



Riding
CURVES

RUGGED MOUNTAIN MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KHLOE SUMMERS

Riding Curves

Rugged Mountain MC

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Summer to Winter Publishing



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Chapter One

Lily

Nothing beats leaning back in a big cozy chair at the library to pop open the newest Brynn Taylor book. She's my all-time favorite romance author and the woman knows what she's doing. Somehow, she manages to take the roughest, gruffest, grumpiest guy and make you fall head over heels for everything he does. This particular character is my favorite yet. He's protecting the heroine from an ex and they're slowly falling in love. She doesn't see it yet, though. I squeal internally at their situation, ignoring every reality floating around me. When I'm in the story, nothing else matters.

Flipping the page, I take my time to rub my fingers between the crisp edges of the paperback. At home I read on an e-reader because it's convenient. When I'm in the library, I like the smell of paper, the touch of the pages, the crinkling sound of a story unfolding.

"Sorry to bother you, Lily..." My friend Grace creeps around the corner, holding what looks to be my phone in her hand. "You left this on a shelf in the romance section. It's buzzing."

Considering no one ever calls me but Grace, and she's two feet away, a streak of panic flushes through me as I reach for the cell. I dropped Austin off at school two hours ago. He didn't seem sick, and I can't imagine that we'd forgotten anything. Sure enough, it's Mountainside Elementary.

God, what if he tried climbing up the fire escape again? They called twice last week with warnings about his behavior. I'm not sure how many more he's going to get.

My stomach clenches. "This is Lily. Is everything okay?"

"Hello, Ms. Waters. This is Mrs. Freeman down at Mountainside. How are you this morning?" Her tone is soothing, but I know her better. "I'm calling about Austin."

My stomach tightens more. "Is everything okay?" I'm repeating myself now, but I feel like she should have led with his safety.

"He's fine, Ms. Waters. I'm calling today because I wanted to give you a heads up on a discussion administration has been having."

"Administration?"

"Yes. As you know, Austin is a very sweet boy..."

Here comes the 'but.'

“But... he’s extremely disruptive to the rest of the class. Today, he decided to play the floor is lava during math class.” She lowers her voice as though she’s about to tell me a sin. “He jumped on all of the desks and nearly knocked a child over. We feel he may be better suited for an alternative form of schooling.”

Okay, that does sound disruptive. I agree, but I’m stuck on her plan. “I’m sorry, an alternative form of schooling?”

She clears her throat. “Yes, homeschooling. I’m sure you know how small the town is, and we try our very best with every student, but occasionally the parameters unto which we can handle behavioral issues outweigh our capacity. We believe that Austin would receive a more fulfilling education in a home setting.”

I try not to laugh. Sure, I’m sitting in the library lounging right now, but six days a week I’m on my feet at the hotel cleaning. Long hours, long days. There’s no time to homeschool. “I’ll talk to him about his behavior.”

“Right.” The woman’s tone turns curt as she says, “We’ve had that conversation before. Remember? Last year we talked multiple times, and now this year three times already and it’s only the start of the year. I know you have your hands full, Ms. Waters... being a single mom and all.” I swear she says it with snark. “And we’re all doing the best we can to help Austin, but our resources are limited, and in cases like Austin’s, we believe the best option is homeschooling. We’ll need to make a plan by next week.”

Next week? On spite alone, I wish I could take him out of that school *today*. I can’t believe they’d employ someone who’d give up on a kid this easily. Unfortunately, that’s not an option. Mountainside Elementary is the only school in town, a tutor would require money, and homeschool requires time. I drag in a deep breath, checking myself before I speak. “Thank you for calling, Mrs. Freeman. I’ll be sure and do some research.” I disconnect the line before she gets a chance to respond.

“What was that about?” Grace’s face is about as contorted as my attitude.

“Austin is causing trouble again.” I blow out a heavy breath. “The teacher thinks I should consider homeschooling.”

Grace bursts into laughter. “What? No. Did you tell them you barely have time as it is?”

“I think she knows. This is my punishment for sitting down for three

seconds. You know that, right?” I blow out a heavy breath and stare down at the book I was about to get lost in. These days, it takes me a year to finish a short novel.

Grace lowers into the chair next to me and reaches out for my arm, squeezing gently. I don't know what I would do without her. Some days, she's the only other adult I talk to outside of work. “I'm going to be mouthy, and you're not going to like it... okay?” She commonly starts sentences like this. I've gotten used to it. Actually, I appreciate her *'tell it like it is attitude.'* I don't have time for the beat around the bush stuff.

“Okay. Hit me with it.”

“Are you sure? I'm going to be blunt.” Her face is flat and serious.

I nod, though my stomach clenches. Sometimes her blunt, straightforward ways can hurt, despite how helpful it is.

She reaches out her hand, locking it in mine as she talks. “Austin doesn't need homeschool. He needs to see his mom happy.”

I roll my eyes. “What? I'm happy.” We both know I'm trying to convince myself.

Her head lowers and her eyes narrow in on mine. “You're lying to yourself, Lil. You are not happy. You're getting by. You work six days a week, sometimes seven. You come home, cook, clean, do the kid thing, rinse and repeat. When was the last time you laughed, or smiled, or felt any kind of emotion other than hard work?” Her brows crinkle. “Is that an emotion?”

I stare blankly at her. She's not wrong. It's been a long damn time, but I'm not sure how any of this helps Austin.

“Hear me out, okay?”

My brows raise.

“Seriously. Don't interrupt me, get all weird, and immediately say no.”

Oh, this is going to be good.

“I'm dying to hear this.” I grin. “Tell me.”

“There's a bachelor auction up at the lo—”

“Nope.” I stand from the chair and leave behind any hope of relaxation I had. “Thank you, though.”

“You said you'd listen.”

“No, you *asked* me to listen. I'm not going to a bachelor auction, Grace. Maybe you misheard my conversation. My son is about to get kicked out of school.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t think he feeds off of your energy? You don’t think he senses your turmoil, your loneliness, your exhaustion?”

“No. I think he’s a seven-year-old boy who likes to pretend he’s a monkey.”

Grace tips her head to the side and steps toward me. “He’s looking for attention, Lil.” She drops the words right there in the quiet library, waiting for me to pick them up.

“Are you saying I don’t give him enough attention?”

“No. I’m saying you laugh at him when he acts out. He likes to see you smile. So, he does the same in class, trying to make friends.” She huffs as though she’s getting frustrated with herself. “You need to make yourself happy. When you do, Austin will relax. Trust me. I saw the same thing happen to my nephew when my sister got divorced.”

We pause for a moment before she continues.

“The auction is tonight, and it’s for charity. You could assign your donation to the school. Maybe it would buy you some more time.”

“That’s not going to work.”

“What’s not going to work?” She stops her eyes from rolling.

“*This*. Your whole spiel. The doing it for a greater cause angle.”

“Actually, you’re not doing it for a greater cause. You’re selfishly going to an auction and choosing to sponsor the school your son attends in hopes that they give you more time to figure out a plan regarding his behavior.” She grins. “Tell me that isn’t a good idea.”

“It’s not a good idea.” I grab my coat off the hook by the library door. “I appreciate you, though. You know I do.”

“Well then, if you’re not going for yourself, go for me.”

I turn back toward Grace and stare at her. She’s about my age and build, but where my hair is blonde, hers is brown. And where I have boundaries and limitations, she has none. “You’re making it up. I talk to you every day. You haven’t mentioned this once. Besides, the auction is with the MC guys, right? The big, inked up, rough and tough bad boys of the mountain? That whole vibe just makes me nervous.”

“It’s dinner. One dinner. I haven’t been out in months either. It would be good for us.” She folds her hands in front of her and whines, “Please... my mom will watch Austin. You know how much she loves having him, and we’ll only be gone for a few hours. Plus, it’s up at that new lodge they built. It’s about to open, and we’d get first look inside. Please, please, please,

please, please?”

“Even if I were considering this, where do I get the money to do all this donating? I don’t work six days a week because I’m rich.”

“Oh.” Grace's chest deflates as though she hadn’t thought of the answer to that question yet, then re-inflates suddenly. “It’s on me. Consider it a birthday gift. Everyone knows you can’t refuse a birthday gift. It’s bad luck.”

“My birthday is a month away.”

“Perfect timing then.” She grips my hand in hers. “You’re running out of excuses. So... I’ll pick you up at six. What’s the worst that can happen? You go on a date? You have some fun? You talk to someone other than me and a seven-year-old boy? I mean...”

My stomach tightens into a ball at the thought of a date with anyone. It’s been years, maybe eight, since I’ve been out with anyone of the opposite sex. I don’t even remember what dating is like or what it means, but the thought of doing something different for a change does sound interesting. And if the school were to give me some additional time to figure things out with Austin, that is something to seriously consider.

I draw in a deep breath, swallowing down the lump in my throat. “See you at six.”

Chapter Two

Chap

I stand at the edge of the stage and look out at the crowd of women staring back. I stand for the auction every year, and every year a date with me is bought by Mrs. Robinson, a woman in her nineties who lives down in the valley. When her husband was alive, she'd take me back to her house for a cozy homemade meal, just the three of us. Since he passed, I take her out and we do our best to remember him with a couple of shots of whiskey and a steak.

"We'll start the bidding for this sexy hunk of religion out at one hundred dollars." Kane loves this shit. He's got the personality for it... loud and aggressive.

Being that most folks here know how the bidding goes with me, Mrs. Robinson is the first to raise her hand. She'll usually take me for one hundred flat, which she asks to be donated to the animal shelter.

I stare out at the crowd, waiting for Kane to drop his gavel, but another flag goes up. "Two hundred," the woman shouts. I can't see where I'm standing who the bidder is.

Mrs. Robinson is on a fixed income. The one hundred dollars she spends is all she can afford. Sure, we can have dinner another night for free, but this night is kind of our thing.

Kane lowers his gavel. "Sold to the woman in the back for two hundred dollars. You can meet your date by the bear statue in the lobby to set up the night."

Mrs. Robinson stands from her chair, and I meet her toward the side of the crowd. I try to stop by to see her at least once a week, but every time I do, it's as though years have gone by. Her hair seems grayer, her stature more rounded, and her wrinkles more pronounced. I don't know how much time we have left with her here, and I want every second to count.

"I'm sorry. I promise we'll do dinner tomorrow night. My treat."

