



FALLING FOR  
**GABRIEL**

THE ARMSTRONG MEN - BOOK 2

**REINA TORRES**

FALLING FOR GABRIEL (POLICE  
AND FIRE: OPERATION ALPHA)

THE ARMSTRONG MEN

BOOK TWO

# REINA TORRES



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Dear Readers,

*Welcome to the Police and Fire: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!*

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

**READ ON!**

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

## ABOUT THE BOOK

As far as the people of Fallport were concerned, Misty Bridges was just the new girl in town with a service dog. What she didn't broadcast was that her dog Roya was a trained cadaver dog. Most people saw it as something ghastly, but she knew firsthand that a cadaver dog meant the difference between bringing a family member home or a lifetime of uncertainty for loved ones.

It was a valuable service and Roya was a natural.

Gabriel Armstrong has been a Fallport Deputy for a few years. He's got a good head on his shoulders, and a work ethic that won't quit. He's seen the SAR team fall in love like dominoes and then his brother, Joshua.

Gabriel thinks he might just be up for a Happy Ever After of his own, but it won't be anyone he knows. Especially Misty Bridges, who's new to town... they just can't seem to get along.

His boss assigns him to work with Misty on a case in Richmond and it soon becomes obvious that she needs someone looking out for her, because she's attracted the attention of someone who has no problem ending lives just because he wants to.

With their lives tangled together, can Gabriel and Misty set aside their natural need to push each other's buttons if it means dropping the hammer on a killer? And maybe... they'll realize that their Happy Ever After is the person standing beside them.

## CHAPTER ONE

### GABRIEL

Gabriel pushed open the front door of the cafe and stifled a yawn. A quick wave at Sandra, the owner of the cafe, made sure that he was looking forward to a hot cup of coffee and a meal. That was the right way to start the day and he'd left early enough that Brody would still be in bed asleep and what about Joshua?

Smiling, he slid into a booth with a view of the town square and shuffled his cutlery and napkin on the tabletop.

"You're here early, Deputy Armstrong."

He smiled at Sandra. "I'm a hungry man and I heard you had a corned beef special."

She drew back in surprise for a moment before she poured him a steaming cup of coffee. "If I didn't know better, I would say you were flirting with me."

That made his smile brighten better than a cup of coffee.

"You're too much woman for me, Sandra."

She pointed a wagging finger at him. "You are a *smart* man."

"Mama didn't raise a fool." He shrugged and touched the cup of coffee, enjoying the heat of the porcelain against his fingers.

"No, none of your family members are. Still," she craned her head back and looked at the door, "I'm wondering where the other two are. You boys usually arrive at the same time."

He couldn't argue. "Brody might be coming in, but I think Joshua'll probably have breakfast at home."

"Hmm..." Sandra's soft reply was noncommittal, but he saw the smile on



her lips. "I have to say it's a little strange having the gang broken up."

"Not broken up, just changing."

She nodded. "Before you know it, another one of you Armstrongs are going to fall."

Gabriel almost choked on a sip of coffee. He grabbed for his napkin and wiped at his lips and chin, but missed a drop that hit his tie.

"Thank goodness that tie is a dark color, son."

He nodded in agreement. "It saves on dry cleaning."

She shrugged. "Ordering the Special?"

"Yep." Gabriel nodded, holding the cup up near his mouth. "Thank you."

Sandra turned around and took a couple of steps away before she turned back around. "Where do y'all dry clean your uniforms?"

Before Gabriel had to answer, the cafe door opened up and Sandra's attention was taken away, leaving Gabriel to his own business.

A spotted streak of fur darted onto the green in the town square and Gabriel sat up straighter in the booth.

As he watched, the dog skidded to a stop and dug into the grass under her paws. She bounced again and again and a moment later, he saw who he was looking for.

Misty Bridges.

With a name so wholesome he expected her to be in one of those old Afterschool Specials the moms had videotaped to show them when they got too rowdy.

She was wearing shorts. No, that was too mundane a word for what she had on.

They were closer to tights than actual clothes. If he remembered correctly, Rachael had called them yoga pants.

He'd never had an interest in yoga.

Yogurt, sure. It was pretty tasty if you threw enough stuff in it.

But that was as far as his interest had gone.

Until he saw the way those yoga pants emphasized her figure. A figure that he'd only seen in loose fitting clothes for the most part.

He heard a sharp bark and turned to see the dog spin around in a few excited circles before she sat down and snapped her head up as if she'd been well trained.

But of course she had been.

Misty might be a little too easy going and happy for his peace of mind,

but he was beginning to learn more about her.

And he liked what he saw.

A little too much.

He watched her work with her dog in the grass and smiled.

The soft clatter of a plate touched the tabletop, turning his head back.

"Entertaining?"

Gabriel didn't answer her. Instead, he looked at the plate in front of him and took in a deep breath through his nose. "Delicious."

When he met Sandra's gaze, she crooked an eyebrow at him and shook her head. "You certainly are a tough nut to crack, Gabriel Armstrong."

She turned and walked away to another table leaving him to dig into his meal and look across the street again.

The dog was a well-contained ball of energy, eyes on Misty, body almost vibrating with excitement, but reacting quickly with every command.

Roya. That was the dog's name.

What it meant, he hadn't remembered to ask. Not that he would have many opportunities to ask in the future, and that was mostly his fault.

Okay, it was pretty much all his fault.

He'd been asked to make sure that Misty got home safely the night that Christopher Frishe's father had interrupted Avalon's night at the On the Rocks bar with her friends.

And Gabriel had made a mess of that night, unable to get a hold of his emotions when he'd seen Chris' dad confronting Avalon.

He might not be in love with Avalon like his brother Joshua, but he loved her like family. She'd been a part of the Armstrongs for as long as he could remember his own brother. Joshua and Avalon had been childhood sweethearts from the moment they'd met.

He'd struggled that night, finding his temper almost boiling over without a way to really get it under control.

And Misty had been in the path of his stormy emotions.

God, he really should apologize.

It would make things easier for everyone.

With Avalon living next door with his brother and planning their wedding, he'd be spending more time around Misty. And even though Avalon hadn't said anything about the tension between himself and Misty, he knew things would come to a head at some point.

It would make sense for him to just do it. Rip the bandage off of the

wound and deal with it.

Yeah, he was really looking forward to it.

If he brought a steak with him, and managed to get Roya on his side, things would smooth over between them faster.

And if that happened, he could hope to ignore the strange tension he felt when Misty was in the room.

Oh, who was he kidding?

He thought about her even when she wasn't in the room.

Feeling like this was awkward and off-putting.

He had to keep his focus on... on other things.

His work.

His family.

His-

Roya came to a quick and almost tumbling stop on the grass.

With a quick snap of movement, she was sitting placidly in front of Misty with her ears up and pricked forward, her mouth slightly open and her tongue lolled out almost as if the dog was smiling.

Gabriel looked up and saw Misty's easy smile.

She looked down at her dog and said something that had Roya's tail thumping in wide, sweeping arcs.

He couldn't hear her words, but they were likely filled with praise. The two had a great rapport together, and Gabriel was reminded of the time when he'd applied to take a K-9 training course. There was a Federal Program offering money to pay for the cost of the dog and the training for the K-9 and their partner.

When he'd been turned down for the program, he'd brushed it off, but he'd really wanted to join the program.

Maybe he could ask Misty about how she'd found Roya and what the training cost had been.

That would probably be the easiest way to start a conversation with her. One where they didn't have to worry about getting off on the wrong foot.

He'd certainly had enough of that where Misty was concerned.

He watched as Misty took a treat out of a pouch she had around her waist and Roya seemed to dance with happiness.

Misty placed the treat on the long line of Roya's nose and took a step back before she gave her a quick hand-gesture that had the dog tossing her nose up into the air and opening her mouth under the treat.

It fell right into her mouth, and the dog almost seemed to swoon with joy as she munched on it. Misty sat down heavily in the soft grasses and Gabriel stood.

He hit the edge of the table on his thigh and bit back a curse as he rubbed at the sore spot.

"You okay there?"

He turned and saw Karen, the waitress, wincing in sympathy. "I just hit my leg. It's not a big thing."

Before he could manage to get a complete hold of himself, he turned his head to look out the window and saw Misty and her dog rolling around in the grass.

"Why don't you go out there and talk to her, Gabriel?"

His hand stilled on his thigh as he turned back to look at her. "Talk to who?"

Karen rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'm no detective, Gabriel Armstrong, but it doesn't take more than a pair of eyes and a couple of brain cells to rub together to see that you're interested in Miss Bridges. You better go out there and talk to her."

He dropped his chin down and looked at her and raised an eyebrow at her. "I've got to get to work."

She reached into her apron and pulled out her order pad. Pulling off the top sheet, she handed it to him with a knowing smile. "Deflect all you like, Officer Armstrong. I can see right through you."

He looked down at his uniform shirt and then back up at Karen. "Nope, not see through yet."

He headed over to the register and saw Sandra's wide grin directed right at him.

He handed her his check and his card with a sigh. "Not you too."

"Who, me?" Sandra gave him a smile as she ran his card. "What would I have to say about what?"

She ripped the receipt from the printer and put it down on the counter.

"Or should I say about *who*?"

Gabriel pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote out a tip and his signature as he kept his gaze down on the paper. He let out a breath as he straightened up.

"Okay, ladies," he swiveled to look at Karen as well, "I'm headed out, feel free to talk about me while I'm gone."

It wasn't until he had his hand on the door handle that he heard Karen's voice.

"Where's the fun in that?"

\* \* \*

## MISTY

Misty Bridges knew that she was a mess.

No, it wasn't just her physical appearance, although she knew that was properly heinous. She'd gone on a morning run with Roya and decided to do some training in the grassy area in the center of town.

It wasn't until she was working with Roya in the grass that her grumbling stomach had turned her head toward the diner.

And Gabriel Armstrong sitting in full view of the window.

Why did he have to be so handsome?

Roya's bark turned her attention back to the training she was supposed to be doing.

A couple of quick commands to Roya had them both smiling and earning Roya a snack.

Reaching her fingers into the pouch at her waist, she took out a treat.

"Want a treat, girl?"

Roya's sharp bark and dancing front paws was enough to get her smiling.

And she needed it.

Lately she'd been spending a bunch of time with Avalon at her place. They'd been working on plans for the wedding and Misty was enjoying the laughter and swooning sighs when they worked on plans with Rachael and Kay, Joshua's cousin and his sister.

It wasn't lost on her that Kay was also Gabriel's sister, too.

Especially because Kay was making it a point to apologize for Gabriel being short with her the night that Edgar Frishe had made a scene at On the Rocks.

It was crazy to think that the Armstrongs were just such a tightknit family that when something happened to one of them, or one of them did something, they all seemed to hear about it.

Being an only child, she'd wondered what it was like to have a sibling, but seeing the Armstrong family in action was daunting.

It was hard enough knowing that Fallport was a small enough town that her life was already public knowledge. Seeing how much Avalon was a part of the Armstrong family was a little strange for Misty. As much as Avalon, Kay, and Rachael were trying to bring her into the circle of their friendship, Misty couldn't help feeling like she was the oddity in the group.

It didn't help that she was ridiculously attracted to Gabriel.

It was crazy, right?

He thought she was... Well, she didn't really know what he thought she was but it was obvious to her that he didn't like her much.

That was the problem, as far as she was concerned.

There had been a time in her life when she'd tried to make friends when it was clear that it would take a lot of effort.

But that wasn't where she was now.

She was okay with being friends with Avalon, Kay, and Rachael. Joshua was sweet too. She just needed to keep some space between herself and Gabriel.

Because, being totally straightforward and honest with herself, she worried that if she was around Gabriel too much, he might be the reason she lost her new circle of friends.

Oh, Avalon would still be her friend, but if Misty couldn't be around Gabriel without upsetting him, it wasn't going to be possible to spend time with the whole family if she couldn't figure out a way to put some kind of real distance between her and the eldest Armstrong son.

Her mind distracted by those difficult thoughts, she found herself toppled into the grass by Roya.

She laughed and made a quick grab for Roya's head to try to keep the large dog from slobbering all over her.

"Stop it, girl!"

Normally Roya would listen to her commands, but it didn't help that Misty was laughing so much that her words were mostly laughs.

"Silly, girl!"

Misty turned on her side, wrapping her arms around Roya's large wiggling body.

"Not the face! Yuck." She didn't have any real issues with Roya licking her face, but she was already sweaty and overheated. She really, really wanted a shower.

She more than wanted it, she needed it.

She had to head home and get that shower before heading back into town to start her shift at the post office.

"Okay, okay. Stop! We have to head home, girl."

Roya rolled off of her and sat up like she was more spring than puppy.

"Oh, good." Misty got up on her knees and then lurched up onto her feet.

"Now we can go, Roya. Are you ready?"

She reached for Roya's leash and her hand bumped into something else.

"What?"

Misty stepped back but kept her hand on the leash.

Gabriel lifted his hand off of the leash and held it up and open between them. "Sorry. I thought I was helping."

Oh god. She must seem like a total jerk.

"It's not a problem!" She winced as she heard her own tone. It was a little too sharp. "You just caught me by surprise."

He didn't look like she'd put him at ease.

Yeah, she was just hellishly awkward around him.

"I didn't see you come up."

He shifted and lifted his hand, placing it on the back of his neck. "Sorry about that."

"No," she gave her a head a resolute shake, "no need to apologize. I didn't- I mean... Nevermind." With a sigh, she shrugged. "I was headed home to get a shower before work."

*Oh goodness.*

Was Gabriel Armstrong blushing?

*Oh wow. What did I say?*

"So, I need to get going because I have to make it back in time for work." Misty adjusted her hand on Roya's leash. "So, I need to get going." She stepped around him, trying to give him some space, but before she made it more than a couple of steps, she felt his hand on her arm.

She turned back, dropping her gaze to his hand, and then looked him straight in the eye.

How could a simple touch make her feel like she was a live wire?

Maybe she was really losing her mind the more time she spent around Gabriel.

And that was just cruel, really.

Being this close to him and knowing that he really hated every minute she was there.

Her life really sucked.

She tried to move away, but he just wasn't letting her go.

"Gabriel?"

Misty was close enough that she could see that he'd shaved that morning. And the play of muscles in his jaw as his lips flattened into a thin line.

"What's going on?"

He drew in a breath through his nose and let it out through his mouth.

"Your phone is going straight to voice mail."

"My... my what?"

"Your phone," he let go of her arm and she swore it looked like he was going to rub his palm against his pants leg, "it's not on."

"Of course it's on."

Scoffing at the idea, she reached for the pouch at her waist and frowned. The pocket where she kept her phone was empty.

"Where's my... Oh! I think I left it at home."

"Well, the chief has been trying to call you. He called to ask me if I could find you."

If Gabriel could find her? Why would Chief Hill think that Gabriel would be able to find her?

"Can I give you a ride to the station? I can take you home after or wherever you need to go."

Wow. Really, what could she say?

Chief Hill wanted to talk to her.

What she knew about the Police Chief was from Avalon and how he'd helped when she was struggling. If he wanted to talk to her, the least she could do was talk.

"Sure, I'll talk to the chief, but I'm kind of gross. We had a long run today. I'm not sure if you want me to be gross in your car."

A strange look passed over his features and goodness, he had no right to be that gorgeous this early in the morning.

He started to talk and she wasn't paying a damn bit of attention.

"Sorry?" She shook her head and hoped that she hadn't been staring at him with stars in her eyes. "What did you say?"

She'd upset him.

No, the word she had in her head was 'exasperated.'

A muscle ticked in his jaw and she felt something tickle at the back of her neck.



"I'll give you a ride."

He turned and walked away, leaving her to follow behind him.

She'd really messed things up.

Again.

## CHAPTER TWO

GABRIEL

Well, he was batting ZERO.

And baseball had been his strength in high school. His coach had always complimented his ability to read the pitcher and know where the pitch was going to come in across the plate.

He had none of those same skills when it came to dealing with Misty.

As a part of the Fallport Police Force, he should have some skills in communicating with the public.

Normally he did.

That's what was really getting under his skin.

Why was it different with Misty?

Gabriel scrubbed a hand over his face as he turned the car into the parking lot of the police station.

When he dropped his hand down, he saw Roya's face in the rear-view mirror, the dog's ears up and pricked forward. Smart dog.

Beside him on the passenger seat, Misty kept her gaze trained on the world outside of her window.

All he could see of her face was from the reflection in the window glass as he pulled into an empty parking spot near the back door.

Behind them, Roya's paws tapped on the backseat upholstery and she whined a little.

That was when he saw Misty's face.

She turned on her seat to look back at her dog, and the gentle set of her features made him feel jealous. Of her service animal.

He was glad they were at the station. The faster he delivered Misty to the

chief, the faster he could go on his normal shift and put the whole unsettling morning behind him.

Gabriel jogged around to the passenger side of the car and found that Misty was already on her feet, pulling the back door open.

Roya kept her gaze on Misty's face, waiting.

A moment later, Misty gave a quick command to her dog and Roya leapt down and sat at Misty's feet.

Before Misty could say or do anything, Roya turned her head and looked straight at him.

That quick turn had Misty mimicking the gesture. She looked him straight in the eye with an almost-grimace. "I can get the door."

He shook his head. "I've got it."

He closed the back door of his vehicle and used the time he was looking away as a needed cooling-off period. Gabriel didn't like feeling so off balance. That strange feeling was apparently reserved for when he was within a few feet of Misty.

Or when he was close enough to see her.

And he had damn good eyesight.

Misty took a few steps away from his car as the back door of the station opened.

Gabriel locked the doors with his key fob and then he followed Misty into the station after the chief gestured for them to enter.

IT WAS lucky for him that his chief didn't believe in wasting a lot of time. Usually Gabriel viewed it as yanking off a Band-Aid. It was the fastest way to get information out. Dealing with the fallout would happen later.

Simon reached into his top drawer and pulled out a file. "I know you were headed into work today," his expression was one of sympathy with some distaste, "but I'm afraid that might have to change."

Gabriel saw Misty balk a little at the idea as she sat beside him, her hand fisting around the leash that she'd held lightly until that moment.

"Sir?"

"I had a call early this morning from the Chief of Police in Richmond."

Richmond? Gabriel eased forward just a hair in his chair, feeling a little like Roya, who was also listening intently to the chief.

He opened the file and tapped the top paper, drawing attention to the

printed article on top. "It seems like you've been holding out on me, Miss Bridges."

Gabriel turned to look at her and saw the way she shifted on the seat.

"Is it strange if I said that I was kind of hoping that we weren't going to be needed here in Fallport?"

Simon's lips pursed a little as he nodded his head. "I guess I can see how that might be the case."

Gabriel was still waiting to hear what the two of them were talking about, but he had more than enough patience to wait for them to clue him in. This was his chance to be around Misty and not shove his foot in his mouth.

He was enjoying the respite.

Simon turned the paper around so that it faced Misty. When he picked it up by the edge, he swung his gaze toward Gabriel and gave her a questioning look.

She shrugged and leaned on the arm of her chair.

Simon turned in his direction, handing him the article that he'd printed out.

Gabriel smiled when he saw a photo of Roya on the front cover of the newspaper. The first few paragraphs talked about Roya and what she'd been trained to do.

When he reached the fold, he turned to look at Misty and found her looking away, toward the top of Simon's desk, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

Before he could speak, he saw Roya sit up from her comfortable sprawl on the floor and lay her head on Misty's knee. Roya's gaze lifted up and fixed on Misty's face.

Roya was trying to reassure Misty. That was amazing.

Gabriel was just sad that she needed to be reassured.

Shrugging, he tilted his head to look at Misty. "How did you think people would react?"

When Misty's chin dropped down, Gabriel felt like a jerk all over again. He had a feeling he'd know her reasoning, almost word for word.

"It's one thing to have a Search and Rescue dog like Raiden has Duke, his bloodhound. When Duke finds a lost hiker, everyone cheers. When Roya finds a body, sure, everyone's relieved, but it's not easy for anyone. I have to work to keep Roya upbeat after those searches."

Gabriel watched as Misty gave Roya a scratch between her ears and then

down the back of her neck.

Roya was almost swooning at the easy touch, leaning into Misty's hand like it was heaven.

Maybe it was.

They had a great relationship. That was easy to see.

Misty lifted her gaze to the chief. "Was it Rolan who asked for me?"

Simon didn't seem all that surprised at the question, but Gabriel was more than curious. Rolan?

"Detective Harris was in the room when the Chief called. He said you'd probably guess it was his request."

Misty nodded as if the whole interaction was the 'usual.'

How many times had she worked with the detective?

And why was it bothering him so much?

Simon leaned forward, bracing his elbows on the desk. "I've already called over to the Post Office."

Misty tensed up a little beside him, and Gabriel's gaze bounced back and forth between them.

"I explained to Gary that we needed your assistance for the next day or so. He said he has everything under control."

Misty stood up and Roya scrambled a little on the hard linoleum tiles, skittering for a second until she settled into a sit beside her handler. "I just need to go back to my apartment first. I'll contact the detective and ask him for an address."

When she turned to look at him, she seemed a little shocked to find him on his feet as well. He was raised a gentleman and his body knew deep down in his marrow that Misty was a woman.

Beautiful and smart. And most definitely a woman.

"I'll drive you back to your apartment."

Misty seemed to hesitate for a moment, but before she could say anything for or against it, Chief Hill made his feelings known.

"I'm assigning you as a liaison to the Richmond Police Department, Gabriel. You'll drive Miss Bridges down to Richmond. You'll stay with her while she's there and bring her back when she's done."

Gabriel turned to look at Misty and wondered if the color rising high in her cheeks meant she was happy or pissed.

He really needed to learn how to read her expressions more. He certainly did suck at it.

"Gabriel?"

Gabriel swiveled his attention back to the chief. "Yes, Chief. I'll keep an eye on Miss Bridges."

"Keep an eye- I really don't need someone to babysit me, Chief. I've..." She looked down and rubbed her fingertips against the crown of Roya's head. "We've been doing this for quite some time. I can take care of everything."

Gabriel saw the tick of a muscle in the chief's jaw. He was still smiling, though. That was different. Then again, Misty wasn't an officer with the Fallport Police. She was a civilian.

"Miss Bridges, if I made you feel like I was saying that you weren't capable, that was not my intention."

"No, Chief," she shook her head, "I would feel strange taking... taking Officer Armstrong away from his duties."

Oh boy.

Chief Hill turned toward him, his arms folding across his chest.

Gabriel and the other officers had seen this particular pose a time or two. Normally, it meant that someone was going to get chewed out. The tight smile on Simon's face was different, though.

"Officer Armstrong-"

Oh, so it was 'officer' now.

Great.

"Do you feel like I'm taking you away from your duties?"

Beside him, Gabriel felt Misty tense a little.

"No, sir. It sounds like you've assigned me to see to Miss Bridges..." He barely kept his gaze on the chief. He wanted to see what kind of expression Misty had on her face, but he was afraid that he might smile a little too much and earn that verbal set down that he was hoping to avoid. "So taking her to Richmond sounds exactly like my duties."

Simon unfolded his arms and snapped before he pointed at him with a nod. "Exactly. That's exactly what I'm saying." The chief turned back to look at Misty. "If I wasn't about to pound through a tower of paperwork over the next few days, I'd go with you myself. I've heard of cadaver dogs and seen videos and reports, but I've never seen one working up close and personal."

Gabriel turned to look at Misty and he saw her shoulders shake in silent laughter.

At least she wasn't outwardly upset.

He couldn't imagine how that would affect their drive.

"I should get Miss Bridges to her apartment, Chief. I'm betting that the Richmond police have a pressing need if they're reaching out."

Simon nodded thoughtfully. "That's true." He leaned his hips against his desk and reached out a hand toward Misty. "Thank you for your understanding, Miss Bridges. It means a lot that you're willing to help out."

Misty cast a look down at Roya. "That's what we're trained for. We're always happy to help."

Chief Hill nodded with a smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

\* \* \*

## MISTY

Misty was afraid that she was on the verge of a panic attack. Or fainting like a fan girl at a boy band concert. It wasn't just thinking about spending what might be a few days with Gabriel Armstrong, it was the fact that she was in her shower, naked, with him in her apartment.

A soft whine was followed by a flap of vinyl.

Misty looked down and saw Roya's face in the gap at the end of the tub. "Hey, girl."

Roya stared at her and for the first time in a long time, Misty had no idea what her dog wanted.

*That's what happens, she grumbled in her head, when you need to get a grip on your hormones.*

Roya whined and Misty had to laugh at herself.

It really wasn't that big of a deal.

It was an assignment.

A chance to keep Roya current with her skills. Sure, they trained a lot, but this was going to be a chance to get into the field. To work outside of Fallport.

Richmond had so many more distractions. It was going to be a good test of Roya's skill and her own.

"Okay, girl. I'll hurry up."

Roya's head disappeared and the shower curtain fell back into place.

Misty spoke as if Roya was still listening. Well, she was. Roya never let her shower alone.

"I just don't want to be smelly in the car on the way to Richmond."

A soft wuff reached her ears and Misty turned the shower on higher to rinse off.

IT WAS a bit of a struggle to get all of Roya's things in the car.

Normally, Misty had everything in her own vehicle, where everything had a place.

Sharing the back of Gabriel's truck with his gear and Roya's equipment was a new experience entirely. It didn't take long at all to fit everything inside. Gabriel didn't quibble over how much she was bringing with her.

In fact, he asked her if she had enough stuff for herself.

He didn't even look like he was kidding.

Weird.

What was even weirder?

The phone call she had with Gary right before they got on the road.

The call was picked up after a couple of rings and Gary sounded almost too happy to answer it. "Fallport Post Office, Gary speaking."

"Hey, Gary, it's Misty, I-"

"Hey, you didn't need to call. Just let me know when you come back, and we'll get you back on the schedule."

Misty lowered her phone and looked at the screen wondering if she'd called the wrong number. Which didn't make sense, but neither did Gary's happy tone. With the two of them working, they were still super busy.

"Uh.... What did Chief Hill tell you about where I'm going?"

She could imagine Gary shrugging on the other end of the line.

"Not much, but once he said you were doing a favor for the police department, I did a Google search for Misty Bridges Police and up popped a bunch of articles. You and Roya are superstars living right here in town."

His reaction startled her, and she struggled to believe it.

Normally when people found out about what Roya did, they thought it was macabre. Some thought it was borderline disgusting.

In Fallport so far, the reception had been... refreshingly different.

"Okay. Then, I'll call you when I'm headed back. I won't know until I get there how big of an area they want us to cover."

"Okay then. I'll make sure to have some welcome home biscuits ready for Roya."

"Thanks, Gary."



"Take care, you two."

The call ended and she lowered her hands to her lap, staring at the dark screen.

"Are you okay?"

Hearing Gabriel's softly spoken question did things to her.

Warm, sexy things.

"Me? Yeah. I'm fine. I guess Gary looked us up on the internet."

"Oh, yeah?" He gave her another quick look before he turned back to stare at the road ahead of them. "Is there a lot of stuff on there about you two?"

She shrugged. "I guess. He said there was a bunch."

He cleared his throat. "I don't understand it."

She turned to look at him, happy to have the time to observe him while he watched the road. "Understand what?"

"You really don't see it. You don't understand how amazing it is... what you and Roya do?"

"I don't like the reminders."

The energy in the car dimmed. The smile that he'd had on his lips faded. She felt like she had to explain. The last thing she wanted was to make the car ride depressing.

And sometimes the best way to get out of something was go straight through.

"The first time I saw a cadaver dog work was when I was in high school. Some of the kids in my neighborhood went out into the woods to party. Rumors were that they'd gone out to smoke weed and drink. They were gone almost three days when the police in town stopped thinking that they were just sleeping it off and started looking for them."

Behind her on the seat in the extended cab, she heard Roya's paws moving around on the blanket they'd set down on Gabriel's upholstery. Roya's soft whine reached her ears and she wanted to turn around and give her good girl a few pets, but the seat was too high.

"There were a few handlers in the area doing training and when they offered to help, a few of the parents refused. They believed that their kids were just lost and that they were coming home. The chief sent the handlers and their dogs in anyway.

"They found the kids a few hours later."

She swallowed hard and then pulled in a deep breath.

"Were any of them friends?"

Misty nodded and then shook her head. He wasn't really looking at her. "Yeah. One of the girls. We weren't close, but I'd known her since we were little, and she lived next door. When they brought the bodies out of the woods, her mother... her mom dropped to her knees, and she hugged one of the dogs. She held onto it until she stopped crying.

"I understood what she felt, or at least I think I did. It was bittersweet to know that Trish was gone, but they could lay her to rest. They didn't have to wonder. Some of the parents..."

Her breath caught in her throat.

Gabriel spoke then, completing her thought.

"Some of the parents would have been happy not knowing."

She nodded.

"I guess I can see how they might think that, but I'd hate to think that someone I love was lost like that. Not knowing..."

"Yeah. It's easy to see both sides, but I'd want to know what happened. I'd want to bring them home."

She caught sight of Gabriel in her peripheral vision. He nodded, agreeing with her.

Silence fell between them, but it wasn't uncomfortable, not for her.

It felt like a weight fell from her shoulders.

A weight she didn't know she'd been carrying.

As they drove down the road with the forest thick and lush on either side of Gabriel's truck, she just let the world rush on by.

## CHAPTER THREE

GABRIEL

When they arrived in Richmond, Gabriel was glad that he'd entered their destination into his phone. An hour out from Richmond, Misty had fallen asleep in the passenger seat of his Silverado. He'd let her sleep because he couldn't bear to wake her up, not when she looked so peaceful.

Besides, it wasn't like he didn't have company.

Roya moved over on the bench seat and laid her head on his shoulder.

It was a strange feeling to have that heavy head on his shoulder and Roya's warm breath on his ear and cheek.

Strange.

But nice too.

And Misty?

She was beautiful to begin with, but sound asleep, her hands folded in her lap? She was angelic.

He wasn't ready for thoughts like that.

Not when he seemed to stick his foot in his mouth whenever she was around.

Yes, he'd started it, he just couldn't figure out how to fix it.

There had been those first few minutes when they'd been on the road and they'd been talking. Communicating.

It didn't fix what he'd messed up from the beginning, but it was a start.

He just had to make sure they kept moving in that direction.

At the very least, he had to be able to be in a room with Misty without making everyone feel the tension between them.

So he had to hope they were working past that with this trip.

The screen on his phone changed to a new view, telling him to turn onto the next road and put his signal on.

As soon as they turned and worked their way into the light traffic, he turned to look at Misty and found Roya's face in his.

"Hey, careful." He laughed, and Roya took a swipe at his cheek with her tongue. "Okay, okay." Gabriel leaned away from Roya, trying to keep his focus on the road. "If you're going to do that, why don't you wake up your mom, okay?"

As if Roya understood what he'd said, the large dog launched herself over the back of the seat and landed beside Misty.

The dog showered Misty with snuffles and swipes of her tongue, startling her awake.

"What? Who? Oh, hey, girl."

She was laughing suddenly, and that sound hit him where he hadn't expected it, right in his heart.

"Oh, goodness. How long have I been sleeping?"

Misty sounded a little confused, and Gabriel reached out to soothe her. With Roya between them, he had to reach his arm over the mixed shepherd breed, and that's when Roya lay across Misty's lap.

The warm skin he felt against his palm was a shock to him.

And to Misty if her gasp was any indication.

He turned to look at her for a moment and saw that his hand was loosely laid against her neck, his thumb just above her collarbone and the rest of his fingers behind her head, tunneled through her hair.

He should move his hand.

Take it away.

But he couldn't.

Her warmth and the gentle throb of her pulse against his skin was too addictive for his own good. It took more than a little effort to lift his hand away, but he knew he had to.

Their relationship... Well, it wasn't a relationship and he didn't have her permission to touch her like that.

He paused to give Roya a scratch on her back before he put his second hand back on the steering wheel.

"Sorry. I didn't know where-"

"It's okay."

She looked away out the window and he ground his back teeth together.

There he was again, tripping over his own feet.

The GPS program changed the screen again.

