A STARLIGHT HAVEN
LUMBERSNACK ROMANCE

AXES & O'S



'Steamy, snowed-in and deeply tender'
Bailey Hannah, author of
Alive and Wells

KAYLA GROSSE

Praise for

AXES & O'S

"Kayla gets it! *Axes & O's* has everything I crave in a good MMF: blazing hot spice, beautifully complex characters, and kink that's both hot and heartfelt. And can't forget that broody lumberjack. I ATE this one up."

—Sara Cate, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Praise*

"Sweet, seductive, and hella kinky. Kayla knows exactly how to make readers swoon endlessly and blush profusely, with an extra helping of lumbersnack contained within these pages to devour. *Axes & O's* is an adventure in the woods not to be missed." —Elliott Rose, author of *Chasing the Wild*

"Steamy, snowed-in, and deeply tender—*Axes & O's* isn't just about the heat (though there's plenty of that). Kayla has a way of blending raw emotion with irresistible spice, and this one is no exception."

—Bailey Hannah, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Change of Hart*

"Surrounded by snow and undeniable desire, Kayla crafts a thrilling tale where every moment is heated, intense, and full of emotion. With sizzling chemistry, a touch of humor, and a unique hero to keep things interesting, this book delivers all the thrills of an unforgettable winter romance."

—M.A. Wardell, author of *Teacher of the Year*

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Kayla Grosse, author of the international bestseller *Trick Shot: A Spicy Christmas Novella* and a collection of sweet and spicy plus-size romances, grew up in a suburb of Madison, Wisconsin. Though she lived near a big college town, her backyard was a cornfield, and her favorite hobby was riding her horse and imagining herself flying through the fields with a cape on her back and a sword in her hand. Her overactive imagination led to writing lots of fanfiction, scripts and publishing several books. When not writing, Kayla can often be found riding horses or drinking fancy espresso. She lives in Los Angeles with her cockatiel, Fiyero, and Quarter Horse, Atlas.

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Also by Kayla Grosse

Scrooged for the Holidays
Trick Shot (Brother Puckers Book #1)
Puck Shy (Brother Puckers Book #2)
Silver Foxed
Whirlwind
Change of Pace
Rein Me In (The Cowboys of Night Hawk #1)
Rope Me In (The Cowboys of Night Hawk #2)
I Like You Like That

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This book is dedicated to anyone who's ever
looked at a person in flannel holding an axe and said,
"Yeah, I'd let them split me in half."

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Author's Note

This book is a high heat, MMF, vanilla businessman meets "lumbersnacks" snowed-in holiday romance that's meant to be a fun escape from reality. If that's all you need to know, skip this note, and go to Chapter One. If you'd like to know more about what's in store for you, here's what you can expect inside these pages:

- Toy play
- SO much oral
- Dominance/submission
- Bondage/rough sex
- Polyamorous relationships
- Primal play
- Fisting
- Sword crossing
- Humiliation/derogatory language
- Light discussion of the foster care system and PTSD

If you'd like a full list of tropes and content warnings, please visit my website http://www.kaylagrosse.com.

Now, if you're still here, please enjoy my Fox, Little Lamb, and their Wolf.

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Xoxo,
Kayla

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Morgan's Mulled Wine 

Ingredients:

1 bottle of red wine (750ml, something fruity like Merlot or Zinfandel)

1 orange, sliced

2 tablespoons of honey or sugar (adjust to taste)

3 whole cloves

2 cinnamon sticks

2 star anise

1/4 cup brandy (optional add for an extra zing)

1 teaspoon of whole allspice berries (optional)

1/2 teaspoon of whole black peppercorns (optional)

1/4 teaspoon of grated nutmeg (optional)

Additional orange slices, cinnamon sticks, or star anise for garnish

Instructions:

Pour the bottle of red wine into a large pot or saucepan and add the sliced orange, honey or sugar, cloves, cinnamon sticks, star anise, and any optional spices (allspice, peppercorns, nutmeg) to the wine. Warm the mixture over low to medium heat. Stir occasionally to dissolve the honey or sugar. Be careful not to let the wine boil, as this will cook off the alcohol and can create a bitter taste.