She leans into my chest for a hug. The woman has been a pseudo mother for me for as long as I've known her. Most of the guys in the MC feel that way about her. "Hopefully you won't have time, dear."

"I always have time."

She nods toward the woman making her way toward the lobby. “Not if that’s your date. She looks much more appealing than me.”

I glance toward the woman making her way out of the room. A tall blonde with curls that land on her mid-back. She wears a tight black dress that leaves little to the imagination.

I look away and back toward Mrs. Robinson. “Nothing compares to a date with you.”

She laughs. “I think that would. Let’s not lie to ourselves here. Go! Talk to her! Let an old woman see you be happy. I was only buying you out of guilt, anyway.” We both know she’s full of it, but I go along with her game.

“Is that right? Well then, I suppose you don’t want dinner tomorrow night?”

She pats me playfully. “Nope. I’m busy tomorrow night. Kane and his family are dropping by for my famous chili and cornbread.”

I grin and kiss her on the head, hooking her fragile arm into mine as we walk toward the lobby. “I see how it is.”

We turn toward the elevator, and I press the button. She’s one of the lucky few to stay in the lodge tonight before the grand opening.

“You know this is good for you, right?”

“What is?” I glance down at her.

“A date with a younger woman.”

“This isn’t a date.” I shake my head and stare down at the ground. “It’s an agreement for charity.”

She glances up at me. “You should think of it as a date. Look at her! She’s gorgeous!”

I glance toward the woman in the hallway whose breasts are spilling from her dress. “She is beautiful, but you know my heart is with God.”

“You understand you can love God and a woman, right?”

My chest tightens. “You’re a thirsty old woman. Do *you* know that?”

The elevator doors open and Mrs. Robinson pulls free from my help before stepping inside the metal box. “You’re forty-nine years old, honey. Maybe it’s time to ask God for another path.”

“We’ll talk about that later. Right now, we’re going to get you to your room.”

She slaps me away. “You will *not* keep that woman waiting! I’m old, not incapacitated. I can find my way to my room. You go show that woman a

good time and think about what I said.”

I’ve been thinking about what she’s said for as long as she’s been saying it, but nothing changes my mission. I’m meant to be a priest. There’s a spiritual calling, a desire to help people, and a sense of purpose that I can’t walk away from.

The elevator doors close, and I turn back, heart pounding. I’m used to helping the guys with all their relationships. Putting any of that into practice is another story.

I drag in a deep breath and turn toward the statue at the door. This close, the woman waiting simply isn’t beautiful, she’s stunning. Long blonde hair, gorgeous blue eyes, a thick curved frame, and pouty pink lips that drive daggers straight through every moral I hold.

Ignoring the tightness in my chest, I step forward, holding out my hand. This is like any other meeting. She’s just a woman, and I’m just a man. That doesn’t mean anything, exactly how it hasn’t meant anything the million other times I’ve met women.

Yet somehow, my body says it does.

“Hey. I’m Chap. I, ugh, I guess you’ve won a date with me... if that’s a thing. Seems you may have overpaid, though.”

She smiles wide and bright. “Well, it was my friend that bid on you... not that you don’t seem worth it. I just... I’m awful at this.” She reaches her hand out, sinking into mine. “I’m Lily. I’m also totally inept when it comes to dating or holding basic conversations. I figured you should know that up front. Also, I have a seven-year-old son. A terror. So, if you’re not into that, you should go now.” Her eyes widen. “Not that this is a real date. It’s not, and it doesn’t matter that I have a son, but you should know. Right? I don’t know. I’m bad at this.”

I can’t help but smile as she speaks. “Thanks for the heads up. I think all boys are terrors for a while. It’s in their code or something. I know I was a piece of work growing up.”

“Ever play the ‘*Floor is Lava*’ during math class?”

I drag in a deep breath. “Nope. Can’t say I have, but I did the whole underwear on a pole thing in fifth grade. The underwear wasn’t mine.”

“Oh God. Whose were they?”

“Would it make you feel better if I told you it was a real jerk of a kid?”

“Maybe.” She bites back a smile.

“Me too, but they were a pair I grabbed from a random locker in gym class. The kid was humiliated. I still feel bad about it.”

She smiles, this time wider, and I realize now this is what I’m working for. That smile that lights something I haven’t been aware of in a while. “I guess it’s good that you feel remorse. Where is the kid now?”

“No clue. He moved off Rugged Mountain.”

“Probably from humiliation.” She laughs. Pretty and a sense of humor. I should leave now. “So... how does this whole thing work? The date I mean.”

“We can go out now if you want, or if you’d rather we go later, that’s good too.”

“No. I mean... now is good if you’re free. My friend disappeared right after the bidding, so I’m sure she’s found someone to entertain her for the night.”

“Are you hungry? We can head to the dining hall, or we can take a walk down to the river. There’s a little waterfall and a path that’s real pretty this time of night.”

A *walk*. I haven’t taken a walk with a woman who isn’t Mrs. Robinson since junior high, and even then, I think I was being escorted to the principal’s office.

“A walk sounds great. I’ve been stressed all day.”

“What about?”

“Oh,” she leads the way out the front doors, “I don’t want to bore you with all my life’s details.”

“It’s not boring. The details of life are what make people interesting.”

She brushes her hands over her shoulders as though she’s cold and I take off my jacket, wrapping it around her frame. There’s a light breeze tonight, and the scent of her floral perfume blows back toward me.

“Oh, thank you. I, ugh, no one’s ever done that for me before. Well... not that I don’t go on dates... because I do.” She pauses and laughs nervously. “I’m lying, I don’t. I don’t go on dates. I’ve literally been tied to my house for the last eight years.”

I clear my throat. “Well, you’re not alone. This is the first, actual date—not date, I’ve been on since I was a teenager.”

Her brows narrow. “*What?* You’re like... I figured all you MC guys were getting around. I mean... *look at you*. The whole muscled, inked, beard thing is a vibe around here. Women must be throwing themselves at you.”

“If they are, I don’t notice.” I glance toward her. “I suppose the same could be said for you. You’re very pretty, so I can’t fathom why you’re all alone?”

“Oh.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Yeah, no. No one talks to me.”

“Someone must talk to you. What do you do?”

She drags in a deep breath. “I clean rooms at the inn on Main Street. It’s a shit job.”

“You’re doing something important, though. People at the inn need you.”

She smiles. “I guess. I always thought I’d be a librarian. My friend, Grace, works down at the library in town and I’m so envious of her. Every day, she’s surrounded by books. Funny thing is, she doesn’t even want to be there. She wants to work at the bakery. What about you?”

I chew my lip and stare out at the night sky, taking in the cool breeze of autumn as it rolls across the hills. “If you want to be a librarian, why not go for it?”

“Oh, well, there’s only one library in town and that position is filled. I think they have part-time jobs available, but that won’t work. I need a steady income. What about you? What do you do?”

I avoided the question the first time, and I’m not sure I can anymore. It’s not that I don’t want to talk about the priesthood, I do. It’s my life, but there’s a part of me that could live a few minutes in this fantasy where I see a beautiful woman, genuinely connect with her, and imagine an alternate future. Though, I guess that’s not fair. “Currently, I work construction, but I’m next in line for the priesthood up at Hickory Church.” For the first time in my life, the words sting as I say them, and I can’t figure out why.

Her eyes widen and she stops in her tracks, turning toward me. “*The priesthood?*”

I nod and sigh. “Yeah.”

She shakes her head as though she’s trying to catch up with everything I’m saying. “Wait, so you’re like a *priest, priest?* Like you don’t have...” She clears her throat. “Like you’re *married to God?*”

I nod. “Unofficially, yes. I’ve gone through seminary, background checks, the whole thing. Right now, I serve as a transitional deacon. It’s required for about a year before you become ordained, but I’ve been stuck for a while.”

“Why?”

“Ah, past life stuff. I was a wild child.”

“How so?” Her brows are knit together, and her arms are crossed as she stares toward me. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me.”

“No. I’m an open book. I was a rowdy young adult. I had a past where I spent a lot of time doing things that weren’t approved by the church. My biggest vice when I was younger was gambling. I got addicted to the thrill of winning and it nearly wrecked my life. It got so bad that I lost not only all of my world’s possessions, but anyone else’s who would loan me anything. Luckily, with the help of friends and church, I was able to come out better on the other side. I worked hard to pay off all of my debts and sought forgiveness.”

She smiles and touches my arm. “That must have been hard. Is that when you decided to become a priest?”

“I wanted to make sure I gave back to those like me who were lost but needed to be found. Unfortunately for me, my past has made the bishop of our region skeptical of my devoutness. So, now I’m in a holding pattern until I’ve proven my sincerity.”

“So, how long can they hold you back from being ordained?”

“As long as they want to, but I suspect they want me to drop out of the MC as well. Motorcycle clubs and churches aren’t usually viewed in the same light.”

She turns away and we begin walking again. “So why don’t you leave the MC?”

“That’s not an option. These guys are the only family I have, and they’re as much of the reason why I’m here today as the church. I can’t turn my back on one half of my salvation for the other. It’s a package deal.” I chuckle a little under my breath. “Besides that, look at this lodge. A massive charitable undertaking done by this very MC. One can only hope that acts like this will help change the opinion of the bishop.”

“Yeah, I see how that makes sense.” She grins as she says, “But that doesn’t explain why you’re selling yourself in an auction. You’d think being sold to the highest bidder would raise some eyebrows.”

I laugh and scrub my hand down over my beard. “Well, historically, it was always just an excuse to go out on a date with Mrs. Robinson. She’s the woman you saw me helping into the elevator. So, as you can see, I’m clearly an unstoppable ball of sexual energy.”

She smiles. “I love Mrs. Robinson. She helps me out with Austin when my sitter is busy.”

I make a mental note to talk to Mrs. R about how she knew the woman she was pushing me toward this evening. Funny, she failed to mention that.

“*Austin?* That must be your son.”

She sighs. “Yeah... the seven-year-old who’s going on twenty-two. Maybe he needs the seminary.”

My brows narrow. “Why don’t you let me talk to him? I’ve got a lot of experience with youth ministry, and I live on a ranch just a few miles away. Maybe some hard work would help.”

“No. I couldn’t ask you to do that. Trust me, he’s out of control. I’m not sure anything would help at this point. No boy should have to grow up without his dad. I know that’s what he’s missing, but I don’t know how to fix it. I don’t have time for men, and if I did, I wouldn’t trust them enough to hang out with my son. I hope you can appreciate that.”

