I close my eyes and shake my head, glancing toward Bobby. I need to stop this. There’s nothing wrong with Bobby. He’s cute... in a baby skinned, hair slicked back, good-boy kind of way.

“So, how’s school going?” He clears his throat and I notice the cherry scented freshener on his vents.

“Oh, I love animals, so it’s fun for me. I’m finished at the end of the year and I’m hoping to find work with Waylon’s

Ranch. He's always looking for more on-call vets. What about you? You're a finance major, right?"

"Finance and accounting. I want to move to the Springs when I graduate. My uncle has a firm out there I can join. It's pretty successful, too."

I already know this won't work. There's no way I'm leaving Rugged Mountain, not ever. Everything I've ever experienced is on this mountain top. I'm meant to be here.

I don't tell Bobby this. Instead, I nod and smile politely. "That's awesome. I'm sure your family will miss you."

"Ah, it's only an hour away. They'll come visit. It'll be fine. There are so many more opportunities out there. Lots of veterinary offices, too. I hear the pay is really good."

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'm in it for the pay. I like helping and feeling like I'm a part of something. Besides, I'd miss this whole hometown vibe thing, you know?"

"For sure." He hesitates as though he wants to convince me of more. I appreciate that he doesn't. "I'll miss the diner... and the bakery if they ever get it rebuilt. I gotta say, that's the best pie I've ever had. What's your favorite?"

"Oh, the Sky-High apple for sure. What about you?"

"Blueberry lemon. My mouth is watering just thinking about it."

I should try to find the commonality between Bobby and I. We both like the diner. *Check*. We both like employment. *Double check*. Instead, I only see the negative. He doesn't like Sky-High apple pie.

You know who does? Clive.

We shared a piece last summer while Cody complained to the waitress that his coffee was too cold. I should've known right then that things wouldn't have worked between us. Maybe I was having too much fun with his dad to notice. I think that's the first time I've admitted that to myself.

Bobby says something, but I miss it.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh, I just said we’re here.” He glances out the side window toward the quarry. This time of night, the big gaping hole looks more like a lake. The snow has melted and run down, leaving a fair amount of water inside. It’s actually kind of pretty. Pine trees reflect against the water and there’s a silence out here that can’t be beat. I can’t figure out why Clive would say this place is dangerous. It seems pretty peaceful so far.

Bobby flips the center console up between us and turns the radio to low. His arm is outstretched, and he’s motioning for me to come toward him. We are here together on a date, so I guess the logical conclusion is for us to be close, but I’m not feeling it. Honestly, I’m surprised Bobby is. So far, everything we’ve talked about we’ve been on opposite sides of the spectrum on. Why would he be feeling the urge to get closer? I only want to pull further away.

Thankfully a truck pulls up next to us. *Unthankfully it’s filled with assholes.*

Bobby leans forward and rolls down my window. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Brought some beers. You want some?”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t even glance toward me. What happened to the sweet boy I knew a second ago? I mean, I get it... I wasn’t leaning in, but I didn’t think beers with dudes we went to high school with was on the list of things to do.

The guys from the truck beside us hop out and pull down their tailgate, yanking a cooler full of local beer toward them. I don’t know these guys well, but I remember their faces from high school, mostly because of the heckling. What is it about bullies? No matter how many years go by, seeing them is like a trigger to the nervous system.

The older of the three nods toward me. “I remember you.”

Bobby grabs a beer from the cooler and stretches it toward me.

I bite back a nervous Joker-like grin and look away, taking the beer with no intention to drink it. I'm pretty sure my face is dark red. I've never been good with people. In fact, I'm not a fan at all. If I could stay inside all day reading books and playing with my dog, I would. That said, there's nothing worse than last minute social interactions. I need time to prepare for things like this.

The oldest bully laughs hysterically. "Yeah, you're the girl that pissed her pants in like seventh grade, right?"

My stomach turns to knots. I don't know why I expect Bobby to stick up for me, but he doesn't.

"I didn't piss my pants. I had my period, asshole." I roll my eyes and hop back up into the truck.

The guys make some comment about how I can't take a joke and Bobby laughs along with them. He doesn't seem to pay any mind to the fact that I'm hurt, angry, and want to leave... *now!* Maybe this is the fake I was seeing in him. He's one way to me and another in front of the boys.

Why did I agree to this?

I stare down at my phone and scroll through my contacts. Dolly is either asleep or still buzzed from yesterday. My parents aren't an option because I'm pretty sure everyone in town would talk about me forever if I got picked up by my parents from a date. Before I know it, the list of possibilities is empty.

Maybe this is why people socialize. There are more people to call when you need help.

The truck shakes as two of the guys sit on Bobby's tailgate.

"Hey, you okay?" He knocks on the side door and leans into the window.

"Not really. I thought it was just gonna be us."

"Yeah, me too. Does this bother you?"

Clearly it bothers me. The fact that he's asking is only because he's seeking permission to enjoy the night without

worrying about me. Quite honestly, this wasn't going to work, regardless.

"I want to go home."

"Really? We just got here."

"Really." My tone is flat, and my face is straight.

"Okay, well... let me have a couple of drinks and we'll head out."

Clearly, I'm not leaving anytime soon.

I stare out at the quarry, watching as a few meteors shoot overhead. They're not as impressive as I'd hoped they'd be. Then again, maybe it's my mood right now.

I contemplate biting the bullet and calling my mom. I could tell her to park down the road. Sure it's dark, the corners are all blind, and who knows what kind of wild animals are up here this late at night, but I'm desperate to leave. Maybe I could scare a grizzly off with my grin.

I'm nearly convinced this is my only option when my phone buzzes.

Clive: You still on your date?

My heart floods with panic and excitement. It's only eight p.m. He must know I'm still on the date.

Me: Sort of.

Clive: What does that mean?

Me: He's drinking on the tailgate with some bros. I'm scrolling through my phone for dog videos.

Clive: Do you want to be doing something else?

Oh God! Is he asking because he wants me to be doing something else *with him*? Maybe I'm reading into it.

Me: Anything really.

Clive: I can be there in ten minutes.

I stare down at the message, reading and rereading the words over and over again as I try to comprehend what they

say.

My brain imagines a circle of events. Clive picking me up, the overwhelming urge to thank him, the soaking puddle in my panties when he looks at me the way he does, my arms wrapping around him, and finally... ecstasy.

The heat on my face turns hotter.

Clive: You still there?