Once the wine is warm and fragrant, reduce the heat to low, and let it simmer for at least 15–20 minutes. The longer it simmers, the more the flavors will meld together. You can let it simmer for up to an hour for a richer flavor.

If using, stir in the brandy just before serving, then strain the mulled wine to remove the spices and orange slices. Pour into mugs or heatproof glasses, then garnish with additional orange slices and cinnamon sticks. If you want to get fancy, use dried orange slices! Serve warm.

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♫♫ Axes & O's Unhinged Playlist ♫♫

"Animals" Maroon 5
"Lithium" Nirvana
"Fuck You" CeeLo Green
"White Christmas" Frank Sinatra
"Christmas Eve/Sarajevo 12/24" Trans-Siberian Orchestra
"Meet Your Master" Nine Inch Nails
"Mount Everest" Labrinth
"Such a Whore (Stellular Remix)" JVLA
"Pillowtalk" ZAYN
"Hungry Eyes" Eric Carmen
"Closer" Nine Inch Nails
"The Happiest Christmas Tree" Nat King Cole
"Addicted" JON VINYL
"Play with Me" Rendezvous At Two
"Inside Out" Eve 6
"At Last" Etta James
"Reunited" Peaches & Herb
"Surrender" Shelly Peled
"Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas" Sam Smith
"The Bad Touch" Bloodhound Gang



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Chapter One

The Hunter

I LICK MY CHAPPED lips, the bite of frigid winter air freezing the fresh saliva as my heart thuds in my chest. The night is eerily quiet, the newly fallen snow dampening the sounds of Mother Nature, requiring me to call upon every ounce of training ingrained in my body so I have an element of surprise when I catch my prize.

Snap!

The heated blood pumping through my veins rushes straight to my cock, and the corners of my mouth tug up.

Gotcha, little lamb.

I lighten my footsteps and even out my breathing, turning my head languidly toward the origin of the sound. She'd been doing so well until that little mess up. Now she's caught my attention, and it will not waver.

I'm a predator, a cunning fox ready to devour his meal, and she doesn't stand a chance.

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Chapter Two

Nathan

"Nathan, did you get my email?"

My head pops up to meet the blank stare of my manager, Kathy. She's got on an oversized white sweater that blends in with her pale skin. If she was standing against a white wall, you'd miss her. Scratch that. You'd see her red lipstick and that's it. Just red lips. Big, giant, bright-red lips that, when opened, micromanage the shit out of me.

"Which one?" The snide question is out of my mouth before I can stop it. Those stained red lips press together, and I swear the pronounced blue vein on her forehead pulses like a worm.

"The one about the Newman presentation. I need the entire slide deck proofed again. It has typos on it."

My jaw ticks. There aren't any typos on that fucking slide deck. I've proofed it near a million times. "I've gone over it, Kathy. I promise, it's good to go."

"You didn't open my last email from four p.m."

An exasperated sigh catches in my chest as I stare at the woman I'm certain is the devil in disguise. Her muddy-brown eyes are narrowed, and she doesn't blink as she waits for my answer. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen her blink. Maybe she's a robot.

"You sent a different email this morning about the deck," I reiterate. "I looked it over. I promise—it's good to go."

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Her lips press together so tightly, all I can see is a thin red line. The action only makes the vein in her forehead pulse

harder. I understand my pushback could get me fired or at least warrant a warning. But I'm beyond caring. I'm tired, I'm overworked, and I should be on Christmas vacation by now. But no—instead, I'm still here, stuck with Kathy the Grinch until she lets me leave.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "But you never emailed it back to me for a final proof. That's what the email was about, and I want to see it. The slide deck needs to be perfect, and you know that only *I* can find double spaces. You had two the last time I checked."