I glance toward the woman whose black dress clings tight to her hips. It’s easy to see how gorgeous she is, but the more I get to know her, the more I see how badly she’s hurting. Something tells me tonight would’ve gone better for her if she hadn’t ended up with the virgin who’s trying to be a priest. Maybe what she needs is some release of her own. I know a few guys here that would’ve gladly offered her that as part of her auction win. My cock throbs at the thought of being that close to her, touching her, smoothing my hands down over her curves, and tasting her lips.

I shake my head, re-diverting my thoughts. “I grew up without a father. He left when I was ten. You know how most people think that trope of Dads saying they’re going for milk and never coming back is made up? I’m one of those kids.”

“What?”

“Yeah. My mother did the best she could, but I was completely out of control after that.”

I cringe at what I just said. Get it together, man! A little bit of hope goes a long way. “I know now that I was looking for boundaries. But at the time, no one knew what to do with me. I could talk to Austin and maybe give him some direction. Like I said, I’ve got a ranch filled with things to stimulate and exhaust young minds. There’s a herd of goats I can’t keep up with. They’d love a seven-year-old’s attention.”

She glances up toward me. “You have no idea what you’d be getting into. I wouldn’t want to put that on you. We barely know each other.”

“Ah, it’s not a big deal. How does tomorrow morning at eight sound? I’ll bring breakfast by, and we can all go to the pumpkin patch.”

“All?”

“Unless you’d rather me take him alone.”

Her cheeks turn pink as we near the lodge doors again. “I’m sure you’re busy with the lodge opening and everything. I wouldn’t want to take you away from that.”

“Actually, it would be a nice break. I’ve been eating and breathing the lodge for months now. I could use an outing of my own. That is unless I’m pushing too hard. I don’t mean to force myself on you simply because you paid me for it.”

She laughs. “No! You’re not. I, ugh, I have to work at two, so morning is great.”

I open the door of the lodge and she walks before me. I try not to glance down at her round ass as she walks through the door, but none the less, my eyes divert.

This is fucked up. *I shouldn’t be looking at her like this.*

She turns toward me and smiles. “Well, I guess we’ll see you tomorrow morning then. Thank you... for the walk and the... yeah. Thank you.” She doesn’t know what to do with herself. Her arms reach out then pull back again.

I open my arms and lean in for a hug, holding her against my chest for far too long. It’s so long that my cock draws hard again, and I can’t help but notice the ends of her nipples against my chest.

Does she like this too, or is it cold?

It has to be the temperature.

She releases the hug, takes my jacket off her shoulders, and hands it back toward me.

Damn it. I need to get my head straight.

“Tonight was fun. I’ll get your address from the auction paperwork.”

She nods and bites back the prettiest smile as she turns away. “Sounds good. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See you in the morning,” I say, wondering if I’ve just made a perfectly, terrible decision.

Chapter Three

Lily

“He’s not a priest yet.” Grace laughs. “Haven’t you read those books? The ones where the priest falls for the slutty, little cow maid, and they have this passionate affair that no one can know about? Well... she gets pregnant, and they have to run away together. Ugh... they’re so hot!”

“No, I haven’t read those books, and if I had, I’d realize *they are books*. This is real life, and I’m... me. No one is leaving the priesthood for me, Grace. I can’t even get a man to parent his child.”

“That’s not on you and you know it. Derrick is an asshole. He was the day you met him. All that aside, I think this is good for Austin. He needs a man in his life.”

“I don’t know. I thought about it more last night and I think maybe it’s a mistake. I mean, he needs a *permanent* man in his life. This is temporary. We’re a project to Chap. That’s all.”

Grace huffs heavily into the phone. “Mister hot, sexy, priest man doesn’t have to leave. You know... you could convert him.”

“*Convert him?* What’s wrong with you? Did your mother let you play with the cleaning supplies when you were little?”

“I sound like a woman with a pulse on what’s happening. Maybe... he’s doing this because he has a thing for you too?”

“Too? Who said I had a thing for him?”

“You did!”

“When?”

“You spent the first five minutes of this call telling me how hot the man was.”

“That was my segway into telling you how off limits he was.”

“And by off limits you mean what? That you have to try harder? Sounds like a challenge to me. You love challenges.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re going to hell for talking like that.”

“Please. He’s not off limits yet. We already discussed that. You have to show him how good the dark side is!”

“Oh my god. I’m done with this phone call. I love you. Bye.”

“I love you more!” Her tone is upbeat. “I’ll be by at one thirty to pick

up Austin.”

“Thank you.” My stomach turns as I hang up the call. I can’t figure why Grace is single. She’s outgoing, cute, sweet, and funny as hell. Maybe it’s because she has no boundaries.

I glance down at the time on my phone. It’s two minutes before eight. Austin is still eating breakfast in front of his television show. That’s the one good thing about mornings. I get about an hour of peace between Power Rangers and Batman. That probably makes me a horrible mother. I should have crafts up for us the second he wakes up. I should have him out in the garden pulling weeds or cleaning the pine needles out of the yard. Instead, I plunk him in front of violent cartoons and let him eat frosted flakes while I talk about a hot priest on the phone with my bestie.

The irony of my role in his behavior is not lost on me.

The door knocks and my chest tightens. I know this isn’t a date, but I’m nervous just the same. Chap might belong to God, but God made him insanely attractive. The man is big, wide, tall, inked, bearded, and I swear if the lumberjack portion of heaven had a mascot, he’d be it.

I drag in a deep breath and open the door, trying to act like a normal human being who does normal human things, but the second I open my mouth any sense I had left is lost to the past.

“You’re here. You look great. I mean, not great like hot, but great like good. Better than good.” I clear my throat. “Sexy. I mean not sexy... but like I like flannel. A lot. Not on you. Well, yeah on you. But not...” I sigh. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Chap grins ear to ear. I swear I’ve never seen a nicer smile. “Sounds like you’ve already had a few cups.”

“A couple.” I laugh under my breath. “I don’t know why I’m nervous. Last night was nice. It’s been a while since I’ve talked to a man that openly. Not that it matters that you’re a man. I just—”

His hand lands on my shoulder. “I know what you mean. Same here. Also, I brought coffee and donuts. Stopped at the diner on the way in.”

I blow out a heavy breath and nod, noticing now that he’s balancing a bakery box and two large cups in one hand.

What’s wrong with me? I grab the cups he’s balancing on the box and make my way toward the kitchen, trying desperately to shake off the crazy that has settled its way into me. Seems that I’ve put on my nicest pair of jeans and the most modest shirt I own, but failed to prepare myself mentally.

“You look great by the way. I like the kittens.”

I glance down at the blouse that I’ve buttoned clear to my neck. Usually, I let the girls air out a little, but today, like a psycho, I’ve buttoned this kitten blouse straight up and down.

“Yeah, I bought this on sale. Some online shop. I don’t remember the name, but the kittens are what got me. Which is weird because I’m not really a cat person. I like horses and dogs.” Why am I saying this? My face flushes with heat. Why do I care what he thinks of me? It doesn’t matter! I blame Grace. “Anyway, what’s your favorite animal?”

Oh my god, I didn’t just ask a grown man what his favorite animal is!

“Oh. Um... I’m boring. I’d say dogs. I have a bluetick that’s been with me through everything. He’s eleven this year. That boy still hunts with the best of them. Gives great hugs, too.”

I refrain from saying the next thing that pops into my head, which is ‘*oh, you like snuggling?*’ Instead, I shift my focus to Austin in hopes of a distraction.

“I haven’t had a dog in years. I’d love one, though. Austin... could you come in here? There’s someone I want you to meet.”

He hollers with frustration, “Not now. I’m watching my show.”

“He’s okay.” Chap reaches for the hot mug I hand him. “We can catch up after Batman. I remember how dramatic each episode can get. I’ve been meaning to get caught back up.”

I nod, and settle on the stool next to Chap, trying not to suck in the scent of cedar and rugged man on his skin. He isn’t allowed to smell this good, let alone look this good. *That should be a sin.* A man of God should look like a man of God. Not sure what those characteristics are, but they sure as hell aren’t those of the hottest man you’ve ever seen.

“There’s just so much guilt for everything that happened with Austin. I feel so bad that he doesn’t have a dad, or a father figure at all in his life.”

“Do you mind me asking what happened?”

I shrug and blow out a heavy breath. “Derrick had a girlfriend in California. They were in love you know. Apparently, I was just the girl he got pregnant.”

“Wait... so you were the mistress?”

“I didn’t know I was the mistress. I thought we were in love. I found out about her when Austin was born. I knew Derrick did a lot of business in California, but I never questioned it because I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. You trusted someone. That’s how love works.”

“Can I ask you something personal now?”

He nods. “Go for it.”

“Is it ever hard?”

“Excuse me?” He laughs loudly. “Is what hard?”

Kill me now!

My fingers find my hair as I twirl it to calm myself. “I am so embarrassed. I didn’t mean anything. I was trying to say... I guess the part where you might not have kids or a family or...”

“I was messing with you. I knew what you meant.” He takes a sip of his coffee before saying, “Sometimes I fantasize about a family and wonder what the whole thing would look like. A wife to come home to, dream with, and a life together. A few kids to love and play with in a little garden with hand painted rocks. Some days, that seems like an ideal life.” He glances down at the mug and back again. “But I have a lot to make up for and the priesthood gives me that opportunity.”

“What do you have to make up for? The gambling? A lot of people do that.”

“When my mom died, I promised her I’d make something of my life. Something more than I had been. You see, there are a lot of people who need help finding their way and what better way to do something meaningful than to help them find it.”

“What about that thing people say... how to the world you’re just one person, but to one person you could be the world. I mean, my family became my purpose when I wasn’t looking. Who’s to say you can’t have a family and help others find themselves?”

“I suppose. But as far as a family of my own, that opportunity never really presented itself before.”

I sip from the coffee he’s brought. It’s from the diner on Main. I’d know that flavor anywhere. “What about your needs? I mean... don’t you have like... desires. How can you shut all that off?” *Why am I still talking? Someone say a shutting up prayer for me. Please!*

His gaze meets mine. “It’s very hard at times, but that aspect I tucked away in the back of my head. At first, I was leaving room for the right person. Then, it became about staying devout. I’m sure it’s some kind of control issue I have with myself, but over time it evolved more into a penance and a focus on my path to the priesthood.”

