

Admittedly FOR ME

BEECHWOOD FALLS
BOOK 1



JENNA LOCKWOOD

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Admittedly For Me contains mature content. Reader discretion is advised.

This book deals with the grief of losing parents— NOT in graphic detail, but the journey of healing from loss.

To those who have gone through life feeling alone, I see you.

To those who have lost themselves in times of grieving, it's okay to not be okay.

You're worthy of happiness and love.

PLAYLIST

[HTTPS://OPEN.SPOTIFY.COM/PLAYLIST/6BIhTUA7b58L6QXbbU5LqK](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6BIhTUA7b58L6QXbbU5LqK)

OR



CHAPTER 1

EMERY

AVOIDANCE HASN'T HEALED ME. And as I pass the faded wooden sign of my hometown, Beechwood Falls, sorrow and secrets are my welcome.

The cemetery on the hill greets me with a memory my heart won't forgive. My haunting thoughts still ring loud in the silence. Desperation to drive back to Aspen and drown in work weighs heavily on my chest as my pulse synchronizes with my rapid breathing. I swallow the lump in my throat I've managed to suppress for the past five years and continue driving toward the aging downtown. The bright yellow paint on the corner ice cream stand is chipped and faded, but still full of customers. The fountain I used to toss coins in downtown is a reminder of all the childhood wishes that never blossomed.

Facing my house will need to wait a little while longer.

Gravel crunches stones under my tires as I pull into The Painted Pony. My ears pick up the gritted sound under the rubber, and instinctively, my body relaxes. Cutting the ignition and looking around the full parking lot, jitters nerves through me. The possibility of running into a bunch of townspeople tonight is likely. Small talk and explaining the last five years are too much to handle. With a deep breath, and twenty-nine days left here, I put on a brave face and head inside to find my two childhood best friends.

The once dingy, outdated bar has been given a facelift as I walk through the first set of glass doors and follow through to the swinging saloon ones. At least there have been a few changes in this building over the years. The dance floor is double in size, since they removed half of the pool tables, and the thick scent of smoke has been replaced with decent smelling pub food. Unfortunately, the collection of tacky neon signs has grown. If it's not the

music aiding in my headache, the fluorescent lights in the entryway were the culprit. Their DJ has a large crowd line dancing as I scoot around the tables, and the rhythm hits my chest as cowboy boots beat against the hardwood floor in unison.

“Emery!” Savannah’s long chestnut hair bounces as she jumps from the chair. “It feels like a lifetime since you left!” If her voice isn’t loud enough to attract attention, her tall, curvy figure is enough to draw any man’s eye.

“I’ve missed you too, Savannah.” She wraps me in a hug. Though I try to fight it, her touch has always had this feeling of warmth. Comfort.

“If I knew my wedding was going to be one of the reasons to finally have you back, I wouldn’t have asked Justin to wait until my law degree was finished to get married.” Hallie stands, leaning in for a hug. Thankfully, hers is brief. “I’m glad to have you back, Em.” Her blonde curls frame her emerald eyes. “We ordered these while we were waiting.”

“Starting with a double?” I look at the three large shot glasses on the table. “To your wedding!” We raise our glasses and the burn slides down our throats. This is just what I needed to ease my anxiety. “Come on.” I stand, linking our arms with a smile. “I’ll buy us the next round of shots.” My grin grows as I hold in a squeal. The three of us together under the same roof is always impossible with our schedules, and I’ve distanced myself from this town for friendship’s sake. Leaving was for the better.

“We don’t hang out enough anymore.” Hallie pouts. “Thanks, adulting.”

“Catch me up, girls.” We push through the crowd and arrive at the bar. “How is the dance studio? I saw the new sign on the way in, and it looks great.”

“Taking over our old studio was the best decision. Ever!” Savannah’s brown eyes gleam. “I love teaching so much. Parents are driving from surrounding towns now to bring their kids to me.”

“I’m happy for you. I’ve seen your viral dance videos. Amazing choreography.” Savannah was the only one of us three who kept up with dance, and she’s always wanted to teach it. I rest my arms on the old wooden bar top. “I don’t think The Falls are the only thing bringing in tourists now.” The viral social media video about the gorgeous waterfalls has attracted more people over the past year. Summer nights at The Falls were where most of my teenage memories ignited.

“Tell Emery about the other big news!” Hallie yells over the music.

“One of my dancers has an audition in Vegas in a few weeks.” Her voice

is full of pride. “She has a bright future, for sure.”

“That’s amazing news, Savannie.” I lean in, proud of what my friends are accomplishing. And proud of what I’ve accomplished over the past eight months after my life took *another* crash.

“I hope you girls are ready to do some final touches on the wedding with me. Two weeks is going to fly by.” Hallie claps with excitement and flags down a bartender who is too busy to be working alone. “I prolonged my honeymoon an extra two weeks because you are finally back in town.”

“You’re the only reason I’m back in town.” If I’m being honest, the other event this month wasn’t one I had planned to attend. I push the thought away. “Please, keep me busy!” I nearly beg. “I can’t spend my days sitting around the house. Or wandering around town with my own thoughts.” Hallie nods sympathetically and forces herself to stay quiet about the issues she wants to help mend. Our shots arrive just in time, and I hold mine up to toast our friend.

“To our best friend working her ass off to get her law degree, and for passing her BAR exam earlier than expected.” I give her my best smile as Hallie’s eyes radiate joy. “And for marrying her dream man.” I feel my heart’s armored walls add another layer with how much I want to forget what I lost. But this moment isn’t about me. She deserves to be celebrated.

Tonight, my personal problems can drown in spirits.

I follow behind the two of them while they talk about proposals and wedding details. Glancing around, I’m still in awe of the facelift of this place as we make our way back through the crowd. To my surprise, most faces aren’t recognizable. Thank goodness. Hallie and Savannah’s lives are going to plan, and mine seems to have me on some karmic wheel I can’t get off. Hearing my name, I snap out of my thoughts as we settle in a booth.

“Are you alright, Em?” Hallie’s thumb fiddles with the pages of her menu while staring at me.

“I’m doing really great, Hal.” I force a smile, knowing she can read my lie. “I am happy for you. I’m glad for all three of us to be hanging out again. Life is close to perfect.” I wink at Savannah, but the small lift of her eyebrow proves she believes how fine I am.

“I know, I just thought of you and Ryan and how the past eight months have—” She goes to ramble, but I cut her off.

“Hey.” I reach for her arm and look up. “That’s in the past. I’m over it.”

“By over it, you dropped all feelings, threw yourself into work, and now

avoid relationships,” Savannah chimes in with her classic half smirk.

“I am happy with life,” I assure them. “My breakup was the best thing for me. Look how quickly I became an executive chef and earned a Michelin Star.” Cooking and running the restaurant back in Aspen has been my sanctuary.

“That wasn’t an ordinary breakup, Emery.” Savannah’s brow furrows as her concern grows.

“I’m fine. I didn’t move away from *Aspen* after the breakup. So it says something.” Reasons for leaving this town still keep me awake some nights. “Ryan and I clearly weren’t meant to be.”

“You seemed like the happy couple when Hallie and I flew out there for your engagement party.” Savannah leans forward as her brown eyes become serious.

“And then we weren’t.” I shrug, trying to keep my friends at a distance with yet another subject they can’t relate to. “How about another double. Anyone?”

“What’s really going on, Emery?” Hallie softens her voice. “Does it have anything to do with the hospital event for your—” Her words are shrapnel to my heart, and I don’t want to hear the end of her sentence.

“No.” I smile, shaking my head in an attempt to rid the pain. “This is my first vacation in years. I took a full month off for you, girls. But you know how I feel about this town. Alcohol and best friends are the only things likely to keep me sane.” I feel my voice flatten as I ignore the time approaching for me to leave this booth and face my childhood home.

Savannah holds my gaze, dipping her head to my level. “Where is the loving, less cynical, bubbly woman we used to know?”

“She left when her *fiancé* was getting it on with her roommate. A week *after* our engagement party.” My teeth grab my bottom lip, not meaning to let my tone slip.

“We’re here for you when you’re ready to talk about it.” Hallie’s attention flicks to her phone lighting up, and I’m glad she doesn’t push me to spill.

“Fine. We won’t bug you about it,” Savannah sighs with a defeated face. “For tonight, at least.” I know her nurturing fix-everyone self wants to pry for more information. While they want to help, Hallie and Savannah have no idea what it’s like to carry the weight and blame for parental death.

“In lighter news, I haven’t addressed this with you both yet....” Hallie’s

eyes meet mine. “But I’m breaking tradition and would love you *both* as my Maids of Honor.”

My throat constricts around a formed lump. “I’d love to, Hallie.” I bite back my disbelief at a happy ending. If not unfaithfulness, death will get the best of you.

“This is so exciting!” Savannah’s smile eases my trembling pulse. But only for a spilt second.

“I’m gonna use the bathroom and I’ll be right back.” Thankfully, neither of them decided to join. I check my phone, after feeling it go off a couple of times tonight.

Josie: Lemme know when you get there!

Josie: Miss you so much xx

My best friend from Aspen brings a smile to my face. Opening the next text turns my stomach.

Aunt Quinn: Have fun with the girls! Can’t wait to see you later and give you a big squeeze. <3

I can’t avoid my childhood home for much longer. I don’t even know to prepare for everything this town is about to trigger this month. Desperation to forget everything has me heading to the bar after I use the bathroom. The wooden bar top supports me as I debate what to drown myself in next. Woodsy cologne passes through the air, awakening memories. Memories which I should forget. The ones my brain plays like an old record to soothe the treacherous nights.

Zoning in on a top-shelf bottle, the summer I swore to never speak of flashes past like a movie reel. The end of summer after graduation when I decided to leave this town within a three-day span. My eyes nervously trace the crowd. Was he still in this town? Ian Wells is the last person I need to bump into this month.

“Tequila, please.” I smile as the young worker gives me a questionable eye.

“Careful not to drink too much, little one.” He winks, and I’m sure if I gave the invitation, he’d take me back to his place and help numb the world around me. The bartender back in Aspen knew how to.

I take the shot glass with an eye roll. I should be used to this remark. I’ll

forever have a youthful face. My tiny frame and big doe eyes are more of a curse than a blessing. Tequila burns as it flows down my esophagus. I gave this brand of poison up years ago, and now reminded of why. Tequila tastes like compilations of unwanted memories. Tequila tastes like my parents' death. Tequila was discovered to be the strongest medicine I took comfort in. Tequila only heightens my craving for the most powerful adrenaline rush. Tequila tastes like *him*.

The only person who could level with me and aid in keeping my mind busy. Not even in a sexual way. He kick-started my healing and was the culprit of my spiral. With icy eyes and a jawline that was trouble in its most perfect form. My heart surges to my throat, cutting off my ability to breathe. I need to forget it all. "A Bacardi, please." Since I swore off feelings, the burn in my throat is the only thing I welcome to feel.

A hand taps my shoulder, causing my antsy self even more anxiety. "There you are. Our food arrived," Savannah shouts over the music. "Is everything alright? We've missed you."

"I've missed you too. I'm so exhausted after the couple days of driving here," I reply as I finally feel the alcohol saturating my brain.

"Right, you and your fear of flying." Savannah adds. "One of these days, you should try to face a fear." I know she's implying more than a plane.

"Not now." The bartender hands me my shot, and I down it as Savannah's disapproving look grows. Rolling my lips, I link our arms as we walk back to the table.

I pick at my salad and finish my Long Island Iced Tea, finally reaching my needed alcohol limit to tolerate the hurt. Hallie mentions something about working as a team for a bachelorette party or something. I attempt to nod, and my head falls like a bowling ball sinking into the gutter. Rolling my head to the side, I bring it back up to a more stable position. I watch Hallie and Savannah exchange looks of obvious concern, but a lazy smile rests on my lips.

"I'm fiiiine, guyssss." Hallie and Savannah mutter a few words, then they're paying our tab and walking me outside. The sound of crickets replaces the country music from the bar as we head into the night, their arms under mine. I expect a cool breeze to shock my system, but I'm no longer in Aspen. Cooler nights won't happen for a few more weeks here.

"We'll let this first night slide." Hallie opens her car door. "You've had to take in a lot coming back here." Her hand brushes a strand of hair out of my

face in a motherly manner. “Maybe you’ll have a good sleep in your childhood bedroom.” *And wake up to more memories I drank to forget.*

“Don’t take me home.” I lie down in the back seat instead of sitting.

“Emery, your aunt wants to see you. I don’t know how much you’ll remember about tonight anyway,” Savannah chimes in. “I’ll drive you back here in the morning to grab your car.”

“Savannah and I don’t know what it’s like to lose our parents, but yours were regulars in our lives too. We miss them.”

“You weren’t the reason they *you knooww*,” I slur, unable to say the truth out loud and bring my hands over my eyes to block out the bright car lights.

“For the millionth time, Emery. Neither were you.” Savannah sighs, closing the car door and taking me to the one place I’ve been dreading to go.

CHAPTER 2

EMERY

I SQUINT as the morning sun illuminates the pale blue walls of my childhood bedroom. My eyes bounce around the dormant objects of my room and land on my backpack. Panic jolts me. *Am I late for class?* The bass drum thudding throughout my brain tells me otherwise. I don't remember anything after walking to the parking lot last night. It's been a while since I've drank this much. Am I *still* drunk? Scattered Polaroids litter my walls as outdated long necklaces drape off large thumb tacks. My favorite jean jacket hangs off the computer chair, right where I left it five years ago. I still don't know why I never took it when I moved. That jean jacket spent almost every summer night with me. I fall back on my pillow before I allow myself to grab the well-worn material. A tug of war with my heart if I dare bring it to my nose. Will it still smell like *him*?

Turning back to the opposite side of my bed, a cup of water with two aspirin rests on the nightstand. My smile shoots pain to my brain, but I mentally thank my aunt. She barely has a handful of years on me and came to the rescue after my night out.

A moment later, a soft knock taps at my door before it pushes open. The aroma of fresh coffee and pancakes roams through the house, but nausea from this hangover does me dirty.

"Good morning, babe." My Aunt Quinn peeks her head in.

"Hey," I murmur, as she walks over and sits on my bed. "Your hair looks great darker." Her natural light brown hair is gone, slightly altering her look from my mothers. "When did you change it?"

"After I visited you in Aspen eight months ago." A lull hangs over us, as she doesn't want to bring up another devastating event. "I never thought I'd

see the day you came back to town.” Her smile never resonates well with my grief. My eyes avert down as a younger image of my mother sits in front of me.

“Hallie is getting married. I can’t say no to that.” I reach for my glass of water and force myself to finish it.

“It’s crazy to think I was twenty-three when you took off.” She rests her hand on my leg. “I’m sorry if I wasn’t enough for you to stay.” There’s a saddened tone to her voice, but she’s not to blame.

“Aunt Quinn, it wasn’t you.” I shake my head and it pounds in punishment.

“I tried to find balance for you and me. It’s just...could you imagine taking care of a senior in high school while trying to excel in med school?” She doesn’t mean to make me feel like I was a burden. She didn’t ask for any of this either.

“Nope. But at least your PHD is almost complete.” I try to level with her, but I didn’t follow in my family’s medical footsteps. “I can’t imagine finishing school at twenty-eight.”

“I’m also looking forward to seeing what the hospital has done.” Aunt Quinn gives me a half-hearted smile and the nausea forming isn’t from the hangover. I have no doubt Hallie had planned her wedding around this hospital event as well. She meddles out of the goodness of her heart, but damn, she’s forcing to me to face everything at once.

“It’s not like my parents are aware it’s their five-year death anniversary.” I toss my dark auburn hair in a messy bun as my phone beeps.

“Emery,” she says under her breath. “Being cynical doesn’t heal.”

“I love you, Aunt Quinn, but stating the obvious is simply stating the obvious. Life comes and goes.” She pats my leg and stands.

“I’ll meet you downstairs. There’s coffee already made.” When she leaves my room, I silently groan.

I don’t want to face this house. My room still holds the smell of cheap body sprays seeped into the carpet. It’s soothing and haunting all at once. I toss back the covers and brace myself for the journey downstairs. My parents’ room is still untouched, and I don’t know if I can handle a faint smell of them as I walk past their room. As I make my way to the top of the stairs, my heart stutters, avoiding eye contact with the hanging family frames. I don’t need a reminder of what no longer lives.

I move past the entryway and torture myself by walking through the

living room. For a moment, time stands still. I swear I can hear my father from his downstairs office, wanting me to tell him about my day before he went on about the surgeries he performed. The fireplace mantle holds a few drawings my mother and I made when I was eight and she never tossed out. Coloring pages of me following in their footsteps of wanting to be a doctor made her so proud.

I never spent much time in daycare. My childhood seemed like a dream from the outside, but that ended when I turned twelve, along with new family memories and traditions. Twelve was the year I could stay home alone. Take care of myself. Raise myself. The year my mother could go full force with her career around seventy hours a week. Most of my holidays were spent with Savannah's family.

Looking around, my eyes zone in on the stack of magazines and my mother's favorite blanket by the couch. The magazines we were supposed to look through together on weekends. How has my aunt lived in her sister's house for so long and been able to deal with the reminders? I don't dare touch the blanket either. My mother spent the minimal time she had off work either sleeping or out buying quick freezer meals for me to heat. Sharing a blanket and making memories together was always scheduled for "next week." My childhood dwindled into caring for myself. Happy twelfth birthday to me. But who was I to hold my parents back from saving lives?

Until I selfishly begged them to see my last dance recital...

"I haven't spent much time in here," my aunt pipes up, as my body jumps out of its skin. "It feels strange to move anything, so I've mostly just sat on this cushion the odd time I feel like watching a movie." She shrugs as her eyes scan the room.

"Yeah, it almost feels intrusive." As she wraps me in a big hug, I try to remember what my mother's felt like. But only for a moment before a sting reaches my nose as my eyes burn, and I shut down from the pain. "Your parents would be proud."

Are we really bringing this up so soon? My stomach ticks with annoyance, knowing if they were still around, I wouldn't be praised amongst their other surgeon friends.

"Let's not be too kind." I yawn, trying to wave it off.

"I have a contracting company stopping by to update quotes on the outdoor kitchen and little guest house." Aunt Quinn's brown eyes twinkle.

"Is Beechwood Fall's really needing to host that many tourists for you to

add on?” I get how gorgeous The Falls are, but that’s about all this town offers.

“I already have a bunch of people interested in booking a few nights and the thing isn’t even built.”

“I guess people don’t want to rent one of the four bedrooms our house has?” This house was signed over to me as of eighteen, but I’ve told my aunt to treat it as hers since I wasn’t coming back to town again.

“Too intrusive, and I’m too busy to host like it’s a bed-and-breakfast.”

“I get it,” I say quietly, and her cheeks welcome a smile.

“But these construction men are so hot, Emery. If I wasn’t serious with Carson, I’d go for either of the guys.” She smirks and tosses her hair to the side. “I briefly remember them from high school. They were both a grade or two younger, and one of them had the most mysterious flirty eyes.”

“You don’t have to stick with one person, Aunt Quinn. Sometimes it’s easier to get your fix and go.” My response happens so quickly, causing me to pause and question if I’ve sobered up yet.

“Savannah and Hallie filled me in on your recent coping mechanisms.” Her heavy gaze holds mine. *Why is everyone doing that?* “It may seem easier right now, but you know you’re worth more than a casual hookup.”

“Look, I know you care, but I’m old enough to make my own choices.”

“Fair enough.” She folds, as if scared disagreeing will send me away. “I’m going to finish getting ready, then I’ll be back down.”

My jaw tightens as I notice a little coffee bar now setup on top of the liquor cabinet. I stop mid-step, seeing the tequila bottle in the same position as the night I left it. The night when...

“Daisy Girl?” A deep, familiar voice startles me from behind me. The nickname shocks my system after not hearing it for five years. My heartbeat palpitating like crazy in my chest. Whipping my head to the front door, Ian Wells stands in my doorway with his piercing blues cementing me in place. I’m dizzy as I grip my hands on the liquor cabinet, and I’m transported back.

Here’s to another night of Ian coming over while my best friend cancels their plans so she can study. Ian’s been able to relate and help me through some tough moments, but Hallie shouldn’t feel the need to pawn her boyfriend off on me all the time. It’s mid-summer break, but Hallie is hyper focused in summer classes, trying to complete some college courses before graduating high school.

“This couch is the comfiest.” Ian sits with a cushion between us and shuts off the TV. Nothing has grabbed our attention in the last half hour. “Your parents had good taste in furniture.” His past-tense reference shouldn’t be a shock to my system, but my breath hitches as my heart picks up speed. I stand and he follows, probably knowing where I’m headed. The crash only happened months ago, and drowning my eighteen-year-old self in alcohol happens to be my medicine of choice.

“I know you’re able to talk about your mom, but don’t bring up mine.” His mom checked out of life on Earth seven years ago. Maybe seven years from now I’ll be able to mention my parents.

“Emery—” Ian’s right behind me as I walk into the dining room.

“Choose something from here.” I nod to the mini bar my father enjoyed after work. “It’s Friday night and you securing another carpentry job deserves celebration.”

“Only one of us is twenty-one.” He gives me a pointed look, but I know my desperate eyes should be enough for me to convince him to hand over the bottle like he did last time.

“My parents gave Hallie, Savannah, and I each a glass of champagne on New Year’s.” And compared to everyone else in this small town under twenty-one, I’m not getting hammered at the lake or The Falls. I’m in my house.

Ian crouches down, opening the liquor cabinet, glancing back at me. His side smirk shouldn’t make my stomach flutter. “Your parents had a very specific taste in tequila.”

“Yeah, they visited Aspen every winter before I was born.” I had only been a couple of times as a young child, but that ended the older I got. “My father purchased a few bottles every trip.” I take the bottle from Ian’s hand and pour two large glasses. I wince, taking another sip before placing it at the front of the cabinet, making sure it is in the same proper position to look pretty.

“You can feel sad, you know. Angry, even.” I swear he thinks the more times he tells me to feel that eventually I will break down. Which I’m still not ready to do.

“I’m angry that I don’t like the taste of this. But I don’t want to waste it because my father isn’t here to enjoy it.” I gulp the tequila, and as the burn hits my throat, my eyes blur with unwanted tears. With another sip, I blink away the tears.

“You need a way to channel your grief better.”

“My aunt is going for her PHD in psychology.” I roll my eyes, walking into the kitchen. “Trust me, I’ve heard it all.”

“Yet you’re still ignoring it.”

“Because it’s going to hurt.” My voice wavers, and I set the glass on the counter. “I’m not ready to face that yet.” I look into his understanding eyes, and he takes my hands in his. His large hands hold mine tightly as he nods in understanding. The rush of need he causes through me is so wrong, but it’s everything I long to find in someone.

Why is Hallie still with this man? They barely hang out anymore.

“We all heal at different times.” He clears his throat, dropping my hands, and I feel my lungs breathe again. “We are all here for you when you’re ready for the next step.”

“I’m hungry.” Maybe eating my feelings is a better option.

“Then cook.” I head toward the kitchen and grab a cup of noodles. My aunt and I don’t eat the healthiest. “No, create a recipe or something. Focus and be in the moment. You can’t live off packaged food.”

“Well, my parents never cooked and were always at work.” I swallow my tears with another sip of tequila.

“I’ll teach you.”

“Emery.” I’m ripped from the memory of us to reality. My heart stops at hearing Ian’s happy voice from my left speak again. “You’re back.” I continue to stand there like an idiot as my jaw opens and closes, searching for what to say.

“You didn’t get an invite from me to come over.” I keep my voice quiet, because if my aunt hears us, I’ll be cornered into explaining a moment Ian doesn’t even know I witnessed. One that has confused me enough to not make the best decisions for years now. Fully facing him, I take in his matured face and how his body has become even more muscular. “You can leave.”

“Thought that was *your* specialty.” He matches my quiet tone as if mocking me, and I hate how I want to smile. “I’m here for work. Rhett and I are on this project.” I exhale, feeling lightheaded from holding it. Ian’s the contractor? He did it. He actually started the company he always talked about.

“Fine,” I clip, taking a deep breath in an attempt to mask my emotions. I watch as his confused expression takes over. Not the side of me he was

expecting, but it's all I have to give right now. "I'll leave." I walk toward him, hoping if I move quick enough, I can brush past him and out of the kitchen.

"Emery, wait a minute." His arm blocks the doorway, and I nearly collide with his chest. Damn him for smelling so good. "I'm looking forward to Hallie and Justin's wedding." Ian's breath hits my neck, awakening shivers down my spine. "And seeing you more."

I should have gotten ready or had a shower before coming downstairs. This oversized sports shirt makes me feel too naked. My stomach flips to my throat, then settles.

"I thought you'd show up a night or two before the wedding, to be honest." My feet remain stuck in place as I glare up at him. His proximity still has a hold on me. "Did you come here alone?" He scans down to my hands and back up.

"Move. Please." Ignoring him, I point a finger into his chest and step forward. He remains a strong barricade, staring into my eyes as if he'll find the answers. His lack of personal space intensifies the nerves stirring through my body.

"Not so fast, Daisy Girl." My jaw tightens with annoyance from my body's reaction.

"You'll see me again at the wedding," I mutter, ducking under his arm, but he turns to follow me. I knew this time around wouldn't be an easy getaway.

CHAPTER 3

IAN

“DID I DO SOMETHING?” I can’t help myself and reach to place my hand on her shoulder.

“Nothing at all, Ian.” She shrugs me off, slipping on her shoes and avoiding eye contact. *Is she planning to leave wearing that?* “I figured you’d run away when you saw me in the kitchen.” Her tone is almost accusing.

“Me? What’s that supposed to mean?” Time away from here should have only made her happier. *Isn’t that what she wanted?* “Emery, you left because you needed a fresh start.” I shake my head as her hand rests on the door handle. “You were the one who didn’t say goodbye to *me*.” I have a good idea as to why, but she could have owned up to it.

“*Goodbye.*” She can’t shut me out this entire time.

“Did Aspen’s mountain air heighten your attitude?” Emery opens the front door, and I glance at her naked fingers. Huh, no ring... “Let’s not do this again, Daisy Girl. Once was enough.” It hurt to let her go the first time, but now she’s back with a new attitude, and I don’t know what the fuck happened.

“Once?” The warmth in her smile and eyes is gone. “I don’t want to be around you.” Her voice raises just before she shuts the front door with aggression. I notice she doesn’t have keys in hand. I head into the kitchen to pick up my clipboard and go to chase after her, when I hear Quinn come downstairs. She glances out the door window and opens it.

“Emery?” Quinn calls out, but shuts the door, defeated, as Emery continues. “How hungover is she to walk the streets wearing that?” Quinn mutters to herself, running a hand through her hair. She turns toward the kitchen before I can speak, and her hand shoots over her heart.

“Sorry, you told me to let myself in like last time.” I grip the clipboard tighter, and she eyes me with suspicion, then looks back to the front door.

“Do I even want to know what happened a moment ago?”

“I’d love to have answers as well.” I run my hand over my jaw and try to process the last few minutes.

The front door opens as Emery enters with a huff. Beautiful auburn hair falling out of her messy bun frames her tired blue eyes. “You guys were really going to let me leave wearing this?” Her hands wave over her oversized T-shirt.

“You’re the one who stormed out of here like the Wicked Witch of the West,” I call out as she heads up the stairs with a scoff. “We’re talking later, Daisy Girl.” I clear my throat as I hear a bedroom door slam.

“Hmm, her friends called her their *little daisy*.” Quinn’s arms fold as her head tilts to the side with curiosity.

“Daisy Girl is a name I coined.” Even though Emery was going through hell, there was a time before where her laugh was pure, and her face radiated innocence and joy. I was doing whatever I could to keep her spirits up like they once were before her parents died.

“And why didn’t I know about you and her back then?” She eyes me curiously, eyebrow quirked.

“You were busy with med school. Emery and I weren’t romantically involved. I just leveled with her because I lost my mother a few years prior.”

“Fair enough.” Her voice deflates as a hopeless tone kicks in. “No wonder she left. I was a shitty guardian at twenty-three.”

“You weren’t. Emery felt bad that *you* had become a stand-in parent for your sister.” I might be oversharing, but Quinn looks so lost right now.

“That girl, man.” She shakes her head and blinks back tears. “I hope you two work out whatever is going on.” Quinn laughs, slightly unstable, and nods toward the backyard. “Come on, I’ll show you one more thing I’d like to add on out back.”

I follow Quinn and meet my friend and business partner, Rhett, outside while we go over new plans. This town is expanding, and she’s been given quick town council approval to host tourists and add a little rental house on her property. After Quinn heads inside, Savannah pulls into the driveway and Emery hurries out. Her red hair reflects the sun, and her cut-off shorts are distracting as fuck.

“What happened when you went inside the house?” Rhett adjusts his

backwards hat as his brown eyes widen for an answer. “If you fucked her in that short amount of time, she’d have every reason to bolt out of there, all pissed off.”

“You know I’ve stopped hooking up.” I shove a drill into his tattooed body. “I’m not like you. That was Emery, if you remember.” I speak slowly, trying to figure out why she’s taking her anger out on me. I was there for her, and now I seem to be the whipping post.

“I haven’t gotten laid in weeks, Ian.” He brushes his hand over the stubble on his chin. “We are too damn busy with work, and I’m exhausted by the end of the day.”

“Take it as a sign to wait for a woman you have chemistry with beyond the bedroom.”

“Like how obvious it was that your chemistry with Emery was stronger than what you had with Hallie.” He met Emery one fucking time. During a group hike at The Falls, when we weren’t even alone together.

“Hallie’s better suited for Justin.” I introduced Hallie to my best friend Justin shortly after we ended, and it was basically love at first sight.

“I’m surprised Hallie didn’t dump your ass on that hike.” Rhett’s deep voice chuckles. “You and Emery were just firing conversations back and forth.” He stares to the side as if he remembers the moment so clearly. “It felt like all of us were intruding on your date, even though you two weren’t flirting. But you brought out a damn sparkle in Emery’s eye.”

“Hallie and I were kind of on the outs at that point. Mutual agreement.” I think back on us acting more like friends than a couple. We were both at different stages in our lives. She was studying her ass off, and I was taking any building job I could. “We didn’t mention anything to anyone, because Hallie didn’t want Emery to have another big change after her parents died.”

“So y’all stayed together to keep things normal for Emery?” He shoots me a look, and I know, it sounds ridiculous. “But you seemed to be hitting it off with Emery.”

“Who was very vulnerable and needed a friend to relate to more than anything.” Any feelings I had beyond friendship I kept on reserve until she had learned to cope better with other things.

“How long is she back for?” He doesn’t press for deeper info on the past, but his smirk is smug. “It’s been a while since I’ve taken a lady home. Maybe she can be the one to break my dry spell.” I don’t bother taking the bait. If he’s doing this, he already knows my depth of feelings for her.

“You just said you’re too tired, so we’ll see about that. But really, no chicks have been doing wonders for business, Rhett.”

“Speaking of our growing business,” Rhett muses. “More work is coming in for some commercial buildings. We are going to need professional help with interior design besides mimicking people's Pinterest boards.”

“And hire a few more laborers.” I make a mental note to ask our workers if they know of any good prospects. The few we have now are great, but there is no way we can expand and give people a decent turnaround for completion. “We should hire more before breaking ground on the Theil project downtown.” I think out loud.

“I’m gonna head back to the office and put together an estimate for Quinn.” We now own I & R Construction. Offering almost anything you need. Except top-notch interior design...but that’s a back burner issue for now.

“I’ll line up interviews this week for new workers.” Rhett squares his broad shoulders and clears his throat. “Finding a qualified designer who will relocate to a small town is probably not going to be the easiest,” he says, as I sense his aggravation rising.

“Nope.” Our budget isn’t as high as what big cities can offer either. “So, when we finally hire one, don’t sleep with her and put our company at risk.” I’m serious and he knows it.

“You know fancy materialistic women don’t pique my interest.” He’s got a point. Rhett tends to go for one of the many line dancers in cowboy boots at The Painted Pony.

“Right. I’ll meet you back at the office.” Climbing into my truck, my phone beeps.

Chickpea: Can you pick me up from school today and tomorrow so I don’t have to walk? Mom is taking time off work to have an afternoon date. *eyeroll emoji*

My twelve-year-old niece is someone I’ve all but raised and taken care of since my sister got pregnant at seventeen. This is nothing new. My sister has her routine of dropping Sophie off unannounced or asking through a last-minute text. I’d drop anything for my niece, but there are times I have meetings and can’t cancel.

Me: I’ll be there. You’ll have to do some running around with me though.

Chickpea: Better than being at home. Thanks.

Our mother passed away when I turned fourteen, and my sister, Amber, is two years older than me. In a spiral of sudden hurt, Amber ended up pregnant with Sophie shortly after. I became an uncle at fifteen. Ever since, she's had a string of potential men to become her daughter's new father. I try to be the best influence I can for my niece, as she needs to see how she should be treated. My grip on the wheel tightens as I head toward the office. I need to let off steam. My lunch break will be out in the wood shop chopping logs so I can clear my mind.

CHAPTER 4

EMERY

“WHAT’S your story with my steamy contractor?” my aunt asks, falling next to me on the couch. My heart jumps to my throat and her now raised eyebrows and small smile tell me my face hasn’t hidden my shock. “Emery, I’m sure I can level with you.” She laughs as I rest the hot coffee on my tongue in hopes it disables my speech.

“He dated Hallie back in the day, but helped keep my mind busy when you were at school or studying.” I avoid her eyes. “He lost his mom too.” Hugging a pillow to my chest, I realize how much I shut my aunt out when she moved in to help take care of me. I had just turned eighteen, but I still needed to finish out senior year.

“Keep going.” Quinn’s eyebrows raise.

“It’s irrelevant.” My teeth dig into my bottom lip as she waits for more information. “Nothing happened between us, if that’s what you’re fishing for.”

“I’m here when you’re ready to talk about whatever it is you’re trying to suppress.” She sighs and thankfully drops it.

“Let’s bake those cookies you used to bring over when I’d start back at school.” I change the subject and stand, feeling out of place with the lack of time I’ve spent in the kitchen this past week.

“The fall delights?” She smiles, following me to the kitchen. “I forgot all about those. I haven’t made them since I was a teenager.” Aunt Quinn opens some drawers in search of the recipe. “I know I gave the recipe to your mom because you loved them so much.”

“Except she was always too busy working at the hospital to ever make them.” I wince, feeling selfish for wanting her to choose me over saving

lives.

Baking cookies as a tradition was one of the many memories I wanted. Now, the opportunity to create any with my parents has been taken from me. My jaw clenches, stifling the urge to spew more negativity. Feeling the burn of tears begin to surface, I hold my breath to help keep them hidden. Aunt Quinn bites back her response as she continues to search through drawers for the recipe. I know she wants to agree, but she remains silent. Sensing my aunt's inner panic to appease me, I set the basic cookie ingredients on the counter and turn to face her.

“Relax, I’m sure we can come up with a similar version, if not better than the original recipe.” Pushing forward a smile, I take her busy hands in mine. “Seriously. I only remembered the cookies a few minutes ago. It’s not a huge deal.”

“Your mom and I used to bake all the time when we were younger.” Aunt Quinn’s smile is as soft as her features. My mother only wore that smile when she would tuck me into bed as a child. “Our parents were busy working at their clinic constantly, so she pretty much raised me since she was ten years older.” The generations of high-status doctors aren't as glorious as it sounds for their children—at least in *my* experience. I love my parents, but it’s hard to believe they loved me more than their job.

“I’m meeting Hallie and Savannah downtown for ice cream soon if you wanted to join us.” I break the silence after the ingredients are mixed together.

“Thanks, but I’ll have to pass.” My aunt scoops dough onto the tray. “My boss asked if I could come in a few hours early.” While I’m thankful for people dedicated to being there for others, I’m left once again after taking time off *my* job to see her.

“I totally get it.” My chest tightens as I set a timer while my aunt heads upstairs to get ready for work.

With the cookies fresh out of the oven and no one to share the first bites of warmth with, I leave the tray to cool and walk downtown. I text Savannah not to pick me up. The fresh air steadies my breath and refreshes my mind.

Feeling the warmth on my face, I let my eyes fall shut. But as Ian’s face appears behind my eyelids, I open them again. Seeing him after all these years was bound to happen. Especially since he’s friends with Hallie’s fiancé. It was only a moment we interacted, but my eyes etched every damn feature of his into my brain. I huff, kicking a rock on the pathway. How dare his

features become more prominent with age. His dark, tousled hair and mysterious blues have matured in the best way. His voice held confidence without the cocky undertones of his younger self.

I spent too many summer nights talking to him and a tequila bottle, when I probably should have talked to someone more professional. But the healing process differs from person to person. At that time, I was keeping my mind busy, and he helped keep my stomach full by also teaching me how to cook. I was grateful for our friendship. He was a safe space for me. A guy who listened without expecting to get into my pants. But I let grief take over one night...and I needed a clean slate where no one knew me. Savannah's name flashes on my phone screen. I ignore the call and continue the fifteen-minute walk downtown to clear my head. Perks of a small town—walkability. Moments later, a white Jeep comes into view.

“Emery.” Savannah's Jeep slows beside me. Detriments of a small town—you're easy to find. “What are you doing?”

“I needed to clear my head.” I avoid her eyes as my teeth toy with my bottom lip.

“Please get in. Let's talk.” I sigh, knowing it's no use arguing. “You look exhausted.” Her brown eyes scan my face.

“Aunt Quinn is getting an outdoor kitchen and,” I pause to release a breath, “I bumped into Ian.”

“He and Rhett have had a company for a while and are planning to expand,” she replies as the downtown comes into view. “Pretty great, right?”

“It's great.” A lot has changed over the years. Not that his name has left my lips since I've left this town. Hallie stopped mentioning him early on after I moved.

Savannah parks, and it's not long before we're picking Hallie's blonde hair out of the people around town. She's in her business attire, wearing a smile as she spots us.

“I'm so excited to spend the afternoon with you,” Hallie says, before she's even reached us. “I was able to move my meeting an hour later, so I can spend a little extra time out and about.” Warmth carries through me at Hallie making time for me. “I've been craving the pistachio ice cream since I drove past the ice cream hut the other day.” I giggle, trying to lighten my mood.

“I swear you've never ordered another flavor other than that one.” Savannah links her arm with mine and Hallie's as we walk toward to hut.

“Well, when something is perfect, there's no need for change.” My

stomach jolts with nerves as a familiar truck heads toward us.

“So, we meet again.” Ian’s truck pulls up to the curb as we are about to cross the street for the ice cream hut. “You look more revitalized than hungover today.”

“Oh, nice!” Hallie’s eyes dart back and forth. “Did you guys have a good catchup?”

“We didn’t chat long. He’s doing some additions to my house.” I slip my hands into my back pockets because I find him staring at them again. “Though, someone could brush up on their manners.” Sass kicks into gear as I shut down the way he makes my body feel.

“Excuse me? I entered the place with permission.” Ian’s voice drops, but it’s edged with amusement. “I believe someone needs their attitude checked, Miss Davis.”

My heart beats against my chest, and I swear they can all hear it. My lower region should not light up and clench in response to his gaze. I’m sure if he pinned me against the truck door right now, I’d succumb to whatever he does, no matter who watches. Even after all these years, my body craves his touch. There was something so alluring about his dominance.

Before I can rationalize a proper thought, I test the waters. “Anyone who treats a client with disrespect and doesn’t let her *leave the room* needs to have their manners assessed.” Being the shortest of the group, I hold my stance.

Hallie and Savannah share a look I can’t quite read. Their eyes flicking between Ian and I as an uneasy feeling dances through me.

“To be fair...” He smirks as his forearm vein bulge from gripping the wheel. “You aren’t my client. Quinn is signing my paycheck.” I freeze as his eyes narrow, his grip adjusting on his steering wheel. “I didn’t expect to see you back in town this early, Daisy Girl.”

“Well, I’m known to do the unexpected.” I raise my eyebrows, hinting at a moment only he and I remember. He holds my glare a little longer before turning to our friends.

“Have you girls hugged her yet? This attitude needs to be loved away.”

“I have no idea what happened between you two.” Hallie bumps my shoulder. “I told Ian the other day, and you at the bar...” Hallie trails off, pursing her lips. “Maybe you were too drunk, but I appointed you both to work together and plan the joint bachelor and bachelorette party.” I definitely missed that, but I smile through my stomach dropping.

“Oh, my goodness,” I say with as much excitement as I can muster up.

“Of course, I can do that for you.” More time with Ian isn’t what I had planned, but my time back here is about Hallie.

“Something low key at Rhett’s farm.” Ian nods my way. “We can go over everything this weekend.”

“I’d love to have a photographer there too.” Hallie glows just thinking about it. “Let me know the costs of everything.”

“Hallie, I’ve got you covered. You don’t need to pay a damn thing.” It’s the least I could do for her special moment.

“Emery, just because you have a lot of money—”

“Don’t,” I cut Hallie off, knowing where she is going with this. “That’s not mine.” Spending my parents’ life insurance for personal use has never felt right. “Ian and I can split the cost.”

“I’m fine pitching in too,” Savannah pipes up.

“So, Saturday at my office?” Ian points to me. “One in the afternoon work?”

“Makes more sense than one in the morning,” I toss out, and he rubs his hand over his jaw.

“Where’s the old Emery?” Ian asks the girls.

“I was hoping you’d be the one to find her.” Hallie laughs, checking her watch.

“Hello, I’m right here.” I look between them, stunned. I know I’ve been a bit hostile, but this keeps coming up and it’s only been two days. “I didn’t realize you two stayed this close over the years.”

“I stopped bringing his name up because you’d immediately change the subject,” Hallie throws at me in the kindest way possible. “You know Ian and Justin are friends.”

“Well, you two broke up...” I think out loud as Savannah picks at her nails, watching how this all plays out.

“I wouldn’t say we were a hundred percent together.” Hallie laughs as Ian chuckles.

What the hell am I missing?

“It worked out in the end for you.” Ian winks toward Hallie. “Justin is a better fit for you than I was.”

“Y’all wanna share something?” I feel my nerves take over.

“I need to get back to work.” Ian taps the side of his truck. “I’ll see you soon.” He drives off without another word of explanation, and both girls turn to me.

“I did not expect you to act that way when you saw him.” Savannah cups my face. “You and Ian used to get along so well. He was the only one who could make you laugh before you took off to Aspen.”

“Speaking of,” Hallie’s interrogation tone sets in. “Why couldn’t you say goodbye to him before you left? Poor guy didn’t even know you left until you had. Does how you’re acting with him now have anything to do with it?” I can’t tell if she’s playing dumb, or he really didn’t fill her in. It should have been obvious to him.

“Because I didn’t need his input.” It’s a half lie, but I’m not ready to admit the truth. “How about we do lunch instead of ice cream? I need a drink.”

“That’s not a good crutch, Emery.” Savannah sighs. “I know this town has so many memories, but you don’t need to take it out on alcohol or Ian.” Her arms wrap around me in a tight hug, and though I want to pull away, I find myself breathing in her familiar scent as my heart rate calms down. “We are all yours whenever you need us.”

“Well, you’re gone this weekend to surprise Logan.” Hallie runs a hand through her hair. “You haven’t seen him in three weeks.”

“I’m here every day besides this weekend...and Vegas.” Savannah tilts her head side to side as her long curls bounce. “Logan has been so busy with work and lives an hour away. I can cancel, though, if you want me to.”

“No. Seriously, Savannie, go get laid because three weeks is a while.” I laugh before realizing we are already in line at the ice cream hut.

“It’s not just about the sex, Em.” Savannah rolls her eyes.

“I find strictly sex works best.”

“Given your circumstances with Ryan, I’ll let that slide,” Hallie adds. “But not for much longer. Emery, relationships are great when you’re with the right person.”

I keep quiet until it’s our turn to order and wonder if there’s still a chance of redemption for the one man I haven’t stopped thinking about.

CHAPTER 5

IAN

“I LOVE THIS LITTLE CABIN.” My niece, Sophie, kicks off her shoes as we enter my place. “Thanks for picking me up again from school and letting me stay with you.”

“Never a problem, Chickpea. I don’t want you to be home alone when it gets dark.” I nudge her and mentally curse my sister's name for putting so many men before her daughter.

“Do you have a lot of homework?” I open the fridge and pour her a glass of her favorite watermelon lemonade.

“Ugh, do we have to talk about that? I always get good grades.” Sophie rolls her eyes as she turns to her phone.

“You know the rules.” I raise my eyebrows, and she sets her phone down.

“I know. Screens can’t replace human interaction.” She downs half her drink. “You have pizza on the way, right?”

“Nah, we can make it from scratch.” I watch her face scrunch. “Come on, you used to love cooking.”

“When I was a kid. I just turned twelve, Uncle Ian. Kids my age are all about food delivery.” There’s only one place in town that delivers, and I’m too far out of the downtown area for that.

“Probably because parents don’t think it’s necessary to teach their children how to cook anymore.” I sense her attitude and back off. Lately, she has been moody, and I wonder if it’s hormones or something deeper. “Fine, we can order food and pick it up.”

She looks toward the fridge, shaking her dark blonde curls. “No, we can cook together. Mom always orders food.” Her voice drops, but I won’t question anything unless she gives me a green light. “Mom says this guy

she's been seeing is *the one*."

For twelve, she has a strong head on her shoulders.

"Your mother is trying her best to give you a normal life, Chickpea." Her nickname has stuck since they were all she wanted to eat through her toddler years.

"I don't need a father. I need a parent. One who doesn't try to act like my friend half the time." Her forehead creases as I let her continue. "For years, she's been on this father hunt when I just need a present mother."

I nod and take her hand. "Have you told her this?"

"I've mentioned it, but it's like she's trying to make up for a past mistake." Her eyes glass over. "Me. I'm the mistake. Mom has missed years of enjoying life as a young person." Her voice cracks. "You are the only man I need."

My stomach twists as my heart drops. No child should feel like a burden. "Hey." I look into her eyes. "She chose you. She wanted you to be part of her life."

"Yet here I am most evenings without a mother." She has a point.

"Are you trying to say you feel unwanted?" I'm not one to get emotional, but a lump forms in my throat.

"I don't know how I feel, Uncle Ian." She shrugs, and I appreciate how she's able to talk about her feelings instead of bottling them up and shutting down. "I know I want to avoid relationship drama. I'll stay single for life." She glances in her cup and giggles.

"There are good guys out there, Soph."

"You seem like a good guy. Where's your woman?" She mimics my trademark half smirk. "I had a sleepover at Allison's last weekend. Her aunt wanted you to call her. She said you gave her a very memorable few weeks last year."

Dear God.

That relationship was short-lived when the woman tried to put a dog collar on me and have me bark when I came. I'm all for kinks, but that was too far. I clear my throat. "That ended because I wanted it to. I was the good guy."

"Whatever. See? She wanted more time with you, and you left. So why keep opening up when people change their minds?"

"One day, you'll meet someone who alters your world." Just like Emery took over mine. "You least expect them to make such an impact and you'd do

anything to make it work.” But I had to let her go, and now it’s too late. She’s taken.

“Riiight.” She rolls her eyes. “And what if they don’t want you back?”

“If it’s real, you’ll know deep down how they feel.”

“Won’t hold my breath for that.” Sophie sighs, opening the fridge to grab the ingredients, and we begin making our dinner.

A knock rattles my door as I’m finally molded into the couch, and Sophie is well fed and starting her homework. Today has been an exhausting whirlwind of work, emotions, and entertaining my niece. With the unexpected cliché arrival of ‘*right girl, wrong time, one who got away shit*,’ I can pinpoint the visitor. Peeling my ass off the leather sofa and sighing, I open the door. “I knew it wouldn’t take long for you to show up.”

“I brought beer.” My lifelong friend Justin enters my cabin and sits in his usual chair. “We have some talking to do.” His eyes swing to the table. “Hey, Sophie.”

“Why don’t we go talk outside so Sophie can focus?” And not hear the conversation I imagine is about to happen.

“Hi, Sophie.” Rhett enters the cabin with a bag of chips and a chocolate bar. “I picked this up for you just in case you were here.” He hands her the chocolate as her cheeks heat. That man can make anyone blush.

Heading out back, we sit around the fire. It’s warm out, but the fire helps keep the mosquitoes away. Cracking open a beer doesn’t relax me the way it should.

“I heard all the details about your interaction with Emery today,” Justin hints, hiding his smirk with a sip of beer.

“Of course, Hallie went home and gossiped to you.” I relax back in my chair and sigh, wondering what she observed that I didn’t. “Why wouldn’t she give me a heads up that Emery was back in town?”

“She probably figured you’d piece that together.” He laughs. “Hallie wasn’t expecting the hostile tone from Emery toward you, though. I told her you two getting together this month isn’t likely.”

“I wouldn’t hit on her.” I’ve only ever put her first and my feelings second. “The girls were just there for her engagement party. I imagined Emery being softer and more endearing if she’s in love and ready to plan a fucking wedding.” I need to let out frustration and stand, throwing a bigger log on the fire. “I expected her to fill me in on how happy she’s been.” Justin quirks his head to the side in confusion before blinking and taking a long sip

of beer. “What the fuck was that look for?”

“Nothing.” His tone holds hints of secrecy.

“Dude, come on. What did Hallie gag ball you about?”

“Nothing, actually.” He chuckles, continuing to assess me. “Are you going to question Emery about what she’s been up to?”

“I’d love to know her reason for leaving, but I won’t pry.” I have suspicions about what made her run, and it would be nice to know before she leaves again. “I now have my niece to look out for and work is crazy.” I glance through the kitchen window as Sophie continues to do her homework like the amazing child she is. “I’d like to know why time away from this town hasn’t brought Emery more joy, but it’s also not at the top of my list when she barely wants to look at me.”

“She could be avoiding the pain and it’s added up.” Rhett points his beer bottle my way. “Look at Sophie. She faces the hurt and talks about it. She heals through channeling the happy memories.”