400 FEET AND YOUR DESTINATION IS ON YOUR RIGHT

Misty leaned forward and touched the screen.

"You put the instructions on silent?"

He nodded and smiled. "You were sleeping. I didn't want to wake you."

"You..." She sat back against the chair. "You let me sleep."

He shrugged. "You looked tired."

Gabriel slowed the truck and turned down the driveway. A uniformed officer stepped in front of the truck, his hand up. The long suffering look on the officer's face said that he'd been standing around for quite some time.

Gabriel rolled down his window and picked up his badge from the tray on the dash. Holding it up, he gave the man a chin lift in greeting. "Fallport PD. I've brought Miss Bridges-"

The officer turned away, reaching for the radio clipped to his lapel. He said a few words. Listened to a message back. Stepped out of the way, waving them forward.

As Gabriel continued down the driveway, he gave a quick look to Misty.

"Is Richmond PD always this..." He lifted a hand from the steering wheel and made a vague gesture, mimicking the hand movement of the deputy they just passed.

"Oh, that was nothing. Wait until you meet Detective Harris. That's an experience."

He heard the note of humor in her tone, but there was also an edge that he didn't like. "I guess it's too late to go back?"

He heard Misty's sigh and saw the way she rubbed her hands over Roya's back.

"Yeah. And we have a job to do."

That was the truth of it.

They had a job to do and so did he. Gabriel was planning to keep a close eye on Misty and Roya. He wasn't expecting any danger at the scene, but he wanted to learn more about them.

He wanted to know everything.

\* \* \*

MISTY

Misty knew when Rolan came up behind her. Roya started to growl.

"Seriously, Misty? Haven't you taught your dog any manners?"

She drew a breath in through her nose and held it for a second to gather her thoughts and her temper.

When she turned around, she made sure she had Roya's leash held tightly in her hand and she was blocking the doorway so that Roya couldn't lunge at the detective.

"You know better than to walk up behind me, Detective."

His smile was never more than a smirk. "So it's 'detective' now?"

"It's always been detective," she reminded him. "And it's Miss Bridges, Detective Harris."

"I'm Officer Armstrong."

Gabriel stepped in, but instead of crowding her, he moved forward, making Rolan take a step back as they shook hands.

"Chief Hill sent me as Miss Bridges' guard. As long as she's here, I am too."

Misty barely held in a burst of laughter that threatened to come out as Rolan glared at her.

"Really? You think you need protection from me?"

Her eyes widened.

She was stunned that he'd say something like that, but no more stunned than Gabriel.

He turned, putting his back to Rolan as he leaned in toward her ear. "What is he talking about?"

She lifted a hand and set it on Gabriel's chest. She felt the thunder of his heartbeat under her palm. Misty met his eyes and shook her head. There was no time to talk about it at the moment, and she wasn't sure she wanted to talk about it at all.

Misty turned and stepped to the side, letting Roya leap down to the grass. Reaching into the truck, Misty took out Roya's harness and quickly put it on. She smiled down at the dog. "You're just the bestest girl, aren't you?"

Roya tipped her head back and grinned. There was no other way to describe the way her mouth widened, and her tongue lolled out.

Turning toward Rolan, Misty was all business. "What are we looking for?"

Glaring at her, Rolan shook his head. "We had an anonymous call come

in and say there's a body buried on this property."

Misty turned to look at the property behind him. It was considerably more than an acre, likely three or four if the fence was anything to go by. A large, but dilapidated house sat off to the right of the center line, and there were several outbuildings that hadn't been cleaned or cared for in some time.

"Did the tip say anything about where on the property?"

"That," Rolan's tone was droll, "is your job, isn't it?"

Misty thought she heard a growl again, but this time, it wasn't from Roya. It sounded like it came from Gabriel.

Goodness.

Given the way Rolan turned to look at Gabriel, he'd heard it too. Nice to know she wasn't hearing things.

Still, the men could go all caveman on each other later. She and Roya had a job to do.

"What about the grounds?" Rolan turned to look at her again. "What kind of terrain are we looking at?"

He waved a hand at the scene. "It's grass. I'm sure there are a few stones here and there and maybe some trash."

"Roya, stay."

Misty gave Roya the hand command to sit and stay beside the truck and then started toward the house.

Gabriel caught up to her a few steps away. "What are we doing?"

She smiled, appreciating the fact that they weren't going to talk about Rolan, yet. "If we were in the woods or a natural area, I wouldn't be concerned, but on a plot of land like this, I like to look around and make sure I don't see anything on the ground that might damage Roya's feet."

"But Roya's going to search the grounds, would walking around the property create an evidentiary issue for the police?"

"The bodies, if they are here, are likely underground. I won't be disturbing anything under the surface of the ground. I just want to make sure that my dog won't hurt herself during the search. My first loyalty is to Roya. If she could hurt herself, I don't think I'd allow her to do the search."

She looked into Gabriel's eyes, unsure of what she'd find there.

She wanted to ask him what he was thinking.

Quite a few people thought she was silly to worry about Roya. They saw her as a tool and likely, if Misty peeked into their garages or tool boxes, she'd find damaged tools. Dirty, badly treated tools.

That may be okay with them, but she cared for Roya as more than a tool. Roya was family. And family deserved better care than that.

Gabriel's lips lifted at the ends. "I get it. If I help you look, it would go faster. I bet the Richmond PD would rather get this started as soon as they can."

Misty felt a little shiver along the side of her neck where Gabriel had touched her earlier. It was a delicious sensation that warmed her from the inside out and as the two of them worked their way around the property looking for possible dangers in the grass, she slid curious looks in his direction and smiled softly to herself.

Things were changing between them, and she was glad that it was happening.

WHEN MISTY STARTED the search with Roya, she did it with a pencil drawing of the grounds provided to her by one of the officers on hand. Rolan had attempted to bring it to her himself, but Roya snapped at him and as much as Rolan liked to be an ass to her, he didn't like the idea that they would have an audience comprised mostly of his coworkers.

Rolan was the kind of guy who loved privacy when it came down to his horrible behavior.

Like the monster under the bed, he didn't like the light.

At the edge of the property, Misty got down on one knee beside Roya and unhooked the leash from her harness. The utility harness had the word SEARCH on both sides, stitched in black thread on a bright orange background.

Looping the leash loosely around her own neck like a scarf, Misty laid her hand gently across Roya's back. "Okay, girl. You know what to do. Search."

As soon as Misty took her hand off of Roya's back, her dog lurched forward and dropped her nose to the ground.

Roya moved deliberately around the edge of the house first, her nose moving back and forth across an area slightly wider than her muscled body.

Misty followed behind her with the officer that had been assigned to mark the search area.

The officer took a step closer to Misty and spoke quietly in her direction. "Can I ask a question or two?"



Keeping her focus on Roya, Misty nodded gently. "Sure. Go ahead."

"Okay." The officer clipped his pencil to the clipboard and gestured at Roya up ahead of them. "Is that as fast as search dogs typically go?"

Misty shrugged. "It's how fast Roya goes. I let her go at her own speed. She's the one with the super nose. I'm just the human that gets to spend time with her. "

"Uh huh." They walked for another few steps as Roya approached the back corner of the house. "When they had the other dogs come through here, they were all over the place, practically running over each other."

"Other dogs?" Misty looked at the officer for a quick moment. "How many dogs have already searched the area?"

The officer looked a little apprehensive before giving Misty the answer she was asking for. "We had three dogs out here yesterday and they didn't find a thing."

Misty's mind was filled with questions, but she didn't bother asking the officer. She doubted that the officer would know much more than he'd already told her by making that admission.

Up ahead, Roya turned at the corner of the house and moved out of Misty's sight. Misty picked up her speed and turned the corner as Roya ducked under some trees.

Wary of letting Roya out of her sight for longer than a moment or two, Misty jogged to catch up to her search dog.

The officer was close behind her.

Movement out of the corner of her eye turned her head to see what was happening. Gabriel reached the corner of the house and had his eyes fixed in her direction.

It made sense since the chief had tasked him with keeping an eye on them.

A soft swish of sound was followed by the bob and sway of low-hanging branches.

Misty walked around to the other side of the tree to look for Roya, but the overgrown branches made it nearly impossible for her to see.

Crouching down, Misty approached the tree and using her arm, she lifted up the branches near the bottom.

When she finally caught sight of Roya, her heart caught in her chest.

Roya was flat against the ground, her head between her paws, her tail sweeping back and forth like a fan. Misty moved further around the base of

the tree until she could look Roya in the eyes.

"Got it?"

Thump. Thump. Thump. Roya's heavy tail pounded on the ground.

"Good girl, Roya. Stay right there for a moment." Misty ducked out from under the branches and met the startled gaze of the officer. "She's alerted under the tree."

The officer beside her nodded his head, but his voice didn't sound all that sure. "Under the tree?"

Misty gestured at the spruce tree. "She'll stay until I give her the command to move."

"Uh huh." He nodded, staring at her with wide eyes.

"Do you want to tell Detective Harris?"

"Detective Harris!" Gabriel shouted the alert from the corner of the house, and she gave him a grateful smile. He raised a hand acknowledging her reaction.

Misty crouched back down by the base of the tree and gathered a few branches in her arm so she could show Rolan where Roya had alerted on the ground.

When he crouched down beside her, she only had room in her heart for the pride she felt for her dog.

And looking at Roya's wide grin, she knew that Roya was feeling it too.

"She found it fast."

Misty shrugged. "She's got a great nose."

"Are you sure there's a body under there?"

Frustration pinched between her shoulder blades. "There's decomp there, detective. Roya's nose is sure and that's good enough for me."

Silence fell between them, and she found herself biting the inside of her cheek.

"Detective?"

"Hmm?"

Misty let out her breath through her nose in a huff. "Do you want to record this so I can let my dog up and give her the treat she so richly deserves?"

"Yeah," he lurched up and onto his feet, "sure. I can do that."

BY THE TIME Misty stood up to her full height, a couple of Tyvek suited

evidence techs were moving forward with their kits.

It took a few moments for them to take pictures and place markers to identify Roya's finding before Misty could call Roya to her side and give her a treat from the pouch at her waist.

Roya snatched the treat out of midair like the boss girl that she was, and Misty rubbed her head. "Good girl."

"Everything okay?"

She looked up at Gabriel who was standing beside her under the shade that the porch cast over her. For a strange and almost wondering moment, she enjoyed his height. Thinking that if they were to dance, she could lay her head on his shoulder.

Shaking off the sensation, she answered him. "Yeah, we're fine. I don't like Roya out of sight much more than she was. I like to have eyes on her, so I know that she's okay."

"What was up with the detective? He looked like he didn't believe what he was seeing."

"Maybe not." She leaned in closer, lowering her voice. "The officer walking with me said they had other dogs here yesterday."

"So," Gabriel drew out the word, "I'm guessing his hesitation wasn't because of his gratitude."

"Who knows with Detective Harris? I certainly don't." She paused for a moment and then looked back up at Gabriel. "I guess it does kind of feel a little too quick. We'd barely turned the corner around the back of the house. With all of this land, it seems like an odd place to put the body. But what do I know?"

Gabriel leaned in and she breathed in his scent, hoping that he didn't notice.

"This part, as you well know, is going to take some time. I'd like to give Roya a chance to stretch her legs. If we're going back today, she's going to be in the car for a while."

"Yeah," Gabriel turned and gestured toward the other side of the house, "we can take her over there and let her run."

We?

It was probably just a turn of a phrase. It didn't mean anything.

Right?

Right.

"Roya?"

Her dog put her butt down in a perfect 'sit' with her eyes fixed on Misty.

"Go." She gestured to the yard.

Roya lurched up from the sit and almost pranced a few paces over, dipping her nose down to the ground.

"Roya?"

Her dog looked up at her, her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth. An unspoken 'YES' in her open expression.

"Go, girl."

Again, Roya moved away a few paces and then turned back to look at Misty.

Gabriel's presence at her side was a bit of a distraction. "Has she done this before?"

Misty shook her head and looked back at the massive gathering around the tree. "Maybe she thinks she's still working?"

Looking down at Roya, Misty had a strange thought.

Maybe she was right?

Lifting her hand, she gestured to Roya. "Search."

It looked like Roya blew out a breath and then she was off, nose to the ground, moving back and forth in a sweeping pattern.

Misty looked up at Gabriel and smiled. "She's a workaholic, I guess."

She walked off, following Roya through the unkempt yard. In some places the weeds and grasses came up to her waist, hiding Roya almost entirely from her view.

Gabriel waded through the tall grasses at her side, the two of them swaying back and forth as they tried to find places to plant their feet.

It was in a moment like that when Misty realized that Roya wasn't ahead of them. Or at the very least, Roya wasn't cutting her way through the weeds, maybe she was resting in the grasses.

Misty turned to look at Gabriel beside her. "Do you see where she is?"

Gabriel craned his neck, looking ahead of them. "I don't see her."

Panic grabbed at her heart.

She should have been paying attention.

She should have-

"There."

Gabriel used his hands to push the waist-high weeds aside and she peered through the opening.

When Misty finally saw Roya, the worry that had grabbed a hold of her

heart fell away only to be replaced by something else entirely.

Dread.

"Is something wrong?"

She felt Gabriel's reassuring presence at her shoulder.

"Wrong?" she repeated, unsure of what else to say. "Maybe?"

Just to check again, Misty looked down at Roya and saw her laid flat against the ground, her head set down between her paws.

Oh god.

She looked back at Gabriel, pulling her lower lip between her teeth.

"There's another body."

## CHAPTER FOUR

GABRIEL

As strange as it was to see Roya work as he'd only heard of cadaver dogs and seen videos of them, it was disconcerting to see the push back that Misty was getting from Detective Rolan.

He almost seemed to take it as an affront that Roya had indicated a second body on the property.

"We already have one Crime Scene crew working on your first find. We've got a second crew headed here now."

Misty tilted her head to look at him. "Okay. I don't see a problem with waiting. I just wanted to let you know that Roya found what could be another body."

"What *could* be?" The detective raised an eyebrow. "So you're not sure."

Gabriel felt his neck tense up. He didn't like the attitude from the detective.

Misty lifted her chin a little and met the detective's scornful look. "Roya is. She's the talent here. I'm her partner. She found a second body. I'm telling you about it. What you do with that information is up to you."

"Look-"

The detective's answer was cut off by one of the techs. "I have flag markers. Is it okay to approach Roya, Mist- Miss Bridges?"

Misty's expression changed as she answered. "Absolutely. She's trained to wait for something like this. I'll walk with you."

The man almost smiled as he walked a step behind Misty. If Gabriel read the visual signs correctly, the tech wasn't all that comfortable around dogs and instead of telling him Roya was fine and expecting the man to tough it

out, Misty was smoothing the way with her natural ease.

Gabriel let out a breath. Her ease with pretty much everyone else except himself.

"Hot and cold."

Rolan had moved up beside him and Gabriel felt like bristling at the sudden movement. He was acting more like Roya around the detective.

He'd trust Roya's instincts around the detective, so he was in good company.

"You spend much time with her?"

The man's question held an edge. Like he was trying to dissect Gabriel's connection to Misty. He might be a detective, but if this was the extent of his interrogation skills, he wasn't going to be all that effective.

Gabriel kept his gaze focused on Misty and Roya, but he couldn't help but keep tabs on the detective and his coarse behavior.

The detective huffed. "You got something against me, *officer*?"

"I'm sorry," Gabriel managed to keep his expression as close to neutral as he could, "I was focused on the search."

"Focused on her ass, you mean?" Rolan scoffed. "Can't blame you."

Turning his head toward the other man, Gabriel gave the detective a hard once over. He looked the part of law enforcement, but clothes didn't make the man. He was well kempt in a spartan kind of way, but there was a sour tinge to his expression. Gabriel was wondering if it ever went away or if it was permanent.

Gabriel had a good idea that his impression of the detective wasn't going to change anytime soon.

If ever.

Rolan spoke again. "She's just showing off. You'll get over it like I did."

Gabriel let his breath slowly escape through his nose and shook his head at the other man. "What is your problem?"

Rolan dragged his gaze off of Misty and looked at him with a stern glare. "Me? I don't have a problem. But with the way you're coming at me, I think you've got one." He shook his head. "People like her play at being important. Guys like us? We do the footwork. We do the real work. She comes in, looking pretty with her make-up on and walks her dog around. Tosses the thing a few treats. Gets her picture in the paper. And we're the ones slogging through the evidence and get elbow deep in dirt stinking with remains."

With a stiff lift of his head, Rolan huffed.

"Don't tell me you've fallen under her spell." He chuckled, and the sound was rough and cold.

Gabriel wondered what had happened to the man, or if he'd always been such an ass. "I've been assigned as the liaison to Richmond PD by my Chief. And Misty is part of that assignment. If you have a problem with her, then you need to figure out how to get over it."

To say that he was confused was an understatement.

Rolan had to know that Misty and Roya were an asset. He was the one who suggested that she come to the search.

Now, he was complaining about her as if she wasn't important.

Gabriel doubted that he was going to get any real information out of the man. He was wound up from the beginning and now that there were two searches going on, Gabriel had a feeling that the detective wasn't going to let it go.

Gabriel's job was to be there to watch out for Misty and Roya.

He didn't bother saying anything to Rolan, he just walked over to where the tech had marked the perimeter that Roya had indicated.

The man in the Tyvek suit was shaking his head. "Incredible."

Misty reached into the pouch at her waist and gave Roya a treat and then a scratch between her ears. "Good girl."

The tech took off his head covering and looked up as Gabriel made his way to Misty's side. He pulled off his latex glove and offered his hand to shake. "Tom Sweet. Evidence Tech with Richmond PD."

Gabriel shook his hand. "Gabriel Armstrong. Fallport PD."

Tom grinned. "Glad you folks are taking care of these two." He looked back at Misty. "There have been a few times when I was hoping they'd call you, but on this search..." he shook his head, "thank goodness. Two?"

Misty sighed. "If Roya's indicating, then yeah. She's incredible. I'm just so happy that I get to work with her all the time."

Gabriel stood a little taller when her gaze moved to him. He even managed a hint of a smile. "You two, okay?"

Misty's expression lightened and her smile washed over him like a cool wind.

He wasn't prepared for the reaction, nor was he ready to feel the cool touch of Roya's nose against the back of his hand.

"Hey, girl."

Gabriel crouched down beside the mixed shepherd and gave her a good



scratch from her head down to her shoulders.

"You really are something."

Roya rewarded his kind words with a tongue-lolling grin.

Gabriel looked up at Misty, worried. "Should I... I mean, I should have asked before I put my hands all over her."

There was a fleeting expression that crossed her features, but he didn't quite understand it.

"It's okay." Misty's voice was even and almost light. "Roya's a dog as well as a search professional. We all deserve a break. If she didn't like it, she'd tell you."

He thought of Detective Harris who seemed to elicit growls and bared teeth from Roya.

"Do you need anything? Either of you?" Gabriel stood and gave Misty what he hoped was an easy smile. "Something to drink or eat?"

"We're good for now, but maybe some water for Roya in a bit." She cast a look between Gabriel and Tom. "I'm going to ask Roya to continue her search."

Tom's face dropped, his mouth went slightly slack. "You don't... I mean... You think there might be-"

Misty touched Tom's arm, stilling his words. "It's not something I want to think, but the anonymous tip has already produced double the number of bodies. I really don't think we should leave until we go over the property."

Tom moved away, pulling his arm back as he looked between Misty and Roya. "But you already found two. The tip mentioned one body. One."

Gabriel turned and looked at the whole of the property. It wasn't a square property line. It might have even been added to through additional land purchases over time. Even with the smaller structures on the land, there was a whole lot of land to search.

He met Misty's worried look with his own. "Whatever you think is best. I'm here on your schedule."

Her brows raised together and then she tilted her head to look at Tom. "You have more of those flags?"

Tom swallowed and his Adam's apple dragged along the length of his neck. "We have a whole box in the van. Are you saying..."

"I'm hoping that I'm wrong, but I don't want to leave this search before we've actually completed it." She looked down and gave her dog a big grin. "Right, girl?"

Roya's ears pricked up and her tail waved back and forth. She gave a quick bark and scooted forward.

"Okay." Misty let out a breath. "Let's get going."

\* \* \*

## MISTY

Even with the training that she managed to get in with Roya back in Fallport, there was no real way to know how Roya would perform until they were out in the field.

And after five hours of searching the property, Misty knew that Roya was in tip-top shape.

Herself?

Not so much.

The heat on her forehead, nose, cheeks and the back of her neck reminded her that she had forgotten to put sunscreen on.

And the ache in her lower back and knees said that she needed to do more exercises of her own.

She looked at her phone and the time.

It was late. Much later than she thought they'd be in Richmond.

Misty heard footsteps behind her and turned around. "Hey, I- Oh! Chief Sorvino. I'm sorry. I wasn't... I didn't think you were coming to the scene."

The older man looked comfortable in his pin-striped suit. He found a place to stand under the shade of the tree beside her. "Well, I wasn't planning on coming by at all, but once I got wind that you had more than five bodies on the property, I knew I had to head over."

Misty nodded. "It's better to have you in front of the news crews than Rolan."

Lowering his chin toward his chest, Chief Detective Charles Sorvino chuckled softly. "Always knew that you were a smart one, Miss Bridges."

She smiled at him, but tried to keep it soft and somewhat hidden from the others on the scene. "Thanks, sir. I'm happy to help. I'm just... shocked."

He nodded. "I get the feeling that this anonymous tip has just opened up a huge investigation for us. I think we owe you and your dog a lot of thanks. And," he shook his head, "accommodations for the night. I know you and your pup need some sleep before we go over the rest of the property."

Misty smiled and reached down to give Roya a scratch between her ears.

"Thank you. We really do need some downtime."

The Chief Detective gestured past her shoulder, and she tensed up until she saw Gabriel step up beside her.

"Yes, sir?"

Reaching into the pocket of his suitcoat, the Chief Detective gave Gabriel a card. "This is the address of the Brick Inn. Our department has a contract with them for instances like this. They'll have rooms for both of you paid for by our department, and the restaurant in the lobby will take care of your meals."

The Chief Detective pointed at the underside of the card. "My cell phone is on the other side. When you get settled, text me a time that you can start in the morning. Let me know if there's anything you or your search dog need from us."

Misty tried to ignore how tired she was. Just standing there, hearing about plans for a hotel, made her legs ache even more and a twinge twist in her lower back.

"Thanks, sir. I think it'll really help for us to get some sleep and come at this fresh in the morning."

"This can't have been easy for either of you."

Misty turned to look at Gabriel, shocked at his words and the gentle tone of his voice.

"With the evidence crews digging through the sites that Roya helped them mark, the air has a lot of dust. That has to mess with Roya's nose."

She smiled at him. "That's one of my concerns, besides just how tired she must be. We train for things like this but, well... not exactly like this."

Gabriel agreed with a nod. "This is kind of a marathon instead of a 5k. We should get going and get checked in to the Inn."

Misty held out her hand and the Chief Detective shook it heartily. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Bridges. We're glad you could come and help. Roya was always rock solid, now she's worth her weight in gold."

BY THE TIME Misty climbed into the passenger seat of Gabriel's Silverado, she felt her arms and legs start to ache.

"Ow."

Gabriel reached in and around her, and Misty froze when his cheek was close enough that she could smell a woody scent on his skin.

She held her breath and her eyes widened as she wondered what was about to happen. And along with that wondering was the idea that she wanted Gabriel Armstrong to kiss her.

She bet it would be amazing.

He did have the most amazing lips and-  
CLICK.

"There." He leaned back, smiling. "You're all buckled in. You want me to put Roya in the back or-"

Before he could finish his question, Roya made the decision for both of them, scrambling up onto Misty's lap.

Wrapping her arms around the calico patterned dog, Misty leaned in and laid her head on Roya's. "Hey, girl."

Gabriel's warm laughter melted away some of the tension in her shoulders. "Looks like you both needed a break. I'll get us on the road and to the Inn. You two just rest."

It seemed like just a moment or two before the driver's door opened up and Gabriel climbed up into the truck.

He eased into the seat and turned on the truck, putting the air conditioning on.

Misty almost moaned at the comforting cool air.

"You two have been out in the sun all day. Even with the long sleeves of your shirt and the shade of your hat, you've gotten a little sun. I bet you'll sleep through the night."

Misty lifted a hand to her nose and then drew her fingertips over a cheek. "Does it look that bad? I could tell the skin was a little tight."

Gabriel took his hand off the gearshift, leaving it in Park, and touched her chin, lifting it a little. Then he turned her face away from him and then back in the other direction.

Misty had never felt so self-conscious about her face before. She rarely wore makeup even on the best of occasions, but she was used to fading away in a crowd.

She stood out when she put an effort into her persona when she was in the middle of social events, but there were a few people who she could just be herself around and not worry that she was making a fool of herself.

The first few times she'd been around Gabriel, he'd been a little tense.

Gruff?

Honestly, she didn't know.

She did like the way he cared for Avalon, but everyone did. The problem seemed to be that Gabriel was tolerating her to make Avalon happy.

And really, what girl wanted to be just that?

It was like that time in college when some of the people in her dorm were talking about a party one of them was going to have at their parents' house off campus.

The weekend of the party came and went and when everyone in her section of the dorm came back on Sunday morning, struggling with their hangovers, they'd asked why she hadn't been there.

The question had been as confusing to her as it was to them. She didn't think she was invited because no one had actually invited her to come. They didn't understand that she wasn't the kind of person to just show up to something where they'd assumed that she would.

When Misty had been invited to the Armstrongs' Sunday all day events, she'd been excited, but Gabriel kept away from her, putting plenty of room between them.

And now, it felt like things were changing, but maybe that was just an indication of how tired she was.

It would be par for the course for her to lean into this warmth she was feeling between them, only to have Gabriel cringe away from her.

Roya, likely sensing her inner turmoil, gave her a big lick along the side of her face. Thank goodness she'd given Roya a good cleaning on her face and paws after they'd stopped for the day, Misty chuckled silently.

*See?* She sighed. She just wasn't the kind of girl that guys would gravitate toward. Roya was as cute as any dog could be, but they had a pretty grisly job at the best of times.

Who would want to get close to that?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GABRIEL

The Brick Inn wasn't exactly where Gabriel thought they'd be put up for the night. Either the Richmond Police Department had a decent sized discretionary budget, or someone wanted to make sure that Misty and Roya were comfortable.

Which was fine with Gabriel. He could sleep in his car if it had come down to that, but he was thankful that wasn't the case.

The front desk staff already had two keys ready for them when they arrived and only asked for his information.

The young man behind the desk explained, "We already have Miss Bridges' information, sir. These keys are for two adjoining rooms just down the hall." He gestured toward the hall opposite from the front desk. "Our restaurant is open until ten, but if Miss Bridges would prefer to stay in her room, we're happy to have your meals delivered."

Gabriel was surprised, pleasantly so.

He finished filling out his information on the guest card and the clerk returned his drivers license with a smile.

"I don't suppose you can tell us what happened on the search?"

Gabriel felt his brows push together and furrow.

The younger man winced. "I know it sounds kind of silly to ask, but we've all seen the articles about Miss Bridges and her dog." He took the opportunity to lean to the side and waved at Misty.

Gabriel turned around in time to see Misty wave back and then Roya followed suit, lifting her paw in the air for a wave of her own.

"Dude," the clerk gushed, "that was awesome!"

He ducked down behind the counter and pulled out a little brown paper bag with a checkered ribbon tied around it, holding it closed. Setting it on the counter, he leaned toward Gabriel and smiled. "My manager had these treats delivered from the Hot Dawg Bakery in town. Compliments of the Brick Inn."

"Uh," Gabriel pushed his wallet into his back pants pocket and took the bag in his left hand while grabbing the keys in his right, "thanks."

The clerk shrugged, but his smile doubled in size. "It's not everyday that we get celebrities staying here."

WHEN HE MADE his way back to Misty, he saw the way she pushed up from her perch on the back of the sofa in the waiting area. She looked a little stiff in her movements and he had a feeling he already knew what they'd be doing for dinner.

He gestured for her to follow him down the hall. "I'll grab our bags after you two are safely in your room."

She nodded and walked up to his side, Roya following easily on the other side of her. "Thanks. That's really nice of you."

Gabriel was a little uncomfortable at the softer sound of her voice. "Hey, you did the heavy lifting today. I just got to stand back and watch."

Misty's chin dropped a little and he heard a deep exhale.

"He said the rooms are adjoining, so if it's okay with you, I'd like to keep the connecting door unlocked."

She turned to look at him and he continued quickly.

"If something happens, I can get through the door even if it's locked, but I'd rather not have to replace their doorframe. Simon would probably put me in time out."

Misty laughed and he warmed at the sound.

He stopped at the first door and opened it with the key on the ring with the matching numbered key chain.

"Wait here," he stepped inside the room and stopped turning back to look at Misty waiting in the hall, "please."

She nodded, smiling at the same time.

He went into the room and made quick work of checking the closet and the bathroom before returning to the front door. "It's clear. Come on in."

Misty stepped inside and her eyes went straight to the bed. He heard her

groan and that sound did something to him.

While she kept her eyes on the bed, she made a quick, half-hearted offer. "Are you sure you can get the bags?"

Gabriel smiled. "Yeah. I can get them. Do you want to lie down for a bit?"

She didn't even reply verbally. Her feet walked her to the bed and Roya followed at her side.

"I'm going to keep your key so I can bring your bags in without making you get up."

Misty flopped down on the bed face first.

Roya clambered up beside her and lay down almost face to face with Misty.

Shaking his head, Gabriel turned around and headed back out to his truck.

WHEN HE OPENED the door to the room a second time, he was a little surprised to see that the bed was empty.

A quick look across the room showed him that Roya lay across the door to the bathroom.

The door wasn't closed all the way, but the lights were on inside and he could hear the heavy splash of water in the shower.

Gabriel set Misty's suitcase on the bed and laid Roya's duffle beside it.

He took a few steps toward the bathroom, not getting close enough to look in or get too close to Roya. He had no idea how the dog would react to it.

"Misty?"

He waited for her to respond. When she didn't, he tried again.

"Misty?"

Roya looked up at him, her tongue lolling out.

Gabriel closed his eyes and pushed the door open another couple of inches. He raised his voice a little.

"Misty?"

Something hard hit the wall and then fell to the ground.

"Dang it!"

"Are you okay?" He nudged the door open a little more, keeping his eyes closed even if he probably couldn't see anything if they were open.

"Yeah. I mean yes. Sorry. I dropped the soap." He heard a few



unintelligible sounds and then she grumbled. "That sounds crazy, right? I should have waited for you to come back but I needed to get out of those clothes."

Wow. He knew she didn't mean anything by her words but it didn't change the fact that his imagination tried to fill in a lot of details.

"Gabriel?"

He cleared his throat, but it didn't clear the hard lump in it. "I'm... going to go and get my stuff and go to my room. When you're... when you're out of the shower... and dressed, unlock the connecting door and knock to let me know it's safe to come in."

"Okay."

He left the room then and marched himself out into the parking lot.

The distance he put between them didn't make that much of a difference. It wasn't the heat from the shower that was clinging to his skin. That he could blame on his imagination.

His interest? That was all on him.

And Misty?

He knew that he'd been an ass to her before. And even if he tried to defend his crap behavior on circumstances, that wouldn't be fair to Misty.

And yes, he knew he had to apologize to her.

She deserved it.

Better yet, he was raised better than how he'd behaved around her. While he'd been upset about the things that had happened to Avalon, Misty didn't cause Avalon any strife. In fact, Misty had proven that she was a good friend to Avalon.

Even if Gabriel's brother wasn't in love with Avalon, she'd been a part of his family's circle since they were children. He cared about Avalon like a sister and he'd taken her problems to heart the same way he would have if it had been his sister Kay or their cousin Rachael.

*Again, his conscience reminded him, none of that was Misty's fault.*

He unlocked his truck and pulled his bag out before reaching in for his work bag.

It didn't take long to hoof himself back inside and into his own room. Gabriel dropped his things on the bed and crossed to the connecting door. With a twist of his wrist, he unlocked the door on his side and pulled it open.