I shouldn't have talked to Grace this morning. Every instinct inside of me wants to steer this man away from the cross and between my legs. Why? Why am I so desperate to touch him, kiss him, show him what it would be like to feel physical euphoria?

"My show is over!" Austin saves the day with his Nerf gun. The dart hits the side of Chap's shoulder. Usually, I'm ready to throw that thing in the trash. Right now, I'm thankful for every dart in the gun.

The assault doesn't faze Chap. He stands from the kitchen stool and Austin immediately backs down. He's not used to seeing men this big, not up close and personal.

"You ready to head to the pumpkin patch?"

Austin narrows his gaze. "I don't like pumpkins. Who are you?"

Chap holds out his giant hand for Austin to shake. "I'm your mom's friend, Chap. And you?"

Austin returns the shake. Next to Chap he looks like an infant. "I'm Austin." He sounds like one too.

Chap glances toward me. "Do you like pumpkins?"

I nod and he turns back toward Austin.

"Your mom likes pumpkins, and I happen to love them. So, we're going to pick some out. Grab your jacket."

For a long moment, Austin stares up at Chap as though he's considering a spar but instead, he runs off to grab his coat. He even puts his boots on before he's asked.

"Okay, I'm not letting you leave." I laugh though I'm completely serious. "He *never* listens like that. Not to anyone."

Chap laughs. "It was one thing. I'm sure he'll start questioning me soon."

"I don't know. It's the tone of your voice. You sound so sure of yourself. You made me want to put my boots on and you weren't even asking me."

"So you're a sucker for some dominance?"

My cheeks burn. *Is he flirting with me? Can priests talk like that? Am I turning him like the books Grace talks about?*

No. I laugh to myself at the stupidity of my thoughts and grab my coat off the hanger by the door.

"Sorry," he says. "I was kidding. I thought it was—"

"It was funny. I'm sorry. I'm all in my head." I leave out the part

about how I do like dominance and how it's been a long while since I've had a man with a deep voice tell me what to do. I need help. Serious, brain restructuring help.

"Are we doing this pumpkin thing or what?" Austin stands by the door with his coat and boots in place.

"Let's go. Hop into the back seat of my truck and buckle up." Chap takes charge as though he's been here for years, like he knows what to say and how to say it. There's no waver in his tone. There's only confidence and Austin responds... *immediately*. He even seems happier, like the direction has somehow alleviated whatever anxiety he was carrying.

"Great job getting buckled, buddy." Chap reaches back and squeezes Austin's ankle as he opens up the truck door for me.

This is a dream. This man isn't real. He brought me donuts, he made my kid follow direction, and he opened the truck door for me. I'm obviously still asleep in bed.

"What do you like to do for fun, Austin?" Chap closes my door and makes his way around to the driver's side.

Austin responds when Chap sits. "Play video games and watch TV."

God, I'm an awful mother.

"What games?"

"Superhero stuff mostly. Do you play games?"

"A little but I'm awful busy on the ranch and at work. You play any sports?"

"Nah. I want to play football, but Mom won't let me. She said it's dangerous."

"She's not wrong. It can be dangerous for sure."

"Maybe you could talk her into it. She's easily persuaded with compliments."

I glance back at Austin. "What?"

"You are, Mom. Last week I was in trouble at school, and I told you how pretty you looked, and you forgot all about it."

"I didn't forget, Austin. I moved on. You're still in trouble for that. The school called me yesterday."

I realize Austin is seven, and I'm not trying to scare him, so I don't throw out threats of getting kicked out of school. Instead, I watch the pine trees pass and let my chest relax for a second, knowing that everything isn't on me all at once.

“Well, you’re pretty and you let me get out of trouble, so...” He giggles.

“Your mom is nice,” Chap’s deep voice resonates through the truck, “and you’re right. She is pretty.”

Okay, I’m either losing my mind or this man is fucking with me. Either way, I love it. It’s been years since a man other than my seven-year-old son has told me I’m pretty. *Years.* That said, I’m sure Chap is just being nice.

He turns on the country radio station and we ride toward the pumpkin patch on the west side of town. People come from the Springs this time of year to see the foliage change, so our apple orchards and pumpkin patches are jam-packed with city dwellers. It’s good for business and the local economy, but if I had my choice, I’d prefer a quiet mountain all the time.

“Are we going to carve these too?” Austin’s voice is chipper and upbeat, and I am in awe of the three hundred and sixty turnaround he’s done in less than twenty minutes.

“Whatever you say, bud. I think your mom has to work at two, so we can carve them up tomorrow night... if you’re free.”

“Mom, are we free?”

I want to say, *‘Yes, we’re free for eternity. This man can most definitely take over our lives. You can call him dad and hell, maybe I’ll call him daddy,’* but that’s not reality.

“Let’s see how today goes, okay? We can’t take up all of Mr. Chap’s time.”

Chap nods and I wonder if I’ve just inadvertently blown him off. That wasn’t my intention, or maybe it was. Maybe I should hold him at arm’s length. The last thing I need is to get attached to a man I can’t have, let alone Austin. That’s even more apparent when Austin’s hand hooks into Chap’s as they wander toward the wagon filled with hay.

The scene is everything I’ve ever wanted. A big, strong, confident man inked up and dressed in flannel, holding my son’s hand. A fall afternoon with a pumpkin patch on the horizon. The scent of cinnamon and warm spice in the air.

A swell of panic rushes over me. Panic that this isn’t permanent, and it never can be. Every bit of good I feel right now is temporary, and there’s no way around that.

“Austin, why don’t you come back with me?”

Chap's brows crinkle but he encourages Austin to listen as he says, "Go ahead. Your mama wants you."

"No. I'm good here." Austin grips Chap's hand tighter.

I knew this was a bad idea.

"You listen to your mama. Hold her hand." His command is immediately obeyed and Austin links into me with a groan.

"Fine, but I'm holding Chap's again when we get the pumpkins."

"Deal, and we're treating you to this hayride, Chap. Let me go grab the tickets."

He pulls three from his back pocket. "I grabbed them online last night to avoid an argument here this morning." His eyes narrow. "I hope that's okay."

"You'll have to let me repay you somehow."

"No need. You overpaid for that auction last night. This is the least I can do."

I leave out the part about the auction being an early birthday gift from Grace and watch as he lifts Austin up onto the back of the wagon and reaches back for my hand.

I slide into his large palm and let go the second I'm tucked into the hay. There are so many out of towners on the back of this tractor that we could be anywhere. No one knows Chap, or me, or Austin. For the first time since the fall started, I'm glad for the autonomy.

Here in this haze of strangers, I pretend that this is my family. I pretend that this big, hot man belongs to me. *That I belong to him.* I pretend that we're out for a day of family fun before we head back to the house where I make us a warm meal and the big guy and Austin tend to the animals out back. I pretend that when night falls and Austin is in bed, the big, hot man and I do dirty, filthy things that these small-town people wouldn't dare even think about.

A rush of excitement filters through me at the thought, which is my signal to push it away again.

"Do you guys do anything with the pumpkin seeds?" Chap's arm lands behind me. I could easily lean into his strong solid body.

"Umm... sometimes we roast them, but I forget some years. You?"

"Haven't carved a pumpkin in years, but my grandmother used to make pies from all the insides. After we were through tossing them at each other... of course."

“You know, growing up, Halloween was never a huge deal. We kind of skipped right to Christmas. I don’t even remember trick-or-treating much.”

“Do you take Austin out?”

“Only because the people here get into it. Main Street is totally decked out, and all the shop owners stand outside with buckets of candy. It’s easier since the houses are all spread apart so much out here. Austin loves it.”

“What are you dressing up as, bud?” Chap directs his question toward Austin who’s sitting quietly picking at pieces of hay. I swear this is a different kid.

“Batman.” Austin’s voice deepens as he talks. “Mom is making my costume.”

“I love it. My mom used to make my costumes, too. They’re so much better than store bought. You can really make it unique.”

“Yeah. Mom is putting turbo blasters on my back so I can be a flying Batman. No one else is going to be a flying Batman.”

“That’s awesome. A much more futuristic Batman.”

“He glides with his cape... usually.”

“But not Austin Wayne, future Batman.” The wagon stops near the pumpkin patch, and everyone files out into the field on the search.

Austin runs straight toward the biggest, lumpiest, dirtiest pumpkin in the patch. “This is the one! He’s disgusting! I need him!”

“He’s too big to carry out, kiddo. Let’s pick a small—”

“He’s not too big. I can get him.” Chap snaps the pumpkin off the stalk and lifts it in his arms without a grunt, as though the pumpkin were a marshmallow.

“See, Mom. Chap’s got it!”

“Mr. Chap,” I correct.

“Chap is fine,” he says, carrying the pumpkin to the edge of the wagon. “Now you have to pick one.”

“Me? What do I need a pumpkin for?”

“We’re carving them tomorrow night, remember?”

I twist the ends of my hair. An attempt to calm my nerves. “Did I say that? I thought we were considering that as an option.”

“Are you saying you’re not inviting me back for a pumpkin carving party?” Chap’s face downturns playfully. “I’m a big guy, but I have feelings.”

“Yeah, Mom. Pick a pumpkin!” Austin’s face lights and he weaves

his hand into mine. “You too, Chap... Mr. Chap. We can carve them together.”

Together. We can all carve them together. I like the way it sounds so much that I allow myself to bend into the patch and choose the roundest pumpkin within eyeshot. Chap chooses one as well. A big one with lumps and a curly stalk.

“It’s a plan then. Tomorrow night, carving party.” His grin is so genuine that my chest tightens on command.

“Yay!” Austin jumps in place. This is the happiest I’ve seen him in years, maybe ever. How could one afternoon have such an effect on him?

I should stop this. If I have any sense about me, I’ll stop this. The fact that I’m getting attached to Chap after two meetings means that Austin is most definitely fond of him too. I should end this before I’m in a mess I can’t get out of.

But before I get the chance, the guy on the tractor is blowing a whistle to direct everyone back from the patch, and we’re bumping along the path back toward the little market at the top of the hill where the truck is parked.

“If tomorrow night doesn’t work, we can always reschedule.” Chap helps Austin and I out of the wagon, then piles all the pumpkins into his arms, and carries them toward the truck.

“No. Tomorrow night works. It’ll give me a chance to make you dinner. What do you like?”