“Emery doesn’t really have happy memories to get her through the sad ones,” I think out loud and stare at the flames. “Her parents shut her out as soon as she could legally stay home alone.” My grip tightens around my bottle, frustrated at how some parents prioritize.

“I know Hallie has been worried about Emery’s actions lately, and from what I’ve heard, Emery has me on edge too.” Justin drops this ball without any fucking context.

“You gonna elaborate, man?” I lean forward, waiting for more. “Emery has always been the cautious type. I admired that about her.”

“Not my place to share.” The furrow in his brow tells me he’s choosing his fiancée over me, and I have to respect that.

But fuck, it’s frustrating.

I know pressing for more information will only leave me with nothing, no matter how close he and I are.

“Want another?” Justin cracks open a beer and hands me one.

“Nah, I don’t want that influence on Sophie.” I’d like a few beers after this week, but Sophie needs one stable person in her life. My phone dings with my sister stating her date finished early, along with a paragraph bitching about the guy. I don’t bother reading the story. “I need to get Sophie home.”

A blue glow illuminates my walls as the clock reads three a.m. Sleep still hasn't graced me. I throw on sweats and drive to the edge of town to visit the one person who understands my scattered thoughts. Large magnolia trees drape over me as the damp grass seeps through my sneakers. Chills pebble my skin, but fill me with comfort as I rest against the cold stone. My head tilts, observing the sky above. The knot in my gut drops, knowing shooting stars are nothing more than rocks burning to their death instead of granting wishes.

"Hey, Dad." My voice breaks through the rustle of whispering trees. I know he can't physically hear me. His grave is merely a box of bones next to my mother's, but his voice echoes at times I need him most.

"You'll never believe who walked back into town." A chuckle arises at my disbelief. "You said Emery and I were fated based on the first five minutes you spoke with her. I know I laughed at you back then, but there's never been a woman close to making me feel the way she does." I exhale loudly with frustration. Hell, we never addressed or acted on feelings, and she still consumed my thoughts for years after she took off. I became accustomed to her never returning. Until now. The memory burns through my mind, like a movie glitching repetitively on a certain scene.

"Do you always wake up this early to go fishing with your dad?" Emery rubs her eyes as her arms wrap around her waist, my sweatshirt engulfing her.

"Usually." The glow over the hills illuminates the red accents of her dark auburn strands. "The sunrise is almost as beautiful as you."

"Yes, messy hair and tired eyes scream beauty." Sarcasm laces her voice as it cracks from a long night of her drowning in spirits. I wish I could help more. Hallie and Savannah sent her my way in desperation to help their friend heal after I had been the only one to make her smile when we'd all hang out.

"Maybe you should lay off the tequila and sleep in your own house." Maybe directing the focus to something more sobering is worth a try. I pull up to a dock off the dirt road and see the steam rising off my father's cup of coffee. I know she's hurting with the loss of both parents, but I didn't think she'd con me into letting her spend every Friday or Saturday night drowning in alcohol. But then again, my sister had done the same when our mother passed. I just don't want Emery to end up with the same results as Amber.

"Has hanging out with your father always been like this for you?" She tries

to redirect the conversation, as if whatever we are doing means nothing. It can't mean anything, the time we spend together. Not yet, anyway. She has healing to do, and I have a girlfriend who happens to be Emery's best friend.

But there is something about Emery and me that we can't shake. We're drawn together without force.

"Yeah, we love to spend time together. Fishing and lake time has gone on since I've been able to form memories. We talk about our week, or sometimes we don't say a damn thing."

"Where's your mom?" She keeps her eyes on the lake.

"She's with yours." I swallow, watching her silently process my response before nodding.

"I wondered why you were so understanding with me." Her voice is soft and breathless. "You've known exactly what to say to me since the moment of the crash." Almost as if it's a relief someone gets it. "How long has she been..."

"Seven years." She nods without another word.

My truck idles in park before I cut the engine and take a moment to enjoy the surroundings. I give a silent thanks to being alive and healthy. The cabin sits to the left of the dock. Trees paint the river shades of green and red as the end of August mornings creep in. The crisp smell of morning dew and nature fills the air as I exit the truck and help Emery out of the passenger side.

We reach my father, who grins at the tiny beauty beside me. "Who is this young lady?"

"Emery Davis, sir." She holds out her hand to shake his before I can introduce her.

"Pleasure to meet you." My father's eyes light up as he assesses her.

"Sorry for crashing your morning together," Emery states. "Your son told me this will be worth it."

"And is it?"

"He brought a vegetarian fishing." She pauses, holding in a giggle.

"We don't always fish." A rare, amused smile forms on my father's face.

"It's more about embracing the beauty of life around us and taking in the quiet." He nods to me. "Appreciating time together." I hear her sharp breath, and she holds it while pushing forward a smile.

"It's nice you take time away from work to make memories together." It's more of a passive aggressive jab, but I know how much she rambled on in a drunken state last night about how her family memories went down the drain.

"That should keep Ian in line with how to treat his future family." Her voice

is tight, and I can't quite read her the way I normally do.

"That boy needs to learn how to pick the right woman first," my father says, glancing my way. I don't know what it is about Hallie, but he never smiles at her with the warmth he's showing Emery.

"Don't pressure him." Emery pats my arm. "Forcing children into your path only pushes them away." I wonder how much truth is behind her words as she looks past him at the lake. My heart drops, knowing her parents worked long hours and no doubt gave her the medical field push.

"My son just needs to do what makes him happy." She nods, and we find our spots on the dock.

By the end of the morning, my father winks, shooting me a knowing smile. One of which I know is a 'that's the girl for you' kind of look.

I blink back to reality as the breeze ends my trance. Losing him last year after his second heart attack still irks me. I tried to change his eating habits, but he was set in his ways and missing my mother. Standing, my hand brushes over the gravestone with a sigh. Beechwood Falls isn't the same without my parents.

CHAPTER 6

EMERY

“YOUR PHONE IS GOING off like someone is in crisis mode.” Hallie laughs, though I can tell she’s slightly annoyed I brought my phone to The Falls.

“A semi crisis, yes.” I cringe as we carry on the hiking path to the infamous falls we’ve been to countless times. “I didn’t realize there was cell service out here now.”

“The joys of tourism and the town expanding. I don’t mind the tourists. This town could use a little more life.” She tilts her head toward my phone as it goes off again. “Who else is up this early?” We woke at the break of dawn to beat the tourist rush.

“It’s Josie, my friend back in Aspen. She’s currently traipsing through Europe, trying to mend her broken heart.”

“Ugh, poor thing!” Her voice aches, as if it feels my friend's pain. “Do you think she will be okay?”

“Things should work themselves out between her and her man. I have a feeling.” Though I’m not striving for a relationship or a long-term guy, Josie deserves the happy ending.

“I love that you have faith in them.” Hallie nudges me with a show-stopping smile.

“What can I say? They’re *fated*.” I roll my eyes and quicken my pace. If Hallie and I are a little breathless, there will be less talking.

“Kind of how I know you’ll get a happy ending too.” She knows I don’t care to put myself out there after Ryan.

“Hallie, I’m happiest not having to deal with the risk of heartbreak.” My chest tightens, thinking back on witnessing Ryan cheating. “I fell even more in love with cooking again after we spilt.” I only need to be good enough for

myself.

“When you find your person, there *isn't* any more heartbreak.” She smiles, resting her hand on my shoulder. “I know you’re still healing, but don’t write off love forever.”

“I’ll think about it,” I clip, upping my pace a bit more as we hit a small inclination.

“What made you choose Aspen anyway?” Thankfully, Hallie switches topics, but it’s to one I also try to avoid.

“The hiking views. The Falls here are gorgeous, but being on the mountaintops just hits differently.” Aspen has this way of making you feel so small in an already small town. Pausing, I acknowledge the other reason. “Honestly, my parents used to talk about how much they loved it. It was one of the only places they took me as a little kid too.” My throat grows thick, and I hate myself for letting these memories have such a hold on me.

“There it is,” Hallie confirms, and slows down her pace. We continue walking, swatting the few mosquitoes who seem to be immune to bug spray.

“No one in Aspen brings up my past because they don’t know it.” Some people in this town didn’t know how to act after I lost my parents. We’d meet at the grocery store or downtown, and I’d get a sympathetic blank stare or a “*How are you? Must be tough.*” Why couldn’t they focus on the positive topics? Like my graduation? The fun things I was doing that summer.

“Understandable. Have you thought about what to say to your parents’ friends at the upcoming hospital event?” I feel my legs move faster.

“Can we walk quicker? These mosquitoes are crazy this morning.” I also don’t want to talk about the hospital thing. “I’m used to a morning workout.”

“I’m getting a test run of my wedding hair and makeup done after.” Hallie shakes her head. “I don’t want to be breathless or sweaty.” I bite my lip and nod. “Go ahead. We aren’t too far from the falls. Burn off your steam, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Hallie—”

“Seriously, Em. It’s fine. I could use a moment to clear my head in silence too.” She smiles, waving her hand to scoot me off.

“We’ll walk back down together.” I blow her a kiss and jog along the path.

Veering right, I take the trail leading to the top of the falls to save my little legs from having to climb the bigger boulders up to the top. There are things I have missed about South Carolina, the warm weather being one of

them. I do prefer the warmth, but if I never felt the humidity again, I wouldn't be upset. I know I'm reaching the end of the trail as the sound of pressure from the water rushes to the bottom of the swimming hole. I smile, embracing the serenity of the lush trees and birds chirping around me. With a deep breath, I take in the scenery around me. These are the moments I appreciate in life. Looking down at the clear water below, I enjoy the quietness of waking up early. Soon it'll be full of people swimming as the day progresses.

Staring over the rapid flow of water, I notice someone walking out from behind the falls. My heart picks up tempo as Ian makes his way closer, shirtless, with the peak of sun adding glistening accents to his toned body. His abs flex as he runs his hands through his hair, making this look like something straight out of a commercial or sports photoshoot. His smile grows, and that's when I realize I've been standing at the top of the falls like an idiot, staring at him. Shit. His ego doesn't need to see me gawking, but it's too late. With a few effortless long strides up the rocks, he's in my space.

"Good morning, Daisy Girl." His voice is calm as usual, but I don't have the time or energy to give him.

"Just let me be." I haven't heard vulnerability in my voice in a long time. Yet Ian has a way of getting to me.

"Give me a minute, please." His arm reaches out, but he pulls it back, sensing I don't want to be touched. "I'll leave you alone after."

"We meet at the shop tomorrow afternoon, Ian." I feel a small smile force its way onto my face.

"*That* conversation can be strictly business." He rests his hands on his hips, and I fight like hell to not stare at his body. When I nod, he continues. "I just wanted to say that I'm proud of you, Emery. Your cooking has come a long way." I can't hold back a small giggle, remembering how I first started out burning water. "There's the bit of light brought to your eyes. Is Aspen treating you right?" He glances down at my body again, and I'm starting to get annoyed.

"Why do you keep looking at me?" I glance down at myself and toss my hands to my sides.

"Hallie and Savannah went to Aspen about eight months ago for an engagement party." My tongue pushes to the roof of my mouth to hold my breath.

"Yes, they did." I don't have it in me to talk about that right now.

“I was just looking for a pretty ring.” Thankfully, they have proven to be tight-lipped about what actually happened.

“You’re good at *looking*, aren’t you?” I want to scream what has been eating at me the past few years. “My life today isn’t any of your business.”

“I don’t deserve this hostility, Daisy Girl. Especially after putting you first.” Bullshit.

“This conversation is on hold until further notice.” I notice Hallie walking up the trail below. “Or we just forget it happened.” I head toward the rocks to venture down to meet her.

“Oh, I’ll be bringing it up again.” Ian winks as he walks past me. But not before turning back with a smirk that I’m tempted to smack off. Hallie appears at the bottom of the rocks, and Ian jumps off the last rock to meet her. They greet each other as I cautiously make my way down. Ian faces Hallie, but his awareness to protect me is almost instinctual. His arm reaches to the side just in time to brace me as I nearly slip on the last rock. I swallow my pride and take his hand.

“Thanks,” I mutter, hopping onto the safe ground. Ian nods before taking off in a jog down the path.

“What was that about?” She glances up at the falls and back behind her.

“Nothing. He just helped me down.” I step closer to the water.

“No, at the top of the falls.” Her sly smile wants a deeper answer.

“Just trying to plan your party and him being too nosy. He’s lucky I didn’t push him into the swimming area.”

“Right.” She smiles wide. “Ask Ian to show you all the things he built for the wedding when you visit him at the shop tomorrow.”

“That is...a really nice thing for him to do.” He’s still selfless, I see.

“His heart might be too nice.” She searches my eyes. “He went out of his way to try to help you find yourself again. And on top of that, he was juggling his little niece, working full time, and his father having a heart attack that summer.” Hallie shakes her head, and it almost solidifies this man is too good for anyone.

Especially me.

“Which is why I didn’t want to burden him after his father needed him.” I swallow and desperately want to continue down the trail.

“I wish I knew what you were thinking at the time.” She huffs with a sadden tone. “Or what you’re currently thinking.”

“I’m thinking about how you’ll make a beautiful bride and how I can

make this shared bach party exactly the way you want it.”

“It would be perfect if you just moved back here.” A lot of walls would have to come down and I’m not ready for that.

“Hallie, I can’t. But I’m here to celebrate your wedding. Then I’m out of this town until Savannah decides to get married.”

“Or a baby is born?” Hallie’s cheeks hold a tinge of red as her eyes alight with a mix of excitement and fear. Her hand touches her stomach as her lips roll into a straight line.

“You’re not.” Giddiness cracks a smile on my face, and I have no idea where this elated feeling is coming from. Even though I grew up babysitting, I’ve never thought about having children. Hallie nods as her eyes glass over.

“I’m late and took a test this morning. I haven’t had a chance to tell Justin yet, but this whole morning has had my mind buzzing.” She takes a shaky breath, and I realize I should hug her. I open my arms and pull her in. Oddly, she doesn’t hug me back.

“Were you two trying?” My eyes widen as realization kicks in. “We were out at the bar drinking the other night.” Hallie was an only child as well, and we never talked about babies. Savannah did enough obsessing over them for all of us.

“I won’t be drinking at our wedding, that’s for sure. I’m worried that’s going to be hard to go unnoticed.”

“Creating life is a pretty cool thing. You made a human, Hallie.” I keep my voice light.

“You’re right. I’m just not sure I’ll know what to do. Changing a litter box and buying cat food has been my extent of nurturing.” She fans her face as her eyes water. “I came off the pill a couple months ago and heard it can take a year or so for hormones to regulate again. Didn’t think it would be two months later.”

“With the amount of research that I know you’ll be doing about pregnancy, plus your motherly instincts kicking in, you’re going to be amazing, Hallie.” My hands reach for hers. “I don’t doubt you for a second.”

“It would just be nice to have you around more. You could be the fun auntie!” Hallie’s green eyes actually twinkle, and I feel my heart pinch.

“My chef career is *my* baby.” My parents worked their asses off, and I need to do the same. “I’ve worked so hard to get to where I am, and it’s finally taking off.”

“There are places around town that would make a great spot for your *own*

restaurant.” Except there isn’t much room for growth with a career in a town like Beechwood Falls.

“Let’s talk about baby names.” I pivot the conversation and begin walking toward the trail back to the car.

A mile off the downtown strip, Ian and Rhett’s office and wood shop come into view. It’s nothing fancy. I’m the only car in the parking lot, questioning if we were supposed to meet here. Walking through the front, the receptionist is absent. I continue past the desk to the long hallway with a couple of doors. Taking a deep breath, my frustration grows because if he forgot about our meeting, I’m losing the afternoon with my aunt for nothing. Every room is empty. I glance out the window in the last office, and an old blue truck bed catches my eye. Ian’s father’s truck is peeking out from behind the wood shop.

Walking toward the shop, the echo grows louder. A crack of a log rings through my ears, and I pick up my pace. Just as I want to chew this man out for not telling me he was hiding behind the building, Ian comes into view, swinging the large ax. The thick log has him swing once more before splitting in half. I’d like to blame the heat for making me dizzy, but noticing his jaw is firmly set as he uses aggression to toss the logs aside, I picture him using the same strength to toss me around the bedroom. His rough, chapped hands sliding over my smooth skin. Crap. I’m no longer frustrated—at least not in the angry way anymore.

Ian still doesn’t notice me and picks up another log to split. I doubt I can swing an ax as effortlessly as he can. Setting it down, he lifts the bottom of his shirt to wipe his forehead. My eyes gravitate to his toned abs, and I find myself hoping he takes his shirt off to chop another few logs. As if he heard my thoughts or senses my arousal, he looks my direction with a knowing grin.

“You made it,” he greets, walking toward me.

“I nearly left because I couldn’t find you.” I fight to keep my eyes on his and not drop to the abs I know are hiding beneath his black tee. “We have a party to plan and you’re hiding out back, chopping wood.”

“Maybe you should try chopping wood sometime.” Ian walks through the

wood shop door. “You’d probably be less angry.”

“Maybe I should have pushed you off the falls yesterday when I had a chance.” The smell of fresh-cut wood fills my nose as we walk farther into the shop.

“I rest my case, Daisy Girl.” He has always had a gorgeous smile that meets his eyes. I smirk because I’m not as annoyed as I want to be.

“Do you really need to use the ax when you have a machine to chop it for you?”

“Yeah. It benefits me in more than one way.” Ian’s eyes bounce around the shop, and I take it he doesn’t want to elaborate.

“So, I have a photographer lined up for the party.” He nods, but remains zoned out. “Are *you* okay?”

“A lot is going on in my personal life. I’ll chop some more wood after we sort through things, and I’ll be good.” He clears his throat and claps his hands together.

“I get it.” I try to relate without actually knowing what is going on. But I also feel like I don’t have the right to know. “This meeting is about Hallie and Justin, and we need to make their night special for them. I’ll bring the appetizers, and Savannah said Rhett was supplying the alcohol.”

After spending time going over the details, Ian nods to the side. “Come, take a look at what I built for the wedding.” I trail behind him to a beautiful archway. Next to it is a bar, and a small table.

“Wow, they’re all gorgeous,” I say as I spot a beautiful dessert tier stained to match the other wooden builds. “Is that—”

“Hallie mentioned you might cater something bite-sized for the wedding.” I nod, stepping closer as he assembles the plates. “I made this with you in mind.”

“That’s so thoughtful,” I breathe, feeling my heart soften.

“Hopefully, you’ve gotten better at reading ingredients.” Humor laces his tone. I turn to face him, and my pulse goes wild as we mirror the same stance as that one night five years ago.

“You can’t eat cupcakes before dinner,” I scold Ian and stir my pasta sauce.

“Wait twenty minutes.”

Ian takes a bite of the dessert and leans over the sink like he’s going to be sick. “You added salt instead of sugar.” A laugh erupts from me, pulling me out of the sorrow I had been feeling. The large jars were right next to each

other on the shelf and my mind had been elsewhere.

“Serves you right.” The wine bottle in my hand rises to my lips as I take a swig. I don’t like the flavor of white wine, but it’s fuzzing the fact that today marks four months since my parents’ car crash in April. My laughter slows and the guilty pain makes itself at home again. I take another sip.

“You need to share some with the recipe, Daisy girl,” Ian softly speaks, and I wonder why he keeps the nickname since I’m losing petals of joy each day.

“De-glaze the pan, or it’ll burn.”

“I’m scared to.” I take another sip of wine, feeling I’ve reached my limit.

“All the cooking shows have flames happen afterward.”

“Pour the wine in.” Taking a step closer, he’s now by my side, encouraging me. “I promise there won’t be a flame.” I feel safe with him close, but maybe it’s all the time we’ve been spending together this entire summer.

I take a deep breath and pour some wine into the pan. It doesn’t burst into flames. Confused, I glance over my shoulder, my head a little too close to Ian’s than it should be. The pan sizzles loud as steam rises.

“You gotta scrape it.” I turn back and push some of the food around. “Use some force, Emery.” He’s hovering over me, watching me burn it. “Like this.” Ian steps behind me and holds the wooden spoon over my hand. My breath hitches with his touch, and I want more. So much more. I’ve heard him talk about what he’s capable of in bed. That conversation accidentally came up one night when I complained that sex might be overrated.

Ian lets go of the spoon and takes a step back. “See? No flames. You had nothing to worry about.”

Turning to face him, the only flames are the ones burning between us. His eyes drifting over my mouth confirm that.

He’s also the only person who truly makes me feel.

Having me laugh in moments I want to cry.

Encouraging me to try new things I’m not confident with.

I’m finding myself in him again.

Our moment ends when the timer goes off. Ian busies himself with straining the pasta as I grab two bowls from the cabinet. The sauce smells amazing, and I can’t help but to grab a spoon and try it before we sit down.

“My God, this tastes so good,” I say as the creamy wine sauce with a hint of pesto awakens my taste buds.

Ian walks over with a bright smile. “You did it. I’m proud of you.” It only took a couple of months to make something this perfect on my own, with a

little personal twist. He's so patient with me. "How do you feel?" He believes I'll be able to heal and find my old self again. I'm starting to believe it too. "I'm proud of myself." My smile is wide as I'm filled with pride. "I can cook proper food now." Right away, my smile drops. I can't tell my parents that I accomplished this. But would they even be proud if they didn't care enough to teach me. To take the time and cook proper meals for me?

"Hey." Ian tips my chin up, reading my mind. "Let yourself be happy for a moment." I pout, but nod. "Should I eat another cupcake so you can laugh at my reaction again?" His grip still holding my chin.

I feel a grin making its way across my face. Staring into his intense blue eyes, this moment feels right. He swallows as his eyes flick to my lips and back up to lock onto my gaze. He feels this too. Holding the counter for support, I push up onto the balls of my feet to lean in. Except he stands tall, and his hand drops from my face. Then it clicks. I initiated him cheating on my best friend.

This is not who I am. I may vomit. I stumble backwards as I internally scream at myself. I was too focused on forgetting my parents and wanting to escape grief.

How did I stoop this low?

"I'm sorry." I hear the panic rise in my voice. This ends now. His jaw tightens as his eyes fill with frustration. "How mad are you?" Ian blinks with an annoyed sigh, but he still hasn't said anything. "Forget it. You don't have to answer." I want him to back away and give me even more space, but he doesn't. "You should leave."

"Emery, I..." I watch him stand there, trying to form a response. Anger radiates off him as his hand brushes over his chin. He's probably scared to hurt me.

"I hear you loud and clear. Don't say another word. Please, leave my house before I do." Though I'm too intoxicated to drive and would have to walk. Ian rolls his lips in with a pained face, walking out of my house.

A dog barks, bringing us out of the moment. There is not a doubt in my mind as to what he is thinking. And this time, I wonder what he's going to do. As far as he knows, I'm taken. His hand brushes over his jaw and his eyes glance at my hand for a ring he will never see. I feel my chest tighten, unsure of what's about to happen. I'm not ready to explain myself to him.

"Any changes you'd like me to make to the dessert tray?" I can catch my

breath.

“No.”

“Well, it’s yours. Maybe you can use it for your wedding one day.” Ian smiles as I watch him try to blink back hurt. God, this man.

“Maybe.” With a small shrug, I make my way to the door. Inside is suffocating me with emotions.

“What do you think of the town after being away for so long?” He walks as he talks, and I venture behind.

“I’m not sure why people are so attracted to this small town.” I lean against the woodpile by the door. “The Falls are alright, but we aren’t that different from other small towns.”

“Tourists say the people are dandy.” Ian rests beside me and gently bumps his shoulder against mine with a smirk. “Well, *most* townspeople are.”

“I’m super nice.” I playfully smack his arm and want to double check if his biceps are really that firm.

“So, I’m just your whipping post?” His eyes make a pass at my lips, and he pushes off the woodpile, retrieving the ax.

“I’d use you for no such thing.” The flirty tone leaving my mouth throws me off. I’m bouncing back into our banter too easily.

“I saved your ass yesterday at The Falls, and you greet me today by mentioning how you regret not pushing me into the water.” He sets a log on the bigger stump, and I watch the veins in his forearms flex.

“That was before you made me a display to show off my incredible treats.” I grin, watching the ax lift to his shoulder, and he slices the wood in a strong, quick swing. “You and Rhett seem to have a lot of business.”

“Yeah, we need to hire a few more people and a qualified interior designer next to keep up with everything.” The ax head rests on the chopping block as Ian leans forward, sitting his chin on the bottom of the handle.

“Choosing décor isn’t that difficult.” Though I have zero style when it comes to decorating or choosing fashion.

“You want the job?” His half smirk builds a slow arousal through me, and I silently curse it away.

“I have an award-winning job back in Aspen, thank you very much.” I feel the pride radiating off of me.

“I’ll take credit for that.” He stands to his full height and holds my eyes. Mine flicker to the movement of his thumb brushing back and forth over the top of the ax handle. I’ve never wondered what it was like to be an inanimate

object until now. Or how his thumb would feel stroking the sensitive bud between my legs. If he's being intentional, it's working.

"Don't make me come over there and swing that ax." I raise my eyebrows, even though I would have lived off packaged food if not for him.

"You're welcome to try." He holds it out to me, and out of cocky spite, I walk toward him, ready to chop a log of wood better than he can.

"Jesus." I manage to grip the handle, but lifting doesn't happen. The weight of the ax head feels like it's half my body weight.

"I know, I make it look effortless." Ian chuckles as I glare up at him. "Want me to help you?" He steps closer, stealing the air from my lungs. I should say no.

"Sure." He stands right beside me and proceeds to show me how to have a proper grip. My body buzzes with the suppressed need to explore him as I grip the handle tighter.

"There ya go. Now lift it and come down straight." He helps get the ax into place, but as I swing, there is barely a crack in the log. "If you come out here every day, I'm sure we could train you to split one by the end of the year."

"I'll stick to cooking." I let him take the ax back.

"I'm proud of you." I look away as his eyes meet mine. "Go enjoy the rest of your day." He dismisses me with a laugh. "I know you'd rather be with the girls." *Only because I'm not wondering what they look like hovering above me.*

"I'll see you around, Ian." I walk backward for a moment, watching his thick hand grab a log and set it onto the chopping block. He lifts the ax and does a clean cut the first time. I quickly turn around and continue walking before he can see me gawking once again.

It's going to be a long, torturous month here if I keep spending time with him.

CHAPTER 7

EMERY

“I’M EXCITED for us to go out tonight.” I smile as we walk down Hallie’s hallway to the master bathroom. “Too bad Savannah is still out of town.”

“I know. How did the meet-up with Ian go?” Hallie replies, staring at me through the bathroom mirror before unzipping her makeup bag.

“Pretty good. He made me a food tier. I guess I really do need to make some goodies now that I have a fancy tray,” I hint, knowing Hallie told me she didn’t need me to cook up a huge assortment of food.

“Yeah, an extra dessert won’t hurt,” she gives in easily. “You make great food. Just be sure it doesn’t make you late for the ceremony and dinner.”

“It won’t.” I smile as she applies her makeup for tonight. “I’ll keep it simple and delicious.” I pick up a makeup brush and debate what to apply. I’ve always been a *mascara and call it a day* kind of girl.

“Thank you for not tearing his head off.” She runs a hand through her blonde curls. “He’s even building me an outdoor altar and bar.”

“They’re beautiful, Hallie.” I meet her smile in the mirror. “The altar is going to look even better with all the flowers you’ve ordered for it.”

“I’m sorry if it’s painful for you to be planning my wedding when you were supposed to have one too.” Her green eyes hold mine, as if waiting for me to break down. Not happening.

“It wasn’t meant to be. Things happen for a reason. I got a Michelin Star out of it.” I push forward a laugh. “I found myself in recipes again.”

“I remember how it all started.” But she doesn’t know how it ended. “Ian was the only one who seemed to understand what you were going through.”

“I felt bad for taking time away from you two.” Even if she was prioritizing school over us.

“I asked him to be there for you. Plus, you know how busy I was with studying. I didn’t have much time to hang out with you either.”

“And it’s not weird that I’m hanging out with him now?” I don’t know why I feel the need to double-triple check. I guess a near guilty conscience is getting the best of me.

“You hanging out with my high school boyfriend? Please.” Her laughter echoes through the bathroom. “Emery, it’s a small town. People swapping exes is common. Slim pickings.” I cringe from her truth, but don’t want to stoop to the branding. “Plus, this is to plan my wedding with Ian’s *best friend*.” I shrug, trying to find a loophole. “Emery, Ian and I weren’t as serious as you make us out to be.”

“It’s just the whole girl code thing.” I try to find the words as she smirks back at me.

“I knew you had feelings for him.” She pulls out her lip gloss as her eyes find mine. “If anything, I think you *still* feel something for him but are too closed off.”

“Hallie, I never said—” My head spins as I place my hands on Hallie’s bathroom counter to steady myself.

“You didn’t have to. I don’t know why things became weird between you and Ian. And I don’t need to. But I did honor girl code when you wanted to keep the move to Aspen between Quinn, Savannah and me.

“I live in Aspen. We’d never work.” Not that I even want us to. I fidget, shifting my body weight from each leg, and I push down the way he makes me feel once more.

“Even back then, you were suited for him more than I was,” she simply states. I bite my tongue, not sure what to respond with.

I plaster on a fake smile and finish applying my makeup. “I definitely need a few drinks at the bar tonight.”

“Along with your flings, you now consume alcohol regularly.” Her forehead creases as her eyes reflect concern. “As your best friend, I don’t fully approve.”

My makeup brush drops to the counter. “Well, my life is going great at the moment.”

“You’re angry, which makes sense with all the hurt you’ve been trying to ignore.” Holding my breath, my jaw clenches as her truth pierces my ears. I just want to forget.

“Now you’re sounding like Aunt Quinn and her psychological analysis.”

Not needing another light intervention, I zip up my makeup bag and walk back into the room to find an outfit.

“She’s a smart woman.” Hallie laughs. “I just love you, Emery, and want you to be happy.”

“Cooking makes me happy. So, I do lots of it.” I keep my attention on a handful of shirts I tossed in my bag.

“Alright.” She sighs, knowing I’m going to shut down any moment if she presses for more questions. “Are you coming back here tonight? I don’t know how late I’m staying.”

“Yeah, my aunt is having Carson over. They aren’t the soundtrack I want in my ears.” We laugh and finish getting ready before climbing into her car and heading out for the evening.

The Painted Pony packs in people like sardines as we enter. I feel my smile grow as the music starts to pump through me. For a confidence boost, I opted for dark smoky eyes, tight jeans, and a low-cut green top. Every step is a confident stride as my hips sway. “Come on, Hallie, name you poison.” I slap my hand on the bar.

“Emery.” Her eyes widen, waiting for me to clue in. “This *mama* will have a ginger ale.”

“Oh, right!” I yell over the music and order myself a double Jameson.

Music pulses through me as the tempo syncs with the lights. Hallie and I reach the dance floor through a crowd, and her yelp catches my attention. Justin takes Hallie’s hand and pulls her into him with an impressive spin. People sway, knocking into me, and I dodge a drink spilling on my shoulder just in time. Others are townspeople who I’ve tried to avoid throughout high school and pray they don’t call out my name. Hallie ditches Justin and takes my hand as we dance. The mix of club music and country line dancing is bizarre but refreshing. We share a few dances before she leans into my ear.

“I’m taking off after this next dance. I will leave the door unlocked for you unless you want to leave with Justin and I now.”

“No, I’m actually enjoying myself,” I say over the music. “I haven’t had a night out in a few months because I usually work nights.” Plus, a one-night stand might help take the edge off my sexual frustration.

“Okay, love you! Be safe.” Hallie hugs me and takes off with Justin. *Be safe*. I laugh to myself and head back to the bar for another double. Beechwood Falls’ extent of breaking news is if someone’s dog is missing. After my shot, I return to the dance floor. This second double quickly kicks

in, and a pair of hands land on my waist. Fingertips dig into my hips in a firm manner, his face burying in my neck as he grunts. I've come across assertive men before and never had an issue. I don't mind dominance, but I've never had a skin-crawling shiver from their touch like his. Especially since he hasn't even said hello or asked if I'm interested. My hips halt as unease races through me. I try to turn out of his grip, but his teeth bite my shoulder.

"Hey!" I yell over the music. "What the hell are you doing?" I take a deep breath, trying to stop this woozy, tipsy feeling.

One hand travels up my breasts in an assaulting manner as his other pulls me tighter against him. "Let's get out of here." His strong grip moves to my upper arm, pulling away from the dance floor. I'm dragged toward the secluded back bathrooms.

"Stop!" My heart pounds as I look around for anyone to notice us. "Leave me alone," I try to yell, but my voice is a letdown. This night is no longer fun.

His tainted, stale mouth meets my neck. "Don't fight it. You want this," he growls, biting down.

My vision doubles as my head floats in alcohol. I feel myself squint hard to blink dramatically. As if that will sober me with enough force to push a man twice my size away. His lips meet the vein that I know he can feel, pulsing with fear. A victorious chuckle erupts through him as his hands cling to my shoulders. I can barely compute that we made it into the bathroom until I'm caged against the sink, staring at us both in the reflection. This is not a sight I want to witness head on. I glance down at the faucet, trying to figure out an easy enough escape, until his hand meets my throat.

"Watch us, little lady." I listen in fear of him squeezing my throat too hard. He reeks of cigars and cheap whiskey. Where is the group of women always hanging out in the bathroom when you need them? Tears prick my eyes, and I search through any scenario to free me from here. His chest locks me in place as his hand leaves my neck and meets my hip. My skin crawls with disgust as he reaches around the front of me to unbutton my jeans.

I know stomping on his toe in defense will do no harm when I'm a hundred and seven pounds and heavily intoxicated. My last hope is if he turns me around so I can knee his groin. I'm flexible enough to kick him, but my head feels like I'm floating.

"Why d-don't we gooo ta your plaaace?" I beg in a failed seductive tone. Fuck, I'm too sloshed to even take control by speaking.

“As if I haven’t heard that before.” His breath brings bile to my throat, and I hear the clink of his belt unfasten. Is he really this bold without even taking me into a stall?

“Stop it!” Begging the music not to mask my voice, I scream with all my energy, feeling my lungs deflate.

“She said stop,” the roaring voice of a savior yells as the door flies open.

His weight vacates me, and as I grab onto the sink to stabilize myself, an arm wraps around me. My back meets a tall, firm chest. Before my vision can focus, I see the creep’s head held against the mirror.

Relief instantly floods through me, and for once, I might cry. With a deep breath, the smell of the person behind me calms me. My eyes meet the bloody face of the man who will now have me testifying against him as he’s helpless against the now cracked mirror. I attempt to steady my shaky breaths and follow the arm holding the man’s head. I want to vomit, and not from the alcohol.

Of course, raging blue eyes clash with mine, throwing me more off balance. Ian once again swoops in take care of me. I have no doubt he’ll want to talk about tonight, but I just want to rid this from my memory and store it with everything else I try to forget. As I take a step to the side, away from Ian, he lets me lean against the wall to collect myself.

“I ne-need air.” I push off the wall.

“Emery, wait,” Ian says, as the guy against the mirror grunts.

“Air.” My hand rests on the door frame.

“I’ll be out in a second.” As Ian’s now distracted with the creep, I leave the bathroom.

My hand traces the wall, all the way down the hall toward the bar’s entrance. How I’m even walking at this point blows my mind. Maybe I’m actually floating down this hall like the graceful dancer I once was...

“Hey, watch it!” someone says as I feel a bump on my shoulder.

“S-sorry?” I’m not as graceful as I imagined. My hand guides me to the swinging saloon doors at the front. I stumble forward, letting go of the wall, and grab the door. With a deep breath, I steady myself before heading to the parking lot to rest for minute, before I walk to Hallie’s. Thankfully, she’s only a few minutes away. I don’t trust being alone with the one of the town’s new taxi drivers at this point.

The air is warm, but the slight breeze helps sober me. I blink a few times, trying to weave my way through the cars. Tonight did not go the way I had

planned. But that's the story of my life. Adrenaline rushes through my veins as my arms begin to tingle. My hand reaches to my back pocket to make sure I still have my phone. Thank goodness. Looking down, I watch my hands shake. I can't tell if I want to cry or laugh at the irony of tonight.

My head spins as I rest against a vehicle. I curse under my breath and know if I really had to, I could have found a way to get out of that situation. I guess portraying and giving off the energy of the easy girl finally caught up to me. Maybe my friends are right and I need to lay off the drinking. I didn't want Ian to see that side of me tonight. The scared and vulnerable girl once again. Anger tightens in my stomach, wishing I would have left with Hallie and enjoyed the rest of the evening making a happier memory.

"Good." Speaking of the devil, Ian's voice echoes through the air. "I see you've found my truck."

"You did-didn't need to save me," I hiss, trying to peel myself away from this door. "Coulda handled it."

"Yeah, you looked like you could have." He inhales sharply through his nose, and I expect him to yell at me for being that drunk in a bar. "Are you hurt?" His voice is soft and full of worry.

"Beterrrr than the guy's f-face you smasshhed against the mirror." I straighten my posture and try to take a step past him. "Niiight."

"You can't stand properly without me or my truck supporting you." His hand steadies my shoulders as I give in and lean back against his truck.

"Why are you here?"

"Justin and I own the bar. They said you were here alone, and I wanted to check on things," he replies. "We need to tighten security."

"I'm twenny-threee. Don't need a babysitterrr." I point my finger at him with a sloppy arm and instantly regret it. "I'm an aduuult." I am way past my alcohol limit to save my ass.

"An adult who makes rookie moves." Gah, why does he have to move so much?

"Whatever," I breathe, willing my vision to focus.

"I wish horrible things didn't happen to drunk women, but you should be aware of your alcohol intake around strangers." He opens the passenger door.

God, can he not be right for one second? "Sc-screw you, Iaaan."

"Yeah, time for you to get some rest." He motions to the door. "Get in."

"No." I push away from the truck to stumble toward the back. Again, tracing my hand along the side for balance. His eyes close as I watch his

chest rise. His shoulders square as his jaw ticks. Maybe I'm finally sobering up.

"Get in, or I will pick you up and put you in there myself."

"J-just cuz you shoot orders at me, doessnn mean I listen." I feel myself losing this battle each time I slur a response.

"You don't get to make reckless choices around me when you are this drunk." He shakes his head, extending a hand to grab.

"Believe me, I know the outcomes of my drunken choices." I can't hide my regret, and his face softens, going back to one of the moments that drove me out of town.

"Get. In. Now, Emery." He holds his hand out to me.

"I can do it." I let go of the truck, only to trip my first step forward.

His arms catch me in a charming photo-worthy dip. Worry fills his gaze as our eyes meet. My throat constricts as my stomach turns without enough warning. "Oh, no," I whine, turning my head quick enough to empty my stomach contents beside him.

My vision fades as I feel myself lifting off the ground.

Is my brain a balloon? Throbs expand with each pulse as I wake. I keep my heavy eyes shut as my body sinks deep into the bed. Earl Gray tea whiffs through the air, willing me to enjoy this moment. I sigh, sinking into the comfiest mattress, and the heavy comforter engulfs me like a weighted hug. Never have I been in a bed this inviting. I freeze, sensing something isn't right. *Shit*, never have I been in this bed. I squint one eye open to observe the foreign scenery. I'm not in Hallie's guest room.

A log wall with a deer head greets me, and if I wasn't sick to my stomach from this hangover, the poor dead animal would do it. I'm definitely in a cabin. Slight panic runs through me as I memorize the surroundings, just in case I need to escape a creep planning to hold me captive in the woods. I turn my head toward the devil that hangovers call sunlight. My heart jumps to my throat in surprise at who greets me.

"You're kidding me." Air vacates my lungs as I try to piece together last night. This can't be real. I shouldn't be waking up in *his* bed. "What the hell am I doing here?" I sit up. Pain punishes me as it radiates through my head.

“Good morning to you too, Daisy Girl.” Ian smiles, lounging in the chair with a coffee in one hand and a notebook in the other. “Tea?” He motions to the mug on the nightstand.

“What?” My stomach turns with uncertainty. “Why am I in this bed?” I glance down at my jeans on the floor. “Did we—”

“I require sobriety to go along with consent. And those who are single.” He takes a sip from his mug. “But if you ever did wake up with me, you’d be in my arms, or with my head between your legs.” His voice is light, and the cockiness in his tone is oddly comforting. “I slept on the couch, only after I was convinced you didn’t have alcohol poisoning.”

“But my pants...” I think I’m still too drunk to piece things together. “I’m in your shirt.”

“You started to undress when we arrived. My shirt was the only thing you agreed to keep on...after some convincing.” His side smirk and tilt of his head tell me information is being withheld for his amusement.

“Why did you bring me here? I could have gone back to Hallie’s or elsewhere.”

“It was one in the morning, Emery. Taking you trick or treating for somewhere to sleep would be impolite.” He stands, taking a seat on the bed, and I fight to keep my eyes off his well-earned abs. “A simple *thank you* would be nice.”

“I’m not done yet.” Worry fills me since this is the second time I have ever blacked out, and the first time I woke up in my own bed to my aunt. “Did you see me naked?”

“Even if I did, I didn’t act on it.” I wish I had the strength to slap the amused smirk off his lips. “Last I heard, you have a fiancé. I wouldn’t ruin that for you.”

“Well, aren’t you charming.”

“And handsome.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

I roll my eyes. “The sight of you is repulsing.”

“I’d look in a mirror before you throw out jabs.” He nods, setting his mug beside mine on the nightstand.

I flash back to the heavy makeup I applied yesterday. I feel the thick mascara clumping my eyelashes. “How do I look?” I lighten my tone.

“Like a drowned raccoon.” His voice remains dry. “I’m waiting for the rat to crawl out of the nest it made in your hair.”

I scoff. “You could have just said hungover.”

“You know I call it like I see it.”

“You don’t look top notch either.” Which is a lie. He's shirtless, wearing gray sweatpants, and has perfectly messy sleep hair. His muscular chest is right near my face, and *yeppp*, I’m trying and failing to be discreet about giving attention to his V-cut abs.

I rub my hands over my face to shake this feeling. “I need pills and a shower.” I fall back onto the feather pillow and shut my eyes. “My God, this bed is heaven.”

“Darling, you have no idea.” I feel his weight leave the bed and notice the sunlight disappear.

I ignore the subliminal message and open my eyes to him hovering over me. The smell of fresh, woody shower gel is too alluring. “Why does your room look like a cabin?”

“Sit up and tell me if the view is familiar.” He lends a helping hand.

“The fishing lake,” I state, mostly to myself, as I look out the window at the beautiful lake and dock where I first met his father.

“I moved here last year when my father’s second heart attack sent him to my mother.” His words are an ice bath, and my stomach sinks, triggered by the feeling of death.

“Shit.” It falls through my lips before I can stop it. I feel the burn from my bulging eyes, and I can’t blink. It was almost too much to bear watching the hurt Ian endured taking care of his father after the first. They showcased a beautiful bond between a parent and child. One I had longed for. They went from doing things together, to Ian going solo or tending to his father’s needs. “I’m so sorry.”

“We miss him, but he had spent years missing my mother. When she died, so did part of him.” Nodding, I focus on the pain in my head so my deeper hurt doesn’t surface. “Living downtown in Beechwood was getting too busy for me. My sister and niece stayed in our childhood house, and I moved out here.” Ian points toward the obvious bathroom. “There’s medicine in the bathroom next to a clean towel for you. I’ll make breakfast.”

I sigh and swing my legs out of bed. “Thank you,” I say, before making my way to the rustic bathroom.

Ian was so close to his father; I can’t even imagine the pain he’s in. My relationship was nowhere near what he and his father had as I entered the teenage years with my parents. Yet, he moved into the cabin, reminded of his father’s absence daily.

With the cotton towel around me, I feel a tad bit revitalized. Grabbing my tank top, I glare down at my restricting jeans. There is no way I can squeeze into those when a comfy pair of Ian's sweats are within reach. I roll down the waistband multiple times to find a suitable length and enter the kitchen. Pausing, I avert my gaze. Does he have to flip pancakes shirtless, as if he has a crew snapping photos for Calvin Klein?

"It smells amazing." I clear my throat, noticing his piercing eyes scan me up and down. "These looked comfier than my jeans."

"You were pretty cute in just my shirt earlier." He winks, bringing the mug to his lips.

"Don't make this any more awkward, Ian." He's enjoying this too much.

"I'm not being awkward. You're just unsure of what happened last night." My jaw tightens, along with my gut, as I'm worried about what I might have said or done.

"Enlighten me, then."

"Not so fast." His eyes hold mine, as if I have hidden answers. "I'll bring up topics that drunk you brought to my attention, and the sober Emery can answer."

"I don't play games." I tear off a piece of pancake, thrown off guard by the fluffiest texture. "I couldn't have cooked these any better."

"Maybe we need a cookoff to see who really deserves that Michelin Star." He taps my hand as I reach for another. "I'll get the plates."

"So..." I take a seat at the breakfast bar. "What did the drunk Emery blabber about last night?"

"Well, she seems to have done a 180 when it comes to guys."

"Really now?" I spin around on the breakfast bar chair for dramatic effect. "How so?"

"The sweet, cautious Emery is gone." He eyes me carefully.

"Hmm," I muse for my own entertainment. "Did she say why?"

"Nope. Just how life is easier without strings attached." His eyes meet mine, and somehow my heart feels his pain. "Which confused me. You're well aware that I have been there too. At the end of it, it's not any easier, Daisy Girl."

"Stop calling me that. I haven't been that girl since the accident. Since before I left this town, and you know that." I swallow, unable to look into his eyes.

"She's still in there, though." I clear my throat, unsure of where he's

going with this. “You’re still the sweet Emery, even if you have it buried beyond these thick walls you’ve built.” Welp, now's the time to ruin the perfect image of me for him.

“Sex is just sex, Ian. It doesn’t matter how you get it. Humans have urges. Some have busy lives, leaving them unable to settle down.”

“Unable or unwilling?” he questions, not missing a beat.

“It doesn’t matter.” At this moment, I almost believe myself. “Next question.”

“You didn’t answer the first one.”

“I gave up on the relationship thing many months ago.” I tug my bottom lip for comfort. “Trust me, it’s easier.” He abandons the pancakes and gives me his full attention.

“So, you weren’t engaged long?” I shake my head. “And now you’re trying to heal your broken heart through alcohol and guys.”

“I never said it broke.” He holds my gaze, and I hope the strength in my voice is all the convincing he needs.

“You also didn’t confirm it wasn’t.” He leans forward to rest his chin on his hand, looking for an answer. “You were hurt badly.” His eyes see right through mine. “Even after your parents’ accident, you had more emotion.”

My fork drops. “Fuck you,” I seethe, annoyed that something so small can flip my switch. That he’s the one to do it. “You think something else happened that shut me down more than that?”

“Seems like on a different level, it has, Emery.”

To my surprise, I still haven’t smashed my mug into his perfectly chiseled jawline. But I’ll be damned if I don’t slightly appreciate how well he reads me, as if I’m an open book. He still knows me, even after all these years. There are never any hoops to jump through or sugar-coated words. He’s always been straightforward. No matter how much it bugged me, he said what I needed to hear.

“I got burned in the same type of way we could have burned Hallie. Except, you two weren’t together for a year and a half and engaged,” I vent, staring at my empty left finger. “I found him with my roommate a month after our engagement party.” Shaking my head, I feel his gaze screaming at me to meet his. “I don’t want your pity. I deserved what happened.”

His index finger gently curls under my chin to tip my head toward him, thumb lightly pressing my bottom lip to release my teeth clenched onto it. “No one deserves that.” He knows I’m single now, and my heart palpitates,

unsure of how I'll respond if he makes a move.

I swallow roughly with the uncertainty of what I want to come from this moment. *Don't bring your eyes to his lips*, I repeat for however long I'm in this trance. Why is looking at a guy's lips always a green light? I hate it. Or do I? It takes everything in me to pull my gaze away. Ian triggers emotions, and if I'm sucked into this moment, it will only cause more pain.

"Don't." I'm not sure if I even hear my own request.

"I wasn't going to, Daisy Girl." His eyes tell the truth as he returns his hand to his mug. "You're vulnerable."

"I don't need you to feel sorry for me or to help me knock down walls that are up for a good reason." Ian remains calm, as if expecting this reaction from me. It annoys me more. "I deserved what happened to me, because fooling around with you back then did cross my mind." Fuck, the alcohol must still be talking, and I see sorrow in his eyes as he keeps his gaze on me.

"You're a good person, Emery. You distanced yourself halfway across the country to make sure you wouldn't hurt your friend." If he's guessing, he's spot on...again.

"I don't do relationships. If you get anything from me, it'll be one night." I lift my mug in a saluting manner. "So, if you think we can rekindle where we left off five years ago, you're too big of a dreamer."

"I didn't say I was interested in a relationship with you in the first place." He backs off, shaking his head. "We want different things."

"Yeah, you proved that," I think out loud and scrunch my face.

"I gave up one-night stands." He throws me a challenging look. "Don't worry about me making a pass at you."

"Men always want sex. It's inevitable, Ian." One night of fun might be worth it, the more I think about it. Maybe then I could finally move past thoughts of him.

"How about we finish eating, and I'll drive you back to your place," he states, shutting down our conversation, and I remain silent as I devour the best pancakes I have ever tasted.

CHAPTER 8

IAN

“SECURITY HAS BEEN UPPED,” Justin says over the phone as I pull into Quinn and Emery’s place. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You arrived on time and saved her.” Co-owning The Painted Pony with Justin has been great, until walking into what I did the other night. It has been difficult to sleep with that scene slipping into my mind.

“Good. That situation better not repeat itself under our roof again,” I grit out, my blood fuming at the thought.

“I imagine people would come forward if this was a regular thing. The guy was from out of town.” I’m starting to realize it’s no longer just the surrounding townspeople who are attending the bar at night.

“Small-town growth is hit or miss. See?” Running my hand over my face, I sigh. “Emery’s well-being was at stake.”

“Hallie has this big dream that you’ll be able to bring Emery’s emotions out while she’s in town.”

“You and Hallie talk about me and Emery too much.”