Me: Yeah, I'd like that.

Clive: Leaving now.

I lick my lips and stare out at the quarry and the shadowed pines that stretch before it. The streak of a meteor sprawls across the sky and my entire body stills. I'm not sure what's happening, but I'm positive I'm making the right decision.

Chapter Four

Clive

Lark is standing next to the taillights of a pickup truck when I pull up to the quarry. Bobby and three other boys are drinking with big old grins on their faces. I put the truck in park and glance toward Lark. She's wearing a short black dress with tight stockings and a blue jean jacket, her curves on perfect display. She's fucking gorgeous.

As I walk up, I reach out and squeeze her hand in comfort. Though she's beautiful as ever, her face tells the story of a girl who's had a shitty ass night, and I'm about to fix it. "Wait for me in the truck."

She nods and does as I've asked as I approach the boys. "Who's driving tonight?"

Bobby narrows his gaze. "What? Why are you here? She call you?"

"None of your business. Give me your keys."

The oldest of the group laughs and turns toward me. "Who the fuck are you, old man? I'm not giving you the keys of my truck because some fat bitch called and ratted us out."

I realize the kid is drunk. I realize he's a dumbass. I even realize that Lark is out of earshot and probably didn't hear a thing he just said.

But I did, and I don't fucking like it.

I pull back and punch the idiot square in the jaw.

The others join in, jumping on my back, punching with all they have. Even together, they couldn't fight off a rabbit.

"You boys always fight like this or is it the alcohol?" I shove two of them to the ground and roundhouse the third. Bobby has backed away, choosing to avoid all of this.

"What the hell?" Lark hollers from behind me. "What's going on?"

“Nothing. Get back in the truck.” My voice is steady. I don’t want her to see this part of me, but I’m not sure I have a choice now.

I pull the keys from the ignition of both trucks. Of course, they both left their radios running, so they were easy to find. Not sure why they needed simultaneous stations at once, but they aren’t that smart, so I give them a pass.

“How are they going to get home?” Lark asks as I drop their keys into my glove box.

“I’ll call my buddy at the police station and tell him what’s going on. He’ll pick the keys up and decide what he wants to do with them.”

“You beat those guys up. Won’t you get into trouble?” Her face is red and her lips are parted.

“Those assholes nearly hit a pedestrian in town last week. An eighty-year-old man. They were going twenty over the speed limit through a crosswalk. They shouldn’t even be driving right now. The cops will thank me.” I glance toward her and put the truck in drive. “I’m sorry you had to see that and deal with all this tonight.”

“Me too.” She sighs. “I’m totally shocked Bobby did that. It’s like the whole good boy thing was an act.”

“You okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No. He’s... just a mess.” She lowers her eyes. “I heard what those guys said. You didn’t have to do that.”

I hate that she heard anything that happened out there. “I needed to do that.”

She shrugs. “No, you didn’t. I *am* fat. It’s a thing. I’m okay with it.”

“But they said it like it was negative. It’s not. You’re beautiful.”

She glances up at me and then away. “No, I’m not.”

“Are you kidding?”

She shakes her head. “No, and I think I’m done with dating. There are more jerks than nice guys these days, and I’m over it all.”

I’m desperate to tell her that older guys do it better. Tell her that she’s been messing with kids, and that’s why she’s seeing recess results, but I bite my tongue. “You wanna go home or do you still want to see that meteor shower? I know a place.”

She glances toward me. “Anywhere but home. I don’t want another lecture on how I can’t keep a boyfriend.”

“Your parents giving you a hard time?”

“Apparently, my mom was already engaged and pregnant with me by twenty-two, so that should be my life too.”

“What do you want? Not for work, but for your life?”

She blows out a heavy breath. “My life? I don’t know.”

“You never thought about having a family or who you’d marry?”

“Oh.” She bites back a smile. “Yeah, I think about that kind of stuff. I want two kids, a little ranch house where I can keep a barn full of horses, and maybe a few dogs.” She smiles wider. “I guess in the fantasy there’s a guy... somewhere.”

“Okay, that’s a plan. Let’s say you have all that, do you still work?”

She nods. “I’d want to stay home until the kids were a little older, then I’d go back to work, and maybe start my own farm clinic. The big part is being with the kids when they are little.” Her eyes light up as she says, “When I was a kid, my mom spent so much time with us, and I loved that she’d bake cookies and listen to all our problems. That’s such an important time to spend together.”

“Then you should have that.” I stare at her, wondering how she feels so right. “Tell me more. What are you naming these kids?”

“No way. You tell me something. Why aren’t you remarried?”

“*Remarried?* I was never married the first time.”

“But Cody...”

“Had him after high school out of wedlock.”

“What happened to his mom?”

“He never talked to you about his mother?”

She shakes her head and laughs. “Cody never talked about anything serious. I think the deepest we got was his obsession with pythons.”

I laugh. “He does have an obsession with snakes. We, ugh, his mom and I, we raised him fifty-fifty, but she was always missing. I think she wanted to be an actress, so she spent a lot of time traveling for auditions and what not. When he turned eighteen, she permanently bailed. He hasn’t heard from her since. I haven’t either.”

“Oh, that sucks. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that. Maybe that’s why he’s having such a tough time.”

“Could be, but I don’t give him excuses. My grandparents raised me. Didn’t know either of my parents. You get to choose who you are in life regardless of what happens to you. You’re either the guy who sulks or the guy that changes things. In this family, we choose the latter.”

“Why didn’t you get married then?”

“Never wanted to.”

“Never ever?” Her tone is sweet and light.

I look toward the road and drag my hand down over my beard. “Not until recently did I start seeing the value of it.”

“Why recently?”

“You’ve got a lot of questions tonight.” I flick on my blinker and pull into the driveway of the house.

“I thought we were going to watch the meteors?”

“We are. There’s a break in the tree line up there. I’ll park on the hill, and we’ll watch.”

She nods and stares forward. “Okay. So, why recently?”

“Persistent, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s my thing.”

I glance toward her and put the truck in park at the top of the ridge. The heat is pumping through the vents and stars streak through the sky, showering us with soft glowing light.

I saw Cody’s truck when I pulled in. I don’t want to know the weird looks I’d get for being up here with his ex. I’m not sure what explanation I have. I suppose I could’ve kept driving, but the ridge is such a perfect spot to watch the sky, and all I want for Lark is perfection.

“So,” she presses, “why recently?”