“Anything easy.”

“Steak and potatoes? I think I have some corn from the garden I can bring in.”

He sets the pumpkins into the back of the truck and rounds to help Austin and I in again. “Don’t go out of your way. I’ll help you.”

Okay, this is some kind of cruel joke. What did I do to deserve this? The most perfect man walks into my life, *does* everything right, *says* everything right, and he’s completely off the table? Someone somewhere has a hexing doll and they’re using it to hurt me.

For part of the ride back to the cabin, Austin rattles off stories about superheroes and tells Chap about the sled he wants for Christmas. Chap returns his conversation with stories about his own childhood and how he’d help Austin build a sled of his own.

All the while, I stare out the window watching the colors on the maple trees blow in the wind, wondering how I’m ever going to get this man out of

my head.

Chapter Four

Chap

“Do you have a second?” Mrs. Robinson is always happy to take my calls, but today she sounds even more enthralled about a life update.

“Oh, dear. Yes I do! How did last night go?”

“You know Lily, and you didn’t tell me.”

“Oh.” I hear the grin in her voice. “I know her a little. Her son Austin helps me out sometimes. He’s a nice boy. How did the night go?”

I sigh and scrub my hand down over my beard. I’ve never spoken openly about a woman before. Mostly because there’s never been a woman, but I need to get this off my chest, and Mrs. Robinson is the one person I know I can trust with anything. “I like her.”

“You like her? What does that mean?”

“It means that I had a lovely day with her and Austin at the pumpkin patch, and when it was time to say goodbye, I could barely get the words out of my mouth.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I hugged her, and we went our separate ways. I’m going back tomorrow night to carve pumpkins. She had to work this afternoon.”

“That’s wonderful news, dear! Are you going to kiss her?”

“Kiss her? I don’t think I should kiss her.”

“But do you want to?”

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Honestly? She’s too young for me.”

“You’re making excuses, dear. She’s young, but not too young. She could use a man like you.”

“Well, that’s not an option... is it?”

“Isn’t it, though? You’ve been waiting to be ordained for years. Maybe there’s another path for you. Maybe you need to have a talk with God. Pray on it. That’s what you do, right?”

I bury my head against my palm as I hold the phone in front of me. There’s no good answer here. I know that as well as anyone. The whole point of my journey is to refuse *all* temptation. If I don’t refuse this, then who am I?

Mrs. Robinson lowers her tone to a gentle whisper as she says, “You’ve paid for your sins, Chap. If you take a few minutes of life to explore something for yourself, I’m sure God will understand.”

“I’ve been searching for purpose and meaning for so long, Mrs. R.”

“If it’s about purpose alone, you know damn well that woman would give you purpose. If you feel anything for her at all, you should explore it. People like that don’t fall out of the sky.”

Making sense of what I feel for Lily is complicated. I’ve never felt a pull like her in my life. She’s a super nova and I’m a black hole, desperate to absorb every piece of her.

“I love you, Mrs. R. I’m going to lay down for a little bit.”

“It’s only seven p.m. You’ll be up all night. Do you want me to send over some leftover chili?”

“Thank you, but I’m good for now. I’ll give you a ring tomorrow night.”

“Okay, honey. Talk to you then. I expect all the details.”

My stomach tightens as I disconnect the line and lay back in bed. The ceiling fan spins above me one sharp blade at a time, over and over again, taunting me with indecision.

Why is this happening, God? What lesson am I learning here? What am I supposed to do with this? I’ve lived my life knowing that everything happens for a reason. Did I meet Lily for a reason?

Lily. An image of her curved body frames itself in my mind. Her tight jeans, that cute, white top with buttons that looked like cats. Her long blonde hair on her shoulder. Her soft curves that spill and taper. She’s gorgeous. She’s perfection. Her mind, her body, the way she speaks, the way she moves. Every detail about this woman is an aspect of life I’ve been missing.

My cock stiffens beneath the sheets.

Damn it!

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly, willing my mind to think of motorcycles or squirrels... but nothing replaces her. Every vision is of Lily. Lily bending forward to pick that pumpkin. Lily nervously talking about her day. Lily and all those curves in that dress last night.

My cock throbs harder.

I rarely masturbate. Deep down, I know it’s a sin and I try to avoid it at all costs, but right now it might be the lesser of two evils. If I release thinking of her, maybe I’ll dodge the bigger bullet, which is claiming her for

my own.

Convincing myself that jerking off is the better option, I reach beneath the sheet and touch myself, jerking to the thought of her soft skin against mine.

Forgive me, Lord.

I jerk faster, harder, letting the filthiest thoughts of Lily take me closer to the edge.

I could tell she'd like to be dominated. *Would she like it if I landed my hand on her throat and backed her against a wall? Would she like it if I told her to get on her knees? Would she like it if I bent her over, gripped her hips, and pressed into her like she was the only one?*

My thighs tense and I pump harder, faster, imagining what she tastes like, what her thighs would feel like pressed against my face, what she'd sound like calling out my name.

What's wrong with me? What's happening?

God, give me a sign. *Something.* Tell me to stop. Tell me to go after her. Direct me toward the path that makes the most sense.

I'm not sure many men pray for guidance when they're masturbating, but here I am in a labyrinth of mental confusion and pleasure that I can't find my way out of.

I jerk quicker as the image of her round breasts pressed against my chest comes into mind. Her hard nipples were like spears poking against me. *I want her. I need her.*

My stomach tightens and my thighs tense. I'm going to come. For the first time in years, I'm about to come to the thought of a woman I can't stand the thought of being away from.

Fucking hell!

As tension builds, my phone rings on the bedside table and I glance to see her number populate on my screen.

I swear this might be the only thing on Earth right now that could get my hand off my cock. Maybe this is the sign I was looking for.

"Hey." I sound breathless and I hate myself for all the dirty, impure things I was just thinking.

"Hi, Mr. Chap. It's me, Austin."

I clear my throat. "Austin, what's wrong? You're on your mom's phone. Isn't she at work?"

"No. She isn't feeling good. She laid down and I'm trying to make her

soup, but I don't know how. Do you know how to make pumpkin soup?"

I sit up from the bed. It's odd that Lily didn't go to work. Grace was there to meet us when we got back. I thought she was watching Austin for the afternoon.

"Where is Grace?"

"Oh, she's here, but she's busy doing the knot thing with yarn."

"The knot thing with yarn?"

"Yeah, the sticks and the yarn and you tie it around in circles or something."

"She's crocheting?"

"Yeah. Plus, she doesn't know how to make soup. Can you come over?"

"Does your mom have a cough, bud?"

"No. She said she has a migraine, but I bet soup would still help her."

I sit up from bed and toss on my jeans, then the flannel I was wearing earlier. Maybe this is the sign I needed. Then again, maybe it's nothing more than a woman with a headache and a kid who knows how to use a phone.

It's hard to tell what kind of mysteries the universe has in store, but something is drawing me toward Lily. And right now, a little bit of something is all I need.

Chapter Five

Lily

When I open my eyes, it's nearly two a.m. *Two!* How did I sleep for so long?

Austin! Oh my god.

I peel up from the bed and dart into the living room. I didn't intend to fall asleep. I thought I'd lay down for a minute and send Grace home before it got too late. I know she has to work in the morning.

"You okay?" A deep voice startles me from behind. "We were getting worried about you."

I jump in place and spin toward the voice that I want all over me. "Oh my god! Chap. What the hell are you doing here?" Suddenly I'm overly aware of my messy hair and the short t-shirt I'm wearing.

"Austin called. He wanted help with pumpkin soup for you."

"Pumpkin soup?"

"I think he was trying to be nice, given the conversation we had earlier about all the pump—"

"No, I get it, but where's Grace? She was supposed to—"

"She said she had to work in the morning, so I offered to stay. I hope that's okay. Austin was insisting, and you didn't feel good, so I thought it was—"

"No. It's not okay. We barely know each other, and I don't need Austin getting all attached to you. What good does that do anyone?"

He steps forward and lands his hand on my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"*What's going on?* What's going on is, I had a headache, and I thought my best friend was coming over. Instead, I wake up to a strange man who's playing father with my kid. I like you, Chap. I *really* like you, but what are we doing? This isn't normal. I can't handle watching Austin's heart break when you walk away."

"What about your heart? Will your heart break if I walk away?"

"What?" I shake my head. "What are you asking me? Do you want my heart to break?"

"No." He pauses then catches my gaze. "I want to push you up against

that wall and kiss you like you've never been kissed. I want to lay you back on that couch until your body and mine are one. I want to know what it feels like to touch you and hear you moan out in my ear." His voice shakes when he speaks, and I swear I hear his heartbeat through his chest.

I swallow hard. "So, what happens if you do that? What happens if you touch me, Chap? What happens if you let yourself go?"

His breath picks up and his jaw tightens. He's struggling with himself, and I don't know how to help him.

"Look," I finally say, "you should go."

His gaze lifts. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." It's a lie, and it sounds like a lie.

"You're not better. What happened tonight? You were feeling fine earlier."

"You're a human lie detector too? You're here to tell me my head isn't really hurting... because it is." I know I'm being a bitch, but getting close to him only makes things more complicated.

"Sit down and talk to me." His tone is commanding like it had been with Austin earlier, and I want to listen, but instead, I fold my arms over one another and lean against the back wall. "There's nothing to say. Where is Austin?"

"He's in bed. It's two in the morning. He did make you that soup, though. It's in the fridge. Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

I wet my lips and stare at the man before me. Even in the middle of the night, he's hot as hell. Heck, maybe more so. His hair is sticking up weird and his beard is frayed and wild. He's still wearing the flannel, but it's unbuttoned, and the sleeves are rolled as high as they go. "There's nothing wrong. I told you."

"Talk to me." His tone is low and straightforward. "I know what happened today. I was there too. You felt something."

"I told you I don't want to get close to you! What's the point? You have other plans for your life and that's all reasonable. I—"

He steps toward me. "You're scared. I'm scared."

"I'm not scared." I look away then back again slowly. He's stalking closer. His giant body moves like a ball of heat that's blazing straight through me, setting fire to every bit of rationalization I have left.

"You're terrified, angel, and so am I," his thumb tips beneath my chin, "but I have to know what happens here. Don't you?"

A lump grows in my throat as I stare at the giant in front of me. *What is he saying? Why is he calling me an angel? Why do I like it?*

“Tell me today wasn’t perfect. Tell me that last night didn’t feel like magic and I’ll stop.”