“Hallie just wants the best for everyone.” I can almost hear Justin smile with his endearment toward her.

“Emery has to want to help herself too. We can’t force her.” My heart pinches. I had made her a priority years ago and she took off. “I’ll always be there for Emery, but she’s also only in town for a few more weeks.”

He chuckles, as I hear Hallie call him in the background. “It’s cute how enamored you still are with her, even though she’s trying to stay off your radar.”

“Fuck off.” I hop out of my truck and Rhett pulls into the drive.

“You’ve been grouchy and stressed lately. Maybe you need to get laid

and release some tension.” Justin laughs. He has a point. “Or continue depriving yourself.”

“I could have any girl in my bed tonight if I wanted.”

“Yeah, but not the chick you want,” Justin taunts. “You gonna keep her as a what if or make a big move?”

“Timing, man. Emery is resilient, yet delicate. If it’s meant to be...” I hear Hallie in the distance again.

“I’ll call you later. I’m needed for wedding duties,” Justin mentions, too cheery, and I end the call with a smile, but it’s only half happy. Emery and I would have been great. Knowing her engagement was called off due to cheating, I imagine another wall has been built. She deserves to be loved. Cared for. I want someone to own my heart—*her* to be exact.

I haven’t seen Emery in three days. My stomach turns at the thought of what would have happened had I stopped for gas, like I planned to on the way to the bar. At the sight of the scumbag’s hands on her, it took every ounce of my control to not smash his skull continuously into the mirror.

Running my hands down my face, I push the memory aside for now.

“Our team should be here in a few minutes.” Rhett walks around where the den and outdoor kitchen will go. “I’ve got good news and bad news.”

“End on a positive note.”

“Bad news, Quinn’s favorite countertop is on backorder for a month or so,” Rhett continues. “Good news is, there is a similar one if she doesn’t want to wait.”

“How is that a pressing issue?” Annoyance fills me. “That’s a last-minute detail, man.”

“I’m going insane about the final designs. The hospital wing we worked on was basic enough with the blueprints and following the color theme, but our new contract for the downtown apartment building is stressing me out.” Rhett usually isn’t easily overwhelmed. He balances our job and farm life. This must really be weighing him down.

“Right, an apartment building downtown by the lake will attract more people moving here,” I complain; I can’t help it. “Meaning more traffic. And less of the quiet small-town feeling.”

“Beechwood Falls isn’t going to become a mini city, Ian.” He’s probably right. “Not everyone likes having to do yard work and owning a house. Apartments free up time.” Which is why the lack of apartments has kept people away.

“I posted an ad the other day, looking for an interior designer willing to relocate to a small town. We will see what happens, but we may need to sweeten the deal,” I tell him. “Offer first month accommodations or something.” Rhett snaps his fingers, remembering something.

“Plus, the lake house Mrs. Webber wants to renovate for tourists.” He readjusts his backwards hat like he usually does when anxious. “She wants the interior theme to be woodland chic, but not nursery-like. Whatever the fuck that means.”

“We’ll work through this.” I set my hand on his shoulder for a brief squeeze. “Let’s get together with the guys at your place tonight for a drink. I’ll bring steaks for everyone.”

“Y’all can help me get the goats in the new field too.”

“Will do.” I smirk. Rhett has a small farm as well as our business. Goats, cattle, and chickens are his specialty, but his goats seem to be more like pets since only a few of them are for milking.

Finishing out the workday, exhausted as usual, I run home to shower, then pick up the steaks on the way to Rhett’s. My phone dings just before I turn onto the dirt road leading up to his place. I pull over, not recognizing the number and knowing cell service will be spotty up his road. Which is another reason why his little bachelor loft on top of his garage has been difficult to rent out. But also, he is so damn picky about who comes around his property.

Unknown: I need to return your sweats.

I pause, wondering if this is a joke, or if Emery went out of the way to get my number.

Unknown: Oh, and this is Emery

Me: Hello Daisy Girl.

Me: How sweet of you having my number memorized.

Daisy Girl: Do you want them back or not?

Me: I’d love another opportunity to see you again.

I stare out at the big field and think back to the first time I had met her. I had walked into the best and worst day of my life. Hallie had wanted me to

meet her best friend.

The grill was dimly lit that day, but Emery's innocent gaze was laced with dark undertones yet to be discovered. Without knowing this woman's name, I was drawn in. Instantly, I knew it was going to be difficult to forget her face after her eyes pierced through mine. I shouldn't have been feeling that way since I had a girlfriend. Our eyes remained locked as we tuned into the same wavelength. Like we had known each other in a past life. I blinked for a moment, breaking the spell as a tall blonde walked back to the table and followed the auburn-haired girl's gaze. The blonde, who I realized to be Hallie. Hallie smiled, waving me over to introduce said best friend.

A truck honks as it pulls up beside me, my friend Tyler giving me a questioning look. I give a thumbs up for him to continue on to Rhett's. I can't help the giddy feeling of her reaching out, watching the bubbles on the screen before they disappear.

Daisy Girl: My offer for one night still stands, but don't hope for more.

Fuck, it's tempting, but I need more. Once I taste her, watch her expression as I slide into her pussy for the first time, and how she looks coming undone for me... one time will never be enough.

Me: Swing by tomorrow morning if that works for you. Your other offer still isn't enough for me.

Daisy Girl: see you then

I shouldn't have expected any other answer from her, but a guy could hope. Getting Emery alone is when she's most vulnerable with me. Each interaction is an opportunity to break down those walls. Even if we don't end up together in the long run, at least I know I'm trying my best *this* time around. I put my truck into drive, and head down the long dirt road to Rhett's. Thankfully, when I arrive, the goats have been moved into the new field. The conversation with the guys starts out with Emery and the bar incident, and though they stop when I tell them to shut it down, my thoughts for the rest of the night can't switch from wondering what she's doing right now and if I'm on her mind too.

CHAPTER 9

IAN

WITH A FRESH CUP of coffee to awaken my brain, I sit at the table by the window, a blueprint for our next project in front of me. Looking it over, I know we need to sweeten the designer deal a bit more. Time is running out and this project is starting soon.

As I take another sip and slip through my paperwork, I hear a car pull up. I imagine it's Emery, and as a knock hits my door, I know for sure.

"Emery, you don't need to knock," I call out, just as I open the door.

She stands with perfect poise, her soft, loose curls cascading effortlessly over her delicate shoulders. My eyes wander over her without shame, stopping at her breasts. A low-cut T-shirt should not hug a body that well.

Looking at me with sweats in hand, her little grin has me wondering if this outfit was deliberate to tempt me into giving in.

"I find letting myself into people's homes this early in the morning to be rude." Her sass is stronger than my black coffee, and I don't mind it. I huff a laugh and step back, inviting her in.

"Well, let me reward your politeness with a cup of Earl Grey." I reach for the sweats, neatly folded, when she hands them over. "Thanks for returning these." She nods, following me inside as a yawn takes over.

"Could I actually have coffee?" She glances out the large window overlooking the lake.

"Rough night?" I ask, wondering if the night at the bar has fucked up her sleeping as much as it has mine.

"My aunt *really* enjoyed her last night with her boyfriend." Her eyebrows raise and a slight blush paints her cheeks. I fight with my hand to not reach over and rub her cheek with the backs of my fingers. I keep myself busy

preparing her coffee.

“You could have crashed here.” I offer without any implication. “Or at your friends’.” I meet her at the window and hand over a mug.

“Thanks. But crash here?” There’s an annoyance to her tone as she keeps her gaze forward. “If I were to stay here at night, it would be for a night of exploring whatever this slight tension is between us.”

I swear, a switch flipped in her brain out of nowhere. She wasn’t happy to see me one day, her annoyance front and center of our few interactions as soon as she came home. And now, since the other night, she couldn’t be more up front about what she wants from me.

Emery turns her back to me as she looks out the window. When I see the smirk on her face, the one meant to taunt me, I know I can’t let her get away with this for too long.

“Slight?” I lean down toward her ear and whisper. “You know we’d be dynamite together, Daisy Girl.” Her shiver doesn’t go unnoticed.

With a smirk of my own, I step forward to reach for the window latch above her. She stills as my arms surround her, too close to the window. A small gasp arises from her as my breath hits her neck. Goosebumps paint her skin as my shirt brushes against her back.

“But if I have you, Emery. That’s it. I won’t be letting you run back to Aspen so easily this time around.” I don’t touch her, hovering my lips next to her ear. “I don’t know if *you’re* ready for that. So maybe you should stop with the teasing, hmm?”

If there’s ever going to be a first move, it’ll be on her own terms, but playing by my rules.

I flick the lock of the window, needing the slight morning breeze to circulate through the cabin. The sound jolts her, and her coffee topples over the brim. Slowly, she turns around, cocking her head to the side. The hint of peach and coconut passes between us off her skin, drawing me in as my body reacts the way it always does around Emery. Full of incomparable adrenaline and need.

Back then, I fought like hell to ignore this when Emery and I were alone, but now, it’s more tempting, because we have every opportunity to act on it. My throat becomes thicker as I try to swallow.

Her hand rests on my chest, searing into me through my shirt. My jaw ticks as I restrain control to not take her right against this window while the pleased sounds of the many orgasms I would give her mix with nature. Her

gaze mimics mine as she pushes up on her toes. If she's ready to give us an honest shot, I'm here for it. But if she's toying with me, my dick is gonna ache. Her lips ghost the side of my cheek and I damn near snap.

"Don't you think you should wipe up that mess?" Her snark is a seductive whisper. Before I can rebuttal with my hips against hers, she pushes me away. "Wouldn't want to ruin your pretty floors."

"I didn't know unlocking a window would startle you that much."

Her silence speaks volumes that she won't admit to feeling something between us. Something more than only sex will satisfy.

"I guess I'm an easy target to cage against a window." Her brow furrows. "Or a bathroom sink." Unable to read her for once, I hold her gaze, trying to figure out if she's being serious, or if it's her façade.

Goddamnit, I'm an idiot. I run my hand over my jaw as I figure out how to apologize. Remorse fills me and suddenly bile turns in my stomach. That is, until her giggle fills the room.

"Stop. Your lost puppy face is making *me* feel bad now." She walks past me with a huff of a laugh and sets her mug on the counter. "I'm fine about the other night. Unfortunately, it happens all the time to people." She shrugs. "You didn't trigger me, if that's what you're scared of."

"Emery, *I'm* not fine about what I saw the other night. There's no way you can brush that off."

"Just another mental wall. Forget the past and just be thankful to survive another day on earth." Her nonchalant statement flows out as if it's been memorized.

"Sounds like a fun way to go through life."

"I do what I need to." Grabbing the paper towel roll from the counter, she walks over to clean up the spilled coffee.

"Is yours coping, or stifling any possible emotions now a day? I know you're scared to let people in."

"Look at what happens when I do." Her eyebrows raise, challenging me. "Besides, aren't you seeing someone named Amanda? Word around town is you two were spotted at the fast-food place the other day, and once last week." She tosses the paper towel in the trash and takes a long sip of her coffee. "I won't be anyone's girl. Let alone anybody else's *other* girl." Her accusations fire through me.

I shake my head as an unsteady laugh thunders in my chest. Does she really think that low of me, or is she just trying to push my buttons? *Word*

around town. She stands proud by the door with her arms crossed and hip popped to the side. For someone of five-one, she holds confidence like she could wrestle and win against any bull in a field. My fingertips dig into my palm, resisting to grip her chin and the temptation her new attitude brings out.

Blue eyes flick down to my hand, then back up to me. That damn glint in her gaze acknowledges she has the upper hand. She trusts me not to make a move, but she's testing limits now. Her head rolls slowly, as if she's stretching her neck. But the subliminal message is loud and clear. Nothing has changed between us. Communicating wordlessly. My hand urges me to grab her throat as I back her up against the wall. I want nothing more than to kiss her so roughly she's branded for days.

"Amanda is our accountant." I command her attention with a strong voice. "We've been meeting for lunch during the interview process. But it's nice to know you've been asking people about me." I nod to the door. "I'll see around, Daisy Girl. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Without another word, she leaves, and I head back to the table and drown in blueprints and paperwork before getting ready to go into the office. Though the feeling of her proximity stays with me the whole time. As I'm leaving, a phone dings, and I notice she lefts hers behind. I guess we'll be seeing each other again, sooner than I expected.

I drive into the long driveway of maple trees, arriving at the large yellow farmhouse-style house with a big wraparound porch. This place has aged, but still has a homey feel, despite what has happened to the Davis family. I park my truck as Emery's phone dings again. I'm curious about how popular she is back in Aspen, because the name Josie has been flashing across the screen quite a bit over the past few hours.

Making my way up the front steps, I pause at the tiny blue handprint vandalizing the front pillar. I smile, imagining a rambunctious little Emery. I also love that her parents didn't bother painting over it. I knock twice, and I'm ready to leave, just before the door swings open.

"Didn't we say we would see each other another day?" Her hand rests on her hip, bunching up her sundress she changed into after leaving my place.

“Drop the ice queen façade, Emery.” I lean forward to her eye level, placing my hand on top of the door. “You know it doesn’t work with me.” There’s a grudge or something I can’t seem to dig up, but I will. “I came to bring you this.” I hold out her phone.

“I didn’t realize it was missing.” Her teeth grip her bottom lip as she stares at the phone in my hand.

“You’re a little old to be lying.”

“I thought it was in my car and had better things to do than grab it.” As if waiting for my apology, her eyebrows raise.

“You know, it’s refreshing you don’t feel the need to hold this like a comfort item. Most people do.” As she blinks down to the phone again, her breathing increases. “Come on, I’m not gonna bite.” I wiggle my wrist and still wonder why she hasn’t snatched it back. When she steps closer than needed, my male brain catches a peek at her cleavage and my dick instantly wonders what it would feel like sliding between it. Or what sounds she makes bent over the counter and her dress bunched around her waist. I swallow, differentiating what my heart needs opposed to what my dick needs.

Delicate fingertips reach out carefully not to touch my skin. “You gonna act on the way you’re staring at me?” She notices my gaze darken and shoots me a mischievous smirk.

“Whatever you’re cooking smells amazing.” I don’t miss a beat and regain composure.

“Yeah, thanks to you, actually.” She gestures toward the kitchen. “Have you eaten?”

“I haven’t.” On cue, my stomach grumbles.

“Stay. I can’t eat this entire meal on my own.” Excitement sparkles through her eyes, awakening part of her spirit we have all been missing.

“Are you sure I’m not intruding on family time?”

“Aunt Quinn and her boyfriend are in the next town over for dinner. It’s the least I could do to thank you for the night at the bar.” Sincerity travels through her voice, and a soft smile brings me back.

There’s my Daisy Girl.

“I guess I can critique your culinary skills.” I smirk, following her into the kitchen.

“It will be ready in five minutes,” she says, walking over to the stove and peering over her shoulder at me. “I hope your taste buds are ready to be awakened.” I don’t miss her flirty tone and let myself play into it a bit.

“I’m sure I’ll be craving for more.” I lean against the counter, slightly crowding her space as she stirs the sauce with a large wooden spoon. “No meat?” Did she actually make it through culinary school as a vegetarian?

“Decomposing flesh isn’t my cup of tea.” She bites the inside of her cheek.

“Well, when you put it that way...” I trail off. “You need a developed taste pallet to work in your field.”

“Just because I taste meat, doesn’t mean I swallow.” Her eyes narrow in a sultry manner, but her mouth tightens to bite back a smirk.

“Punny little one, aren’t you?”

“Do you remember the first time I tried to make this veggie pasta and burned the water before the noodles even went in?” Emery babbles so quickly, smiling brightly, and I nod, waiting for her to continue. “Well, I have completely revamped this recipe, and it’s the dish that earned my first Michelin Star.”

“Look at you shine, Daisy Girl.” God, she’s beautiful as pure joy radiates out of her. My heart feels her pride and excitement. Flexing my hand, I fight the urge to cup her sweet face and kiss the hell out of her as I step closer.

“How hungry are you?” she glances up, peering through her eyelashes.

“Very.” My voice drops, getting caught up in the moment. I need to get a grip on myself.

Her breath hitches. I’m sure it would be the same hitch if I pinned her against a wall and weaved my fingers through her hair to tug it roughly.

“Come on, hold that thought until dessert.” Emery turns around, shutting off the stove and emptying the pasta into the strainer.

I clear my throat and keep quiet while she dishes up dinner. A soft smile rests on Emery’s face as she plates the food. I smile along with her, watching as she puts on the finishing touches and hands the bowl to me.

“This looks incredible. I am so excited to try this,” I praise as we take a seat at the table.

“Dive in.” Emery giggles, warming my heart as she twirls the noodles on her fork.

I pause before I take my first bite. “Thank you for sharing this with me.” I can’t stop my eyes from wandering over her plump lips. Now, she’s unintentionally luring me in, and this is not why I came here.

I take the first bite and the flavours awaken my taste buds. It’s creamy and full of herbs, but there’s a sweetness to the vegetables. Then, there’s a

lingering kick of heat and smokiness. It's everything at once, but is layered to perfection. I savor this bite and try to process my thoughts.

"Good?" Her eyebrows raise with a wide smile.

"By far one of the best meals to hit my tongue. You have come such a long way from where you started." I shake my head in disbelief. "Holy shit, this is incredible. Did you sear the portobellos?"

"And added a touch of truffle oil." She's glowing as I devour a few more bites.

"Michelin Star well earned." When she meets my eyes, I see part of the old her. "I'm so proud of you. Cooking really is your calling."

"Just sucks how it was discovered." Her voice wavers, and I see her guard begin to rise.

"Hey." I place my hand over hers, and instead of flinching, she surprisingly releases a relaxed breath. "You know I'm a good listener." I don't want to push her, but keeping everything inside what has dimmed her light all these years. "I'm here if you want to talk."

"It's just, cooking doesn't exactly fill the void of missing them anymore." Her words rush out as she shakes her head. "That's it. All I needed to say."

"Maybe a new hobby would be helpful." I give her hand a small squeeze, and she pulls hers back to rest them in her lap.

"Possibly." She eyes the bottle of wine on the counter, but doesn't go for it. "So, have you *completely* given up on casual hookups?"

Oh, we're back to this?

"Pretty much," I simply state.

"You're a good guy and hot as hell, Ian." My eyebrows raise, and she rolls her eyes. "Come on, you know how hot you are. You could easily have a girlfriend if you wanted."

"Maybe the struggle is finding the right girl. The one I want to spend my life with." Knowing the right girl is seated across from me if she was open to healing.

"Well, I'm used to getting a quick fix from whoever, *whenever*," she shoots back with an attitude-filled tic of her head.

"Not as often as you're trying to make me believe." I look her straight in the eyes.

"Fine. Most recently, it's been a good friend of mine. Sort of a friends-with-benefits thing, but there is absolutely no attraction to him outside of... you know." A blush paints her cheeks.

“Now you’re too shy to say the word sex?” I laugh. “You and I had a great friendship, and chemistry. Imagine how great a relationship and sex would be with a partner who checks off all of the boxes.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she solidifies. “Couldn’t have happened.”

“You were—” I pause, trying to create the right explanation. “You *are* so in tune with me, and this pull is undeniable. Back then, I couldn’t wrap my head around wanting to spend every second with you. I was supposed to want that with *her*.” I finish as Emery simply shrugs.

“That proves Hallie wasn’t meant to be with you.”

“And you were. You still are.” I say it as a statement, because even now, my frustration is in knowing I can help her castle walls crumble and bring back her sweet self. It’s just a matter of her allowing me to.

“I’m not meant for anyone. I’ll just fuck it up without even knowing.” Emery hides her pain with a forced smile. “Why did he even propose?” I open my mouth to reply, and she holds up a finger. “It doesn’t matter anyway. You don’t hook up, and that’s all my heart can handle.” Watching someone emotionally freeze in front of you, and remain this way years later, is more heartbreaking than I imagined.

“Do you want to talk about your engagement?” I can’t help myself. “What that guy pulled is not fucking fine.”

Her laugh is slightly unstable. “I wasn’t in love with him, not the way you hear Hallie gush about Justin, or my friend, Josie, so torn up about being on a break with her boyfriend. Ryan more so fit the bill with being in med school, and I know my parents would have approved of me marrying him.” Her blue eyes widen, but don’t hold any hurt like most eyes do when mentioning a breakup. “I mean, I’m not in the medical field, so he was my way of keeping medicine in the family, I guess.”

“You still invested time with him, and it ended. That part has to hurt.”

I need to know there’s a chance she’ll come back to me. That she’ll face what she hasn’t.

“I was annoyed and angry, over feeling hurt.” She shrugs, and I want to reach over, shaking her as I repeat that it’s okay to not be okay over and over. “Did ending things with Hallie hurt?”

“Hallie and I ended the relationship mutually. I’m sure you were informed.” She tenses at that, which confuses me. “We weren’t too torn up, but that’s a whole other story.”

“See? Less feelings, less heartache.” She picks up her glass of water to

cheers. “I would know about that.”

“I want to love.” I pause, choosing my words carefully. “Even if we disagree on things, I know we will work through problems and ride the roller coaster together. I want someone to come home to and talk about our day. To listen as she tells me all about her day, as we cook dinner side by side. To hold her while she sleeps and kiss her sad moments away. Life isn’t meant to be lived alone.”

“I’m not alone.” Okay, my approach isn’t going the way I want. “When did you stop sleeping around?”

“After you disappeared without a trace, that’s how I spent the next few years.”

“It wasn’t exactly without a trace, Ian.” Her defensive tone kicks in, and I can’t hold myself back from blurting out the question I still haven’t gotten answered.

“Why didn’t you say goodbye?” There’s a touch of desperation in my voice, longing for something to put this to rest. Her eyes bypass my lips and land on her plate.

“Partially because I didn’t trust myself around you again.” The words blurt out of her before she can stop them. “Hallie was dating you, and I hated myself for getting caught up in the moment. I was dealing with too many emotions at once and nearly stooped to a level I wouldn’t have recovered from.” I’m still pissed about how that night played out. I had wanted to kiss her too.

“You were going through a lot,” I try to justify with a soft voice. With Hallie and I having an agreement to keep things normal for Emery, I had to stand by my girlfriend at the time. And Emery was too vulnerable to kiss. “Our chemistry was undeniable.”

“But the timing wasn’t.” Annoyance raises in her tone, and I feel her pain. “I had to get away from this town. Away from you.” As her voice breaks to a near whisper, I want to cup her face, kissing her pain away.

“Thank you for being honest with me.” She holds my gaze, even as her teeth find her bottom lip with nerves.

“Well, you did go out of your way to build me a dessert stand.” I’d do anything just to watch her smile and enjoy life.

“Anything for you, Daisy Girl.” Her body relaxes further into the chair. “How long are you here for?” Watching her sit up straighter, I know I’ve asked the wrong question. Walls are rising, once again.

“Only two more weeks until I’m back in the kitchen.” Her chipper voice fills the room and reminds me that I should have followed through with my plan *four* years ago. “Leaving this month as only a memory.”

“Why escape?”

“It’s not escaping.” She eyes me carefully, but I let it go as I stand to collect our plates.

“I’m glad you’re back. Even if it’s for now. It’s nice to know you’re enjoying your job and are *healing* how you see fit.” The last part is a lie, but I’m trying to sweeten her up.

“Thanks,” she says, shutting down the conversation completely. “I also have cupcakes.” There’s a damn sparkle in her eyes as she talks about food, and I feel my lips mimicking her smile. “I’m torn between two, so you’ll have to tell me your favorite.” Emery pulls her hair to the side of her shoulder. This little devil doesn’t even know she’s exposing my weakness. The nape of her neck and collarbone are on full display, tempting me to press my lips to the tender spot of her neck.

She’s the deadliest poison, masked with a look of innocence.

“Honesty is my specialty.”

“Respectable trait,” she whispers, giving me a side eye.

“Hallie knew.” My admittance drops the fork in her hand, and snaps her full attention to me.

“Knew what?” *How obvious the chemistry between you and I was.*

“How you and I felt about each other.” Her mouth forms a perfect little ‘O’ shape as she avoids my eyes.

“It’s been briefly brought to my attention.” She leans against the counter. “So, she broke up with you then?” I walk over to her, and her arms cross against her chest. I wonder why Hallie hasn’t given Emery the full details yet.

“Not really. She just...” I search for the right words. “She wanted the same energy we had. The carefree playfulness. The banter. For her own eyes to look at me the same way yours did.”

“I don’t think I’ve looked at you any differently than now.”

“Exactly.” I grin, leaning forward. “Hallie wanted her and I to feel as connected and comfortable, the way me and you had from the first time we met at The Painted Pony.”

“She never told me why you two ended.” I can’t read her. “But I also never gave her the opportunity.”

“Your parents died shortly before we had that conversation. She wanted

to keep things as normal as they could be for you. Not deal with her going through a breakup when you thought the relationship was going well. But we were pretty much just friends.” She remains quiet, so I continue on. “We had planned to publicly end things at the start of her university semester. So you and I would have a chance to see where life took us, but then you vanished.”

“So, you two were basically over the night I almost kissed you?” A mix of hurt and anger fills her voice. “That would have been the time for Hallie and you to tell me before I left town.”

“I thought maybe you were caught up in the moment of trying to forget your pain than actually wanting to be all in with me. You were young.” I didn’t want one night with Emery. I wanted them all. “Why else would you not tell me you were leaving or say goodbye?”

“Because, even if I did feel a connection with you, I wouldn’t do that to Hallie.” The pitch in her voice squeezes as she bites her bottom lip. “With or without her blessing.” She releases a heavy breath and looks down at her fiddling fingers. “Plus, I didn’t want to be another burden.” She’s fighting emotion as her cheeks suck in. “Your dad deserved more attention after his heart attack than I did.”

“I love how respectful you were about that. You deserved attention too, though.” I debate about cupping her face, but it might be too soon to trigger tears. “Things are different now with him gone, but my feelings aren’t,” I say as she scoffs a laugh, taking the opportunity to deflect feelings.

“Right. You’ve held on to something you’ve never had after five years.” Now’s the time to hit with more truth.

“I kept myself busy and tried to find you in every woman.” I look her straight in the eyes as her breath hitches. “If I can’t have you, I at least want you to have yourself. The version of you beyond the fortress.”

“I’m what life made me out to be.” Her chest rises with the new information, and she keeps her gaze down. “I’m not what you need. I won’t do relationships.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re still hurt.” Her mouth opens and closes, but my bluntness shouldn’t be a surprise. “I’ve been there. It’s easier to stay closed off than to let the hurt in.” Someone needs to care enough to hurt her feelings, so it gets through her thick skull. “You’re back in town and I’ll fight to break down those walls, Emery.”

“My parents loved their jobs more than me. Walls didn’t start *with* their crash.” A vulnerable tone surfaces, and she tries to swallow it down. “My

walls are decades thick, Ian. Then the town lost two surgeons—At. Once.” She turns to the sink with aggression, and squeezes more than enough soap to begin cleaning the dishes. “I’ve seen fingers pointing the blame.”

“Blame? You were in high school and just asked your parents to come to your final dance performance.”

“Pretty selfish of me to pull them away from their highly praised job to watch me twirl around.” Within a breath, I’m right next to her. All I can do is shake my head. For once, she’s actually talking about that night, which Hallie and Savannah say she never does. “It wasn’t just *their* lives I affected.” I shut the water off and spin her around to face me as she blinks back tears.

“Emery,” I begin, but she holds up her damp hands, placing them on my chest.

“I don’t need your response.” Her touch warms my heart, but her eyes shift to a look I’ve seen on too many women. “I’ve gotten everything under control with my life now. I know what I need to keep the hurt at bay.”

“Stop letting guys use you for a quick fuck.” I lean down closer as my hands reach to wrap around her wrists, waiting for eye contact.

“I’m the one to make that call.” She is well aware how easily I can read her, and sensing that her pulse is racing as she fights back, letting her guard drop. That alone makes her nervous. I don’t have it in me to call her out on this, though, and I don’t want to.

“I care about you. You mean more than a night to me, Emery.”

“I don’t want to.” The quick tic as she tilts her head, once again, signals a lie.

“Because you’re scared of feeling more?” I’m not backing down until she starts to let her guard down. “Do you feel valued after they leave? These guys probably don’t care if they get you off or no—”

“Drop it, Ian.” Her tone stays sharp. “I’ve let you in enough for today.”

“Dessert time?” I glance around the kitchen, immediately dropping the moment. She’s right. For someone who doesn’t open up, she’s done good this evening. Her throat clears as she pulls her hands away, then turns to a container of cupcakes.

“I haven’t tasted this batch yet. They’re raspberry red velvet.” Emery finds her smile again. Food really is one of her safe havens.

I reach for a cupcake and examine it for extra effect. They’re just as picturesque as the ones I’ve seen on the baking shows my niece likes us to watch. My mouth salivates at the sight. Taking a bite, the cream cheese icing

melts on my tongue.

“My God, this is smooth. The icing is rich but doesn’t overpower the raspberry cake. Delicious.”

“Perfect.” She winks. “They’re almost as sweet as me.”

I only smirk, because if she tastes this sweet, then I’ll be a fucking goner. “Indulge.”

“Mmm,” she moans as her eyes fall shut, tasting her own creation. Her head remains low as her eyes peer up.

This woman has so much control over me, and I am starting to lose my own the more she lets me in. “You have frosting.” My index finger curls under her chin as I run the pad of my thumb along the corner of her mouth and over her bottom lip.

When her tongue slides out gently to brush against my thumb, the contact hums through my body and straight to my cock. Her heated gaze locks me in a trance. I know what’s on her mind. I watch her chest rapidly rise and fall, as if matching her accelerated heartbeat. My grip on her chin tightens gradually as my heartbeat thuds through my ears. As her hand comes up to hold my wrist holding her chin, she pulls down, and it draws our bodies closer. My eyes stare into hers, waiting for her approval. Emery flicks her eyes to my lips as her tongue darts out to wet them.

Fuck it.

I’ve waited long enough to taste her. My lips press to hers, and we both moan. Savoring how soft they feel against mine, a spark shoots to my toes, and I feel ridiculous with how over the top this is. Her body presses into my chest as she stands on her toes, weaving her arms around my neck. I pull back for a moment, looking down at her as my heart warms. Her smile is soft, but her eyes lure me in as they hold a hint of sensuality. This time she leans in, and I lose it.

There’s nothing gentle about the second kiss. A possessive force takes over me as I claim her. I’ve wanted this moment for so long. We are a steady motion of heavy breaths and colliding lips. Her body conforms to mine, as if made for me. This feels right. So fucking right. My hands slide down her ribs, gripping her hips, lifting her weightless frame onto the counter.

Dinner plates shatter to the ground, but the sound only intensifies the moment. This is really happening. I get to hold her. Taste her. My hand laces through Emery’s hair, and I tighten my fist. Her responding moan is sweet motivation as I tilt her head to the side, exposing her porcelain skin. Running

my nose along her neck, I savor having her in my grasp. Then, just behind her earlobe, on that sweet spot of her neck, I press my lips. When she gasps, I bite.

Hard.

With a breathless whimper, her legs wrap around me, and she pulls closer. I grind into her as her hips roll into me, pressing on the tip of my erection. She's too easy to lose myself in, but I need to keep my own moral ground.

I break the kiss just as her phone rings. Time has never been on my side like it has been tonight. Panting, Emery avoids my eyes and stares at her phone. Her mouth gaped open from shock. She straightens her legs, sliding off the counter.

"Hello?" she answers the phone breathlessly. "No, I didn't check my phone all day." She pauses, running the side of her thumb over her swollen, wet lip. "Yeah, no problem, Hallie. I will be there in ten minutes."

As she hangs up, I take a cautious step toward her. She watches my feet, but I need her eyes to tell their truth. "We don't need to talk about what just happened if you need to go." I break the silence.

"There is nothing *to* talk about." Her shoulder brushes mine as she walks past me, out of the kitchen. "We got caught up in the moment. Send me a text if you'd like to finish what we started." She adjusts her dress, bringing her eyes to mine. "That was one hell of a kiss, and I'd like more."

"Still not the type of *more* I'm wanting, Emery." I watch a tinge of regret fill her. "I'm not sorry I kissed you. But you'll have to give me a little more of you before we re-visit the last five minutes. And *not* physically."

"Right." Her eyes dart around the room, unsure of how to respond. "At least there are no *what ifs* now." Slipping on her flip-flops, she brings a finger to her lips. "That kiss is most likely all you'll get from me, if that's your stipulation." Her teeth pull at her bottom lip. *Her same anxious habit rearing up again.* "I can't allow myself to get caught up with you."

"Can't or won't?"

"I-I have to go see Hallie." She shakes her head and grabs her keys.

I nod and don't press for more. "Sorry about the plates. I can clean them up."

"Don't worry about them." She opens the door to usher me out. "Let's go."

Taking the long way home, I replay this evening. Emery's vulnerability

shines through her masquerade of having everything under control. She puts on such a front for everyone not to worry about her. It annoys me more than it should.

I know it's not my place to fix this tiny fireball, and she needs to want to help herself. But I want to help ignite her so she can blaze through life as bright as she can.

CHAPTER 10

EMERY

I FLIP the omelet in the pan as the waffle machine dings. Shutting off the stovetop, I open the oven to check on the fresh bread that should be just about done. The raspberry jam is cooling by the sink, and all I need to do is finish my homemade whipping cream for the waffles.

Beeping from a work truck pulls me out of my trance. I miss my job. It's only been a week and a half away from my apartment above the restaurant, but all these emotions have me cooking enough food for the entire neighborhood. I miss the mundane routine and structure of my days, surrounded by work, fitness, and basic daily adult chores. I miss living in the absence of feelings. The hurt and confusion this town holds are hitting full force. And God, that kiss with Ian is still tingling on my lips—and the lower parts of my body. The one person who I can slightly open up to can't be granted the possibility to hurt my heart. Things need to stay strictly casual if we act on it again.

I yawn and pour a second cup of coffee. Sleep has been non-existent. Hallie interrupted this kiss with having wedding dress doubts, keeping Savannah and me at her place to help for a couple of hours, then throw in my thoughts of kissing Ian and where it could have escalated, I was up even longer.

“Do you really have to leave?” Aunt Quinn enters the kitchen, wide-eyed over all the food. “It's not even eight in the morning, and you have enough food to feed Rhett and Ian's entire team.”

“Hmm, maybe they'll have more energy to get the job done quicker.”

“Emery, they're not that much of a disruption to us.” My aunt dips her pinky into the jam. “After breakfast, I'm heading to the flower shop to help

Allison get the arrangements in order for Hallie's wedding."

"I saw the budget Hallie put toward all the flowers." It's crazy how much she is obsessed with flowers. "Everything will look beautiful, but they're just going to die after."

"At least their relationship will last a lifetime." She smiles, patting my foot.

"So why care about flowers?" Florists are smart with their career choice. Whether it's a happy or sad event, they've got a flower for it.

"Because she can do what she wants." I hand her a plate of food, and she shimmies her shoulders. Why did I have to glance at an older photo of my mom and me when I was walking down the stairs this morning? Seeing my mother's smile in real time pinches my heart.

"Right." It seems more logical to spend the money on an extended honeymoon instead of flowers, but it's not my wedding.

"Emery," my aunt says with a mouthful of food, like she can't wait another few seconds. "This food would bring the tourists in alone."

I give her a look that says, "don't start." I'm pretty sure staying in this town would completely break me at some point, and I'm just not ready for that.

"Fine, I'll stop annoying you about staying." She finishes up her breakfast and gets ready to leave. Walking to the door, she pauses. Her eyes narrow, burning through me, searching for answers. I clear my throat, growing uncomfortable with her silence. She tilts her head nonchalantly, but I can see there is a motive. "Did Hallie or Savannah stop by last night when Carson and I left?"

"Savannah is out of town. I went over to Hallie's after dinner." I rack my brain, hoping she didn't get security house cameras and watch a play-by-play of last night. "Why?"

"There were broken plates in the garbage and a half-eaten cupcake smashed against the counter." If this is her best attempt to bite back a smirk, it's a good thing she didn't go into acting.

"We, ugh, dropped the plates by accident," I stammer. There is no denying we are both terrible at this game. "Sorry, Aunt Quinn."

"We? Dinner for two?" I watch her raise her eyebrows, waiting for the reveal of the other guest. I give none. "Okay, then. Don't tell me. I'll use my imagination," she sing-songs, shooting me a wink. "See you later."

I reach my hands up and clasp them together in a long stretch. The sides

of my ribs slowly expand as I lean from side to side. I spend the next few minutes stretching and mentally processing the past twenty-four hours. Kissing Ian has been nothing but torture for my body. Getting myself off did nothing to relieve me. All I can think about are his strong hands on every part of me. The way his grip in my hair was a painful pleasure as he moved my neck to the side and how he bit that spot of sensitive skin. God, his primal assertiveness is hot.

One thing I did learn about myself years ago was that I craved his dominance. How he demanded respect and witnessing the little gestures of how Hallie was *his* when we were in public. The way he held her face when they'd kiss and how he'd always hold her close when we would party by the lake. Hallie mentioned a few times how controlling he was in bed, and while she wasn't into that, it piqued my interest.

I shake my head and no longer have an appetite for all this food. Groaning, annoyed with myself, I begin to wash the dishes. I could go for my hands pinned above my head right about now. I'm sure I can push him enough to break his rule. Tying my hair up, I bend to find Tupperware in the bottom cupboard.

Heat and humidity flow through the kitchen as the screen door opens. "Good morning." Ian's surprised voice fills the room. *Perfect timing.* I stand and turn around as his eyes travel from my bare feet to my shorts that could pass as underwear, and land on the baggy long-sleeve half off my shoulder. "Cute morning attire."

Was this attire worn on purpose? *Maybe.* But my messy bun and soft, innocent smile can make it look coincidental. "I guess," I reply, and make my way to head out of the kitchen.

He steps in front of the kitchen entryway and stops against the narrow opening. Standing still with a challenging smirk. If I don't want to walk around through the living room to get to the other side, I have to brush past him.

"Excuse you." I squeeze through, knocking his arm with my shoulder. He quietly chuckles, igniting my aggravation. I playfully kick my leg up, and stumble back as he grabs my ankle. In one quick move, he pulls me in, wrapping one arm around my waist as I do the splits against him.

His hooded eyes burn through me as his voice drops.

"I bet you want me to follow through with the thoughts playing through my mind." He releases my ankle, helping me steady on my feet.

“Maybe not with everyone around, but yeah,” I throw back, breathless, and feel my panties growing wet.

“I guess only time will tell.” Smirking, he reaches above me for a mug.

“Oh, no. You don’t get to do this ‘*my house is your house*’ kind of thing.” I shake my head.

“Your aunt told me that my crew and I could help ourselves to coffee.” He bends down to my eye level. “She’s kind of the boss.”

“Well, I don’t see her here. I believe that makes me in charge.”

“You want to be the one on top? I like it.” His eyes dance mischievously as I pin him with a glare. “Denying me coffee is a little uptight, Emery.”

“Fine,” I huff. “The caffeine may help you work faster so I don’t have to keep waking up to your face.”

“You wouldn’t have a voice left to sass me if you woke up next to me.” He keeps his distance as my arms cross for comfort. Now would be the time for me to argue back. To tell him to fuck himself and get back to work, because I’m not dropping another wall for him just so I can ride his dick. My jaw tenses. The thought of giving him a tad more *has* crossed my mind after the kiss, and I hate that. Goosebumps surface my skin, and I can’t blame it on the temperature. My skin craves his touch.

“If you want to discuss last night at some point, or take it further, I’ll be right here,” I say as Rhett walks in momentarily, breaking our moment.

“Thank you for the coffee, Emery.” Ian’s voice is overdramatized, as if there’s nothing for the workers to see. “That is very kind of you.”

My front door opens, and Savannah leaps toward me, wrapping me in a hug. “I’m *baaack*,” she sings, but her eyes look drained.

“Hey, sweet thing,” Ian greets, nudging her shoulder. “How was the weekend with your lover?”

“Was Landon surprised to see you?” I ask, as she tightens her arms around me.

“Umm.” She pulls back as her eyes glass over. “His other girlfriend was surprised too.”

“Other?!” I feel my body paralyze, and my stomach sink, taken back to the moment I walked in on Ryan and my roommate.

“Shit. That sucks.” Ian quickly pours his coffee with a wince.

“How dare he fucking cheat on you,” I practically seethe as I feel my blood boil.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now. We have Hallie and Justin’s

mixed bachelorette party at Rhett's tonight." Savannah takes a deep breath. "You and I can forget boys together and do shots."

"I'm trying to limit my liquor for a while, Savannie." Glancing off to the side, I catch a glimpse of Ian's muscle flex as he pours milk into the mug.

"Right. I heard about Ian saving your ass the other night at his bar."

"I would have been fine." I have to believe that in order to move on and forget about it. "Ian was the one who insisted I go home with him."

"She said my bed was heaven." His eyes light up as Savannah's mouth drops.

"He's joking," I quickly defend myself. "I mean, it was comfy, but he slept on the couch."

"I wish you two could have seen your faces." Ian laughs, shooting me a wink. "I'm sorry about what happened to you, Savannah." She nods as he walks toward the back door.

"That man is completely into you." Her voice lowers.

"Savannah." I keep my eyes tracing the grout of the tile to avoid contact with the brown ones.

"You like him. It's been obvious since you two met." The weight of her hands on my shoulders makes me look at her. "Let yourself be happy, My Little Daisy." My jaw clenches as she uses that nickname. She did that one hundred percent on purpose.

"Ian and I want different things, okay? I can't let my heart go through that kind of vulnerability again." I sigh, but I didn't experience the kind of heartbreak Savannah is currently hit with. That would require me to actually allow myself to build an emotional connection with a guy. Opening up to what I felt last night with Ian. "Look, my *Shining Sunflower*, even if the kiss last night was worth shattering my deceased parents' favorite dinner plates, he won't let it go past that." I regret the words as I say them, just as a loud squeal pierces through the house, turning heads in our direction.

"I knew it!" She claps her hands like a child.

"It's not going to happen again."

"Emery, I am happy for you." She pauses, eyes narrowing. "Why not past a kiss?"

"Because he wants more." My brain rattles from a million thoughts.

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Savannah, you just had your heart broken. Why would I put myself in that position?" She rolls her eyes as they water.

“You know he’d work through shit with you.” Her voice crack hits me tight in my heart. “You know he wouldn’t cheat or use you.”

“I don’t want to hurt. My parents don’t have any more happy moments, so why should I?” My hand goes over my mouth, not meaning the last part to come out. I shut my eyes and breathe. This town is too much.

Savannah’s long arms wrap around me, pulling me tightly against her. “You, my dear, are scared.” She can feel my heavy breathing. “Scared, because you might feel something more, and you know you’d want to continue. You both have the same frequency.” I remain silent. “As for your parents, you know they’d want you to enjoy life.” Her chin rest on the top of my head, and I feel my throat constrict.

“You don’t get it.” If a gut can physically hit the floor, mine is there on display. I know I look like a ghost as she pulls back, and I zone in on the jam by the sink.

“Which is another reason why Ian is great for you.”

“Look, just because he understands what it’s like to lose his parents, that doesn’t mean we need to cling to each other.”

“Hallie told me the other day you two are meant to be.”

“And do you know why they broke up?” My voice is barely above a whisper.

“She said their love ran its course, and they were just not compatible.”

“Savannah, she wanted to find a guy who could mimic the same chemistry she saw between Ian and I,” I admit as if I’m at fault. “She wouldn’t settle, and I love her for having that standard. I fought against my feelings, and that was part of the reason I skipped town years ago.”

“And now the feelings are flooding back?” *They never left.* Savannah’s eyes are too hopeful for what she just went through. Avoidance.

“Girl, let’s focus on you.” I hold out my arms. “You really thought Landon was the one?” She nods. “What do you need? Your favorite meal? A shoulder? Alcohol?”

“I cried the entire drive back home.” Savannah blinks back tears. “I spent the last two days hiding out in my house.”

“Come here.” Pulling her in for a hug, my body locks from my foreign gesture. I hold her tight as she fights back tears, knowing Savannah wears her heart on her sleeve. She’s cautious, but when she lets someone in, she’s in it for the long haul. Dreaming up a beautiful life and letting her love be known to the world. But he wasn’t meant for her, and the world is shitty at times.

“No, I can’t cry.” Stepping out of my arms, she places her hands on my shoulders. “Gosh, we weren’t even engaged, and it hurts this badly. I can’t imagine what you went through.”

I shrug and turn to pick up my coffee mug. “The universe knows what’s going to happen, and we don’t always have control. What we *can* control is accepting what happens and moving on to the next scene. Channel what you can, and better yourself.”

“Em.” Savannah runs a hand through her hair, searching for the old me. “You can continue to take on the weight of life, but eventually, coming up for air won’t be an option until you choose to drop the load.”

“Well, aren’t you the wise old elf,” I mutter.

“I know you don’t want to dance again, but let’s deal with our problems together.” Savannah perks up with her *new idea* face. “We try to relieve our stress at a yoga class.” Her voice raises with excitement. “Oh! Kenzie from high school offers guided meditation sessions at my studio three times a week!”

“Okay, I’ll try something with you. But you book it and let me know when, okay?” I know wood chopping works for Ian, and alcohol shouldn’t be a continual crutch for me. And when she looks like that, wanting to help me, I can’t turn her down, even if I want to. “I need to get started on appetizers for Justin and Hallie’s party tonight.” My teeth pull at a piece of my lips, tearing it. I welcome the pained sting as it gets me out of my head.

“Perfect. I’m not going to let you drown, Emery.” Savannah smiles sweetly. “At least not while you’re in town under my watch.”

“I’ll be fine.” Lucky for me, I’ve always been a strong swimmer.

Glancing out the back window, I watched Ian’s crew pack up for the day. My appetizers enter the oven, giving me ten minutes to shower. The warm water trickles down my body, and I remember the pair of lips molding to mine rhythmically. This man is taking over my thoughts too much.

A beeping sound rings through the house, pulling me out of the trance. Did I really fantasize about us for that long? My hands shake, grabbing a towel in a rush. My phyllo dough appetizers will burn to a crisp. I run down the stairs, nearly tripping halfway down. Bolting into the kitchen, I grab the

counter to stop short. My wet hair now cold and sticking to my back.

“Another minute and these would have been burnt to a crisp.” Ian removes the oven mitt as his eyes rest on my exposed legs.

“Well aware, Ian. Why do you think I ran down here in a towel?” I square my shoulders, slightly arching my back as my hair adds to my irritation. “You do realize I do this for a living.” I shiver, crossing my arms, which hikes the towel up a bit higher. “Why are you in my house?”

“Your aunt’s countertop is on back order for a few weeks. She was gone this morning when I wanted to ask how badly she wanted that specific one.” I know he is trying his best to keep his eyes on mine, but the tightness of his jaw shows his restraint to not look at my ass.

“She’s either helping Allison at the flower shop for Hallie’s wedding, or studying.” I want my eyes to stay forward, but they drift to the counter where I was held against the night before. “Thank you for saving my pastries.” With a deep breath, I turn to scurry out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not wearing this to the party.” What kind of question is that? My hand lifts to fiddle with the piece of towel tucked in at the top. Within seconds, he could have me naked and picking up right where we left off on the counter. “Want to follow me upstairs?” My tongue wets my lips as I openly eye-fuck him in his Carharts and the shirt his broad shoulders fills out so well.

“No.” Ian rests his eyes on my cleavage, and I can see him practically vibrating with how badly he wants me. It’s the same humming feeling of need I’m experiencing. He makes his way to the door and looks over his shoulder. “But my offer still stands, if you’re interested in more than just one night.”

With a huff, I stomp up the stairs a little too aggressively. I rip the tags off my new floral sundress, which all the bridesmaids are wearing to the party. I find my cowboy boots in the back of my closet, then finish getting ready. Grabbing my appetizers, I check the address before driving to Rhett’s.

“Emery!” Hallie comes running over before my car is even in park. “The photographer is waiting by the porch.” She talks too fast with her excitement. “I also cannot wait to taste what you made.”

Laughing with a nod, I roll up my window and take a deep breath before exiting my car. We grab the food, and I follow Hallie to the patio out back where tables and his outdoor kitchen are.

“Wow, this must be the main hub for you guys.” I take in beautiful landscaping and big deck.

“He enjoys hosting. The goats and cows are in the far field right now,” Hallie mentions as Rhett walks up with a smile.

“Emery, it’s been a few days.” He holds out his hand as it clasps around mine. This town seems to breed freaking giants and skipped over me.

“I vaguely remember you.” I smirk with a wink. Why am I being flirty? “Thanks for hosting all of us.”

“My pleasure.” One of his tattooed arms lifts above to adjust his backward cap. “Tyler has to drop his daughter off at his mom’s, so he’ll be a little late. Who else are we waiting for?”

“Savannah should be here any minute.” Hallie smiles, giddy. She doesn’t know about the breakup. Savannah most likely wouldn’t tell Hallie right now for fear of bringing down her special night.

As a black truck pulls up, a flustered Savannah hops out of the passenger seat, a familiar guy behind the wheel following her inside. He winks at Savannah before veering off toward the guys near the barbeque. She meets my wide, questioning eyes and shakes her head.

“That was so embarrassing.” Savannah smooths out her dress. “I’ve been so busy teaching dance, that I forgot to get gas. Again.” Her eyes swing toward the guy whose truck she was in. “I broke down just before I turned onto Rhett’s road. Thankfully, Tyler stopped because I didn’t have cell service.” Right, that’s his name. Tyler Dempsey. He graduated high school right before we entered freshman year.

“That was nice of him.” There’s a slight taunt in my voice.

“I *teach* his daughter ballet.” I get the memo loud and clear. “She is the cutest thing.”

“Being a single father must be difficult.” Hallie looks around, half distracted. “Great, everyone is here. Photo time!” she yells out.

The guys all dressed in plaid shirts look better than damn catalog models. There’s something about country boys doing labor jobs, day in and out, that hits another level of hotness when it comes to muscles.