My hand clenches around my mouse. I'm convinced this woman puts in double spaces just so she can chastise me. I was born after typewriter conventions were a thing, so I don't put double spaces after periods. Not to mention, I told her verbally in passing that the deck was proofed and ready to go. But apparently she wasn't listening. Or she was, and she's just doing this to be a jerk.

"I swear, Kathy. The slide deck is perfect. I did my job. It's done."

Her high heel taps on the floor like a petulant child, and I think I can see steam coming out of her head. "I'm your manager, Nathan," she huffs. "You do what I ask. Please send me the current deck so I can look it over. You know I need to approve the changes."

I lower my gaze from her heated one and glance at my watch. It's after six and three days before Christmas. I had wanted to get on the road early to avoid holiday traffic, but clearly that's not happening.

Kathy's still standing near my desk with her arms crossed and an expectant look on her face. For a split second, I debate whether I should keep antagonizing her or not, but I'd rather get the hell out of here before she finds something else for me to do. I exhale a breath and open my email, finding the one she sent at four p.m. among a slew of other emails from people

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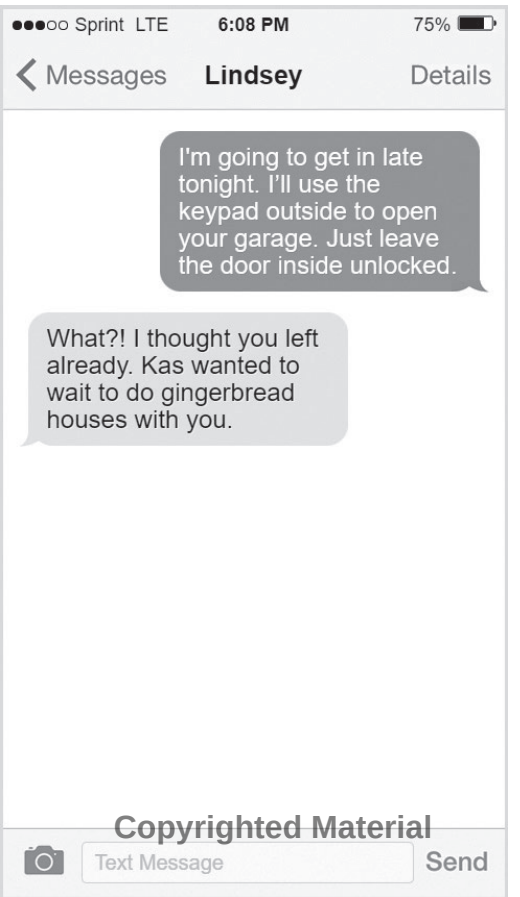
asking me for stupid things that they 100 percent could do on their own.

With a few more clicks, I attach the deck and send it to her. "Okay, you have it."

Kathy doesn't say thank you. Instead, she stalks back to her office without another word. I grit my teeth and take out my phone to text my older sister, Lindsey.



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I sigh, even more upset that I'm now going to disappoint my six-year-old niece because of my jerk of a manager.



I read my sister's last text a few times. I've debated quitting my position at this marketing agency a lot over the last year, especially in the last month. I don't know what crawled up Kathy's butt, but she's been more of a twat than usual. Every time I talk to Lindsey about it, she tells me to get a new job.

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But the money is good, I get great benefits, and the job makes my mom happy. I've also been working my way up the ladder the last couple of years to snag a director position and eventually be the boss of people instead of them being the boss of me.

My email pings, taking me out of my thoughts. Of course, it's from Kathy. Nobody's left in the office except for us, so she could have just told me what she had to say.

With an eye roll, I open the email to see she says I missed another space. I swear to god, this woman gets off on being this way. There's no way that was there when I sent it to her. It truly makes me wonder if she's doing it just to keep me here. Maybe she's lonely and wants company. But I'm not going to try to psychoanalyze my manager when all I want to do is leave.