I draw in a heavy breath and glance toward her. “Recently I’ve met someone that I really like and sometimes I think about forever with that person.”

“Oh,” she stiffens, “who’d you meet?”

I shouldn’t have let this conversation get so far out of control. I don’t want her thinking I’ve got a thing for anyone else... because I don’t. My eyes are only on her. That said, I can’t well tell her that.

“You ever put much thought into meteors?” I say leaning forward to stare up at the sky.

“What do you mean?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. How every atom is glowing.”

“Yeah?” She raises her brows. “You okay? You suck in too many diesel fumes lately?”

I shake my head and turn toward her. “Maybe.”

She laughs. “Seriously, what’s wrong?”

“Cody should’ve treated you better. And those guys tonight... total assholes for not seeing you more clearly.”

She shrugs. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t be, though. You’re gorgeous. Really fucking gorgeous.”

Her lips part as she stares at me. “You’ve said that twice tonight.”

“I mean it.” I lean in ever so slightly. It’s not intentional, but it happens.

She does the same, as though we’re two out-of-control meteors destined for a collision. All the thoughts that should be running through my head are drained through my feet and left on the floor of the truck.

A tiny sigh leaves her lips, and she angles in.

My hand cups her cheek and my fingers run through her silky hair.

Another sigh.

She isn’t pulling away. She wants to be here. She wants me to keep going.

As our lips meet, our cosmic sparks collide. At first, it’s soft and sweet but quickly goes deeper. Minutes pass like seconds and the scent of diesel is replaced by the berries on her lips. Whether it’s Chapstick or something she ate, this taste is how I’ll always remember this moment.

I hold her by the back of the neck until she’s on my lap with her small hands against either side of my face, her lips never leaving mine. The dress she’s wearing pulls up, and I grip the back of her ass. My fingers slide through holes in her stockings, tearing through them like an animal until my palm is rounded with her bare ass.

She moans deeply into my mouth.

Fuck!

My cock is the hardest it’s been in years, pressing against the zipper of my jeans. My mind is gone. I’m feral, an animal, wild and out of control. I need her, and I need her now!

“What are we doing?” she pants as she rocks back and forth on my waist. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Do you want to stop?”

She pauses for a minute, and my heart stalls. The last thing I want to do is stop. “No, but what happens after this? I’m... I’ve never like... done this before.”

I’m not sure why, but every nerve in my body lights on fire. Probably because I’m a sick fuck. “You’re a virgin?”

She nods. “It’s embarrassing. I... I don’t know. I wanted to save myself and then this got out of hand.”

“It shouldn’t be embarrassing. It’s admirable.”

She grins. “I fantasize about you taking it.”

Any chance I had left of being a good man is long gone. I’m not a good man. I’m not a good man at all. I want to sink into her little, virgin pussy and make her mine. I don’t give a fuck what anyone else thinks about it.

“Fucking hell. I need to stop or... damn.”

She pouts out her lip and leans into my chest. “Why? Was this a mistake?”

“No, this isn’t a mistake. I’ve been thinking about you for so damn long. You have no idea.”

She narrows her brows and bites back a pretty smile. “How long?”

“Too long. Too damn long, my girl. Either way, I can’t do this.”

“My girl?” she squeaks. “I like that. I’d like to be your girl.” Her tone is weak and panting. “Do you know how long I’ve spent fantasizing about you?”

“How long?”

“Too long.” She bites back a smile like she’s embarrassed.

I tip my hand under her chin. “What’s wrong? You’ve been smiling like that all night.”

She shrugs. "I don't know. I hate my smile."

"You hate your smile? Why?"

"I look like the Joker."

With this, I can't help but laugh. "I'm sorry, but you're not allowed to talk to you like that. You know how many times I've touched myself to the memory of that smile? That gorgeous, perfect grin." I kiss her lips gently.

"So then take me. Let's do this. I mean, why can't we... aside from the obvious."

"I think the obvious might be it. I could get past the age thing, if you could, but Cody would make a huge fucking deal out of this, and I'm not sure he'd be wrong."

"Does he have to know?" Her tone is so innocent that she makes sin sound sweet.

I remind myself that it's not. That even if we hide it, the truth will come out someday and then what?

"I can't fuck you once and not think about you again." I grip my hand around her smooth throat and stare up at her sweet little face. "If I take this tight little pussy, my girl, I'm taking you forever. I won't have it any other way."

She swallows hard and stares at me. "What if I want that too?"

"I'd say you should think about it. I'd say you need to make sure you can handle the fallout this'll cause."

"There won't be a fallout," she grinds against my hips, "because it's our secret."

"Forever?"

"If it needs to be." She moves her palm over my chest. "I want you however I can get you."

"It's not realistic. We can't hide forever."

"Why not?"

"You want a family, a barn with horses, dogs... I want to give you that."

“I can give myself those things.”

My hand wanders off her throat and down over her chest as I palm over the hard nipples I’ve been fantasizing about for years.

Fuck!

She rocks back and forth. “I had a dream about you last night at the bar.”

I smile and palm over her panties. She’s soaked. “What about?”

“You were touching me...” She swallows hard and leans her head back as though she’s giving me more room to work. “You had your cock edged to press into me when I woke up. I’ve been needing you ever since.”

I have a feeling it would be embarrassing how fast I could come right now.

“We should stop.” That’s it, the last bit of will I had left. If she pushes past that, I’m done for... and so is she.

Her head nuzzles against my neck and her fingers weave through my beard. “I don’t want to mess around with guys my age anymore. They don’t treat me right. I think you would.”

“You’re right, I would, but that doesn’t change the fact that we could never be together. Not like you deserve.”

My hand still sits on her pussy, my finger tapping on her clit through her thin white panties. One flick of her cotton and I’d be inside of her, pushing in deep, smelling her, taking her in.

Fuck!

She breathes out against my skin before her hand lands on my cock. “I’ve watched you take control of everything for years. I’ve always imagined you were that way in bed too.”

“Is that what I do in your dream? I take you... despite what’s good for you?”

She nods. “Yeah, you do. You take me. You tell me what a naughty little girl I am, and you fuck me hard.”

I drag in a deep breath and let it out in a heaving sigh. If she wants me to take her, I will. I’ll take that tight little pussy and I’ll make her mine. The future is tomorrow’s problem, and right now, I’m okay with that.