“Okay,” the photographer begins. “Get with your partners who you’ll be paired with.” Hallie hadn’t gone over couples, but knowing I planned this party with the best man, Ian is my buddy for these photos. Fuck.

“I think I prefer your other outfit before the party,” Ian murmurs, placing his hand on my shoulder as we pose.

“Well, you had the opportunity to enjoy more of it,” I whisper.

“Just because something is free, doesn’t mean I have to take it.” Would my cowboy boots hurt his feet if my tiny self stomped hard enough on them?

“And a towel is not a dress, dumbass,” I say as Hallie glares my way. “Sorry,” I whisper yell, and Ian gives my shoulder a squeeze.

We spend the next half hour taking photos around the property before we eat. Hallie’s cousin, Makenna, keeps eyeing Dax, but he doesn’t pay much attention to her.

“Makenna, get over him,” Hallie snaps, breaking her trance. “You just graduated high school. He’s not into you.”

“Just let me enjoy the little time I get to have with him, okay? It’s an innocent crush.” She blushes.

“Oh, I’m sure you’d let it go further.” Savannah laughs.

“He wouldn’t.” Makenna rolls her eyes with a pout. “After the wedding, he won’t even remember I exist.”

“As it should be.” Hallie gives her a pointed look.

“I’m going to go hang out with the guys by the goats.” Makenna stands, walking toward the field. I never pictured Rhett to be one to obsess over goats, but it’s quite cute.

We sit around the bonfire as the sun sets, and Ian strums on the guitar. Who knew he and Justin could actually sing. It’s does nothing to quell my body’s obvious need for him. The lightning bugs decorate the field and the crickets chirp along with the music. Time fades as the small talk continues. Savannah has been avoiding me and talking with Tyler about his daughter most of the night. I guess it’s keeping her mind busy. Hallie walks over to the porch and returns with a few bottles of liquor.

“Okay, game time!” I watch the guys share dreaded looks, but Justin glares their way. “More of a ‘get to know each other’ better than we think.” If this night wasn’t about Hallie, I’d be protesting up a damn storm. I’ve never enjoyed games. “Relax, it involves drinking, not an actual board game,” Hallie explains. “Never have I ever.”

“We aren’t fifteen anymore, Hallie.” Savannah laughs. “Plus, Emery will get so plastered again.” This feels so immature, and Hallie is pregnant. She’ll just pretend to be drunk, sipping water from her wine tumbler.

“Thanks for the confidence,” I snap, but am the only one who knows what she’s going through. “The questions can be about anything or targeted.”

“I have never played this game before.” Makenna’s youthful eyes light up

as she looks around.

“I wouldn’t mind playing,” Dax says. “I always enjoy learning things about people.”

“You say that now.” Ian’s eyebrows raise. “I could get you drunk pretty quick with all the shit you’ve done through the years.”

“I’m a teacher now. I’ve toned it down.” Dax reaches for the liquor bottle and pours himself a shot before turning beside him to Makenna. “Yeah, you’re sticking with soda.”

“Ugh, whatever.” She rolls her eyes.

“If any of you are too drunk to leave, I have my studio apartment above the garage you can crash in. Or one of the few bedrooms in the house.” Rhett tosses another log onto the fire.

“I’ll start.” Tyler grabs our attention. “Never have I ever owned a bra.”

Us girls roll our eyes and take a sip. The game continues with ease as everyone becomes more intoxicated from basic questions. I cheat my sips because I can’t handle another drunk night and I’m already tipsy. Once the blood alcohol of everyone else settles in, the targets are more pointed. “Never have I ever used lumber to build something.” I can’t help myself and smirk as the guys take a drink.

Ian leans in closer, resting his arm on my chair as a few heads turn in our direction. “I’d cool it down on targeted questions before you get plastered, Daisy Girl.”

“Never have I ever had a one-night stand,” Makenna proudly says, glancing around to see who took a sip.

“Savannah, I’m pretty sure you need to drink.” I hear my voice raise a little louder than I intended.

“Nope. I’m proud to say that at twenty-three, I’ve been with *two* guys.”

“I’ll make an award for you.” I smile too dearly, in a form of sarcasm.

“I’ll ask the next question.” Savannah holds her can of alcohol up and shakes her curls as her carefree side starts to kick in. “As for my turn, never have I ever cheated.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I reluctantly watch Ian take a sip, followed by Dax. My stomach knots, knowing Ryan would be taking a drink too. Cheating isn’t necessary. Disgust and heartbreak for those girls hit me. I almost hope the women didn’t know they were cheated on to ease the pain, but at the same time, they should know.

“You men are terrible.” Justin shakes his head, taking Hallie’s hand in

his.

“In my defense, I was fourteen and just lost my mom.” Ian tries to be sly, swinging his eyes my way. “Still not okay, though.” The fact that he *didn't* lean into me that night years ago when I was caught in the moment of grief makes me believe he hasn't cheated since fourteen.

“Seriously, guys,” Tyler begins. “I would never do that to a woman.”

“That would require you getting back into the dating world.” Rhett nudges him. “It's about damn time, man.”

“Fuck off. I only need to focus on being the best father I can, and my job.” Tyler clears his throat, keeping his eyes on the glowing flames.

“Brielle might enjoy having a mother figure.” Rhett goes on.

“Look how the first one turned out.” I want the full story, but it's not my place to ask about his daughter's mother.

“Never have I ever been cheated on,” Ian says with confidence, and Savannah openly chugs the rest of her drink.

“What are you talking about?” Hallie's eyes bounce back and forth between Savannah and me. “You were just with your boyfriend. I know you weren't cheated on in the past.”

“Don't ask.” Savannah's wide eyes turn to Hallie, and I shake my head. The group falls silent, processing what isn't spoken out loud.

“Never have I ever kissed a girl.” Hallie speaks up, continuing the game, and slurs her words before giving Justin a grin.

Ian's eyes dart toward me as I bring the cup to my lips. I shrug. There were some wild times back in culinary school. Toward the end of the night, most of the jabs were pointing to me. Though I was taking very small sips, they were adding up. Targeted questions were starting to fire up every nerve in my body.

“I need some air.” *Wait, I'm outside.* I stand only to stumble. “I mean space.” My hand grabs Ian's shoulder to steady myself.

Slowly, I walk toward the porch away from the group and take a seat on the front steps. The slight crisp in the air tonight centers my attention. I need to sober up before heading home. I cradled my head in my hands, too caught up with sorting through a million emotions. A couple of people walk past me to enter the house, but lifting my head is too much work. Coming back to this town has held too much emotional drama for me to handle. My life has perfectly closed off and scheduled a few states away from here. Just the way I like it.

The front door opens, followed by a cup of coffee placed at my feet. “Figured this would sober you up a bit.”

“That game got a bit carried away,” I quietly respond before lifting my head to look at Ian.

“Doesn’t it always?” His eyes soften as he takes a seat beside me. “You took a drink to the question about having sex in a public place. Where was it?” Ian asks, fully intrigued.

“I’m not answering that.” I embrace the heat of my coffee before giving in with a smile. “A mountaintop in Aspen, and a changing room in Victoria’s Secret.”

“That place is always so busy.” His chuckle fills the air.

“That’s why you have to be sneaky,” I admit, as a faint laugh erupts in my throat. “And quiet. I noticed you drank too.” Instinctively, we both move closer, and his hand casually makes its way to my thigh. I swallow, trying to ignore it.

“A wedding, a concert, multiple times at the lake during my teen years. Cliché and boring.” Ian takes a sip from his mug.

My mind zones in on the weight of Ian’s hand resting on my thigh. His thumb rubs back and forth, sending a tingling need throughout my body. His simple touch ignites so much temptation within me. I need more. This isn’t enough. A sigh leaves my lips, though it sounds like a half moan as my eyes close.

I place my hand on his as it inches higher under my dress. “This is technically public right now,” I hum, feeling breathless. “You wanna take this into Rhett’s place?”

“Take what?” I allow his fingertips to trail up my inner thigh. My stomach flips as my body responds to his rough hand traveling down the inner part of my sensitive thigh. “This pussy?” He watches me bite my bottom lip to make myself aware of his actions. “I know your panties are soaked right now.” We could easily sneak off into one of Rhett’s bedrooms for a bit and succumb to each other's touch. “You know how to earn orgasms, Daisy Girl.” His hand slides back to my knee as his thumb rubs back and forth. Damn him.

My voice hitches before I find the strength to speak. “Touch me again, and I will drag you into the house and ride you senseless,” I breathe out as my arousal takes over all thoughts.

“Oh, I’d love to hear you scream my name.” His gravelly voice is

seduction at its finest.

“That’s a little too confident for something overrated.”

“I’m confident because I can back up that statement.” He takes a sip from my coffee mug as I remain silent, watching him set it back down. “I’m a man of my word. Maybe you should think about more than a one-night stand with me for the full experience.”

“Oh, now you wanna man up?” His touch vacates my body as I finish speaking. He pulls back to assess me.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” His curious and slightly offended eyes watch me closely.

“There’s... You don’t even know that I know.” I debate telling him, because this memory haunting me has really shaped who I’ve become. “Please, share a truth about us. One you thought you’d never tell.” His hand brushes over his jaw as he takes a deep breath, eyeing me curiously.

“Well, you know Hallie and I were on the outs.” He stares ahead at the group, who’s now out of earshot, as I hold my mug of warmth. “About a year later, it finally clicked where you were when Justin mentioned Hallie and Savannah were in Aspen.” He pauses, and I watch him debate how far he wants to take this story. I need to hear him say it out loud.

“Mmhmm.” I nod. “Keep going.”

“I remember our conversation one night about your father’s tequila and how your parents enjoyed the place.” The way he chose this specific story has me nauseous, yet relieved.

“It was honoring them in some weird way because I didn’t follow through with med school like they wanted.” I take a sip of my coffee as he blinks, confused.

“It made sense that you went there because it’s a place that still somewhat held their memory, but you had zero emotional attachment to.” He swallows, unable to look at me. I can’t breathe because I know how this plays out. “I went to Aspen, Emery.”

There it is.

“I hope you enjoyed your trip.” I guess I’m still not over his trip either.

“Emery, I just told you I went to Aspen after figuring out that’s where you were.” I feel his eyes burning through me, waiting for a bigger reaction.

“Aspen isn’t massive, Ian.” I blink slowly. “I saw you that night.” I was with a guy I barely knew and his sister as we walked through the grassy area during sunset. “Seeing you made my heart stop, and a wave of hope washed

over me. I faked interest in the guy to see what you'd do." My throat tightens. "Moments later, you were gone."

"You held on to that guy with the brightest smile..." His eyebrows draw together and his head shakes as his mind takes him back to that moment. "Your laugh traveled down the street. The same smile and laugh that was only reserved for me in your time of grief." He clears his throat as his eyes lock with mine. "You looked happy. I had to put you first."

"I wish you would have crossed the street." My voice is near breaking, this conversation tearing me apart, just as that night did. "That moment shaped me into who I am today." I strain as his jaw tightens, searching for words.

Ian swallows as his hand reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I figured I read the signs wrong." I want to lean into the comfort of his touch, but don't.

"You read them enough to feel like flying to Aspen was worth it, Ian!" I feel my voice cracking as my emotions rise. "You saw me on the street in another man's arms. *That* was your pinnacle movie moment to sweep me away. To choose me. Us." He's quiet as I open my mouth, attempting to find the right words. "I spiraled after you left."

"Wait, so you saw me and didn't reach out after?" *I get he's shocked, but seriously?*

"Ian, I struggled with not being good enough for my parents. Not feeling like I was worth their time or attention. You show up, yet I wasn't worth you crossing the damn street to even try." My heart beats faster than I've ever felt, my stomach clenching as I try not to cry. "I looked for validation in everyone. I settled and got engaged to a man simply because my parents would have liked that he was becoming a doctor." There's no point in trying to hide my rapid deep breaths as anxiety makes its entrance.

I look back at the group by the fire, and as Hallie and Justin share a sweet kiss, I wonder how life would have been if Ian had made his move. All these years, we may have been happy. If anything, I probably would have gotten married first.

"I was going through some stuff too, Emery." There's a desperation in his voice that sinks into my gut. "The man I am today would cross that damn street."

"Except I've closed up shop." I shrug, no longer having it in me to be fully guarded. "I'm here for two more weeks, and then I'm gone. I don't

expect you to uproot and leave your business to move to Aspen.”

“I fucked up.” A long sigh cuts through the sound of crickets nearby.

“To be fair, we both did. The past five years have been messy, and with me shutting Hallie down every time she brought you up...” I shake my head, feeling defeated. “We both fucked this up in different ways. It sucks.” It *hurts*. “We have to let it go and realize we had some growing up to do.” I swallow, trying to stabilize my breathing before I stand.

“Emery, I still—”

“Don’t. I’m curious about the physical connection, but that’s all I can offer you. All I know how to offer you.” With a pathetic huff and half smile, a familiar car pulls into the driveway.

“That’s your aunt. I made sure you’d have a ride home since we were all drinking.”

“I don’t need a babysitter. Rhett said we could crash here.” He stands, taking my coffee mug and walking me to the car. “What I offered you wasn’t the alcohol talking.”

“Let’s not put ourselves in that situation just yet.” He places a soft kiss on my forehead before opening the car door for me. “Sleep well, Daisy Girl.”

Is there any proper way to recover from tonight?

CHAPTER 11

IAN

“EMERY!” My niece walks over to the dessert table. “Wow, you almost look the same.” Emery smiles, taking in how much my niece has grown.

“Sophie?” She hasn’t seen her since she was seven while she was over and I was caring for my father.

“The one and only.” She giggles. “My uncle said not to bug you, but it’s been foreveerrr.” She giggles and drags out with excitement. “I remember asking my mom to dye my hair like yours for months after I met you.”

“You’re not bugging me.” Emery shoots me a pointed look. “Today has been busy, but I’m glad you came over to say hi.”

“I noticed this was the first moment you’ve gotten alone and told Sophie to wait a bit.” I shrug as Emery’s eyes soften.

“It’s fine. Wow, you’ve grown up, Sophie.” Emery stares in awe. “You look exactly like—” she cuts off, not knowing how touchy of a subject it is. “You’re gorgeous.”

“I look exactly like my grandpa.” Sophie laughs, smiling as her eyes brighten. “Well, the girl version. Which is cool.” Sophie glances up at me, and I rest my hand on her shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. “It’s like I still get to see him when I look in the mirror.”

“That’s quite the positive outlook.” I know Emery can feel my eyes scanning her, but keeps her focus on Sophie. “What do you enjoy now to keep busy? I remember you had an extensive doll collection back then.” A wide smile is brought to Sophie’s face from Emery remembering.

“I’ll let you girls catch up.” I lean down, kissing the top of Sophie’s head before heading off to mingle with my friends.

I watch her in the distance as Justin and I get a moment to talk after the

ceremony and photos. Hallie looks beautiful, but she always does. Emery has been going through the motions today, smiling when needed, saying the right things, and completely avoiding me at all costs unless it's for a photo or the scripted time with me since we are part of the wedding party. It's a lot for the both of us to take in after the other night. Not only have I lived with the guilt of not crossing the street, I now know how badly I hurt her. How I played a part in altering her life in a way she isn't proud of.

A chuckle escapes his throat as he shakes his head. "I know how bad you've had it for that girl." He glances at Emery, then turns his attention to his now wife. "Fight harder this time if she's really worth it."

I tip back my beer, watching people take turns asking her the questions about her return and how proud they are with her living her life. Justin and I share a look and wince as a person goes on about her parents and how the hospital has changed since Emery left town.

"She's happy for Hallie, but she's painfully pushing through tonight. Look how her smile is in place, and only her eyes are moving." I should interrupt so she can to escape the crowd for a minute. She's suffocating.

"Hallie doesn't mind having a break from the attention." He winks her way, and she blows him a kiss.

"She needs someone to break down her façade." Me in particular.

"She's not a game, Ian."

"I never said she was. I care and want to fix everything I've fucked up." Emery didn't need a fresh start. She needed to face her hurt.

"You both deserve to be happy." Justin clinks his beer bottle on mine.

"Sorry, this is your day." This is the first time I really look around and observe the twinkling lights and thousands of flowers. "Who knew a barn could look this magical."

Justin takes in the scenery. "I'm glad it's everything Hallie wanted it to be. She put so much time into planning this." He sips his beer and loosens his tie. "Life has been overwhelming lately with scheduling, the honeymoon details, and her pregnancy exhaustion."

Did he just...

"Pregnancy?" My head snaps between him and where Hallie is across the room. That's when I notice her champagne glass is still full.

"About that." Justin's smile reaches his eyes. "Pretend you're surprised in a month or so."

"Holy shit, man!" I try to keep my voice low and not make a scene.

“Congrats, Justin. You’re going to be the coolest dad.” Joy fills me, and I vicariously live this moment through him. I smile, hoping one day to have a family of my own.

“I’m pretty damn good with kids,” Justin brags. and he’s earned it. “My nieces and nephews love me.”

“I’m so happy for you.” I pat him on the shoulder as Hallie looks over with suspicion. I can’t help letting my eyes fall to her stomach and hers widen. With a wink her way, I walk back over to my part of the table as dinner and speeches need to be made.

Guests dance as the dinner wraps up and our heartfelt speeches are made. Emery stands by the mini dessert bar, shoving her face with treats and looking busy. I walk over, popping a cream puff in my mouth. I’ve never had a sweet tooth, but Emery’s baking is irresistible. Her gaze remains low as she searches the table, trying to look busy and avoid other guests. She’s been her quiet, non-sassy self all evening, and I’m due for backlash by my upcoming offer.

“Let me twirl you around the dancefloor like a gentleman.” I reach out my hand.

“Yeah, I don’t need a gentleman.” Her huffed laugh settles in her chest as she stares out at the dancefloor.

“Well, if the right song comes on, I’ll stand and let you grind your ass against my dick,” I mutter, closing the space between us. “Please? One dance as wedding partners?”

“I guess it’ll stop others from trying to ask about what I’ve been up to the past few years.” She pops a cream puff in her mouth and cautiously places her hand in mine as we head to the dance floor.

“You look stunning, Emery.” My arm rests on her lower back as I take in the forest green dress and her dark auburn hair. She suits the woodland themed wedding more than the bride.

“You look decent in a suit.” The words seem to pain her. “And you did a great job building all this for your friends. That was really sweet.”

“I’d do anything for them.” I slow our swaying as her body remains relaxed. “Did you get much sleep?” All my brain has played on repeat is her on Rhett’s porch, admitting how she wished I made my move back in Aspen. Opening up to me like that wasn’t easy.

“None, actually.” Her eyes float toward Hallie and Justin, both smiling as they talk to a few people by a table. “You?”

“About an hour.” She won’t make eye contact even when I give her hand a slight squeeze. “What are you thinking about, Daisy Girl?” I pull her closer so her chest is tight against mine.

“This moment is about Hallie and Justin. Not me.” Her shallow breathing accentuates her chest, and my eyes gravitate to her cleavage.

I spin her out and back into me, holding her tight. My arms wrap around her waist as she bows into me. When my cock meets her back, she stays in place, not jolting away. I know she’s worked up. “Right now, they’re talking with others and having a great time.” With her back against my chest, I lean down to her ear. “This moment and dance are yours.” Her small gasp draws in her ribs, and her skin pebbles. I bite my tongue so I don’t lean down and place my lips on her neck. I can see her pulse going wild, and it drives me fucking insane. Her breathing turns into pants as her soft skin flushes pink for me.

Clearing her throat, Emery scans the crowd before spinning herself out, keeping hold of my hand. She bites her lip, pulling us out of the barn to the calm night near the country field.

“We don’t need to bring focus onto us.” The blue in her eyes darkens as the sun sets behind the cornfield.

My mouth is her main focus. Placing my hand under her chin, I relocate her eyes. “What don’t you want the guests to see?” She’s antsy as her weight shifts in her heels.

“How badly I want to kiss you again,” she breathes, and the way her hungry eyes stare at my lips, I swear she’s about to kiss me. “Hallie doesn’t need to witness *that* on her wedding day.” Her lips roll inward, resisting the urge. Snapping out of the moment, she shakes her head. “Let’s go back inside before people come looking for us.”

“Okay,” I agree. “I need to talk to a few people who’ve tried to get my attention tonight.” With my hand on her back, we walk inside. Leaning down, I keep my voice low and seductive. “Please let me know when you’re ready to leave. Together.” Her sharp inhale spreads a grin across my face before she walks off toward Savannah. She showed a bit more vulnerability at the bachelor party and a reward is due. As much as I want to chase after her, or had wanted to spin her into a kiss on the dance floor, I respect her enough to keep whatever is happening between us to go under the radar.

We mingle a bit longer at the wedding before saying our goodbyes to everyone. The road is simply white noise as we head home. I keep sneaking

glances her way as she watches the fields passing us by.

“You’re remarkably strong.” I reach my hand over to intertwine our fingers. She fixes our grip into a proper hand hold and remains hushed. This entire time, I keep wondering if I had crossed the street, we might be driving home differently tonight. To our house. Carrying our children to bed since they fell asleep on the drive home after the exciting night of eating too many desserts and dancing the night away. “You held it together so well tonight, Emery. I can only imagine what’s going through your mind.”

“Yeah,” she whispers, staring back out the window. I need to get her out of her head. I need to get out of *my* head. Pulling up her driveway, I give her hand a squeeze.

“Dessert was incredible,” I rave, watching her lips twitch in a ghosted smile before her teeth tug on her lower lip. “Thank you for the dance.”

“I appreciate the ride, Ian.” I watch her speak to my mouth, and I debate leaning down for a taste. “Are you going to walk me to my door?” Her hand rests on the handle.

“Of course, I am, Daisy Girl.” She hops out of the truck, before I reach her side to help her out. Her hand slips into mine so naturally that it’s hard to believe my hand is made to hold anyone’s but hers.

Heading up her porch steps, the creaks of the old wood and a field of crickets are the only sound. My stomach does a weird flip as my heart beats wildly. As we reach her door, I freeze, unsure of how this should end. But I know how I want us to.

After Emery confessed that I missed my chance, I’ve been toeing the line of moral ground. I could act on her offer, tossing aside my standards for a night with her, but I’m stalling because she still has healing to do. Knowing I could have had her as more than a casual hookup back then is really fucking with my mind right now.

Emery doesn’t reach for the handle, and instead faces me.

“I had my first kiss standing right here.” She points to the porch light and a soft laugh rests in her throat. “Just as our lips began to move, the light flickered and my dad opened the door.” The porch light is dim, but sweet innocence twinkles in her eye as she blushes.

“You must have felt embarrassed.”

“More annoyed, honestly.” Her eyes land on the door handle, but she hasn’t reached for it. “It was one of the only times my father got home from work early.” She sulks with a blink, but I don’t want her shutting down.

“Tell me more.” I bring her hand to my lips and gently place a kiss to the back of it.

“I lost two hours of my evening with him because I was with a guy.” Jesus, how emotionally neglecting did they become for her to be that desperate to spend time with her parents?

“You really enjoyed spending time with your father.” I brush her cheek with the back of my hand.

“I enjoyed our evening routine. Which didn’t happen daily.” I feel my jaw tighten as an emotional sting hits my nose. She was just a young girl craving love from her parents.

“Sounds like those evenings together were really special.” My free hand holds her cheek in a gentle cradle. Melting for a moment into my touch, she seems to catch herself.

“But him interrupting the kiss was probably for the best.” She steers the conversation back to physical.

“Was your date a bad kisser?” Her teeth tug at her lip, gaze holding mine.

“Not nearly as good as you.” Emery’s small hand lifts to the back of my neck as she pulls herself up against me. Leaning down, I close the gap between us. With just a brush of our lips, I pull back to look into her eyes to make sure this fucking real. Her soft smile reaches her eyes and I dive back in, knowing how she feels about me. Us.

Deepening the kiss, I keep it slow, savoring every movement. Holding the back of her head, I push her against the door and slide my hand to her neck. Her pulse goes wild as I hold her throat. She twists the door handle, and we step through the doorway, my hands on her hips, pushing her against the door to close it. Her shallow breathing kicks into overdrive as my hips press into her. My cock screams to break the zipper of my slacks. As I welcome her tongue into my mouth, the sweet taste of her dessert still lingers. The feeling of her arms around my neck, her body against mine, the quickening desperation in her breathing, and the slow pace of our tangled lips, is the exact high I’ve been longing for. Kissing her for a lifetime would never be enough.

Reaching up her back, I unzip her dress, and she breaks the kiss. Playful eyes meet mine as she shimmies down and steps out of the fabric. A little grin spreads across her face as she stands proudly in lace lingerie. Not taking this all the way is going to be pure fucking torture.

“Is maroon still your favorite color?” she muses, reaching to pull me in

by my tie.

“Look at you caring enough to remember.”

“Everyone has a downfall.” I drop her wrists as she smiles tightly. Emotion hangs over our heads and the knife in my stomach twists. This is too messy.

“Emery,” I rasp in an unsettling tone.

“Don’t.” With a small shake of her head, she’s back to kissing me. Her lips feel so right, and I need to get this out of my system, even if it breaks me. Her fingers begin to fumble with the buttons of my shirts, and I loosen my tie before taking it off. As my tongue dips into her mouth, I take both her hands in mine and secure my necktie around her wrists.

“Smart choice,” she says against my lips. Before I can ask if this is okay, she lifts to her tiptoes, and circles her arms around my neck, securing herself to me. “I’m a much cuter necktie.”

“Don’t move.” Voice dropping, I grind into her. Forehead resting against hers, I stare into her eyes.

“Bossy.” My hand grips her waist as my other hand lightly dances just above her panty line.

Leaning over to her ear, I whisper, “Do you want to stop?” She shakes her head. “I didn’t hear you.”

“No.” She’s breathless, fidgeting against my cock.

Goosebumps paint her body as I nip at her ear to edge her on. My heart beats as my cock pulses, wishing I’d just toss her on the couch and fuck her hard. I’ve never battled control the way I always have with Emery. Which makes me want her more. Cupping my hand between her legs, over her wet panties, she whimpers and grinds against me.

Gently, I begin stroking her before slipping my hand inside the lace. My finger brushes down between her slit and remains in place, her hips already bucking in need.

“What did I say?”

“Don’t move,” she pants.

“Good girl.”

“How am I supposed to come without you moving?”

“I bet you could with enough anticipation and only a few soft brushes against your clit.” I lightly move my finger back and forth as she wiggles. “I want to take my time with you.”

“That is not what I had in mind.” A frustrated groan leaves her lips.

“I can head out, then.”

“No.” At her begging tone, I just about unravel. I’m eager to hear her beg for my cock.

I reward her. My finger moves faster and applies pressure on her pussy. My hand gripping her waist travels around her back, pulling her flush against me. Her deep breaths and flex of her stomach are all that’s allowing her to move against my finger. “Ian, yesss.” Her voice pitches a bit higher. “Edge me more, please.”

Two of my fingers spread her open as my middle finger circles her clit. Once she starts moving with me, I stop, holding my fingers back in their original place. I’m becoming impatient as I need to feel her come undone by my doing. I circle her once again and dip two fingers inside.

“Fuck, you’re soaked,” I growl into her neck.

“Mmhmm,” she moans, putting most of her weight in her arms around my neck.

“Do you want to feel my cock stretch you out?” I curl my fingers inside before pulling them out and circling her clit. Her leg buckles as her orgasm nears.

“Yeah.” Her body locks, right on the precipice of release, and I stop just before she can come.

“Say it,” I demand.

“It.” Her sinister smirk sends my throbbing cock into overdrive. I remove my hand from her panties.

“Open your mouth.” Her eyes widen, but she obliges. “Maybe some lubrication will loosen up more words.” Sticking my finger with her arousal into her mouth, her lips wrap around me.

“Mmm,” she moans, sucking my finger back into her throat. My cock screams at me to shove it through her lips.

Withdrawing from her mouth, I bend to remove her panties. I grab the long end of the tie and pin her arms above her head. My foot pushes hers aside to a wider stance, and remains on the inside of her foot, locking her in place. Gripping her chin, my rough kiss has a moan echoing into my mouth. My hand travels between the valley of her breasts and over to pinch her pebbled nipple. Her skin is so soft and so addicting to touch.

“Again,” she demands, and I find myself listening. I roll the bud between my fingertips and pull. Her breath hitches, and I repeat on the other. “How is it possible this might make me come?” There’s something about her being

shamelessly vocal that's willing me into submission. Disbelief washes over her, and I continue the motion, her mouth parting.

Letting go of her arms, my free hand slips a couple of fingers inside her soaked center as my palm pushes against her clit. I still can't believe this is happening. That I'm finally touching her body as she bares parts of herself to me. As I circle her clit faster, her head falls forward, teeth digging into my shoulder as she comes. I don't let up until her legs give out.

"Tan," she manages to say as I pick her up, carrying her to the kitchen. Her ass rests on the cool granite, and I notice the bowl beside her.

"Is that the cream puff filling?" I can smell the sweetness from the bowl mixing with her arousal. My mouth waters. Scooping some filling off the side, she licks it from her finger.

"Please, take this off." Holding up her wrists, I remove the necktie. "You tell me." She holds an innocent tone and reaches for more filling. I watch as her legs spread, and hand travels south. The filling rubs along one of her pussy lips before she sucks the remaining cream into her mouth.

Leaning against the counter, my arms rest on each side of her. Her perfume is the same scent she has worn all these years, and I'm consumed by how many years we have lost. The years I want to make up for. Her arms wrap around me, and she whimpers as I lay her down, nose skimming her jaw as I travel up to her ear.

"Tell me if I take anything too far." I kiss down her neck before dragging the tip of my tongue back up to her ear. "There's no holding back once I start, Daisy Girl."

"Kay." She pants, her voice full of anticipation.

I kneel between her legs and let the tip of my tongue dab her clit, just once.

"Yes!" Her gasp fills the kitchen, hips jolting as I suck her clit between my lips. Her back lays flat on the counter, and I pull her closer as her hand weaves through my hair. My arm slips under her lower back, lifting her off the counter with my mouth still attached. Licking up the dessert filling, I graze my teeth up her plump pussy. Her arousal mixed with the filling is just as delicious as the meal she cooked the other night. Emery sits with her legs over my shoulders, and I carry her to the couch.

"You taste so fucking delicious, Emery. I could feast on you every day."

"Y-you caaann." She twitches. I smile into her pussy, moaning in response to add more vibration. Her back arches off the couch as her orgasm

rolls through. “Don’t stop. More.” I swirl my tongue around as her body shakes and instinctively tries to back away from oversensitivity. My grip tightens, but I ease off my tongue pressure and pace as she begins to come down from the high. Kissing her thigh a few times, I lead the trail back up to her dripping center and suck her into my mouth once again. Her body reacts even quicker as a loud, gasping moan projects through the room.

“I don’t know if-if my body c-can handle this,” she breathes erratically, squirming beneath me. My hair feels like it's going to be ripped from my head with her grip. “Aha, so sensitive.” I wait for her cue, but since she’s saying everything but stop, I continue at a gentle pace, slowly easing her into another orgasm.

“Your body can handle almost anything when you put your mind to it.” Two fingers enter her pussy and curl. Her eyes widen as her jaw parts. “Do you like my fingers inside you?”

“So much. Yesss.” Just as her hips go to move with my fingers, the heel of my hand pushes on the outside of her lower stomach. “Holy shit, why does that feel this good?”

“You’re welcome.” Sliding my fingers out, I lick her pussy again as I add three fingers into her. Her breath hitches, but she lets me continue. “My cock is about this wide, Emery. If you ever get the chance to take it, you should be prepared.” Her walls squeeze me as I feel her body tense, her orgasm ripping through her as she cries out. “Slow, deep breaths. I’m proud of how you’re handling yourself.”

She moans, taking a few deep breaths as I instructed. I give her a few more seconds before I suck her pussy into my mouth until she’s contorting on the couch, seeing how long she can take the pleasure. My tongue flattens, dipping inside her and back, swirling rapidly around her clit. Her hips buck out of control, and I fight to keep them in place. Fuck, she's fun. Pride fills me.

“Daisy.” The word falls from her mouth, and I back away, puzzled. She’s limp, full of exhaustion as she lies there with her legs spread, chest heaving, and an occasional body twitch.

“Thought it was better than stop.” She giggles, and my heart doesn’t know what to fucking feel. “Consider it my safe word.” She smirks.

Oh, we can definitely go that route.

“Now that is a pretty sight.” I stare down at her and her well-loved pussy. “Do you want me to touch you again?”

“Like, right now?” she asks on one breath. I nod, licking my lips. “Put two fingers in, gently kiss the top of my clit, then blow on it.” *If we don't end up together, I'm the one who is going to spiral.* “I want to see how much more I can handle.”

Slowly, my fingers enter, and I begin to pump them in and out as she calmly moans. I drop to my knees and look her in the eyes. “You're a fucking dream, Emery.” When I softly blow on her pussy, she twitches, but releases a satisfied sigh. I continue sliding my fingers in and out before pushing them deeper inside and holding them in place as my lips feather kisses over her clit. She gasps with the contact, and I pull back, curling my fingers as I retract them from inside her. My two slick fingers massage her swollen pussy lips, and as I reach the top of her clit, her hand grabs both of mine. Her other hand meets her clit as she rubs herself to another orgasm right before my eyes. More of her arousal slips out of her, and I lick my way up her pussy, meeting her eyes before kissing up her body.

“You did so well,” I praise, caging her between my forearms. “Your confidence is sexy as hell, Emery.” I press a soft kiss to her lips.

“I don't know if I can stand.” She chuckles, breathless. “If we have sex, I'm definitely resorting to the dead starfish position.” I can't help but laugh at her comment.

“You can starfish when I tie you to my bed another time.” I hint at the idea, and she nods in compliance.

“I don't know what time my aunt is coming home.” Emery moves her thigh to brush my erection, looking down my body.

“Please, let me taste you another day.” My cock aches, needing my hand to relieve it. I need to wrap things up with Emery, but I also don't want to rush out.

“Maybe. You're quite skilled with that tongue.” Her hand travels down to my cock.

“That's barely a sample of what I'd do to you.” Her eyes roll, but I have them meet mine again.

“Your cock is throbbing.” She gives it a slight squeeze as my hips involuntarily push into her palm. “We could have a quicky.” If I have all of her now, she'll shut me out easier. I already want to end every night like we just did, and I need to try to recover from it.

“I'm not sure I can handle just one night with you. I'll want every midnight with you by my side.”

“You could have had that if you and Hallie were honest from the start.” My chest tightens at the reminder of how I’ve fucked up. In the long run, who cared if I didn’t run it by Hallie to tell Emery how I felt. Swallowing the lump that I know is sitting in her throat, she gently pushes me off and walks into the bathroom.

I pick up her dress and hand it to her as she comes out of the bathroom. “Goodnight, Ian.” Taking the dress with an unreadable smile, she heads up the stairs, naked. Her ass jiggles with each step, and I fight my temptation to follow her up the stairs and take up her offer. But I also need to put me first too. Frustration grows in me for wanting what I can’t have. I want us to get back to our endless conversations and laughter. Going for random drives and cooking together. Heading back home, my mind stays busy, formulating a way to crack another layer of Emery’s walls.

CHAPTER 12

IAN

THE VIEW OVERLOOKING the open grassland holds the reflection of the sun through the river as the sun sets. This place has always been my piece of paradise. Justin and I sip our beers on the back deck. “You better still keep coming over, even though you are married.”

“I’m here right now, aren’t I? The only thing that will actually change is her last name.” Justin’s laugh settles as he stares ahead. “That and our newest family member.”

“I’m happy for you, man.” I crack open another beer and wonder if I’ll ever get to experience that. “Is Hallie out for the night?”

“The girls are doing some pottery and wine class downtown.”

“Pottery and wine?” My eyes remain on the firepit flames. “That seems like a very boring night. And a waste of money, if Savannah is the only one drinking.”

“I guess the girls are trying to keep their yearly childhood tradition this month. An end of summer memory.”

“That might help bring out old feelings.” I can see Hallie and Savannah wanting to jump on the opportunity to relive past events, to help Emery gain some closure. I just hope their good intentions don’t go south. “What tradition?”

“Every year when the girls were younger, they’d take a craft class to make their parents a cheesy gift. Hallie is hoping to get Emery to make something to drop it off at her parents’ grave.”

“That’s a lot to take in.” My chest grows tight at the thought of Emery blaming herself all over again. Ever since the night of the crash, she’s struggled with that. Time hasn’t changed a thing in that regard. “Has she

visited their graves?”

“Not since she buried them.” Justin shrugged. “I don’t really blame her either. I mean, they technically aren’t there.”

“She should at least make peace and try to let everything go.” I sigh, wishing she’d allow herself that.

“Well, now that she’s back in town, maybe she will.” Justin shrugs, and I know he doesn’t want to get too involved with this subject. “This hospital event is sometime soon and will probably have her skipping town early. Hallie imagines she will try to get out of the event.”

“It’s a lot to face. Especially after not seeing everyone in so long.” And the fact that Emery does not practice medicine. I know she feels a certain way about her parents and their friends’ judgment.

“Do you know if Hallie or Savannah are going with her?”

“She turned their requests down.” My annoyance increases with his statement.

“They should go anyway. Of course, she’d tell them no. I said I was fine when I lost my mom. You stuck by me and slept at my house the entire week, even when I didn’t say a goddamn word to you. That’s what friends do.”

“They’re scared that pushing their luck will drive her away again.” Which is why she can keep her guard up still and not face these issues.

“Why is everyone so scared of hurting her feelings? They mean well, but if they really care, they should just tell it like it is.” Justin nods and stares at the fire. “They kind of do. You can’t force her to do anything, Ian. If she doesn’t want anything to do with you, doesn’t want to listen, there’s only so much you can do.”

“True, but I’m not ready to give up.” I take a deep breath and decide to change the subject. “How has Hallie been feeling with the pregnancy?” It’s only been a couple of days since the wedding, but we didn’t get to talk much about it.

“So far, so good.” Justin smiles, elation in his voice. “She was a bit nauseous this morning, but some toast helped.”

“I can’t wait to build your child a toy box, or one of those mini rocking horses—no, a rocking tractor.” It will be nice having another little one hanging around. My niece is in her early teen years, and I swear she was just a little tike begging for one more piggyback ride.

“Sounds like you need one of your own.” Justin smiles, his eyes full of warmth.

“In time.” I get up and toss another log onto the fire, letting the conversation die out.

Lost in our own thoughts, his phone beeps, startling us both. “The girls are finished.”

“Tell them to stop by here for a bit.” I gather our empties and carry them into the house. “I have stuff for s'mores. Chicks love those. I especially imagine pregnant ladies.”

“Hallie is already home. And for once, she has tomorrow off work.” Justin smirks. “I am going to head home and keep her up half of the night.”

“If I had someone waiting for me too, I'd be doing the same, bro.” I chuckle as he steps off the back patio. “Goodnight,” I call out.

“Hey, Ian?” Justin says, grabbing my attention, and I turn my head.

“Yeah, man?”

“I stand corrected,” Justin calls out, and I watch him walk past the tiny redhead approaching me with flushed cheeks and a shy smile.

I'm not a man to have a loss for words, but this is almost as unexpected as running into her the first time she was back in town. “I'm not here to sleep with you.” She quickly shakes her head as her dark curls bounce. “I just... found myself wanting your company.” Her level head shows she's making progress, and I suppress a wide smile. “Like old times.”

“So...?” I pause, waiting for her to continue, wanting her to give me more. When she doesn't speak, I continue. “It's after ten and you decided to just stop by and talk?”

“I didn't expect it either.” I've never heard a more honest tone in her voice since before she left. “Tonight kind of sucked. I figured I could share my sucky energy with you.”

“Pick a seat. I'll always make time for you.” I yawn, but try to make it unnoticeable.

“Do you have to be up early?” Her blue eyes fill with concern. “Sorry, I shouldn't have dropped by unannounced.” She turns to head back out.

“Wait.” I nod toward my outdoor furniture. “I know your tolerance for wine is very low. If I had to sit through a stupid pottery class, I would need plenty of alcohol as well.” I watch her eyes soften. “Who dropped you off?” I don't imagine her driving after having a few drinks.

“Mr. Melanson was teaching the class and lives just up the road from you. I'm assuming Justin told you where we were.” She takes a seat on the opposite side of the patio couch from me.

“Briefly.” I sip my beer, allowing her to fill the silence as she wants to.

“The lake is so calm.” She sounds almost shy. “It’s such a nice night out. You have a perfect field of lightning bugs to gaze at.”

“You’re enjoyable to gaze at.” I throw out the cheesy line, but it’s true with the way the moonlight glows off her hair and how her eyes shine as she stares at the fire.

She shifts, and I silently groan at her choice of attire. Her jean shorts show every curve too well, while her fitted white tank top hugs her cleavage. A shiver pulls her arms around her, and I stand, holding up a finger. Opening my patio door, I grab my hoodie and hand it to her.

“Thank you.” Her eyes always seemed to blend with whatever shade of blue she wears, and this navy hoodie darkens them. She gets comfy on the couch, wrapped in my hoodie, as if it’s a blanket. Looking over at me with flushed cheeks, I’m guessing she is at least two glasses of wine in.

“I have everything for s’mores if you want to make some.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks.” She smiles, and there is something admirable about the sad vulnerability she masks with strength. The urge to break down her walls and have her open up consumes me once again. To have Emery overcome something she didn’t think was necessary.

“Let’s talk.” I sit on the other side of the couch. “Should I lead into some things I’ve been thinking about, just jump in, or do you want to start and tell me what’s on your mind?”

“I think I’ll need another glass of wine if you want to jump in.” Her expression becomes unreadable as her fingers brush over her bottom lip. “You know what? Just jump. You and I don’t work well with small talk.” A small laugh pushes through. “Rapid fire. Go.” And I don’t hesitate to do just that.

“Is your guard up because of your parents, or because you were cheated on?” Her eyes widen slightly, and she takes a moment before responding, which lets me know she’s actually going to. It’s both surprising and relieving.

“Both, for different reasons. Feeling semi responsible for their death hurts too much to think about, and the second is pretty obvious.” Her fingers fidget. “I wasn’t completely in love with Ryan. You know I like to control situations, but my guard was still down after my parents. You should know that.” I nod, and so does she, tilting her head. “I didn’t become fully vulnerable to him, but I started to share my past and said yes to our future.” Her stare penetrates me, and I feel every word. “I quickly realized how much

power I gave him to use against me.” Her half-hearted smile pangs my gut. “I wanted a family unit that stayed together. For some reason, he was hellbent on proving it wouldn’t happen for me.” Clearing her throat, her eyes swing to the fire. My gut aches to heal her.

“Do you still want a family?” I’m not sure I want the honest answer.

“All I know is that I want to stay in control of my heart.”

“By?” I find myself leaning toward her.

“By not needing to rely on any man to make me happy. Just *sated*.” I take a long sip from my beer before she reaches forward, removing it from my hand. Emery downs half before she continues. “You can’t expect me to sober up after you made me blab about death and breakups.”

“Fair enough,” I reply. “What is the full reason you left without saying goodbye?”

“Pass.” She bites her lip, looking out at the lake as crickets sing away. I keep quiet, giving her another minute to ruminate on the question. Emery twists a loose strand of hair. “Your dad needed you. His heart attack consumed you, and I didn’t want to be your burden.” She switches and fiddles with my hoodie string around her finger. “Seeing him suffer made me grateful my parents didn’t.” I’m proud of how she’s talking through this. “But that was terrible for me to think about because I didn’t want to see your dad in that state either.” She bites her cheek with an expression saying she’s not finished. “I also didn’t trust myself around you.”

“I love my dad, but we know he did that to himself.” His health and self-care went downhill after my mother passed.

“And I begged my parents to leave work. Threw a whole fit to guilt trip them.” Her voice pitches as her emotions heighten. “I needed a fresh start.”

“It’s not fresh if the wound was still deep.” And that does it. I see her shutting down before she says a word.

“New topic.” She pulls her hood up and looks adorable. I wish I could squeeze her, but that would probably earn me a punch.

“What did you make tonight?” I run a hand through my hair, trying to calm myself.

“A stupid drink coaster.” Emery pulls out the square from her pocket. “This is proof that with enough alcohol, anyone can believe they are an artist.”

Laughing with her, I study the ceramic square she handed over. The hand drawn clock and the engraved words, ‘*Don’t mess up my table,*’ spike my

interest.

“Don’t mess up my table.” I read out loud as Emery swallows. “That’s a good quote for a coaster, but why the clock?”

Her eyes drift to the empty bottle, then back to me. “Fine.” I stand up, walking to the outdoor fridge, and crack open a beer. “If you throw up again, I will be sending you a housekeeping invoice.”

“You’re not that big of an ass.”

“Why the clock, Daisy Girl?”

“After a long day of surgeries, my dad would always pour some of that fancy tequila around my bedtime.” She fiddles with the beer label as I watch her get lost in thought. “I would sit with him in his office with my glass of warm lemon water about twenty minutes before bed.” She smiles softly as the fire flames reflect in her eyes. “Back when I *had* a bedtime, that moment was always special to me.” She sits up straighter as her face tightens, as if angered at the memory. “Time was made to catch up on our day. Back when I still needed my parents home to take care of me because I wasn’t old enough.”

I scoot a little closer. “I’m sure you went to bed late as you got older.”

“Which meant he’d just work longer hours, and I’d see him whenever.” That explains why she has a gloomy first kiss memory. “By thirteen, I was sometimes alone until ten at night, depending on their shifts. Friends would hang out, but of course, their parents wanted them home earlier because we had school.”

“I’m sorry.” I’m struggling to find the right words.

Emery takes a moment to lift the bottle to her lips. Instead of taking a drink, she sets it back down. “Anyway, he always got mad when I’d leave my glass on the wooden table, and would hand me a boring silver coaster.”

“So, you made the coaster in memory of him?”

“I made the coaster to please Hallie and Savannah. They have been on my ass for years to visit my parents.” Emery yawns, turning to sit in the corner of the couch. Her body is directly facing me as she brings up her legs and tucks the sweatshirt over her knees. “They want me to bring something to the gravesite. My parents can’t use the coaster, so it’s all irrelevant. You can keep it, for all I care.”

“I will keep it for when you’re ready to visit them,” I reply, not wanting to push boundaries. “You should visit once, for yourself. To say goodbye, or find peace.”

“You might be right.” Her answer takes me by surprise once more. “That

time is *not* now.” She shakes her head. “They didn’t leave by choice.” Taking a deep breath, she holds the bottle out for me to take. She always dances around saying they died.

“Death happens, Emery. It sucks.”

“I’m aware.” I’m starting to annoy her. Good. A slight breakthrough for more emotion.

“Have you thought about therapy?” I watch her face and anticipate a lash out, but her brow furrows as if confused. “Maybe talking about the difficult stuff with a stranger would be easier than someone who knows you.”

“Do you go to therapy?”

“No, but I have my outlets and people to help get me through difficult moments,” I admit. “Chopping wood is a way to get out anger, and being in nature keeps my busy thoughts tamed.”

“I have my ways of coping.” She pauses, debating saying more. “I did try a meditation class with Savannah this morning, though.”

“How’d that go?”

“I didn’t hate it. I might do another class again this weekend. But I’ll think about talking to a stranger. Even though you relate more to the situation than probably anyone else.” There’s slight sarcasm in her tone as a defense, but she doesn’t fight me. “I can’t promise to follow through with anything when I get back to Aspen, though.”

Right, the place she can go back to closing everything off. I need her attention back to incentives.

“I can’t stop thinking about how you tasted the other night.” Maybe giving Emery what she thinks she needs, what she’s used to, might be the best option to help her emotionally open up even more.

“Is that so?” she draws out, her lips holding a daring smile. Slowly, I turn, mirroring her body. Her lips part, and a wink lures me in. But I know this game. I’ve played the ringmaster for years and know this move all too well. I’ll let her have the power, for now.

Placing the coaster on the table, I lean closer. Our gazes never shift from one another. Her knees resting at her chest part, allowing me to crawl between. Hovering above, I fight like hell to keep myself in control and not show my nerves. I want this moment, but have always pictured it differently. Her breath escapes, as if she is suddenly unsure of my actions. Still, she doesn’t stop me. Leaning down, my lips dusted over hers before I spoke. “Have dinner with me tomorrow.”

Emery cups the sides of my face, whispering against my mouth. “That’s not how this works.” Her head tilts just as her lips catch mine.

Her eyes open as I back away. “We are both stubborn. How about a give and take.” I start the wager. “We will do things your way, if you agree to do things my way.”

“A one-night stand doesn’t take this much planning.” Her lips articulate in aggravation. “I would know.”

“You do realize who you are talking to, right?” I chuckle. “My reputation in this town wasn’t the most modest after you left.”

“So, what exactly am I agreeing to?” Emery purses her lips.

“You’re saying yes to me taking you out for dinner before getting you in bed.”

“I don’t need you to wine and dine me. I need you to throw me against the wall and fuck me breathless.” My cock throbs, scolding me to just give her what she’s asking for.

“I know *you’ve* lost respect for yourself, but for my sake, I am going to have a nice evening with you first.” Standing, I take her hand. “You’ll want dinner to keep your strength up.” She stands and my sweatshirt hits her knees.

“Pick me up at six tomorrow. Don’t be late.” Her mouth drops with the fact she just gave in. She walks past me, pulling out her phone.

“Look at you, penciling me into your day.” I received a sly glance over her shoulder as she brings her phone to her ear.

“May I have a taxi—” I shake my head.

“Stay here tonight. I’ll sleep on the couch.” I wait for her to forget it. “I can drive you home.”

She walks off the back patio reciting my address. “The taxi is already on its way.”

“Since when did Beechwood Falls start a taxi service?” I’m pretty damn sure I’d see a taxi driving around town.

“Since all the summer tourism.” She heads toward the front of the house, and I pick up the coaster. I follow her down the driveway, and a minute later, and to my fucking surprise, a car appears.