I delete the space she's highlighted, then save and send the doc back to her. Once I'm sure the email is fully sent, I begin to shut down my computer. I can answer the rest of the emails from my sister's if need be, but the office is closed all next week for the holidays, and everyone is gone. I want to be gone, too. Kathy can deal with it.

I reach for the messenger bag I have tucked near the side of my desk and then take my suit coat off the back of my chair, standing to put it on. My stomach growls as I pack up, reminding me I haven't eaten since this morning. I'll have to hit up a drive-through on my way to Starlight Haven. If I don't, I won't be eating until I get to my sister's since everything in her remote California mountain town closes early.

"Where do you think you're going?"

My head turns to find Kathy stalking toward me with gusto in her step. I should just not answer and walk out, but I'm too nice for that.

I place my bag over my shoulder and grab my travel mug from my desk. "Home," I lie, not wanting to divulge any of my personal life to this madwoman.

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"I have something else I need you to look at."

"No."

Kathy's eyes bug out of her head, and to be honest, I think mine do, too. But I've had it, and I don't regret saying no. I should've been doing it for a long time now. But as Lindsey would say, I'm allergic to that word. I'm a people pleaser, especially with a dad who expected us to never say no and always follow the rules. I even had an ex call me a golden retriever once, always aiming to please. Which I'm not saying is a bad thing—I do like to please—but sometimes I wish I could be a pit bull. Maybe it's time I started trying to act like one.

"Nathan," Kathy says, that stupid vein on her forehead pulsing again. "We aren't done working yet. I need you to stay until seven."

I hike my bag farther up my shoulder, my fist clenching around my mug as my sister's voice enters my head: *You should quit that soul-sucking job.*

"I'll have to tell Mr. Brentmoor about this if you leave now," Kathy adds.

Our boss, Mr. Brentmoor—who isn't a bad boss, per se—probably wouldn't care that I left. But I don't trust Kathy to tell the truth. Knowing her, she'd make it seem as if I were being hostile or not doing my job. When in actuality, I do too much. And it's not like I get paid overtime for all the evenings I've stayed late or mornings I've come in early; I'm salaried.

I take a step back as Kathy watches me carefully. Even though the exit is toward her, I don't want her to find my behavior threatening. I may not be a very large guy at five-foot-nine, but I do work out, and she's a tiny human. I've often questioned if she eats more than just protein shakes and bars.

"I need you to stay, Nathan."

I take another couple of steps back, then walk toward the exit, giving her a wide berth. When our bodies are parallel, I pause to meet her confused glare.

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"I'm not staying, Kathy."

"But—"

"I quit."

Her mouth drops open, and I don't wait for her to respond. I hasten my steps so I don't lose my nerve and try to take it back, pushing open the office doors as Kathy's eyes watch me leave. The cooler air from the hallway hits me, and I suck in a calming breath, taking another step, then another, until I'm at the elevator that will take me to the parking garage.

It isn't until the heavy doors slide shut that I let out a loud laugh. The noise springs free from my chest and bounces off the metal walls, echoing back in my ears. The joyful sound is foreign, but it feels good. Really good. Before I know it, I'm laughing in earnest. Cackling, even. I can't believe I just did that. I can't believe I quit my job.

Holy. Shit. I quit my job.

I quit my job.

Fuck. Fucking fuck.

I quit my job.

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Chapter Three

The Prey

My sly fox heard me. I knew the moment that twig snapped that he was on to me, and now I have no choice but to run again.

My head darts to the left and then right, snow muddling my vision. It's coming down like crazy, but I love it. The cold flakes melt on my heated cheeks and collect on my lashes, only adding to the beauty and thrill of the moment.