From there, he went into the bathroom and washed off his face and hands, enjoying the warm water on his skin. When he opened his eyes, he looked

back at himself in the mirror.

His brother Joshua, and cousin Brody told him he had a resting grump face. They always laughed when they said it, but standing there, looking at his expression, he had to admit they were right.

Even though he wasn't upset or overly tired, he looked like he was about to argue with someone. Or give them a traffic ticket.

Gabriel shook his head and let out a breath.

How Misty managed not to run screaming away from him when he looked in her direction, he had no idea.

He dropped the towel on the side of the sink and backed out of the room, turning off the light as he went.

He wasn't used to thinking about how others viewed him.

No, that wasn't completely true.

He knew as an officer that it mattered how the public saw him. As a brother and cousin, he knew that he wanted to be an example for his family. Including how his parents saw him.

He'd grown up in a tight-knit family circle, but seeing his brother Joshua and Avalon cement the love that they'd always had for each other and preparing for a wedding?

It felt like he'd finally seen what was missing in his life, he just wasn't sure how to open himself up to even the possibility of the same.

Especially if his resting grump face would probably scare away anyone who might want to get closer.

A soft knock at the closed connecting door moved him to the center of the room.

"Come in."

He heard the lock on the closed door click open and he let out a breath to calm the sudden rise of nerves from his middle and into his throat.

\* \* \*

MISTY

Opening the door between their rooms felt like she'd opened a door into another dimension. Cheesy? Well, she was tired.

And even with the shower she'd treated herself to, she was still exhausted and her muscles were aching.

It was partly her fault, anyway.

Being around Rolan was a pain and a half. Even though she knew what she was doing and she was damn sure that Roya was the best for hundreds if not thousands of miles, she was eager for Roya to be her best every time she went out.

And Roya had worked miracles that day.

She was so damn proud.

Lifting her hand, she knocked on the door and waited to hear Gabriel speak first.

And waited.

Misty looked back at Roya, who was blissed out on the bed, her head lolled to one side and an ear halfway up.

She didn't look concerned at all.

No, Roya generally left the uncomfortable feelings for Misty. The way it should be. Puppies who were the best girls should rest like the angels they were.

Humans, on the other hand, they were a mess.

Misty reached out to knock on the door again and jumped back when the doorknob jiggled.

"Misty? My door's open."

She looked down at the doorknob and frowned at it.

She was pretty sure she heard him chuckling softly on the other side of the door.

"If you unlock your door, you can come in here or I can come to you."

A little shiver moved up her arms at his words.

Lifting her hand, she turned the bar on the lock above the doorknob. The click seemed to echo through both rooms. Misty lowered her hand to the knob and turned it down.

The door opened inward, and she stepped back.

Gabriel stepped into the doorway and gave her a smile. A smile that had her nearly tripping over her own feet as she took another step back.

He was handsome when he had his normal serious mien on display, but smiling?

He could break hearts. And just being this close to it made her heart beat a little faster.

She could blame it on exhaustion, but she knew that Gabriel already had a pull on her emotions. Misty just wasn't used to him smiling at her.

"Sorry." She forced the word out so he didn't think she was asleep on her feet. "I've never opened a connecting door before. Come to think of it, I don't spend a lot of time in hotels. Connecting doors are just kind of strange."

He leaned his shoulder on the door frame. "Growing up, we always had rooms like this if we were traveling with my aunt and uncle and our cousins. It was just easier to have us connected."

She nodded. "It would make sense then."

"Then again," he shrugged, "it did get a little chaotic sometimes."

Misty smiled at the almost wistful tone in his voice. "It sounds like you miss it."

"Sometimes..." His voice drifted off. "Then we have our dinners on the green between the houses and I remember why it's also good to have my own place."

Misty smiled at his words. "I think it's fun. Although, looking at how y'all go after each other from time to time, I bet it's easier now than it was when you were kids."

Gabriel grinned and just the sight of his straight white teeth made her heart skip a beat.

Goodness.

"We should probably get you and Roya something to eat before you fall asleep."

She put a hand to her face and turned partially away. How exhausted did she look?

"I brought food for Roya. I'll put it out in a few minutes. Why don't you come in?"

He took a few steps into her room, and she had to force in a breath. It felt like he'd taken up more space than she'd remembered earlier.

"The clerk said they'd bring food to the room if you don't want to go out to the restaurant. But if you do want to leave the room for a while, I'll stay here with Roya so you can relax."

Stay in the room with Roya?

"I'd rather not go out, even to the restaurant. I'm half afraid that I'll fall asleep face first in my plate. I had no idea that I'd be this exhausted."

He nodded. "The heat? I was a little uncomfortable with all of the full sunlight on scene. I guess I miss the trees more than I thought I would."

"Right?" She crossed to the bed and sat down on the edge. "I think it would be better to sit around here and hope I can finish my meal before I fall

asleep."

Gabriel crossed to the small round table in the corner of the room near the windows. He picked up a laminated card that was the size of a regular sheet of paper. "This is the menu." He looked at one side and then the other as he brought it over to her.

She watched as his gaze moved quickly over the paper, back and forth. He was a fast reader.

Good. A man that read fast wasn't averse to reading.

And she liked to read.

She spent a lot of time reading when she could. Roya would place her head on her thigh and let Misty pet her over and over again as she devoured books as fast as she could.

"Here."

She reached out and took hold of the menu.

A quick perusal of the offerings had her zooming in on an option that normally wouldn't have drawn her attention.

"How good do you think the meatloaf is here?"

Gabriel tilted his head to the side and then moved around to stand beside her. "It says it's a specialty here."

She looked up at him. "Your voice doesn't sound all that sure."

He shrugged. "That's because 'the moms' meatloaf is the best. It would have to be really something to make me order it away from home."

She nodded. "Yeah. I wasn't much of a meatloaf person until I had it with your family." She let her eyes continue to scan over the items. "I've been meaning to ask Avalon... but, why do y'all call them 'the moms'?"

"It's just family shorthand, I guess. My mom and my aunt are so alike. They cook the same dishes. They do the same crafts. Bake the same treats. People just stopped asking us which of them made something and everyone just started calling them 'the moms' as if they were a package deal."

"And they are," she murmured softly, feeling her cheeks ache a little from her smile, "just like the Armstrongs are the Armstrongs."

He sat down beside her on the bed, their hands just inches apart as he looked up at the popcorn ceiling over their heads. "It is," he chuckled. "We are," he corrected. "At times it was something we fought against as kids, mostly when we were teens trying to be ourselves outside of the family, but now we lean into it. It's nice knowing that someone has your back all the time."

Misty lowered the menu down to her lap and felt her heart constrict in her chest.

Someone that has your back all of the time?

Her first thought was Avalon.

Even though they'd only known each other for a short amount of time, Misty felt like she knew Avalon soul deep. Like how she'd always imagined a sister would be.

Still, she wasn't going to say that to Avalon.

The last thing she wanted to do was put her feelings out there and make her friend feel like she had to echo the sentiment. It was easier to play it loose.

It was easier to keep things... easy.

"You asleep? Or just having trouble picking out something to eat?"

She fixed her eyes on the first thing that caught her attention. "Salmon and veggies."

"Veggies," his tone was softer than it usually was. Almost wistful. "Avalon says that, too. You guys are getting really close."

She felt that in her heart, and it was nice to hear him say something similar.

"What do you want to drink?" He got up from the bed and made his way along the side of the bed to the nightstand.

"Water," that was her first thought. "Oh, and some iced tea if they have it, please."

"Water and iced tea," he echoed. "You're a hard woman to please." Then he shook his head. "Just joking."

She felt her shoulders relax. She didn't realize that she'd tensed up at his words. "Yeah... joking."

A strange look passed over his face as he dialed the restaurant.

"I've messed it up again, haven't I?" He turned away and spoke softly into the phone.

Misty didn't know what to think.

She'd probably misheard what he'd said.

She was just tired.

Maybe too tired to understand.

"Maybe I just need a good night's sleep."

Roya sat up on the bed, leaning into Misty's side, flicking little kisses across her cheek.

She wrapped her arms around her dog and sighed. "You're the best girl. You know that, right?"

She laughed as she narrowly missed having Roya swipe her wet nose across her ear. "Let's get you fed. Come on, girl."

When she was on her feet, Misty felt much better.

On her feet, the world firmly beneath her, she could breathe. She just didn't know how she was going to keep herself together.

Having Gabriel in the same room with her, even with Roya there for distraction, made her feel like she was short of breath.

## CHAPTER SIX

### GABRIEL

Dinner with Misty had been a subdued affair, she'd quietly finished her meal and he'd done his best to keep his inquisitive gaze off of her as much as possible. He wanted to ask her a flood of questions, which wasn't his usual style.

Not that he'd ever developed a dating style.

In fact, spending time with Misty was changing him. Living in Fallport, he'd grown up with most of the women living in town. There wasn't a need to get to know them more than he already did.

When Elsie Calhoun had moved to town and started working at On The Rocks, Gabriel had a few conversations with her, but a few hard looks of warning from Zeke, the owner of the bar, was enough to drive home the point that he had to keep his distance.

One particular evening, he'd managed to get a smile from her that went beyond her normal customer service smile and less than twenty minutes later, Zeke had stopped by the table to make it absolutely clear that Elsie was off limits.

"She has a son."

Gabriel had shrugged at the cautionary comment.

"Fine by me. I bet she's a wonderful mom." Gabriel saw Zeke's hackles rise and he'd continued to talk. "She's sweet and easy to talk to. That's the extent of it."

Zeke's expression eased a little. "Good to hear. I won't stand for it if you step out of line. Heaven help you if you hurt her."

Gabriel placed his hands flat on the surface of the table and looked Zeke



in the eye.

"Point taken. I just like talking to her. I'd like to consider her a friend, if possible, but I'm not interested in crossing you. Seems like you already have feelings for her of your own."

Oh, Zeke had downplayed that idea and walked away from his table, grumbling. Gabriel had seen beyond Zeke's sullen denial.

He just wasn't going to say anything more. It wasn't that he didn't have anything to say, but he didn't know Zeke well at all. Going into detail about his own observations wasn't something he was willing to do.

He liked going to the bar, and he had a feeling that Zeke would eventually pull his head out of... where he'd stuffed it.

And he had, the lucky man.

Gabriel wasn't sure he'd ever figure it out for himself. At least where it came to Misty.

He'd taken a hard line when they'd met during Avalon's return to Fallport. He still had to apologize for that.

Misty stood up and reached for his plate. "Here, I'll take that." When she finished stacking the plates onto the tray, he took it from her hands.

She probably didn't know that her hands were shaking. Misty was exhausted and he had to fight himself to pull her against him and lend her what strength he had to spare.

"I'll put the tray outside." He softened his tone so he wouldn't startle her and started across the room.

He heard the soft click of metal and heard the jingle of Roya's dog tags crossing the room as he set the tray in the hallway, just to the side of the door.

When he turned around, he saw Misty and Roya ready to go out.

"If you'll give me a minute, I'll go with you."

Misty shook her head. "No need. I can take Roya out for her walk and come back in about a half an hour."

Before she moved past him, Gabriel put his hand on her shoulder, startling them both. "I'd like to go with you." He saw her hesitate and continued on to explain. "This is an unfamiliar area for both of us. I'd like to go with you and stretch my legs, but I'd also feel better if we went together."

Her eyes were half-lidded when she nodded. "Okay. It's probably a good idea for us to go out together."

Gabriel had to admit that he liked the way she'd phrased her agreement. He did want to go out with her, he just wasn't sure that she'd ever agree and if

she did, he'd have to worry about making things uncomfortable for his brother and Avalon if things didn't work out.

But before he could worry about that, he had to ask her out in the first place.

And while they had spent a number of hours together without incident, he wasn't under any misconceptions that things were good between them.

Misty deserved an effort on his part.

An effort that he was going to make, even if it was just to make things right between them.

Gabriel walked through the open connecting door between their rooms and got his jacket and keys to the hotel room and truck, just in case.

He came back in time to get a soft woof of greeting from Roya and a sleepy smile from Misty.

He opened the door to her room and stepped out into the hall to see if there was anyone around. When it was clear, he held the door open for her and waited for Misty and Roya to join him in the hallway.

A quick tug on the hotel room door showed him that it was locked and they headed for the lobby.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS quiet for the most part. A dog on another block barked and was answered by another somewhere farther down the road.

While Roya's ears perked up and she turned her head in their direction, she remained quiet.

Gabriel smiled and reached down to tousle Roya's long ruff of fur at the back of her neck, but he stopped short and looked up at Misty. "Can I?"

She nodded and gestured down to Roya who looked like she was dancing at his feet. "She's not working right now. Besides that, I think you made a friend."

Gabriel smiled as he bent over and gave Roya's neck a hearty scratch and then they continued walking down the sidewalk. Roya would step out in front of them and criss-cross the path, leaning to sniff at a pole or a plant as they walked.

He smiled as her tail lifted and swished back and forth like the rudder of a ship. "I've seen you two working in the center of town on the grass."

Misty cast a quick look in his direction. "Really?"

Gabriel had to step in quickly because he wasn't sure what the tone of her

voice meant. "In the mornings. I tend to go to the cafe and eat. The window seats along the wall gives me a good view." He shook himself internally, wondering if he really sounded like a creeper. "Usually, I eat with Josh and Brody and sometimes the conversation gets a little stale. I like watching you work with Roya."

He winced and continued to walk a few steps before he realized he was alone, and he turned around.

Misty was standing along the edge of the sidewalk with Roya seated at her feet, the dog's head turning toward him and back toward Misty. Roya didn't show any stress. She had her mouth wide open, and tongue lolled out.

"I'm making a mess of this." He sighed.

Misty tilted her head a little. "Mess of what? The walk?"

He lifted his hands in a vague gesture of frustration. "The walk. Talking. Pick one. I'm making simple things difficult. I've done that since we've met."

Misty's smile was soft and her eyes held a light he hadn't seen all day. "Well, I can't say you're wrong about those early days."

She walked closer to him and Roya pranced up between them and slightly ahead as they continued to walk.

Gabriel was trying to compose the right words in his head instead of messing up again.

"I was wondering if we'd ever get on common ground."

He turned to look at her, but she kept her gaze on the sidewalk ahead. Which was a good idea. He was fairly sure that he'd trip over his feet and make a complete ass of himself if someone wasn't watching out.

"I owe you an apology."

There.

He'd said it.

And miracle of miracles, he hadn't died.

"The night at On the Rocks. When I took you home." His lips pressed into a tight, thin line as his mind replayed the scene that night. "I was an ass."

"Gabriel-"

"I was worried about Avalon and Joshua. I knew what having her back meant to him, but I wasn't prepared to feel what it meant to me."

Misty was silent beside him, and they paused as Roya took her time sniffing around the bushes at the corner of two cross streets.

Gabriel took a few steps away and lifted a hand to rub at the back of his neck. He knew he was still making a mess of things, but he had a feeling he

wasn't going to get better overnight.

He'd always been better with actions instead of words. Probably why he'd been so drawn to law enforcement instead of the other options for work in Fallport.

As they stood there on the corner, he looked up and met Misty's patient gaze.

He really needed to do better.

"Avalon was always like a sister... or a cousin to me. Things were obviously different with Joshua. They always knew each other on a deeper level." He let out a breath and scuffed the heel of his boot on the concrete. "When Chris' dad went after Avalon in the bar, I wasn't expecting to be as mad as I was."

He let his thoughts settle a little before he spoke again.

"And I took it out on you. I think I even saw it while it was happening, but I was just... I was struggling with the idea that handling things as I'd been taught to do might not be enough for me."

It sounded worse coming out of his mouth than it had in his head.

What would she think of his feelings?

Of the struggle he was still having?

"You were thinking of hurting him? Chris' dad?"

He remained quiet because his anger wasn't all that specific.

"I had more than my share of unkind... No, that's too nice for how I felt." Misty shook her head. "I wanted to kick ass when that was happening. I'd never really had a friend that I'd connected to as fast and as deep as I'd found with Avalon.

"And it scared me, you know? How someone so kind and sweet could have someone hate her that much? I didn't understand how that was possible. And knowing that. Knowing who it was. I'm pretty sure I would have gladly dug a big ol' hole in the forest and pushed that angry old man into it."

Roya piped up with a big WUFF.

Misty nodded like she understood what he was thinking. "I've watched my share of Netflix Crime Documentaries and the stuff they have on YouTube is scary at the best of time, but still informative."

Gabriel wasn't sure if he should agree or be concerned.

Okay, maybe both.

"So if you're thinking that I'd be upset about the anger you were struggling with back then, think again. I would have probably joined up with

you and gone to kick his grumpy ass."

Roya WUFFed again and they both smiled a little.

"I got on your case that night." Gabriel pressed his curled fingers into his chest, just above his heart, trying to dull the ache he felt there. "I probably acted like a neanderthal."

Misty shrugged. "That or the town really does have a Bigfoot."

He looked at her and smiled, almost letting out a laugh.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I'm not the funniest girl, but I try. Or rather, I'm *trying* at times."

Gabriel was smiling at that. "I think you're taking it easy on me, and I'm sure I don't deserve it." He walked closer to Misty but stopped when Roya got up on all fours between them. "I am sorry for the way I treated you. I should have apologized before this."

"You don't have to-"

"I do. I owe it to you for the way I treated you, and I'm hoping that you can forgive me."

\* \* \*

MISTY

"Forgive you?" Goodness. "Sure. I was hoping that while we were here, we might get a chance to work things out."

"I think I'm the one who had to work things out. You didn't do anything, Misty."

It almost hurt hearing those words. She had no idea that Gabriel was struggling, just like she was. They were both thinking they were at fault. It was a real load off of her shoulders.

Roya whined and tugged on her leash, heading back toward the Inn.

Smiling, Misty let Roya have her way, turning her head to look at Gabriel to make sure that he was walking back with them.

He took a few extra steps and caught up, walking beside her.

"I'm glad you said something," she explained, "I was trying to figure out what to say to you, but I was so tired after today that I was worried I'd fall asleep in the middle of dinner and confirm whatever you were thinking about me."

"Thinking about you?" A strange look passed over his features, but it was

gone soon enough. "I hate to say I was thinking the same thing. I was pretty sure you thought I was a complete ass and you'd be right."

"Really," she drew in a breath and loved the cooler air that the evening had provided, "I'm just happy to get this out in the open. I was worried that if we didn't clear the air that I'd have to turn down Avalon's invitations to Sundays with your family."

He winced and she smiled.

Gabriel Armstrong was a big guy who wore authority well.

And even his grumpy scowl looked good on him.

Sure, she'd told herself she could just visit the Armstrongs and just stay out of Gabriel's way just so she could spend time with her friend and her insanely awesome family, but deep down inside, she didn't want to stay away from Gabriel.

There were a few times, *right*, 'a few times' that she'd tucked herself in wondering what it would be like to see that dark-eyed scowl up close and very personal.

And there had also been a series of dreams that she was *not* going to think about when she was close enough to touch him.

"Then I'm even more sorry about it."

She loved the sound of his voice when it didn't sound like it was being pulled out of his throat.

"When you came over on Sundays, I was just trying to keep myself out of the way so you could enjoy yourself."

That was an eye-opening admission all on its own.

"And I was trying to keep the peace with you by leaving a big chunk of space between us whenever we were in the same space."

"Sounds like we were both trying to smooth things over."

She nodded at his words. "And making a mess of it. At least I did."

He pushed his hands into the front pockets of his slacks. "Pretty sure that was all on me."

Misty came to a stop and turned her head to look at him. "Are you really turning this into some kind of a competition? Because if that's the case, I'm so much more responsible for this thing than you are."

There.

She saw it.

A real and genuine smile on his face.

"Do you want to arm wrestle over it?"

Her eyes were wide open and her chin dropped, opening her mouth. Did Gabriel Armstrong just crack a joke? She looked at him for a moment before she spoke.

"I'm pretty sure I can take you at arm wrestling," she gave him what she hoped was a super confident look. "So, to save your ego, I'm going to demur."

Misty was fighting off a smile and she felt almost giddy at the way they were finally able to talk to each other sans the eggshells she was pretty sure were going to drive her nuts.

"So," he scoffed playfully at her, "you're not going to arm wrestle me to save my ego?"

Nodding, Misty continued to walk. "Pretty much. I'd hate to see a grown man cry."

"Cry?" He outright laughed. "You'd have to work really hard to make me cry over arm-wrestling."

She shook her head. "I've been known to make a few men cry."

That seemed to catch his attention. "Is Detective Harris one of those guys, because he strikes me as a guy who has a very fragile ego?"

"Rolan? He's one of those guys who gives the police a bad name. I only had to deal with him during searches, but he puts the concept of polar opposites to shame. He's out in the stratosphere. I think under all of his... bluster, he's just the kind of guy who thinks there's one way to do his job."

"The old way?"

She nodded at Gabriel's interjection. "Pretty much. He likes to do it all himself. Turning over a big plot of land to us to search? He was probably gnashing his teeth the whole time.

"When Roya found the first body? I bet he was hoping that we'd pack up and leave. When Roya found a second one? He was probably ready to spit nails."

"And then when she found even more?" Gabriel shook his head. "I bet he felt like things were being pulled from his hands."

Misty gestured with her free hand. "Pretty much. By the second half of the day, I didn't even see him."

Another strange look crossed Gabriel's face and Misty wasn't going to let that go.

"What are you thinking about?"

He shook his head and lowered his gaze to the ground. "I don't want to

upset you-"

"Gabriel." Misty stopped walking and only had to wait a moment for Gabriel to stop, too.

Roya, ever the loving furball, stopped between them, turning one way and then the other to look between the two of them.

"The only way to upset me right now would be to leave me in the dark. If there's something going on, I want to know."

"I'm here to watch out for you and Roya. The last thing I want to do is distract you and make Roya's work harder. Why don't we just wait, and I'll tell you when we're back on the road tomorrow or the next day? Keep your focus on the job at hand."

"I can focus just fine." She gave him a hard look. All the laughter they'd been sharing had faded away into the night. "I'd rather know what's going on instead of being left in the dark. I'm a big girl who can handle a grumpy old man, but I'd rather know what's going on. I need to know."

She saw the look on his face and wished she could just see right into his head.

Did she think he was trying to hurt her?

No.

She had no doubt that he thought he was helping by keeping things quiet. He wasn't trying to hurt her. He was trying to protect her.

They just had two different ideas of what that meant.

He let out a breath and gestured toward the Inn that was just about fifty feet away. "Can we go inside? I'll tell you, but I think it's better if we had a little privacy."

She wanted to argue that they had plenty of privacy standing on the sidewalk, but as she was standing there, she felt her knees start to shake.

She'd almost forgotten how exhausted she was.

Walking with Gabriel had been a revelation and a joy... at first.

Now, she was worried that the reprieve they'd had was about to disappear.

Misty hoped that wasn't the case, but why should this be any different than before she'd arrived in Fallport?

No.

She mentally shook her head and looked Gabriel in the eye.

They'd agreed to a new start and put things behind them. She was going to give him the opportunity to prove that he meant it.

Plenty of people meant what they said, but they didn't always follow



through with it.

Misty gave him a nod and they started walking through the parking lot together.

She hoped that this time...

She hoped that Gabriel was going to show her that he... that *they* were different.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

GABRIEL

When they arrived back at the property in the morning, the mood of the whole gathering had changed. The perimeter had been moved further back, and the road had been blocked to the cross street. Reporters and news vans were camped out just beyond the barricade.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Misty tense, hunch down a little in the passenger seat as the cameras turned toward the truck.

"Hey, you, okay?"

She nodded, but it was a tight bob of her head instead of a calm, easy gesture.

"Misty?"

"Hmm yeah. Fine."

A soft whine filled the cab of the truck, and then he saw Roya put her head on Misty's shoulder, putting herself between the window and her trainer.

Yeah. Both of them knew that Misty wasn't fine.

As they reached the barricade, Gabriel rolled down the window and looked at the young officer manning it. "I'm here with-"

"Miss Bridges. Yes, sir. One second and we'll have the barricade open for you."

Gabriel rolled up his window and leaned over to look at the front of his truck. Two officers slid the barriers to the sides and had to put out their arms to hold back reporters.

"I don't know why," Misty's voice sounded almost like a whisper, "but I kind of wish we'd continued into the night. Stopping just let the word get out."

Gabriel blew out a breath. "They could be using it as an investigative tool. They'll likely get the camera rolls and video from the news vans. I'm sure the investigators are taking their own pictures at times, trying to capture the crowd."

"Capture the... do they think the killer is going to turn up to watch?"

Gabriel felt her squeeze his hand.

He'd left it down on the console between them and he felt her fingers grab onto him.

Turning his hand slightly, he was able to adjust the hold so he could grasp her fingers in return.

"Do you think things could be dangerous for Roya?"

Gabriel couldn't help the smile that turned up at the corners of his mouth. Her first thought was for Roya. "They've had police here all night watching over the property."

She nodded and he saw her reach up and give Roya a good scratch along her neck. "You'll be fine, sweetheart."

Gabriel shook his head, still smiling. She really did have a good heart. A great one.

"I think we're going to have to put your boots on today and protect your paws."

Gabriel almost choked on air as Roya retreated back and laid down on the back bench of the truck. Sighing in a dejected way as she laid her head down.

Misty sighed like an indulgent mother and looked at him with a little grimace. "Sorry. She's going to grumble at me for a bit, but once she's searching, she'll have her mind on other things."

He pulled into a space near the gate and put his booted foot on the brake, but he didn't shift the truck into PARK just yet. Turning to look at her, Gabriel couldn't help but smile at her. "I don't have a lot of experience with dogs, but Roya sounds a little like Sarah when it rains."

"Sarah?" Misty's brow furrowed. "Your niece?"

He nodded and struggled to hold back a laugh. "Kay's daughter. She's a little powerhouse which is good at the best of times but try to put rainboots on that little hellion and she'll make you reconsider your life choices."

He wasn't prepared for the burst of laughter from Misty.

"Ha! Admit it. You love it."

He grimaced and gave her a look. "After she calms down. Absolutely. But while it's happening I'm praying for sunshine."

Misty almost gave his hand a pat. Almost... because she still had a hold of his hand, and he had a hold right back.

She turned her gaze down to look and he eased the hold he had on her hand.

"Gabriel, I-"

The passenger door opened, and Gabriel released her hand and reached across her body in an instinctual gesture and put his hand against the chest of the man in the doorway.

He didn't like the man. That was obvious. And he'd hated telling Misty about what he'd heard from the detective on scene the day before. Misty had been more hurt than angry, and that grated on Gabriel's nerves. He didn't want the man anywhere near Misty.

"Detective Harris." Gabriel gave him a little push with the tips of his fingers. "You'll need to step back so Miss Bridges can get out of the truck."

The man grudgingly took a step back, but he didn't leave enough space for Gabriel's peace of mind.

"I don't like waiting. I've been standing outside your truck, waiting for her to get out and bring the dog with her. We can't just stand around all day."

Gabriel didn't like the man's tone.

Not at all.

"You can wait until-"

Gabriel felt her grasp his hand again and this time, when she gave it a squeeze her eyes were on his.

"I'm ready to start as soon as we get boots on Roya." She spoke loud enough for Detective Harris to hear her words clearly. "We did see some broken glass and bits of metal yesterday. I'd like to put some protective boots on her before we finish searching the rest of the property."

Then, she turned to look at the Detective. "If you'll step back and give me a couple of minutes, Roya will be ready to go."

The detective stared at her with a wide-eyed, pointed glare. "Boots?"

"You wear shoes with thick soles," she dropped her gaze toward his feet before meeting his gaze again, "you know as well as I do that a scene like this can come with some dangers and if Roya hurts her paws, she could be out of commission for quite some time."

Rolan shook his head. "She's an animal!"

"A highly trained animal, Detective." Gabriel heard the edge in Misty's tone. "You wouldn't need me to tell you what to wear at a crime scene."

"As if you would," he snarled.

"That's right. I know what to do with Roya to make sure she does her job. You can count on that. I'm responsible for Roya. I'll see that she's protected any way I can."

Detective Harris crossed his arms across his chest. "Fine."

Gabriel and Misty waited for him to back up and away from the open doorway of the truck cab, but he didn't.

"Detective?" Misty lifted her chin and Gabriel's smile broadened. "If you would please take a step back."

"Harris?"

Gabriel fought off a smile when he saw the impeccable suit of Chief Detective Sorvino behind Detective Harris.

"If it's okay with you," the distinguished older man sighed, "we'd like to finish searching the property. At the moment, we have a small crowd gathered," the Chief Detective grumbled, "I'm sure Miss Bridges would like to have Roya kept out of the public eye as much as possible."

Hearing her name, Roya put her paws up on the back of Misty's chair and her long pink tongue lolled out. She WUFFed at the older man.

Misty reached her hand up, smiling, and gave Roya a good scratch. "Sounds like Roya agrees with you, Detective Sorvino."

Detective Harris stepped back, grumbling under his breath. "If the dog can't do its work with an audience, what the fuck is the point?"

Gabriel saw a muscle tick in the Chief Detective's jaw and he had a feeling what that unconscious gesture was about. He didn't have a better handle on how to deal with it, but Misty was the peacemaker. "Well, it looks like it's time to get to work." She held out her hand. "Detective Sorvino?"

The distinguished gentleman was in full force as he held her hand to help her step down from the truck.

When she was down, Gabriel reached over and flipped the release on the passenger seat. Roya leapt down to the ground with a soft yip.

Smiling to himself, Gabriel got out of his side of the truck, and went around to the back. Misty met him there and together, they took out the things that she'd need for Roya, including the boots that she'd mentioned.

Then she brought them to where Roya was playing at Chief Detective Sorvino's feet and before Roya realized what was going on, Misty had one boot on.

The look of betrayal on Roya's face would have been laughable if Misty

was just putting the boots on for doggie fashion. He knew the point of the coverings and before Misty asked he picked up a boot and slipped it over one of Roya's back paws.

He winced at the stunned look on Roya's adorable face. "Sorry, girl. It's for your own good."

Before he picked up the other boot on the ground beside him, Misty had the third one on.

A deep-throated chuckle reached Gabriel's ears. "Look at the two of you. Parents wrestling a child into boots. It reminds me of the early days with my kids."

Gabriel felt an odd tumble of feeling in his stomach at the man's comparison.

He'd already likened Roya to his niece and her antics, but that was different, right?

Seeing it from his own perspective was one thing.

But the detective had said that they looked like parents.

And somehow that was a world away from talking about his niece, Sarah.

At least, that's what it felt like.

Beside him, Misty didn't seem to have the same reaction to the other man's words. She was already getting to her feet and giving Roya a hand and voice command to get her ready to work.

Gabriel let go of the air that had been stuck in his lungs.

When Misty grabbed her bag and started for the gate to the property, Gabriel followed quickly behind.

It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to the chief detective. He had a job to do and emotions he didn't know what to do with.

First things first, he reasoned.

He'd watch over Misty and Roya at the crime scene and wrestle with the rest of it later.

\* \* \*

MISTY

By lunchtime, Misty's energy was flagging. Roya was a champ, though. The crew of techs who processed crime scenes made it all as easy as they could.

The techs had regrouped that morning before Misty had arrived and they mapped out the best way for them to record Roya's hits on the property and keep 'the ball rolling,' as one of the techs had explained.

It made things easy for Misty, too.

It wasn't so much that they didn't have to wait as long for someone to come and mark the places where Roya signaled the scent of human decomp. Having others around helped her keep her focus away from imagining what was under the ground, waiting to be dug up.

As Roya made her way into the last corner of the property, Misty felt an odd sensation on the back of her neck.

It felt like... it felt like a buzzing insect hovering just above her skin.

Misty lifted a hand and pressed her fingers to the back of her neck.

Nothing.

Well, at least nothing physical.

She tilted her head to one side and then the other, stretching it out to shake the feeling. It didn't work.

Adjusting her position in the grass to keep a better eye on Roya, she felt the uneasy tickle across her neck again.

Lifting her hand halfway only frustrated her even more.