“Goodnight, Ian. See you for our *date*.” Opening the car door for her, I tap on the driver’s window as she settles inside. “If you lay a hand on this woman or do *anything* that I wouldn’t approve of, you’ll fucking regret it.” The guy in his early twenties shakes his head nervously. “Understood?”

“Agreed, sir.”

“You’re Colton’s boy, right?”

“Yes.” Another nod.

“Okay, drive safe.” My smile is overdone, and I notice Emery smirking as her phone screen lights up her face in the back seat.

Saying goodbye, I open my truck’s passenger door and slip the coaster in the glove box. If Emery was using the coaster as her first and last graveyard visit, I’ll know when she is ready to find closure. A hint of her old self came through when she agreed to dinner. Hell, the fact that she was the one who labeled it a date says she is starting to open up.

I head inside and don’t fall asleep until she kindly lets me know I don’t need to hunt down her taxi driver. A fucking taxi service in Beechwood Falls. Who fucking knew?

CHAPTER 13

EMERY

“How WAS your night out with the girls?” My aunt hands me a cup of tea and joins me on the couch.

“It was fine. But it just proved how different life has been since we graduated high school.” I lift the mug up to my mouth, hiding the way my cheeks suck in. “How different our lives have become.”

“Different, yes, but you’re in control of how you react and respond to it.” Her voice is soft, and I can tell she’s skating around what she really wants to say. “You got home pretty late last night.”

“Mmhmm.” I sip of my tea and answer honestly. “I took a little detour after we finished. I needed help clearing my mind with someone who related.”

“I’m glad you have that here.” I can see in her eyes how she wishes she was that person for me. “What did you end up making?”

“Nothing worth taking home.” Ian can die with a coaster. I couldn’t care less. Our date better not consist of a cemetery picnic in an attempt to heal this wound. “Not like my parents can use it.”

My aunt sets her mug on the coffee table and picks at the thread coming off a pillow.

“You know, I miss them too.” Her voice is quiet as her focus remains on pulling a thread. My chest tightens as I watch her face fall. I didn’t mean to drop my baggage on her.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Quinn.” I sigh, as my aunt sinks farther into the couch.

“I also lost you months later when you left for Aspen.” My stomach bottoms out and my lungs deflate.

Instantly, unexpected tears sting my eyes. Why the hell is my body doing

this? Yes, I'm aware of how selfish I've become. Not only did my aunt lose her sister and brother-in-law, but at twenty-three, she became a guardian to a teenager. One who shut her out and couldn't wait to leave. I can't imagine taking on that role at this age. And then to let me abandon her and this town? My head spins, realizing how I've acted over the past five years. I'd only see her and my friends when they'd come to visit me. How do I even still have friends at this point?

"I'm sorry for waiting years to come back." My voice cracks, and I pray she doesn't move closer. I really don't want to fill this mug with tears. "I had been so absorbed in starting over that I didn't think about your feelings."

"I understand why you did what you did." I could have used some tough love at that time and the only person who gave it to me was the one who knew the pain of losing a *parent*. "I'm just glad to have you back." Her eyes soften as she leans forward, taking my hand. "Even if it's only for this month."

Swallowing my nerves, I began to speak. "Ian and Savannah have been adamant about having an outlet." Her eyebrows raise, half believing me. "Cooking hasn't been helping the way it used to. Maybe it's because it's my job now, but I don't know. I think they're right and I need something else outside of that passion." My stomach clenches as I stare at the coffee table and focus on zoning out.

"It seems Ian cares about you as much as your girlfriends." She can sense my walls forming, and slightly alters the question to get me to keep talking. Damn her.

"He makes me confess things I don't usually say out loud." I pause, wishing he would have just kissed me and kept it at that.

"Confess things like?" Aunt Quinn leans forward with eyes full of hope, but my head shakes, shutting her down. "Whatever he got out of you, I'm glad. It's a small step forward."

"No promises there." But he does have a way of making me feel comfortable enough to talk about what hurts. "He and I are actually going for dinner tonight." *Okay, Emery, you can stop talking now.*

"Oh..." Aunt Quinn's eyes light up before a grimace falls across her face. "For the hospital party?"

Shit. That can't be tonight.

"Do I really need to be there? I'm not the one who is having the wing named after me. The ones who earned it aren't even around to see it." The words all rush out of my mouth at the same rate as my racing heart.

“*Ones who earned it?*” Okay, I deserve that scolding look. “They’re your parents, Emery Davis.” *Were*. But I don’t say that out loud. “You’re a big reason the hospital had funds to produce this wing.” She scoots closer to me as I feel my body stiffen.

“Call me humble. I don’t need the recognition.” My stomach turns as I mentally count down the hours until I’m faced with this situation. “You know I don’t like getting attention.”

“You don’t have to make a speech or anything.” Her hand squeezes mine. “It would mean a lot to them to see you after all these years.” She pauses. “You can reschedule with Ian, or see if he will join.”

The front door opens before I reply. My friends always had perfectly horrible timing. Savannah has never knocked since the first time my mother told her she didn’t need to when we were kids. “You.” Savannah points my way and smiles, walking over to the couch. “You have some questions to clear up.” She sits right close to Quinn and leans on her.

“I don’t have time.” I give her a warning look, which is pointless, because my aunt can see something is up. I know the question. Which is why I didn’t respond to her text. “I need to get ready for the hospital thing.”

“We have plenty of time,” Aunt Quinn encourages. “Plus, you’ve been quite talkative today.”

“I arrived just in time, then.” Savannah laughs, and I can’t fight the calmness her smile and easy laughter brings me. “You had me pick you up for the pottery class, then didn’t want me to drive you back.”

“So?”

“Why did you ask Mr. Melanson for a drive? Did you make a little stop at his sexy neighbor’s?” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“It wasn’t like *that*.” I shrug, annoyed at her happy spirit. “You’ve been extra chipper for someone who caught their boyfriend cheating. Doing a lot better than I was, that’s for sure.”

“I have my moments of sadness. But I acknowledge them and have a good cry.” Her voice wavers. “And, yes, it sucks, but I’ll be okay.” She regains strength. “Teaching dance has been keeping me busy, and watching Tyler’s daughter has been fun.”

“I’m glad you’re healing.” I tilt my head back with a groan. “But why do you have to be so interested in my whereabouts?”

“You used to be a bubbly open book, and since your engagement ended, you’ve become even more closed off,” Savannah states simply.

“I’m not that closed off,” I answer, void of all emotion.

Hallie’s signature knock taps on the door, and a second later, her head pokes inside. A wide smile paints her face as she joins the crowd on the couch, leaving the door open. Justin and Ian slowly followed behind. I shouldn’t hate the comfort Ian brings me, but I still can’t face grieving.

“I forgot you left your recipe notebook in my purse.” She hands it over. “When you didn’t answer my call, I got worried. So here I am.”

“You felt the need to bring dumb and dumber along with you for the delivery?” I wince, feeling guilty that my sharp tongue has been the recent defense mechanism. “Sorry.” I’m in such a weird place in my head. “Why has my place always been the local meetup?”

“You’re just that special,” Savannah chimes in. “We’re glad you’re back.”

“I love having this house full again.” Quinn smiles, standing up. “It’s been really quiet with just Carson and I here.”

“I wouldn’t put any emphasis on the *quiet* part.” I laugh and glance up at her. “You still wonder why I am always tired?”

My aunt’s face flushes as everyone’s eyes zone in on her direction. “At least I’m not sexually frustrated.” She tosses her hands in the air. “We are leaving at five, Em. Long gowns are required, and I added a plus one with your name ahead of time.” She turns, heading up the stairs. “You girls need to stop by more often again. Like the old days.”

“I don’t want to go to this hospital thing tonight,” I admit, running a hand through my hair. Ian’s questioning look shoots my way.

“Crap. I forgot that it was tonight.” Hallie bites her lip, mouth pursing. “I swore that it was next week.”

“Me too.” I sigh, but honestly, I didn’t pay attention. I was hoping it would pass without anyone noticing.

“Justin picked up shift at his bar, and I already agreed to meet with a client,” Hallie says, concern clear in her tone. “I’ll cancel and go with you.”

“Don’t,” I say a little too loud. “I’m not staying long. I really only need to show my face during the stupid rope cutting for the wing.” I feel my pulse in my ears.

“Okay...but call and let me know if you change your mind.” She sighs, sharing a look with Savannah, and they back down.

“Take Ian as a plus one.” Savannah’s smile grows. “He did work on the project with Rhett.”

“Actually,” Justin chimes in. “Ian has a date. Which I forgot to ask who it was with.” Hallie’s head whips toward Ian with a glare.

“I don’t need company,” I quickly add, hoping Ian gets the hint that tonight is canceled for us. I guess our dinner meal and *hookup* will be postponed. “I’m an adult. I can handle a few hours of handshakes and free champagne.”

“Emery,” Hallie warns. “You and alcohol need a break.” She’s right. I’d been doing really well with that until last night. And tonight, well, disassociating from the hospital event would be nice. But I’m trying to make small changes. A meditation class tomorrow afternoon might do the trick.

“I’ll be your plus one.” Ian draws everyone’s attention. “My date wasn’t anything serious. I’m pretty sure she only likes me for my charming face.” He wiggles his eyebrows with a sinful grin.

“And probably that flirty side smirk,” I reply before I can stop myself.

“Emery, do you have a gown to wear?” Hallie’s eyes light up. *Here we go.* “I have the perfect—”

“With all the events this town holds,” I cut her off, “I’m sure there is something in my closet I can make due with.”

“We better get Ian home to change.” Hallie gives up, nodding to the door.

Savannah follows them, but turns around before leaving. “You’ve got this. I’m sure Ian can help in more than one way.” She winks as I toss a pillow her way.

CHAPTER 14

IAN

THE BLUE HALTER gown brings out Emery's eyes and gives vibrance to her hair. Her strands are curled, falling over her shoulders, and the makeup on her face is light enough to gently accent her features. She's breathtaking and smells like a bakery.

I place my hand on the small of her back as we enter the ballroom, and she doesn't flinch. I could hold her all night. She feels right. Like mine. Her smile's held in place as her eyes dart around the room. By the stiffness in her walk, she's nothing but nerves. I don't blame her. Losing my parents was difficult, but I'm not the one facing a crowd of their friends, and holding the weight of their death as if responsible. My arm pulls her waist closer as she eyes the champagne table.

"Are you going to have a glass?" I lean down and murmur in her ear.

"I want one, but probably shouldn't."

"Take a deep breath." Instinctively, I place a kiss on the top of her head, and she releases a shaky breath. "You don't have anything to worry about. I'm right here." She nods a little too fast.

"These people have known me since I was a child." Emery takes a step forward, and I follow suit. "They all expected me to follow in my parents' footsteps. Now, I just donate from afar." She's a donor?

"Don't worry about what they think." I glance around the crowd holding serious faces and overly fake laughs. "Some people just donate money for a tax write-off."

"Come on, you're aware of the cost it took to build this wing." She smirks, leaning into me for comfort. I try to ignore my heart flip. "I might be the top contributor and why this got built, but as uptight as these people may

look, and *are*, they fund most of the hospital.”

I refrain from asking the dollar amount, wondering what Emery’s contribution is. And she didn’t even care to show up tonight for recognition. “Why do you contribute each year?”

“My parents dedicated their lives to saving people.” Emery’s eyes lock on a distant group of people laughing about. “It’s not hard to believe they loved working more than they loved me. I always made them go out of their way to spend time with me. Then, everything crashed. *Literally.*” My heart squeezes for her as I tighten my hand on her hip. “I help fund this hospital with the insurance money I received after they died. Two separate life insurances from surgeons were quite hefty.” She swallows, tilting her head up so her eyes meet mine. “It’s not my money to carelessly spend. I used some for schooling and the move to Aspen, but I like knowing most of their funds are able to help people.”

That’s one hell of a beautiful heart for someone who tries to portray they don’t have one. I fight the urge to lean down and press my lips to hers. The simplicity of a gentle kiss to take away her pain, and thank her generous heart at the same time. Stepping in front of her, I place my hands on the sides of her face. For a moment, her eyes hold the innocence I once knew. The sweet gaze and smile she wore when her world was as perfect as it could get before graduation. The look that made me fall so damn hard for this girl only minutes after meeting her. She blinks, glancing to the side, that look instantly dissipating.

“I should find my aunt and shake a few people’s hands, then we can get the hell out of here.”

“Emery Davis?” an animated, older voice projects behind me. “Is that really you?” I turn, watching the guy give her body a scan.

“My looks haven’t changed since I left.” *Well, your tits didn’t fill out this halter when you wore it to prom.* I’ve been fighting to not give an obvious stare since I saw her.

She holds out her hand for a shake as he steps in for a hug. I stay close to Emery, protective over how she is with physical touch. Not to mention, after the altercation at the bar.

“Are you okay with him?” I ask her quietly and earn a glare from the dude. I don’t care what he thinks; Emery’s feeling safe comes first. Her hand gives my upper arm a squeeze with a smile of appreciation.

“I’m good, babe. Thanks.” The nickname rolls off her tongue and straight

to my heart. It sounded too authentic, and like something I could never get tired of hearing. My dick awakens as I replay the feeling of her hand on me. Justin's right. I've got it bad for this woman. I step to the side to give them privacy, but keep a close eye.

I observe their interaction, trying to go unnoticed as the silver-haired man proudly goes on about what the days were like when her parents had shifts together, and how Emery has been so generous with donations. Emery squares her shoulders, holding a humble expression. Bernard, which I overheard from Emery's greeting, places both hands on Emery's shoulders before pulling her into a hug. She awkwardly hugs him back, and as soon as they part, a lady approaches to carry on a similar conversation. Emery's smile stays in place the whole time. How these people couldn't tell she was faking every interaction beats me.

"How are you holding up?" I approach her the moment she has a free second.

"Just telling my parents' friends exactly what they wanted to hear." She sighs. "Same old, same old." She steps closer, resting her body against my chest. I wrap my arms around her waist to pull her tighter. On her exhale, she melts into me, handing over some of the weight to carry.

"Your parents would be proud of you." She stiffens as her head tilts up. She's so close for me to lean down and kiss. But she rolls her eyes, strengthening her guard. I smile down at her, but she doesn't believe me.

The people in charge gather everyone around to make their speech about this wing and the hospital contributors. Quinn is right by our side as tears prick her eyes. The stone-cold expression on Emery's face remains in place as a blanket over a large photo of her parents is revealed. Applause fills the room as she forces a tight smile and glances at her aunt's hand. Her pinky finger hooks around her aunt's as Emery's hand slides into mine.

"We'd like to thank Emery Davis as one of our top contributors." One of the speakers raises their glass. "If not for your hefty funding over the years, this new wing would not have been built." Emery shakes her head and nods up at me to get the focus off herself.

"Thank you." She smiles shyly. "I may have helped with the funding, but I was not the one who put this into action." There's an awkward pause as Emery figures out what to say next. "Let's give some applause to W&M Construction and the hospital team for helping and getting the right people in place to help make this happen." Everyone claps, and they promptly cut the

rope to open the new Davis Wing.

Rhett and I didn't have a huge part in the build of this place, but he did the blueprints and we worked alongside another company to get this finished. People filter down the hall to check out the new wing, and Emery hangs back.

"Are you coming?" Quinn tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and smiles at Emery.

"I've seen what a hospital looks like." Her auburn hair brushes against her shoulder as she shakes her head. "I've had enough peopling for tonight, if that's okay."

"I'll tell people goodbye for you." Quinn brings her niece in for a hug and shoots me a silent thank you. "Thanks for joining me tonight. I know that wasn't easy." Emery remains stiff as she nods.

"Ready to go?" I ask as Emery. She stands in place, holding her hand out to me. I watch Quinn's eyebrows shoot up out of my peripheral. I step forward, reaching to take her hand, but she pulls it away and turns to walk down the long, sterile hallway. Guess I took a moment too long. Within a few strides, I catch up, lacing her fingers with mine. Her jaw is firmly set, and her chest heaves from her deep breathing. I want to take away her pain. Emery's grip tightens as we near the front doors, her pace nearly dragging me out of the building.

I expect her to stop and catch her breath once we exit, but she bolts to the truck. The cool night air of fall creeping in blankets around us. She frees her hand from mine, but I stand in front of her.

"You showed up for people. I'm proud of you, Emery." I gently tip her chin up and look into her eyes. "I'm proud of your generosity, your willingness to face this event that I know has your anxiety going haywire, and even though life has taken rough turns on you, you pull through every damn time." Her eyes swing to the pond across the street.

"Let's go," she whispers, trying to fight emotion.

I open the door for her, and we make our way down the quiet road as the sun begins to set.

"You're wrong, you know." She breaks the silence. "When you said they'd be proud of me." Her fingers twiddle, picking at her nail beds.

"I wouldn't go that far." Reaching over, I lace my fingers through hers.

"As far as my family history dates back, medical school has happened through generations. I'm the first to break that." Her voice grows quiet.

“They’d be disappointed with me if they were still alive.”

“You know they’d be happy to see how passionate you are with your job. Just like they were.”

Emery picks up our intertwined hands and places her free hand over ours as her laugh echoes through the car. “You really think you know me, don’t you?”

“Quite well.” I wink.

“You’re wrong again.” The humor drops from her voice, and she lets go of my hand. “As terrible as this sounds, their death gave me the freedom to pursue a career I actually enjoy.” I pause from her honesty and decide to drop it.

“Fine, I won’t ask any more questions.”

“Yeah, right.” Her tone bounces back to light as her arms cross. “You like to run that mouth of yours.” I debate how to handle the flirtiness in her response. She borders a fine line, and I’m trying to figure out how far to push her.

“Okay, last one.” I smirk as the light turns red, and we stop at the split in the road. “Do I turn left or right?”

She smiles inwardly at my semi-sly attempt to ask if I’m turning toward her place or mine. “Straight.” Emery points ahead. “I’m in the mood for good music and a country road sunset.”

“As you wish, Daisy Girl.” She doesn’t comment about the nickname like I expect, so I turn on the radio. “Better?”

“I said *good* music.” She purses her lips as new age pop country song comes on. “Do you mind if I plug in my phone?”

“We’re in my dad’s old truck.” The sky burns a deep orange as I pull into a large field, letting us lose sight of civilization. “There’s just the radio.” I reach to change the station.

“Right.” She turns up the volume and smiles as “*Forever and Ever, Amen*” by Randy Travis plays. “I like this old truck. Why did you buy a second truck bigger than this?” Her eyes travel down to my lap, then back to meet my eyes. “I hope you’re not compensating.”

“You hope? You had a pretty good grip on it the other night.” It’s dark, but I can see the faint blush form on her cheeks and a smile reaches my eyes. “I haul a lot with construction, but it’s also just preference to be the bigger vehicle.”

“Always wanting the upper hand.” Her eyes roll, and I cut the ignition.

“Come on.” I open my door. “We have a few minutes left to enjoy this sunset.” Reaching behind my seat, I grab a blanket.

“We’re sitting outside to watch it?” Her surprised eyes brighten her smile as she hops out of the truck. We climb into the truck bed, and I hold her waist to lift her onto the flat rooftop of the truck. I follow behind and she settles between my legs. With the blanket wrapped around us, Emery leans back, resting her head on my shoulder as my arms circle her waist. I’m so grateful to spend this moment with her. I hope she can find some serenity to calm down after the evening she’s had.

“I can’t believe I have a beautiful girl and a beautiful sunset before my eyes.” I watch the burning glow over the trees.

“Cheesy much?” Her shoulders shake as a soft laugh flows through her. “How often did that line work on chicks?”

“This is the first time I’ve done this.” I feel her head tilt against me as she looks up. “I’m serious. I’ve never sat on top of here.”

“I’m surprised this oldy hasn’t dented.” Her giggle vibrates against me, and I wrap my arms tighter around her.

“My father used to talk about the days when him and mom would take a sunset drive and do this.” I had only found about it after my mother passed. “This was their truck. No backseats for us kids.” I find myself chuckling as I remember my father saying this truck was special and that maybe one day, I’d get to enjoy a country road drive with someone special. “They loved watching the sunset. Sometimes they’d hire a babysitter and mom would pack a picnic.” Emery stays quiet, but I feel her holding her breath a little too long. “He loved taking Mom out in this truck. I wonder if they parked here.”

“That type of love doesn’t sound real.” There’s a sadness in her voice.

“Why not?”

“It’s something I’ve never witnessed or known.” She shrugs. “I barely saw my parents even hug each other, let alone me.” The sun tucks itself behind the trees and the air almost instantly grows cold.

“My parents’ kind of love was real. To me, anyway.” I lean down, kissing her cheek. “It’s the kind of relationship I’m going to strive for.”

“Then I hope one day you find it.” She’s monotone as her teeth subconsciously toy with her bottom lip. Emery stares ahead, and I can tell her thoughts are racing along with her heart. She wants to feel, but truly doesn’t know how. And God, do I want to show her.

Reaching over, my thumb tugs on Emery’s chin, pulling her lip from her

teeth. She sucks air in as I turn her face toward me. Her eyes scream for me to kiss her, but she's tense in my arms. I may never recover if she leaves, but I need to remember this moment. Her ravenous eyes stare at my lips before leaning in and capturing mine. Her hand holds my jaw, keeping my head in place as she begins to deepen the kiss. It's tender and languid until she moans into my mouth, slipping her tongue inside. Silenced adrenaline rings through my ears. My hands cup her breasts and give them a squeeze as my cock digs into her back. She pushes against it, and my hips grind against her.

"Take me back to your cabin." She swallows thickly with eyes fully of certainty. I lean in for one more kiss before helping her climb back down.

I drive home, thankful there is no traffic to hold us up. My cock wills at me to pull the truck over and have her ride me. But this truck isn't the place for me to get her naked and calling out my name. My mind has too much planned for tonight.

The heat blasts on high as we pull into the dirt driveway. Emery glances my way as my mind devours her. The moonlight sparkles in her eyes, as I stare, wonder-struck. I cut the engine and jump out to open her door, but Emery hops out before I reach her side. Her heels sink into the grass, nearly tripping her up. But I'm right there, hands gripping under her thighs and lifting her into my arms. She rests her hands on my shoulders with a wicked grin. My dick aches as she presses herself into it and my fingers dig into her ass.

"Easy, Daisy Girl." I carry her through the front door. Closing it behind her, I set her down and press my body against hers. Backing her against the door, my hand lingers on the frame, restraining myself from touching her just yet. "You think you're getting my cock inside you right away?"

"If I'm not here for you to use, then I'll say thanks for the hospital event and see myself out." Her grin is challenging, but the sweet curve of her mouth leads me to the vulnerability in her eyes being brought back to the earlier event.

"Emery." My hand rests on the back of her head as she begins to turn away. My thumb pushes on her neck, tilting her head up to look at me. She's now in her thoughts about everything. With a tight roll of her lips, her arm lifts to hold the nape of my neck. Her eyes swing to my bedroom before coming back to me.

"Make me forget." Her hand travels down my body, pushing us toward the room.

It's barely twenty feet away, but I unzip her dress and untie the halter on the way. The gown falls to the floor, and Emery steps backward and out of the fabric. We reach my room as she pushes me away to display her lace panties and bare chest. I've never prayed for more self-control than I am right now. She waits a moment, growing uncomfortable as I take in her tiny shoulders, her beautiful full breasts, and the curves of her hips. She's breathtaking, and right now, all mine. I want to capture this moment and remember it forever.

"Scared? You still haven't kissed me..." Her eyes drop to my dick as her tongue swipes across her lips. She takes a step toward me with a devilish grin. "Usually, within this time frame, the guy is already inside me," she rambles her sass, as if trying to make me jealous.

"Sucks for you if there's no foreplay." My comeback takes her by surprise as she tries to find words.

"I'm always ready for a dick. I think you're the inexperienced one."

"Watch it." I drop my tone in warning, because as gentle as I planned to be with her, the sassy remarks are awakening the no mercy side of my greedy cock.

"Hey, this is the second time I'm naked before you, and yet you still have your pants on." Her arms cross under her breasts, perking them up more. The pebbled nipples ask to be pinched between my teeth.

"Emery—" If she wants to be taken out of her head, I know exactly how to do it.

"Should I fluff the pillows while you decide if you'll fuck me or not?" I undo my pants, holding her gaze, demanding her eye contact with just my presence.

I crowd her space, gathering her hair in my hand, and wrapping my hand around it. "Emery how about—"

"Should I get you a glass of water?" She's showing no fear, and waiting for me to snap. I remain unphased and pin her in place with my eyes. "You need me to show you how this starts?" Her voice slightly wavers with the last sentences. I'm enjoying how I've confused her by keeping my cool. But another side of me kicks in that I didn't expect to use with her. She's about to get what she asked for.

"Maybe you're all talk." My fist tilts her head down. I free my cock from my briefs, but it does nothing to ease the throbbing ache. Pumping my cock in my hand, I watch her eyes light up, tracking every stroke. "You're stalling

like you ain't gonna look pretty with my dick down your throat." Her lips part on a small gasp as lust fills her blues.

"Yet you still haven't made me." Her head cocks to the side as my grip tightens in her hair. I pull her with me while I sit on the edge of the bed. Tugging on her hair, I bring her down to her knees.

"Shut that fucking mouth of yours and take my cock." Her pupils dilate, and the warmth of her mouth welcomes me. My jaw hangs loose as I slide to the back of her throat. Emery's head moves in a steady rhythm as I start to thrust in deeper. She gags, as one hand lifts to wrap around my cock and the other slides between her legs. I'm in awe of the sight before me.

"Hands behind your back." Now that she's on her knees for me, I will time to freeze. Obliging, her hands move behind and her lips kiss the tip of my cock. Her sultry eyes peering up at me through her lashes.

"Only if you grip my hair harder," her voice rasps. My pulse races, knowing she's handing me another level of trust.

"You're not the one in charge here." I trace my cock around her lips as my other hand keeps its grip on her hair. "I'm going to fuck your sassy mouth the way I want to." Her mouth opens, tongue pushing out to allow me access again. "That's it. You're gonna take all of me." I continue to thrust until I hear another gag, and she glances up at me with watery eyes. "The way you take my cock is such a beautiful sound. Be a good girl for me."

Emery swirls her tongue around the tip and lightly blows. It twitches, needing her mouth again. "I didn't tell you to stop." I bring her head back onto my cock. Looking down into her eyes, there's a glint from how much she's enjoying my control. "Such a good fucking girl." I set the pace so she isn't taking me deep, and this doesn't end any second. "Just like that," I say through clenched teeth. "Fuck, Emery. Nice and slow." As I feel the tension rising in my body, I'm overwhelmed that all these emotions I'm feeling won't be enough to last me a lifetime. My hips move with her, but I can't help myself and quicken my pace. As she sucks me harder, I take my hand off my cock to thrust deeper. "You gonna let me spill down your throat?" Fuck, I've dreamed of this for so long, but I do give her this option.

Her moan vibrates through my cock as she nods.

"Take me deep." After her gag, I hold her head in place as my dick empties itself down her throat. Letting go of her hair, she pulls back and swipes her thumb under her bottom lip.

"Well, wasn't that *brehtaking*." She grins up at me. I hold out my hand

to help bring her to her feet.

“I’ve got big plans for you, Emery Davis.”

“You better not be all talk.” Her eyebrows raise as her head tilts to the side with attitude.

Now I can take my time with her and slow things down. Stepping forward, I walk her backward until her legs hit the mattress. “Do you remember your safe word?”

“Would you feel more confident if I tattooed it on my wrist?”

“Kind of useless since they’ll be in restraints very shortly.” I don’t bother asking if it’s okay because I remember how much she enjoyed the necktie.

“Would be a reminder of what I let you do to me every time you see it.” Her hand slides down her stomach, dipping into her lace panties.

Emery’s teeth grasp her bottom lip, and my eyes bounce between her mouth and how she circles her clit with a moan. Fingers disappear inside her, and I have no idea how I haven’t made a move toward her yet. I’m so fucking stunned. She pulls out her soaked fingers, locking her eyes with mine as she brings her fingers to her mouth. That’s when I snap. My hand wraps around her wrist as I pull her closer and suck her sweet finger. Reaching for her other wrist, I lay her on the bed.

“Such a little tease.” I hover above, memorizing how her beautiful hair fans around her head. “Anything off limits?”

“Yeah. No admitting if you feel anything beyond the orgasm.” I nod, slipping my hand under her back and lift her body up toward the pillows, leaning down to kiss her. Her hands lift to hold my shoulders, and I grab a hold of her arm. Reaching to my right, I place Emery’s wrist in the rope, and tighten it with one hand.

“Prepared much?” she says against my lips.

“I bought these after you agreed to go out with me.” I secure her other wrist before pressing my lips to hers. “I wasn’t sure how tonight would end.” Depending on the tone of the night, I was prepared either way. “If you move, the rope tightens.” Unbuttoning my shirt with one hand, her needy eyes track my movement.

“Thank you for chopping wood.” Licking her lips, her eyes remain glued to my chest. “And heavy construction.” She continues to look at me like I’m a piece of meat—or in her case, broccoli—and I don’t mind at all. Watching this woman desire me the same way I crave for her has my soul elated. We are both acting on our needs. Taking what we’ve thought about for so long.

My cock springs back to life.

Discarding my shirt on the floor, I lean back down. With a gentle kiss on her lips, I lightly pepper more down her neck. A moan hums through Emery's mouth as I taste the sweet skin along her collarbone. Every kiss is deliberate and slow as my lips travel down her stomach. I smirk, watching her squirm and arch into me when I stop just before reaching her pussy. I'm so eager to taste her again, but I want to hear her beg. Smooth pale legs part wider, desperate for my mouth to make contact. I go back in, the tip of my tongue running along her panty line. My teeth nip at her hip as I continue my way down to the perimeter of where she wants me so badly. She squirms, shimmying her hips to find contact with my mouth.

"Stay still." I sit, securing each ankle to the bed before staring down at her. Now, she's mine to do as I please. My tongue runs up her slit just once as my thumbs gently push into the dips under her hipbones.

"Ian," she begs, and it lights me up. Ghosting my mouth over her pussy, I lightly blow. "Relax, Emery. I'm taking my time with you." I slide one hand up her stomach to fill my palm with her breast. "There's nowhere you need to be." My hand gives her breast a squeeze as I massage it.

"I need to be seeing stars, Ian, and you're prolonging it." Frustration grows in her voice. The pad of my thumb swipes back and forth lightly over her clit. I want to remember every sound and movement she makes under my touch. "If you're a good girl, I'll show you the whole damn galaxy."

CHAPTER 15

EMERY

"If you're a good girl, I'll show you the whole damn galaxy."

His words are music to my ears as I lie here tied to his bed. The last time I was in handcuffs had me swearing to never let a man restrain me again. But with every touch, every dirty word, the way he looks at me, I'm melting beneath him. Ready for everything he has to give.

He feathers his fingers over my sensitive skin as I anticipate rough pressure. This is what I needed after the night I had at the hospital, to let go, to forget for a little while. And he's delivering in spades. Ian keeps proving he is there for me. I wonder what my parents would have thought of him. Would I even care? He's not in the medical field, so they would have had to approve of that... Oh my god, they should not be on my mind right now. This has to stop.

"Your pace is giving my mind too much time to wander." It's tantalizing as Ian brushes his thumb over my clit. My heart sinks with the inability to stay in the moment. "Don't worry, the way you can make me come undone is highly skilled, it's just—" I lift my head off the pillow, feeling my past fill me with regret. "It's a me thing."

"It's an *us* thing. We'll work through this together." Ian pauses as he looks into my eyes and responds so casually, thoughtfully. I lose my breath from his words alone. He's here for me.

"An *us* thing." I swallow and lie back down. If I continue to look into his eyes of adoration, I might actually cry. Adding more pressure to my clit, his lips trail over my hip, and up to my breasts. I gasp at the bite of his teeth on my nipple. My quickening breaths near me to my first orgasm, but his hand lifts off of pussy before I can fall off the edge. His eyes meet mine as he

crawls up my body and weaves his hand through the back of my hair. Kissing me deeply, he sucks on my bottom lip and grinds into me.

Instinct has me wanting to wrap my arms around him, but the rope tightens. My body freezes from past experience, and he pulls back, sensing my reaction. "I'm fine."

"If it's too much, tell me."

"And you'll untie me?" I silently curse at myself. Why can't I be normal and just enjoy our time together?

"Emery." He backs off me a little farther and brushes the back of his finger over my cheek. "I can untie you now if you'd like." As his eyes search mine, I stay quiet, watching another question form. "Is this too much like the handcuff thing that you said you didn't really care for?"

"It's just that last time the guy didn't let me out when I asked because he wanted to finish with me tied. He was in control." This is dumb. I know Ian wouldn't tell me no.

His eyebrows shoot up as I watch rage form. "You didn't tell me he took it that far."

"I know you'll listen to my safe word." I feel so exposed right now beneath him and *really* need to get back in the moment.

"Always." He lowers his face and runs his fingers through my hair. "You giving me control of making you feel good is simply that. You are the actual one in charge, Daisy Girl. This is about you."

"About us." More relieved, a devilish smirk spreads across my face. "Now what are you waiting for?"

"You're the one who'll be waiting, but not too long." His mouth connects with mine, eager to get back to making me squirm. Calloused hands slide down to my hips and he breaks our kiss. "Is anything off limits tonight?"

"I trust you." I do, and my eyes show it. "Just make sure I'm left breathless."

"And speechless."

My body eases into his bed as Ian trails kisses across my jaw and neck. Instinct has my arms reaching to touch him, and the rope tightens. Right, I need to only focus on what he's doing to me. His hand slides down to cup my pussy and the tip of his finger lightly circles my opening. "Fuck, you're already so wet."

"Your dick down my throat was the kick-start." My stomach flutters. "I loved how controlling you were."

“I knew you had a kinkier side.” Two of his fingers fill me and curl. My jaw falls loose just as his lips press to my clit. Giving him full power to do as he wishes, and he’s choosing to be gentle. Slight suction begins as Ian pushes his fingers against my G-spot.

“Suck me harder.” I need more of the roughness I know he can give. My arms want to tangle in his hair out of habit, and I tug on the rope again. “I gotta stop doing that.”

“Stay still and be a good girl so I can have my way with you.” Kisses make their way back to my stomach before he stands.

“I might go for that water you mentioned earlier.” There’s a mischievous glint in his eyes, and I’m not sure if he’s serious about an actual drink. “Are you thirsty?”

“Only for you.” He disappears through the door, and I listen as the fridge opens and the tap turns on a moment later.

“Now, where were we?” Ian walks back in, setting his ice water on the nightstand. Opening the drawer, he pulls out a blindfold. His thumb and finger slide the thick ribbon through them, smoothing them out. I can’t hide the excited smile taking over my face. This is something I’ve only tried once, and I know he will give me a better experience.

“You’re overdue on giving me orgasms.” He nods, blackening the light as he secures the ribbon over my eyes.

Within seconds, my hearing heightens. Ian’s lips greet mine, and his fingers caress up and down my body. My heart races as he breaks the kiss, and I hear him pick up the water glass. It sets back down and the weight of him returns to the bed. I sense him hovering over my waist, and my curiosity is cured when his nose skims up my stomach. Lips meet my nipple, and as he opens his mouth around the bud, the ice-cold sensation makes me gasp. A low chuckle rumbles in his chest as he holds the cube between his lips and slides it down my body, staying on my lower stomach. Ian’s mouth attaches to my pussy as his cold tongue warms itself against me. I begin to squirm, all ropes slightly tightening, and I like that. The combination of the tug, the sensation of his mouth building my orgasm, and the melting ice sending a stream of cool water over my hip, keeps my mind racing in the best way.

“I’m so close.” My chest rises as my breathing quickens. His large hands hold down my hips as he swirls his tongue until my body is shaking. Fingers enter once again as he continues to make me come undone. Euphoria spins my head.

“Thank you for letting me taste you again.” He breaks contact, and I hear the drawer open. “For letting me explore you.”

“Don’t disappoint.” I hold a sassy tone, still trying to hold on to my guard before it completely dissolves. A humming of vibration fills the room, and my body lights up, already anticipating the reaction. My back slightly arches, waiting for contact. A round ball meets my inner thigh as it vibrates. “Safe choice.”

“Do you use a wand often?” His teeth graze my hipbone.

“It’s actually one toy I *haven’t* tried.” The vibration is close enough to my pussy, but not right on it. I need more.

“You would skip the basics, wouldn’t you?” My stomach dips in as cold water drops splatter on parts of my skin. Ian’s gravel chuckle is pure seduction as his hand travel over my body and his cold hand cups my breasts. As he inches the wand closer to my pussy, I feel him climb on top, his fingertips running up and down my arms. “Your skin is so soft.” The vibration disappears from my body for a moment, and the wand meets my nipples, tickling them. Slowly, the toy traces down my curves, and lighting my entire body up. My shallow breathing craves the sensation lower. A moan leaves my mouth, and my legs pull as far as they can on the rope to spread a bit farther. The rope tightens with a bite, and it only fuels my arousal.

“Yes, lower,” I pant, my pussy throbbing as the wand hovers over my clit. I can feel it without it actually making contact. Ian blocks the light as he hovers over me before kissing me roughly. His teeth biting my lower lip and pulling another moan from me. It’s painful yet addicting. This distraction is all I’d ever need to get through life. I know he’d give me this every damn night if I stayed in town and gave him a little *more*.

The thought jolts me, and Ian senses my lack of focus. The wand finally awards my clit with contact, and my hips buck into the needed friction. Ian grinds his hard cock against my hips as his hand revisits its new home in my hair.

“Come for me, Daisy Girl,” he growls in my ear, turning the wand to a higher setting, and I give in to the build. Another orgasm rips through me as I hear him hum in approval with me at his mercy. What does he look like as he watches me come apart for him? The toy is still held in place as I shake uncontrollably. Is he going until I use my safe word? Just as I pause with the thought crossing my mind, the wand shuts off. “I know how much you can handle.”

“I need to feel you inside me.” My ears ring as I come down from my high.

“In good time.” His voice is a seductive whisper. Giving him control over *us* is what I thought I needed. What I really need is more. His lips press to my shoulder and kiss down my arm. He has such a tender side, and I want to experience it.

“Daisy.” The word leaves my mouth so quickly, I don't realize I said it until he sits up.

“What’s wrong?” I hear the worry in his voice. I want to cup his face and tell him I just need him. Him to kiss away the hurt. Him to see all of me. The nerves of wanting this go haywire and my heart races. He removes the blindfold as he scans my eyes.

“Nothing.” I blink, adjusting to the light. He’s partially relieved but confused. “I know I was on board with this, but I want to feel you. Watching you as you make me come undone.” My cold front is quickly melting, but vocalizing my emotional needs is terrifying. “You make me feel important. That my needs are prioritized, regardless of yours.” Tonight has made me want to forget the hurt, but what really matters is the feeling of being alive and making this night happily memorable.

“You’re important to me, Daisy Girl.” He reaches to untie the rope. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make you feel comfortable.”

“Then I need you inside of me.”

“I can do that too.” I smile into his kiss as he positions himself at my entrance. He pulls back, looking into my eyes, and my stomach flips. Pushing into me, he watches my eyes widen with his width. He pauses, allowing me to adjust before slowly easing out and back in. I tilt my hips, meeting his slow thrusts, and run my fingertips over his shoulders and down his chest. “You’re beautiful, Emery.”

Never have I let a guy look at me as we slowly move together. I feel him in my soul. With each thrust, Ian crumbles the mortar of the bricks I’d placed. I’m so in this moment, my eyes threaten to water with how gentle he can be with me. The vulnerability is becoming too much as my arms wrap around his neck to kiss him. This man makes me want to commit to him.

Sensing my fear, his tongue slips into my mouth as his pace quickens. My hands slide up his back, as my nails dig in, dragging down. A hiss echoes in my ear, and I grip his ass, pulling him in deeper. Resting on his forearms, he grinds upward, hitting my clit each time. Right as my pussy tightens around

his dick, his thrusts slow, pulling out to the tip.

“Not fair,” I whimper.

“Not fair would be denying my mouth from sucking on your pussy another time.” Shifting down my body, his face sinks between my legs and his mouth covers my clit.

“Dear Lord!” I’ve never been with a man so obsessed with devouring my pussy the way he has been.

“We can beg for forgiveness *after* this sweet sin.” I twitch as my legs tighten around his shoulders. When my hand weaves a grip into his hair, he breaks contact. No fucking way. He can’t be edging me when I’m so worked up it’s nearly painful.

“You’re giving me blue bean,” my voice squeaks. He pauses before laughing, and I wish my gaze could send actual lasers his way. “How do you get me so horny and angry at the same time?” My back arches, tilting my pussy toward his face. “*You* need to fix it, Ian!”

“Do I?” His breath tickles me, but it’s not enough to get me off. “How badly do you need me, Daisy Girl?” His smile is wide as his fingers stretch me.

“I’m not begging, Ian.” My voice is strained, needy for a release, but I won’t give him what he wants.

“I guess that means I haven’t worked you up enough.” Ian presses a ghost of a kiss on my clit, and my body shudders. “I’m more than happy to keep edging you until fucking dawn.”

“Or I’ll take matters into my own hands.” My fingers feather up and down my clit.

“I’ll take a front-row seat with that.”

“Or be a man of your word and make me come.” For once, the sass doesn’t sit well with me. Wanting *us* doesn’t either, but I can’t help myself tonight. “I want you to be the one to make me come.” Smiling, his mouth kisses up my body until his broad shoulders cage me in.

“Watch me,” he says before rewarding me with his cock, pressing deep on the first thrust.

“Thank you,” I pant on one breath, as his punishing pace doesn’t ease up. My eyes roll back, letting him have his way with me, since his pace is too rough to meet him with my own thrusts. He’s intoxicating, and this high is one I’ll probably never recover from.

He brings my leg over his shoulder and turns me on my side. “God,

Emery, you feel so fucking good, baby.” At the endearment, I grip onto his forearm for support. Ian brings his other arms up to pinch my hardened nipple, causing a squeaky breathy moan from me. “Take what you need from my cock like a good girl.” He grips the crease of my hip as I feel it bunch to my ass. He zones in, watching it bounce with each thrust. “Fuck, this position is so hot.” I love that this sight turns him on. My orgasm nears, and I reach for the wand.

Shifting my body, I make better access for the toy. “I know you have two more orgasms to give me, Daisy Girl.” The wand vibrates against my clit, my pussy tightening so much, it nearly forces him out. Gripping the duvet, my release takes over.

“Ian!” I involuntarily scream as my body palpitates under him. The wand is ripped from my hand, and he wastes no time. Pulling out, he grips my legs and flips me onto my stomach.

His hand slaps against my ass. “Fuck, I’m lucky to witness this beautiful jiggle. So sexy.” As he slams into me, I cross my ankles, tightening me even more. “That’s right, Emery.” My arms stretch out, clawing and gripping the pillows, my pleasure already mounting again. “Such a good fucking girl.”

“Yes!” I shriek with another earth-shattering orgasm, feeling his own spill into me. I remain still for a moment, taking in the way my head and body hum. Ian drops a kiss between my shoulder blades and pulls out.

I turn over with a satiated smile. “Talk about perfection,” I whisper. “Why did I wait all these years to return when that was waiting for me here?” It’s the euphoria speaking, but I was never ready to return. I’m not sure I’m even willing to stay. Ian blinks at me and leans down to kiss me slowly, his lips trailing over my neck.

“I love how you screamed my name more than once tonight.” His grin presses against my skin before his lips meet that sweet spot on my neck. He still can’t get enough of me and I’m not mad about it.

“To be honest, I don’t believe it myself.” I’m shocked and breathless, my mind hazy and words slurry. “I’ve always thought screaming was overrated or fake.”

“There’s nothing fake about us, Emery.” The ice bath of words has me tensing beneath him for a split second. I know how real we are. But I don’t think I can face it head on yet.

He nips at my ear before pulling back. When his eyes meet mine, I know he doesn’t regret speaking his mind.

“I’m exhausted. I need to work out more to keep up with you.” My face feels flushed.

“Nah, more fitness will make you lose the jiggle on your ass.” He laughs as my eyes roll. “By all means, down some milkshakes and add to those curves.” Warmth filters through me, knowing he finds some of my insecurities such a turn on. Just another reason why this man is incredible.

“I don’t think you’ll see results within my timeframe here.” I watch his heart sink, but he swallows it. “I can say with confidence that this is worth another trip to town in the future.” Wordless, he climbs off the bed. Remorse shines through my eyes and guilt enters my gut at seeing how I’ve hurt him.

Like the gentleman he is, he holds out his hand to help me up. “You can use the bathroom first.” I nod and head out of the room. Ian uses the bathroom after me and as I walk back in, I notice the duvet has been taken off and another blanket is in its place. Exhaustion takes over, and I surprise myself as I crawl into his comfy bed. If he expects me to scurry after mentioning my timeframe here, I can at least give him this. But what if this is too much for *him* now? A nervous smile meets his happy one as he pauses in the doorway.

“I get to taste you, fuck you, *and* hold you in my arms?” Walking to the bed, he slips in beside me. His arms wrap around my waist as he presses a soft kiss to my head, and I take a deep breath, settling into his arms. “I’m the luckiest guy.”

But you deserve so much more from a woman.

CHAPTER 16

EMERY

THERE'S nothing fake about us, Emery.

I tap my phone screen for the umpteenth time this morning and shut off the guided meditation I attempted to try at home. Ian hasn't reached out after last night, so maybe that was it for us. Maybe I ruined it. My aunt knows something is up. She took one look at me this morning with raised eyebrows as I ventured down for a tea without a word. I've been holed up in my room all morning, engulfed in the smell of Ian...and swimming in his large hoodie. It's pathetic I left in the middle of the night. But things felt too right. He did, indeed, show me a whole galaxy, then laid beside me and held me in his arms. It was perfect, and I couldn't wait for him to fall asleep before I escaped. Jeez, maybe I am more fucked up than I thought.

Saying he blew my mind last night is more than an understatement. Goosebumps form on my flesh at the thought of his lips pressed on my neck and between my legs. The way he knew my body nearly had me in tears, which shouldn't be a surprise since he always knows what I need. Before I was established with my career, we would have worked. We would have been monumental. Even after five years, the attraction, our connection, the words I don't have to say out loud because he knows what I'm feeling... It's only taken a couple of weeks for me to bounce back to letting him help carry the weight of the past. I can't do that to him. I won't. He deserves better. Someone without all the emotional baggage and suppressed trauma.

I know I'm the problem.

My heart jumps as my phone buzzes. Reluctance fills me, scared to look and see if it's Ian. Curiosity claims the best of me as I reach for it.

"Hey, Savannie." My voice cracks as I nervously fiddle with the hoodie

string.

“You sound spent.” Her voice fills with wonder. “How did the hospital party go? Did you and Ian enjoy the evening?”

“It was fine. A lot of familiar faces.” I’m not sure how much I want to share. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you want to join Hallie and I on the Vegas trip for my dance student?”

A getaway to clear my head after last night is much needed. “Yes, you can definitely count me in.” I won’t have to risk facing Ian right away. “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Hallie is tagging along at the last minute?” She is usually so organized and scheduled.

“This was a last-minute thought to ask you girls because Hallie said she’s not working this weekend.”

I smile. “I’ll call Hallie and work out flight details.”

“Great! I’m at the studio all day today, but I will be by your place tomorrow morning.” We hang up, and I feel a bit lighter. I’m able to switch back to the meditation video and finish it out before having an extra long shower, since my body feels like I had an intense workout. I shut off the water and hear my phone go off again and again.

So now he decides to spam me with messages and a phone call. I don’t have the guts to open my messages yet. Getting dressed, I toss the sweatshirt in his laundry basket and head downstairs.

“You got in *very* late, missy.” Aunt Quinn smiles, pouring coffee to go.

“We had sex.” I toss my hands in the air and let them fall to my sides, defeated. “Yeah, it was incredible, and I actually *tried* to stay. But I ran and don’t want to talk about it.” A half smile appears. I can’t believe I just said all that to my aunt.

“You attempted to stay. That’s still something, Emery.” She places her hand on my shoulder with a soft squeeze.

“More for his sake, because I know how much last night meant to him.”

“And you, if you tried to stay the night in his arms.” Her phone dings, and I think I’m saved by it. “You feeling scared actually means you feel something for him.” I hate that she’s right.

“I can’t admit that.”

“*Yet.*” She looks down at her phone. “Carson and I are going out for the

day,” she responds with a soft voice and thankfully drops the other conversation. “I can wait, if you’d like to join.”

“Thanks, but I’m actually going to pack and get ready for tomorrow.” I grab my favorite old Hollywood mug out of the cupboard. “I’m going to Vegas with Savannah and Hallie.” I feel giddy about getting to explore a new place with my childhood best friends. “Savannah’s student has a dance thing, and we could use fun a girls night.”

“That sounds exciting.” Aunt Quinn sets her coffee down, giving me her full attention. “You’ll enjoy all the fancy places to eat.”

“Exactly, and I’ll be farther away from this town.” I clear my throat and reach for the coffee. “Vegas will be an upper after the hospital event you faced last night.” In theory, it’s a happy expansion for the hospital, but it came at a cost.

“Last night hurt my heart too, Emery.” She walks closer, and I prepare for the tension to take over my body. Her arms wrap around me, and I find myself relaxing into the embrace. “I cried myself to sleep.” My heart races, and I distract myself by grabbing the milk from the fridge. “But I woke up feeling better.”

“I’m glad you found something that helps you.” I lean against the counter and bring my mug to my chest, as if I can hide behind it. “Everyone deals with things differently.”

“Emery.” Her disapproving tone kicks in just as her phone lights up on the counter with Carson’s name.

“Go pick him up,” I encourage. “Seriously. You deserve to have a fun day.” I settle for a hug before she leaves and open the cupboard to pour a cheap bowl of cereal. For once, I don’t have it in me to cook. Tossing my hair in a messy bun, I get a load of laundry going and tidy up the kitchen. I make tea and crack open my recipe book that I’ve barely had time to look over since being here. Most of these recipes are what I plan to create for a cookbook. Selling one in my own bistro is a dream I’m working toward.