I take off as quietly as I can through the fresh snow as I pump my arms and lift my legs high so I don't trip. I know our property like the back of my hand, but so does the one hunting me. Even if I could mute the sound of me running and clear my footprints in the snow, he'd be able to track and find me. He always does.

I come to an abrupt stop when I reach a fork in the powder-covered trail. I debate my options, wondering which way I should go. I could go right and head to the old hunting cabin, but with the snow coming down, I'm not sure I'd make it that far. And if I'm being honest, I don't think I want to make it that far.

"I can hear you thinking, little lamb."

The hair on the back of my neck rises, and my nipples automatically tighten at the timbre of my hunter's deep and taunting voice. I have no idea how he snuck up behind me—I didn't hear him running after me. But that's what makes him my cunning fox. And why I know I'll always lose this game.

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I take a step forward, finally hearing the snow crunch behind me.

"If you run again, know I'll show you no mercy when I catch you," he warns.

Hot arousal pools between my legs, and despite his taunt, I know him. I know he wants me to run. The corners of my lips pull up as images of what will occur when he catches me pop behind my frozen eyelids.

I inhale the scent of winter: damp earth, pine, and burning wood, soaking in the scenery for just a moment. The way the world has gone quiet from the falling snow makes what my fox and I are about to do far too dirty for such a pristine and beautiful setting. But that's part of the fun.

I slowly turn my head over my shoulder, my long blond-and black-streaked hair wet from snow and sweat. My hazel eyes connect with my hunter's cool blue ones, and in the dark evening light, they look like two pools of haunting black.

"Who says you'll catch me?" I taunt.

He flashes me his white teeth, but I don't wait for his sly and mischievous smile to fully seat itself. I burst forward and take off to the left, weaving my way through incense-cedar trees and pines while his amused and throaty chuckle follows behind me, telling me he'll make good on his threat.

Which is exactly what I want.

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Chapter Four

Nathan

My sister wasn't kidding when she said it was snowing. When I left the office for the four-hour drive to Starlight Haven, it was just about forty-five degrees and raining. But as I started my ascent into the mountains, pure-white flurries danced in the air and have only gotten heavier with every increase in altitude.

The wipers frantically cut back and forth across my sedan's windshield. I should've gotten a Jeep or something better, but when I bought my car, my sister and mom hadn't yet moved to Starlight Haven, so I didn't foresee winter driving in the mountains in my future. It's also an El Niño year in California, so everything has been wetter, meaning we're set to get a lot of rain and snow this winter season.

Good for people who love to hit the slopes, bad for people like me who only go into the mountains to see their family. And by the way this snow is coming down, I have a feeling I'm going to be at my sister's for more than a week like I had originally planned. Not that I mind. Now that I have no job, it's not like I have anything to do but work out, maybe surf, drink a few beers with my friends, and of course, start looking for a new job. I have a good amount in savings to live off for now, but it's not enough to last more than six months without an income.

I express an audible sigh. I turned twenty-eight this year, and as I think about it now, my life is a little boring, though by my own design. I've always been a focused person, someone

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who's worked hard and achieved the goals I set out for myself. I like the routine of a nine-to-five, the predictability of it. I like waking up, going to CrossFit, heading to work, then going home to my meal prep or to the bar to meet up with my friends—and sometimes, though it's rare these days, taking a woman home for the night.

That last thought creates a crap ton of new rabbit holes in my head. As soon as I hit my mid-twenties, my mom and sister started constantly asking about my dating life. They want to know when I'm going to settle down, get married, and have a family. But there's this little problem I have…

Every relationship I start ends.

Not because of anything the women have done wrong. I've dated quite a few amazing ones, but something has always been missing. On the outside, everything would be fine and look like a healthy, thriving relationship, but inside…

I dated one woman in particular, Sasha, for a year after college. I think she thought I was her forever, and there was a part of me that wanted to give myself to her. She was smart, funny, and beautiful, and we had a lot of the same interests. We even surfed together. But as our relationship went on, I realized if I proposed to her, I'd doom her to a life with a man who loved her but would always feel like something was missing. Like something wasn't right. And I didn't want that for her. So we broke up, and now she's married to a wealthy guy in Maine and has two kids. Which is exactly the life I knew she wanted and deserved.