“There are so many reasons for you to stop. What about the part where you can’t do this? You belong to God.”

“I asked for a sign and Austin called me.” He shrugs. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Lily. That has to mean something.”

“You will. You’ll stop eventually. I’m just me and it’s only been two days. I can’t be the reason you don’t do the thing you’ve always wanted to do.”

He sighs long and hard, his hand still beneath my chin, drawing my gaze toward his. “I’ve lived my life for God, and I’ll always live my life for God, but maybe, I’ve been mishearing his guidance. Maybe I was meant to meet you. Maybe I was meant to meet Austin. Maybe you were meant to get that headache and I was meant to be here, right now, with my hands on you.”

“Or,” I sigh, trying to stop my heart from racing out of my body, “you’re making a huge mistake. You ever think of that?”

He stares up at the ceiling then returns his gaze to mine as his lips angle closer toward me. “You will never be a mistake. You are the sweetest, most beautiful soul I have ever met, and I want you, Lily. I want you for good. Tell me how you feel. What was tonight about?”

I draw in a deep breath, trying to ignore the way his words make my clit throb. “Today felt like everything I ever wanted, Chap, and that made me sad because I know deep down that even if you give into me on some whim right now, you’ll regret it. And if I let myself care about you, I’ll only get hurt. Anyway, I think the stress of Austin’s school and everything got to me, hence the migraine. I’m okay now. You should go before you say anything else we can’t come back from.”

The giant looks down at me. His hand touches the side of my face, the other resting on my hip. His gaze is soft and warm, like a hug. And while there’s something about him that makes me believe every word he says, I feel stupid for believing it.

This isn’t one of Grace’s books. This is real life. In real life, priests are priests, and single mothers stay single. This isn’t real. Men don’t stay. Men leave. All this is going to cause is pain.

He leans in. “If you don’t want me forever, that’s fine. I’ll respect

that... but let me kiss you just once. One kiss, and we let fate do the rest.”

“I don’t believe in fate, Chap. I believe in hormones, and our hormones are definitely going crazy right now.”

“Fate is what brought us here, Lily. Fate gave us the hormones we’re feeling. If we kiss and they all go away, then I’ll agree with you, and leave without another thought. But if I kiss you right now and I feel half of what I think I’m about to feel, I’m laying you down in that bed and I’m not letting go. Not now, not ever. The choice is yours.”

He stares down at me, his lips slightly parted, his biceps firm and flexing. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

I should tell him just that. I should tell him to stop. I should tell him to stop, and I should show him the door, lock it behind him, then find chains to keep it that way, and never open it again. *Not ever.*

Instead, my clit throbs and my heart hammers against my chest. As wrong as it is, I want Chap.

My gaze drops to his lips and toward his eyes again. Over and over, we’re stuck in a dance of temptation that neither want to escape. He leans into my lips, kissing me with an ache in the back of his throat as though he’s needed me for an eternity.

Wild thoughts run through me. A future, a home, a tiny little cabin in the woods, a dozen horses, a happy Austin, a wedding by the river, a baby bump, a million days just like yesterday where we’re doing nothing, but everything is happening. A million days where we’re just... *happy.*

I’m not sure I’ve ever had that thought with anyone. There have always been questions in my mind. Questions that wouldn’t rest. *Would this work? How could it work? What about the way he talked to me the day before?* If I’m honest with myself, with Chap, there’s none of that.

His lips press into mine rough and hard. His beard scratches my face, and I’m surrounded by the scent of pine and cedar on his skin. He’s soft but firm in his grip on me, and I feel the shake in his frame as he holds me. I wonder if it’s fear or an unsettled urge that he’s been fighting off for his entire life.

His tongue sweeps past mine, and he growls low as he pulls away. His tone is low and ragged as he says, “Are you going to tell me to stop? You should if you want me to. I’m not sure what’s going to happen next.”

I believe him. There’s an edge to his tone, a wild fever in his gaze, an unevenness in his breath. He is going feral, and judging by my nodding head,

I'm about to go with him.

Chapter Six

Chap

There's not enough air left on Earth to fill my lungs.

Lily leans into me, filing her fingers through the hair on my chest.

She's so damn perfect. Her long wavy hair, the soft sigh that keeps landing on my neck, the way her ragged breath warms my ear.

"I need to hear you say it. Give me consent," I growl.

"Are you sure you want it? Maybe I should be strong and stop you before you make a huge mistake."

"Are we still on that? I told you. You're not a mistake, angel. You're about to be the one thing I got right in life. Tell me you feel the same way."

Her gaze draws up toward mine. "You are the sweetest, toughest looking man that ever lived, and you know that despite my better judgment, I feel the exact same way about you, but you need to promise me you're not going anywhere. You're here for good."

"Oh, honey, I'd take you out back right now and marry you if I could."

She bites her bottom lip and steps toward me. "You're all I want, Chap. Touch me."

She's sweet and soft like honey against my skin. And while I want to devour her all at once, I take my time admiring every inch of her feminine frame. The curves and valleys. The way her ass rounds out. The soft sounds she makes with each touch. She's perfection, every inch of her.

I drag my hand to the base of her t-shirt and lift the thin fabric up and over her arms, exposing her bare breasts and white cotton panties. I've seen a naked woman before on a few occasions. Mostly in movies, but this is like nothing that's ever happened before. She's here in front of me, her breasts heavy and swinging, her nipples hard and pert.

My tongue salivates at the thought of licking them, suckling her.

Her hand reaches out toward mine and she lands my palm on her breast, smiling. "Your hands are rough."

"Sorry, I—"

"I like it. I want them everywhere, Chap. It's okay to touch me. Touch me however you'd like."

At forty-nine years old, it's embarrassing to have never touched a woman, but with Lily, I'm glad I waited. I'm glad I have this to give to her. This moment of virgin touch.

With one hand on her breast, she guides the other toward her core. I palm over her panties, pressing the heel of my hand against her center until she moans. With that, I continue, again and again, pressing and rubbing my palm against her until she's moaning out, pressing her body against mine.

My cock is hard, aching to be let free from my jeans.

"It's okay to tell me what you want, Chap. I want to give it to you."

"I don't want to be too forceful with you. I don't know my limits yet, you know? I'm feeling pretty wild right now. I could hurt you."

She smiles and looks toward the ground. "You're not going to hurt me."

"I could. I'm so much bigger than you."

"Okay, if you're worried about it, give me a safe word. If I holler it out, you know to give me a break."

I nod. "A safe word. Like what? Alligator?"

She kisses my chest and runs her hand over the buckle of my belt. "Alligator it is." My jeans fall to the floor and my hard cock springs to life in her hand. "I'm glad we have a safe word, actually." She smiles. "I didn't realize what we were working with here. You're huge. This might actually hurt."

I lean in and kiss the top of her head as I tug her panties to the ground. "We'll go slow, angel."

She nods and whimpers as my bare hand lands on her smooth, plump entrance.

Damn this is nice. She's soft like velvet, and whimpers and jolts with every touch as though she's a live wire and I'm the electricity.

My cock grows harder with every jump, and I cradle her face in my hands, kissing her lips deeply as I slide a finger into her soft mound as she strokes my length in her hands.

In and out, over and over, I finger her pussy, playing in the silky juices she's making before sliding the fingers into my mouth to lick them clean.

She's delicious, and like a starved dog with his first bite of food, I come alive. Every moment in my life, leading to this moment, was nothing until right now. Right now, I'm on drugs. I'm high on cocaine. I'm desperate

for a fix.

I growl and wrap my arms around her body, squeezing her ass gently before roaming up and over her breasts again.

Lily moans, brushing her soft pink pussy against my hard cock.

“Are you going to be a good little angel and bend over for me?”

She nods and bends onto the couch, presenting her dripping wet pussy like a pretty little package that’s desperate to be eaten.

I run my hand over the lips and bend down toward her, sucking and licking her clit, until she’s jumping and convulsing against my beard.

How have I lived without her? How have I gotten by without the sweet taste of this angel in my mouth, on my lips, against my tongue?

“I don’t have a condom. That’s a problem.” I say it out loud before contemplating a solution.

“That’s okay. We don’t need one.”

“I won’t be able to pull out. I don’t trust myself.”

“Don’t then. We’re good. Just come inside me. Please!” There’s desperation in her tone. An ache I’ve never heard from another human being. It’s deep and yearning, impatient and frantic.

Kneading her ass, I work toward her entrance, sliding the head of my cock against her silky wet slit before pushing in further.

There’s no thought to the movement, only need. Raw, wild, need and I’m here for all of it.

Her hair drapes against the side of her shoulder and onto the bed as I push into her core, thrusting harder and harder. My hands drive into her hips and my biceps lock as I thrust faster, watching as the vibrations send a ripple through her ass and into her shoulders.

I lean forward and tuck my hand onto her breast. She’s sticky with sweat, and as I wrap around her, I can’t help but feel like this is where I’m supposed to be. Against her skin, on her body, next to her beating heart.

I thrust harder. “You’re so wet, angel. Are you going to come for me?”

She whimpers in succession, an answer of sorts, as I reach around and circle her clit with my thumb. This is another first, but she reacts to my touch as though she likes what I’m doing, so I go faster, thrusting and circling until I’m so drunk with her panting and moaning that I empty myself inside of her with a loud, deep moan.

I’ve never felt anything like this in my life. It’s euphoric and as every

nerve in my body fires, all I see is black. My eyes open slowly and the room spins. I pump in and out of Lily slower now.

The series of rhythms against her small frame excites her until she's thrusting against me aching for relief. "*More! More! More!*" she shouts, as tiny convulsions take her over, leaving behind whimpered aftershocks that shake through the both of us.

I expect her to be finished, but she turns back and lands her lips on my cock, sucking and licking the fragile afterglow off as my heart slams against my chest. I fist into her hair and growl out as she pulls her lips off of me.

With her gaze on me and her pouted lips parted, she backs off gently. "Sorry. I had to know what we tasted like together."

I grin. "That's something we're never going to be sorry about, okay?"

She turns back toward me, straddling my lap as I sit back on the couch. "Deal. How are you feeling? Do you regret anything?"

My brows narrow as I smooth up and down her back, tickling the last bits of sensation out of her. "I don't regret a second of that. Do you?"

She smiles that gorgeous grin that I can't get enough of. "No. Not a second."