Chapter Five

Lark

It's thirty degrees outside, but the truck is a sauna. I pinch myself discreetly of course, for the third time tonight. Apparently, I'm awake... unless this is one of those cruel dreams where your brain lets you think you're awake until you really wake up.

Right now, I need Clive's cock deep inside of me, spreading me open.

No more dreams.

No more fantasies.

I need him... now!

My body, my soul, my heart, my clit, my everything craves his touch. I bury my face against his chest and rock my hips against the ridge of his hard cock. He seems to like this, and I like the low rumble in his chest as I move. There's something about that sound, about his giant frame, about his big, rough hands all over me that has me believing I could give up everything else on Earth to have him touch me.

Babies, we could raise them together in secret. A house, he can sneak over after dark. Holidays, we'll leave town at the same time and spend Christmas shackled up in Idaho or Montana. Whatever it takes, I need this. He's so warm, so genuine, so real, and everything about this man is everything I've ever wanted.

His rough hand meets my throat, and he tips my chin up with his finger. "Let me take you somewhere nice. We can take our time and do this right."

That, I agree to. Not because I care about where I lose my virginity or how we make love, because I could fuck him right here in this pickup truck. In fact, I'd love to go home smelling like pine and diesel. I want that scent scrubbed on me

forever. But if Clive wants this to be special, I'll do whatever he tells me.

He kisses my lips gently and palms his hand over my pussy one last time before I slide off his lap and back onto my side of the truck. I'm only there for a second before he pulls me back and tucks me under his arm to ride next to him.

I like this spot. It's natural. I fit here under the weight of his massive shoulder.

We're halfway down the hill, and I'm in heaven, when the shape of a figure I recognize all too well appears at the end of the driveway.

I glance up at Clive and slide away, wondering if I should slip beneath the seat or throw myself in the back before Cody sees us. I don't know how to explain this away. *Why would I be with his father at nearly midnight?*

Clive squeezes my hand. "I'll handle it." The driver's side window rolls down and Cody approaches. He's built like his father. Tall and wide, though he hasn't grown into himself yet. His hair is buzzed short, and he wears a baseball cap forward. Even with the shadows from the cap, I see his twisted eyebrows.

"What the hell? Why are you two together?"

"Meteor shower," Clive replies. "What are you doing out so late?"

"Yeah. So, why are you watching it together?" Cody's tone is both confused and harsh.

My stomach is in knots. I don't care what Cody thinks of me, but I don't want to cause trouble between him and his father. Not for Cody's sake, but for Clive's. Part of the reason he's so attractive is that he cares so much about his son.

Clive wants Cody to be a part of everything at the ranch. I know he built it for him to take over someday, but Cody doesn't want any part of it and that breaks Clive's heart. I know it does. I see it in his eyes and in the way his shoulders fall when Cody rejects him. This would only make things worse.

What am I thinking?

I can't mess up their lives. Clive is Cody's father. We would *never* be normal. *Not ever*. Even if we ran off and did everything secret, Clive would never forgive himself for what he was doing... and I'd be the reason. Eventually, he'd resent me, and then what? I'd lose him.

This is stupid. I should stop it.

I have no idea where the conversation has gone between Cody and Clive, but it seems to have wrapped up. That said, it's not at all resolved. I know that look on Cody's face. He's going to have questions later.

"Sorry, I zoned out. What happened?"

"It's nothing." Clive's tone is low as we drive away.
"That kid is in his head right now. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, but what did you say? What did *he* say?"

"I told him you needed a ride, and we decided to watch the meteors. He was weird, but it's the truth... almost." Clive glances toward me and his big hand reaches out for mine. I want to leave it there. I want him to swallow me up. I need him to take me, spread me open, and make me his.

I need there to be a space and time where it makes sense for us to be together, *but this isn't it*.

"I should go home." My voice cracks as I speak.

"What's wrong?" Clive glances toward me.

Tears roll down my face as I stare back. I want to crash into him, hide under his strong arms, lose myself in his giant frame, find safety with him, but I can't.

"Why are you crying, my girl?" Glancing between me and the road, he wipes away my tears.

God, why does he have to be so perfect?

I draw in a staggered breath as I force the lump in my throat down. "I... we should think about this some more. You can't do this to Cody."

His eyes widen and his hands return to the wheel. “You already feel like mine.”

“You feel like mine too,” I manage, wiping away tears, “but this doesn’t work. We know that.”

He reaches toward my hand again, but lands on my thigh and squeezes. “So, what now?”

I shrug. “You take me home.”

“I don’t know if I can.” His tone is low, graveled, and pained.

“What if this isn’t about the future? What if we just took tonight? A single night out of thirty-one thousand.”

He stares toward me then glances back toward the road. “I don’t know if I could ever be satisfied with one. I’d see you around town with other guys, and deep down I’d know you belonged to me.”

“I’d see the same. You with other women.”

“There are no other women. There haven’t been, and there won’t be.”

Deep down, I know I should walk away. The idea of a single night is a lie I tell myself to get what I want, when in reality, it will never be enough. That, and trying to emotionally detach from this is going to be hell.

“Where would we go?”

He glances toward me again, his hand on his beard. “A hotel in the Springs. We could spend the night and wake up together in the morning. I’ll hold you all night long.”

My thighs ache and I know for sure my body wants to say yes. It’s my brain that’s fighting me.

“I need to know you’re okay with this, though. You losing your virginity. I... you can’t lose it to me and then regret it.” Clive’s hand is back on mine.

“I’ll never regret giving you my virginity. Not ever.” I move his hand to my thigh and the smallest finger of his massive hand brushes against the edge of my panties.

I'm done, cooked, ready to be served.

He flicks on his blinker and turns onto the highway,
passing by the road that would take me home.

For a moment, I wonder what my parents will think,
what the world will say, who the hell I am. Then, that rumble
in his chest comes back again, and I know I'm right where I'm
supposed to be.

Chapter Six

Clive

The hotel is the nicest I could find on such short notice. It's not a Holiday Inn, but it's not the Ritz-Carlton either. I'm surprised I even know that name. Other than the short hotel stay I made in Atlanta when I went down to visit my sister, I haven't left the ranch in twenty years.

There's a king-sized bed in the center of the room and a wall of windows that overlook the mountains. At least that's what we were told. Right now, they only overlook darkness, which is fine by me. I'm only here to see one thing, anyway.

Lark stands before me, her small, curved frame shaking. And though she's clearly desperate to be touched, I can see her nerves at work. I want to calm them, ease her, make this the most memorable night she'll ever have. Then again, I feel selfish for wanting any of that.