And Sasha isn't the only woman in my past with a similar story, which is why I eventually stopped dating for a partnership and now mostly just date for fun.

If one can even call it that, because I have a similar problem there. Even with sex, I feel as if something is missing. It's nice, sometimes great, but it lacks. Again, it's not anything to do with the women; I know it's a me thing.

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Since I was raised to do things with every ounce of my

effort—to be the best at it or not do it at all—in the last couple of years, I've invested most of my time and energy into work. Which has gotten me absolutely nowhere.

Okay, maybe not nowhere.

If I hadn't quit tonight, I probably would've gotten a promotion after the new year or at least a good raise. And minus not being in a long-term relationship, I live a nice life. A life my dad told me he was proud of before he died two years back from a sudden stroke. A life Mom tells me she's proud of every time I talk to her.

I grind my teeth, wondering what Dad would say if he was still alive and I told him I quit my good-paying job because I didn't like my manager. I already know Mom is going to be disappointed. At least Lindsey will be happy, but I'm still fighting myself over my decision. I'm the first person in our family tree to go to college and get a corporate job. And now—

"Fuck!" I slam my hands against the steering wheel, frustration and anger boiling over—at myself and the situation I'm stuck in. But the tantrum was a stupid move, because the force causes my car to swerve on the wet, icy road. I release another curse as I grip the wheel, managing to steady my car before I scold myself for being reckless. The last thing I want to do is get seriously injured or die, especially right before Christmas.

With my heart beating fast in my chest, I take a relaxing breath and focus. I consider pulling off to the side of the road to check the weather, but I have a feeling that even a few minutes' delay will only make things worse. The snow is coming down even harder now, to the point where it's difficult to see. The white flakes are more like sheets as the harsh wind whips against my windows.

I dare a quick glance at the phone mounted on my dash. I still have about an hour left to go until I reach my sister's place. It's past eleven now—my arrival was further delayed after I stopped to grab a burger and because I'm driving at a snail's pace to avoid an accident.

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"Keep it together, Nathan." My words bounce through the cab of my car alongside the smooth tones of Frank Sinatra singing "White Christmas" over the radio. Very appropriate. And now that I think of it, this will be my first white Christmas. My family never came up to the mountains, though they aren't that far from us, always opting to stay in town and drive to the beach if the weather was warm enough. I have fond memories of Lindsey, Dad, and me making snowmen out of sand while Mom took pictures and laid out a picnic lunch.

My chest tightens with emotion. This will be our second Christmas without Dad and the first we'll be spending together in Lindsey's new home.

From what she's told me, she never pictured herself in Starlight Haven. But after a bad divorce, she decided she needed a change for her and Kas. They'd taken a weekend trip to this charming lake town and fell in love with it. That was shocking by itself, since Lindsey was always a city-loving girl who dreamed of moving to Los Angeles one day. But then Mom decided to sell our childhood home and move in with her, which was even more of a surprise.

It had to have been hard for Mom to live in the little three-bedroom without Dad, so I understood. Now, the only bad part is that every time I want to see my family, I have to make this drive.

Frank Sinatra's voice fades out, and the radio station's host comes on. As soon as I hear something about snow, I take my hand off the wheel and quickly turn up the volume.

"A white Christmas is indeed happening for the people of Starlight Haven," a female voice says. "Looks like the snow is going to keep coming down for the next few days. The county has issued a warning urging residents not to leave their homes, and the roads at the bottom of the mountain have been closed off. If you're currently traveling, stay vigilant, and find a place to shelter if you can. It's getting wild out there!"

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Fucking Kathy. Had she let me go home when everyone else