"That's good because you're stuck with me now."

She leans into my lips, kissing me gently, the salty taste of our pleasure on her mouth. "You're sure about that?"

"I'd bet everything on it."

She laughs. "So... you're gambling again? What have I done to you?"

"Ah, I'd guess this is the safest bet around."

I grip the back of her neck and pull her close to me, landing my lips on hers again and again until the sweet moan I've been working for echoes into my mouth.

For some people, a sign from God is in the patterns of the trees or a message in a dream. For others, like me, it's a gut feeling. A late night call. A bowl of pumpkin soup.

Epilogue

Lily

Two Weeks Later

“Have you seen Grace? She said she wanted to be a part of opening day.”

Chap looks toward me with bloodshot eyes. He’s exhausted. Every day this week he’s been at the lodge late getting everything ready for the grand opening. Of course, there were last-minute changes that needed to be made with electrical and there was an issue getting enough salmon in from local fisherman for the first night menu, but I think everything is worked out now.

“I’m sure she’ll turn up. She took the job in the kitchen because she wanted the experience. She wouldn’t miss opening day, right?”

“I don’t think she would, but it’s not like her to have missed a day calling me either. Should I try her cell again?”

“You’ve already tried three or four times, right?”

I nod and shake off my worries. Today is about the guys at the MC. They’ve worked for months to get this lodge open and today is finally the day. We need to celebrate. And the truth is, Grace is probably fine. She was hanging off some guy the last I saw her. I’m sure she’s busy getting all the rough sex she can handle. That’s her thing. I know because she talks about sex nonstop. Mostly from the books she reads. Now she’s into big, burly kidnapers. Go figure.

I tip up onto my toes and kiss Chap. We’ve only been married for a week, but it may as well be a lifetime. When he shared the news of his desire to no longer pursue the priesthood, his bishop sought an exception for him to remain a married, permanent deacon. It fit everyone’s motivations. As a result, we had to be married before they gave him the permanent role. But trust me, I’m not complaining. Every day since has been a dream.

“You’re going to do great today.” I tip up onto my toes and kiss his lips. “You’re great at everything.”

He narrows his brows playfully. “I don’t know where you get your information, but I feel as though you’re misguided.”

“Not true! You managed to get Austin to behave so well in school that

they gave him another chance, you got Grace a job in the bakery here so I could take my dream job at the library, and you love me. I'd say you're winning at life."

He smiles and pulls me against his chest as the guys take to the front porch to give a welcome speech to the crowd of people camped out in front of the lodge.

The crowd is large. I'd guess around five hundred in attendance. Today kicks off not only the opening of the lodge, but Henry, the guy who owns most of the land up here, will be naming off a few of the winter festivities that are happening up here this year.

"Before we get into everything, I'd like to hand the mic over to my good buddy Chap who has something he'd like to share with all of you." Henry waves Chap toward the stage.

My heart stiffens. I didn't know Chap was talking today. I'd have made him a bigger breakfast, and wished him luck. God, have I been so absorbed with figuring out where Grace ran off to that I let this slip?

Chap kisses my hand and takes to the porch, standing toward the microphone, but his body is still facing me. How does he look better and better with each passing day?

"As many of you know, my path in life has always been with the church. But recently, I found God taking me on a new journey. A path with a woman you all know and love, Ms. Lily Waters. Well, recently Mrs. Lily Byrne." He waves me toward him, and though my stomach hardens into a knot, I follow his lead. "Thank you to those of you who made it to our wedding down by the river last week. We were so happy to have shared that experience with you."

I can't figure what this is about. Chap tells me everything. I wouldn't have missed this.

"Most of you know that Lily has a son, Austin. He's seven years old, and boy has that kid quickly become a son to me." Chap glances toward me. "Today, I'm lucky enough to make that official."

My stomach tightens and tears spill off my cheeks as Chap shows me the paperwork he's holding.

"The lawyer said this would take months. How did you..."

"I sent a guy out to rush the signing." Tears fall off Chap's cheek.

I'm frozen still, and while I know I should say something, the words won't come out.

Instead, I nod over and over as fast as I can, tears falling in succession as Austin bounds up onto the stage and buries himself in Chap's arms.

"You're going to be my dad?"

"If you'll have me, buddy."

I land against his chest, breathing him in as he holds Austin close.

Chap leans in and lands a kiss on my lips, my cheek, my neck, scrubbing his beard against my skin as he moves. With every moment we share together, I believe it's the best I'm ever going to have, and then another one spills in to surprise me.

How is this happening? How am I finally happy? How did I find the man I was supposed to be with and how did we end up here on the porch of this gorgeous lodge holding my son? Holding *our* son.

Henry takes the stage and diverts the cheering crowd back to the opening of the lodge. I'm sure he goes on and on about cookies, gingerbread houses, raffles and rooms and dates, but all I can focus on is the love of my life and the way he holds my son. The way he makes us smile. The way he loves with all his heart. There's never been a luckier girl, I'm sure of it.

"You two make an adorable couple." Mrs. Robinson meets us at the side of the porch and reaches toward us for a hug. "I expect loads of visits."

"You got it," Chap says kissing her forehead. "We expect them too. You're welcome any time. I've got a boy here that's going to be learning the ranch. I know you have some good advice to share about that."

Mrs. Robinson bends down and ruffles Austin's hair. "You're in for a world of fun out there in the woods with your dad. He's got some of the best building skills on the mountain."

"I know!" Austin chirps. "We've been building a sled for winter. I can't wait to see it go!"

Mrs. Robinson smiles. "You are a beautiful family. Cherish it every day."

I can't imagine not cherishing this.

"Hey, you haven't seen Grace, have you? She was supposed to be here today, but she hasn't showed yet."

"Why yes, dear. She stopped by for some advice a few days ago. She said she'd met a man. They were going to check out some rockers for the lodge. Diesel said they were too short for the porch. She said they'd be back by this evening in time for dinner service."

Okay. This makes more sense now.

Chap hugs Mrs. Robinson and Austin and I follow his lead as we help her up onto the porch and into the empty rocker.

She pulls out an envelope. “Here. I want you to take this and put it toward Austin. Something he loves. Something he’ll have fun with.”

My brows crinkle as I open the envelope to see a stack of hundred-dollar bills lined up next to one another. “What? No. We can’t take this. It’s too much.”

“Nonsense, dear. I want you to have it. I can’t take any of it where I’m going.”

“Stop!” Chap pats her playfully. “You’re here for a long time yet. Hate to tell you. And we’re not taking that money. You’re on a fixed income, remember?”

“I’ve got plenty of money, dear. More money than I know what to do with.”

His brows wrinkle. “Then why didn’t you bid more the other night at the auction? It’s our thing. You win me, then I take you for whiskey shots.”

She smiles gently. “Everything happens for a reason, doesn’t it?”

Chap and I glance toward each other, and I lean against his chest full of love and hope for the life we’re about to live.

“Yes,” he says, kissing my forehead. “Everything does happen for a reason.”

Thank you for reading!

[Read Grace’s story next!](#)



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

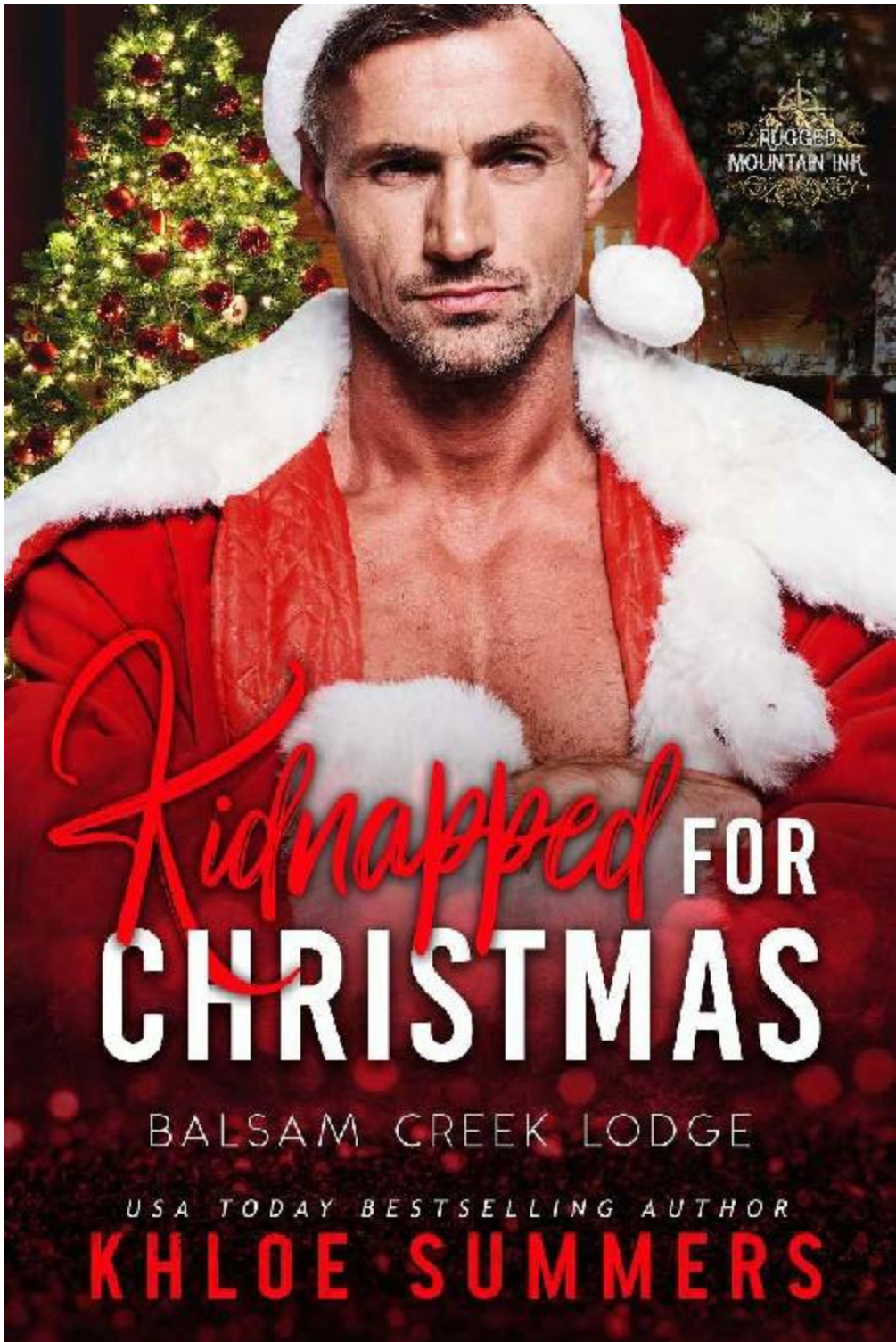
Khloe lives with her husband, (who she affectionately calls Daddy) in sunny Florida. They spend most of their free time sinking their toes in the sand, eating too many pizzas, and hollering obscenities at the TV on football Sunday. (At least he does. She sits on the sidelines and quietly orders nonsense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

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

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KHLOE SUMMERS

Chapter One

Grace

The secret to making good gingerbread is how long you chill the dough. Some people swear by an hour, but I've tried that, and the cookie always ends up soft. I'm looking for crisp, hard edges. A sturdy Christmas cookie that can hold up to all the icing and candy kids will be piling on top.