She knew that it wasn't a physical thing, but she'd reached for it, regardless. The feeling wouldn't go away.

Giving Roya another look, Misty saw her tail waving through the tall grasses at the far end of the property. As the wind stirred the grasses and tree branches around her, Misty turned her head in one direction and then the other.

As she moved, she felt the feeling on her neck only strengthen instead of dissipating.

It wasn't just awkward. It was downright disturbing.

Again, she turned and saw Detective Harris standing off to the side amidst a handful of other police employees. The techs were back wearing their white Tyvek suits, but they hadn't put their headgear on. She doubted that it was that much cooler without the headgear, but any little bit of cool probably helped.

A couple of the techs turned in her direction and looked at her with open curiosity. She didn't see many of them out of their protective gear yesterday, but she remembered the one who was a little standoffish with Roya.

Todd? Tom?

There was something almost familiar about him, but she wondered if that was because he'd been one of the only evidence techs that she'd seen out of his protective head gear.

Hmm...

No, she was fairly sure she'd met him before.

Again, that wasn't out of the ordinary. She'd worked a few searches with Richmond PD and that had put her in contact with many of the police officers and the evidence techs. Bodies, it seemed, required a score of evidence techs. At least the way Roya found them.

So, she was sure that Tom had been to another scene with her when she lived in Richmond.

Detective Harris lifted his arm and gave his watch a purposeful stare.

And then lifted his gaze to her face.

She swallowed and struggled to keep her gaze on him. He might be surly, but she wasn't going to let him think that he cowed her in any way.

He stood there watching with that sour look on his face, one that she was beginning to think was a direct measure of what was inside his heart.

How did a man like that work as a law enforcement officer?

It was one thing to be a realist, but she had a feeling that Rolan Harris may not be ready to put up his metaphorical spurs, but he should be.

"Misty?"

Almost jumping out of her skin, she turned toward the voice and let out a breath. "Gabriel."

She wasn't sure if he noticed the relief in her voice or not, but there wasn't the time or energy to worry about it.

He leaned to the side and pointed behind her.

Misty whirled around and looked through the grasses.

There was no sign of Roya's tail.

Misty didn't look ahead or try to get a better look from the balls of her feet, she just walked through the tall grasses.

"Misty?"

She didn't turn back.

Mentally kicking herself for losing sight of her dog, Misty continued on.

"I'm coming with you."

She heard how fast Gabriel was moving behind her and almost smiled at the warmth she felt in her chest.

Just as she caught sight of a depression in the grasses, she felt Gabriel's



arm brush against hers.

"Careful."

She nodded and slowed her steps.

When she was less than a foot from the depression, she smiled.

Roya was making the space that she'd seen.

Her dog lifted her head, tongue lolling out as she laid still in the grasses.

Misty felt Gabriel come to a stop beside her.

"This is the last one." She said the words and hoped that it was the truth.

"This has to be the last one."

"I hope so."

"If it is..." She shook her head. "Even if it is, it's still a horrible loss of life."

Misty lowered her head as she felt a sob building up inside of her. Until that moment, she'd kept herself focused on the job ahead of them.

Now that they were likely done with the job, it felt like the walls were closing in. Her mind was suddenly assailed with thoughts of who was buried all over this property.

Her thoughts turned her stomach over and around as if it was strapped into a rollercoaster with no end.

"Hey."

She heard Gabriel's voice, but it sounded like it was a thousand miles away.

Then she felt his hand against hers.

It wasn't that he was holding her hand.

It felt like he'd touched the back of his hand against hers.

Just sharing his warmth with her.

His warmth and his support.

Why did that feel... so good?

Misty turned around and caught the eye of the tech.

With a quick hand signal, she lead the way to where Roya was laid out, her head down but her ears still alert.

Misty gestured for the tech to move closer and then she watched as the tech marked Roya's position with a little colored flag. "I never thought I'd see so many of those flags in twenty-four hours. It feels like it should be a celebration of sorts, but here we are watching as they literally dig up evidence from a score of murders and I... I don't know what to think about it."

"Then don't think about it."

She turned to look at Gabriel, hearing but not understanding his words.

The question must have been written on her face, because he answered it right away. "What happens next isn't up to you. Together, you and Roya helped find these remains. There's going to be families out there who will finally get answers. Some closure. They will finally have their loved ones back home. That's not just a good twenty-four hours, Misty. That's an amazing twenty-four hours for anyone."

Misty worried her bottom lip between her teeth, thinking about his words.

A tech in their Tyvek suit stood up and gave them a thumbs up.

Misty let out a breath. They were done.

The new site was marked and there wasn't any land left to search.

"Are you ready?"

She turned to look at Gabriel and she saw the concern in his eyes. "Hmm?"

"Ready to go?"

It was like he'd thrown her a lifeline.

And Misty was ready to grab it with both hands.

"Yes." Her shoulders almost sagged in relief. "Yes, please."

He reached out and wrapped his hands around her upper arms. If someone else had done that, she would have shrugged or stepped away, but there was something about the way he touched her... was touching her, she wanted to lean into his warmth.

He gave her a soft smile.

"I'll go and talk to Detective Sorvino. I'm sure he'll send us home and we can get on the road."

Roya trotted over to her side and leaned against her as Gabriel walked toward the police at the front gate.

A cool, wet nose against her palm turned her head and made her smile.

She looked down into Roya's eyes and felt the weight fall away from her shoulders. "Let's go to the truck and clean up so we can get going."

A soft ruff reached her ears and when Roya moved, she had a little spring in her step, weaving through the grasses as they followed behind Gabriel.

\* \* \*

*FINALLY*, he shook his head as the truck pulled out of the makeshift parking

lot that the uniformed officers had set up for the search.

Finally he could breathe.

She was gone.

His mouth felt like a desert.

His head was pounding with pain.

And his hands ached to punch in her pretty face.

That sanctimonious bitch!

All she had to do was walk in. Smile. And let her dog do all the work.

It had nothing to do with her, really. Anyone could do what she did. She just had to feed the dog. Play with it. Give it treats.

And become a fucking hero!

It was crazy when he thought about it. She was a glorified dog walker.

Roya should have gone to a better person.

Roya should have been his.

The thought almost made him smile.

Roya would have been his.

The only thing that stood in his way was Misty Bridges, the selfish bitch.

The only good thing that he'd gleaned from the last two exhausting days is that Misty was living nearby. Close enough for him to reach.

Close enough for him to find and make her pay for what she'd done to him.

What she'd taken from him.

Yes, he was going to get what was his and prove that she'd been wrong from the beginning.

He smiled and no one noticed or cared.

That was going to change, he decided. People were going to finally look at him and see what he'd known from the beginning. He was a god damn hero.

And Misty Bridges was standing in his way.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### GABRIEL

The drive back to Fallport was quiet. Gabriel was already in a somber mood because of what he'd seen... the number of bodies that the Richmond PD were busy digging up. He hadn't seen anything like that living in Fallport, and he was incredibly grateful to live in a community where they didn't really have to worry about a serial killer.

Sure, they had their problems, but he couldn't see a time when they'd have to worry about having a cadaver dog alert on more than a dozen buried bodies in someone's yard.

Gabriel hadn't really thought about it much while they were there on site. He had a job to do and that was to watch over Misty and Roya.

Both had fallen asleep a short time into the drive and Gabriel had been relieved, even thankful, that he'd gone with them to the search.

He wasn't saying that Misty would have driven through the exhaustion. She would have taken the time to rest if only for Roya's safety at the very least, but he was more than happy to be there to help.

The snuffling snore from the back seat of his truck cab made him smile from time to time. Roya was a heavy sleeper. Something he hadn't noticed at the inn, but then again, he had a closed door between their rooms.

Once they were close enough that the roads were bordered with tall trees and the world outside his windows was more green than anything else, he would glance at Misty from time to time.

He wasn't usually a guy that liked short haircuts on women.

Gabriel cringed at the thought.

*That sounds stupid.*

And it probably was to think it too. Probably a little chauvinistic.

But he hoped he was getting past it.

He doubted that Misty would appreciate his view on female hair. He knew his sister and cousin wouldn't. And if he said such to Avalon, she'd probably kick his ass.

No, she'd probably give him a pointed stare and then poke him in the gut, trying to tickle him all the while telling him he was a caveman.

Yeah, he had some issues.

Like how much Misty's haircut was growing on him.

With her head leaned against the window on the other side of his truck cab, he could see the long column of her neck and the way her hair curled along the line of her chin.

He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and nodded his head to the music playing from the speakers.

If anyone had asked him what song was playing, he couldn't tell them. It was just a distraction from the feelings he was fighting.

He wanted to reach out and touch her hair. Touch her shoulder and reassure himself that she was sleeping soundly, getting rest.

That probably put him into the super creep category. While he couldn't help the feelings he was having, he could keep his damn hands off of Misty.

The woman was exhausted and deserved to recharge her batteries without worrying about him touching her when they barely knew each other.

That, again, was his fault.

He'd had the opportunity to get to know her, but he'd been an ass before, putting up boundaries between them. He'd apologized for that, but that didn't mean that he could just put it out of his head.

Apologizing for something didn't really matter if you just went back to being an ass. So he'd have his hands full reminding himself to be better than he'd been. He'd thrown up a wall between them for no good reason and even when Misty had come to dinner with his family and spent time with them, he'd made things difficult.

He could suck as a man.

Joshua was easier to deal with. Josh was gentler than he was. Friendlier.

Lord knew that he deserved all the happiness he had with Avalon and the happiness they'd have together. They both deserved it.

*What do I deserve?*

He cringed at the thought as it popped up in his head.

If he'd said it aloud in front of his family, he had a feeling what he'd hear. His father would arch an eyebrow at him, tilt his chin down toward his chest and ask, "Is there something we should know, son?"

His mother would lean in and take his hand in one of her own and grip his shoulder with the other. "You deserve to be loved, son. Everyone does."

He smiled at that thought. His mother was incredible. She probably qualified for sainthood after dealing with his grumpy ass.

And his sister Kay?

She'd roll her eyes and look at her husband, sharing one of those smiles that they always had around each other before she'd turn back to him and give him the look she'd been turning in his direction ever since Joshua got Avalon back in his life. The look of, "Finally."

And Joshua? Well, when he pulled his attention away from Avalon, he'd just look confused. "What did you say?"

Yeah, his brother was head over heels in love. Had been since he was a kid. Joshua didn't understand what it was like for him.

Hell, Gabriel didn't understand what it was like for himself. At least he knew now that the problems he was having were all his own damn fault.

Misty mumbled something in her sleep and sat up, her back arching away from the seatback with a stretch.

Gabriel fixed his gaze on the road ahead, turning his head just a tiny fraction of an inch away so he wouldn't have to see her out of the corner of his eye.

With the warmth in his truck cab, she sighed and turned on the seat, laying her cheek against the cushion before settling back into sleep.

He could see her face with just a quick turn of his head.

Asleep, she looked almost ethereal. Her eyelashes were dark against her pale skin and her hair laid against her cheek in waves.

Peaceful.

And yet he missed the spark in her eyes. The wit in her voice. The sweet sound of her laughter. He hadn't heard enough of that.

His thoughts took another turn as he breathed in the air closer to home.

Thinking back to the last family gathering they'd had on the green between their homes, he remembered the easy way that Avalon had fit against Joshua as they sat on a picnic blanket, her head gently leaned against his chest.

Misty had been there too, sitting cross legged in the grass with Roya

sprawled out beside her.

He'd been across from her then, free to watch her when no one was looking in his direction.

Now, he wondered what it would be like to sit beside her. To have her leaned against him.

He'd be more than happy to give Roya her share and more of belly rubs when Misty's hand grew tired.

It couldn't be that simple.

Could it?

He fixed his gaze resolutely at the road ahead of him and drove on. Could he just spread out a blanket near his family, pat the blanket beside him and suggest, "You can sit here if you like."

He shook his head.

No.

It couldn't be that easy.

Gabriel knew he had more work to do to repair the problems that he'd created between them.

He just wasn't sure if she would be receptive to the change.

To the idea that he didn't want to be just friendly.

How was he going to get there?

WHEN HE PULLED around the backside of the duplex where Misty was renting, Roya sat up in the backseat and peered between the front seats at Misty first and then at him.

"Hey, girl." Gabriel released his seatbelt and twisted a little so he could give her a good rub between her ears. He kept his voice soft as Misty was still sleeping. He wanted to give her a chance to get as much sleep as he could give her before waking her up. "You need to get out?"

She just stared back at him, her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth.

Roya certainly wasn't going to give him an answer that he understood.

Shaking his head, he opened his door and before he could open the back for Roya, she leapt over the console in the middle and down to the grass at his feet.

"Okay, girl. You do what you need to do, and I'll get your mama up."

Roya moved around the yard, sniffing at some of the bushes before she

found one she liked.

Gabriel found himself laughing silently as he moved to the other side of the truck.

The door opened up easily enough, but before he could reach in to wake Misty, his phone vibrated against his thigh. He unhooked it from the case he had on his belt and lifted it so he could see the screen.

A message from Avalon met his eyes.

AVALON: You're back! No. I'm not stalking you. Remember we have a family plan.

Gabriel rolled his eyes. They did indeed. The family plan covered quite a few people and kept their prices down, but it also allowed for a nice little app that tracked each other.

AVALON: Want to invite Misty to dinner with the family?

Gabriel's chin dropped to his chest, and he shook his head. Why hadn't he thought about that in the first place? That would have been a great idea.

GABRIEL: I'll ask. I just don't want to wake her up at the moment.

Gabriel knew he could probably just get back in behind the steering wheel and Roya would probably jump right back into the cab of the truck, but there was something that wanted to keep Misty to himself for a little while.

Selfish?

Definitely.

He didn't think that was going to change anytime soon.

Misty and Avalon were great friends, probably best friends, but he just wanted some time.

They were finally on decent terms with each other, but he was also a little worried that whatever they'd started to build between them would dissolve just as quickly, especially in the middle of an Armstrong family crush.

Still, he needed to ask.

Misty wouldn't like him making that kind of decision without asking her. He was a jerk at times, but that didn't mean he wanted to be one for the rest of his life.

Certainly not in her eyes.

Before he could come up with a plan, Roya did it for him.

The calico-colored dog jumped up into the cab and wiggled her way into the space around her feet.

Misty startled awake, her hands reaching for Roya and the dog happily melted against her. "Hey, girl. What's-"



Gabriel smiled as she seemed to cycle through a bunch of realizations in lightning speed.

Sitting up, her hands busy in Roya's thick fur, Misty took in their surroundings before ending on his face.

The smile that touched her lips made him stand a little taller.

Placing a hand on the doorframe, he gave her a grin of his own. "I didn't want to wake you."

She grinned, blinking her eyes as she fought off a yawn. "Roya has no problems waking me up when she needs something."

"Well, I let her out to... ah... make her rounds."

Misty laughed and shushed Roya out of the truck. "That's very law enforcement of you. Have you ever considered getting a K-9 for Fallport?"

He felt his face heat a little and the warmth reached his ears too. "I've actually been looking into it for a while, but the cost is... beyond our budget."

There was a spark in her eye a moment later. "So, it's just budget that's holding you back?"

He sighed then. "That was the first concern, but now Fallport has a Search and Rescue dog and now we have a famous cadaver dog in town. I don't see there being a big interest or push in a K-9. Besides," he reached up and cupped a hand to the back of his neck, "we don't have a lot of crime that would warrant a K-9 here."

"I'm... I mean, Roya and I are hardly famous. No one knew who we were here in town, except for the Chief until just a few days ago." She waved her hand at him as if she was pushing away his answer. "That's not what I'm asking. I do know a few people in the business of K-9 placement and training."

"A few people?" He couldn't stop the laugh that erupted then and when she joined in, he didn't want to. "I'd say you probably know more than that."

"So if you're serious about it, I can ask around and see if we can get a grant for Fallport."

He was really excited by the possibilities she was bringing up, but he knew that possibilities and reality weren't always all that compatible. "But remember, we have Duke and Roya-"

"Stop." She put a hand on his chest and slid down from the cab, moving him a few inches away. "You really need to see things from my angle. Look at the possibilities here, Gabe. You can't just put up roadblocks to everything you want. If you do that, how will you ever make anything a reality?"

She gave him a nod, smiled and then she looked up into his face. She certainly looked very proud of herself, like she'd won an argument that he didn't even know they were having.

And that's when his brain short-circuited a little.

A pop.

A fritz.

Her hand slid down his chest a little until only her fingertips were touching him.

And even through his uniform and the undershirt he was wearing, it felt like she burned him.

He didn't want to push her away.

No, not at all.

He didn't want to move away from her either.

He wanted to get closer to her.

He wanted to burn.

And if she sent him up in flames, he'd die a happy man.

She told him to stop putting up road blocks?

Well, okay then.

He kicked one out of the way and leaned in.

Gabriel still had one hand on the doorframe. The other hand wrapped around her wrist and instead of just moving it out from between them, he brought it up to the back of his neck and let go.

That's when he felt her fingers... no, her *nails* trail across the back of his neck, just over the fold of his collar and slide in between the fabric and his skin.

*Fuck me.*

He leaned in and kissed her.

## CHAPTER NINE

MISTY

She was stunned.

That didn't even cover it.

Stars. She saw honest to goodness stars.

Yep, she saw a bunch of those.

A dazzling light display behind her closed eyelids.

She gripped the back of his neck with the hand *he'd* put there. Lifting her other hand, she wrapped it around his back and holy hotness, the muscles she felt under his uniform shirt, flexed at her touch.

Misty tipped her head back and he leaned into the kiss, sliding his tongue between her lips.

*Oh!*

*Yikes!*

Heat flooded between her legs at the dominant sweep of his tongue against hers.

She didn't recall a time when she'd been this aroused just from a kiss.

But then again, she'd never kissed Gabriel Armstrong.

He turned his head slightly and she followed him, unwilling to let go of those heady sensations.

She felt Gabriel's hand gently grip her chin and then he tilted his head again.

Her instinct was to follow him, but he held her still and kissed her again.

*Wow.*

Misty had no idea what exactly had changed in the way he was kissing her, but it made a world of difference. It felt like he was... like he was inside

her head and learning just the right way to make her ache and need.

She tried to dig her nails into the muscles of his back but with his shirt in the way her nails slipped, and she slid the hand she had on his neck down to his back.

She just couldn't get close enough to him.

*WUFF!*

Misty startled and broke away from the kiss.

She looked up with widened eyes and saw Gabriel watching her with a smug grin on his face. "What," she wondered aloud, "was that?"

"That," he drew in a breath which she felt under her hands where they were on his shoulder and side, "was a kiss. You seemed to know what it was."

She felt a hot blush spill across her cheeks. "I know what a kiss is, Gabriel Armstrong."

His mouth quirked up at the corner. "Both names?"

"Well," she straightened up a little as she prepared to answer him, but that's when she realized that he had her up against the open doorframe of his truck, the lower half of his body pressed intimately against hers.

"Well, I..."

So intimately she felt the hard line of his erection pressed into her belly.

"I..."

"Something wrong, Misty?"

Oh, why did his voice have to be so deep?

So... hot?

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and she wet her bottom lip with her tongue.

"Earlier, you called me Gabe."

She blinked, startled, and then her gaze included more of his face. That's when she saw the way he'd lifted one eyebrow as he looked at her.

"Could you stop?"

That made him smile. A big grin.

"Stop what?" He settled a hand on the line of her shoulder and trailed his thumb along her collarbone.

"Stop..."

Her mind emptied as his thumb swept up and along the side of her neck.

"St-stop..."

And he did. He lifted his hands away from her and took a step back,

listening to her words.

As soon as a soft breeze passed between them, Misty snapped out of the daze she'd been in.

"Hey, wait."

Gabriel stopped in place, his chin lowered slightly, and his gaze was pointed down to the ground.

She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a little upward curve at the corner of his mouth.

"You're... You're just going to... to-"

"To step back? Take my hands off of you?"

*Goodness. He was really inside her head.*

"I didn't want you to stop like that." She shook her head, knowing that her words were as clear as mud. She racked her brain to figure out the way to explain her thoughts, but as her mind struggled with that concept, her gaze lowered, and she saw the bulge along the front of his uniform pants.

Instantly, her mind *and* her body remembered what it felt like to have that pressed against her.

She wanted to feel it again, but her mind was still busy grinding away at the question she needed to answer.

"I wanted..."

That was a good start. Right?

But where did she go from there.

"I was trying to explain..." Misty shook her head. "I can't remember what I was trying to explain."

Gabriel smiled at her again and her mind went blank. When he spoke, that sexy voice almost made her shiver. "Should I apologize for the kiss?"

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"No! I didn't mean that. I just... I just don't like it when my mind goes blank and you... you do that to me."

His smile brightened and she fought off the urge to stamp her foot like a child.

"Don't smile like that!"

She laughed and he joined in.

Roya jumped down to the ground and sat off to the side and looked back and forth between them.

"It's not funny!" Misty protested as her sides started to hurt.

"If it's not funny," Gabriel's shoulders were shaking, "then why are you

laughing?"

"It's better to laugh than kick your butt."

His laugh stilled, but he was still smiling. "I'd like to see you try."

Her laughter died away too. "Don't tempt me."

"Gabe."

She heard him say his name and she drew back, her brow furrowing over her nose. "Why are you saying your name?"

He stepped closer again until there were just a couple of inches between them and she had to tip her head back slightly to see his face. "You called me Gabe earlier. So I was wondering if a moment like this is when you'd call me Gabe."

Misty paused and closed her eyes. She wanted to think about it and being this close to Gabriel Armstrong was distracting.

Tempting her to fall right back into his arms.

She smiled and her shoulders twitched with a silent giggle.

"Are you laughing again?"

"No, I'm-" She put out her hand and felt her palm come in contact with the hard wall of his chest. Misty flattened her hand and smoothed her palm across his uniform shirt. Her smile softened and she repeated the gesture. "I'm..."

"You're petting me."

Startled again, her eyes opened and she leaned back and away from him, but her hand didn't move.

Gabriel had her hand pressed against his chest, covered with his own. "That," he emphasized with his eyes and that amazing voice, "was distracting me."

"Sorry," she felt her blush deepening on her cheeks, "I don't usually do any of... this." She gestured between them.

"Would I sound like an ass if I said I'm glad you don't?"

She swore she could feel the rumble of his voice through her skin, direct from his chest. It made her warm all over. "As long as you're okay with someone who's pretty clueless about the whole relationship thing, then we're good."

Something changed in his expression. It was there and gone so quickly there wasn't a hope that she'd understand what it meant, but she wasn't sure it was good.

"Oh god," she bit into the inside of her cheek, "you weren't... I mean,

were you talking about-"

"A relationship? Yes."

The wave of relief she felt was replaced with a measure of panic.

"With you?"

Gabriel's eyes darkened and he stepped in. She felt that same hard length against her belly and her skin heated all over.

"Yes, Misty. With me. Unless you're interested in someone else."

"N-no... I didn't think you were interested in me. Not after-"

"Not after I acted like a complete ass after the night in the bar? Or the times you came over for family dinner?"

To say she was shocked was a complete understatement. She was floored. "How did you know that I was thinking about that?"

He leaned in with a smile. "Because I've been thinking I messed this up before we even started, and I thought I was mad at you when I was mad at myself."

"So I should blame you then?" She laughed out loud.

"I'm good with that as long as we can start over."

"Or," she shrugged, "we can both forget about blame and just start over."

"I'd like that, Misty." His voice had become barely a whisper as he leaned in. "I'd like that a-"

WUFF!

Roya's excited bark was followed by a short, crisp honk of a horn.

Misty leaned to the side to get a look.

Gabriel did too and she heard him groan. "Looks like we're about to have company."

He turned her toward the road and put himself behind her with his hand on her hip.

Misty saw Avalon and Joshua in his Jeep pulling in behind Gabriel's truck.

She tilted her head toward him and spoke softly. "Should I worry that you put me in front of you like a human shield?"

Laughter. Goodness, she loved it when he laughed. He leaned in and she felt his lips gently brush the shell of her ear.

The touch sent a delicious shiver down her spine.

"I'm pretty sure no one wants to see how hard I am right now."

She tried to turn but he put a hand on her shoulder and along with the hold he had on her hip, she went still. Still enough that when he stepped up

behind her, leaning in so that she felt what he meant.

Misty was sure she was bright red when Avalon came walking over to give her a hug.

Honestly, Misty was thrilled for the friendly gesture. To say that she was frazzled was another severe understatement.

When Avalon leaned back, holding her at arm's length, Misty's friend gave her a side-eye look. "Are you okay?"

Joshua gave his brother a hearty smack and stepped back to stand by his fiancée. "What's wrong with Misty?"

"Nothing!" Misty knew that her answer was a little too loud and really, Joshua hadn't been asking her anything. "I'm fine."

Avalon wasn't satisfied. She could see that by the curious look on her friend's face. "You're flushed." Avalon lifted her hand to her own face and gestured at her cheeks. "How much sun did you get in Richmond?"

Misty leapt at the plausible excuse. "We were out for hours searching. I remember thinking I should have brought sunscreen, but I didn't think we'd be there for two days."

"That sounds exciting!" Avalon stepped closer and gave Misty another hug.

When she finished, she gave Gabriel a look around Misty's shoulder.

"What? No hug?"

Misty bit into her bottom lip as Gabriel's hand on her shoulder gave her a squeeze.

"He's..." Misty turned to look over her shoulder at Gabriel but she knew she couldn't look him in the eye, or she'd die of humiliation. Instead she turned back to Avalon and blurted out a few words. "He's basically holding me up. If I didn't have him to lean on, I'd probably fall," she gestured to the grass under her feet, "flat on my face."

She wasn't sure, because she couldn't see him, but it felt like Gabriel had leaned forward, touching his forehead to the back of her head. She did hear the soft groan from his throat.

"Then I'm really glad we stopped by."

Misty saw Joshua shaking his head as he stood beside Avalon.

His voice wasn't as deep as Gabriel's but it had a similar sound to it. "We brought over some food for you. Avalon didn't think you two would come to eat with the whole family, so we just wanted to make sure you'd eat. We were going to put it in your fridge and message you two."



"But now that you're both home-"

*WUFF*

Avalon laughed and reached down to give Roya a satisfying scratch between her ears. "Now that you three are home, do you want me to heat it up for you before we leave?"

Misty didn't know what to say. Her brain and heart were still reeling from her unfinished conversation with Gabriel. She knew they couldn't finish it with her best friend and Gabriel's brother there.

"Okay, let's go inside and I'll heat it up and you two can tell us all about your trip."

Avalon took her hand and started toward the door, and Misty looked back at the two brothers.

Gabriel was adjusting the fit of his slacks and Joshua? Well, he was shaking his head and watching the show.

*Oh boy.*

Things were just starting between them. Misty didn't want Joshua's reaction to change Gabriel's mind about... whatever they were starting.

For the first time in a long, long time, she felt like she was headed in the direction of something really good with a guy.

The fact that it was Gabriel?

She didn't know how to keep things on an even keel.

Misty let Avalon lead the way, happy that she'd given her friend a spare key to her place because she was feeling like she'd be all thumbs if she'd tried to manage it herself.

Instead, she ended up holding the bag, quite literally.

Avalon chattered on as they walked inside, with Roya happily dancing around everyone as she moved about the room.

The two Armstrong brothers came in, closing the door behind them, and Misty tried to keep her focus on Avalon.

If something had gone on between the two brothers outside, she really didn't want to see it... yet.

She wouldn't want to deal with it until she had the place back to herself.

Avalon started up her stove and directed Joshua to put the drinks in the refrigerator. Misty felt his hand settle gently on her shoulder as he walked by, and she didn't quite manage a smile.

Before she could make a decision to look for Gabriel, he was there, behind her.

His hands, goodness they felt big, were on her hips and his chin touched her shoulder. "Hey."

"Hey." She had to swallow hard to clear her throat.

"You don't think my brother making me the butt of the joke is going to keep me away, do you?"

When he said it like that with a light lilt of laughter in his voice, she was finally able to breathe. "It wouldn't?"

He turned his head back and forth and she could feel his touch against her shoulder. "Not hardly. I've given him so much hell over the years about Avalon, if he didn't give me some of it back, I'd be surprised."

Misty crossed her arms loosely over her belly and covered one of his hands with her own. "Well, you've certainly surprised me the last few days. I guess it's just a thing, hmm?"

"I've got so many ways to surprise you. It'll take years."

She had to bite down a laugh. Misty felt almost giddy. It was certainly a strange thing indeed. "As long as it's not 'jump scare' jokes. I'm not cool with those."

He nodded and then leaned back to brush a kiss along the shell of her ear. "Good to know. I'm not big on scaring people. I'd rather make you-"

"Gabriel?"

He straightened up and they both looked at Avalon as she stood by the stove, setting the timer.

"Would you like us to leave?"

Mortified.

Mortified!

Misty dropped her chin to her chest and squeezed her eyes shut.

It was Joshua who spoke next.

"Ava? Don't push."

"Push?" She turned toward her fiancé, her fists dropping to her hips. "I'm pushing where I need to. Since the moment they met, they've been on the wrong side of the love/hate line. I feel like they've finally got things on the right side, so I'm not going to do a thing to ruin that."

"If they need time alone to... you know... *work out* their feelings, then I will drag you out of here right now."

A quick look toward Joshua said that he had been stunned silent by Avalon's words.

As much as Misty wanted to 'work out' her feelings and perhaps a few

other things, she really needed a little space first.

A little distraction.

And Avalon? Well, she was certainly causing a distraction.

"I think you both should stay." The words came out of Misty's mouth in a rush. "After all, I'm sure you want to know what happened in Richmond and I think... I need to talk about it."

After she said the words, she turned her head, trying to see Gabriel's expression. He leaned into her line of sight with a smile. "I'm good with that."

Avalon gave her fiancé a big, self-satisfied grin before she turned back to Misty. "Great. You two get comfy. I'll have my handsome man set the table."

Joshua rolled his eyes, but he looked at Gabriel with a smirk as he mouthed. "Handsome." And pointed to himself.

Gabriel turned her so she could look at him, but keep her answers to herself as Avalon and Joshua worked behind her.

"Are you sure you want company at all? If you want, I can get them both out of here and give you some privacy."

She thought on it for a moment, looking into his eyes for no other reason than just enjoying the sight.

"No, I'm good. I meant what I said, but thank you for asking." Leaning closer, she almost had her cheek against his when she spoke again. "When everything was going on with Avalon, I saw how protective you were with her, and I admit I was more than a little jealous. And what you were willing to do to make her safe? It was something of a dream for me.

"And now, I feel that. I feel your presence comforting me. Protecting me. I don't want to let that go. Please stay, at least through dinner."

Gabriel moved until his forehead was pressed lightly against hers. "Whatever you want."

*Why?* She wondered. *Why did he have to be so amazing?*

As he led her over to the couch, she fought off the worries that those feelings wouldn't... couldn't last.

And prayed that they would.

## CHAPTER TEN

### GABRIEL

Dinner ended up being a lot of fun. Misty laughed. Roya danced around and got more than her share of scratches and belly rubs. And Gabriel didn't miss a single opportunity to listen to Misty. Not just her words but her body language.

As soon as she started to fade off to sleep, he sent Avalon and his brother packing.

Avalon was the harder one to get out the door. She knew that Misty was exhausted and Avalon wanted to make sure that Misty and Roya got off to bed safely.

Standing in the doorway, Avalon was ticking off on her fingers the things she could help with.

When she got to four, Joshua wrapped his hand around her fingers and brought it to his mouth. He brushed a kiss over the tips of her fingers and Gabriel turned his head and rocked back on his heels.

"Baby," Joshua's voice had softened a little, "he can handle walking Roya, and putting out her food. And," he grasped her other hand that she'd just raised, "locking the door."

"But... what about..."

Gabriel had to admit that his brother had things well in hand with Avalon. Both hands, really.

Joshua loved Avalon to distraction and the two of them were made for each other. They'd been in love since they were children playing house.

The way they touched and interacted with each other felt like they'd been a couple for years, when in fact they'd been separated for ages.