If I can't keep her, what am I doing here?

She mentioned earlier that she liked it when I took control. I wonder if that would put her at ease.

"Take off your clothes, my girl." The words land effortlessly, as though they've been on the tip of my tongue for a lifetime.

She bites back a smile, and though my instincts all want to jump, I hold on for a second longer, waiting for her naked body to present before me. I already know how perfect her weight is on my lap, but the anticipation of feeling her bare skin against me while she bounces will be a whole other experience.

As her clothes fall to the ground, I drag in the aroma of her skin and watch as her curves dip. She's gorgeous. So, fucking gorgeous. Anyone who hasn't been able to see that is a fucking idiot.

With her dress pooled on the floor and her small hands dragging her panties down, I know I've made a mistake. I won't be able to walk away. I can't know she's out in the world unprotected by me.

Maybe that means I should stop now. Maybe that means I should tell her.

I don't.

We'll figure it out later. Besides, she'll try to stop me from doing something to mess things up with Cody. And while I love him, I'm not living my life for him anymore. He's an adult.

"Good girl. Come sit on my lap and let me hold you."

I'm naked on the edge of a hotel chair when she backs up against me. Her smooth skin presses against my bare chest, her round ass on my hard cock.

I don't deserve her. I don't deserve this moment.

I wrap around her, hold her tight against my frame, and lean into her ear, breathing her in, tasting her neck, whispering low, "Are you going to be a good little girl and let me inside?"

She nods and the slick, wet folds of her pussy brush my cock.

Fucking hell!

"What if I do really dirty things to you? Are you going to let me?"

"Like what?" There's a whine in her tone.

"What if I want you sitting on my face, grinding that pretty little pussy all over me?"

"Yeah," she pants.

"What if I want you riding my cock hard and then licking it clean? Could you do that?"

She swallows hard and rocks against my lap. "Yeah."

"And what if I took my cock out of that tight little pussy and slid into your ass?"

She shrugs. "I'd try it... with you."

I want to be everywhere at once, all over her.

"And what if I told you to get on your knees and suck my cock like a good girl? Would you?"

She leans back and raises her arm around my head, scratching lightly against the nape of my neck. "Right now, yeah."

"Stand up, my girl."

She whimpers and stands.

"Good girl. Now get on your knees and suck my dick. Have you ever done this before?"

She shakes her head, biting back an innocent little grin.

"It's okay. Just go slow. Use your tongue first and then your mouth."

I'm losing it as her sweet little frame bends and lowers to the floor before me. I feel my teeth sink into my bottom lip with so much pressure I think I've drawn blood. I'm going to explode. She won't be able to do this for long.

Her warm tongue lands on my balls and she sucks gently before licking up the shaft of my cock. She's sloppy and unpracticed, but it's already the best blow job I've ever had. There's something about the uncertainty. The way she touches my shaft, the way she sucks, it's all unmetered and haphazard and I don't know what's coming next.

I slide my hands into her hair and grip tight, moving her head more rhythmically for a moment before pulling her off with a pop.

"I can't take much more, my girl. Fuck."

The nights I've thought about this. The days I've scrolled past her photos.

How am I here? How is she here?

My brain cells are nearly extinct and I'm no longer able to make sense of anything.

She swirls her tongue on my tip and sits up from the ground. "I'm dripping wet. Feel me."

Her smooth, curved, naked frame stands before me. She's asking me to touch her sticky, little virgin pussy.

I rub my hand against her soft mound and slide a finger inside, hooking it forward to touch her most sensitive spot. As I move, her breast brushes against my tongue.

My teeth scrape against her nipples and sounds of pleasure spill from her lips that tell me I'm doing something right.

She leans forward against my shoulders as I thrust inside of her.

"Oh God. That feels good! Don't stop!" She's panting, excited, desperation in her tone.

This is where I want her, forever locked in this place of near pleasure. Her voice aching, her thighs needy, her soul so desperate for mine that the world could be ending around us, and I know she'd stay right here with me.

I'm so hard, my fucking head hurts. I need her!

She reaches for my cock and strokes gently as I thrust two fingers inside of her. I'm not sure how she'll take me. Even this is tight inside of her.

"I need your cock, Clive. I need it now." She's panting against my shoulder. Wet, heat spreads as she bites down.

I slide my fingers out of her and guide her back toward my cock. She's so fucking slick. The thick, red lips of her pussy lower onto me. With every inch that slides deeper inside of her, I know this is never ending.

Sweat breaks onto my forehead and drips down between us as I wrap my arms around her frame.

One hand rests on her tit, the other on her throat as she leans back and catches her breath. Breathly sigh after breathly sigh, she takes me deeper.

This is what I've fantasized about. This sound. This deep, sweet, moaning puddle of a woman on my lap.

"That's a good girl. Take all of me. You okay?"

She whines out. "It hurts a lot."

"Okay, slow down. It's just stretching. You'll feel better in a second." I have no actual proof of this, and considering how tight she is, I imagine this is incredibly painful. "Do you want to stop?"

"No." She pushes down harder, concentrating on every inch as though she's working herself open for me.

When she's all the way against my lap, I hold her close and lean into her ear. "You're so fucking perfect, my girl. Every god damn part of you."

She shudders against my touch and bounces gently as I explore the depths of her body. Thankful for the mirror in front of us, I watch her face. She hasn't noticed it's there, which makes it better. There's no show, no act. Every flinch of her muscles, every broken moan, every smile is natural and just for me.

Her arms loop back around my neck as she rocks and bounces lightly, brushing the back of my hair.

"This would be cruel, don't you think?"

She pants, bouncing on my cock, taking what she needs. "What do you mean? Am I hurting you?"

"No, baby. No. You could never hurt me. I mean, it would be cruel of us to walk away from this now. Don't you think?" Blood pulses in my ears. "I can't walk away from you. You're mine for good. Can you tell me that? Will you tell me you're mine?"

Her dark eyes drag up to mine in the mirror. Maybe she knew all along I was watching.

I lean in and scrape my teeth against her shoulder. "Say it. I know you want to. Don't think about anything else. Right now is all that matters."

She bounces faster and faster.

I grip her hips and watch her breasts rise and fall in the reflection, her gaze never leaving mine. Then all at once, her core squeezes tighter around my cock and she screams out, “I’m yours, Clive! I’ve always been yours!”