"How many trays do you have left?" Arnie scrubs his hand down over his beard. It's been a long day. We should've left the lodge two hours ago, but it's crunch time. The motorcycle club spent almost a year building this place. Now it's our job to make Balsam Creek Lodge a destination people look forward to coming to.

I blow out a heavy breath. "I still have to finish these two trays and there's another four to go in. I'll be here another few hours. You go ahead home."

He lowers his head and stares at me with the downturned look of a dad who knows better than to leave a single woman alone on the road at night. "I'm not leaving you here. We had an inch of snow fall already and there's more to come. I'd feel better if I stayed."

I shake my head and peek into the oven. The cookies are puffing, and the scent of ginger and cinnamon fills the room. "This isn't about the snow. You're worried about Jack showing up. I told you he's all talk, and no bite."

Arnie is the cook for the lodge and though he's in his late forties and I'm only twenty-six, we've found an odd friendship in each other. He looks out for me, and I cause him a never-ending train of headaches. It's our thing.

I roll my eyes and open the oven door, letting the heat blast my face warm as I pull the sheet pan. "Seriously, I'll be fine. Go get started on your weekend."

"Oh..." Arnie laughs under his breath. "Well, if it's that easy, I guess I'll leave you here to do your thing." I know he's being sarcastic.

I settle the tray on the counter and slide the next two into the oven. "You know, we shouldn't focus on me so much. What we should be doing is looking for a date for you."

I think this is one of the conversations that causes him so many headaches. I can't figure why he's single. A big guy with loads of tattoos that

likes to listen to your problems, you'd think he'd have been snatched up years ago.

"I don't need a date. I told you and everyone else here that. I'm good being single. Besides, my plate is already full. My daughter just came back into my life, and I barely have enough time for her as it is. The last thing I need is a love life to figure out." He smiles. "Not to mention, you don't make it look that appealing."

"Not everyone is like Jack. Jack is a special case."

"I think a man who takes you out of town and leaves you at a rest stop is more than a '*special case*.' He's certifiable." Arnie has been upset about this since it happened two weeks ago.

"He's a hot head. That's all."

"You're making excuses for him."

I grab the spatula off the counter and transfer the baked cookies to the cooling rack. "I'm not making excuses. I feel dumb."

Arnie grabs a piece of broken gingerbread from the counter and groans with delight as he bites into the warm morsel. If he wasn't twenty years older than me, I'd be into him. Aside from the fact that he's hot as hell, he's the most emotionally in tune man I've ever met. Sure, he has his moments of barbaric nonsense, but for the most part, Arnie's age brings him a wisdom that men in my dating pool don't have.

"You're not dumb." His big, rough hand lands on my shoulder. "You trusted someone. You're human."

"Human? That seems like a really low bar." I blow out a heavy breath and stare down at the cooling cookies. "Do you think I made enough?"

"I'd say so. There's wha—"

"Gracie," a deep voice interrupts. I recognize it immediately and lift my gaze to meet Jack's. He's standing in the back door of the kitchen in tight black jeans and a black hoodie. Dark shadows line under his eyes and the scent of alcohol spilling off him overpowers the sweet scent of ginger in the air. "We need to talk. You've been avoiding me."

Arnie steps between us, widening his shoulders. "There's nothing to talk about. Leave." His tone is deep and harsh. It's a version of Arnie I don't usually experience, but I hear the built-up rage in his tone and I'm not sure I've ever felt so protected.

Jack steps forward, tightening his fists.

Alone, Jack is a big guy. I'd say he's six foot two and maybe two

hundred and twenty pounds. Tattoos cover his arms and neck, and there's an air about him that's dark and dangerous. As sick as it is, that's what drew him to me in the beginning. But next to Arnie, Jack may as well be a toddler.

Arnie steps forward, towering over Jack in both height and stature. "I said, leave."

Jack stares up at Arnie, then back toward me. "Gracie invited me here, old man."

"I didn't invite you here." I step forward, sliding between the two men. I don't want Arnie getting into trouble. Jack has connections all over the Springs. I know his dad is a big federal defense attorney and half his family works for the police department up there as well.

Jack grins. "The last time we spoke, you told me to stop by and see you."

"That was before you left me at the rest stop." I blink hard multiple times, trying to make sense of the crazy that's spilling from his lips.

He laughs. "You're so dramatic. I didn't *leave you* at the rest stop. I told you I was leaving, and you refused to come."

"You what? *No!* I told you I needed more quality time together, and you stormed off."

"Storming off is a pretty big indicator that I'm going to leave." He laughs.

I stare toward him, wondering how I ever looked past his way of thinking for nearly six months. "I think we're good here. You can go."

His grin gets wider and reaches around me, taking a perfectly crisp gingerbread off the counter. "I'm not going anywhere."

I'm not sure what I'm angrier about. The fact that he's ruined a perfectly good cookie, or the fact that he's so arrogant.

Arnie's big hands land on my shoulder and he carefully moves me to the side before stepping toward Jack. His fists are balled, and though I reach forward to stop him from doing anything he'll regret, he continues with his punch regardless.

Jack is unphased. He wipes blood from his cracked lip and chuckles. "An old man that can throw an actual punch. I'm impressed. Why are you fighting for her, though? You two have something going on?"

Arnie hauls back and punches him again. This time Jack lands on his back, sliding against the tile floor with a heavy thud.

I'd love to say he's learned his lesson, but the man is still laughing.

Arnie stalks toward him, gripping the back of his collar before tossing him out of the side door and locking it behind him.

“I’m so sorry. Are you okay?” I reach out for his hand as I run the warm water in the sink. He’s split his knuckles with the punches. “I’ll get the gingerbread out of the oven, and we should head out for tonight.”

“You’re not going home.” Arnie’s gaze meets mine with more seriousness than I’ve ever seen from his gentle eyes.

I smile and grab a towel from beneath the sink, blotting the water off his cracked hand. “And where am I going?”

“With me.”

“With you where?” I laugh. “Your cabin? No, I’m fine. Jack was drinking. Couldn’t you smell it all over him? He acts stupid when he drinks.”

“The man acts stupid all the damn time. I don’t care what made him come here. I’m not letting you go home alone.”

I twist off the sink and leave the towel wrapped around Arnie’s hand. I appreciate his concern, and while I agree Jack is a complete psycho, I don’t think he’d follow me home. He’s had the opportunity to come after me for weeks now and he hasn’t.

“You’re sweet, and I appreciate you, but we have this gingerbread contest in two days. I need a good night’s sleep.”

“Nope.” He slides the first two cooling racks into the fridge. “I’m off the next two days, and so are you.”

“Technically, but I should come in to bake since I still have thousands of cookies to finish.”

“You can bake at the cabin.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“It’s going to this time.”

I’ve only known Arnie for a few weeks, but in that time, he’s only ever been a cinnamon roll. This is... weird.

I laugh. “What do you think is going to happen? I don’t even think he knows where I live.”

“He could follow you.”

“Okay, so he follows me. Then what? I’ll see him behind me and I won’t go home.”

Arnie sighs as though this answer isn’t the one he was looking for. “Do you have anywhere else you can go tonight? Maybe some friends or family?”

I think over the list of people I'd call. I have my sister, but she's out of town with my mom. They took a trip to California in celebration of my sister's thirtieth birthday. I was supposed to go, but being this is the first Christmas season for the lodge, I decided to hold back. And friends... *what friends?* The only friend I have is Lily, and she just got married. I can't impose on them.

"I'm good... honest. Obviously, I don't want anything to happen to me." I laugh under my breath as I tidy up the rest of the workspace and grab my coat off the hanger by the door.

"Yeah, well... I appreciate that you can take care of yourself, but I can't let you go home alone."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Dead serious. A piece of shit that'll show up at your place of business isn't the kind of guy that knows boundaries. You're safest with me. We'll recalibrate a plan in the morning."

"I told you I have to work tomorrow." I smile as I talk, though there's conviction in my tone. I'm sure he doesn't really expect me to go back up to his cabin with him. This is what nice people say, but it ends there.

"We'll figure all that out in the morning." He tosses on his jacket and unlocks the back door, holding me back with his arm as he draws his gun and surveys the dimly lit area.

It's snowing lightly and there's a frigid chill in the air that bites at the exposed skin on my neck. I'd question his use of a gun if I weren't used to every person up here carrying. Truthfully, I've thought about getting myself acquainted with a firearm multiple times. Now it's starting to feel more like a necessity.

When Arnie believes that it's safe, he turns back toward me and narrows his gaze. "You have two choices. You get up in my truck willingly, or I buckle you in myself."

I laugh. "Oh... is that right? You're kidnapping me now?"

"If that's what it takes."

Is this a game we're playing? Is he flirting with me? What's happening right now?

"Let me get this straight. Your plan is to take me up to your cabin and what? You going to hold me hostage until winter is over?"

He continues to scan the area. "I don't like being out in the open like this. Which one is it? Am I carrying you or are you coming willingly?"

My jaw drops a little. Maybe this isn't a game. "I'll catch you in a couple of days." I step around him and walk toward my little white car that's parked at the far end of the lot. I make it three steps before I'm swept up off my feet and hurled onto Arnie's shoulder.

I can't believe he can actually lift me. I'm not light by any means. I push against his giant frame. "What are you doing? Put me down!"

He doesn't listen... and I can't figure why this show of dominance has my pussy soaking wet.

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