When Avalon came back home to Fallport, the two had all but fallen right into their Happy Ever After.

Well, mostly.

But the problems that they'd had.

The dangers that they'd faced.

They'd done it together.

That and they'd had help from the local community. The SAR - Search and Rescue Team. And the first responders in town.

Fallport might not have the bells and whistles of Richmond, but Fallport had other things to recommend it as a place to put down roots.

And Misty had come to town for that 'small town atmosphere.'

The rev of Joshua's Jeep reached his ears and he turned to see that the Jeep had pulled out into the road and his brother waved at him from the driver's seat, laughing along with Avalon.

Gabriel sighed at himself. He'd been so lost in his thoughts that Avalon and Joshua had walked away while he'd just stood there.

Thinking.

About Misty.

He turned around and saw Misty asleep on her sofa and Roya laid out between the sofa and the coffee table.

Now that his brother and Avalon had gone home, it was up to him.

Walking forward toward the couch, Roya lifted her head and gave a soft, almost whispered WUFF.

He chuckled and waved Roya closer.

She crawled until she was away from the couch, and then she moved past him to the door, lifting her nose to the leash that was hanging there.

"Smart girl."

"She's the best."

Gabriel turned back to the couch and saw Misty looking at him. Her cheek laid on her forearm. She was smiling at him, dreamily.

He wanted it to be about him, but realistically, it was because she was still half asleep.

"I'm going to walk Roya."

Misty drew in a deep breath and let it out again. "You're pretty good too."

"Uh, thanks?"

Misty started to yawn and Roya, always the good girl, yawned along with her. "You want me to go with you?"

"I just need the keys so I can lock the door while I'm out."

Misty almost dropped the keys as she pulled them from her pocket. Gabriel picked them up from the couch cushion and leaned over to place a quick kiss on her cheek.

"I'll be right back."

"Mmm..."

She was out before he stood back up.

With a smile on his face, he and Roya headed out for her walk.

\* \* \*

## MISTY

Misty yawned and heard Roya whine from her bed against the wall.

Lifting her head, she cracked open an eye and saw that Roya was dreaming. Her legs twitched. Her tail swished. Even her ears were moving around.

Sighing, Misty reached out and picked her phone up off of the charger and froze.

When had she put her phone *on* the charger?

Lifting up her blanket, she saw that her clothes were still on, but not her shoes.

She swept the room with a glance and didn't see anything else.

Or anyone else.

Misty moved the blanket off her legs and tried not to groan as she sat up and put her feet on the floor.

With her socks still on, she smiled. The floor tended to get cold in the morning and having her socks on helped tremendously.

Misty made her way to the main room, passing the kitchen and dining area. She stopped at the corner and smiled.

Gabriel Armstrong was squished between the armrests of her couch.

She smiled, remembering the dinner they'd had with Avalon and Joshua. But that's where those memories ended.

It probably wasn't a good idea to go any closer, but curiosity was something she couldn't stop.

Or rather, she didn't want to.

Getting an unguarded peek at the handsome deputy was almost

impossible to resist.

No, it *was* impossible to resist.

Wedged into her couch, he looked amazingly comfortable with his arms wrapped around one of her throw pillows.

Misty backed into the hall and stepped into her bedroom. The bed wasn't very big, but she had two pillows on it. Picking one up, she pulled an extra quilt out of her closet and made her way back into the living room.

Gabriel hadn't moved an inch.

"Silly man," she sighed softly, "you can't be comfortable like that."

She draped the quilt over his body. Even with him curled up, the quilt barely covered his feet to his shoulders.

Misty sat down on the coffee table and hoped it was as solid as she thought it was.

Reaching out, she tried to tug the pillow out of his arms, but he was slow to let go.

"I'm trying to give you a better pillow to sleep with."

"It's fine." His words were growly, but they weren't harsh. He sounded like he was halfway between awake and sleep.

Without a thought, she reached out and touched her hand to his cheek.

Warmth.

Heat.

Misty moved her hand until the heel of her palm glanced over his temple and she felt his strong pulse.

She could do this all day. All night.

There was something about touching Gabriel that made her feel like she had magic in her hands.

"If you're trying to tuck me in and get me back to sleep, you're doing it wrong."

He grumbled and put his hand over hers, holding her palm against his cheek.

"Is that better?"

He took a breath and turned slightly into her touch, lifting his gaze to meet hers.

Wow.

The look in his eyes made her forget about everything but the man in front of her.

"It's okay. But it's missing something."

She was startled and curious. "What's missing?"

His gaze moved over her face, and he shifted in the couch, lifting himself from the cushions with his elbow underneath him. "You, kissing me."

She paused, her lungs tightening around whatever air she had left in them. Did she want to kiss him?

Yes. Very much yes.

Was she ready for what might come next?

"We don't have to, Misty."

She heard the tightness in his voice, and she saw the caution in his eyes.

"I'm not going to push."

"I know you're not-"

She shook her head. "I don't know why I'm hesitating."

"I know why you might be."

Oh? That caught her attention. "Okay. Why?"

"You've been through a lot these last few days. You've seen a lot of ugly things. Dealt with ugly people. And then I kissed you after that long drive home. Maybe it's just a little much. Too much change too soon."

Was that it?

"Oh... okay."

"Hey." Gabriel sat up and pulled her closer. "Don't shut down on me, please."

Misty tightened in his arms, not because of him but because of herself. How off she felt.

"Misty?"

Her cheeks heated at the unspoken words in the tone of his voice.

"Then why am I so... nervous about how it feels? About how I feel being with you. What I want to feel with you."

Gabriel's eyes darkened. He put his hands on her arms and warmed her skin with his touch. "There's something about you that's not just under my skin, Misty. I feel like you're inside my heart."

"That's why I think I couldn't figure out how to react to you when we met."

"And now?"

"And now," he cupped her face in both of his hands, "I know what you could be to me. What we could be to each other. And I know it might seem sudden-"

"But it feels like it's been," Misty lifted her hand and put it against her



chest, over her heart, "under the surface."

"So I'm not going to push you if you need time or space. There's no need to rush what's going to happen when we're both ready."

"Okay." She agreed because that's all she could do at the moment. "But..."

He smiled at her, a soft encouraging look. "But what?"

"What do we do until we're both ready?"

He looked around the room until he found the clock on the wall.

"Right about now," he brought her closer into the circle of his arms, "I just want to hold you."

Something inside of her leaned into his words and the warm rumbling core of his voice.

Misty wanted to crawl into his embrace and fall back asleep, but she shook her head at the situation they were both in. If she tried to squeeze onto the sofa with him, she was likely to fall right off the end of it.

It might be funny, but she didn't want to break the mood they were in. She wanted to keep them inside of the bubble she felt surrounding them in the quiet of her home. No, she didn't want to let it go yet. Didn't want to let him go either.

"Maybe we should go into my room. At least you can stretch out there."

"Sounds good to me."

Misty stood up and held out her hand.

Gabriel grasped her hand and got to his feet before leading the way to her bedroom, hardly sleepy anymore.

\* \* \*

GABRIEL

Gabriel stopped just shy of the bed and turned to face her again. "No pressure. I just want to hold you for a little while."

"I'd like that."

There was an ease in her voice that made him relax as well.

This was a tenuous time in their relationship.

And it was a relationship, he knew it in his heart.

"Go ahead, sweetheart." He rubbed his thumb against her palm. "You get up there and I'll get in behind you, wrap my arms around you."

Her smile filled his heart. When she took off her top and pants, he had to hold himself back from touching her.

She slipped under the covers and left the blanket folded down to give him room to come in behind her.

Gabriel removed his undershirt and slacks and slipped in behind her. It took a little bit of moving to get his arm under her body so he could hold her close, but it was worth it.

So damn worth it.

Her chin-length wavy hair felt like silk against his skin, tickling his neck.

Her nearly bare back stoked the heat licking at his chest.

And the curve of her backside against his front, the fullness of her body cuddled up against him felt like heaven.

He managed to fight off an erection. This moment... cuddling her... it was about being intimate. It was a chance to get to know each other on a different level.

To discover things that words couldn't say, but not let desire get in the way of a warm and gentle touch.

Misty lifted her hand and reached back, setting it on his bare thigh.

She held it there.

Kept it still.

And the heat that bloomed at that touch was comforting.

"I thought about you the other night... at the inn."

Gabriel pulled in a breath and let it out. "You did?"

Misty moved against him, her back against his chest.

"I know that we had those connecting rooms. I know that you explained the way it could help if something went wrong during the night, but that wasn't what I was thinking about. Not the context, really.

"I imagined what it would have been like, or rather what it would have felt like to have you in the room with us."

Gabriel lifted his hand and trailed his fingertips along her upper arm. He wasn't trying to make her shake or shiver.

He wanted her to feel the delicate connection between them.

He wanted her to know that what he felt for her wasn't just the desire to have sex with her.

Being with her was changing him.

Being close and calm with her at his side... in his arms... it settled him in a way he'd never experienced before.

He'd always been a guy that did things.

Moved forward.

Worked for a goal.

Spending time with Misty, walking Roya, watching them work, even just driving around felt good.

Deep down, soul warming good.

And here they were, skin against skin. Holding her felt like heaven, peaceful and relaxed. He wasn't thinking about anything but the woman in his arms and the feeling that they were headed in a good direction.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

MISTY

As much as she hoped that life could just go back to normal, Misty had to remember that she was living in Fallport. Along with all the good, there were a few things that she was still getting used to.

When she got to work early the next day, she entered the post office from the back door and stopped short at the sight before her.

"Ta-da!" Gary gestured at the side wall where they'd made a little home for Roya when Misty was working. She'd brought in a few things to keep Roya's food and water in control, but they'd been very simple and spartan.

Gary was almost giving her jazz hands as he gestured to the wall and giving her an expectant look.

Roya reacted before she did, almost dancing over to the water absorbent mat and WUFFed at the new dishes on the stand. Where they had been plain and simple before, the two dishes were now engraved with adorable letters that spelled out. DON'T MESS WITH ME. And LAW & WUFF.

"Well?" Gary's smile was all teeth and his eyes were wide and waiting for her response.

"Gary! They're adorable! Thank you!"

He waved it off with an awww shucks look. "I feel like people are going to come in here and ask you to sign their mail."

"Me?"

Misty felt like she was missing something.

"Why me?"

His eyes narrowed at her, and he tilted his head. She wasn't sure what was going through his head. Maybe concern?

"Wait. You didn't see the newspaper?"

"Newspaper?"

"You're going to be a superstar around here." Reaching for the piles of papers that Gary had on his desk, he pulled out a newspaper and held it out to her. "Here. The delivery truck brought in a few copies of the paper. The driver wanted you to sign one and hold it for him when he comes back. I told him you couldn't do it on office time, but I'd ask if you would sign it for him.

Misty took hold of the newspaper but before Gary let go of it, he leaned in and whispered. "Don't bend it any more than you have to. I think I might frame it for the office and it's better when the papers are crisp."

She nodded slowly, not sure she understood everything he'd said, but enough.

Misty read the article over again, struggling to understand the words in front of her.

"Events at the property of Buster Roberts have shaken the residents of his neighborhood and others in Richmond who have wondered about their missing loved ones for years.

"Sources at the Richmond Police Department are very hush-hush about the bodies that they are still digging up on the all-but-condemned property. The Coroner's office have disabled their phones to keep distractions to a minimum as they have quite a bit of work in front of them.

"Richmond PD's crime scene techs have erected a twenty-foot wall around the property to keep out curious eyes and the local press. Even local drone enthusiasts have been warned away and in two cases, their drones were confiscated.

"To say that this is going to put Richmond on the map for serial murderers is an understatement, but it's going to highlight the fact that Richmond PD is stuck in a bit of a rut. They're going to have to answer why a serial killer was operating under their noses."

*Oh no.* She blinked at the paper and willed the next words to fade away. She wanted them to be deleted... invisible.

"Not surprisingly, the dynamic search duo of Misty Bridges and Roya, her cadaver search dog, were seen at the search.

"Sources say that the police were operating on a tip that there was a body buried on the property but given the number of excavation sites that were seen, more than a single body was found.

"Again, people in Richmond are left to wonder how the local law

enforcement agencies haven't brought Miss Bridges back to Richmond to live and work here on a daily basis."

Misty blew out a breath. "Not that they could convince me to move back now. The last thing I want is for us to be infamous in a town that big."

"Can I give her a bone?"

Misty turned her head toward Gary and saw him lift a butcher paper wrapped item from a cooler he placed on a metal stool. "That's a bone? One?"

Gary grinned back at her. "Biggest one the butcher had."

Misty laughed. "Yeah. Okay. She might not eat it all in one sitting."

"It won't hurt my feelings. She can gnaw on it until her heart is content."

"Okay then."

As Gary unwrapped the paper around the bone, Misty saw the massive bone and the meat that had been left on it.

"That's like a feast!"

Gary got down on one knee and presented it to Roya. "She's a hero who deserves a feast."

Misty continued to read the newspaper article.

"The concerned public has begun to wonder if the Richmond Police Department will be able to handle the investigation on their own. Local politicians are calling for the FBI to come in and take over the investigation. Chief Detective Sorvino has made it clear that if he deems it necessary to bring in outside law enforcement or investigators, he will personally make the call."

She shook her head. "I'm sure he will. He's a good man. Smart too. This can't be easy for them."

A bell sounded above the door.

The three men who walked in weren't normally inside the Post Office or on their feet. Silas, Otto, and Arthur were fixtures at a table outside the building and kept their sharp eyes on the comings and goings in town.

Silas' hand slapped at the countertop. "Well?"

Misty turned her head, confused. "What can I help you gentlemen with?"

Otto pointed at Gary behind her. "Him! He promised he'd get us copies of that Richmond newspaper."

Arthur scoffed. "Newspaper? More like a gossip rag. You know how I feel about them, Otto."

Silas huffed and folded his arms. "Then why did you ask Gary to bring in two copies for you?"

Arthur, never one to let a good affront pass him by jerked a thumb toward the back wall. "Roya. I like dogs. Everyone knows that. I wanted to get Roya to sign a copy too."

Silas' brow pinched over his nose. "You think Roya can pick up a pen?"

Gary lifted a beige block from his desk up front. "I've got a stamp pad that should work if Misty's okay with us getting a paw print."

Otto grumped at Gary. "Well, it looks like just you can unless you got us those copies we asked for."

Gary looked at the older men with a shrug. I'm not a newsstand or a personal delivery service. I asked the MVS driver to bring me a stack if he can find that many."

Misty really wasn't prepared for such a reception back home in Fallport. Home.

She smiled even when she wanted to wince. It was a good site better than how people saw her in Richmond. Whether they saw Roya as a hero or not, people gave them a wide berth as if Roya was a bad omen or something like that. The cold shoulders weren't always easy to shrug off.

The reaction from some folks was visceral.

Roya felt it too. She didn't know how to express it, but when Roya hung her head and moved glacier-slow, Misty could tell that her good girl felt the judgement.

Things were certainly different in this small town.

At least so far.

Gary and the three gentlemen who were still grumbling at Gary had accepted Roya. The Chief of Police, Simon Hill, didn't seem to have any issues with her talented dog. The Search and Rescue team and their search dog, Duke, were great obviously. They were familiar with her kind of work. And of course, Gabriel and his family. They were big fans of Roya.

She smiled.

Gabriel.

He'd left that morning to head back to work for the late shift and she wasn't sure she'd see him for the next day or two, but just the thought of him made her smile.

The front door of the post office opened and as the bells dinged, Otto turned around with a warning scowl on his face.

"Oh, it's you."

Gary stared wide-eyed at Otto, shocked at his 'greeting.'

Police Chief Simon Hill gave them all a smile, one that he'd likely perfected in years of public service. "Good morning, gentlemen."

Misty saw Arthur jerk a thumb in her direction. "What about her? Don't tell me you think *she's* a guy."

Simon's eyebrows rose at that, but he didn't answer. Instead he fixed his gaze on Misty. "Do you have a moment?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure. I just got back to work after Richmond, and -"

"Go ahead, Misty."

Misty turned to look at Gary.

He tilted his head back toward the door at the back of the post office. "Go on. If the Chief needs to talk, I can cover the front."

"Are you sure?" She didn't want to make things difficult for Gary. He'd given her a job when she'd moved to town, and it was a job where she could bring Roya to every shift. That meant something to her.

It meant a lot.

"Sure." He waved off her concern. "Besides, right now it's just these three Nosy Nellies. Go ahead."

She gave her boss a thankful smile and gestured for Simon to follow her.

Once the door closed behind them, she turned around.

"Is everything okay?"

"I spoke to Chief Detective Sorvino from Richmond. He said you were a huge help."

The tightness in her chest eased. "Oh, good. I'm glad. I mean... I talked to him before I left. I'm still trying to process everything that happened. I've been there to recover bodies before, but so many... and in such close proximity? I mean, they were just there in the ground, like... like... he was planting a garden."

Misty heard her voice rising and clasped her hands over her throat. Panic started to set in.

"How could... How could anyone do something like this?"

She didn't know if it was the concern on his face or the gentle hand he placed on her shoulder, but she burst into tears.

"So... so many people."

She tried to shake herself free of the emotions rushing up inside her, but it was too hard for her to push away.

Misty held up a hand between them and stepped back from the Police



Chief.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break down like that."

Simon didn't move toward her, but he didn't move away either. When she looked at him, she saw real compassion in his eyes. "You don't have to apologize, Misty. I'd be a little surprised if that didn't affect you somehow."

She tried to wave it away. "I didn't even see anything. Not really. Just the flags that they put down to mark where Roya indicated. Can you imagine if I'd seen something? I probably would have lost it."

His eyes or his expression never changed. "You can't judge yourself if you did. Things like that can affect people who've seen those kinds of things before. We're all human."

"Well," she sighed, "being human isn't all it's cracked up to be."

He shook his head. "You got me there."

"I... I don't mean to sob and run, but I have to get back. Unless..." she lifted a questioning brow, "you need something from me?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I guess I just wanted to know if you wanted updates as they come in? I don't have anything official to do with the investigation, but their Chief Detective said he'd give me any information he could as they worked it through."

She grimaced and lifted her shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. "I'm... I'm not really sure. I'm not sure I'd want to know details. Right now, I just know numbers. Placement. I'm afraid," she drew in a breath as her heart stuttered in her chest, "I mean, I just don't need any more details in my head."

Misty watched his expression.

"I hope that doesn't make you think I'm... some horrible person."

"No." He shook his head and gave her a slight smile. "I don't blame you for not wanting images in your head."

He gave her a smile and she saw the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

"You take care, Misty. If you need anything. Let me know." He started to walk away and then turned back. "We're lucky to have you and Roya in Fallport."

"Actually," she smiled back at him, "we're lucky to be here with all of you."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### GABRIEL

Gabriel hadn't seen Misty for a few days. Two of the deputies were out sick with some kind of stomach bug, so they were scrambling to cover all the shifts.

Picking up his phone from the console of his patrol car, he dialed Misty's phone number and waited a few rings before she picked up.

"Gabriel! Hey!"

"Hey. Do you have a few minutes?"

He heard her laughter and then the soft snuffle of sound before she spoke again. "Roya saw your picture on the phone and she's trying to say hello."

It was easy to laugh with her.

She lifted his spirits and made his heart lighter. He'd never felt like that before.

"How are you?"

He heard the curiosity in her voice. "On another double. Patrick is still sick."

"Are you getting enough sleep?"

His instinct was to tell her he was fine, but the truth was an entirely different matter.

"I sleep well enough to keep me going. But I imagine you in my arms and that helps."

There was a pause on the other end of the phone call.

"Misty?"

"I was hoping it wasn't just me." Her voice was soft, almost a whisper. "I didn't think it would feel like this."

"I'm hoping that the shifts are back to regular by Sunday. And I'm hoping that you'll come to the family dinner with me."

"With... with you?"

He heard the surprise and confusion in her voice.

"Yeah, with me."

"What would your parents say? Isn't this kind of sudden?"

"Does it feel that way to you?"

"Yes. No." He heard the rush of air across the phone. "I mean, the last time they saw us together, I think we were both avoiding each other. Throwing glances like they were knives."

"They'll be happy," he insisted.

"For us?"

He heard her hopeful tone and smiled.

"For me," he clarified. "You're great. They'd be ecstatic for me. They'd likely worry about you. Maybe have you see a therapist."

"Why would they do that?"

"Concern for your sanity. It's wide knowledge that I'm a grumpy asshole at times. Especially around you when you first came around the family.

"They'll worry for your sanity, but they'll be thankful that I'm smart enough to realize you're..."

"That I'm..."

"That you're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Gabriel."

"Okay. Okay." He shook his head. "I won't press the issue. I want you to feel comfortable around my family. However it happens. Just tell me how you want to do it."

"Play it by ear. We'll come on Sunday, but nothing official."

He winced and wanted to remind her that Avalon and Joshua, already saw that there was something between them.

Gabriel wondered if he should talk to Avalon before Sunday. Pave the way for an easy day with the Armstrongs.

"Gabriel."

Her tone was tentative.

"Yeah?"

"I don't want to mess this up."

He shook his head, sorry she felt that way.

"I don't want to go too fast and end up unable to be around you. Around

Avalon." He heard her softly spoken words and ached for her deep in his heart. "I don't have many friends, Gabriel. None as close as Avalon has been to me. I don't want to lose that if something does... or doesn't happen between us."

"I wish..." Gabriel wanted to kick himself for doing this on the phone. He should have kept things easy. Relaxed.

"You wish..."

Her voice shook a little and he heard Roya whine near the phone.

He really needed to do better where she was concerned. He'd lived his whole life with a wall up and around his heart for a couple of reasons, but Misty didn't deserve to suffer because he didn't have his shit together.

"I'm sorry that I'm making you worry. I need to see you." He looked at the clock in his car. "I think it would be better to see you face to face. You should know I mean what I'm saying."

"I want to see you too." She sounded surprised at her own words. "As long as you don't get in trouble on the clock."

"I'll radio in that I'm taking a break and I'll be right there."

He heard her soft exhale before she spoke.

"Be careful, okay?"

"Okay." He smiled, his chest warming at the thought. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

The call ended and he called in to the station to let them know that he was going on his break.

He needed it.

He needed her.

\* \* \*

MISTY

As she set her phone down on the side table, she felt Roya's paws on her thigh. Then Roya licked her cheek.

"Hey... hey!"

Misty tried to get her hands between her face and Roya's tongue. She was only partially successful.

"Hey. Calm down."

Roya wasn't about to listen.

Misty knew that if she could get her voice settled and into 'command' mode that Roya would likely listen.

She just wasn't able to settle her voice.

After a few days without seeing Gabriel, she had been starting to overthink things.

Ah, who was she kidding?

She was overthinking everything.

When they'd been in Richmond, they'd been so close.

They'd shared space for hours in the car, down to the city and back. And in that space, she'd felt close to him.

The last few days with him working double shifts, she'd started to worry.

Her space felt kind of 'empty' without him.

And that's when she'd started to question herself.

Hearing his voice on the phone that evening was something that she didn't know she needed. They'd had a few short calls before that, but they'd only fueled her thoughts that the closeness she'd felt with him in Richmond and right after their return had just been a fluke or the result of the stress they'd been under.

Misty recoiled as she felt something cold against the back of her arm. She let out a nervous laugh and sat back, letting Roya crawl up into her lap. When Roya leaned into her and rubbed the side of Misty's face with her own cheek, Misty sighed and hugged her beautiful dog close.

"I'm sorry, girl." She let out a long, pent-up sigh. "You don't need me acting like a lovesick idiot, right?"

A soft whine reached her ear and Misty looked down into Roya's beautiful dark eyes.

"I'm so glad I have you in my life, but I know I haven't been focused on you the way you deserve."

She laughed out loud as Roya almost danced on her lap.

"You're too good for me." Misty's hands moved over her squirming dog's body giving her all the best scratches. "Come on, let's go get you a snack."

That got Roya's attention and her search pup launched herself off of Misty's lap and skidded across the floor, heading toward the closet where Misty kept the treats.

A few steps away from her chair, Misty heard the doorbell ring.

Misty and Roya stopped and looked at each other.

The bell rang again, and Roya let out a loud, excited WUFF!

Smiling ear to ear, Misty moved to the door and turned the knob, but the door came to a short, abrupt stop.

"Oops!" Misty laughed at herself and pushed the door closed and unhooked the chain. "One sec!"

She pulled the door open, smiling, and then stopped short.

The doorway was open and empty.

The bright and happy feeling that she had inside dipped.

Misty took a step into the doorway and looked out toward the parking area. She could only see her car. She hadn't expected to see Gabriel's truck, but she didn't see a patrol vehicle either.

"Gabe?"

Misty hated the way her voice shook.

"Gabriel?"

Her voice was louder, but that didn't mean she wasn't feeling even worse.

Had she really just opened her door without looking?

Misty heard Roya's nails clatter across the flooring and Misty stepped back to block the dog from running outside.

Roya evaded her hand once before Misty grabbed hold of her collar to move her back.

She stopped short when headlights swept across her doorway.

Misty's head snapped up and she let out a soft sigh as she saw the shape of the vehicle that pulled in beside her car.

"Gabriel."

The patrol car was still running when she left the doorway, and it was the feeling of cool grass under her feet that told her she'd forgotten to put on shoes. That didn't stop her from rushing to the driver's side of the patrol car.

"Hey!"

Gabriel smiled as he opened his door and stepped out.

Misty was trying not to look at his uniform. The man looked so, so good in his uniform.

Instead, as she looked into his eyes, she felt her heart kick against her ribs. The look in his eyes was dark with the night surrounding them, but in his gaze she found a heat that made her shiver from more than the cold snap of the evening.

"Gabe." Her tone was too breathy, and her body heated and she was wondering if steam might actually rise from her skin the closer she got to him.

He didn't say anything back, but he moved closer.

When his hands grasped her hips and turned her back to his cruiser, she only had a moment to take in a breath before he had his mouth on hers.

Her eyes closed a heartbeat later and she tipped her head back to open her mouth.

Gabriel moved in closer, leaning into her body and sliding his tongue against hers.

She moaned and he answered in almost a growl.

Feeling the vibrations against her lips and where his body was pressed against her was delicious torture, and her hands moved over his arms and shoulders restlessly. She didn't want to grab a hold of him because she was worried she might never let him go. And that, she feared, was just another indication that this might be more chemistry than anything lasting.

She wanted to be wrong, but she was more afraid that she might be right.

Gabriel's voice rasped in her ear. "Where did you go, Misty? Did I lose you?"

*Oh god.* What would she say to that?

"I'm sorry, I was just distracted."

She wanted to cringe at the admission, but he didn't give her the time, he pulled her into his arms and gave her a hug.

No kissing. No caressing.

Just a hug.

She leaned into him, wrapping her arms around him to return the hug. It was perfect.

He was perfect.

Right?

Why was she so worried?

"Ooh."

Gabriel's voice was filled with laughter as Roya fell into them.

Misty felt his arms loosen around her as he leaned toward her dog.

"Hey, girl. I didn't realize you were so big and solid."

Misty laughed at that. "Careful. She might be concerned about her weight."

Gabriel shook his head. "Roya knows she's the best girl. Don't you, hmm?"

Misty looked down at Roya and frowned. "Hey! What do you have in your mouth?"

Roya barked and pulled back a little.

Misty knew that look. You ask a dog what they have in their mouth and they're likely to try to eat and swallow it as soon as they could, so she reached out and snatched it out of Roya's mouth.

"Ow!"

She dropped it and lifted her hand to her face. Even in the darkness, she could see a drop of blood welling up on her finger.

"Let me see."

Before she could say or do anything, Gabriel took hold of her hand and illuminated her hand with his flashlight.

"Puncture wound."

"It... It was the flowers."

"Flowers?"

She pointed down to the ground at her feet.

Gabriel began to lean over to pick it up but stopped short as she lifted her hand toward her mouth. "Stop."

"Why?"

She tried to lift it again and he gripped her wrist.

"Stop."

"Gabriel, I-"

She stopped short when she heard the noise.

A deep-throated hacking sound.

Turning to her left, she saw Roya hunched over toward the ground, her shoulders rounded, and her tail tucked down.

The noises she was making chilled Misty to the bone. "Oh god. Gabriel." She turned to look at him. "She's sick!" She reached down to grab her phone and realized that she didn't have it on her. It was still in the house. A moment later, it didn't matter. "I can't remember the name of the Veterinarian in town!"

Gabriel lifted his phone and opened his contacts. "I know one we can get to in a few minutes. Come on."

She followed him as he picked up Roya and put her in the back seat of his cruiser. And then she ran around to the other side and slipped in, putting Roya's head on her leg.

Even with her fingers moving through Roya's fur, searching out her dog's favorite scritch places, Roya was still trying to cough up... something.

"Please, Gabriel. Please, hurry!"

He did, and moments later, they were pulling up in front of his uncle's



home.

Howard and Louise Armstrong rushed down the stairs and helped open doors. Misty wanted to help carry Roya inside, but Gabriel pulled her dog into his arms. "I've got her, Misty. I've got her."

She leaned in on Louise as they made their way inside.

She hoped that Gabriel's uncle would know what was wrong and could help Roya. She was all that mattered.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MISTY

It was nearly impossible to concentrate as Gabriel's uncle started to look at Roya. Louise was distracting her. Probably on purpose in that she was asking questions about Roya's history and health.

Mindless.

Numb.

Misty gave the answers to Gabriel's aunt because she knew that they were important. She held it together because she had to.

Inside, she felt like she was dying.

It would only be okay when she heard definitive news from Gabriel's uncle. Maybe then she could relax.

That's what she was holding onto.

SOMETIME LATER, probably just minutes by a real clock and not her twisted gut, Avalon came into the house, followed by Joshua.

Avalon didn't say a word, but Joshua moved in to talk to his uncle and Gabriel.

"Hey, sweetheart." Avalon wrapped her arms around Misty, and it was suddenly even more difficult to hold herself together. "It's going to be okay."

Misty tried to nod to agree with Avalon, but she wasn't sure she could move. Her skin was hot and yet she was cold inside.

"We called Brody. He's finishing up a shift with the ambulance and when he's done, he'll be heading back here."

Misty tried to swallow, but it was hard. Painful.  
She wanted to talk, but it was just as difficult.  
Misty watched, but she could only see their backs.  
She could only hear their words and some of the devices that they were using.

"Sedative."

"IV fluids."

Oh god. "Why is this happening?" Misty cringed as she tasted bile on the back of her tongue.

"I'll need to administer an emetic."

Just the sound of the word made her want to throw up in sympathy.

Roya whimpered and Misty was out of her seat and around the makeshift exam table.

"Hey, girl."

Roya's dark eyes met her own and Misty could feel her pain and confusion.

"What's wrong?"

A soft whimper was followed by a rough scratching cough.

Instincts pushed her forward and she reached for Roya's head to pet and soothe her.

"Watch out!"

She heard Howard's words, but didn't comprehend their meaning.

A moment later Misty screamed as Roya threw up blood.

"No no no..."

Again, Howard called out instructions and Gabriel moved around the room with Louise, bringing him supplies and towels. Avalon tried to coax her back to a chair, but Misty was fighting it.

"I don't want to sit down. I want to help."

Avalon struggled with her a little more, but Misty wouldn't budge.

Part of it was that she didn't want to leave Roya, the other part of it was that Misty wasn't feeling well.

Cold, clammy hands and she felt flushed.

Shaky on her feet.

Any bit of motion stirred her stomach.

Gabriel moved over to her side and took her by the arms. "Misty? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?"

She tried to shake off his concern but wasn't anywhere near successful. His hands tightened on her arms.

"Misty, you don't look good."

"Oh! Who the hell cares?" She lifted her arms in a desperate gesture. "I want to help!"

"Misty?"

Gabriel grabbed her wrist and held her hand steady.

"You're bleeding."

She gave it a cursory look and then shook her head.

"It's just the thorn on the flowers, Gabriel. You remember, right?"