With this, intensity builds so deep within my cock that I lose control. Every ounce of rational thought is lost, and I come harder than I’ve ever come in my life.

Her hips roll against mine as I fist into her hair and growl against the nape of her neck. When my eyes finally open, she’s watching me come undone and I know in that moment that if this woman walks away from me, I won’t survive it.

“Say it again,” I groan into her ear. “Tell me you’re mine.”

She pulls off my dick slowly and stares at me, her eyes gentle and soft as she climbs forward on my lap. “I’m yours, Clive. I just hope I don’t hurt you.”

“You could never hurt me, my girl, no matter what happens. You understand me?” I tip her chin up and kiss her lips gently before standing from the chair and carrying her to bed.

“What about Cody? How do we explain all this?”

“He already knows.”

Her brows wrinkle. “What do you mean?”

“He knows me. He knows how I act, what I like, what I do. I wouldn’t go out in the middle of the night for anyone, and I’ve never watched the meteor shower before.”

“So... that doesn’t mean anything.”

“It does. I could see it on his face.”

“So then why did we come here?” There’s panic in her voice.

I huddle her into my arms and brush the back of her head gently. “Because I’ve got to live for me too. Cody is on

the wrong side right now. When he comes back to good, we'll have a talk, but you're my priority. You and everything you've been dreaming of." I kiss her forehead gently and she settles against my chest with a soft sigh. There are so many things I want to do to this woman, and now that I've got time, I'm going to do every last one of them.

Chapter Seven

Lark

I wake up sometime around four a.m. to three missed calls and about ninety-five text messages. Most of them are from my mom. I should've let her know I was staying with a friend so she didn't worry.

Clive is still sleeping soundly. He lays sideways on his giant frame, cradling me in his arms. I don't want to ever move again.

I type out a response to my mom apologizing for the lack of thought and let her know I'm with a friend. I don't know if she'll believe me, but it doesn't matter. I'm safe, and I'm happy.

Snuggling further into Clive, I scroll down the messages.

Dolly: Considering you never called me when you got home, I'm assuming you're getting fucked?

I smile. This time, I don't think about how I probably look like the Joker. I let the grin happen. I let the warmth fill me up, and I close my eyes and wonder how in the hell I ever got here.

Me: Let's just say you have my blessing to go after Austin. Turns out, older men do it better.

I figure she won't respond until morning, but I get a ping back right away.

Dolly: Where are you?

Me: A girl doesn't kiss and tell.

Dolly: You're with Clive, aren't you? You dirty, filthy girl! I love it! I expect every detail come morning.

Me: Are you going to call Austin now?

Dolly: I ran into him at the market this afternoon. He was fixing the bakery with your boy. I don't think he knows my name so... probably not. I need a date to this wedding though or I'll never hear the end of it. We'll see. Tonight isn't about me, though. You're living for all of us right now.

Me: I kind of am.

Dolly: Kind of... you're totally living for all of us. I'm jealous!

Me: Truthfully, I'd be jealous of me too. He's incredible.

Dolly: I love you. I'm so happy for you. When you get home tomorrow, we need to search for my date! Maybe Clive has a hot friend.

Me: I think he does. His name is Austin.

Dolly: In my dreams. Night, girl!

Me: Night. XoXo.

My pussy is still dripping with come, and I know I've made a sopping mess out of the sheets, but I don't move. I stay still, scrolling through the messages on my phone. Some from my mom, a few from my dad, a dozen more from my mom, another from Dolly, one from Cody.

Cody?

What the hell? My heart stills, sinks, and demands life support.

I click the message.

Cody: You have something going on with my dad? If you do that's fucking desperate.

Cody: You do, don't you? You two are shacked up right now.

My heart won't beat. I keep reading.

Cody: The least you two could do is keep it a secret, right? Not do it right in front of me.

There's a space in time where he stops texting for a few hours, then starts back up again.

Cody: I'm taking off, anyway. You two do you.

I'm not sure if I should respond or not, but I opt for not. Unfortunately, he must be watching the phone for the read message because three dots light up the screen right away.

Shit!

I should say something.

Me: Where are you going? We should all talk.

Cody: I guess you two have made it official now?

Me: I don't want to come between you and your father.

Cody: Do you love him?

I drag in a deep breath.

Me: Yes. A lot.

There's no response. He doesn't read my message. No little dots show up. Nothing happens. Minutes go by, and then an hour. I lay back on the pillow and stare at Clive. Maybe I should wake him up, tell him what happened. I already feel like I've done something wrong.

I scoot up from the bed and hang my feet off the edge, dragging in a deep breath.

"Hey." Clive's voice is groggy behind me as he says, "you're not running off on me, are you?"

I turn back and crash into his arms as tears roll down my cheek. "Cody is messaging me. I told him I love you. I don't know what to do. I'm sorry!"

Clive leans forward and brushes my tears clean. "You love me?"

I nod. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for that. Not ever. Understood?"

Humming out a reply is all I can manage between tears.

"I'll call him. You stay here and rest."

I draw in a staggered breath and agree, though I feel horrid. The last thing I'd ever want to do is cause trouble between them.

Clive is gone for what seems like forever. I've counted one hundred and sixty-two floor tiles, sixteen pods of coffee, and ninety-nine lights on buildings surrounding ours when the door clicks open.

"All set." He climbs back into bed as though he's just negotiated a deal with the cable company, not told his son he's in love with his ex-girlfriend.

"Okay," I climb up onto my knees and look toward him, "what happened? Is he okay? Are *you* okay?"

Clive smiles and reaches out for me. "We're all okay. He's not happy, but we didn't expect him to be. He needed to hear how this progressed and get confirmation that nothing was going on while you both were together." He runs his hand over his beard as he says, "It's going to take time for all this to sink in. The good thing is, we're not hiding. I love you, you love me, and the rest will work itself out." His calm is what I need. It's what I've always needed. And while things might be complicated for a while, I know we'll find a way to make things work.

I snuggle back into his arms and close my eyes, taking in the warmth of his big, rough frame. People say love is complicated, but that's a lie.

It's not the love that's difficult. That part is easy. It's letting other people in that's hard. It's knowing that the love you have for someone might ruin another person's life.

How is that possible? I don't want to ruin anyone's life. I just want to love who I love. I just want to be happy.

Maybe that's the selfish part.

My phone buzzes and I jump to stare at the screen.