A soft knock hits the front door, but I ignore it and begin to head up the stairs. I’m not in a peopling mood, but Ian walks right in anyway. I turn to face him, enjoying being able to look down at him for once.

“Good, you’re home.” He’s in a dark blue t-shirt and beige Carharts.

“How about you don’t barge into people’s homes.” Dammit, this look is too distracting and hot. “And, *good, I’m home?*” I’m more nervous about being called out for leaving when I’d rather we forget about it and keep it as a

nice memory.

“I tried to call.” He shrugs. “I need the sweatshirt you took last night. It’s my only one.” If he wants to bring up what happened, his face is showing no signs of it. I’m almost annoyed because, in Ian fashion, he should be pushing for answers or triggering me to *feel*.

“It’s *not* your only one.” I cross my arms over my chest and feel my dress rise. “It’s currently in the wash.”

His eyes stay to mine, not even acknowledging how short this dress is. A smirk grows across his face. “It’s the new design for the company’s attire. I would like to get my employees’ approval before I order a bunch for them to wear.”

“Now you’re a clothing designer, bar owner, and contractor CEO?” I take a step forward.

“Can you please go get it? I can give it back to you after.” I’m not sure how my expression is right now. I’m not sure what angle he’s trying to come at me. “You probably looked adorable wearing it home last night.”

“I have to pack. Savannah is going to be here bright and early tomorrow.” I wait for him to reply, and he holds my gaze, irritating me even more. “Is that all you’re here for? Just the sweatshirt?”

“I’d love to take you back to my place and we work through our shit together, but I’m sure that’s not on your agenda.” His tone remains smooth, like it would be so simple to do. “So, if you want to forget like it never happened, then I’m supporting you once again.”

Feeling my eyes narrow, I know it’s not that easy for me to ride off into the sunset with him. Yet here he stands, making peace. Fine, we can both forget it. If he realized one night isn’t worth fighting for more, it makes me skipping town that much easier. Not that I want him to keep fighting for me.

“You’ll have to be patient.” Which should be easy because he’s never been anything but with me. “You can pick it up tomorrow or tonight.”

“You can stop the washer.” A professional tone remains, and irritation crawls through my skin. “I’m here now.” Why is getting what I wanted feeling so shitty?

“Are you fucking kidding me?” My voice cracks. Maybe I did read last night wrong.

“No. The team and I are meeting up for a barbecue, Emery.” His arms rests on the stair railing as he makes himself more comfortable. “You should know by the multiple times I’ve sucked your pussy that I don’t shy away

from wetness.” There’s no time to hide my expression. Or how my body reminds me of how it felt.

“So, are we going to talk about it?” I take a step down, bringing myself closer, yet I can’t bring myself to say what we did out loud.

“Go ahead,” he encourages, but I shake my head, chickening out.

“Where are you and Savannah going tomorrow morning?” Not what I meant, and he knows it. What happened to the guy I was with last night? Why am I caring?

“Vegas. Hallie and I are joining Savannah on her dance trip.”

“Sounds fun. Alright, if you don’t want to stop the washer for your other clothes, are you able to drop the sweatshirt off tonight?”

My teeth find my lip as I stand on the stairs in confusion. “I’ll bring it to you.”

“I appreciate it.” He nods curtly, stepping back to leave, but holds my gaze.

The lack of sexual tension emanating from him has never felt so foreign. He wants me to bring it up. Though I don’t want to, I find the words traveling through my mouth.

“Ian, about last night...” I begin.

“I knew you wouldn’t stay.” His voice is blunt, holding no mercy. I’ve hurt him, but he knew what he was getting in to. “I didn’t even expect you to fall asleep in my arms. I wanted you to. I wanted to hold you all night and wake up to your sleepy smile on my chest. It was nice that you attempted, but you’re too much of a coward to wake up with me and talk about what happened.” I blink, feeling my neck pull back as his words hurt. I *tried* to stay.

“Excuse me? Coward?” Stomping down the stairs, I pause until we’re at eye level.

“Yes. Only a coward would leave a warm, comfy bed and the arms of someone who cares about them.” My throat tightens as he lays out the truth. “God forbid you might have me wake up and ask for one more night.” He smirks, leaning forward, and I lose my breath. “*Or*, that it was good enough for you to wake up *wanting* more.” At least his tone is making it easier to not be vulnerable.

“Ridiculous.” Just once, I’d like him to be wrong. “You think you know me so well.”

“You and your body.” His eyebrow quirks as he steps onto the first step,

now gaining his dominant height back.

The door opens without a knock, as Savannah enters our stare-down. “Oh. Am I interrupting something?” She glances back and forth between our unreadable faces.

“No, Ian was just leaving.” I speak through gritted teeth.

“It sure looks like it.” Savannah’s eyes widen with amused wonder.

“I was.” He smiles, his eyes now roaming my body. “You know, I’ve been busy. I think I could use a little Vegas vacation myself.” He’s not serious. No fucking way.

“You’re not coming.” My voice grows louder than expected. “In fact, you should be working overtime on my aunt’s project to get everything done in time.” His jaw ticks, and I watch as his eyes grow hungry. Pride hits me, knowing my sass fueled it.

“If you haven’t noticed, Daisy Girl...” He plasters on a fake grin. “Rhett and I are handling things as best as we can, since Quinn has added a few more things to the list.”

“Savannah is going to be busy with her student’s audition and you don’t need to spend the evening listening to girl talk.”

“I’m sure you have one hell of a story to tell.” Ian raises an eyebrow as my heartbeat echoes in my ears.

“Not every moment needs to be broadcasted, Ian.” A flash of hope and appreciation blink back at me. Last night may have meant something to me, but it’ll be nothing more than a memory. Ian’s heart filled eyes shoot through my soul as I fight to hold composure.

“Okay, someone needs to start talking.” Savannah’s amused voice breaks the moment as she takes a step back.

“I slept with Ian.” I shrug. So much for not broadcasting. “He came over to get his sweatshirt back. No biggie.” I need to shut him down.

“Yeah, no big deal that all the forest animals now know my name,” he simply states, looking directly into my eyes. “Loud and clear as you screamed it last night—multiple times.”

“I still had enough energy to leave.” Even as I say the words, I grow nauseous with denial.

He turns to Savannah with a shrug and purses his lips. “She’s scared.” He calls me out.

I wish I wasn’t.

Ian opens the front door. “Have a fun trip, Emery. Please don’t forget my

sweatshirt.”

“Oh, you’ll get it,” I call out, a little too dramatically. “Tightly around your neck,” I say as humor glints in his eyes.

“Just like your legs were. You kinky girl.” He winks, not missing a beat. “I love it.”

Savannah’s jaw would be hitting the floor if she wasn’t so tall. Her eyes bug out, mimicking a cartoon character as she stares at me. “I thought you said calling out names was overrated.”

“Maybe it was warranted.” I step off the stairs, annoyed with myself.

“He must have really known what he was doing.” The giddiness from her voice is spilling into her smile.

“I’m not talking about this.”

“So, you’d rather talk on the trip with Hallie?” Savannah taunts, following me into the laundry room.

“We had sex. What am I supposed to say, *‘Thank you for the multiple body-shaking, name-screaming orgasms? From here on out, you’ve probably ruined all men for me.’*” I huff. “*‘I’ll never look at restraints or vibrators the same way?’*” I don’t think so, Sav.”

“Wow, Emery.” Savannah leans against the wall. “That was...very detailed. Damn. Way to go, Ian.”

“Can you please stop that?” I aggressively transfer my clothing into the dryer.

“You, my dear, want to do it again.” Savannah assures with a giggle. “You also don’t want to break your rule.”

“Rules work.” I swear, if this laundry keeps tangling together, I’m going to light a match to it all.

“So does facing emotions,” Savannah sings. “Was last night with Ian really no big deal?”

My chest tightens and my stomach clenches, scared to take in a breath and break down. “You saw his response.” I need to calm down. “I was the one who said some things don’t need to be broadcasted, and then I go and blab.” My emotions heighten as frustration kicks in.

“And how did that make you feel?”

“That’s such a clinical response, Savannah.” I shut the dryer door and smack the push button. “If he wants to publicize our night like I did, as if it meant nothing, then so be it.”

Shit. My heart sinks as her eyes widen, getting an answer beyond the

surface level.

“Well, if you don’t want to act on these feelings, how are you going to deal with them?” She steps forward, and I know I’m about to be hugged. Now’s not the time for that.

“I’m trying to branch out with guided mediation. I did one this morning.”

“I’m proud of you.” I give her a small smile. “And you were only drunk on orgasms?”

“Sooo drunk on them.” I can’t fight the smile and feel my cheeks blush. “How are you doing with your breakup?”

“I’ve been keeping myself busy.” Her face falls. “I can’t get the image of him and that chick out of my head.” Rolling her lips in, she shakes her head as her eyes glass over. “I know I deserve better.” She sniffs, wiping a tear, and I pull *her* in for a hug.

“I’m sorry, Savannah.”

“I cry less each time the tears start, though.” She pulls back with a soft smile. “So, I’m getting better. But for fuck’s sake, she was using *my* vibrator on *him*.” I can’t help but chuckle. “To each their own, but yeah, it was unexpected.”

I head to the door with her following, and slip on my shoes. “Come on, let’s go to The Painted Pony for lunch. We can figure out a few must-see things in Vegas.”

CHAPTER 17

EMERY

“GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF,” I say out loud as I spot Ian’s truck in his driveway. “Breathe, Emery. You have control.” Momentarily, I consider leaving the sweatshirt at his door, but that would prove me to be a *coward*.

It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since I ran from this cabin. Tingles ripple through my body at the thought of being pushed against the wall again. Ian towering over me as his hands tangle in my hair.

I lift my hand to knock, but since he took it upon himself to barge into my house, I let myself in. The small, open concept of the living area and kitchen are empty. Looking around, the doorframe of his bedroom captivates my eyes where I had been flush against. My heart races at the thought of it happening again. Of wanting it to. I glance back out the window as golden hour shines off the lake.

“Ian?” My voice is barely audible, but his place is quite small.

As soon as he peers around the corner, I knew I should have knocked. He walks out of the bathroom in only a tight pair of briefs. His hand runs through damp hair as he sports a Cheshire Cat grin. The scent of his alluring shower gel roams through the air, cutting off all hopes of self-control. This man and his muscles are hot. Resisting to give Ian the satisfaction of his hotness, my jaw forcefully tightens.

Diverting my attention, I scan the room for something else to focus on. The sun through the window glistens off the few water droplets on his skin, accenting his toned body. I need to keep searching. The poor deer head mounted by the woodstove proves my desperation as I keep my focus on it. My throat grows tight as I try to clear it.

Composure, Emery.

“Emery.” That velvet voice resonates a deep need inside me. “You should have knocked.” His famous cocky smirk grows with every confident stride toward me. “We know how clear you were about not wanting to see me in the nude again.”

My unsteady nerves couldn't be more obvious as my gaze rests everywhere but on him. “I'm gonna leave this on the couch and head out.” My arms forget how to toss the sweatshirt when Ian steps forward.

“Here I thought you came to talk about last night, again.” My heart jumps to my throat, but I sigh, feigning disinterest.

“Alright, if you want to talk about us, then I'll listen.”

“I thought I knew where to start with you, Emery.” His deep breath expands his chest, widening his shoulders.

“A little presumptuous, aren't you.” I roll my eyes.

But with each step he takes, my stomach inches higher to my throat. I hadn't realized I'd been taking steps backward until my back hits the door, startling me. His hand meets the side of the wall over my shoulder as he towers over me. Leaning in, his lips ghost against my ear before his husky voice continues.

“The only words coming to mind are asking you to give me free rein. This little dress you're wearing would look pretty tied around your wrists and over my bedpost.” My eyes try to zone in on the deer head, but Ian is too close. “I want you to give me the okay to control every inch of your body as you beg for my cock in your pussy again.”

“I—” At a loss for words and needing a change of underwear, I remain silent.

“I want to see you squirm.” His other forearm lifts and rests on the door above my head, sucking me into every word he speaks. “My cock is so fucking hard right now.” I glance down, but I don't want to move my hips forward to check, because I know that will have me giving in to more. “I want to bend you over my couch and claim you as mine. Slap that sexy ass of yours and watch it jiggle.” His forehead rests on mine as his tongue traces over his lips. “I'd like to spend every damn day knowing you're mine.” I have too much going for me in Aspen. “But I'm sure you need to head out because you haven't worked on yourself enough in order to be happy with someone again...” He's so confident, and correct.

I feel my mouth open, attempting to form a response, but I remain mute. The familiar ache between my legs grows at his dominance. With the

slightest invitation, I know he can tend to more than my body can handle. In the best way. A simple nod would be all the confirmation he needs to allow him to consume me.

My mind and body need to keep it together. Not knowing if I've been standing here, speechless, for a minute or an hour, I somehow muster the words.

"You can't keep your employees waiting." My throat dries as I close my eyes, feeling him back away.

"Thanks for the sweatshirt. Have a fun trip with the girls." Ian flips a switch, and his tone becomes lighter. Unaffected. "I'll be here if you need to talk, or not talk." My eyes open as he disappears into his bedroom.

I stumble onto the front porch, placing both hands on a post. He makes me lose all ability to think and just feel. My head spins, waiting for gravity to rebalance me. "Holy shit," I breathe out loudly as nerves begin twisting in my gut. I head back to the house, and as I whip up an exquisite four-course meal for my aunt, she lets me do my thing without any pressing questions.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" Hallie asks as soon as we walk off the plane.

"I'm so in my head right now. A lot has happened the past few weeks." I haven't slept in days, but I'm sure she's asking because of how quiet I've been on the drive to the airport and the entire plane ride. "Do I look tired?"

"You look like you need a year of sleep and so many hugs." Hallie sighs, as we sit in the cab on the way to the Vegas strip. "How did the hospital event go?"

"Emotionally draining, but I got my mind off it and I'm better now." She gives me her typical look of disapproval and shakes her head. I settle into my seat, relieved she let it slide, and stare out the window for the rest of the cab ride.

I'm surprised the hotel is nothing fancy for the amount we all split for it. I walk to the window and notice it overlooks the crowded pool. I'll pass on that. Drunk people practically bathing with each other has never seemed appealing to me.

Savannah smiles, walking through the door, and sets her bag down. Hallie

and I arrived on a different plane a bit later and haven't been waiting long for Savannah to finish the audition with her student.

"I can't believe we are actually here together," Savannah squeals. "Now that audition is out of the way—which I think she nailed, considering how she's been picking up new routines in a matter of minutes back home."

"That's amazing! Maybe our town will be known for two famous people." I wonder how Avery Carlin, a girl who was in Ian's grade, has been enjoying life after leaving town. She skyrocketed to the top of the country music charts the past couple of years with every new release. She looks happy, enjoying life to its fullest outside of Beechwood Falls.

"Make that three." Savannah winks at me. "You're on your way to chef stardom."

"Maybe one day. Can I go to my favorite celebrity chef's restaurant tonight?" I've never felt so giddy from a daydream.

"Anything for you." Savannah and I look at Hallie for approval as she stares out the window.

"I forgot how cool this place was." Hallie keeps her eyes on the view.

I turn to Savannah, who mirrors the same puzzled face as me.

"I'm pretty sure you would have mentioned a Vegas trip, even if I was living in Aspen."

"Um, yeah," Savannah cuts in. "You've never been to Vegas."

"Ian and I may have snuck away here for a night when I graduated high school." Hallie pauses with a guilty face. "I wasn't old enough to get into the casinos. That's also the time we realized we weren't that compatible." Her eyes dance around the living room nervously. "Everything kind of unfolded."

"Too rough for your delicate, dainty soul?" Savannah wiggles her eyebrows before swinging her gaze my way.

Hallie's greens narrow as daggers emerge. "No, I actually feel bad about breaking the leg of a hotel desk." Her smirk reflects an ounce of pride. "Although, I did tell him not to tie me to it." A pang of jealousy hits me that she's been tied up by him too. But I shouldn't care, right?

Savannah wears a mischievous look I only usually see when she's tipsy. "Damn. He seems intense." Walking over to the desk in our suite, she trails her fingers over the top and looks at me. "I bet you were screaming his name loud and clear—" Her voice grows louder with emphasized drama.

"Enough!" My assertive tone jolts through the room. "Hallie doesn't need those memories about him." I read Savannah's look that screams *her, or you?*

“Chill out, Em.” Hallie laughs, running a hand through her loose curls. I watch closely as she attempts to decipher me. “Why are you being so touchy?”

“It’s my fault,” Savannah chimes in quickly. “I’m just being bitchy and getting humor from her sexual frustration.” Hallie somewhat buys it. “I’m angry about my own breakup and took it out on Emery.” She makes talking about her feelings seem so effortless. “I promise I’ll stop. Tonight is supposed to be fun. Plus, I want to hear the rest of this.”

“There’s not much more to it. Ian and I sort of broke up on the way home from Vegas.” Hallie takes a seat next to me on the bed. “This getaway highlighted a lot. We had planned to finish out the rest of the summer as a couple because we didn’t want Emery focusing on a breakup while grieving her parents.” I try to not show my frustration on my face.

“You two didn’t have to act like parents who wanted to divorce but stayed together for the child.” I know why they didn’t stay together, but this right here is also part of why Ian and I lost our chance.

“Emery, so much happened that summer with you, and then Ian’s dad—” Hallie’s voice cracks as her words rush out. “Ian and I were there for each other on a friend level. You must have picked up on the lack of physical touch we had that summer...” She trails off, her voice full of regret. It was noticeable from their constant kisses and him always resting his hands on her hips, to barely holding hands when we’d walk downtown.

“She only meant well.” Savannah intervenes with the growing tension. “Let’s go sightseeing for a bit, and then grab some food.”

We spend the late afternoon walking the strip before magically scoring reservations at the restaurant. My two friends sit with puzzled faces, watching my eyes dance around. Staring at the aisles, I wonder how many times Gordon has walked down them. Just maybe, he’ll appear right now. This menu is amazing, and Vegas is definitely the place to be for any food lover.

“I can’t believe we are actually here!” I clap my hands, unable to control my excitement. “I wish I could meet him.”

“He’s probably the same as any other angry British man who can cook,” Savannah replies flatly, flipping through the menu.

“He is not comparable, Savannie. I would totally hook up with him if I ever had the chance.” I feel a blush hit my cheeks. I need to get a hold of myself.

“Seriously? He looks like an old troll, Emery.” Hallie laughs. “But I’m

sure he'd cook you one hell of a breakfast in the morning."

"Wouldn't that require her staying the night?" Savannah takes the bait as a Cheshire Cat grin forms.

"Might be difficult to teach dance with a broken leg." I send her a glare.

"It's too easy." She closes her menu. "Like you." My jaw tightens, feeling hurt settling in. I'm ready to jab my elbow into her side. "That was a bitchy thing to say, sorry." Her eyes soften as she turns toward me, and I know more is coming. "Emery, you've just been so vocal about ignoring feelings." Savannah places her hand on mine, and I want to pull it away. "Let Hallie and I help you welcome them this time." We're in public, and this is supposed to be about me basking in the glory of eating at this restaurant. What the hell is happening?

"Maybe I'll just take a plane back to Aspen from here."

"Hey, if anger is the emotion you can conjure, I'll take it." Has she been given training from Ian to not fear hurting my feelings? I can't have too many people in on this.

"Just leave her be." Hallie comes to the rescue.

"Look, we have all been through stuff. But we can heal and move on because we deal with it, Emery." Savannah continues on with her point, but I can't handle this right now.

"Just let me enjoy this restaurant," I tell her, expressionless. An intervention is not needed. Especially not right now.

Hallie leans in closer, reaching her hands out to me. "You can talk to us about anything, okay?"

"Savannah thinks I should stop my heart from being closed off with Ian. She wants me to basically get destroyed again." Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Savannah nod. "I am perfectly happy with my life right now. I want to have a fun girls' night with rom-coms and junk food like our old times."

"As your friend, I would prefer you to quit sleeping around as well." Hallie shrugs, ignoring my statement. I glance around for the waiter. "I might not be as blunt about it, but you could get physically hurt in the process. Remember the other night at the bar? What if Ian hadn't stepped in?"

"Then testifying in court would be even more crappy." I still have to deal with the legalities of that. "I can take care of myself."

"Lately, it seems like you and Ian were getting along," Hallie chimes in. "At the wedding, you two were smiling."

"We managed to get along." I finally make eye contact with a waiter, my

foot tapping under the table.

“Ian was supposed to bring you back from Aspen.” Hallie’s green eyes become teary. “This wasn’t how things were supposed to play out.”

Wait.

“What do you mean, Hallie?” It’s in her blood to plan and execute with such precision, but life sometimes takes a turn. “Did you know Ian had planned the trip after I was gone a year?” Her eyes grow, unsure of being called out.

“Now is not the time to bring this up.” She’s saved by the waitress walking over.

“This conversation isn’t over.” Savannah types away on her phone like she has been most of this dinner.

“Let’s hit up a club after this. Enjoy the night life since we are still young,” I suggest, knowing the music and crowd will busy my mind.

Savannah’s phone lights up as her lips tighten. “Pass.”

“Come on. You and I are both single and can live it up a bit.” I lighten my tone. “Maybe if Hallie sends someone a smile, they’ll buy her a drink.”

I watch Savannah’s fingers type away before locking eyes with me. “Maybe I don’t want to feel like someone’s *good time* for a moment.” Leaning into her, I try to see who she’s so involved with through a text.

“Make them *your* good time. It’s Vegas. We can live it up and deal with our heartbreak.” I find my old self coming through. “Wow, leaving Beechwood Falls has me finally feeling more like the usual me.” Except it’s not the town; it’s being within reach of a certain someone who makes me want to drop my guard.

“There’s nothing wrong with the small-town Emery we all once knew.” Hallie absentmindedly rubs her stomach.

“Except part of her died with her parents.” I pause, realizing my acknowledgment. The pain sits in my stomach as I need to quickly redirect the conversation again. “Look, we can go clubbing. No guy actually cares about being used.”

“Oh, you couldn’t be more wrong, silly girl.” If her phone buzzes again, I’m going to flip. Hallie and I haven’t touched our phones this entire time.

“Girls, stop.” Hallie takes a long sip of her drink. “This night is about us having fun. *Together.*”

“I’m done.” Savannah laughs with annoyance, setting her phone on the table between me and her. “Do whatever the hell you want, Em.” I feel my

back hit my chair as her words slap me. “Go hit up a club tonight. Find a guy. Go get plastered and take him for a ride.” She shakes her head.

“By all means, tell me how you really feel.” I try to keep my voice level, not really wanting to hear more.

“Go disrespect yourself, and others in the process. Why face healing?” I’ve never seen her lose her cool like this, and my stomach turns, unsure of what to do. There’s not much I can say. I’ve chosen this reputation.

“I’m fine, okay?” My voice sinks. “I don’t need a guy. I just don’t want to see *you* upset about your breakup. Going out will take your mind off it.”

“Being upset is normal. Yeah, it sucks and I’m hurting.” Savannah threads her hand through her hair and bites her cheek. “When I fall for someone, I’m all in. But I know after I sit in this sucky spot for a bit, I’ll get better.” She huffs, standing. “I need to pee. Our food should arrive soon.”

Her phone vibrates on the table, and Hallie is too preoccupied looking around the restaurant to notice. I glance down, holding my jaw in place as my gut twists with annoyance. My fists bunch of frustration. Savannah knew what she was doing by placing the phone between us and taking off. The nerve Ian has to ask Savannah to keep a close eye on me. *Make sure nothing bad happens.* As if he has the right to keep tabs on my decisions. Why does he have to go through Savannah? He could very easily tell me. He’s definitely getting an earful from me when I return home.

“Is that her ex?” Hallie asks, watching my facial expressions. “He better not ask to get back with her.”

“It’s not him.” Our food arrives, and we stay silent, enjoying some of the best food I have ever had.

The casino is loud, with everyone having the time of their lives, and smoke clouds around us as we walk past the machines to see if anything catches our eye. We meander back to the lobby like the boring people we are becoming, then head back to our room. Room service awaits us with a beautiful cart of treats as we walk into the room. Hallie smiles, picking up a macaroon.

“I ordered this for us as a thank you for the magical wedding you two helped with. We haven’t had a chill girls’ night in years. I thought this would be perfect.”

“I love it. Thank you, Hallie.” I admire the cart.

“I can’t believe we are in Vegas and are having a quiet night in.” Savannah laughs, falling onto one of the large beds. “I’m not mad about it,

though.”

We settle into comfy clothing and gather around the treats. Hallie waits until I’m nearly finished with my chocolate lava cake before speaking. “I need to know the reason you left, Emery. The real one.” Taking a deep breath, I know I need to just tell them. My nerves skyrocket, but maybe this will be another weight off my shoulders.

“I don’t know if I have one. There was a pile-up of stuff.” I slowly set my spoon down, wishing wine was brought up as well. “I needed to get away and explore. Beechwood held pain. It still would if I let it.” I bite my cheek, skirting around the other reason.

“It would have been fine. I had plans for all of us,” Hallie goes on. “Ian was supposed to tell you how he felt when I started university. I wanted you two to be together.” If only I knew that years ago...

“No, Hallie. Being the puppet master was pointless. It still is.” I let my brain empty itself. “It wouldn’t have mattered because I was not mentally or emotionally ready for a relationship. I was in a really low spot.” Just as the worst reason crawls up my throat, I can’t believe I’m about to tell her. I almost swallow it down, but I force it out. “I almost kissed him, knowing you were still together.” Her jaw drops, and I get the confirmation that Ian never told her about that moment. “Yeah, I guess he kept that quiet so it wouldn’t ruin our friendship. Hallie, I no longer trusted myself around him. The guilt at what I nearly did because I was so comfortable with him and couldn’t fight my feelings almost ruined you and I.” I feel tears well in my eyes and blink them back.

“He never told me that part.” Hallie slowly speaks, and as Savannah rests her hand on my leg, I wipe a tear.

“Look, you can hate me. I leaned in and he didn’t.” I’m talking at ultrasonic speed and cannot be stopped. “I snapped out of the moment really fast and didn’t see him again after.” I pause to let that sink in, heart thundering. “I didn’t see him until I spotted him in Aspen a year later and he left without saying hello.”

“Savannah and I were nervous to tell you he was coming.” My heart pinches, and I can’t breathe as I listen to them.

“You knew and didn’t tell me.” I want to be annoyed with girl code, but I nearly broke it.

“Yeah, Em. Even right now, we are nervous you’ll spiral and do something crazy.” Savannah’s phone dings across the room.

“When he came back from Aspen, he was heartbroken—yes, more heartbroken over you than ending things with me—I figured maybe I read *your* signs wrong.” Hallie sighs. “So I stopped mentioning you guys to each other.”

“This. All of this ends now.” I look at both of them, shaking my head. “Tell me things directly. Savannah, I know you’ve been talking to Ian. He should have texted me if he really cared.” My annoyance spikes. “But if you must know, he was one of the main reasons I left. For the sake of our friendship. I wasn’t thinking straight. I didn’t know if it was something I was building up because I didn’t want to be a shitty friend. I needed to keep you as friends, and the only way that seemed fit was out of Beechwood Falls.”

“I get it.” Savannah sighs.

“It hurt losing my parents, and Ian was by my side. Thank you, Hallie, for having Ian be by my side. But his dad was *his* person, and Ian deserved to give his dad all the time he had. I couldn’t be a burden to him. I wanted his father to be his full attention.” I also couldn’t watch Ian own up and face the hurt as I sat there burning my throat with alcohol. Seeing Ian in pain was something that my heart just couldn’t stand. My wound had already started to go numb, and I didn’t want it reopened. “It was selfish of me to leave without much notice. I’ll admit that.”

“We are here for you,” Savannah chimes in with support, but I’m still stuck on her and Ian’s conversation.

“You ran from hurt and problems instead of letting us all come together and help.” Hallie wipes a tear. “I worried you’d become so detached and never find happiness, when I had it lined up for you.”

“Do you hear yourself?” My defense kicks in again. “You don’t determine happiness based on a guy, Hallie.”

“Fine. Dating or not, you don’t *have* to be alone when you have people to help. Remember when I lost my favorite aunt in the seventh grade? I could have spent the summer hanging out and drinking the pain away at The Falls with the older teens. But no, you and Savannah held me and spent that summer letting me choose every fun activity. I was a mess. But you two were by my side with that cheesy joke book, trying to keep me laughing.” I feel my smile grow, remembering how lame the jokes were. But they worked. “Healing was better with people there for me.” My stomach flips with the rapid beats of my heart.

“I get it, okay? I was scared and ran. But I’m happy with life now.”

Mostly.

“You didn’t let us be there for you,” Savannah states as we hear her phone go off. “Ian was the only one who could bring a smile to your face.”

My tears have stopped, and Savannah’s phone buzzes again. I swear it’s like he knows we’re talking about him.

“I’m not touching it anymore,” Savannah promises as Hallie and I both glance toward it.

“I appreciate you girls looking out for me. I’m happy, but I know I could be happier. I’ll work on me when I get back to Aspen.” I smile, taking a breath, feeling a bit of weight lift off my shoulders. “How should we spend the rest of the evening?”

Savannah pushes to her knees in excitement. “Let’s all get tattoos.” Hallie and I roll our eyes.

“I don’t even know what I’d get.” Hallie shakes her head.

“Easy. Each of us resemble a flower.” I remember the day we all laid in the field as kids, reading about the different types of flowers and which one each of us fit best.

“Sit your sunflower ass down because no one is pricking me with a needle. Ever.” I toss a cream puff at her and stare a little too long at it as Ian and I flash through my mind. I can’t help it, thinking about being *his* Daisy Girl. Maybe I could make things work for Ian and I one day. But first, I need to talk to him about texting me instead of my friends. “If only meditation would speed up this healing process...” I don’t mean to say out loud.

“That’s not therapy, Emery.” Hallie gives my hand a squeeze. I nod, and turn on the TV.

Fine. I’ll look into getting actual help when I return to Aspen.

“I love you girls.” Savannah hugs both Hallie and I. “Our little mama looks tired, though.” We smile at Hallie, who yawns and hasn’t eaten much.

“I’m tired and nauseous.” She shrugs. “Can we all cuddle up and watch an old rom-com like we did growing up?”

“That sounds perfect.” I don’t remember how the movie ends, as my mind has my fingers itching to type ‘self-help’ and ‘therapy locations’ into the search engine on my phone. But at the same time, I don’t need my friends catching a glimpse at the screen and asking questions. I’ve had more than enough attention on my issues today.

CHAPTER 18

IAN

A CAR DOOR slams with more force than needed, turning mine and the crew's attention to the tiny figure storming over to us. She's pissed. It's a look I've never seen her wear, and she's trying to cover it up with a smile. But it's an unstable one.

"Mr. Wells." Emery singles me out, but holds a professional tone. "May I speak to you, please?" The crew continues to lay tile, but I feel their side-eyes.

"Me?" I point to myself in question, taunting the seething woman opening the screen door of the backyard. This can't be because we haven't finished the job yet.

"Follow me." Her voice holds a hint of hurt as I follow her through the living room and toward the staircase.

"If you want me to bring you to bed, all you have to do is ask." She stomps up the last few stairs, pausing as we stand in the middle of the upstairs hallway. "I have always appreciated the way you don't dance around things." Her arms fold across her chest, then push out to her sides. "Why stop now?"

"Okay, I want you, Emery Davis." I watch her eyes widen in surprise with the confidence from my voice. "And I mean more than just the physical."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then how about you damn well say it. I have work to do." Between work and my niece coming over tonight, Emery needs to meet me halfway at this point.

"I saw what you texted Savannah last night. What I do with my time is

none of your business.” She bites her lip, like she’s stopping herself from something else she wants to say. Something on a deeper level which scares her. “You shouldn’t have a say or concern about what I do just because we had sex.”

That wasn’t it.

Standing quietly, I watch her chest rise and fall rapidly. Her eyes burn through mine with every frustrated breath. “Want to try saying what you actually mean, Daisy Girl?” Taking a deep breath, I expect her to do the same and speak her mind. Her head shakes as she picks at her nails.

Clearing my throat, I take a moment to say what she *wants* to hear. This is going to pain me. “Fine. You wanted one night of fun, and you got it.” She blinks, giving me full attention now. “Go live your life however you want.” If she walks away right now, maybe I need to let her go. I’m doing what I can to be there for her, and it’s still not enough. “I’ll stop looking out for you.” She has to want to change too.

“Great.” She steps forward, her eyes flaring with hunger as they zone in on my chest. We both need to get our emotions under control. “I can take care of myself.”

“First, you need to get over yourself.” Her eyes narrow in challenge.

“I’m not the one who needs to get over me.” Emery’s head tilts, leaning in closer. She speaks with confidence, though her fidgeting fingers tell me otherwise.

“I won’t apologize for caring about your wellbeing.” I want to hug her, but shake the attitude out of her at the same time. My annoyance grows with my blood boiling and cock throbbing at once.

“You went into detail about our hookup to Savannah. How I screamed your name?” Her face droops, so close to breaking down. I wish she would. “Then, instead of asking how my time was in Vegas, you text her.” Her sinking voice tugs at my heart.

“I’m sorry, Emery.” My gut pangs with guilt. “That was something special for just me to witness. I want to be here for you, but you need to try to help yourself.”

“And if I can’t?” Emery steps forward, nearly against me as her walls teeter back and forth.

“You can.” I step into her, my hand gently taking hold of her chin as I bring her eyes to meet mine. “We are all here to help.”

“Maybe I need to be reminded of what I’ll be giving up if I leave.” And

there it is. She resorts to the only method she knows as her eyes darken. But something she says within her attempt at seduction catches my attention.

“*If you leave?*” My heart skips with the small potential of her staying.

“I’ve stopped drinking.” Her hand gives my bicep a squeeze. “That should be rewarded.”

“It’s still not enough. I’m going back downstairs.” I turn to leave, chest tightening. “I’m not being a new vice.”

“I cried last night for the first time in I don’t even know how long.” I freeze, turning back around to face her. “It was very brief, but I realized tears can fall and I’ll survived. I came clean to Hallie about almost kissing you back then. How I needed to leave town because I didn’t trust myself.” The more she talks, the more secure I feel about her finally being on track with trying to meet me halfway. She walks up to me, eyes locking onto mine. “And needing a clean start.” When her hand travels across my chest and down my abs, I take it in mine.

"How are you feeling after letting that little piece of the past be mended?"

“That maybe it’s not the worst thing in the world.” She swallows roughly, eyeing my obvious erection. My hand slides to the back of her neck as she looks up at me.

“Let’s keep this round for just us.” My lips press to hers, and she pulls me closer, wrapping her arms around my waist. With my dick pushing into her stomach, I lead her to the bathroom.

My palms cradle her cheeks as Emery’s hands fist in my shirt. Using all her strength, I’m turned into the bathroom wall as her body moulds to mine. Her arms lift, gripping my hair as she sinks her teeth into my bottom lip. I flip our positions, putting her against the wall. My fingers lace in the back of her hair as I pull her neck to the side. The sudden aggression forces the air out of her lungs as my mouth suctions onto the pulse of her neck. Her moans fuel me to devour her, wanting to brand her as mine and stake a fucking claim. But that would go against keeping this to ourselves.

I push the door closed before my hands gather her wrists, and I pin them above her head. I kiss her slow. A scene flashes through my mind of coming home to her barefoot in the kitchen after a busy day of work. Her sweet smile greeting me as she takes my hand, pulling me into the bathroom and we end up in the shower. I’m brought back to this moment as her hands tug on my grip, trying to escape.

“We use our words, Emery. Be a good girl and tell me what you want.”

“Free my hands,” she says breathily.

“Polite girls get what they want.”

“Please.” It’s barely a whisper.

Her hands fall freely onto my shoulders, palms immediately sliding over my chest and down to the hem of my shirt. Before she can lift it, I grip her hips, flipping her to face the bathroom mirror. My chest presses against her back as my fingers slip through her belt loops, holding her tight against me. Making eye contact with me in the mirror, a hint of fear passes through her eyes as I realize the last time she was in this position was the night at the bar. I wink and she slowly smirks.

“I trust you can shift my thoughts.” She holds my eyes, unbuttons her jeans shorts, and shimmies them down.

“Most certainly,” I whisper against her ear. My hand travels under her shirt, up her stomach, squeezing her firm nipple. Her high-pitched gasp sends a blaze of heated desire through my stomach.

Emery pushes herself off the counter, turning to face me. When her eyes connect with mine, I nod, letting her take some control. Her touch meets my shoulders as she pushes onto her tiptoes, closing the gap between us, fingers threading into my hair. She’s so addicting. Hands slipping into her panties, I pull the rounds of her ass tight against me as I grind. My cock aches, remembering how it felt to be inside her. Flipping her back around to face the mirror, my hand slowly travels down her waist.

Tracing a ghostly line above her panties, her stomach flips in a wave as she finds her breath. “I’m going to play with your clit, Daisy Girl. I bet it’s ready to feel my fingers.” I keep my voice low as the timber vibrates against her skin. “Look at me as you come.” Pulling her panties down, I take a moment to appreciate the sight in front of me. “I’m the one who is giving your body pleasure.” My fingers massage the sides before dancing over her clit.

“More pressure.” I give her what she needs and her legs buckle. Grabbing her waist, I lift her onto the bathroom counter.

“Look how pretty your pussy is.” Her legs open wider, giving us the perfect view in the mirror. Even with flushed cheeks, I love how she’s confident to let me see this. “Would you like to come now?” I rub her clit quicker, and she shakes her head. Easing off, I stare at her reflection.

“Not yet.” Her lust-filled eyes are so dilated, it’s taking all of my control to not get her off and shove my cock inside her.

“Tell me when.” I hear a power drill out back and push the fact that I should be working aside. Emery trumps work right now.

“Kay,” she says, arching toward my hovering hand. “Edge me.” I begin circling her clit, nipping at her neck, and easing my fingers off her pussy every few seconds. She wriggles even more as we watch her pussy contract, wanting to be granted the ability to spasm. Reaching forward, I turn on the tap as cold water trickles out.

“Touch yourself. Show me how you edge yourself when I’m not here,” I demand and watch as her finger circle clit. Her jaw drops as she inhales, wanting to come, but quickly removes her hand. Instantly, I drip some water over her clit.

“Oooh.” She slightly laughs in disbelief at the sensation. “Yes, please.” Taking my cool fingers, I warm them against her clit as she nearly comes apart. “Rub me harder.” Her head falls back on my shoulder with a moan as my fingers plunge inside her.

“Emery.” I slow my pace to a near stop. “Watch me as your soft pussy clamps down on my fingers. Give me this orgasm, Emery.” She stares into my eyes as I increase my pace and she cries out my name. I continue for a few more seconds and gently ease off to bring her down from the high. I’m so lucky to experience this with her. To be the reason for her pleasure.

I undo my pants as she’s slumped against me. “Up,” I command. “Put your hands on the mirror. I’m not in the mood for being gentle.”

“Good. I’m not the love-making type.” She pushes up to the balls of her feet, and as her heels balance on her ass, I slide in. I push down the pang in my gut, wondering how long it will take her to get to the point of making love.

Her body arches, taking me deeper with a dragged-out moan. I snake my arm under her breasts, keeping my rapid pace. “Yes, Ian. Pinch my nipple.” Her breath hitches into a squeak when I do. She tightens around me, nearing another climax. God, she’s so responsive to me, and it drives me fucking wild.

“Your body is fucking amazing.” I’m close to coming, but the reflection of us is too damn hot to end.

“Mmm, it’s like I’m watching myself in a porno.” Her wicked smirk matches her devilish eyes through the mirror.

“Like fuck I’d let the internet see you like this.” I slow my pace, moving in and out as my hand reaches around the front of her neck and squeezes the

sides of her throat.

“You don’t own me.” If only she sounded remotely believable.

“I’m about to own your pleasure.” I bite her ear as one of her hands leaves the mirror, landing on her knee before sliding up her thigh to rub her pussy. Her walls twitch around me as I feel her begin to stiffen.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Daisy Girl.” My hand covers hers, lacing our fingers together. Sliding out, I grind my cock against her back. Our eyes shift downward, watching her arousal drip out of her. The pulse in her neck goes haywire under my thumb. “Look at your need. My cock did that.” With a side smirk I know she hates to love, my grip tightens against her throat as my hot breath hits the shell of her ear, sending a shiver through her body. “It’s going to do it again and again.” She shifts to slip me back inside, but I deny her.

A low growl of frustration emanates from her chest as she glares at me in the mirror. I’ve yet to hear a woman growl from the need to feel me, and it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard. The tip of my cock slides to the front, brushing against her clit. Pushing up on her legs, she attempts to angle me into her. I push back in, pulling her knees against me so I’m as deep as I can get. But I don’t thrust.

“You suck,” she grits out through her teeth.

“You know all you have to do is ask.” Amusement is light in my tone, enjoying just how pissed off and desperate she is to come.

“I’m about to tie *you* up.”

“Oh, sweetheart, we both know pink wrists suit your skin tone much better.” I watch the flashback of her tied to my bed playing through her eyes.

Eyes shutting, her hips circle as I begin to move with her. “Stay in the moment with me.”

“I am.” She breathes in sharply as my finger rubs her clit.

“Eyes on me.” The dazed look across her face is breathtaking.

“Don’t stop.” A whimper rolls off her lips. “So. Good.”

“Watch me, Emery. I’m the one allowing you this pleasure.”

“Only you,” she whispers, and I take this as her admittance of trust.

“I’m giving it to you exactly how I want.” Picking up my pace, a brief wince meets her eyes as I grind upward to take her deep. “I know you’re gonna feel me every time you sit, Daisy Girl.”

“Yes, Ian!” she cries out as her center constricts around me. “Oh, God!” Fuck, she’s tight, and I hold on for a few more rough thrusts. “Ian! Fuck, yes!” Her body arches into me as she reaches her arm behind, grabbing my

neck for support.

“You’re mine, Emery.” She tenses, her eyes shooting down to her pussy, avoiding mine. Cupping both her breasts, I let myself go, filling her with everything I have.

She’s still unmoving as I pull out. Falling forward, Emery holds her head against the mirror, catching her breath. Clearing my throat, I place a kiss on her shoulder. I lean forward, caging her in as I clean my hands. My nose skims up her neck as her breathing hitches. “How was that for your reward?”

“I’m not... you—” Emery attempts to force out a sentence I can predict. I got caught up in the moment, and calling her mine felt so right. It feels right. But she needs to pull herself together and tell me how she feels about it.

Climbing off the counter, Emery walks to her room. I patiently wait as she returns, wearing a sundress. Her jaw is tight, and her eyes slowly meet mine. “You deserve someone healed. Someone who can give you what you need and not keep messing with you and leading you on.” She swallows as I watch tears brim her eyes. With a strong sniff and blink, she pulls herself together. “I don’t know when or if I’ll ever deserve to be *yours*.”

“I was caught up in the moment. Don’t detach, Emery. I’m here. You’re here and I know you feel something.” There’s a plea in my voice as my heart sinks. “Stay in the moment with me.”

“I can’t detach when there was no attachment to begin with.” We both know she’s lying. “Look, I just need time to process everything. This month has been a lot heavier than I intended. I promise if I do leave, I’ll say goodbye this time.”

“You say if, but it seems like your mind is made up.” She shrugs. “I want to fight for you, but you have to want me just as much. I deserve that too.” I meet her eyes. “You know where to find me.”

“Yeah.” She gently nods, her voice barely audible.

“The choice is yours if you want to keep the armour.” I speak softly, cradling her face in my hands. “But in the end, you and I both know you’ll only be hurting yourself by keeping those walls in place.” I press my lips to her forehead, then linger for a moment at the top of the stairs in case she changes her mind. Without another word, she walks to the bathroom and closes the door, shutting me out.

Finishing the day with much-needed overtime, the last thing I feel like doing is going home to cook. Pulling into the parking lot of The Painted Pony, I realize how little I come to my own place to eat. The staff greets me

as I walk through the doors and take a seat at one of the few free booths. The worn leather cushion welcomes me as it has many others over the past sixty years. Fresh beer on tap and our well-known fried chicken hit my senses. My hands lay flat on the smooth wooden table as I glance around. Even though it's the beginning of the week, this place is still full of locals and tourists.

My eyes track from table to table and roam over the bar area at happy couples. A few older couples are lost in conversation, as if time has stood still for them and only their hair color has aged. The dim lights of this place reflect off the tops of people's heads, and I find myself hoping to pick up on an auburn-haired woman I want to enjoy life with. To settle down with and have the type of relationship my parents had. Even after my mother's passing, my father didn't move on. He had lost the one he vowed his love to and was confident to see her again. I stopped sleeping around because I want to find a love like theirs.

I shouldn't have fucked Emery today. I'm too far gone with her, and while I sometimes feel like I've had a small breakthrough, her guard goes right back up. I'd like to believe things will work out, but we're running out of time. I order my food and stare at the empty space across from me. My head feels woozy, realizing I haven't been in this section of the bar, in this particular booth in years. My mind really is elsewhere lately.

"Dad, the only thing you should be eating here is a salad." We sit in a corner back booth of the rundown dive bar this town should probably close. The owner is too old to care about this place anymore.

"They don't serve salad. No one pays for that stuff." He smiles down at his basket of fried chicken and coleslaw. "This is the only salad they serve, and it won't fill me."

"But the doctors—"

"Look, Ian. I know my heart attack scared you last year, but I'm getting better." My father has been so nonchalant about his food choices.

"I was the person who took care of you. We know Amber wasn't any help."

"She was busy with a kindergartener."

"I was busy with her kindergartener. Sophie was by your side most of the time. And still is." My sister could use a good reality check at some point and step up as a mother.

"Maybe the heart attack was your mother trying to call me to her." My dad chuckles, taking a sip of his beer. Of course, I don't approve of his choice of

beverage either. “You know we wanted out together. You’re an adult now, and I miss my wife. Would seeing her again be so terrible?”

“I’m not ready to lose you too.”

“Where is that Davis girl you were so smitten with?”

“Okay, we can go back to the other topic again.” I take a big bite of my burger, hoping to buy some time, so he forgets.

“You spent the summer with her and that bossy girlfriend you know I wasn’t fond of.” He points his finger at me with a knowing smile. “That little red-head and you had this energy between you. I saw your future together. Then one day, you stopped bringing her around.” I swallow, trying to figure out how to give him an answer.

“Hallie said she left for school out of state. Her parents died, and she needed a fresh start.” There, no lies to be called out on.

“Go, track her down. She’s not scared to keep you in check, and I saw the way you looked at her. She looked at you the way your mother looked at me. Every damn time.”

“If I see her again, I’ll tell her how I feel.” It’s been brutal not asking her location. I know her avoiding pain, and watching me try to cope and heal with mine, made her castle walls teeter. She wanted them cemented for good.

“Man up and tell her how you feel. Don’t let her go a second time, dummy head.” My father shakes his head as my phone lights up.

Justin: Hallie is in Aspen for the weekend. I’m free if you wanna hang

My heart jumps at the first mention of Hallie’s travels. Of fucking course. Aspen.

I stand, tossing some money on the table, and grab my phone with shaking hands.

“Where do you think you’re going, son?”

“Aspen.”

My food is set in front of me, interrupting my thoughts. My father didn’t know much about health and nutrition, but what he did know was love. But you can’t force someone to show their feelings and seek comfort in you. Even though I’m here with open arms, Emery still has to keep me at a distance, as if I leave a bad impression. I can’t keep putting myself through

this. She's right; I deserve to be treated better. If she wants my attention again, she'll have to work for it.

CHAPTER 19

EMERY

“DAMMIT!” An echo sounds through the entryway.

“Is everything alright?” I round the corner from the kitchen.

“Hey, Emery.” Aunt Quinn drops her bag, exhausted. “That drive was too long, but the time away was worth it.” Her arms stretch above her head.

“Hot sex is always worth it,” I reply, but regret sets in with my previous actions. “I’m making dinner. It should be ready in half an hour.”

“Perfect.” Her smile takes up her whole face at that. “We can chat about Vegas over dinner. I’m looking forward to hearing about your last few days.”

“We were there one night. Nothing too crazy happened.”

“Well, I’m sure you didn’t just stay in the house when you got back.” *Yeah, I pretty much have the past three days.* “I’m going to have a quick shower.” She shoots me a tired smile and heads upstairs.

My signature pasta dish has been on my dinner menu for the past few days. It’s my comfort meal and how I hold on to the memories of how far I’ve come since Ian taught me the basics. My skin lights up at the thought of him. At the thought of him telling me what I need to hear beyond orgasms. As safe as he makes me feel, I push my emotions down, setting the knife down to collect my thoughts before I lose a finger.

Biting my cheek, the heaviness of it all washes over me. I shouldn’t have fucked Ian the other day. It was selfish of me to lead him on. But when he looked me in the eye and called me *his*, I doubted that I could ever be enough for him beyond the physical. There are moments I feel like the girl I once knew and loved to be. I know what he wants in a relationship and out of life. Yet, I can’t reciprocate. Why can’t I be normal and let a man love me?

Finishing up cooking, the front door opens. Hallie and Savannah enter

and pause, closing their eyes and enjoying the smell.

“Wow, that smells incredible,” Savannah raves, walking over to the stove.

“You can stay for dinner, if you’d like.” I smile, quickly pulling myself together.

“I have a class to teach in an hour or I would.” Savannah helps herself to a small bite. “Tyler is bringing his daughter to the studio a bit earlier because he has to work. His mom can only be there to pick her up after.”

“You two have been spending quite a bit of time together this week.” Hallie smirks, raising her eyebrows.

“Don’t get any ideas.” Savannah rolls her eyes, but I notice the way her cheeks lightly blush. “I just got out of a relationship. Plus, it’s his daughter I’m spending a bit of time with before classes.” Savannah keeps her eyes on the food, talking quicker than normal. “I’m just being a friendly member of the community.” Tyler is one of the town’s hottest bachelors. And his daughter is the cutest. “He also doesn’t have time to date.”