"The flowers that Roya brought to you in her mouth." Gabriel pulled her closer and looked at the puncture wound on her palm. "Uncle Howard? Come look at this."

Misty tried to pull her hand away but Howard walked over and held out his hand and she gave her hand to him.

He had a manner that brooked no argument.

"You said you hurt your hand on a thorn?"

She swallowed and winced at the pain.

"When Gabriel came to see me, Roya brought me some flowers. I guess they were on the porch?"

She saw Howard and Gabriel share a look, but it was Joshua who spoke.

"I'll go look and see if they're still there."

Realization set in as Misty looked down at her palm.

The puncture wound she had was bleeding freely.

"Was this because of the flowers?"

Joshua stopped just inside the door when Gabriel called to him.

"Use your gloves."

Joshua gave them a solemn nod. "Already planning to."

So many thoughts turned around and around in her head. She wasn't all that sure when she started to talk but Gabriel and his uncle listened intently.

"There was someone at the door. I thought it was..." she looked up at Gabriel, "I thought it was you."

He nodded and he added on. "I told her I was coming to see her on my break."

"I went outside, but no one was there. I felt silly at first. I should have looked out the peephole first or lifted the curtains to check." She swallowed again as bile crept up onto the back of her tongue again. "But then I saw you

pulling in beside my car and I forgot about the doorbell."

Her thoughts jumped ahead as she realized that the flowers had been on the porch. Likely left by whoever it had been who had rung their doorbell.

"Roya picked up the flowers to bring them to me. I did this."

The truth of her words was brought home by the hacking sound coming from Roya.

Howard shook his head as he met Louise's eyes over the exam table. "There's a lot of blood."

"Blood." Misty covered her face with her hands. "Oh god!"

Gabriel gently tried to pry her hands from her face. "Let's get your hands sanitized and- What the hell?"

Surprised at the force in his voice, Misty lowered her hands and saw her face in a mirror on the way behind him.

Where her hand had been, with its wound on her palm. A thick line of blood rolled down her cheek.

She dropped her gaze to her palm and saw that her wound was welling up blood.

Howard barked out some orders for clean cloths and more, but all Misty could do was look into the miserable eyes of Roya as everyone around them tried to figure out what was going on.

\* \* \*

## GABRIEL

It was just before dawn that he was finally able to relax enough to close his eyes.

He was holding Misty's injured hand in his, and the IV of Vitamin K was dripping steadily into both Misty and Roya. Roya was at home with his uncle and Misty was laying there beside him in Doctor Snow's clinic.

A soft knock at the door made him open his eyes.

When the door opened up, Gabriel saw his cousin Rachael.

She gave him an encouraging smile as she whispered. "Can I come in?"

Nodding, he sat up carefully and gestured to the chair that he'd occupied while Avalon had gotten Misty settled and calm.

Rachael gently closed the door behind her and drew the chair close to Gabriel.

He smiled, and appreciated the care that his cousin was taking to let Misty rest.

Rachael looked down at their joined hands and that's when he saw a lightbulb moment in his cousin's eyes.

"I knew it."

Even though she whispered the words, Gabriel turned to look and make sure that Misty was still asleep.

Which she was.

Thankfully.

Gabriel leaned in closer. "I don't care what you think you know-"

"Knew." She gave him a wink. "The sisters have all known since you met her."

The sisters, as she referred to, were the cousins, Rachael and Kay. Now they'd included Avalon in their unholy trinity.

Rachael continued. "But that's not important. How is she doing?"

Gabriel turned his head to give Misty a long, grateful look. "Resting. Thankfully."

"Hey, Cuz." Rachael reached forward and touched his knee. "Make sure you get some rest, too."

"Not sure if I can. I'm waiting to hear if I need to go back on shift."

Rachael's brow pinched over her nose. "Chief Hill wouldn't make you go back out with Misty here in the clinic."

It was a nice thought, but he knew how strapped they were for deputies at the moment.

He was lucky that at the beginning they could call it an actual call, since Roya and then Misty had fallen ill.

Gabriel got to stay around when it was clear that they'd been the victims of some kind of poisoning.

Now they were both resting and on the mend, as far as Doctor Snow and his uncle Howard could tell.

That meant that the emergency was over.

He was just waiting for the Chief to call him and tell him to go back to work.

Gabriel lifted his gaze to Rachael's. "Any word from Doctor Snow about what it was?"

She shrugged. "Between the doctor and Uncle Howard, they figured out that it was an anticoagulant. That gave them a treatment. But they'll be

sending in the blood samples and the other fluids," she winced as she said the words, "to a lab for analysis."

He nodded, sighing out his frustration. "That's one thing about living in a small town."

She gave his leg a squeeze. "That's the truth, Cuz. But either way, Fallport's the best place in the world to live."

He couldn't argue with her words.

"We may not have the bells and whistles that they have in larger towns, but if we were in Richmond, I doubt that I'd have a veterinarian on call for emergencies."

"Nope." She grinned at him. "Or a nurse for a cousin."

His chest tightened for a moment as he felt a rush of gratitude roll over him like a crashing wave. "And if I need to go back out on patrol-"

"I'll be here. Don't worry, Cuz. We've got you and Misty. We take care of family."

Her words struck home, and he felt his throat tighten up, but he didn't have to worry about explaining. The door opened up and Police Chief Simon Hill walked in.

Gabriel started to stand up, but the chief waved him back down into the chair.

"Don't bother getting up, Gabriel." The chief looked down at their joined hands and gave him an approving nod. "I was wondering about the two of you. Good to know I'm right."

Rachael got up from her chair and gave the Chief a thumbs up. "Join the club, Chief."

She looked back over her shoulder at Gabriel. "I'll be around if you need me."

As soon as she left, the police chief gestured at her empty chair.

Gabriel gestured at it with a nod. "Please."

As soon as Simon sat down in the chair he took a long look at Misty laying quietly in the bed. The only noise at that time was the soft rhythmic beeping of the IV machine doling out her medicine.

"She's going to be okay. Right?"

Gabriel smiled even though the chief couldn't see it.

"Looking good so far. We have to wait for the final determination on what it was before we know for sure that they'll be okay.

"But I think we're in the clear."

Simon's eyes narrowed a little. "What do they think it was?"

Gabriel's mouth went dry as he put the words together into a sentence.

"An anticoagulant."

Simon's expression darkened. "Poison."

Gabriel nodded and gently squeezed Misty's hand. "Yeah. That's what Doctor Snow and my uncle think."

"Howard. Looks like he's still up to snuff as a vet after retiring."

Gabriel smiled. "He dove right in to help Roya."

Gabriel saw the chief's expression change like lightning.

One moment he was happy to hear about Roya and the next moment, he looked tired. Or maybe weary.

It was hard to tell in the darkened room.

Gabriel wanted to ask about the quick change, but he had a feeling that the chief would get to it when he could.

Chief Hill wasn't a man who just blurted things out. He was experienced, kind, thoughtful, and damn good at his job.

Simon drew in a deep breath, placed his hands on his knees and then sat back in his chair with his spine straight.

"I had a call this afternoon and I was going to talk to you when you signed out for the night, but..."

"Things happened," Gabriel acknowledged.

"Yes," he looked over at Misty in the bed, "something horrible happened."

Gabriel tightened his hand around Misty's just a bit and realized that he needed the contact. He needed to touch her.

"I got a call from Richmond PD today." Simon paused but didn't stay quiet long. "They found DNA on the bodies they've managed to dig up so far."

Gabriel waited for the other shoe.

"It's all from the same source. Likely the perpetrator."

Gabriel nodded knowing there was more to what Simon had to tell them.

"The DNA matches the owner of the property. The man hasn't been seen for over a year and his son... Well, his son is in prison, and he's been there for the last five."

"So there's likely a serial killer on the loose."

Simon nodded, his expression sober. "That's what they're thinking."

"And the news coverage has been focused heavily on Misty and Roya."



Gabriel felt like a cold hand gripped his heart. "Do you think he was the one who left the flowers on Misty's porch?"

Simon didn't react at all, going completely still. Gabriel felt a shiver crawl up his spine. He'd never seen the police chief look like that.

Ever.

Gabriel nodded, determined to move forward from this moment.

Simon cleared his throat softly. "So, I'm going to put you back on Misty as her guard, unless you think someone else would be a better idea."

Gabriel looked at his hand holding Misty's and exhaled. "You're asking me if I can protect her."

Shaking his head, Simon gave him a hard look. "I have no doubt that you can protect her, Gabriel. I'm wondering if you have the emotional control not to tie yourself up in knots if something goes wrong."

Something twisted inside of Gabriel's gut. His instinct was to push back and tell Simon that he was crazy. That no one else could do the job. But that was him just being stubborn. Right?

Sure, he could take care of Misty and protect her, but his emotional ties to her would make things difficult.

Gabriel didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he was going to do *something*.

Simon's knowing gaze met his own. "I spoke to the Chief Detective about this. He's sending someone here to speak to Misty about the poisoning and sending one of the evidence techs to collect the flowers and look for more evidence while they're here."

Gabriel nodded and gave Simon a grateful look. "Are you okay with them here in Fallport?"

Simon's lips were pressed into a thin line, but it looked more like determination than anything unsettling. "I don't care who he has to bring. If we've got a serial killer here in Fallport? I want him caught and dragged back to Richmond." He looked over at Misty, still and sleeping in the bed. "You take the night to think about it and let me know what you've decided in the morning."

"I've got her covered." It was more than instinct, Gabriel knew he'd made his decision. "How are we going to cover shifts with me out of the rotation?"

Simon's brows furrowed low over his nose. "I'm going to be pulling shifts and if we need to call in help from surrounding agencies, we'll do it."

Before Gabriel could thank him, Simon got up from his chair and gave

him a pointed look. "Don't even think of thanking me. You're a good man, Gabriel. You're also a damn good deputy. I think you know by now that we take care of each other. If someone is threatening our town and our people, we will do anything and everything to stop them."

He walked toward the door and stopped short.

When Simon turned back around, he gave Gabriel a strange, pensive look. "I know it's new between the two of you, but don't take that to mean it won't work or that there's a reason to talk yourself out of trying.

"Take that from a guy who's been looking for quite some time. I see what's happening between the two of you and while I'm definitely not the man who has a track record like your folks, I can see that there's something special between you two. Take care of her. Hold on tight.

"Maybe there's a chance for me down the line." Simon nodded, the motions easing and going slower and slower until he shook his head once and stopped. "If wishes were horses."

Then he was gone.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Misty woke up with a strange floaty feeling in her head.

"Oh, you're up!"

The voice wasn't completely foreign to her, but it wasn't familiar either.

"Where's... where's-"

"Your officer friend is outside talking to Detective Harris. They're really upset about the murders."

Misty shook her head, trying to clear it so she could think straight.

"What... what murders?"

A huff of sound was followed by a soft canine whine.

"Roya?" She put her hand out and waited to feel the familiar fur under her hand, but there was nothing but air. "I thought I heard Roya."

"She's in the next room. She's coming out of her sedation just like you."

Sedation?

She heard a tick and then the lights flared on in the room, nearly blinding her. Her memories weren't far behind.

The flowers.

The thorn.

Roya was sick.

"Is... is she okay?"

Misty heard a tsk.

"She'll be fine, but I don't think you'll be in any condition to take care of her while you're recovering."

Misty felt a pain in the pit of her stomach. She turned on her side and curled up a little, stopping when she felt something tug at her arm.

She reached her hand across her body and touched the bend in her arm.

The slick give of an IV tube was under her finger.

"What's this?" She tried to open her eyes but the bright fluorescent lights made it hard to look at the stand beside her. "What do they have me on?"

"I'll go and ask the doctor to come in and explain. I can take Roya for you and help while you're-"

"What're the lights doing on in here?"

The tight fist of worry in her belly loosened when she heard Gabriel's voice.

"Gabe-" She reached out her hand and felt the warmth of his skin on hers as the lights went out in the room again.

It was then that she noticed the soft warm glow of light from the far corner of the room.

"Roya?" She squeezed Gabriel's hand. "Is she okay?"

"She's going to be, honey. You too."

Misty relaxed at his reassurance. She knew Gabriel wasn't going to lie to her.

"When can I see her? When can I get up and leave? I-"

She felt Gabriel's touch on her cheek and she let out the breath that she'd been unaware that she was holding.

"I'll answer your questions in just a few minutes. The Chief Detective was going to come out to talk to you, but he had to stay behind in Richmond."

Misty tensed a little as she heard Gabriel's voice do the same.

"Detective Harris was able to come. He brought one of the techs to take the flowers to the lab in Richmond. They can run better tests there."

"I know. I mean, I understand." She was still a little foggy. "I want to help too."

She tried to sit up, but it felt like a wave of nausea crashed into her and she collapsed against the bed she was laying in. Gabriel touched her gently as he tried to settle her back.

"You're not going anywhere for the next few hours until Doctor Snow gives you the okay."

"And Roya-"

Misty's voice tumbled over the other voice in the room.

"Who's going to watch over Roya?"

"We are." Gabriel brushed her hair back from her face. "You've got the whole Armstrong family fighting over who gets to help with Roya. I think I saw Josh and Brody getting ready to arm wrestle over the privilege, and then

there's Sarah."

Misty smiled at the mention of Gabriel's niece.

"She's been practicing with her stuffed hippo at home. She's ready and willing to give hours and hours of kisses and hugs."

Misty felt her eyes start to tear up, but before she could speak, she heard Detective Harris speak up. "Sorry to interrupt, but I do have a few questions for you."

"Can this wait?"

Misty shook her head. "I'll answer whatever I can."

She felt Gabriel's hand wrap tighter around hers. He knew how important this was to her. They could talk later. Commiserate about Rolan Harris. He would likely stuff his foot in his mouth. It was that possible lift of her spirits that she was looking forward to.

Footsteps moved about the room before she heard Detective Harris speak.

"Did you see anyone around your house before you discovered the flowers?"

She started to shake her head and then thought better of it when her stomach turned. "No. I didn't see anyone. I think I heard someone on the porch. I'm pretty sure that Roya heard someone too."

Roya.

Misty winced and lifted her unencumbered hand to rub at her temples. "I... my head is really woozy. I think that we heard someone, but we were waiting for Gabriel to come to see us. I think... Or rather, I think I was expecting it to be Gabriel at the door so..." Her head ached something fierce and she covered her eyes with her free hand. "I'm sorry, I don't think I can really remember what was happening at the time. I think I know," she began and winced at a sudden stab of pain in her head, "but I'm not sure if it's really a memory or just some kind of feeling."

"That's not going to be much help."

There was a strange silence in the room after that comment. Maybe it was because Detective Harris agreed with them.

"Well, it's getting late. We better be heading back to Richmond."

"I wouldn't mind staying."

There was that other voice again. It took a moment, but Misty realized that the person she'd been talking to earlier must have come with Rolan. She didn't blame them for their hard words. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it was like to suffer through that time with the detective.

"I would like to take more time to look for evidence. If we could stay for a day or so, I'm sure I could find more evidence to take back with us to Richmond, Detective."

"A day or so?" She heard the sound of paper slapping against skin. Detective Harris was fond of making that noise with his pad of paper against his palm. She wasn't sure if it was to draw attention or just release the frustration building inside. "Do you think our department is made of money? The amount they have to pay me per mile to use my own damn car is crazy money. Did you get the flowers?"

The answering voice was soft, almost a whisper. "Yes."

"There," again, he slapped his notepad against his palm, "see? We can go."

Misty opened her eyes a little more and found that the light in the corner of the room didn't burn as much. She saw surprise on the detective's face.

"It's... it's good to know that you're going to be okay."

Swallowing hard, she moved her head in the barest nod. "Thank you, Detective Harris."

"I know I give you a lot of shit at times."

*At times?*

She felt Gabriel's fingers squeeze her hand.

"But you've got skin in the game now. And you came out okay on the other side. At least," he shrugged, "they say you're going to live."

*Okay?*

"And if I thought the perp would have left more evidence behind, I'd give that tech a chance, but I've also seen the kind of motel you folks have here. It doesn't come close to impressing me. So, we're gonna head back."

She managed a smile. "Okay. Drive safe."

He shook his head. "Stop trying to be nice."

"She's not trying. She is nice."

Misty smiled at the easy way Gabriel's voice cut through the room.

"Well," the detective sighed, "call me if you remember anything concrete. You *can*," she heard the caustic tone of his voice, "use a phone, right?"

"Okay, Harris, let's go."

Gabriel let go of her hand and she heard the legs of a chair drag against the floor.

"You can leave now."

"I'm just joking, *Armstrong*." He sighed. "You were just beginning to get

interesting, Bridges."

The door closed a moment later and Misty's whole body became heavy with exhaustion. She barely fought off a yawn.

"So," she shifted on the bed, "when can we get out of here?"

Misty felt his hand on her shoulder and relaxed into his touch.

"We are staying the night here at the clinic and after Doctor Snow checks in with you tomorrow. If he thinks you're firmly out of the woods, then we can leave."

"But Roya-"

"She's here because my uncle brought her by to see you. She missed you a lot."

"I missed her too."

Gabriel leaned in and she could see him a little more than before. "If you promise to stay here overnight to make Doctor Snow happy, I'm going to bring Roya in to see you now that you're awake. And when my uncle comes back, Roya's going to stay with him."

She grinned at him. "I promise. I just want to see her. I need to know she's going to be okay."

Gabriel's smile was as gorgeous as she remembered. "I think she was worried about you, too. My uncle said that Roya only calmed down when they got her in the car and told her that they were going to bring her to you."

Misty felt tears welling in her eyes. "Gabriel?"

He looked down at her, worry in his gaze. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

He shook his head. "You don't have to thank me."

"I'll thank you anyway," she explained. "Thank you for protecting us. Thank you for caring about us. And thank you," she tried to blink back her tears, "for understanding how much she means to me."

He leaned over her and placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. "It's because I know how much you mean to me. Both of you," he gave her a wink, "now lie back and relax and I'll bring your girl in to see you."

Of course she did what he asked!

He was giving her the world. The least she could do in return was listen.

Loving Gabriel was just too easy for her peace of mind.

And heart.

But it certainly didn't stop her.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It took a few days for things to get back to 'normal.' Not that normal was something the Armstrongs did the same way as everyone else in Fallport. Still, he didn't want his family to be any different.

Sitting under the tree with Misty held against his chest and tucked between his legs, he watched Sarah playing fetch with Roya.

Well, he was watching Roya pretend to play fetch.

His sister Kay sat down beside him in the grass and smiled. "Is she sleeping?"

Gabriel looked down at Misty's peaceful expression and nodded.

"She's been tired a lot lately. I think it's stress."

Kay nodded and put her hand on his shoulder. "She's got a lot on her shoulders."

"She's trying to pretend that everything's okay, but I know she's worried."

"I know what she's feeling."

Gabriel turned to look at his sister. "How so?"

"It's a thing we do. We want to appear like we've got everything handled. No one wants to feel like they're a mess."

"Stress is normal. There's nothing to hide."

"There is when you feel like everyone around you has their lives together. Have you seen yourself, brother dear? Do you know how people see you?"

"I... I'm not sure what you're talking about."

Kay leaned in, lightly bumping her shoulder against his. Before she pecked a kiss on his cheek. "You're superman, Gabriel. You're tall, and strong, and handsome." She sat up and wagged a finger at him. "Don't let that go to your head."



Gabriel shook his head. "Why would I? You'd just cut me down to my knees if I let my ego get the better of me."

Kay's smile was broad and sunny. "You know it, Big Brother."

He rolled his eyes. "I know better than to call you Little Sister."

Her smile turned into a smirk. "And yet, you just did."

He shrugged, and Misty sighed in his arms.

"You love her."

It wasn't a question.

No, his sister just said it out loud.

Kay shook her head. "You're not going to deny it?"

He looked at her, enjoying the joy he saw on her face. "I haven't said the words to her, so I'm not going to say them to you... yet."

"You haven't said it," she pressed, "but you do feel it."

Gabriel turned back to watch Sarah and Roya in the grass. Shaking his head slightly, he spoke to his sister. "You want me to show her how to throw?"

Her laughter was just as lovely as she was. "Thomas said he tried to show her how, but she didn't seem to care."

They watched as Sarah picked up the ball that they'd been playing with and swinging her arm around like a windmill, she dropped the ball from her hand. It bounced on the grass and then rolled a few inches away.

Roya made a big show of running into the green expanse of their combined yards and then dashing back to pick up the ball in her mouth to present it to Sarah as if she'd thrown it a great distance.

Sarah laughed and held her hands up in celebration! "Yay, Roya!"

Roya barked and turned around with her tail wagging and ears pricked up.

From their seats on their back porch, Gabriel's parents clapped and cheered.

And then Sarah dusted the ball off on the grass so she could 'throw' it again.

"You planning on having a few of those?"

He heard Kay's question, but he didn't answer it right away.

Then he decided not to answer it at all.

"That's a discussion for a later date," he explained. "It's not just my decision." He leaned down and placed a kiss on the top of Misty's head, rubbing his cheek against her hair and feeling the warmth of the ambient sun on her wavy curls. "But I would definitely want a couple at least. If she

does."

It was something he'd thought about, but he hadn't voiced yet.

And just saying the words called up a bunch of images in his head. Little boys and girls with curly dark hair. Tumbling in the grass. Playing with dogs. Just being kids.

"Good."

He didn't even have to look at his sister to know that she was smiling from ear to ear.

"Sarah said she wants cousins. Plural, just in case you missed the all important 'S.'"

Gabriel tried to hold back a laugh, but it didn't work.

Misty stirred in his arms and sat up.

He kept his hands on her arms and then lowered them to her hips as she blinked away her nap and sat up, smiling at Kay.

"Sorry," she tried unsuccessfully to fight off a yawn, "it's such a beautiful day."

His heart swelled in his chest at her words. It was a beautiful day and she was the best part of it.

He was in love.

Deeply.

Ridiculously in love with Misty Bridges.

And he wanted to tell her.

"Misty-"

"Aunty Missy!"

"Oof!"

Sarah was on Misty's back, her arms around Misty's neck.

"Aunty Missy, come play with me and Roya!"

Gabriel hesitated, unsure of how Misty felt, but he didn't have to wait for long.

Turning around, she rolled in the grass, twisting around until Sarah was in her arms.

The two of them laughed like it was the best joke in the world and Roya bounced and pounced in the grass surrounding them, barking like she was laughing too.

Rachel and Brody jogged over from his aunt and uncle's porch where they'd been working the grill for lunch. The dads and moms came out, with Kay's husband Thomas following behind with Jake in his arms. And the

sliding door behind Joshua's townhouse opened up on Avalon's joyous peal of laughter.

In moments, Gabriel was surrounded by family and enjoying every moment.

For the first time in days, he felt like they were finally in the sun.

The worries they'd had...

He didn't even give them a name.

"Uncle G! Come help me!"

Well, how could he say no?

"Hold on, Sarah! Here I come!"

He rocked up onto his knees and crawled over to help.

Roya lashed at his face with her tongue, making him close one eye and then the other so he could see where he was going.

That's when someone grabbed him and pulled him down into the grass.

Arms everywhere, he heard Misty laughing beneath him and Sara clambering on his back like they were playing horse.

He curled his back up and Sarah laughed through her first 'yee haw,' and then she kicked her legs nailing him hard in the ribs.

"Ow."

"Whoa there, little lady."

He heard Joshua chuckling a moment before Sara was lifted off of his back.

"Be nice to the horsey."

"Uncle Josh!" Her plaintive wail turned into a laugh as Gabriel rolled to his side.

Josh had Sarah over his head like an airplane and the little girl was in heaven.

"Hey there, big guy."

Gabriel looked at Misty as she rolled onto her side and reached across his body to rub at his ribs. "Big guy?"

"You don't like it?" Her smile didn't dim. She knew he was more than okay with the words.

"I love it." He bit down on the inside of his cheek.

His whole body felt warm all over and it only had a little to do with the sun. The way she looked at him, the way she rubbed her hands on him... it all added up to the feelings that were rushing through his body. Those had everything to do with the woman before him.

The speed of her hands on his side changed and her breathing deepened.

"Sorry, I slept so long."

He reached out and set his hand on her hip. "If you're tired, sleep. I'm just glad to see you smiling."

"I'm glad to be smiling."

They both heard Sarah laughing and they laughed too.

"I'm glad your family is okay with me being here with you."

He slid his hand around and flattened it against her lower back. It brought them a few inches closer to each other.

"They're more than okay with you being here. I don't know if you can feel it, baby, but you're family here."

He saw the sheen of tears in her eyes and hated that she felt so vulnerable. It would change in time. She'd understand that she was a part of the family.

And sooner than later, she'd be an official name carrying member of the Armstrongs. He had the name of a couple of jewelers in Richmond burning in his phone contacts. He was headed there as soon as he got a chance.

It would be nice to have more positive memories of Richmond than he already had.

"I don't want to ruin this."

Her words shocked him. "Ruin this? How?"

She rubbed her lips against each other and lowered her gaze for a moment. "I've been a magnet for drama since I've come to town. You knew that from that incident at the bar."

"That wasn't you, Misty. I know I took it out on you, but that was my fault."

"And then you had to go with me for that search and then the poisoning."

"None of it was your fault. The drama involved in it was something someone else had done. You were poisoned. You didn't cause it."

Simon's words popped back up in his head and he wanted to shake off the worry that rushed up into his head.

He smiled instead. "Nothing that happened was your fault, Misty. Nothing. And whatever happens now, we'll deal with it together."

He wasn't sure how she'd react to his words. He just had to wait.

It didn't take long. "Together, hmm?"

Her smile played on her lips and her eyes shone with what he could only describe as happiness. It only made her more beautiful than she was a moment before.

"I like the sound of that."

He grinned back at her. "Good. Misty? I-"

"Hey," Rachael tapped him on his shoulder, "get up and come and eat. Food's ready."

His cousin couldn't have known the words that were on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't blame her. Food was a serious thing for the Armstrong family.

"Come on." Misty was getting up on her feet and held out a hand to him. "Let's go. I'm finally feeling hungry."

Gabriel was relieved. She hadn't had a good appetite since she'd been sick. Whatever it took to make her happy and healthy again, he'd be happy to do.

On his feet, he pulled her in for a quick kiss that left her blushing before he walked her over to the family picnic table.

\* \* \*

DINNER WAS AMAZING, sitting beside Gabriel as the night sky filled with stars? Perfection.

The rest of the family had all gone back to their homes and they were left by themselves. Roya had climbed up on the lounge chair, sleeping soundly between them as they watched time passing.

Misty lifted her hand from Roya's head and set it on Gabriel's chest.

She closed her eyes and leaned in to breathe in his scent.

She hummed softly, smiling.

Misty heard him chuckle.

"What do I smell like? Barbeque ribs? Grilled corn? Maybe baked beans?"

"You think you're funny." She hid her smile from him.

"I *know* I'm funny." He laughed softly and covered her hand with his own. "Just remember, if I smell, it's because we were running around after Sarah for a while."

Misty tipped her head back and smiled at him with the canopy of stars twinkling over their heads.

"How about you be funny later?"

"Okay." He shifted slightly on the lounge chair and looked at her, eye to

eye. "What do you want me to be now?"

She let out a breath and hoped that this was the right time to say it. The right time to open herself up to him and put her heart on the line.

Lifting her hand between them, she touched her finger to his lips and traced the firm line of the top and bottom before she slid her hand around the back of his neck and drew him closer.

Right before she touched her lips against his, she opened her eyes and smiled. "Mine."

LATER SHE'D WONDER how Gabriel managed to carry her up to his bedroom. It was a long flight of stairs and she wasn't a small woman. She didn't even know how he managed to lay her down on his bed without her bouncing on the mattress.

The man was just strong.

And she was so damn happy to have him.

She was barely aware of Roya's soft sigh of comfort as she settled down against the wall. Misty turned her head for a moment, ready to put a pause in what was happening to make sure that Roya had somewhere soft to cuddle down and sleep, but again, Gabriel had surprised her.

Roya was fast asleep in what looked like a super comfy dog bed.

She looked up at Gabriel, who was removing his shirt, and gave him a wide-eyed look. "You got her a dog bed and set it up in here?"

Gabriel pulled his shirt free and lowered it to his side. He rubbed his free hand across his abs and up his chest over his heart, looking at her.

The darkness of the room didn't keep her from seeing the hunger in his eyes or the slight smile on his lips.

"I know it might seem a little... presumptive, but I've got one of those Woof Box subscription things."

Her jaw dropped a little. "Trying to make points with my dog?"

He didn't answer immediately, but that left her staring at the way his muscles flexed as he breathed. "I was hoping to make her feel at home here."

Gabriel dropped his shirt to the floor and moved closer to the bed.

"I hope you'll be at home here." When his knees touched the edge of the mattress, he reached forward and caught her thighs in his grip and pulled her to the edge of the mattress.

She was breathless at the sudden movement, even more when he leaned

over and braced himself on his hands beside her shoulders.

She'd gone from shocked to aroused in seconds.

"So, how am I doing so far?"

Misty swallowed and lifted her hands halfway between them. She wanted to touch him but held back, barely.

"Well, Roya looks like she's in doggie heaven."

A soft snore made them both chuckle softly.

"Okay, she's definitely happy here."

Gabriel lowered over her, his hands sinking into the mattress beside her until he brushed his lips against her cheek and down toward her ear. "Good to know."

She shivered and shifted against the mattress, brushing the tips of her breasts against his chest.

Like the spark it throws off when a match is struck against glass powder, that bit of friction set her nerves on fire.

He lifted off and rubbed his other cheek along the other side of her face and reached her ear, brushing a kiss against the sensitive skin of her earlobe.

"How about you, Misty? Would you feel at home here?"

It took every bit of energy she had to just breathe. Having his heat pressing down against her, his deep, deep voice growling in her, she was barely able to focus her thoughts.

"It's.. it's not the house," she told him and she set her hands on his sides, dragging in a breath when his ribs expanded with his own breath, "it's you, Gabe. I feel at home with you."

Suddenly, his face was just over hers, his eyes burning with heat, and with a single breath, they were both on fire.

His hands stripped most of her clothes from her body with her help. Shirt, gone. Jeans and panties, gone too. She clung to his arms and neck and back as he pulled her shirt over her head and then her jeans from her legs. Their lips found each other's over and over again, sometimes laughing between and sometimes panting and hands sliding over each other.

It wasn't until she felt his hands roaming across her back that she broke away to speak an intelligible sentence. "Front," she swallowed and felt her nipples pebbling against the cotton cups of her bra, "the clasp is in front."

"Thanks," he met her lips again with a head-tilting kiss and his hands moved around to the front, where his fingers popped open the clasp.

Then the confining cups were gone and his hands were there.

She wasn't sure what to do or say at that moment. All she could do was feel.

And given the moan crawling out of his throat, he felt the same way.

"Fuck, baby." He was struggling to caress both of her breasts at the same time. On top of her, he couldn't seem to get the right leverage to stay where he was. "So damn beautiful, but I-

That's when he must have figured it out, because she was suddenly staring up at his ceiling while Gabriel's hand cupped one breast and his mouth closed over the other.

"Oh, wow."

She blinked at the ceiling, stunned for a moment. His hand and his mouth delivered the most amazing sensations that she'd ever felt. Every inch of her skin was alive. No, she felt like a live wire, sparking and sizzling as he touched her, tasted her, made her vision sparkle at the edges.

Misty wrapped her legs around him, trying to hold him close, but she groaned when she felt the denim of his jeans against her thighs.

"Gabe... Gabriel..."

He lifted his head and she gasped at the sudden loss of his heat. The cool air against the wet skin where his mouth had been.

She wanted to grab a hold of his head and push him back down against her breast, but she had to prioritize.

And her priority?

"Jeans," she groaned, "take off your jeans."

He pulled himself away, out of the welcoming circle of her legs, and reached for his belt.

Shaking his head, he groaned as he forced the zipper down past his erection. "It would have been easier taking this off before..."

She shook her head at him. "Come back. Please."

He pushed his jeans and boxer briefs down over his thighs.

Misty couldn't see beyond that.