Cody: This is weird. Really fucking weird, but he sounds happy. He hasn't sounded like that... ever. Don't make any stepmom jokes and we'll be okay.

My heart swells and I roll toward Clive to show him the screen, but he's already fast asleep. I guess he really did know everything would work out in the end.

Epilogue

Clive

One Year Later

“I have cloth diapers, wipes, a bottle of baby powder, a shower-seat thing, a swing, a crib, little towels, a—”

“Sit down.” Lark reaches out for me. “We have everything. If we’re missing something, we’ll go get it.”

“I want you both to have everything you need.” Anxiety has been in my throat since she found out about the pregnancy. It’s not because I’m not excited. I’m more excited than ever. I’ve never had this before. A relationship. A woman to raise a baby with. Getting to watch Lark become a mother will be one of the greatest things I ever experience in my life.

“We have you, don’t we?”

I kiss her forehead and settle onto the couch next to her, moving my hand against her expanded stomach. I don’t know how she got more beautiful, but she did. Every month that this baby grows, she glows more and more. “I can’t become a bottle of baby shampoo. Did I get baby shampoo?”

She smiles. “You have thirteen bottles in the closet. I think you keep forgetting you bought one and then you buy another. I counted last night when you were on the phone with Cody. How’s he doing?”

“Good. He’s going to swing by later tonight with a gift for the baby. I think he’s excited to meet his little sister.” Cody kept his distance for a while, but he came to the wedding we had at the chapel on the hill. He stood as my best man that day, which in my book, is more than acceptance. I appreciate that about him. I don’t know what it was that forced his change of heart, but he’s done a lot of growing up this year.

“If he’s stopping by, I want to make lasagna. He likes it, right? What about homemade bread? Oh, and—”

“Or... you’ll rest and let me do all that.”

“I don’t want to rest. You’ve been doing everything lately. Why don’t *you* rest.” She struggles to get up from the couch, and for a moment, I watch the cute little show. Her legs kicking, her belly tipping her over.

“Is this what we do now? We laugh at me?” She pouts playfully.

“Maybe... if it keeps you off your feet.” I lean in and kiss her head, then help her up from the couch. She says she’s been resting, but in reality, she’s done nothing of the sort. Up until a week ago, she was still going strong on Waylon’s Ranch as an on-call vet, and twenty minutes ago she was down at the barn feeding horses. The woman doesn’t know the meaning of the word rest.

I can’t tell her that, though. I learned that the hard way.

“So...we really need to pick a name. We’re down to like five.” She pulls out her phone and scrolls to the notepad where she has them jotted down. “Abbey, Daria, Sky, Morgan, or Riley.”

“I thought we agreed on Sky.”

She rolls her eyes jokingly. “Is this because of Sky-High apple pie, because we can’t name our first-born daughter after a pie.”

“Why not? *I* like Sky-High apple pie. *You* like Sky-High apple pie. It’s perfect.” I squeeze her against my chest as tight as I can get her.

“We also love nature. Maybe we should name her Mountain.”

I grin. “Now you’re being ridiculous.”

I pull out a pink box from the fridge and set it on the countertop. “I figured tonight would be the night we chose Sky, so I got the pie to celebrate. You can’t say no now.”

She laughs under her breath and looks away to hide the amusement. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“Sort of, yeah. But really, what’s better than naming a baby after the pastry you shared with the love of your life? We

had this pie at our wedding, and we've had it once a week since. It's all you've craved for nine months. She wants us to name her Sky."

Lark bites the inside of her cheek. "What's her middle name? High? I'm not naming her *Sky High*."

I laugh. "No, I was thinking Sky Apollonia."

She buckles forward with laughter. "We are not naming our baby Sky Appolonia. Thanks, though." She swipes the box off the table, grabs a fork, and heads for the bedroom. "Have a nice day."

When I turn the corner, she's sitting with her feet up on the bed, a fork buried in dessert. "Don't come in here until you're making sense, sir."

I groan low. "What if I'm here to eat with you?"

A wide smile builds on her face, but she hides it. "Not until you promise me we're done talking about Sky as a viable government name for our daughter."

"Okay, okay. Feed me pie, and I'll let it go."

She sets the box down on the bed and spreads her legs wide. "Deal."

Today just got better.

I pull her panties to the side and lick her seam, tasting the creamy wet mess she's been making for me. I could do this forever. Drink her in, taste her thighs, eat my girl until she's satisfied.

Her arms reach up and she stretches back, grinding up against my face. "What about Apple Sky?"

I lick her folds and stare up at her. "Thought you hated that one?"

"Apple is a cute name, and it makes you smile. So... Apple Sky. Not Sky Apple."

I laugh and dive into her little pussy, tasting the sweet juices that drip just for me.

We could call this baby Butterfly Ninja and I'd still love her with all that I am. Nothing in this world will ever change that. Nothing in this world could ever change anything I feel right now. Not for Lark, or the family we've blended, or the world we're creating.

This is what perfect looks like.

Sky-High apple pie on the bed, with my face between Lark's thighs.

Yes, please.

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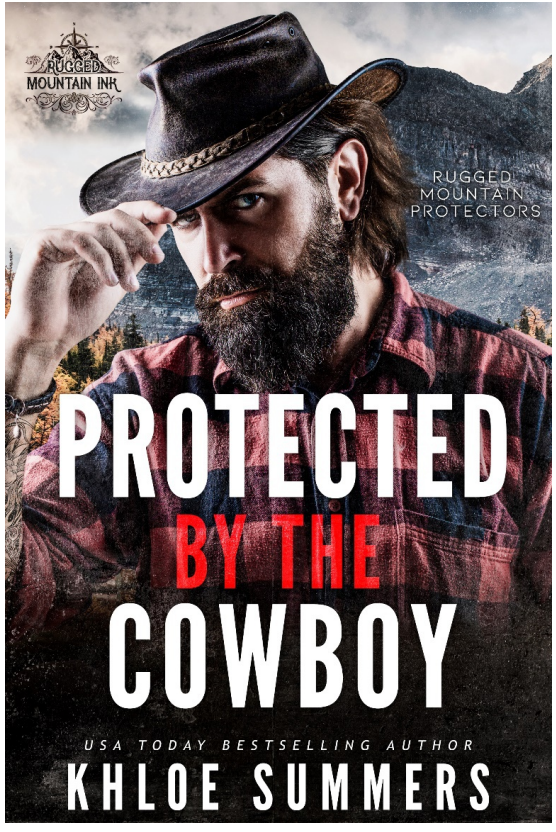
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Chapter One

Dolly

I stare across the table at the man I've been lusting after for months. On paper, he's everything I could ever want. He's tall, dark featured, handsome, and covered in ink. He wears his jeans tight and keeps his boots dirty. He works hard, and he commands attention when he walks into a room.