“Does he have too many fires to tend to in this town?” I can’t help but point out. “Savannah, I’m sure he has free time at the firehouse to strike up a conversation or text with you.”

“I just had my heart broken. I need time to heal.” She says the last part directly to me. “Plus, his daughter is his top priority with his free time. I really admire that.”

“Hey, Emery?” Aunt Quinn’s voice rings from upstairs. “I have a quick question. Can you come up here?”

“You can’t just yell it?” My brow furrows as my friends follow me to the stairs.

“Nope,” she calls out.

My aunt stands against the bathroom door, in her towel, a devilish smirk on her lips. “I have been really reserved about your personal time.” She speaks slowly. “But I am going to need details about how those appeared on the mirror.”

My gut falls to my feet as Savannah pokes her head in the steamy bathroom, dropping her jaw. I don’t need to look to know I forgot to clean my handprints.

“What have you been up to since Vegas?” Savannah turns to me as Hallie looks back and forth, trying to piece things together. “I wish I didn’t have to leave so soon. You better start talking, Em.”

Scrunching my face, I realize I'm caught. "I'm so stupid." I run my hand through my hair. "How did I forget about the handprints?"

"You were lost in the moment of making the handprints." Hallie grins as her green eyes twinkle. "Good for you and Ian," she assumes.

"Quiet." I shut my eyes, wishing this wasn't happening.

"I bet you weren't," Savannah teases. "Do your neighbors know his name now, too?"

"He was exaggerating about the other time." I cross my arms, internally swearing about letting that slip.

"Other time?" My aunt's voice pitches, and Hallie gives me a look I've never seen.

"When? Why didn't you tell me?" Hallie begins to sulk.

"After the hospital party, but I can't continue something that's bound to fail." Taking a deep breath through my nose, my chest compresses at the thought of not seeing him again. "I'm heading back to Aspen in three days."

Savannah shakes her head. "He's such a great guy. I think he's worth you trying to make it work."

"Why don't you have him?" *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"I need to get to class." Savannah holds my stare. "And he sees you, Emery."

"Exactly," Hallie states. "I called that years ago."

"He accepts you more than Logan ever showed he cared about me." Savannah's cheeks suck in. "And we were an *actual* couple."

"She's too scared," my aunt cuts in. "Emery likes keeping her heart solid like a statue, so if she loses someone again, she can pretend it doesn't hurt."

"I am not scared," I defend. Sex aside, I like who I am with him. The thought suffocates me, knowing my countdown to seeing him on a normal basis is almost over. I need to figure out my shit and start therapy or something when I get back home. Even if I don't have Ian, maybe then I'll have part of me back.

"You are. I'm done with tip-toeing around." Aunt Quinn holds the top of her towel, looking down at me. "I'm not saying to run into a guy's arms, but it's not healthy the way you're dealing with all this crap."

"We love you, Emery." Savannah cups my face, her smile as bright as the sun. "It hurts to acknowledge pain. We've been over this. But once you do, life becomes beautiful again." Her watch beeps. "I have to head out, but please let someone be there for you."

I watch her leave and stay quiet, not knowing what to say. I've upset Hallie, my aunt is losing faith in me, and Savannah has been a rollercoaster with her nurturing and slapping me in the face—much like someone else I know. My aunt excuses herself to change, and Hallie just stares with a sad smile.

“Why did Savannah know about you and Ian hooking up and I didn't?”

I give in, explaining everything and why there was tension in Vegas as my aunt comes back dressed, and we head downstairs.

“I'm really not hungry.” Hallie and my aunt blink as they head to the table with plates of food. Anxiety kicks in, spinning my thoughts. The alcohol cabinet lures my attention, wanting to not feel. It would be so easy to just down some whiskey along with these feelings. But I'm not that person anymore. “I need some air.” I bolt out of the house, needing to feel lighter with the open sky above.

My knotted gut plummets as mature trees line the driveway. But I welcome it. For a moment, time stands still. I smile to myself as my throat grows tight. Our property has only aged with the few happy memories I have to hold on to. Closing my eyes, I'm six years old again. I hear my father's echo, telling me not to pass the last tree on my bicycle. My tiny blue handprint vandalizes a white pillar on the porch. I anticipated my mother to yell at that moment, but she called me a creative little bug. The squeeze of my heart hurts, yearning to hear her heartfelt laughter ring through my ears. The porch swing now sits dormant, collecting leaves instead of memories. Its glory days held hours of my parents and I listening to evening crickets and watching lightning bugs illuminate the humid nights of South Carolina. But those times faded like the paint on my old bicycle still leaning against the house.

What I wouldn't give to be a child again.

To hear their voices.

To touch their hands instead of gravestones.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I pull myself together, feeling a tad lighter even with thoughts that bring me sadness. It shocks me enough to take a pause. *There*. If anyone can help me heal, it has to be me.

The realization continues to snowball as I begin my trek, going wherever my feet decide to take me. I'm not ready to dive right in, but dipping my toe in and knowing I can pull through is enough for now. Enough for today.

The evening breeze turns cool and the longing in my chest grows,

realizing how much I've missed the late September nights here. Passing the nature trail, I smile to myself. My friends and I always spent the night before back to school, riding to the lake at night. We weren't into the party scene, but there was a quiet section we found and made our own. The night would pass while reminiscing about our summer, planning our futures as the sun faded behind the trees. Veering right on the sidewalk, I reach downtown. Locals and tourists gather around the fried chicken canteen and ice cream hut, giving the area so much life. Children's eyes light up as they toss coins into the small fountain. I hope they can hold on to their childhood much longer than I did.

I lean against a tree in the grassy area, watching kids climb the tree I played on as a child. Parents smile and couples sit on blankets, enjoying the nice evening. That could be me. Me and Ian, if I really wanted. But loving him and potentially losing him one day in death causes my stomach to churn. At least my parents didn't have to miss each other.

"I know that hair color anywhere," a young voice speaks behind me.

Turning around, I see Sophie smiling, taking a bite of her ice cream. Ian stands quietly behind her. "Hey, girlie! Enjoying your night?" Her bubbly smile helps brighten my mood a tad.

"Yes. There was a live band downtown earlier too." Sophie glances up at Ian. He looks as tired as I feel.

"Your ice cream looks so good, but I don't want to wait in the long line." I laugh. I'm surprised they haven't opened a second stand at this point.

"The line gives Uncle Ian and I time to catch up on our week." She points her spoon toward me. "Except he hasn't been in a talking mood at *all*." Her eyes squint, giving him a suspicious look. "He should practice what he preaches when it comes to talking about feelings." She shakes her head in disapproval.

"We should get going, Chickpea." Ian holds a clipped tone and steps back. "We won't be able to stay long at our next stop." We both use Sophie as our focus. I didn't want us to get to this point. I've hurt him. The last thing I wanted was to leave on bad terms.

"I don't want you guys to be late."

"Oh, lighten up, Uncle Ian." Sophie leans against the tree with me. "And we can stay as long as we want there." He glances toward the fountain, and I turn my focus back to Sophie. "When do you head back to Aspen?" I notice Ian's jaw tighten as he crosses his arms.

“About three days.”

“About?” she giggles.

“Playing it by ear. Might be sooner, might be later.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat and want to end this conversation.

Her enthusiasm grows. “Leaving this town seems fun.”

“Aspen has been a beautiful adventure. Growing up, I never planned on leaving Beechwood Falls. This was home.” Till it wasn’t. I know Ian is listening.

“I don’t know if I could move too far from my uncle.” I follow her nod, and he turns back to us, watching our interaction. “He’s my rock.” I’m caught off guard by how comfortable she is talking about what she needs. “I can’t imagine running from him.” Little does she know how deep her last statement cuts me.

“Your uncle has a special way of understanding people.” Ian clears his throat, and while I try to smile at him, his doesn’t form.

“Yep!” She pushes off the tree, eyes lighting up. “You should come with us. Our Thursday tradition might be livelier with you around.” She giggles, looking up at Ian, who finally chuckles. I grin, but I’m not sure I find the humor.

“No, Sophie.” Ian shakes his head. “Emery won’t want—”

“I’d love to tag along.” I link arms with Sophie, shooting Ian a look. “Don’t make decisions for me.”

“Thank you.” Sophie smiles brightly, tugging me to follow. “I’d love for you to join us tonight.”

“You’re not going to let me finish my sentence?” Ian rubs his hand over his jaw, giving me his own look of warning.

“I think it will mean a lot to Sophie. She seems excited to invite me.” Plus, it will give me time to maybe put us on better terms before I take off this weekend. “This must mean a lot to her.”

“Okay. Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.” The firmness of his jaw gives me an uneasy feeling, as we follow him to the truck. Sophie climbs in the back and Ian helps me up the large step before looking me in the eyes for the first time since he walked out of my house. “Don’t disappoint her.”

“Ugh, my allergies.” Sophie sneezes for the fifth time as we drive. Opening the glove box, I look for possible tissues. My lungs seize as the coaster I made reveals itself. I don’t need this right now. Ian looks at the coaster, then to me. With ears pulsing from the beat of my heart, I grab the

tissue pack and hand it to Sophie.

I had forgotten about the coaster I made. Finally put my parents out of memory since talking to Sophie. My deep breathing doesn't go unnoticed. Ian turns the radio up and glances in the mirror to check Sophie is occupied. I expected it to sit in a kitchen drawer or on top of the fridge of his house, pushed aside like I've tried to do with every hurtful memory I've encountered. But he put the coaster in the truck. Handy access if I ever miraculously decided I wanted it.

Ian's eyes stay on the road as his hand reaches out to cover mine. My mind yells to pull my hand away and cross my arms, but I welcome his comfort. Tears threaten to surface, but I don't let them fall. Sucking in my cheeks, I take another deep breath and hold it. Acknowledging a surface ache in my chest, my other hand covers his, squeezing tightly. I need to prove to myself that this sadness won't physically harm me.

Sophie is quiet, absorbed in her phone. I can't break down in front of her. I don't want to. But his touch feels safe. With another deep breath, I push down the pain. *Don't let tears fall.* Ian's forehead scrunches, and I can telepathically hear him wanting to speak about this. My lips roll in as his hand squeezes mine three times. I get his silent message. If only I could accept the love he offers. Tilting my head up, I shake away this feeling. Which is hard to do now that I've let it creep up to the surface. My face tightens as my stomach clenches, fighting emotions.

"Soph?" Ian looks to the rear-view mirror, getting her attention. "We're going to take Emery home before we make our stop."

"No!" she and I protest at the same time.

"It's always just you and I," Sophie complains. "Mom barely tags along."

"I'm not letting her down." Especially if her mother has been flaking out on her. "I can handle myself, Ian." I still have no idea where they venture to, but she's looking forward to it.

"Fine. But no questions about anything, Chickpea."

She shoots him a look as if he's lost his mind and returns to her phone. Staring at the open land, I realize we are reaching the edge of town. There isn't much to do in surrounding towns, but how much do I know about activities after being away all these years. My hand involuntarily twists under his, lacing our fingers together. Nausea flips my stomach as we approach the *Thanks for Visiting* sign by the cemetery. The truck slows as Ian turns his signal on. He feels me tense, and his jaw tightens as my fingers squeeze him

with panicked force.

What the fuck. I might actually vomit.

“Finally!” Sophie undoes her seatbelt, leaning forward between the seats. She looks at mine and Ian’s hands. “You two would make a cute couple. I’d totally ship you guys.”

I cannot speak. I want to let go of Ian’s hand, but for the life of me, I’m gripping it tighter, and my leg starts to bounce.

“We’ll meet you out there, Chickpea,” Ian grits out through his teeth.

“Fine, but hurry.” Sophie opens the door. “Grandma and Grandpa never get new visitors. Emery hasn’t seen Grandpa in a long time.” She pauses and chuckles. “I mean, you can’t actually see him, but I like to believe he can still hear us.” Shutting the door, she skips away.

She actually skips like there is something freeing about a graveyard.

“I can tell Sophie you’re not feeling well. I don’t expect you to get out.” Now *this* is something I would have liked to have a heads up about. But I’m too stubborn to admit that to him. He already knows I’m thinking it.

My eyes zone in on the compartment in front of me hosting the coaster. There’s no way I can face this all at once. In one lifetime. Sophie stands toward the top of the hill, waving us over. She’s so comfortable accepting the fate of people passing. Not in an abnormal way where she’d be considered a psychopath, but in a strong, healed way. Why couldn’t that have been me?

“Are they close to mine?” I’m not sure how I manage to get the words out, but in a whispered strain, they do.

“A few rows over.” Releasing his hand, my teeth find my lip as I stare at the door handle. “Take your time. Or stay.” Ian opens his door, and emptiness fills me as he leaves. I need him to come back. It’s not even a want. I *need* him to hold my hand again so I can hold myself together. He opens my door and holds out his hand. “Either way, I’m here for you.” Slipping into autopilot, I unbuckle my seatbelt, but don’t take his hand just yet. I step to the side as he shuts my door, and he stares, as if for once, unsure of his next move.

“Come on!” Sophie shouts. “What’s taking so long?”

“No questions!” Ian yells back with aggravation.

“You’re being weird.” She folds her arms over her chest.

I can do this. Just one more time.

My hands shake, and I can’t explain the nerves overtaking me. I reach my hand out to Ian, and he laces our fingers with a firm grip. With each step

forward, I blink away this initial walk I did five years ago for my parents. Spotting Sophie smiling with each hand on a headstone, my throat constricts. And as my eyes flick around the area, my feet cement me in place when I see the section my parents are in. I should let go of Ian's hand so he can carry on, but I tug it, pulling him closer. He follows my cue and places his free hand under my chin, tilting my head up.

"I'm proud of you." His voice has never sounded so filled with admiration. "If this is as far as you go, I know you gave it your best effort." This man is too good.

"I have to try." He doesn't say anything as I follow his lead up to where Sophie is crouched down between two gravestones. Ian's father didn't deserve to be taken so soon. He still had many more memories to make with his children and Sophie.

Sophie chats about her week to her grandparents as if it's a casual conversation with the living. "...and Emery is here, that girl who used to come over and cook with Uncle Ian? She had the really pretty red hair, remember?" We stand back, listening to Sophie do her thing, and she turns around to glance at me. "Whoa, you looked spooked." She takes in how my body is leaning against Ian's arm as both hands wrap around it. "I promise I've never seen anything creepy here, but I get that it's not some people's first choice for a hangout."

I can only nod and block out the rest of what she goes on talking about. I focus on the grass until she walks up to us.

"Are you not going to say anything, Uncle Ian?"

"I was here late last night." That response snaps my head up at him. "Had to process something this week and needed to channel what advice they'd give." His laugh is forced, and he shrugs, keeping his eyes on his niece. I've already taken enough of his energy.

Sophie shrugs, looking around. "Okay, the sun is nearly set, and *I'm* spooked in here after dark."

"Let's go." Ian reaches his free hand out for Sophie to take. I don't say a word the entire way home, and when Ian places his hand on my knee, I look out the window, visualizing what I'd *want* to happen if Sophie wasn't in the back seat. I need my mind to block things out for now.

He pulls up to my house, and I look behind me.

"Thanks for the invite, Sophie."

"I appreciate you tagging along." Sophie leans forward and gives my

shoulder a squeeze.

I want to avoid Ian's eyes, but I don't have any disrespect for him. "Thank you." I'm not sure if I mouth it, or if it comes out audible. He nods.

"I'll walk you up." Ian goes to undo his seatbelt.

"No," I say too quickly. "I mean, I appreciate it, but I need a moment alone before heading inside."

"Sweet dreams, Daisy Girl." His expression softens as I close the door and head inside.

I go straight upstairs and fall onto my bed, staring at the ceiling. This time, holding my breath doesn't hold back my tears. My ears capture the salted droplets as they begin to flow. The way I want to rely on Ian to help me heal and be my crutch isn't fair to him. Or me. I sit up, sniffing my tears away and wipe my eyes. In life, no one's stay is permanent. I need to lean on myself. Help myself. It's not fair to lead Ian on and then take off if my fucked-up fears get in the way. I need to heal for me. *Alone.*

Swiping my phone open, I stare at the virtual therapy app I downloaded, but still haven't had the guts to open. By choosing me, I'm choosing him—if he's still there when I'm ready. The feeling of unease doesn't go away after creating an account, and I haven't set up an appointment—yet. I set my phone on my nightstand, praying sleep will grace me.

CHAPTER 20

EMERY

LAST NIGHT with Sophie had done me in. I couldn't enjoy more than two hours of sleep. It's agonizing to watch people pour dirt on their wound, set a stone, and still be able to add flowers in memory. Though there is support, I feel alone. Paralyzed by time, yet trying to run before the last fresh petal shrivels. But the shovel keeps hitting me in an effort to wake myself from this nightmare.

I'm perplexed by my next life-altering decision. So, while I have my answer, I still want to respond to how I feel in the moment. Shutting off my car, the weight of my lungs brings a sting to my eyes as I toss my head back. I never let more than a couple of tears fall before I pull myself back together. Blinking away drops of salt, I bite my lip with a few deep breaths and suppress what I've worked hard to keep rooted. I watch the secretary leave the office for the day before I get out of my car and head inside. Ian's truck is still parked, and there is a good chance he's alone.

I walk through the doors to the small entryway and continue down the hallway. Ian is already staring at the door, waiting to see who entered. He keeps his face relaxed, but the rapid clicking of the pen top in his hand says otherwise. Swallowing nothing down my dry throat, I come into view.

"Emery." He seems surprised, leaning back in his chair. "I hope you're able to sleep better tonight." That's a nicer way of telling me I look like a zombie. When I nod and can't form words, he continues. "You can sit, Daisy Girl. Or do you want to go for a drive and watch the sunset?"

"I promised I'd say goodbye." The clicking of the pen in his hand stops as he freezes. I flick my gaze to the clock on his wall, reminding myself that time is still ticking. "It's been a fun month exploring our chemistry, and I've

gotten to uncover parts of myself..." I spew off the rehearsed excuses, as detached as I can be. "This town just isn't—"

"No." He stands, shaking his head like his reply is the easiest thing to say. "Don't waste your breath or my time giving shitty reasons that *you* don't fully believe."

"I do believe them."

"Your eyes keep shifting to the right, and you're not doing a complete lip bite," he states with blank conviction. "I know you, Emery Davis. I'm not letting you get away with lying to me, or yourself." I think I just gulped out loud.

"I'm still in charge of making up my own mind." Tension in my jaw grows, and my stomach tightens with annoyance. "I tried."

"Exactly." He steps into me, his eyebrows drawing together as his eyes search mine. "You keep trying, and things are getting better for you. Emery, you wouldn't step foot in a graveyard when you first arrived." Reaching up, his hands cup my jaw as I feel it tremble. "I can't let you throw away the effort you put into dismantling the impenetrable walls you built. Healing takes time."

"I'll visit more often." I try to fight my tears. "You...you deserve a better woman." His head shakes as I watch his eyes water.

"Stay." His strained voice pleads, pulling every piece of my heart from my chest and into his waiting hands. I hate what I'm doing to this man.

"My life is back in Aspen," I can only whisper.

"Mine is staring back at me." And at that, I crumble inside. There is no way in hiding how his words steal the breath from my lungs.

"You make it sound so easy."

"Emery, as complicated as you want to make this, us, it *is* that easy to be with you. Mind-blowing sex aside, I crave the strong connection. We may have a long way to go, but I will continue to fight with you. For you. For us. I've spent years looking for you in too many women. You're who I want. Need. Always have been."

"Ian..."

"I'm listening." He stares into my glassy eyes, demanding a proper response to words I cannot seem to form. A sharp inhale fills my lungs, and I hold it, unsure of how to tell this man who has treated me so perfectly that I cannot live up to what he sees in me. "Take your time," he says, stepping into me as his hand cups the back of my head and pulls me into his chest. "I'm

here for you.”

“Until you’re not.” The words vomit out of my mouth before I can hold them back. My body locks, battling against tears from years of pain. The thought of having to cope with losing him one day is more painful than depriving myself of the love he wants me to accept. His arms tighten around me, cradling my head as if anticipating a breakdown. I need to be strong and walk away.

Just one more time, Emery.

“I love you, Emery. I’m here to love you until I physically can’t. Then, my soul will wait for you in the next life. I’m here for you as you work through your pain.” He pulls back, cradling my face, wearing a look of knowing. Ian has always known my mind as if it were his own. “And when you walk away today because you’re scared and would rather work through grieving alone, I’ll still love you. And you’ll love me, just like you always have.”

My cheeks suck in as my jaw trembles, trying to keep myself together. Anger and annoyance burn through my veins as I internally scream at myself to just give in. To let us be whole-heartedly lost in each other. To let him hold me as I finally sob from how life has treated me. To mirror those around me who have dealt with heartbreak and loss and can *still* feel. Can trust in those around them to help them process the hurt and heal. I wouldn’t be fixed overnight, but he’d be by my side. With a sharp inhale, my head pulses.

He’ll still love me when I walk away today.

When.

His understanding and acceptance of who I am is more than I could ask for. I need to do this for me. With the final petal plucked from my soul, I collapse, desperate for regrowth. Tears fill my eyes, and I’m ready to absorb the light that Ian continues to offer. I’ll do whatever it takes. Ian is amazing, but coupled with the effort I put in for myself, we’ll be even greater.

On a hiccupped cry, his arms encompass me. Wrapping my arms around him, my face buries into his chest, and my tears soak through his shirt.

Every breath shakes my body as I cry out. I don’t want to make a sound, but the embarrassing wail is inevitable. My fortress demolishes brick by brick as my brain loops events I want buried with my parents.

It’s my fault I’ve held it in this long. Expressing emotions did not happen in our house too often. Especially when asking to spend time with parents who had lives to save. That would end in a long lecture of me being selfish.

And the day they left and crashed, I felt the universe's message loud and clear.

"I-it hurts." Heart aching, I gasp for a breath, my body jolting with another hiccupped cry. "Ian—" My fists ball so tight in his shirt that they cramp. Redirecting pain isn't working this time.

"I know, baby." His voice is strained, and I know he's trying to keep himself together for me. "I'm here for you."

"No one else has been." While others were caring, no one has tried to help me heal the way he has.

"They all love you, Daisy Girl." He clears his throat and sniffs, scratching my head as I continue to lose it. "They just didn't know how to reach you." I can't speak, but I try to steady my breathing. Staring at a stack of binders on the shelf, I slowly shut the pain away. My heart aches, screaming to find the numbness I bathed in for years. It's what my soul has found comfort in. Except I fall farther into Ian and cry because I can't summon the same strength to harden my heart now that I've dropped it.

"Emery, your parents loved you," Ian says, looking down at my tear-stained face.

"I felt like I was in their way most of the time." Where there was once more anger in that statement, I end up sobbing. He picks me up and carries me to his comfy chair in the corner of his office and sits us down. I want to get up, but his arms tighten. Ian rubs my back and gently kisses on the top of my head. "I just wanted them to see my last dance performance." I gasp for air and wipe my eyes with my sleeve, thankful I didn't put on makeup today. "For them to say they were proud for once." I feel my lips tremble as another disastrous sob threatens to surface.

"They were. You were worth them leaving work early. You know they didn't have to." He's right, but acknowledging that guts me even more.

"I've been so terrible." My heart races as I lose control of my breathing again. With every shallow pant, my arms tingle, and my head feels light. "I- I didn't even—" I hiccup. "Say goodbye at the funeral." I shake my head and bury my face in his neck. "I couldn't look at the caskets lowering." It would prove it was real. My head pounds as I sob. "I left early."

"It's tough saying goodbye." His voice is calm, but I hear him sniffle again. "You're not terrible. You dealt with your emotions the way you were taught to."

He's right, but feeling this pain is too much. I want to block it out. Get

lost in one of the two ways I know how to. I shift on his lap and pull back to look at him, pushing away any hesitation. My lips crash to his as my hand reaches to undo his pants. But I've barely touched him when his hand covers mine, and through blurred, teary vision, I watch his head shake.

"Please," I beg, tasting the saltiness of my tears.

"Not like this," he whispers against our lips. "You've come so far. I'm so proud of you." Cupping my jaw, his thumbs wipe new falling tears. "Feel, Emery. Don't block. I'm here for you."

I pleasure away the hurt. My tainted body instantly disgusts me. I'm not proud of sleeping around. My parents wouldn't be either. I'm aware I've used guys, but the reality sets in that they were using me too. The vulnerable girl who masked her feelings was easy for them to deal with. Ian wanted more than that. But that was all I could give him.

"I've been touched by so many." I don't want to meet his eyes, but I do.

"It doesn't have to be that way anymore." Ian swallows, his eyes glassing over.

"None of them felt right." I feel the moment shift as I stare into his eyes. "They were all band-aids." I lean in again, hoping he'll take my mind off the pain.

"You can't use me as the cure. You're strong enough on your own." He watches my puzzled expression. "I want you, and I'm here for you. But sex means *more* to me, especially when it comes to you. It shouldn't be used as an avoidance tactic. Which is what you're trying to do right now."

"Fuck." My teeth are going to leave a bruise on my bottom lip, but I don't care. "What am I supposed to do, then?" My voice trails off at the end as defeat takes over.

"Feel. Hurt. Get mad. Embrace and acknowledge everything, but don't stay there." He places a lingering kiss on my lips. "Cry until the heaviness lifts. Stay silent if you need to be with your thoughts, and I suggest you start therapy."

I nod as I feel the weight of my soul drop its anchor to an unknown depth, hoping to weightlessly float to the top one day. Ian holds me as I silently filter through my life. I don't know how long we have been sitting here, but the sun is setting. As I feel my breathing slow, he scoots down in this comfy chair, and I'm able to settle against him. His hand continues its soothing circles on my back and my heavy eyes close.

I blink, glancing around the room in search for the time. It's a blanket of darkness outside and in the office. Exhaustion weighs on my body, and my soul hurts. But the tears are not falling. I think I've finally cried it all out. Ian stirs, and with a deep breath, he tries to stretch. Holding me for who knows how many hours on this chair probably killed his tense muscles. I arch my back as my spine cracks and his arms wrap around me, pulling me back to his chest.

"I need to stand." My voice comes out as a whisper and cracks with hoarseness.

"Yeah, I've had to take a piss for the longest time." He chuckles as I get off his lap. "I wasn't going to disturb you, though."

"Go." I wave my hand out of habit, though he can't see it. His phone flashlight turns on as he walks toward the door. "Keep the big light off." My eyes are sensitive enough as it is right now. I find my phone on the desk. Eleven forty-five lights up my screen. If Aunt Quinn wasn't with her boyfriend, she would have checked in to see where I was. Ian returns, and I wash the tears off my face.

"I should take you home," Ian says as I exit the bathroom.

"Only if you stay the night with me." I know what pulling up my driveway is going to do to me if I do it alone.

"Do you want to face your house now, or tomorrow morning?" He's aware of the family photos I'll have to pass walking up the stairs.

"Now." I take myself by surprise. "I don't think I have energy left to cry. And if you're with me, it'll help."

"I'll always be here for you, Emery." And I want him to be. Taking my hand, we walk to his truck. My drive home is silent, but his hand never lets go of mine.

As Ian pulls into the driveway and cuts the ignition of the truck, the nervous pit in my stomach dissipates. Taking a moment, my lungs expand, welcoming whatever emotions arise. Exhaustion is all that's coming through, but I'm sure tomorrow will trigger more tears.

"Are you sure about this?" Ian asks, giving my hand a squeeze.

"I'm willing to find out," I say as he hops out of the truck and opens my door. Hand in hand, we walk up to my house, knowing I'm entering with new eyes.

I step inside, waiting for a million emotions. Sliding off my flip-flops, I look up at Ian with a deep breath. I don't want to be aware of my surroundings. I make it to the top of the stairs without looking at the photos hanging. We walk into my room, slowly shedding our clothing as I toss back my covers.

Ian lies down in his briefs with an open arm to act as a pillow. I cuddle up, lifting my leg over his torso. Tilting my head toward him, he looks down, kissing the tip of my nose. My hand cups his cheek as I softly press my lips to his. I extend the kiss as he slides one hand to my waist and his arm bends, holding my head steady. Need dampens between my legs, but this time, something shifts. I'm not kissing him to escape. It's slow and deliberate, and I *want* to feel how my body reacts to him. My palm meets his cock as it twitches, coming to life.

"Emery." He pulls back, feathering his fingertips up my arm, and cradling the back of my head. "I don't think this is—" His voice wavers, but his cock is rock solid under my palm as I stroke him.

"It's not avoidance. I promise." I shift my body to straddle him, and his hands squeeze my hips before traveling up my spine. "I want to feel every part of you." Slowly, I grind my hips and lower my head to connect with his lips. "Please," I whimper against them as he softly sucks my bottom lip.

His hand slides into my hair, pulling my ear to his lips. "Anything for you," he whispers, sending chills through my body. "Take what you need." Our hunger-filled kiss remains passionate yet tender as I widen my legs, feeling the tip of his cock poke at my entrance through my panties.

"Fuck me, Ian," I whisper in his ear before kissing down his jaw and back to his lips. He reaches down, tearing my lace fabric. Hands gripping my thighs, he effortlessly lifts me toward his face. My hands catch my balance on the headboard. "Whoa," I giggle, adjusting to the sudden position as I hover over his face.

"Let me taste how ready you are for me." Ian lifts his head to cover my pussy, and as he sucks, his hands grip into my hips, pulling me right onto him.

"Mmm. I love the way you make me feel," I moan, grinding myself against his mouth. This man might suffocate himself, but his grip is not letting up. My head falls to my hands that are gripping the headboard, and his tongue picks up the pace. "Just like that. This pussy is yours, Ian." As the words leave my mouth, his fingers grip deeper into my ass. His growl

vibrates my clit as I embrace the first orgasm.

A hand meets my throat, and I'm flipped onto my back with him hovering above. I blink up at him, trying to process the move as his amused grin spreads wide.

"You're mine, Daisy Girl." His hand meets my neck again with a soft squeeze. "Mine to toss around and do as I please. My hands rest on his shoulders, and with all my strength, I push him onto his back.

"Then that makes *you* mine too." Straddling him, I rub myself over his cock. Keeping his surprised eyes on mine, I slide down in one motion. A groan rumbles in his throat as I pause at the base, letting myself adjust. Ian flexes his hips, pushing in deeper before pulling my hips forward. When he hits a spot deep inside, my eyes roll backward. "I don't want this to end. I want every night with you to be like this." I begin moving up and down, steadying myself with my hands on his muscular chest. This is us.

Air whooshes out of my mouth as he reaches up to pinch my nipple. My orgasm builds quickly, the sensation growing with every stroke. "You're beautiful, Emery."

"You make me feel it." He pulls me down with a kiss I feel deep into my soul. My arms fall to the sides of his head as my hand tangles in his hair. I pick up the pace as he moves with me, building me up. I need to see him. I need to see how he sees me, accepts me with all my past flaws and messy darkness. Sitting back up, he brushes hair out of my face with a smile. "God, you feel so good." I try to swallow the lump in my throat as he holds my hips, and we move together. Staring directly into his eyes, my mouth parts as my fingers claw into his chest. I'm so close.

"I love you, Emery Davis." Those words used to scare me, and here I am, never wanting anything else to fall from his lips. I nod, wanting to say them back.

"I—" His half smile is understanding, but the words still don't make their way past my lips.

"In time, baby." In nothing but the light of the moon, I watch his eyes glass over. His thumb meets my clit, drawing gentle circles. "Now come for me."

I feel every thrust throughout my body, like a frequency we are both perfectly tuned to. I pick up my pace, but fight with wanting this moment to end, or keeping this euphoric build of torture.

"Emery." I can tell by the strain and hint of warning that he's barely

hanging on himself. There's no barrier between us, and this feeling is like no other. I give in to the pleasure with a soft cry. Ian slides out, flipping me to my side as his hand smacks my ass. "Give me another one."

This man is more than I could have ever asked for. More than I deserve, and I want to be everything for him. Reaching up, my hand slides to the back of his neck to bring him in for a kiss. I flip to my back, spreading my legs wider. "Show me how you touch yourself," he demands with a grunt. Sliding my hand down my stomach, I arch my back and give him what he asks for. "Fuck, you're so hot." My body begins to lock as I rub myself to orgasm.

"Yes. Harder, Ian," I pant. He tosses my leg over his shoulder, giving it to me deeper. Grinding upward, my limbs tremble. Staring into my eyes, he doesn't let up. I need to make changes to my life to be able to fully give myself to him. This pleasure and emotion are too much to handle, and my eyes begin to tear. The intensity of this moment consumes me. Ian stills, emptying himself inside me, his eyes never leaving mine. He leans down, pressing a small kiss to my forehead.

"I love you." His hand wipes away my tears before sliding out of me.

"I want to share my life with you, Ian." Those three words still remain stifled at the tip of my tongue.

"I'm not letting you go that easy this time around, Emery." A yawn takes over, as I'm now emotionally and physically drained. Ian helps me up as I head to the bathroom first. I don't want him to let me go. Ever. But I also know I need to be ready to fully commit to him and myself. I need to learn to learn to love me too.

As I drift off to sleep in Ian's arms, my mind goes through the checklist of everything that's needed to be the best version of myself. The version I deserve. But it's not going to be a fun ride.

CHAPTER 21

IAN

A BEEPING of a work truck pulls me from my slumber. Shit. I don't have my alarm. The warmth and weight of Emery is worth being late to work. Though, technically, I'm already here. I don't want to leave this bed. This moment. It was gutting watching her past tear her apart last night, and all I could do was hold her tightly. As much as I want to let myself believe this is the start for us that I've wanted for so long, an uneasy feeling rests in my stomach with her unpredictability. I didn't expect to hear her say she loves me back, but dammit, I was hoping I would. This is only the start of her healing, and if it's too much, I really might lose her for good. Emery stirs, elongating her body as her puffy red eyes flutter open.

"Good morning, beautiful." She tilts her head down, as if embarrassed about how she looks. "Please, don't hide from me." My finger curls under her chin, bringing her lips to mine. She pulls back a moment later with a sleepy smile.

"I guess giving in can be this easy." There's a softness to her voice I haven't heard since the month we met, and it takes me aback.

"That's my Daisy Girl."

"I'm here. But a flower can't grow without a ray of light." Well, hasn't her smart mouth turned sweeter.

"It can, but it's nice having the warmth and support." We hear the front door open, and I know who it is before they even announce themselves.

"Ian?" Rhett's voice carries through the house in confusion.

"Whoops." Emery giggles.

"I'll meet you out back," I call out.

"Morning, Emery!" I can hear Rhett chuckle. "I hope you didn't tire him

out too much.”

“Nah, he’s got the stamina of a stallion.” She giggles again, and I wish I could play that sound on repeat. “He’ll be out shortly.” There’s a long pause before the front door shuts again.

“How are you feeling?” I pull her on top of me and brush the hair out of her face.

“I don’t know,” she answers honestly as her teeth toy with her bottom lip. “I wish last night was it. That I’d wake up as a new person, but my mind is still racing and my insides feel like I’ve been splayed open.” Blinking back tears, she bites her cheek. “I feel like it’s going to be quite a journey.”

“I’ll be by your side through it all. You have a strong support team here.” I feel her tense, but she attempts to keep her poker face.

“Rhett’s waiting.” She sits up, rubbing her eyes. “I’ll make you some coffee while you shower.”

“Do I smell that bad?”

“If I can smell sex off of you, then Rhett and your team definitely will.” Laughing, she gets out of bed and pauses at her vanity, staring at the photos of her youth. “Thank you.” She rests her chin on her shoulder as she looks back at me. “I promise I’ll never throw sass your way again.”

“Don’t lie to yourself.” In a couple of strides, I’m by her side, staring down at her naked body. “You love driving me crazy with sass. I love acting on it too.” I feel my cock lengthen, but he’ll have to wait until later.

Arms wrapping around my neck, she presses her body against me. “How about I sass you in the shower and see how you respond?” Her leg slips between mine as her hip grinds against my cock.

“I’ll show you real stallion stamina.” Picking her up, I carry her to the bathroom and make good on my word.

An orgasm and shower later, I head out back to Rhett and the rest of the crew working away. Rhett raises an eyebrow at me, and for once doesn’t make a comment. I yawn and blink dramatically before giving the framing a once-over.

“I guess Emery’s praise wasn’t fake.” He chuckles.

“She broke down last night about everything,” I quietly admit. “I think this is finally the turning point for her.”

“I’m happy for her. She deserves a good guy like you.”

“She deserves to be happy for herself. If I’m the one to help her out, then my dream comes true too.” I clear my throat, not wanting to get choked up,

and pick up new drawings. “Man, Quinn just keeps adding more and more.” I look over the new design plans. “The town really approved of doubling the in-law suite?”

“With recent tourism and lack of hotels, she’s going to be renting this out.” Rhett eyes me carefully, and I know he’s pulled some strings with the council. “The town is on board with it.”

Running my hand through my damp hair, I blow out a heavy breath. “Fuck, we need to get our asses on the next project. We will start breaking ground next week.”

“Maybe some of us shouldn’t have late nights and shower at a client’s place.” He smirks and gives me a smartass look. “Showing up on time is important.” I roll my eyes.

“Hello again.” Emery emerges with two mugs and a sweet smile. “I made coffee for both of you.”

“Thank you.” Rhett accepts the mug, and Emery scurries off inside. “Dude, I’m happy for you, but remember you went on about us not having time for women?”

“We said not to hire anyone we’d want to sleep with. She is not a part of our company.” I shrug, taking a long sip.

“But she’s distracting you.” I pull myself away from staring at her patio door and realize he’s across the yard with his tools.

“No, she needs support.” Frustration grows as I make way over to him. “Are we supposed to stay single forever and only amount to completed jobs?”

“Alright, you have a point.” Rhett removes his shirt as the sun blazes, and my eyes zone in on his shoulder. “’Bout time you got laid.” He is mostly covered in tattoos, but I know those claw marks are fresh from a woman. “Fun time at the convention?”

“It was fine. It’s a good thing you hired a designer because I probably would have brought the one I banged home. City chicks are high maintenance, but this one was something different.” I watch his unreadable face go back to that night. The fact that he’d considered inviting a woman to his hometown has me intrigued.

“Ferocious in bed?” I chuckle.

“Oh, she really took me by surprise. This hookup was...different.” I’ve never seen him at a loss for words.

“How so?”

“I mean, we hooked up, but we talked a lot of the night.” Rhett stares ahead, still reliving the moment. “Laughed. She was easy to talk to. Her family isn’t as tight as mine and she couldn’t believe I have a goat soap company on the side with my mother.” He laughs, taking me by surprise that he’s actually had beyond a surface level conversation with a woman. “Didn’t even get her name.” He shakes his head before adjusting his hat out of habit. “Not that I need it after our one night.”

“Damn, she must have really left an impression on you.”

“I mean, no one is perfect. She did bitch about her four-hundred-dollar heels breaking.” He shakes his head. “Can you imagine spending that much money on one pair of shoes? And here I thought our steel-toed boots were overpriced.”

“But you wouldn’t be upset if you ever saw her at another convention.” I set the design plans aside.

“She went fucking feral over my accent.” He winks. “Minus the heel fiasco, she was actually well rounded and enjoyable. We didn’t sleep. We ordered room service at two in the morning.” He shrugs, unsure of himself for once. “Maybe I should have gotten her number. Not that it would matter.” A soft expression takes over his face as he stares at the pile of nails.

“Okay, now who’s getting distracted.” I shoot him a smug grin. “Knock that lovesick smile off your face and get to fucking work.” Rhett nods, huffing a laugh as he picks up a drill.

“I’m trying to give the guys a hand here until we have more crew to start,” Rhett says, still half in his own thoughts. “You go over to the next project and make sure everything is in order.”

“Will do.” Walking to my truck, I notice Quinn is now home. My heart pulls at me, wanting to head back in the house to check on Emery. Make sure she isn’t reverting back to her closed-off self. I spot them in the kitchen window, and Quinn moves forward, wrapping her niece in a hug. Safe to say, Emery is on her way to a new beginning. And she has a town full of people to stand by her through it all.

I get in my truck and head down the road, overthinking the worst that could happen. I can’t lose her again. I won’t. Lost in thought, I blink as I arrive at the trail for the falls. How the hell did I even end up here? I run my hands over my face, taking a deep breath. Looking at the clock on the dash, I realize how late it is. I don’t have time to think about my personal life right now. Putting the truck into reverse, I head to the next job.

The afternoon passes, drowning in phone calls to make sure projects and equipment are ready to go and getting an office ready for our new interior designer, who arrives soon. After last night, my heart feels uneasy.

Emery sits on my porch, staring out at the lake as I return home. I park the truck as she stands, walking toward me with a purposeful strut. My heart squeezes, hoping to see her like this every day.

Her arms wrap around my neck, and my hands slip into the back pockets of her jeans. Leaning forward, I taste her sweet smile, and her relaxed giggle travels into my mouth.

This is what coming home feels like.

“You just made my evening. I can definitely get used to this.” I pull back, but keep her waist pressed to mine. “Have you been waiting long?”

“Long enough to think clearly.” My stomach wavers with the uncertainty of her tone. “I brought groceries with me.” She steps back, and I let my hands slide out of her pockets instead of holding her close like I want to. “I thought we could cook together.” Her smile is as youthful and bright as it was to when I first met her. I guess I shouldn’t worry.

“I’d love that.” I press my lips to hers and take her hand toward the cabin. “How did your afternoon play out?” I sense her tension, and the stiffness in her walk. Looking ahead, she toys with her lips. “What’s on your mind, Daisy Girl?” She picks up the bag sitting by my door.

“I keep replaying yesterday and how different I want my life to be.” My heart grows until I watch her smile not meet her eyes. “I’ve lost a lot of years ignoring the pain.”

“But you’ve finally come around. I’ll be by your side to help you face it and hold you through it all.” I follow her into the kitchen as she sets the bag on the counter.

“I ran into Rhett. He gave me his mother’s fresh goat cheese and some eggs.” The light returns in her gaze. “I thought we could enjoy a frittata.”

“Look at you teaching *me* something in the kitchen.” I chuckle, resting my hand on her hips as I press a gentle kiss to her lips. “What’s a frittata?”

“In basic terms, a quiche without crust.” Emery’s arms wrap around my neck, kissing me once more. I will never get tired of this blissful affection. She pulls back, her hand playing with the back of my hair. “This all feels right.”

“Because it is.” With a kiss on the tip of her nose, I pull back and look at the ingredients. “I’m starving.”

“How about a mushroom and goat cheese omelette instead? Frittata will take about an hour.”

“I’m so damn proud of you, Emery.” I can feel the elation come over me. “Remember where you started when you learned to cook?” Nodding, her smile falters, looking at the food.

“I worked my butt off to get where I am today with cooking. I never gave up on that.” A realization comes over her. “I want to put the same effort into finding myself again.”

“I know anything you put your mind to will work out in your favor.” Emery nods again, turning to the drawers in search of utensils.

“Hold on to that encouragement, okay?” She sets cutting boards and two knives on the counter and shoots me a wink, blinking away this odd feeling hanging in the air. “You cut the mushrooms so I can sear them before adding in the peppers,” Emery instructs with a smile.

“You’re the boss of the kitchen.” Her eyes roll as she begins to slice peppers.

“Tell me about your day.” Emery glances at me with her side-eye and bumps my hip. “How are your projects coming along?”

“I hired a designer who is willing to relocate. She moves here in a few days.” Emery places her hand on my back as she passes me to turn on the stove. “I am looking forward to not having to think about color schemes and furniture and all that. I just hope she’s okay with the small-town life and doesn’t run back to the city.”

“I’m happy for you.” Bringing her hand to the back of my neck, she rises onto her tiptoes for a kiss. “You and Rhett must be so relieved.”

“I just hope he doesn’t sleep with her and make things complicated.” I have high hopes for his professionalism, but he will be living with her, and I know the charm he can front when he wants to nail a chick.

“I’m sure he’s going to take this seriously. He cares about you and the business.” She smiles up at me, and I grip my knife a little tighter to fight the urge to bend her over the counter.

“Thank you for believing in us.” Cooking carries on with ease, and our light banter and laughs continue through dinner. Moments like these are ones I’ll cherish. I cannot wait to make many more with her. Maybe one day, she’ll wear nothing but an apron. Finishing our meals, I bring our plates to the sink and walk back over to her.

“Dance with me.” I hold out my hand. My father’s old radio plays quietly

as Emery takes my hand and I pull her close.

“You’re quite charming, you know.” I dip her and hold her in position.

“I love you, Emery Davis.” It rolls off my tongue so freely.

“Don’t let me forget.” Her voice shakes, and I stand her upright. “I need to hold on to our moments like these.”

“I’m here for you.” My heart picks up its pace with the unease I sense coming from her again. “What’s going on in your pretty little mind?”

“My news might be better to share when I’m naked.” She’s deflecting, and my chest aches at her need to resort to sexualizing herself.

“You don’t need to bear skin to tell your truths to me. I see you and I’m here for you.” I give her hands a small squeeze.

“I need to go back to Aspen.” Her voice is hushed and pained. “This decision wasn’t easy and, believe me, I don’t want to go.” She swallows as her eyes glaze over and my heart pinches. This isn’t how it’s supposed to play out.

“Don’t do this to me, Daisy girl.” I take both her hands in mine as my stomach drops. “We both crossed the street.”

“I’m halfway there. I want to cross it.”

“I can help you.”

“You are. By letting me choose me right now, I’m choosing *you*.” She steps back, and I already miss her. “I have to do this to be able to fully give myself to you, Ian.”

“How long will you be gone?” My mind goes to calculating how I can go with her.

“The restaurant is depending on me to return in a couple of days.” I swallow and nod, questioning if *this* is the actual goodbye. “I need to secure and settle a few things before committing to forever in Beechwood Falls.” I can only nod as her hands come up to my jaw. “Hey, I’m yours. Time to put on the big girl pants and get my life back in order. Take the highroad and go for what I want.”

“Okay.” My mind screams, asking where this leaves us. “If this is what you need to do, then do it.” I can’t force her to stay.

“That’s it?” Her head cocks to the side, slightly puzzled.

“Yesterday took you for the ride of a lifetime. You’ve spent years building a life there. I know you have commitments in Aspen, and friends.”

“Not entirely. My best friend is still in Europe.” She shrugs, as if that’s the only thing that kept her there.

“I can fly her out here to see you.” There’s nothing I won’t do for this woman.

“Money isn’t a problem for her.” She laughs, looking out at the trees lining the lake with a softened gaze. “If my gut is right, she’s fated for one of the local billionaires.”

“Do you feel fated to me?” Do I want an honest answer?

“Are you worried I won’t come back?” The taunt in her voice makes me feel a little more relaxed.

My phone starts ringing on the counter, pulling both our eyes in the direction. I want to ignore it. I want to focus on Emery and what’s about to happen with us.

“What if it’s your niece?”

“She prefers texting.” I walk over to the island and pick up my phone, quickly swiping to answer and shoot Emery and questionable look.

“Hey, Chickpea,” I’m so distracted by my moment with Emery that I’m half paying attention when I answer.

“Can you come get me at the lake by The Falls?” That snaps me into focus. I can hear loud music and people partying in the background.

“Are you safe?” That captures Emery’s full attention as her eyes widen.

“Right now, yeah. I just don’t want to be around this crowd of teenagers.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Stay on the phone with me.” I put her on speakerphone. Teenagers partying by the lake is nothing new, but my twelve-year-old niece should not be there. I know the type of shit that goes down. I used to be one of the partiers.

“It’s not life-or-death, Uncle Ian.” I grab my keys as Emery slips on her shoes.

“I’m coming with you,” she whisper-yells, and in my panic I nod as we head to my truck.

“How’d you end up there?” I break the speed limit once I hit the dirt road. Today is just hammering me with negative emotions.

“Mom’s new guy has a sixteen-year-old daughter, and she brought us here so our parents could have alone time.” At least Sophie is out of the house, but I don’t know which location is worse.

“I’m almost there.” I hear the crowd through the car speaker and Emery places her hand on the back of my neck. Her thumb rubs down the side, trying to soothe my stress, but remains quiet. I’ve barely had a second to

process what we are going through, and now family drama occurs. Last time this happened, it only fueled her to stay out of the way.

“I’m here for you.” Her voice is low as she squeezes the back of my neck. I *want* to believe her. We continue down the road until I spot my niece. Hanging up, she runs over to the truck and climbs in the back.

“I’m sorry.” Her panicked voice fills the car. “She seemed cool, and I didn’t think the lake would be this bad.” As her eyes swing to Emery, a look of embarrassment comes over Sophie’s face.

“Which girl brought you?” I unbuckle my seatbelt, scanning the group, ready to chew this girl out.

“That doesn’t matter. She won’t get in trouble by her father anyway.” Sophie has a point, but the parental instinct in me wants to know why the fuck she brought a twelve-year-old to the lake to drink with older guys.

“I’d still like a word with her.”

“Please, don’t embarrass me. Some kids from my grade are here,” she pleads. “I’m a big rule follower. The odd one out.”

“But I know you know how to make good choices, Soph. You should have called before you left the house. I would have picked you up.”

“You’ve been busy working and hanging out with Emery.” She looks my way with a face full of guilt. “Hey, Emery. I knew you two had something going on.” Now is not the time to focus on Emery.

“You don’t put yourself in these situations so I can have time with your uncle.” A stern, parental-like tone takes me off guard as Emery speaks. “Your well-being and safety trump everything.” I blink, as stunned as my niece.

“I’m always here for you. No matter what, Sophie.” I open the windows as we pull away. “You reek of dope.”

“Yeah, she kept coming over, asking if I wanted a joint or vodka. And her boyfriend’s friend kept trying to give me beer.” My grip tightens on the wheel, and I fight everything to not drive back and throw some punches. But their parents are aware of what these kids are up to and turn a blind eye. Hell, I was drinking with my friends at the lake at sixteen, but never around goddamn preteens.

“Thank you for calling me.”

“You’re not mad?”

“A bit disappointed, but I’m relieved nothing happened to you.” If anyone fucking touched her, it would be *me* going to jail. “Did you plan to drink and smoke?”