She could barely see the top of his head as he bent over, but when he stood back up, she was treated to a view that had her heart pounding against her breastbone.

Blinking a few times, she swallowed at the lump she felt in her throat.

Just looking at his cock. Well, it was enough to steal her breath.

And when he wrapped his hand around it, sliding his hand down to the root, she heard her pulse pounding in her ears.



"I thought," she swallowed again and ran her tongue over her lips, "I thought you were coming back here."

Her word choice left something to be desired and only stoked the flames burning inside of her.

Before she realized what she was up to, her hand slipped between her legs and slid under the hood of her sex and, "Ah!"

Oh shit, that felt so good.

Closing her eyes, she wiggled her fingers again and felt liquid heat bathe her fingers.

"Here," Gabriel's voice was almost a whisper, "let me see."

Her eyes opened as his hands spread her thighs apart and zeroed in on her sex.

"Gabriel, I-"

*One second*, she mused. It only took one second of his mouth on her to go from hesitant to hungry.

And then she didn't have words for what he was doing to her.

Well, she had words, but they wouldn't string together in any discernable sentence.

The things that Gabriel could and did do to her body were beyond all imagining.

"How," she managed to force the question out of her throat. "Where did you... Oh, god. Oh!"

He stopped the tender assault and looked into her eyes over her quivering belly.

"That's a lot of questions you want answered while I'm down here."

She tipped her head back and sagged against the sheets. "Forget the questions," she groaned, "I don't even know what I was going to ask."

"All right."

She heard the agreement in his tone, but she also heard the hint of humor in it as well.

He was going to do her in with that humor. The few times she'd had sex before, everything was rushed, overrated, and sometimes painful.

How she could find humor and passion in the same act was confusing enough. The fact that she welcomed it with Gabriel was a true wonder.

"Open up, baby. Let me in."

Opening her legs, dropping her knees to the side, she relaxed, hoping that even more would be different with Gabriel than she'd experienced before.

Oh. Goodness.

Misty felt her sex stretch and open.

And as she drew in a deep breath, she felt Gabriel's mouth close over her clit.

Arching her back from the bed, she felt his lips close tighter around her and his fingers slid in deeper.

Sparks shimmered at the edges of her vision, and her breath caught in her lungs as his fingers plunged into her.

Misty turned her head to one side and then the other, her hands grasping the sheets on either side of her, and only reaching his head when his tongue lashed over and over at her clit.

She was near mindless at his touch, but she managed to grasp his hair, fisting in the thick strands as he brought her closer to the edge.

This, she decided, was what all the fuss was about.

This man and his most talented hands and mouth were finally helping her understand what she'd been missing.

"I'm... Oh god... Gabe..." She didn't know what to say or ask for except. "More. Whatever you're doing," she shook her head, "I need more."

He pulled his mouth away for a moment, and before she could complain about the lack of his touch, he added another finger stretching her wider.

"Look at me, baby." His voice was warm with a hint of pride. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. Her eyes traveled from his face, down his chest and from his muscled arm to his hand, seeing where his fingers disappeared inside of her.

"You're everything I've ever dreamed of."

It took her a moment to realize that he'd said the words. Her head was spinning with sensations and desire.

She wanted to close her eyes and ride the wave, but Gabriel was insistent.

"Look at me, Misty. I want to see you when you come."

Oh. She hadn't expected him to say anything like that.

She didn't know what to do in response.

But what she did know was how determined Gabriel was to making it happen.

He bit into her bottom lip and thrust his fingers into her again. It was only a matter of moments before she felt something tense and shake inside of her.

Then it was done. She went flying over the edge, her hands reaching out

for something solid to hold on to, but the only solid thing she felt was Gabriel's fingers inside of her and her body latched on to him as she tumbled into the most amazing orgasm that she'd ever had.

And that's when she realized how in over her head she was.

One of the best struggles to have.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It wasn't easy to put up with the constant check-ins by Gabriel, Joshua, or Brody. Gary had decided to make a joke of it because she refused to tell him that Simon and Gabriel were worried for her.

Fallport was the kind of town where people noticed outsiders.

She was still getting curious and cautious looks from townsfolk when they saw her in the park at the center of town or at the Post Office.

She'd introduce herself and told them she'd been in town for a little while and they'd give her a slow nod and go on about their business.

But for the last week, the added presence of law enforcement and other first responders was enough for people to start talking.

What added to it was the fact that the local Search and Rescue team had quietly been recruited to take their turns in the rotation.

It had unsettled the trio that hung out in front of the Post Office to the point where they were coming in to check on her themselves.

"Good Morning, Misty."

Blinking at Otis, she leaned forward on the counter. "Good Morning to you, Otis."

He reached into his pocket and set a stack of coins on the counter. "I'd like a stamp, please."

"A stamp? Sure. What kind?"

He rocked back on his heels and shrugged. "Whatever you have available."

Misty opened the drawer under the counter. "Well," she took out a stack of stamp sheets and started to page through them, "we have National Park Stamps."

He shook his head. "Don't like parks much."

"Okay." She grinned and set another stamp sheet on the counter. "What about Frank Lloyd Wright stamps?"

His lips pursed together and his eyes looked off to the side before he shook his head again. "Don't like buildings."

"Umm... I've got flowers."

"Nope."

"Cats?"

"Nuh-uh."

"What about Disney?"

"Why would I want those?"

"What about flags?"

Otis opened his mouth to say something she suspected was a no, but then he changed his mind. "You talking about American flags?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

Nodding, he made his decision. "Okay."

Chuckling softly, Misty cut a stamp from the sheet and set it down on the counter before she started counting out the coins. "Is there anything else I can help you with, Otis?"

He shook his head and picked the stamp up from the counter before he tucked it into his shirt pocket. "Just wanted to let you know that we're keepin' an eye out for strangers, too."

His admission shocked her.

"How did you... I mean-"

The front door opened and Raiden walked in with his search dog, Duke at his side.

Misty didn't want to draw anyone else into the situation.

"Good Morning, Raiden. Duke."

Before she finished saying the dog's name, Roya was up from her bed, her nails clattering on the hard floor as she slid around the corner to the waiting area of the Post Office.

"Roya. Calm!"

Roya, true to her training, came to a skidding halt before Duke. She dropped a biscuit on the floor and with her nose, booped it in Duke's direction. When the biscuit came to a stop, it was a few inches from the Search and Rescue dog. Roya gave a soft WUFF.

Duke looked up at Raiden, waiting.

Misty didn't know how to react. She winced and looked at Raiden. "Sorry. I didn't know she was planning that."

The extremely tall man across the counter gave her a strange almost-smile. "Hmm. She didn't mention it? Strange." He turned his head to look at Duke and, with a single dip of his chin, gave the bloodhound a nod.

Misty smiled. "I guess Roya's getting tired of it just being me and her."

Otis chuckled. "You mean you, Roya, and Gabriel."

Her cheeks flared with heat.

Word did travel incredibly fast through a town as small as Fallport. "Yes, but Gabriel isn't a dog. There are a few dogs that we see at the park and on our runs, but that's about it. Roya doesn't have what I would call 'friends of her own kind.'"

Raiden nodded, and Misty found herself marveling at his red hair that caught the vestiges of sunlight that made it that far into the Post Office. Pretty much every one she knew were dark haired or blond.

"I should probably let you know that the team is keeping an eye out for you around town."

Otis smiled and gave her a wink as he turned and walked out of the Post Office with a little lift in his steps.

Raiden, turned to her, having seen the little interaction. "I see that we're not the only ones."

She shook her head. "I feel like everyone is blowing this out of proportion. There's no real evidence that anyone's coming after me."

Raiden raised a red brow over an incredulous stare. "What about the poisoning?"

She leaned forward on the counter and lowered her voice to a whisper. "You heard about that?"

His shoulders raised almost imperceptibly. "We hear a lot. I think we've grown on the Chief of Police. He just asked us to keep an eye out for strangers in town."

Misty pressed the heel of her hand to her chest, feeling a strange ache there.

Raiden didn't miss the gesture. "Are you okay?"

She started to nod her head and changed it to a shake. "I'm sorry. I don't want to impose."

"Impose?" Raiden's tone was reassuring. "A threat to anyone in town is a threat to our team and our family. If there's a danger in town, we want to

know about it and help."

She nodded, feeling better, but not completely comfortable with the situation.

"I know it's not easy to accept help sometimes, but you're part of our community in more than one way. We're happy to help."

Misty blew out a breath. "I just don't like the idea that if there is trouble that I'm the one bringing it to Fallport."

Raiden shook his head. "You're not bringing anyone anywhere. If someone decides to cause trouble, they're doing it, not you."

She moved back from the counter and took a deep breath. "I think I know that, but," she pressed her closed hand over her breastbone, "I don't feel like it's the truth."

Raiden reached into his pocket and took out a card and held it out to her. "All of our contact information is on this card. Put your phone near it and it'll download the information."

She reached for her phone where she left it under the counter during her work hours. When he brought it within inches of the card, she saw a little pop up window on the screen of her phone. With a little tap on the accept button, her phone downloaded all the information. "Thanks. I hope I don't end up needing this."

He nodded and put the card back into his pocket. "It'll be good to have it. And maybe when this is settled and over with, we can get the dogs together at the park."

As if she understood, Roya lifted her face and panted, her tongue hanging out in a silly grin.

Misty nodded. "Looks like Roya agrees."

Raiden looked down at Duke, whose hound-dog expression didn't seem to change. "Duke's not arguing."

Misty laughed and when the bell over the door chimed, letting them know that another customer was coming in she straightened up and readied herself to help. "Thanks."

He turned and let the older woman pass by. With a nod, he was gone.

WHEN SHE FINISHED work that afternoon, Gabriel pulled up front in his truck. She climbed in with Roya[?] before he could get down to open the door for her. She leaned across the seat to get a kiss before she settled in and grabbed

for the seatbelt.

"Well, hello to you too."

She smiled at him. "The kiss was too much?"

The look in his eyes said that was far from the case. "I could think of a few more things that we could do."

"Adding to the kiss?" She smiled and sat back in her seat. "Sounds great to me."

"But before all of that," he explained, "dinner."

She drew in a breath before she knew she was going to do it.

She hoped that Gabriel wouldn't notice, but he did.

Of course he did.

As they drove along, he gave her a quick look that she saw out of the corner of her eye.

"You don't want to go to dinner?"

"I can eat," she explained. "Sure. Dinner is great."

Gabriel's chuckle filled the cab of his truck. "No. It's not. I can hear that tone of voice."

Before she could find the words, Gabriel did.

"No, we're not having dinner with the family. We do have times when we eat on our own."

"No. No, of course you do. I wasn't trying to say that I didn't want to-"

"You wouldn't," he assured her, "but I know that spending all that time with the family is too much. No, tonight it's just you and me as long as you don't mind putting up with my cooking."

Her heart swelled in her chest and she reached out a hand and put it on his knee. "I'd love to have you cook for me."

He smiled as he drove, looking a little pleased with himself.

She gave his thigh a little squeeze. "Are you wearing an apron?"

His laughter lifted her spirits. "If you want, I can call my mom and ask her if I can borrow one."

She laughed and Roya wuffed from the back seat, not wanting to be left out. "No, that's okay. I might be satisfied if you cook shirtless. The view might be a good distraction."

"Distraction?" Gabriel's expression changed and she wanted to take the words back. "Did something happen at work?"

"No. Not in the way you're talking about. I just had no idea how many people were in the loop on what you and Chief Hill think is going on. Otis



and Raiden-

"From the Search and Rescue team?"

She nodded. "You ask like you don't know, but I'm pretty sure that you do."

Gabriel winced a little. "I'd be lying if I said that I didn't. It just wasn't my idea. Still, I'm glad the guys are looking out for you, too."

"It was nice that it was Raiden who came into the Post Office. I think Roya might have a crush on Duke."

"Roya and Duke, hmm?" He gave her a smile when he turned his head to look at the cross street. "Does that mean that I should have a talk with the young man?"

Now it was Misty's turn to grin. "I think his 'dad' has that in hand."

Gabriel sighed, sounding disappointed. "I don't know. I think if we schedule a play date for the two lovebirds... I mean love dogs? Well, I'll just have to bring my guns and clean them."

Misty laughed. "I heard that the Search team is all former military. I bet Raiden has his share of guns to clean."

"It's gonna be tough being a dad in this town if I have to compete with the Search and Rescue guys."

Dad?

She smiled and gave his knee a pat. "No competition as far as I'm concerned."

Gabriel's smile broadened as he drove. "Nice to know."

Misty rolled her eyes and sighed. "Men."

\* \* \*

IT WASN'T until dinner was done and they were sitting in front of his dark television that he decided to broach another subject with her.

Roya was laid out on the carpet snoozing with a snore every few minutes or so and he couldn't help but admire how great of a team the two were. It reminded him of what he'd wanted to do when he joined the police department.

"Have you ever trained other dogs besides Roya?"

She snuggled into his side. "A bunch. But it wasn't from the beginning of their training, even with Roya." Misty put her hand on his thigh and he

instinctively flexed his leg. "I was working with another trainer at a service dog facility and he was starting to branch out into other training. He found out that I had a knack with search dogs."

Her shoulders shook with a silent laugh.

"What?"

"Let's not tell that to Raiden, I don't have nearly his skill, but if things had turned out different."

Gabriel lifted his hand and brushed her hair back behind her ear. "Let's keep that between us."

"And I was getting really good at training cadaver dogs when I met Roya." She drew in a deep breath and let out a sigh. "She was super smart. A service dog center in Newport News thought that she'd be something special and they were right. She was an exceptional pup for this kind of work.

"Tireless and dedicated. She was the Energizer Bunny of cadaver dogs. Sometimes," Misty shook her head, "I had to order her to rest."

Gabriel leaned his cheek against the top of her head, breathing in her light airy scent. "Do you still have to do that?"

She shook her head a little. "Nope. We've both mellowed over the last couple of years together."

He shifted on the couch so he could hold her closer. "How many years have you been together?"

"Hmm... almost three?" Her shrug almost tickled against his side. "She wasn't meant for me though."

"What?" Gabriel had to work to understand her words.

"Like I said, I was training dogs. I wasn't the one out in the field with them on assignments. I was more of the teacher, not the operator." She sighed.

"Until Roya."

"Until Roya." She tucked herself closer against his side. "Roya's training was being paid for by a non-profit. They'd had more than fifty people apply to work with her and they'd whittled down the applicants to two.

"They were set to bring the two down to the training center, but one of the applicants broke her leg and they were down to the one." Misty shook her head. "We introduced Roya to the last applicant and things seemed great."

Gabriel read... or listened between her words.

"We started the two of them working together and Roya was a rockstar, but her handler was having trouble. The commands are simple enough. The

dog does most of the work. You just have to be there as a support. The handler wanted to lead Roya. There was a point when I thought the handler was ready to get down on his hands and knees and do the search himself."

He could hear the frustration in her voice and he could feel it in her body tucked against his. "You keep saying 'handler' instead of using a name."

"Honestly, I think I wanted to forget his name. I know I couldn't describe him to you if my life depended on it. It wasn't just that he was anxious for Roya to work well. His frustration level ramped up too quickly. There was a moment when Roya was picking up on his emotions and that made it harder for her to do her work. She was almost walking in circles around an area that she'd gone over a couple of times before and instead of taking her to the side and giving her time to focus, he grabbed her collar and yanked her back."

He felt Misty's distress and when she pressed the heel of her hand against her chest, he reached over to cover her hand. Threading their fingers together, Gabriel deliberately drew in a deep, full breath and then let it out again.

He did the same deep breath a few more times until he felt her heart rate go down.

"I rushed over to them and pried his hand off of her collar. That," she whispered into the quiet of the room around them, "was the last time that he worked with Roya. I couldn't allow her to work with someone who would hurt her. And my trainer, Anthony, decided a few days later that I had to work with Roya. Roya stuck to me like glue after that problem with.. that guy. She trusted me and wouldn't leave my side for days.

"It was a little bit of a struggle to work things out with the non-profit. Some of the board members thought that I was trying to shoehorn myself into the situation, but Anthony told them that he had video of their choice manhandling Roya during training. They would have lost face if they kept Roya from working with a handler who was concerned with her well-being.

"At the end of the day, Anthony reminded them that they were paying to train a cadaver search dog. And they had exactly what they paid for."

Gabriel rubbed his hand lightly up and down her arm from her shoulder to her elbow. "I can't see the two of you working with anyone else."

"Thanks."

He could hear her smiling even though he couldn't see her. "You two really are a great team."

Misty turned slightly and wiggled a bit so she could look up at him. "Earlier, you told me you wanted to be a K-9 officer, right?"

He shrugged, trying to downplay his feelings.

Misty didn't let him get away with it.

"If you want to, I know a few people and I'm not shy about calling them."

He had to fight down the rise of excitement in his chest. "We don't really have a need for a K-9 in a town as small as Fallport."

"Hey," she turned her head and pressed a kiss against his chest, "let me call a few people before you decide that it's not going to happen, okay?"

He couldn't ignore the determination in her voice or her positive outlook.

"You're like a bulldog."

She raised a brow at him. "Excuse me?"

"Determined, you know?"

When she didn't say anything or relax her expression, he had to think again.

"A cute bulldog."

Her brow arched even higher.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry."

They laughed quietly together before Gabriel started to sit up. As he held her carefully against him, he leaned in for a quick peck of a kiss. "Why don't you come upstairs with me and I'll beg for your forgiveness."

She shook her head. "You don't need to beg."

He shrugged and got them both up on their feet. That's when he leaned in and whispered into her ear. "How about I just get down on my knees. Would that make a difference?"

Misty didn't answer in words.

She grasped his hand and led him upstairs into the bedroom.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gabriel reached out and opened his phone, swiping his finger over the alarm function and turning it off.

He was wide awake, so he didn't need it to go off.

He settled back against his pillow and kept his gaze on the bathroom door.

Just a few minutes before, Misty slid out of bed to head into the bathroom. He missed her heat beside him and had to pull up his blanket to keep the heat in, but he'd also enjoyed watching her pick up his t-shirt from the floor and pull it on over her naked body.

He wouldn't have minded if she went to the bathroom bare all over, but he loved watching the hem of his t-shirt skirt over her backside and swish around the tops of her thighs.

Fuck.

He was gone when it came to Misty.

He'd been inside her. His fingers. His tongue. And his fucking dick.

He smiled at the memories that they'd created on his bed and while he laid there, waiting for Misty to come back and join him on the bed, he found himself hard again.

The bathroom door opened and his eyes fixed on her, backlit in the doorway.

"You," she hesitated, "didn't have to wait for me."

"Wait for you?" He grinned and she rolled her eyes. "I wasn't planning on doing anything without you." Gabriel grasped the edge of the blanket and pulled it off him. "I like how warm you are against me."

Misty took a few steps forward, her hands grasping the bottom hem of his

t-shirt.

"You look like there's plenty of blood flowing down there."

She was standing at the foot of the bed, her eyes fixed on his cock.

Gabriel grinned at how her eyes widened as his dick twitched under her open perusal. "I guess there's a lot of blood pumping through me, but can you blame me when you're standing there, wearing my shirt?"

The smile that touched her lips wasn't full of confidence, but it seemed full of wonder.

That did wonders for his ego, but what was even better was the way she climbed up onto the bed. She kept coming, hands and knees across the sheets until she tapped his foot. "Open."

"Pushy." He lifted an eyebrow at her, but did as she demanded. Leaving the blanket off to the side, he put enough space between his legs for her to fit. Well almost.

She came closer, still on her hands and knees, almost giving him a view of her breasts down the neck of his shirt, but not quite.

He wanted to pull that thing off of her or rip it down the front, but he stayed where he was, wanting to see what she would do.

Gabriel didn't have to wait long.

She got between his knees and shook her head. "Wider."

With a grin, he shook his head. "Show me."

If she balked at the idea, he wouldn't press it, but he'd seen some fire from her before. When they were stupidly arguing with each other, he'd seen it. And then some.

Her hesitation was worrying him.

Then she leaned forward, placing her hands on his thighs just above his knees and pushed them open.

When her gaze lifted to his face, he saw, amazingly enough, a self-assured grin.

"You're going to just let me manhandle you?"

"Why not?" He shrugged and lifted his arms, folding his hands beneath this head so he could watch. "If it hurts, I'll let you know."

She sat back on her heels, her gaze moving steadily over his naked body.

And yes, his dick liked it just as much as he did, twitching and bobbing under her unwavering perusal.

Misty opened her mouth and he wondered what she would say.

Would she give him a taste of her cutting humor that he found himself

missing? Or would she-

"Fuck."

Her tongue. The texture of it on the smooth tip of his dick almost had him blowing right then and there.

He tried to excuse it because it had been unexpected, but when she leaned over again and swept her tongue around the tip of his dick, he had to hiss out a breath and clench his butt to hold it back.

And then she pulled back, her hand wrapping around the base of his cock to hold it steady, a shimmering thread connecting the tip of his dick to her lips.

"You're killing me, baby. Just killing me."

A spark of humor flared in her eyes. "I didn't think this was a crime."

"Well," he struggled to find the humor inside of himself, "I guess I could say- Fuuuck."

She had him in her mouth.

Gabriel was barely able to form a thought as her mouth moved over him.

Her hand pumped slowly at the base as she took him inside, almost to the back of her throat.

He tried to watch, but he was on the verge of losing his mind. When her tongue swept along his shaft and she grasped his thigh with her free hand, Gabriel's back bowed off of the bed and he felt her draw him deeper into her mouth.

"Misty, I-"

She didn't stop at his warning with words. She leaned further over him, her chin length curls falling forward over her face.

Hair that he had to grab a hold of. It felt like silk against his palm and her mouth like hot wet velvet.

Gabriel was about to lose control.

"Stop!"

Her head popped up, a stunned look in her eyes. "Did I... did I do it wrong?"

"No." He shook his head, his heart pounding like a hammer in his chest. "No... I almost- I didn't want to... not this way."

A soft smile touched her lips. "So how do you want to..."

Gabriel moved to the end of the bed and placed his feet on the floor. Grabbing a hold of her hips, he pulled her onto his lap.

She was on top of him, her knees on the outside of his hips, her slick heat

pressed down on his hard cock.

He was just seconds away from making a fool of himself.

Gabriel saw the way she was looking at him. A startling look of passion in her eyes and the shallow breaths coming from her lungs.

"Here," she groaned, pulling off his shirt.

Her bare breasts drew his attention for a moment before she found his lips in a kiss.

Her insistent kiss pushed his head back and he wrapped his arms around her body.

She mumbled something against his mouth, but he didn't have time to try and grasp her meaning before she grasped his dick.

A moment later, she slipped her tongue into his mouth as she sat down.

They both moaned as she stretched around him, swallowing him whole until the backs of her thighs met the tops of his.

An electric tingle sizzled up his spine as she rocked against him. If he'd thrust into her he would have been lost in a moment.

Having her rock against him made him feel like every inch of his body could feel the friction building between them, and it didn't take long for her to be dangerously close to her own orgasm.

He felt it.

He felt it like it was his own.

Maybe it was.

The two of them reaching for the same release, he just wanted them to find it together.

He moved his hands from her hips.

She already knew the rhythm they needed.

He moved his hands to the swell of her ass, his fingertips digging in, enjoying the swell that he enjoyed staring at whenever he had the chance.

Misty shifted again, changed the angle and the pressure she used.

The edges of his vision darkened and a breath caught in his lungs.

She broke their kiss but didn't stop moving against him.

Around him.

"Gabriel?"

He panted out breath after breath as her body moved him closer to the edge of reason.

"Gabe?"

He closed his eyes for a moment before he opened them again and looked



into her eyes.

"I love you."

"I love you."

He smiled at the shock in her expression. "I wasn't planning to say it, Misty."

She gripped his shoulders and arched against him. "I wasn't either... but I needed-"

"To say it? Me too, but I mean it, Misty. I mean it. I love you."

A gasp burst from her lips as her head tipped back.

Gabriel didn't pass up the opportunity to make her release even more intense.

He closed his mouth over the tip of her breast, his tongue sweeping over her nipple. Gabriel clasped his fingers over her other nipple and gave it a little twist and pull.

He had to catch a hold of her then as her orgasm washed over her. It was all he could do at the moment as the walls of her sex clamped down on him and he went off.

Lost his mind where he'd already lost his heart. Gabriel wrapped his arms around her and held tight as they rode out their orgasms together, his head pressed against her heart, listening to the beat of his future.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Being in love was crazy! Or rather, *she* felt crazy.

Everything felt new.

Exciting.

And sometimes it felt like she had a sign on her forehead.

TELL ME I LOOK DIFFERENT

People mentioned it on the regular. Even people who came into the Post Office who she barely knew would remark on how happy she looked.

Then ask her what was new in her life.

She was tempted to tell one of the more insistent questioners that, "Yes, I admit. I found Bigfoot! He's locked in my garage and plenty mad about it."

Smiling ear to ear, Misty continued to case the mail that was delivered from the regional sorting center. The music playing in the air gave the whole office a light-hearted mood.

From her dog bed against the wall, Roya swished her tail to the rhythm of the music. Not every beat, but always with the rhythm.

Gary popped in from the back door. "Hey. How are you doing?"

Misty gestured to the tray beside her. "Almost done. Maybe you'll finally let me tackle that storage room and straighten that out."

"Hold your horses! Leave something for the rest of us."

She shrugged. "I'm almost done and I like to keep busy."

Gary gave her a look that said he wasn't convinced. "Are you worried?"

She didn't want to annoy him by asking him what he was talking about.

"If you want to take off a few days, you can."

"Take off work? And put it all on your shoulders? No. Not happening."

She had to concentrate a little harder to case the mail, looking at the

address two or three times while Gary gave her a no-nonsense look.

Misty stopped and lowered the handful of letters. "If you're worried that I'm putting you in danger, I'll go."

He waved off her suggestion. "I'm happy to have you here. You and Roya keep the monotony from getting to me. And I'm not worried about anyone coming in here to try to hurt the two of you."

"Oh?" She grinned. "What's your secret?"

He jerked a thumb toward the front of the building. "Those three wiry watch dragons we have out front. If something were to go down here, they'd send up the alarm and have the townsfolk gathering with pitchforks and torches."

"Pitchforks?"

He nodded. "And torches. I've seen the old black and white movies. I can direct the action. I'm a big film noir fan, too." With a soft smile, he leaned in and half-whispered. "I'm writing a book in my spare time. Something like Mike Hammer, but with more action added in."

"That sounds like fun. I watched Perry Mason with my aunt. I'd love to read your book when you get a chance."

Gary hesitated and stepped back with a shake of his head. "I'm still working on it."

"No problem." She lifted up the packet of letters in her hand. "When you're ready, I'll be here to read it."

She didn't hear his footsteps across the floor.

After she cased the last few envelopes, she looked up and saw Gary watching her with a grin on his face.

"It's good to have you here in Fallport, Misty."

"It's good to be here, Gary."

He gave her an 'aww shucks' look and headed for the counter when the bell dinged at the front door.

She recognized the sweet voice of the woman at the counter.

Mrs. Mayberry had just become a great-grandmother for the first time and Misty could hear her breaking out her photo album to show Gary.

It really was a great town to belong to.

\* \* \*

SITTING in his rented car on the street, he was torn between staying there in the car and going inside the pool hall to use the bathroom.

Sitting for the first hour or so had been fine, but he wasn't used to sitting around for long periods of time.

At work, there was always another test to do. Another protocol to run.

Another mindless day at one counter or computer to another. It was the sad reality that the time they spent in the field was miniscule compared to the time in the lab.

And the lab was why he'd earned himself a few days of vacation.

Who would have anticipated that the evidence they'd sent off to the state run laboratory wouldn't have any discernable trace evidence to find.

He'd like to say that if they'd let him swab the stupid thing that he would have found something that would have provided something for the police to go on.

But that would mean that he would have left the evidence on the flower stems before turning it in.

It wasn't going to be that easy.

Hearing the soft tick tick of the almost ancient car clock, he felt a headache start just behind his eyes. To soothe himself, he reached over and picked up the first fuzzy toy his hand touched in the box.

He tilted his head to stretch out his neck in one direction and then the other, but even squeezing the toy in his hand, the ache in his head only grew.

"Why does it have to be so hot?"

He tugged at his shirt collar and leaned closer to the open driver's side window.

"This town is in the mountains. Why is it so hot?"

Someone softly rapped at the windshield, using their knuckles against the glass.

He looked up and stared at the man standing there. "What do you want?"

The older man gestured at him. "I was just wondering if you were okay? You've been sitting out here for a bit and I thought if you were waiting for someone, you could come inside and get cool."

He opened his mouth to shut the man down, but he did have to pee.

And stretch his legs.

"It's cool inside?"

The man nodded. "Got air conditioning and everything. You play pool?"

He had to pick his words carefully. He didn't want to get too distracted.

He needed to keep an eye out for-

"I'll spot you a game?"

He turned to look at the man again. "You any good?"

"I'm okay. I play for fun." The man's smile was telling. He thought he was good. Good enough that he was trying to draw him in.

Well, they'd just have to see.

A quick look at the dashboard clock said that he'd have time to play a few games of pool before Roya and that woman would leave the Post Office for the day.

He just happened to know that there was going to be a bit of a delay with their ride.

That would give him the time to see if he could make himself useful and give him a chance to get the two alone.

"Sure. I'll come in and play a few games."

"Great!" The other man clapped his hands together with a broad grin. "I've been looking for some new blood. Come on inside."

\* \* \*

GABRIEL LOOKED up from his reports when he heard the chief's voice.

"Armstrong!"

Patrick looked over at him with a pointed stare and whispered. "What did you do?"

Gabriel was already on his feet and pushing his chair back in. "Mind your own business." He walked through the squad room and stepped into the chief's office. "Chief."

Simon gestured at the chair on the other side of the desk from his own. "Have a seat."

Okay. Maybe, he reasoned, there might be something to Patrick's question.

Gabriel kept his posture straight, but he met Simon's eyes because he didn't have anything to hide or worry about.

He watched Simon close the door and cross back to his seat, but the chief didn't sit down. Instead, he reached for the folder on the top of his desk blotter and held it out to Gabriel. "Take a quick look."

Gabriel put a hand on the armrest of the chair and reached out. He took

the folder and sat back down. He opened it and read through the top page and half of the second before he looked up again. "No evidence on the flowers?"

Simon nodded, but the expression in his eyes was suspicious. "I don't see how that could be."

"There had to be some residue of something on the thorns. If there was enough to poison Misty and Roya, there had to be something on the flower stems. Or the ribbon that held it all together."

Gabriel flipped to the next page and read it through before he looked up at the chief. "Chain of custody was tight. It was just a few hands on this end. We made sure to keep it preserved. I don't see how anyone can blame it on us."

Chief Hill pointed at the papers in his hand. "Continue reading."

Gabriel flipped it to the next page and finished reading the report.

Every new sentence twisted him up inside, tighter and tighter. "Did you talk to the Chief Detective?"

Simon nodded. "We had a short conversation. He didn't say anything substantive. I had to read between the lines of what he did say. He doesn't believe that we damaged the evidence. He knows how you feel about her."

Gabriel sat forward on his chair. "How does he know that?"

Folding his arms across his chest, Simon gave him a look. "I didn't have to tell him. The man is smart, observant, and has a pair of eyes in his head."

Sitting back in his chair, Gabriel chuckled. "I don't exactly wear my heart on my sleeve."

"No," Simon agreed, "but you don't hide it either."

"No. I guess I don't." Gabriel grinned at his captain. "It's only going to get worse in the future, sir."

Simon's eyes widened for a moment, and then he sighed out loud. "Your bachelor days are numbered, hmm?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I can neither confirm or deny-"

"Bullshit, Armstrong. After this it's down to Brody. Should I start a pool on his chances of staying single?"

Gabriel shook his head. "Not unless you're going to bet on a quick turnaround. I think it's a matter of momentum and we're falling fast."

"Well, I'd like to say that I could let you go and see her right now, but I have to have you write up a report on the chain of custody on the flowers and any and all steps you took at the scene." Simon looked out of his office door and shook his head. "I'm going to get some coffee. I've got my own set of

reports to write."