Yesterday, I'd have wondered what more there was to a man.

Today, I see it.

"Are you always so rude?"

"Rude? Ma'am I'm not rude."

"*Ma'am?* I'm younger than you," I roll my eyes, "by a lot."

"Is that what's botherin' ya tonight? I'm callin' ya ma'am?"

"No. What's bothering me is that you don't have a clue of how to be on a proper date."

He leans in and scruffs his big hand down over his beard. "Is this a proper date? We're at the coffee shop and *you* invited *me*."

I roll my eyes and drag in a deep breath. It's true I invited him, and it's also true that this isn't technically a date. I'm letting my anxiety get the worst of me. I've been on edge all week. Yesterday I cursed out my toothbrush because the battery died. I'm pretty sure that's my fault, not the toothbrush's.

"Sorry." I gulp down more caffeine as though that's the cure to my vibrating nervous system and glance up toward the giant man on the opposite side of the table. "I'm losing my mind."

"What's wrong?"

“My mom is getting remarried to this super fancy asshole. Apparently, he’s worth like two million dollars or something. He’s the one building that mansion between here and the Springs. It has its own tennis courts and a huge pool. Who has a pool in the mountains? It’s like below zero most of the year.”

“What’s he do?”

“Buys and sells real estate,” I roll my eyes, “or so he says. Anyway... they’re getting married this weekend and I don’t have a date.”

“You’re stressed out because you don’t have a date?”

“Are you judging me for my stress?”

He laughs under his breath and strokes his hand down over his beard. God, he’s hot! If my friend hadn’t set this up for me, there’s no way Austin would even look my direction.

“No one’s judgin’ you ma’a—Dolly. Gotta know, though, is that why I’m here?”

I stare down at the table and then back up again. It’s embarrassing enough that I can’t find a date. Groveling for one is even worse. “Yes. I *did* want you to go with me, but I don’t know. I’m not feeling the chemistry. Are you?”

“Do we need chemistry? This is fake.”

“Well, kind of. My mom is super perceptive. She’ll pick up on bullshit immediately and call me out on it. You have no idea how awful my family is.”

More laughter leaves his lips as he says, “You’re makin’ this sound really appealing.”

I sigh, scanning through my brain for who else I could possibly invite, but there’s no one. My list is empty, unless I hire some actor to play the part of my boyfriend, which I can’t imagine I’d be able to swing in the next day.

I’m desperate. If I weren’t, I wouldn’t have allowed my friend to set this up and I wouldn’t be sitting here ready to grovel.

“Look, it’s one weekend. My friend Lark said you were looking for some extra cash. I can pay.”

He grins again. This time it’s more of a cheshire, got me over his lap, kind of grin.

I didn’t realize I was this amusing.

“I’m pretty busy helpin’ rebuild the bakery after that bear ordeal. I’m not sure I have time to get away this weekend.”

“The bakery is nearly finished. What else is there to do?”

“New appliances come Friday and we’re installin’ trim.”

“Okay... can they make do without you?”

He nods. “For the right price.”

Why did I think this was going to be like one of those romance novels where he’d be super sweet and willing to do this for free because he’s secretly seen me around town and has been wanting me too?

“I have two grand to spend on this.” The number makes my stomach turn. It’s all my savings, and I was hoping to spend it on the pet spa I’ve been wanting to open, but I doubt that was coming to fruition anyway, considering I’m going to need way more than two grand to make it happen.

His eyes widen. “*Shit!* Two grand! I reckon I could spend the weekend with you for two grand.”

I bet he could. This might be the lowest point of my life.

“Yeah, but again... the chemistry thing. Plus, there’s an age difference. I’m not sure I thought this through.”

“So, you don’t need me?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat that’s been resurfacing since my mother told me about this stupid event. “I’m sorry I’m confusing you. I appreciate you coming out, but I’m clearly losing my mind.”

He reaches out his arm and knocks on the table twice, as though he's done with the conversation. "Come to my place tonight. Six o'clock. I'll make us dinner."

"What? Why?"

"Because I can't leave for long periods of time. I just got a puppy."

"I can't imagine you with a puppy."

"A German Shepard. She's still house trainin.' Eventually, she'll be at the rodeo with me."

"As what?"

"Emotional support. You like cowboy food or are you one of those vegans?"

"Wait, I don't understand what's happening?"

He grins. "You need a date to a weddin.' I'm saying yes. I assume we need to iron out some details, so I'm invitin' you to dinner."

"You just said you can't leave your puppy."

"My brother, James, can help out for a few days." He stands from the table and suddenly the coffee shop feels small. I'm not even sure how he got through the front door. "I'm lookin' forward to tonight. Be good 'til then."

Now *I'm* laughing. "*Be good?*"

"Yeah, be good." The smile that's annoyed me this entire exchange has shifted, and my heart is doing a squeezing thing it wasn't doing before.

I roll my eyes in playful protest of whatever is happening. "What should I bring?"

"Just your mouth. I like all that backtalk. It's cute."

My cheeks heat and my gaze sticks on his.

"That's the kind of chemistry you're lookin' for, right?"

I swallow hard and drag in a deep breath. "Yeah, something like that."

He smiles and brushes his hand down over his beard before tipping his hat. “Good. We’re showin’ promise then. I’ll see you tonight.”

My heart slams against my chest as he walks away. Something tells me I’m going to regret this.

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Savage Protector (Age Gap, Daughters Best Friend): <https://mybook.to/125qL3>

Hunted and Kept (Age Gap, Protector): <https://mybook.to/OcjX>

Strong and Steady (Age Gap, Secret Baby): <https://mybook.to/A1AXo4>

Rough and Tumble (Age Gap, Secret Billionaire, Mountain Man)

Wrapped and Rescued (Age Gap, Rescue, Mountain Man)

Rugged Mountain Protectors

Protected by the Mountain Man (Age Gap)

Protected by the Cowboy (Age Gap)

Protected by my Stalker (Age Gap)

Protected by my Brothers Best Friend (Age Gap)

Protected by the Biker (Age Gap)

More to Come...