“No! I’m not my mother.” She scoffs, offended. “I’m sure I was created at one of these parties. I tagged along because I thought it would be fun to meet new people.” She sighs and looks out the window.

“You’re twelve,” Emery scolds, but a tad of hurt cuts through her voice. “You should be having a sleepover with friends or having a girl’s night in with your mom.”

“Right. A mommy and me girls’ night.” Sophie laughs and my heart drops through my body. “I’m old enough to be alone. My mom would leave me home all night if she knew my uncle wouldn’t chew her out for it.” She huffs, and I glance at Emery who gnaws on her cheek and anxiously picking her nail beds. “I thought older kids might be more mature.” She just wants to fit in. The non-party kids are far and few in this small town and the ones that surround it.

“Age isn’t maturity,” I grit out, turning onto my road.

“Can I stay with you? I don’t want to interrupt your night together.” Emery’s head whips back, and I step in before her unpredictable self goes off on my niece.

“You’re damn right you’re staying at my place.” If there is a guy staying at her house, I’m not dropping Sophie off.

“I wish your cabin had two bedrooms.”

“The pull-out couch isn’t that uncomfortable. And I know you’ll be safe.” My sister isn’t a hands-on parent, but Sophie is usually not involved with the men my sister associates with. I wonder how great my sister’s judgement has been lately if she’s no longer caring where her daughter takes off to. The situation sucks, but my sister would probably flip her shit if I mention Sophie spending more time with me. As if I’m taking her sweet baby away.

“Is it that bad at home?” Emery asks, but it sounds more like she thought out loud.

“No, she’s gone most of the day for work. I know you are busy with work, too, Uncle Ian, but evenings are when she drinks, sits on the couch, and goes on about how hard it is to find me a father who will stay long term.” Her sigh tugs at my heart, and her eyes meet mine in the mirror. “And weekends are usually spent with you.”

We pull up to the cabin, and when she hops out of the truck, I wrap her in a big hug. “Thank you for calling me for help. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thank you for always being here for me,” Sophie says as we walk up to my place. “I’m not settling for a guy who treats me any less than you do.”

“You better promise me and yourself that, Chickpea.” She nods and gives Emery a shy smile.

“One more thing.” Emery gets her attention. “You’re a smart girl. I’m proud of you for recognizing that you needed out of the situation.” Who is this woman standing beside me?

“You’re going to make a great dad, Uncle Ian.” Sophie walks inside, closing the door behind her. I don’t know why her statement suddenly chokes me up, but I feel the lump immediately form in my throat. Turning my head from Emery, I take a seat on the front porch swing and try to process this evening. I’d love to be a father someday. I’d love to have an excited child running around this property. Spending their day jumping off the dock, splashing about with laughter, and in the evening, chase lightning bugs in between making s’mores around the fire. But in years to come. Sophie’s home life could be better, but she’s still taken care of. And is Emery even going to come back knowing how badly my niece needs me right now?

“Ian.” She stands in front of me, her hand finding home under my chin, tilting my head up. “You need to step up and take her in.” I blink, wondering if I heard her correctly. “Her mother isn’t even caring what her daughter is up to. You know tonight could have ended a lot differently if Sophie tried to fit in.”

“I don’t have room for her yet. She’s getting older and needs her own privacy.” Sophie comes first over anyone. But God, I want Emery and having Sophie and I as a packaged deal is a lot to ask from a woman who is just now trying to confront her own trauma. Emery holds my gaze, pushing me back onto the chair and straddling me. Her hands hold my face, but I know this is not leading to a kiss.

“It’s not difficult to extend a hallway. You can add another bathroom and soundproof the bedroom for her.” Emery smirks, a devilish glint in her eyes. “You know, to keep her out of earshot while adult things happen between me and you.” Air vacates my lungs at her statement. She’s not running scared, and is talking about our future...including my niece.

“Emery, I—”

“No, listen to me. I don’t want to leave.” Her voice breaks as her lips quivers. “Especially now, because I want to be here for you. You need to get a lawyer and sort this shit out. Stop worrying about me. She’s your focus. I’m a big girl.”

“Asking you to step up with me for her is a lot.”

“You’re not asking. I’m telling that if you’re my future, then so is she.” My eyes sting as I try to find words. Emery is stepping up for me. Saying everything I need to hear. It’s overwhelming and everything I need.

“I’ll do what I can for Sophie.” Emery leans down and gently presses her lips to mine. “Are you staying tonight?”

“That wouldn’t set a good example right now. You have some serious talking to do tonight.” She’s right. “But”—she thinks for a brief moment before speaking again—“if I face my fear of flying again, I can stay a few more days to support you.”

“Emery, I love you. I don’t want to be away from you, but I think the drive back to Aspen is what your mind needs to process everything.” Her sharp inhale and tensing of her body tell me I’m right. “It’s okay.” Her eyes blink back tears as she nods. “I believe that you’ll return.”

“I will.” She lets her tears fall freely, dropping onto my arms holding her hips. “This is so hard to do.” Climbing off of me, she glances through the window. “I gotta go.” Standing, I engulf her in a tight hug as if it’s the last time I’ll ever see her. The squeeze of my heart is brutal, but I have to let her go.

“You are so strong, Emery Davis. I can’t wait to have you back in my arms.”

She wipes her teary cheeks, gives me a soft kiss on the lips, and I follow her down the steps to her car.

“Drive safe.” I can barely swallow.

“Always do.” She pulls away, and I say a silent prayer I will see her again.

CHAPTER 22

EMERY

“DID you meet with the bank yet?” Josie’s voice through the speaker makes me feel a little less alone.

“This afternoon.” I feel giddy, yet I’m shaking with nerves. “I don’t know how I’m going to sleep tonight.” I force a laugh, hoping everything lines up the way I need it to.

“Come on, your game plan is golden, Em,” Josie encourages before falling quiet. “I have no doubt the bank and everyone else won’t say no. If they do, I know Emmett would be happy to help out.” Her hurt comes through the strain in her voice. Her billionaire ex-boyfriend—or not entirely ex—would be willing to help, no doubt. But I want to try to do this on my own.

“I know it hurts, Josie.” I relax into my chair overlooking the mountains of Aspen and listen to my other best friend go on about her broken heart. “You know that you also need to put yourself first.”

“Well, I had the bright idea to fake date him and then fall in love with him.” She huffs.

“He loves you too. Sometimes, things need to take a detour in order to get back together. It wrecked me leaving Beechwood Falls.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat. “I cried myself to sleep the first two nights back here in Aspen.” It’s now been five days, and thinking about life back home chokes me up.

“Then just go. The restaurant can cover your shifts,” Josie says, helping me understand her boyfriend Emmett’s point of view a lot more. Putting her first isn’t easy for him either.

“I have a therapy appointment soon, so I’ll talk to you tomorrow if I have

time.” I glance at the clock. “I gave the restaurant my notice before I even arrived back here. But they’re counting on me to make sure the new chef is ready to take over.”

“Making me proud! Look at you go!” I swear I can hear her smile. “I’m glad you’re going all in with changing your life up. Though, I didn’t realize how deep your trauma went.”

“I hid it all too well. I want to make this work, and I miss home. This is what I need to do to in order to be confident in my next step in life.” My smile grows, knowing what I have been working my ass off with to accomplish it.

“I’m happy for you, Em.” Josie yawns. “Enjoy your therapy session. I’m off to bed.”

We hang up as silence takes over my apartment. My eyes pull to the bottle of wine I’m not even tempted to open. I’m not sure how I was so set in the routine of work, brunch with friends, and drinking the night away in bedrooms of different men. It spins my brain, how set in my ways of coping I had been. This week has been non-stop with busting my ass at work, business meetings, and getting things in order for the future I want most. My phone dings as I open my laptop to sign into therapy.

Ian: Miss you. Call tonight if you aren’t working late. I’m still hard thinking about our video chat from last night.

I feel my cheeks heat as I replay how hot things got. Watching him stroke himself as I got myself off has only fueled me to keep going forward. He demanded I called out his name for Aspen to hear and I was more than happy to do so.

Me: I have work quite late tonight. I’ll give you a call in an hour or so. Xo

Ian: Sounds good my daisy girl. I love you.

My thumbs hover over the letters I’ll one day be able to type. The ones I feel, but haven’t been able to speak out loud. I want to go back to Beechwood Falls and spend my life waking up in Ian’s arms. But holding everything in, and pretending life is dandy, won’t help me in the long run. My heart races as I stare at my laptop, knowing the next hour isn’t going to be easy. The past three therapy sessions have had me wanting to call into work and forget the

world. But I've already been able to acknowledge my faults and am not running to alcohol or men like I used to. Work and the people I care about are counting on me. *I'm counting on me.*

Today I'm still diving into the fact that I don't have many happy memories past the age of twelve. My needs were met in the sense of having a warm house, food, and the basics, but my parents took time with me for granted. Or maybe I was unwanted. Sophie has been playing on my mind, and I can't help want to reach out to her. To be what she needs. I should be thankful for the happy childhood and just accept that they did their best. My mother would have flipped if she found out I had been hanging out at the lake at Sophie's age. She cared in that sense. There's a lot going through my brain and my eyes tear up before the video call with my therapist begins. I take a deep breath and try to pull myself together so she doesn't watch me cry for the first fifteen minutes, like the last appointment. But today feels like it's going to be the same, and that's okay.

After ten minutes of the call are spent in tears, I manage to get through the next hour talking about my childhood. Except I don't feel any lighter this time.

Pushing through it, I need to leave for the bank in twenty minutes and told Ian I'd give him a call. Eventually, I'll rest, and it will be in Ian's arms, completely exhausted from orgasms. So, for right now, I'm forcing myself to carry on with this work shift. I need to get this new chef trained.

"Hello, my beautiful." His voice is extra chipper, and I can picture his smile through the phone. I open my mouth to reply, but tears begin streaming down my face. "Emery?" His voice softens. Squeezing my eyes shut, I sniffle with a hiccup. "Awe, baby, how can I help those tears stop?"

"They'll get better each day that I put the work into myself." I wipe my eyes.

"You are amazing. I know this isn't easy for you."

"Diving into my childhood wasn't easy today." I shrug, even though he can't see me. "How is work going?"

"It's going really well. His voice is at ease as he continues to fill me in on what I've been missing in Beechwood Falls.

"One day soon, I'll be back there and get to talk to your face. I have an appointment I need to get to, and this next week is busy." I hear him sigh on the other line. "I know, it sucks that I can't give you an exact date, but please hold on for me."

“I’m yours, Daisy Girl.”

We hang up, and I pull myself together before walking down the street to the bank. I smile the entire way, ready to take on whatever life can give me.

My meeting goes smoothly and I am beyond psyched for what I’m able to put into action in the next few weeks. Even though sleep will be non-existent, it will be worth it.

CHAPTER 23

IAN

“CELL SERVICE IS spotty out here, but the internet works fine.” I unlock the bachelor suite on top of Rhett’s garage for our new interior designer. “Rhett has a side project he’s working on today.” Something last minute for a family friend he didn’t give much detail about. We are already crunching for time, but he was so passionate about taking on this quick project in the next town over. “He should be home around five to feed his goats and show you around.” Tori’s dark brown eyes widen as she sets her designer purse on the counter.

“Goats?” She walks to the front window. “Will they charge at me?”

“You should be fine. They’re pretty playful, but they won’t hurt you.” She nods quickly, and I can sense the unease. “Look, Tori, I know this is new for you and a big change from Los Angeles.” Not to mention, a big life change for someone in their mid-twenties, but she was so confident through the interviews. “Give it time. My girlfriend and her friends are very welcoming, and I know you’re going to fit right in with them.” That was the first time I’ve referenced Emery as my girlfriend, and it pulls my lips into a smile.

“This town is so small. It feels like a Hallmark movie.” Her face softens as she walks back over to the counter. “That’s what sold me on this job. The location is refreshing. Something I’ve always longed for.” I don’t push for her motive in escaping her life, but I see there is a story to be told.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place for that. Rhett is a great guy and a sappy suck for his goats.” Completely contradicting his large, broody self. “There’s a mini fridge, but no actual kitchen, as you can see.” A small island holds a fruit bowl and toaster oven.

“I’m fine with that. I don’t really cook.” She points to the right and laughs. “As long as I have my own bathroom, all is well.”

“There’s no food delivery to Rhett’s place like you have in the city, but there are plenty of people in town who’d be willing to have you over for dinner.” She shrugs with a smile. “There’s an outdoor kitchen out back, and you can share Rhett’s in the house.”

“Thanks. Maybe I’ll pay him to make me dinner.” Tori shoots me a wink with her almond-shaped eyes, and I wonder with how attractive she is if it will tempt Rhett to break the *no fucking this employee* rule we made.

“I’m sure he’d have no problem throwing an extra steak on the grill for you.” I give her the basic rundown of the place and answer any questions. “I’ll bring up your last suitcase and you can get settled in. We can have a meeting Monday morning and go over everything to come for the week.”

“I should probably buy some different clothing.” She eyes me up and down in my Carharts and black tee. “I only have business attire, mostly. I’d like to fit in with this town, and after seeing the more casual attire as I drove downtown.” She tilts her head as her perfectly curled hair bounces. “I’m definitely the odd one out.”

“I’ll give your number to a few girls, if that’s okay? Savannah is really sweet and would enjoy showing you around. She owns the dance studio here.”

“That would be great. I don’t want to be any trouble, though.”

“Tori, people in this town are always here to help. Savannah is one of my girlfriend’s best friends and would happily take you shopping.”

“I guess that’s cool.” It might take time warming Tori up to everyone *treating you like you are family after just introducing yourself*, but hey, she wanted the small-town Hallmark movie experience. “Thank you, Ian.”

“Thank you. We’re looking forward to working with you.” She was a blessing to this company, and her knowledge is going to be handy with our upcoming projects.

I see myself out and head to the job site. Pulling out my phone as I arrive, I smile, staring at the incoming voice memo from Emery. I’m glad she is doing well and sorting things out, but I miss her. It’s been an adjustment not being in the same time zone and having different work schedules. But she’s worth the wait. I step out of my truck and busy myself well into overtime to keep my mind off when she’ll return.

CHAPTER 24

EMERY

“EVERYTHING IS LOOKING GREAT ON PAPER.” I smile over FaceTime as spreadsheets fill up my kitchen table. “I love the 3D designs Tori emailed as well.”

“You know, she came into town ready to work.” Rhett’s eyes hold a hint of admiration. “I didn’t explain this secret side project before she agreed to work overtime.” He shakes his head. “I only opened with ‘*a friend of mine needs help.*’”

“I think she’s going to fit in well.” My hand covers my mouth as a yawn takes over. This second week in Aspen has allotted no more than three to four hours of sleep each night, but I’m welcoming it with open arms. Leasing a building and getting a business set up in a short time frame has been chaotic. I’m so thankful for the bank and everyone working so hard to help me get my new bistro ready. My laser focus has had me temporarily halt me reaching out to anyone besides my work team. Rhett’s face softens, reading my guilty *missing Ian* face.

“It’s been a crazy time for you.” We haven’t spoken much beyond business plans. “How are you feeling about all of this?”

“I feel like I am no longer scared of doing the things that will help me.” I smile, and it’s finally not weighted with pain. “I’m on the right path and confident enough to begin another chapter of life.”

“We are doing everything we can to have things ready for when you’ve finished training your replacement.” He clears his throat. “I’m proud of you. But please give Ian a call. The man’s been trying to keep busy and not talk about what you could possibly be doing at random moments in the day.”

“I will. I feel bad for keeping this from him, but I want the moment he

realizes I'm back in town for good to be perfect."

"I can keep him busy for the next few days. We still need to get a few things built for you." His eyes narrow in on something off to the side as he scans up and down. Clearly distractible at this moment, he readjusts his hat and blinks back to focusing on the screen.

"It doesn't have to be perfect, Rhett. Coming home to freshly painted walls is enough." I don't expect the designs to be put into action right away.

"Oh yes, it does." Tori's voice comes through the phone. "Hello, Emery." Was that Rhett's distraction?

"Hey, girl!" My voice becomes chipper as she walks into the frame. Rhett stiffens as she places her hand on the table, leaning over to see me. "I owe you an extra fancy meal on top of your pay for this." I bite back a smirk, never seeing Rhett fight to keep his eyes off a woman.

"I can't wait. I am no cook." She laughs, nodding toward Rhett as her curls brush his face. "Whoops, sorry," she apologizes, and he sits back, swallowing thickly. "Rhett does most of the cooking for us."

I wonder if Ian is picking up on the tension.

"I appreciate your hard work," I say, glancing at the time. "I have another therapy session, and then need to head to work." I attempt to make eye contact with Rhett through the screen. "And I'll call Ian."

"See you soon, Emery." Tori waves with a bright smile before hanging up.

My therapy session ended in tears once again. Emotionally exhausted is an understatement, but I've got years of tears that need to fall. The kitchen ran smoothly tonight, and I didn't need to step in. My replacement should be good without me, which means heading home is only days away. My heavy weight of missing Ian is almost at the end. I can't wait to be in his arms. It's just after eleven here, but I pull out my phone. It goes to voicemail and my heart sinks. But I don't expect him to answer at one in the morning his time.

I'm wired with adrenaline, and being alone in my apartment just isn't what I need right now. I bundle up and walk across the street. Entering the cozy log cabin style lounge of the Wheaton Hotel, I take a seat at the bar. Clyde, my friend, who only this past summer I decided to hook up with on occasion, greets me. I'm surprised I haven't run into him yet, with Aspen being a small town, and us both being night owls.

"I heard you were back in town." He nods as his cool and relaxed attitude calms me.

“Let me guess, Josie?” His eyes squint, and I can’t fight the small blush on my cheeks. I had a thing for Chad Michael Murray back in the day, and Clyde could pass as his brother.

“Yeah, but she didn’t fill me in how your trip home was.” He reaches under the counter and sets a shot glass in front of me. “The usual?”

“Just a water is fine, actually.” Raising his eyebrows, he smiles with approval. “Looks like your hometown did you some good.”

“Boy, do I have a lot to catch you up on.” I spend the next little bit filling him in on the last month in between customers.

“Em, you need to leave as soon as you can.” He folds his hands in front of me. “I’m happy for you. Good for you for finally taking initiative and facing everything.”

“Am I crazy, though?” I lean forward. “It took a month, and all I want is him for the rest of my life.” I know what I want, and I’m finally going for it, but my heart races as I begin to question my sanity for how fast this all happened. “Am I moving too fast?”

“It wasn’t a month, Emery. It was years in the making.” His gaze rests on the water glass. “I’d like to have a woman gush about me one day.” His comment takes me by surprise, because Clyde has never given a one-woman vibe. He’s perfected the hipster bartender who lives as a ski bum, and fucks all the tourists. He pushes back on the counter, arms full extended, and laughs at my expression. “I know, I know. But I don’t want this style for the rest of my life. It’s time I grow up.”

“That’s quite the epiphany.” He nods in agreement, running a hand through his hair. “Hey, ski season is coming up, and you know the town hires a lot more employees. Maybe you’ll meet someone.”

“Maybe. You look exhausted, but there’s a different spark to you.” He studies me. “There’s this softness to your face that wasn’t there before. An innocence.”

“I suppressed shit for way too long.” My teeth tug on my lip. “I should have started therapy years ago.”

“Or it wasn’t the right time. Things seem to be lining up for you now.” I shrug, but can’t help but wonder where life would have taken me years ago. I probably would have been happy, but maybe not with Ian, and that also pains me. “I’m sorry, Emery.” Clyde snaps me back into focus. “I know you and I both have our issues, but I should have been the guy to have you acknowledge how closed off you are, not take advantage of your body.” He

pours himself a shot.

“Hey, you didn’t take advantage. I put it out there.” He shakes his head, still holding slight regret as he clinks his shot glass with my water.

“How’s the project coming along?”

“A lot quicker than I thought, thankfully.” My phone dings just as a customer waves Clyde over. My heart flips with hopes that Ian is awake. I pull out my phone.

Savannah: Tori can’t wait to hang out with you.

Savannah: Hallie hasn’t gone out much since she’s been super sick with the pregnancy. Love youuu <3

Warmth washes over me, glad how Tori is fitting in. I stare at the attached photo of her, Hallie, and Tori, at The Painted Pony. Tori smiles sweetly with her almond-shaped brown eyes drawing all the focus to. I wonder if everyone from Los Angeles looks like they could be models or actresses. Her dark features are gorgeous, and her smile is radiant, brightening her sultry eyes. I feel any woman could develop a girl crush on her. Which has me wondering how Rhett is keeping himself in line, having to work and live with her.

Me: Poor thing! I was talking to Tori earlier. She seems great.

Me: Love you too. Also! What are doing up at this hour?

Savannah: I was watching Brielle at Tyler’s house. He had some last minute work emergency and just got home...I felt weird spending the night on his couch.

Me: Or test the fire between you ;)

Savannah: Not there.

She can deny it all she wants for now, but I see sparks fly. The bar gets busy, so I say goodbye to Clyde and head back to my place. I’m finally in the home stretch of leaving this place, and I couldn’t be happier. All this self-reflecting the past two weeks has done me good. I enter my warm apartment and my eyes feel as heavy as my exhaustion. Shedding my clothes on the way to my bed, my phone goes off again.

Ian: I was chopping wood and had my phone inside. I love you.
If you're still up, can you call?

I tap the call button.

"Hey," I yawn as my voice cracks.

"Did I wake you?" I smile, relaxing into my bed, wishing his arms were around me.

"No, but I'm close to falling asleep." There's a pause, and I can almost hear the sadness in the silence. "I miss you, Ian. I can't wait to cuddle up to you." I yawn again as my body quickly shuts down from the emotional day.

"Every day is one day closer."

"Exactly." My brain can't form more words, and I feel a sharp pinch in my chest, unable to give him my full attention right now. "I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"How are things with Sophie?" Concern fills my voice, wanting Sophie to be in proper hands. "What has Hallie said about you getting guardianship over her?" It's quite convenient having Hallie specialize in what Ian needs.

"I briefed her, but I'd rather talk to my sister first and try to settle things that way." Yeah, now I'm fully awake.

"Ian, please take this seriously. If something had happened to Sophie at the lake, you would literally be in jail right now." My teeth clench as my heart thuds in my ears. "You need to ensure your sister doesn't get the chance to put Sophie's safety second again."

"Soph has been with me most nights after school this past week." His voice is hushed. "Amber seemed to enjoy having her out of the house."

"That hurts my heart." I'm glad Sophie has Ian, but I wish her mother stepped up.

"Yeah, my sis didn't reach out any day this week to her daughter." He huffs in frustration, and I want to hug him—but also shake him. "You're right. Sophie needs a proper parent, and I'm the one to be there for her."

"It's going to be an adjustment, but I believe in you. Call Hallie tomorrow and get the ball rolling."

"Yes, ma'am." He keeps a serious tone and then pauses. I give him a moment to collect his thoughts. "I want you to know that I still want you." I know he's getting triggered from the last time a family crisis happened. That was part of why I took off so he could focus on his father.

"This isn't like before, Ian." My voice wavers, stomach clenching that he still doesn't fully trust I'll return. "I'm coming for you shortly. Let me be

there to support you too.” A lump in my throat grows, longing to be there now.

“If I start the plans to build a room for Sophie, the guys and I should be able to have something ready to for her by next month.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing the finished product. I’ll be home before it’s done. How are Tori and Rhett doing?”

“Tori knows her design and is really personable with the clients. I think once she gets a bit more settled into country life, this will be a great place for her.”

“I’m excited to meet her. Savannah says they’re a lot alike.” I smile.

“Tori has a bit more bite than Savannah when it comes to proving a point. If Tori knows she is right about something and can back it up, she’s going at it full force.”

“Oh boy. And Rhett is the same.” A giggle sounds through my chest as I picture them arguing. “Have you needed to be the middleman?”

“Surprisingly, no. They’re both extremely professional at work and try to talk things out. They each control different parts of the project. Tori is just a neat freak and gets annoyed with Rhett’s tools laying around.” He clears his throat. “It’s almost like they want to avoid each other and me right now. Something is up, but I don’t feel like it’s them sleeping together.” I bite my tongue, feeling slightly guilty about the things I am keeping from him. “But if they argue at his farm, I wouldn’t know.” I yawn and try to hide it.

He makes a kissing sound through the phone. “Anyway, I’ll let you sleep. Sweet dreams, my love.”

“I’ll be dreaming of you.” I end the call, and to my surprise, I get a full six hours of sleep that night.

CHAPTER 25

IAN

“DUDE, YOU’RE AN HOUR LATE,” our buddy Tyler calls out as Rhett walks around the back of the house. “We ate already, but there’re burger patties if you want to throw them on the grill.”

“Yeah, I was *starving*,” Brielle, Tyler’s six-year-old daughter, yells from her trampoline.

“I, uh, got caught up with Tori.” Rhett avoids my eyes, and I instantly jump to conclusions. “We took on this side project two weeks ago for the next town over. We should be finishing up soon.”

“*Caught up* spoken in a suspicious tone?” I shake my head, glaring at him. “You better not have fucked her.”

“Language,” Tyler throws out in the direction of his daughter.

“Sorry.” I cringe, forgetting there are little ears present. “It’s not often we meet at your place with her around.”

“Well, my parents are on vacation right now, so I’ve had to shift work hours, and Savannah is busy with Tori tonight.”

“Man, Tori is a hot piece of...butt,” Dax pipes up. “City girl has those toned legs you only get from heels.”

“Savannah has toned legs, and she doesn’t wear heels,” Tyler mentions as we turn our attention to him. “I mean-I’m just saying, if someone works out...they have toned legs,” he stammers, eyes averting ours. “Look at all of us. We are all really fit because we work for it.”

“Dude, you need to get back in the dating world.” Dax chuckles, tipping the neck of his beer bottle toward him. “Savannah is my cousin, though, so keep those dirty thoughts to yourself.”

“There aren’t *any* thoughts.” Tyler shakes his head and looks over at his

daughter.

“Back to Rhett, please,” I cut in. “Didn’t you say the project is wrapping up soon?”

“Yeah, a friend of mine wants part of a bakery redone.” Rhett sips his beer before continuing. “We have been pulling long nights, so if you’re able to make a few things for it, that would be helpful.”

“Sure.” I shrug. “It’s not like I’m sleeping much.”

“Tori has the color palette and layout. I’ll have her call you about the style and stain to use tomorrow.”

“I’ll build the stuff this weekend. Tell your friend to make some goodies for us.” It’s been a while since I ventured to the next town over, and I know a couple of places there have great pastries.

“Perfect.” He smirks and takes out his phone.

“What’s it like living with her?” Dax asks, throwing another burger on the grill for himself.

“She’s not in my house, but we share the balcony that leads to her attached living space. Miss California only watches the goats from afar, and when the chickens came near her and flapped their wings, her scream was blood-curdling.” Rhett assembles his burgers and shakes his head. “She’s pretty on the eyes, but there isn’t an ounce of country in her besides the cowboy boots on her feet and songs coming out of her radio.”

“And when *you* eventually get inside her.” Dax grins, eyeing me on purpose.

“Nah, I’m behaving with this one,” Rhett thankfully replies.

“We have a strict rule for a good reason, and you know that, Dax.”

“I’m going to head out.” I see my Emery’s name flash across the screen. “This is a lovely surprise.” I smile as I climb into my truck. “shouldn’t you be at work?”

“The new chef is doing well, so I figured I’d take a step back and give you a quick call.” My chest warms. “I miss you.”

“I miss you more than you know, Daisy Girl.”

“I miss you more.” I hear chattering in the background and my heart sinks. “I gotta get back to the kitchen, but I will send you a text when I finish work. Say hi to Sophie for me.”

“I love you.” One day she’ll say it back.

“I can’t wait to do life with you.” The line goes dead, but her words are promising and keep me believing in us. That Emery will return. I let a sigh of

relief go and loosen my grip on the wheel. She's lit the fire in me to file for custody of my niece, and I know one day she'll be by my side stepping up as the second parent. I make my way down the country road, looking for a shooting star. Is wanting a phone call to last longer than a few minutes with Emery or her back in my arms too much to ask for?

My phone goes off five hours later, waking me, but it's Tori with the design details. I check my phone one more time and sigh. I know things are still great between us, but I can't wait until she is back here and can consistently talk—face to face. I send her a loving voice memo for the morning, then go over the design email Tori sent my way for the project they're working on. I should have everything built this weekend if I can't sleep. Time will pass quicker anyway if I'm busy around the clock.

CHAPTER 26

IAN

Daisy Girl: <3

I BLINK down at the short answer text as my gut wavers with uncertainty. The past few days have been nothing but short answers or emojis from Emery when she responds. The first two weeks we consistently talked and had sexy video chats that were next level mind-blowing. I don't want to doubt her pulling away because I hear how happy she is to be making it possible to return here. Now, I've been shut in the dark and left with quick texts or a five-minute phone call before she has something come up.

"Damn, Ian." Rhett enters the shop with wide eyes. "Did you even sleep?" I set the staining brush aside and look at the six bar chairs, a few dessert trays, and a coffee bar unit.

"It's been a sleepless few nights, but I need to keep my mind busy." I shrug, proud of myself for making this order in record time.

"The owner will be amazed at how quickly you got these built. Tori is with the client right now, getting things set up." Rhett rolls up his sleeves and gives the builds a once-over. "I know we have a bunch of things going on, but the payout for this project was impossible to refuse."

"I don't care about the money. This side project has been a stress outlet." I pick up two stools and walk them toward the door. "Everything is ready to go, except that last chair if you're bringing it over." My heart squeezes, wishing it was Emery who was back in town, asking us to help set up her bistro.

"Any updates with Emery?" Rhett reads my face and readjusts his hat. It's then my eyes catch the halfmoon nail marks on his forearm.

“She’s been short with me this weekend, and I can’t help but worry she’ll eventually phase out our texts altogether.” I hate the vulnerability in my voice, but I can’t help it. His hand smooths over the top of a chair as I get a better look. “Forearm marks look fresh.” I don’t remember him mentioning a hookup this weekend.

“Uhhh, yeah.” He turns to glance at the half moon marks adding more detail to his tattoos. “Tori had a freakout trying to feed the chickens with me this morning.” His one cheek sucks in and, for once, I can’t read him. “She’s *trying* to be country, but a couple of wing flaps had her clinging to me for dear life again.”

“At least she’s trying to fit in. This transition can’t be easy for her. Show her the romanticized version of a small town. Not the dirty farm work.” I pause, meeting his eyes.

“I’m not the romantic type, Ian. That sounds like *The Notebook* date shit.” Rhett glances at the woodwork with a deep breath, then turns back to me. “Fine, I’ll give Miss California a movie-worthy experience.”

“She needs to fall in love with this town and never want to leave.” Or at least stick around until Sophie learns enough about design to start working for us.

“Look, Savannah and Tori have hit it off as friends. I don’t need Tori falling for *me* if I put all this effort into these so-called dates.” This guy is allergic to being with a woman beyond a casual hookup.

“It’s so damn strange that you aren’t already in a stable relationship, considering your family is so close and your parents are each other’s world.” I’ve never been able to figure out why he doesn’t want the family life.

“I’m what they call career driven, I guess.” He shrugs, checking to see how tacky the stain is on the chair. “Trust Emery, man. Working on herself is probably keeping her busy.” I don’t bother responding as my mind wonders if two and a half weeks out of this town has had her falling back into life in Aspen. “I’m going to deliver these pieces, and I’ll be back to pick you up for the walk-through of an older building downtown. Someone just leased one.”

“Yep. Beechwood Falls is growing and all.”

“Only in the summer. You know this town deserves to have the life it once had restored.” He has a point.

“I know. Go deliver those, and I’ll be ready when you get back.”

I help Rhett load the items into the work trailer and pull out my phone as he drives off. I’m two hours ahead of Emery, but she should be up, even if

she worked late last night.

“Thank you for still holding on to us.” Her voice is winded but sweet as she answers on the third ring. “I have missed your voice more than you know.”

“Well, that was the sweetest hello.” A smile stretches across my face, and I relax against the shop’s exterior. “You’re helping yourself, Daisy Girl. Of course you’re worth the wait.”

“I’m doing what I can to see you again,” Emery says, sounding distracted as I hear a whispered voice in the background.

“When will that be?” The fact that she hasn’t given a date to her return still makes me a bit uneasy. I want her in my arms. I want to be counting down the days until she returns.

“When everything plays out how I’ve planned it to.” A heavy car door slams and there’s a long pause. “I gotta let you go. My work order just arrived.”

“You’re at work early on a Sunday.” I head toward the back of the shop where my ax and wood block are. It’s late afternoon here, but chopping wood will pass the time while I wait for Rhett to return in an hour or so.

“I am. I’ll talk to you later. I promise.”

“I can’t wait to hear about your day. I love you.”

Mid October has finally graced us with cooler weather, but the way I’m stress chopping this wood, it’s still not cool enough. Rhett’s truck pulls into our shop twenty minutes later, his head already shaking with disapproval. Tori sits shotgun with curled brown locks, a full face of makeup, and a fitted blazer. Her smile is laid back as Rhett scowls. I still haven’t figured out the energy with these two. Tori dresses the part and takes her job so serious, yet when she’s outside of cliental or off the clock, this carefree, playful side comes out. It’s difficult not to smile around her. Rhett, on the other hand, has the *you get what you see, no matter what I’m doing* attitude.

“Ian.” Rhett rolls down his window. “We are supposed to head over to the leased walkthrough, and you’re dripping with sweat.”

“I’ll shower.” I sigh.

“Good call installing a shower in the shop. Hurry up and use it.”

“I’ll be finished in four minutes.” I set the ax back in its place and make my way inside.

“Did you really not take that joke opportunity?” Tori giggles as she turns to Rhett. “Look at you becoming a softy for things other than your mini

goats.”

“Knock it off, Miss California,” Rhett groans, and I notice he only calls her that when annoyed. “Him missing Emery isn’t worth a lame sex joke.” That didn’t stop him from making a few of them when she first left.

After a shower and clean clothing, we take the short drive down the road to the downtown building. The street holds more familiar faces to spot as the tourist season has begun to die down in October. Rhett pulls in front of the corner building and idles the truck.

“I’m gonna park this around back since I still have the trailer attached. You go in the front since we are already late.” Rhett glances in his mirror, back at me.

“Sure.” I climb out, my stomach unsure if we can take on another project if this building needs to be done quickly. Turning down work is not something I want to do, but we need more employees.

I shut my door and head to the front, reaching for the handle. It’s unlocked, and as I open it, I’m hit with the smell of fresh paint. Sage walls and partially exposed old stone greet me. My heart stops as a large white daisy mural takes up the back wall. Underneath it is Emery.

Slowly, she walks toward me, and I’m paralyzed. Her sundress sways, and the jean jacket she wore religiously five years ago hugs her body. She’s here. In this half-renovated bistro that shut down years ago. The room spins and my eyes land on the coffee bar in back. I take in the chairs and everything I worked long nights on building. It was all for her.

Holy. Shit.

“I crossed the street.” Emery’s soft voice filters through my ears. I don’t even notice she’s made it to me until her arms wrap around my neck. “We’re in this together, from here on out.”

I pause, making sure I’m not making this all up in my mind. “You had all this arranged in two and a half weeks?” I’m stunned I didn’t figure this out. Tori and Rhett busted their asses for Emery. For me.

“A lot has happened in two weeks.” She slides her hands down my chest, and my eye catches something.

“Is this real?” My thumb brushes over the daisy tattoo on her wrist. She nods as I press a kiss to it.

“It’s beyond a reminder of the limits I let you test with me.” She smirks. “Daisies also mean new beginnings. I’m here to stay, Ian Wells.” My throat tightens as her arms wrap around my neck again. “I’m still going to need you

to be patient with me because therapy has not been fun, but I know it will be worth it.” I nod, unable to speak, and hold her closer against me. “I’m yours, if you’ll have me.”

I answer with a kiss that has me supporting her weight. She melts into me, lips parting before deepening the kiss. I pull back to double check that this isn’t a wicked dream. “I love you, Emery Davis.”

“I love you more, Ian Wells.” I blink into focus as my eyes blur. Years of waiting to hear those words fill me with elation.

“No more *what ifs*.” Relief removes the heavy weight of doubt and years of hurt as I stare into her eyes.

“You were never a what if, Ian.” Her head shakes as her eyes tear up. “You were always admittedly for me.”

The End

EPILOGUE

EMERY

2 Years Later

THERAPY HAS HELPED HEAL my wounds.

Relief and acceptance wash over me as the cemetery on the hill fades in my rearview mirror. I don't visit my parents as often as Ian and Sophie visit his, but the coaster sits on my father's stone, where I left it last year, along with the flowers I change out monthly for my mother. Today, my visit proved how far I've come as I shared my exciting news. Glancing at the clock, my heart races, knowing Ian is off work and might beat me home. My phone rings through the car, startling me as I answer.

"Hey, Hallie."

"Hi." She sounds exhausted, and her second baby is due any day. "Do you think you and Ian, or even Sophie, could watch Hunter for a bit tomorrow?"

"We sure can. He is such a sweetheart. Ian will be excited when I tell him." My heart melts every time I see Ian and Hunter together. Their faces light up as they run around the property, chasing each other. He's amazing with him and Sophie. This man's patience with a teenager is phenomenal to watch.

"You guys are the best." Hallie sighs, relieved. "I'll text you later with the time."

"Sounds good, mama!" I end the call and pull up to the cabin as Ian gets out of his truck. I will never get over the sight of how hot he looks after a long day's work in construction.

Ian walks over, grinning as he catches my ogling. "I missed you today,

Daisy Girl. What did I miss?"

"I stopped by my parents' grave." I place my hand on his shoulder, reaching up to kiss him.

"How was that? Everything okay?" I don't usually go out of my way to visit, but Ian was right that talking out loud as if they can hear is soothing in a way.

"Yep. I promise. You've gone to enough therapy sessions with me now to know that I will come to you if something is wrong."

"You've grown so much. My heart is so happy for you." He kisses me again before we walk up the front porch steps.

"We are also watching Hunter tomorrow for a bit."

"Perfect. I bought him a superhero cape today and figured he'd like to pretend to fly while I run with him over my head." This man loves children so much, and I can't wait to see him with a child of his own in the future. "You are incredibly sexy and sweet, Ian Wells."

"And you are looking incredibly delicious in this sundress." Ian's hands grip my waist, pulling me against him, and my arms take their rightful place draped around his neck. "Does Sophie have theatre practice after school today?"

"She does." I let the seductive tone of my voice slip through. Our time alone is sacred and doesn't happen too often. Sophie has her own wing of the house now, but we are still reserved most nights for fear of traumatizing her. "She'll be gone for the next three hours."

"Well, that should be enough time to spoil you on your day off work." Ian's hands reach down and grip my ass, pulling me tighter against him. Life with him couldn't be any more perfect.

"Easy now." I laugh. "You're the one with a birthday this weekend."

"And I want you as my present." Ian's eyes light up, and I wonder why I've let my nerves take over today. "Maybe you can wear a bow for me?" He kisses my lips gently. "I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy." My stomach flips as his neck pulls back.

"Trying out a new kink?" There's a slight furrow in his brows, and I take it he's not on board with the name.

"No." A small shake of my head has him pulling back and scanning my face. I swallow as a smile tugs on my lips.

"Emery, are you pregnant?" he whispers, and I can only nod. He has been so supportive and patient with me as I've slowly confronted my demons.

“I’m going to be a dad. A dad to a baby we created.” He corrects himself, as if scared to offend Sophie.

“I found out this morning.” My smile grows to match his. “But you were already running late for work, and I knew you needed to focus on your important meeting with Rhett before his paternal leave for the twins.” Our friend group has been busy making babies lately. “I planned to tell you on your birthday, but it’s been on my mind all day, and I couldn’t wait.” He brushes a strand of hair out of my face and pulls my bottom lip from the grip of my teeth.

“I know we’ve talked about this in therapy together, and have ditched the condoms, but now it’s a reality.” I pick up on the uncertainty in his voice, though he smiles. “How do you feel?” After watching Hallie firsthand become a mother and Ian and I helping out, I knew there was a missing piece in my life. I want to have a family of four.

“I’m ready to have the family I’ve always longed for.” My hands slide over his shoulders with a small squeeze. “I can take on anything with you by my side.” I pause as past trauma resurfaces. “And if you aren’t there, I have other support and my therapist to get me through.” I have to acknowledge the possibility of him not being around, but I’m able to confidently believe I’d get through it. This part of healing is taking its sweet time, and I honestly don’t know if the fear will ever go away.

“This is the best birthday week ever. This time next year, I’ll be blowing out candles with our baby in my arms.” His eyes glass over as he cups my face.

“I’m excited, but it’s a bit nerve-wracking.” I take a steady breath. “Sophie is going to be so excited.”

“Let’s keep this between us a little while longer.” I nod as he walks us into the cabin. “This is the best birthday present ever.”

“Topping this year’s gift is going to be difficult next year.” I giggle as he taps my ass.

“We can settle for a close second.” He winks with obvious implications, and sets me down as we enter our room. Ian drops to his knees, pressing his lips to mine before he opens his nightstand. “I bought this last year, but you were still in the thick of healing.” I glance at the velvet box, and it’s obvious what’s inside. My stomach jumps into my throat as excitement screams through me. “I didn’t want to pressure you.”

My left hand shoots in front of me, fingers spreading. “See if it fits.”

“I didn’t even ask.” Chuckling, his head tilts to the side before opening the box.

My right hand covers my stomach. “Let’s have our happily ever after, Ian.”

Taking my hand in his, he slips the beautiful solitaire diamond on my waiting finger. “Forever mine.” This is more than I ever thought I wanted, and I can’t help but blink back tears.

“It didn’t take a ring and a baby to solidify that, though.” I sit down on the bed and stare at the ring, elation bolting through me. “I never thought I would get far enough in healing to accept love.”

“I know, Daisy Girl,” Ian says with a wink, his trademark half smirk coming into play.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I kind of like that part of me is in you for ten months.”

“You mean nine, babe.” I roll my eyes.

“Hallie went to forty weeks, right?”

“Yeah,” I slowly respond as his eyebrow raises. My brain is seized at computing math right now, but gears are turning.

“Case in point.” Ian stands, leaning forward as I lie down on the bed.

“You’re about to owe me ten orgasms.” My hands cup his jaw, bringing his face closer to mine.

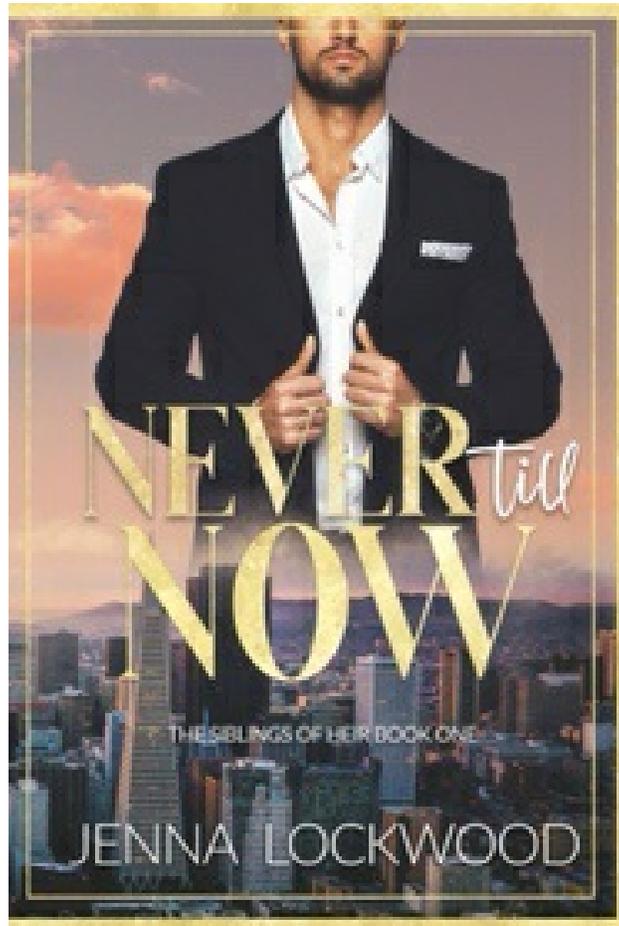
“Not nine?” He hovers over me with a devilish grin. “Sex is fine for the baby, right?”

“Yes.” I giggle, and as his lips brush mine, I speak again. “I’m glad I’m doing life with you.” The weight of the world has never felt lighter. “Thank you for believing in me.”

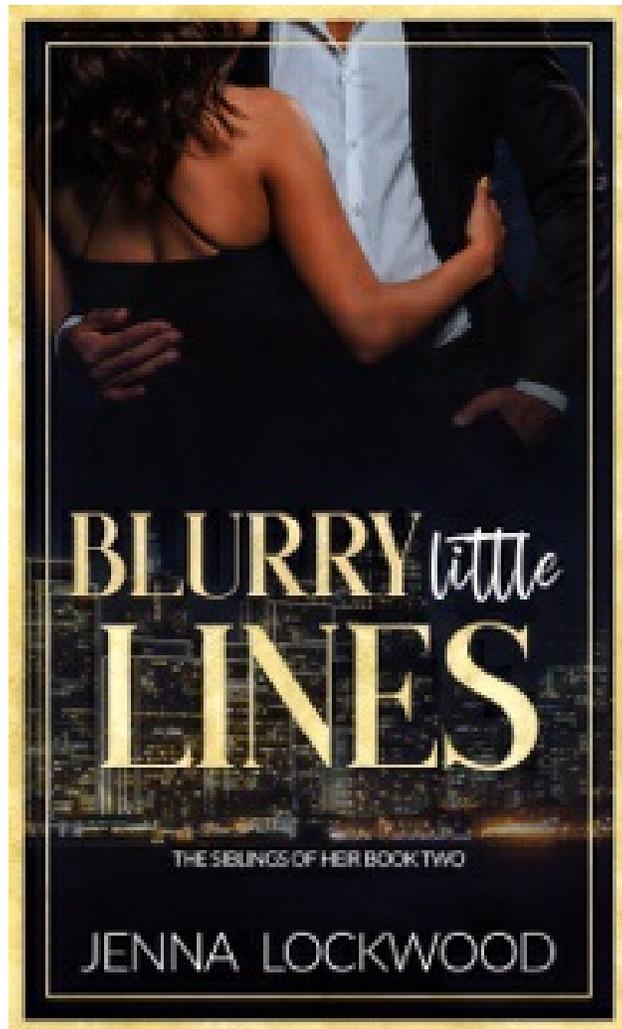
“Thank you for believing in us.” Ian’s mouth covers mine, and he takes full advantage of our next few hours alone.

ALSO BY JENNA LOCKWOOD

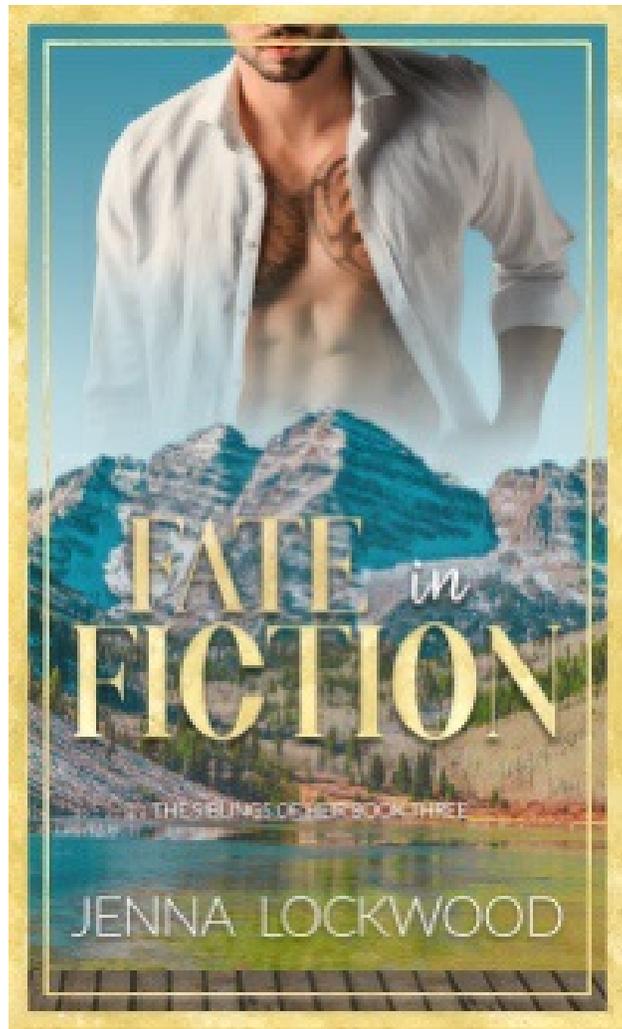
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Never Till Now book 1: [My Book](#) (Adam & Lauren)



Blurry Little Lines book 2: [My Book](#) (Kelsie & Max)



Fate In Fiction book 3: [My Book](#) (Emmett & Josie)

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Alexandra Hale, my saving grace with all the encouraging words and knowing when I need to walk away for a moment. Your warmth, and faith in me is more than I ever knew possible for someone I haven't met— *yet*. I am blessed to know you. You're an amazing sounding board, and I can't wait to squeeze you in March! Doing this without you wouldn't been the same, or sane. I love our late nights writing together and I am so proud of everything we are accomplishing. Love being on this journey with you. Let's Gooooo!

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ABOUT JENNA LOCKWOOD



Jenna Lockwood is a Canadian romance author who loves writing witty banter, angst and steam! Jenna has a lifelong passion for writing poetry and fictional worlds. Writing sassy females and alpha males are her specialty.

She's been a lifelong reader and writer of romance.

In a house of early risers, Jenna spends her evenings flourishing in fictional worlds that consume her mind.

When Jenna is not in the fictional realm of reading and writing, you'll find her exploring new places with her family, chasing her two sons around at the park, or visiting different coffee shops with friends.