He was gone a moment later.

Gabriel knew that the chief was right, it was just crap timing. He looked up at the clock and saw that it was nearing the end of his regular day. He'd have to call Misty and let her know that he'd be late.

Pulling out his phone, he did just that, and then he called Avalon to see if she could give Misty a ride home.

That's right. Home. He was going to ask Misty to move in. He was sure that it was just a formality. He had a feeling it wasn't going to be hard to convince her to move in.

Avalon was living in the same row of townhouses and he knew what kind of trouble the two of them could be. He'd probably have to kick himself for suggesting that they live so close to each other, but really, he'd enjoy it.

So would Avalon.

Joshua would just have to get over it.

Roya was already at home with the toys that he bought for her and the dog beds he'd set up on both floors of his townhouse.

Just the thought of it made him eager to get his write-ups done so he could leave.

Getting up from his chair, he left the chief's office and headed for his desk.

No sense in wasting time, not when he knew that Misty would be waiting for him later.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

As soon as Misty shrugged her backpack on, Avalon walked in through the back door of the Post Office. "Hey, Gary!"

Misty couldn't help the smile that touched her lips. "Hey, you! What's going on? I was about to head out."

Avalon shook her head and stepped closer for a big hug. "Actually, I'm here to get you before I pick up Joshua at the firehouse. Gabriel messaged Josh and told him that he has to stay and write up some reports so we get to bring you home. You get to hang with us until Gabriel comes home and then we'll have dinner together if you two are up for that?"

Narrowing her eyes at her best friend, Misty gave her a straight stare. "What's up?"

Avalon bit into her lip. "Can't I just want to have time with my friend?"

"Sure," Misty shrugged, "but there's something you're not telling me."

Avalon's eyes widened, and then her mouth twisted in a pout. "About what?"

Misty folded her arms over her chest and lifted an eyebrow over her stare. "Spill."

Huffing, Avalon shook her head. "It's nothing."

Roya wound her way around Avalon's legs and then came to a stop at Misty's side.

Misty reached her hand down and gave Roya a scratch between her lifted ears. When she looked back up she caught a shadow flitting through her expression. "What's going on?"

Avalon shook her head, her expression almost defeated. "We didn't want you to worry."



"Tell me." Misty could feel her blood pressure climbing. "What's going on?"

"Look, I had to drag this out of Joshua too. He didn't want me to worry."

"And he didn't want you to tell me." Misty dropped her chin down and concentrated on her breaths. "Tell me."

"Look, I don't understand everything that Joshua was talking about, but there was a problem with the evidence they sent to the lab after you and Roya were sick."

"A problem?"

"They didn't find any evidence on it. It seems like the Richmond PD are questioning how the evidence was handled here in Fallport."

"You mean they're questioning Gabriel's integrity?"

Avalon looked panicked. She reached out and gently touched Misty's shoulder with her hands. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay. We know that Gabriel wouldn't do anything to threaten the case. He's a good officer."

"He's a *great* officer." Misty added extra emphasis on the words. "He'll write his report and they'll see that he did what he was supposed to do. And they'll know that if there was a mistake, that it wasn't his."

Misty took in a few deep breaths, her heart wasn't letting up. It was pounding like a hailstorm, rattling her to the bone.

"Do we have to leave now for the fire station?"

Avalon looked relieved at her change in expression. "No. We have about an hour or two. Why?"

Misty knew that her hopeful smile had lifted the dour look on her face, and her smile brightened even more. "Are you up for a run?"

"Run?" Avalon clapped her hands together. "Always!"

Misty slid her backpack off and started to unzip the front pocket.

"Wait."

Misty looked up at Avalon. "What?"

Avalon's eyes narrowed at her. "You hate running."

"I don't *hate* running," she argued. "I *extremely detest* running, but I think I need to go and run a few miles to clear my head. Unless you don't want to."

"Bite your tongue!" Avalon wagged a finger at her. "I'm going to go out and get a change of clothes from the car."

Misty watched her friend almost skip out of the building. "Gary, can we use the bathroom to change clothes?"

He swept a hand toward the bathroom door. "Go for it. I think a run will

do the both of you some good. And Roya looks like she's about to faint from happiness."

Misty looked down at Roya and had to agree.

Her amazing pupper was on her back wiggling like a giddy snake on the hard, smooth surface. "Silly girl."

Roya stopped wiggling and gave a happy WUFF.

\* \* \*

BRODY HEARD the familiar footsteps of his cousin coming up behind him and continued to restock the back of the small ambulance that made its home at the Fallport Fire Station.

Joshua came to a stop a few feet behind him, waiting.

What for?

Brody didn't know.

He was glad for the most part because he liked to count through the supplies as he went. It was his primary responsibility to keep the ambulance stocked with the supplies they needed. The man who'd had that responsibility before him liked to shove handfuls of supplies in the bins and while it meant they had adequate amounts of things, finding them was another thing entirely.

When he finished stocking the hermetically sealed bandages, he shook his head. "Are you going to stand there all day, Joshua?"

Brody stumbled forward but caught himself before he fell. Turning around, he gave his cousin a narrow-eyed stare. "Seriously? Are we back in elementary school? You shove me from behind?"

Joshua shook his head. "If we're in elementary school, then it's you who's doing the shoving. I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention."

"Attention? Sure." Brody grinned at his cousin. "I'm the one you trust to keep this baby oiled, gassed up, and stocked up with all the supplies."

Joshua sighed. "You make it sound like it's a real chore."

"It is," Brody shot back. "It's not what I would want to do on a date or something, but because it's for work and people's lives depend on having a well-stocked bus, I give it my all. What's up? I thought you would have left to go home to Avalon?"

The smile on Joshua's face was telling. His cousin was more than smitten with his childhood sweetheart. They were wildly in love, and Brody was

thrilled for his cousin.

And Gabriel too.

It was obvious to anyone with eyes that Gabriel and Misty were headed into the same blissful relationship that Joshua and Avalon had.

Good for them both.

"Gabriel's got some reports to write up. He didn't give me more information than that, but Avalon offered to pick up Misty and take her to the house so we can have her with us, but then they decided to go running."

"Running?" Brody winced at the idea. "Not my favorite thing."

Joshua shook his head. "You beat the school record twice in the mile run."

"Yeah. Just because I was fast doesn't mean I enjoyed it. If I have to do it for conditioning, then fine. But for fun? Nope."

"Well, I doubt either of them is doing it for fun. They both needed to run and work out some stuff."

"Work... What do you mean, they both do? Is everything okay with you and Avalon?"

"More than good." Joshua's smile said there was something he was keeping to himself.

"Okay," Brody thought about it for a moment and then let it go. "So you're standing behind me like a creeper in a slasher film? That's mentally stable."

"You're one to talk, cousin. Seriously though," Joshua gave him an easy smile, "I wanted to let you know that we're expecting our new EMT today."

"New?"

Joshua nodded. "We've had that opening for a while now, but no one to fill it, but I heard from the town council that someone finally accepted the position. They weren't supposed to be available to start for another few weeks, but things worked out and they're on their way here."

"Last I heard, they should arrive late today or early tomorrow. So don't be too shocked when you have to share the rig in the next few shifts."

"Okay then. Sounds good to me."

Inside his head, he was groaning. *Another adjustment to make. Great.*

"So when you're done in the next hour or so, you should go into the office and clock out. After that, come by my place tonight for dinner."

Brody hissed out a sigh. "I dunno. That's a long way to go for dinner."

Joshua gave him a shove to the shoulder. "It's right next door, jackass."

Brody looked around the room, playing at being shocked. "Such language."

Pointing a finger at Brody, Joshua gave him a long-suffering look. "Sometimes working with family is a pain in the ass."

Brody's shoulders shook with laughter. "I've got news for you, cousin. Every day working with family is a pain in the ass, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

\* \* \*

HE'D LOST one game to the man who had invited him inside. He was watching the window to the street too closely and he'd had his mind tied up in his plans. That changed in the second game. The second, he'd won by a hair. Then, the money was even.

That changed in the third game.

Buoyed by the rush of adrenaline and anticipation flowing through him, he easily won the third.

Now they were in the fourth and he was pulling his punches because he didn't want to anger the man. If there was one thing he could definitely say, he was a crack pool player, even if he wasn't the best evidence tech.

That thought brought up an image in his head of Misty Bridges, that bitch.

Shaking himself free of that thought, he heard the men near the window talking.

"That's Avalon and... what's her name?"

"Who? You said Avalon. You remember her. She grew up here."

"No, the other one, idiot. I know Avalon. The other one looks familiar though."

"I think that's the woman from the Post Office. She's new."

"New? She's been here for a bit. She's the one with that dog."

He made the shot at the pool table and missed. Norman, the man he was playing against, punched his fist into the air.

"My turn!"

Moving toward the window, he tried to school his features into a look of vague curiosity. Luckily the other men were focused on the view outside the window.

"Did you see that newspaper story about her?"

Anger flared in his belly. The damn newspapers!

"I didn't, but with Otis and the others showing the paper to anyone passing the Post Office, I'm one of the few who've avoided the gory details."

"There aren't any gory details in the paper."

He was looking over at the Post Office, but he didn't see Misty.

It wasn't like he could ask the man. That would draw attention.

The kind of attention he couldn't afford.

"There! See? Behind the gazebo thing."

"It's a gazebo. Not a gazebo thing."

"I'll call it what I want, idiot. Now, there. You see them?"

He didn't know about the idiot near the window, but he could see her.

Dressed for a workout with another woman, a blonde by the looks of her.

They were stretching.

He drew in a breath when Roya bounced into view.

The two women laughed and took turns petting the dog.

"That's not exactly training, is it?"

One of the men turned to look at him. "You say something, mister?"

It sounded like he'd heard the tone of his words, but not the words themselves. Those weren't fit for anyone's ears.

When the women bent over to stretch, one of the men cleared his throat and turned away.

They were probably going to run around the town square, or whatever it was. He heard a huff of disappointment from the table and turned, ready to finish the game off quickly.

Then he could grab a seat at a table near the window to observe her for a while. He didn't have much time to grab her. If the scuttlebutt in the department was anywhere near the truth, he was on borrowed time.

He might not get a chance to have Roya for himself, but he could definitely make sure that Misty couldn't either.

That, he decided was fair even if life wasn't.

"Look at them go!" The bartender laughed and headed into the back. "Crazy women."

The man at the door set his beer down heavily on the table. "You won't catch me running unless I'm being chased."

"Like anyone would chase you, Jim."

Turning back from the table, he looked out the window and saw that the

green grass was empty in the center of town. "Where did they go?"

The man who'd glared at him before turned to look at him again. "They ran down toward the diner. What do you care?"

Yeah, he wasn't going to tell the man anything.

"Just curious. Y'all keep talking about them like they're newsworthy."

"Well, they're... at least Avalon was born and raised here. We care about our people."

Nodding, he turned on his heel and marched back to the table to drop his cue stick down on the felted surface. Then he was headed for the door.

He didn't get far when the man he was playing against was blocking the way. "You can't run out now. You've got to give me time to win back my money."

"Later. Okay? I'll come back later, but I've got to run. I mean, I've got to go."

"Why now? Looks like you could win this one, too."

He heard the hopeful tone in the man's voice, like he may still harbor a hope of winning that game himself.

"Here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the cash he had in it and tossed it toward the man. The bills lifted and then fluttered to the ground. "Take the money."

And then he was gone.

\* \* \*

"HEY." Norman turned his head to look at Whip Johansen, the owner of the pool hall. "How do you know that guy?"

Shrugging, Norman gave him a quick explanation. "I saw him sitting outside in his car. He wasn't doing anything but baking in the sun and he looked like a man who knew how to play."

Jim Cross lit a cigarette and huffed out loud. "You mean he looked like a man you thought you could sucker out of some money?"

"Well, that's not gonna happen now that he left." He made a dismissive wave toward the front door. "Just my luck." He turned back to look at Whip again. "Why were you asking about him?"

Whip grabbed something up from the corkboard by the register. "The police came around with this flier. They wanted folks to keep an eye out for

strangers who were hanging around."

"Strangers who..." Jim took a long drag on his cigarette. "They mean tourists. And here I thought we were supposed to welcome idiots like that and sell them stuff about the Big Foot." He almost snorted a laugh.

"Unless you want to take that out back, put it out, Jim." Whip leveled a dark look at the man. "I think that most folks, even you, Jim, can tell when someone's a tourist and someone looks to be causing trouble in Fallport."

Jim paused as he snuffed out his cigarette. "No need to sound cross, Whip. I didn't hear about this thing from the police."

He held out his hand, but Whip put it in Norman's hand.

Norman scanned the information. It was barely a couple of sentences long. "Can I use your phone, Whip?"

The older man nodded and lifted the partition in the bar so that Norman could step in beside him.

The call connected almost immediately.

"Fallport Police Station."

"Hey. I think I saw someone you guys should look into."

\* \* \*

SIMON LEANED FORWARD and picked up the phone as soon as he heard the ring. "Fallport PD. This is-"

"Sorry to cut to the chase, Simon."

"Not a problem." What little he knew of the chief detective said that he wasn't calling to shoot the breeze.

"We have some news and it's not good."

Simon could hear the distinct sound of wind flying by the window of a car and another sound much more man made. "You're on your way here. Lights and sirens. What happened?"

"Well, that problem we had with the evidence? It's not a problem anymore. At least not one for your department. There was evidence left on the sample and it was one of our people."

"Your evidence tech?"

"Mmmhmm. He's a biological relative of the killer."

Simon shook his head, thinking he needed to clear his mind and his ears to understand what he was hearing.

"You have an evidence tech that's related to the killer?"

"A son, if the DNA is right." The dark chuckle that came through the line was harsh and dry. "And the DNA is always right."

Simon had to let that sink in. The more it did, the angrier he became. Gabriel hadn't done a thing wrong and the man that had filed a complaint on his officer was the one who'd poisoned Misty and Roya.

"There's more, but what you need to know right now is that the tech, Tim Gault is missing. We can't locate him at his home. We're looking for him, but I'm afraid he's not here in town."

"You think he's here."

"Or headed there. We're going to continue searching here, but I've asked for the State Police to look for his car on the roads. I'm sending you a text file with all of his information. His driver's license. License plate. Everything we have."

His cell phone dinged and a notification popped up that he'd received a file.

"I'll get the word out here and we'll get Misty and put her somewhere we can protect her, just in case."

Simon heard a soft exhale through the phone line. "When this is over, we're going to have a big, fat pile of shit to dig through and figure out how the hell this happened."

"Yes." Simon agreed and stood up. "Yes, we will. I need to tell Gabriel."

"I owe him an apology." The Chief Detective grumbled under his voice. "We'll get this man. Right, Chief?"

"We will. Thanks for the heads up."

SIMON MOVED to the door of his office, grabbing his jacket off of the rack at his side. "Armstrong?"

Gabriel was up from his chair in a second. "Sir?"

"Stop writing that damn report, it wasn't you after all."

"Sir?"

Lifting his cell phone, Simon forwarded the file to all of his officers.

Gabriel looked down at his desk as the message came through. He picked up the phone and looked at the screen. "What's this?"

"That's the man who's after Misty and Roya."

"The one who poisoned them?"



"Yes." Simon nodded, hating to be the bearer of bad news. "He's gone missing in Richmond and the Chief Detective thinks that he's headed here."

Simon saw it the moment that realization hit Gabriel.

"You should go to the Post Office and pick Misty up. You can bring her back here if you like. We can protect her in lock-up until we find this man."

He could see Gabriel balk at the idea of putting Misty in a cell.

"I'll get her and bring her here and we can discuss what to do after that."

"Get-" Simon stopped when Gabriel rushed out of the room with a determined look on his face.

"Lord help us all."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"This isn't half bad." Misty felt the burn in her thighs and her butt but she just kept going. Feeling the air brush past her as they ran was surprisingly... fun.

"See? I told you? I think it's the air here. When I was in New York, I tried to run and I didn't know what it was about running in the city, but I didn't like it.

"I tried to run in Central Park, but even that made me feel like I was.. hemmed in somehow. When I came back here, it was so different. I could lift up my chin and take in a deep, lung-filling breath and keep running."

Misty turned her head to look at Avalon.

While Misty felt like she was dripping with sweat, Avalon looked fresh as a daisy. And she told her so.

"Why do you look like you're an advertisement for healthy living and I probably look like I should go home and flop down on the bed?"

"Flop on the bed, hmm?" Avalon shook her head and her braided ponytail swished back and forth. "I'm sure you could get Gabriel to join you."

Misty looked up and away then. "Why did you have to bring that up?"

"Uhh... I seem to remember all of the jokes you told me when Joshua and I reconnected."

Holding back a laugh, Misty felt her stride lengthening, so it was easier to keep up with her friend. "Yes, but-"

"No butts." Avalon intoned and then giggled. "Although our butts look fabulous!"

Misty gasped in mock outrage and shock. "Have you been staring at my butt?"

Misty knew that she shouldn't have said it, but they usually joked about

these things when the guys weren't around. Girl talk, you know?

Still, it made them both laugh when she'd said it to lighten the mood.

It worked.

"Not as much as Gabriel has been. Even Brody noticed how tied up you two are in each other."

"Brody?" Misty had intended to say something else to keep things rolling, but hearing that comment made her thoughts stumble over each other.

"Hey. We're coming to a crossroads here." Avalon lifted her chin toward the intersection up ahead. "Do you want to keep going or turn back toward town?"

Misty slowed for a few steps, hesitating. "I don't..."

Avalon waved her hand. "I'm going to ask the decision making half of your pair." She slowed to a stop and bent over to talk to Roya. "Okay, girl. Wha-"

She had to stop for a moment because Roya bathed her cheek and the side of her nose with a sloppy greeting.

"Yes, yes, I love you too, girl." Avalon gently held Roya's head a few inches out of tongue-range as she asked her question. "Continue between the trees or-"

"WUFF!"

Avalon stood back up and gave Misty a wink. "You heard it. Our darling girl said trees. We'll run to the road that leads out to the highway and turn back then."

Misty wasn't quite so sure that what she was hearing was a good idea. "All the way out there? Good air is one thing, but I'm really going to hurt when we get back."

"Then I'm sure Gabriel will help work out the pain with his hands... and other means necessary."

"You're crazy, but I love you, Avalon."

"Same! Now let's run."

\* \* \*

SIMON HAD SEEN Patrick on the phone as he walked out to the parking lot. He could tell his officer was taking an incident call. No matter what was happening in Fallport, someone had to answer the phones and take care of

business.

As the Chief, his parking space was the closest to the door after the handicapped spots, so it didn't take more than a few seconds to get there.

"Chief! Chief!"

Simon turned to look at Patrick standing in the doorway. "Yes?"

He held a paper up and shook it. "I just got a call from the guys at the pool hall."

"The Cellar? What's it about? Can it wait?" Simon felt his blood pressure spiking at the delay as he watched Gabriel's cruiser disappear from view. "Well?"

Inwardly, Simon winced at the tone he'd taken with Patrick.

He could see the man pull himself up by his bootstraps and do his job. "They said they had a stranger in the pool hall. Norman challenged him to a game, but when Avalon and her friend Misty ran down the road, he jumped in his car and-"

"Fuck!" Simon shook himself. "Whatever information you have, get on the radio and give everyone the details."

"You think it's that person who-"

"Put the information out over the radio!"

Simon slid into his cruiser and slammed the door, cranking the key in the ignition like his life depended on it.

Someone's life did.

\* \* \*

BAD TIMING.

That's exactly what had caused this.

He was tired and needed to get out of the car.

He needed to stretch.

Then he wanted to do something fun.

Take the edge off.

So he'd gone into the pool hall.

Where there were windows.

Lots of windows.

He could see her when she came out of the Post Office.

And then she'd come out and he'd almost missed it.

He thought he was going to watch them on the green grass and finish up his game.

He'd get to see Roya.

His dog.

**His** dog.

Then they'd started running.

Running down the street.

And his plan to earn a bit of cash?

Well, fuck that.

Fuck her too, while he was at it.

By the time he'd gotten to his rented car, they were out of sight.

There were only so many roads in Fallport.

That was going to help him quite a bit.

Or so he thought.

After going back and forth from the main streets to the residential area, he was heading further and further out of town. Heading for the road back to Richmond.

That's when he saw her.

Or rather, saw them.

Two women running down a road, small enough that it made it seem like they were a figment of his imagination.

Then he saw a flick of movement near their knees.

The swish of a tail.

The lift of pointed ears.

Roya.

His foot lifted from the gas as he shifted into reverse.

Roya was his dog.

**His** dog.

It didn't matter that he'd been paid back for the costs that he'd incurred. It mattered that the vindictive bitch had kept his dog.

It mattered that her report meant that other trainers wouldn't even talk to him.

That was her fault.

And it was her problem.

Smiling, he put the car into gear and stepped on the gas. It was really going to be her problem.

And his solution.

\* \* \*

THE RADIO MESSAGE from Patrick had his heart pounding in his chest. A stranger taking off after Misty and Avalon?

That only spelled trouble.

Coming within moments of his wheels hitting the road, was perfect time.

To add to it, he was so damn grateful that he'd added Misty to his FindFamily App. A quick swipe to the right app and he had her in his sights.

He radioed the other cars and let them know what was going on.

Simon had them head for the location.

Things were moving quickly and that gave his spirits a lift. The quicker they moved, the better it was for him.

He'd have Misty safely in his custody until they found this... stranger. Make sure he wasn't the evidence tech from Richmond.

Gabriel was closest by a stroke of luck and when he pushed his gas pedal down, he had one mission and he was grateful for the back-up.

He didn't believe in coincidence.

He didn't believe in crazy random happenstances.

He believed that things happened like dominoes falling into each other. It was probably the reason that Rube Goldberg machines had fascinated him as a child.

Something he was going to share with his own children, but first, he needed to get Misty to safety.

\* \* \*

WHEN THEY WERE HALFWAY to the main road, Misty looked over at Avalon. "Promise me that we're turning around and heading back in."

Avalon gave her a long suffering sigh. "Fiiiiine!"

Misty rolled her eyes. "You know, I could just stop right here and call Gabriel to come and get us. He should be done with his reports by now."

She slowed and reached into the pocket on her leggings. Pulling it out, she saw that a little icon on her screen had a little green light at the top. "Hey, looks like Gabriel had the same idea."

Avalon stopped beside her and looked at the screen to her phone. Smiling from ear to ear, she chuckled a little. "Awww... He misses you." Bumping

her shoulder against Misty's, Avalon leaned her head on Misty's shoulder.  
"Gabriel and Misty, sitting in a tree..."

Misty shrugged her off. "Eww... we're both sweaty. Gross."

Avalon wagged a finger at her. "I can't wait until you and my big brother start popping out the babies. You know sweat's involved in that, right?"

"Big Brother Gabriel?" She grinned as they both fell silent.

That's when she heard it.

Avalon heard it too.

The distinctive sound of a car engine revving.

Building up speed.

Misty turned at nearly the same time Avalon did.

"Oh god."

Misty tensed as her mind finally managed to understand just how close it was.

They had seconds, or maybe less than that.

She turned to look at Avalon hoping to move her out of the way, but her friend was faster than she was.

Misty stumbled back and felt the car hit her shin, lifting her up and throwing her onto the asphalt of the road, landing on her back, bouncing her head against the hard surface. The sky above her was blue, amazingly so. And at the edges of her vision were the tall trees that she loved so much.

She was stunned.

And then she was scared.

The face that towered over her was one she hoped she'd never see again.

Misty blinked up at him and gasped out a word. "Why?"

His fist knocked her out cold.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Hey! Get your hands off of her!" Avalon was struggling to move. She felt like she'd been hit by a Mack truck, but she knew what had hit her.

It was still just a few feet away, but when she tried to sit up, the world swam around her.

She'd been hit and had no idea how bad it was.

Yet she knew how bad it was for Misty.

The man who'd driven the car had her up off the road and in his arms.

It was easy to see that her friend was out cold.

The man kept moving, using his body and the car to help him maneuver Misty into the passenger seat of his car.

"Hey, you!"

He was muttering under his breath.

"Hey, asshole!"

That got his attention.

He turned his head to look at her. Misty sprawled backwards against the seat unmoving. The look that he fixed on her face was terrifying.

He wasn't angry so much as he looked... disinterested.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to leave my friend alone and go away."

His lips curled up at the ends and that only served to make his expression almost psychotic. "Your friend stuck her nose in my life and fucked it up. Do you want to add yourself to the list?"

She shook her head. "Look, don't take her."

He lowered a hand from the car door and when he lifted it back up again he was holding a pistol.



"I'm going to do what I want. And what I want is a little payback for Miss Bridges. So you're going to stay here and bleed out while I have my fun."

Bleed out?

Avalon shook her head and reached for her own phone in a side pocket of her leggings.

"Go ahead and try your phone. I've got something in my car that will make that a little difficult. It'll work again when I'm on the open road." He shoved his pistol into his waistband, and Avalon hoped that he might shoot his dick off.

On second thought, she told herself, it might be too small of a target.

The moment of humor was followed by a cough and a dull ache in her leg.

Avalon dropped her focus to her legs and that's when his words became clear.

Bleed out.

She wasn't in any danger of that. She was bleeding from scrapes but that's when she saw what else was wrong.

Her leg. Her leg was broken.

For a moment she hoped that it was just a trick of the light but light didn't make a straight bone look like a Tetris piece.

The adrenaline that had been coursing through her veins was starting to falter. Tanked and dropped to nothing.

And she was nauseous.

Dizzy. Her vision darkening at the edges.

Even though she knew that she was losing her grip on consciousness, Avalon tried one more time to stop the man.

Leaning over onto her forearm, she tried to move her legs to the side. If she couldn't walk, then she'd crawl.

She wasn't going to just let this guy go without making every effort to stop him.

That's when she felt it.

The movement had jostled something in her, the throbbing pain in her lower leg was now pulsing with frustration.

She kept trying to move around, reaching for her friend.

The car spun its wheels, digging into the softer earth by the roads. Rocks, grass, and earth flew at her as the back wheels pelted her as the main wheels struggled.

And then the car was gone. Not just gone, but speeding away from her.

Avalon ground her back teeth for a moment, seething with anger.

A soft whimper drew Avalon's attention to the grass a few feet away.

Roya lay nearly still in the grass. Her multicolored coat was slick with blood.

Seeing the sun glint off of her cellphone screen, she snatched it up and looked at the coverage. It was low. Really low, but as soon as the car disappeared out of sight, the bars rose.

She shook her head, trying to clear and focus her thoughts.

Her vision blurred and her fingers started going numb.

No. She argued with her body as chills began to set in. No! No. No. Nooooo.

Avalon thought she heard the engine of a car coming in her direction and struggled to call out.

Help! Help!

Her screams were clear in her head, but she didn't think there were any sounds coming from her throat.

And then... it didn't matter anymore.

\* \* \*

RHEA RUSSELL WAS PRETTY sure that she was making good time to Fallport. After their last stop for the potty, snacks, and gas, (yes, in that order) they'd been on the road straight. Songs from children's shows and show tunes had been on shuffle, making their trip one of laughter and fun. A road devoid of traffic stretched out before them.

Rhea looked up into the secondary rear-view mirror that she trained on her son, grinning. "You doing okay back there, sweetie?"

"Ready to be home, mama!"

"Soon, Chipper. Soon."

Refocusing her gaze on the road before her, she realized that her life hadn't changed one bit. Good one moment and hell the next. She gripped the steering wheel and tried to think fast.

There was a car headed right for her!

For a moment she thought that she'd somehow turned down a one-way road, but before she could turn her head and look back to see if she'd missed a

sign, the car was on her. Rhea swerved to the side, her wheels slipped on gravel and grass and nearly sent her careening off the road, but she managed to steer the car back onto the grass.

"Mama?"

Rhea lifted her gaze to the rear-view mirror and forced what she hoped was a passable smile on her face. "Hey, Chip. It's okay. We're okay."

Smiling back at her, his grin just a little wobbly, Chip nodded. "We're okay."

"Good." Reaching out, she tapped the surface of her phone where it was cradled on her dash. "Call 911."

Moment's later, she heard the disappointing news.

"No Signal Available."

She grumbled to herself. She hadn't gotten a license plate number. By the time she realized it was headed straight for her, her brain was only focused on one thing, keeping control of her vehicle.

It was a boat of a car, a massive antique Monte Carlo, and drove like a cargo ship, making her keep a stranglehold on the steering wheel. She made the decision to head into town and wait until she got a signal.

She had no interest in driving after the car for any reason.

She was scared, not crazy.

A moment later, she wanted to reevaluate that idea. She turned onto the next road toward town and swore under her breath. A woman and a dog lay in the grass. Only the woman was moving.

Her first thought went straight to the car that had blazed past her. A hit and run was the obvious assumption, but that was neither here nor there.

She pulled the car off into the grass on her side of the road and threw it into park.

Rhea jumped out and pulled open the passenger door behind her. Chip looked at her, confused. "Are we there?"

"No, sweetie. Somebody's hurt on the other side of the road. I'm going to see if I can help. I need you to stay in the car, okay?"

Chip nodded. His eyes told her he understood the gravity of what she was saying. "Okay, mama."

Grabbing her kit from behind her seat, Rhea headed across the road.

\* \* \*

WHEN HER ICON disappeared from the map, Gabriel only drove faster.

He remembered where it had been and there were a number of reasons why she could have dropped off the app.

He just needed to get to her.

When he turned onto the road, his heart stopped for a split-second.

A car was stopped in the opposite direction and a woman was bend over a body laying in the grass.

He floored the gas and pulled over on the side.

Gabriel rushed over to the scene.

The woman leaning over the body had a medical kit out.

She turned to give him a quick, assessing look. "Fallport PD?"

"Yes."

"You know this woman?"

"Avalon." He breathed out her name and tried to look at her wounds as if he would a stranger. It was the only thing he could do to not come apart emotionally. "She's my sister-in-law. She was with Misty, my-"

"I'm Rhea Russell. New hire at Fallport FD. The car that hit them almost ran me off the road." She looked back over her shoulder. "He was going the wrong way back there. When I turned onto this road, I saw them laying in the grass."

He looked past her at the grass. "Roya... shit." He couldn't move. He just couldn't. If he touched Roya and she wasn't... No, he couldn't.

Rhea spoke again. "My cell phone didn't work when I got here. And then it caught a signal but nothing that will hold a call. I was beginning to think no one would come by?"

He was already calling on his radio. Even with the trees, they had a decent radio signal to the road. It was a must in a town like Fallport. The words came out of his mouth, detached from the rage inside of him.

Gabriel knew that his brother would hear the words. He knew the panic that he would feel. He knew that Brody would hear the words too. If he wasn't still in the ambo, he'd get to the station house and jump into the driver's seat.

A siren cut through the air and he knew that help was on the way.

He ended the radio communication with a simple statement. "I'm going after the suspect."

\* \* \*

WHEN MISTY REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, it surfaced while the man driving the car was staring ahead through the windshield.

She tried to keep silent, but when she moved something cut into her wrist and she turned her head just enough to see what it was. She was handcuffed to the handgrip on the door of the car.

She tried to keep still, but panic took hold and she tested the mettle of the cuffs. The metallic clink of the chain links was impossible to hide. There was no hiding that she was awake after that. Misty couldn't even lift a hand to cover her mouth. He turned to look at her with a smile of cold glee.

The back of her head ached, but it was nothing compared to the fear she felt when he turned to look at her.

"What," she swallowed, trying to ease the constriction in her throat, "what are you doing here? Doing... with me?"

"I wanted to see you again."

The way he said it made it sound like they were friends.

They weren't.

"I was the reason they called you to Richmond, you know." He grinned and turned back to look at the road.

She wanted to keep him talking so she could find out a way to stop the car. The further they went away from Fallport, the less of a chance she had to get away from him.

"You? Did you make the tip to the police?"

"Of course," he seemed almost happy. "Someone had to find the bodies."

"Why me?" She felt something twist inside of her when she said the words. Her head was swirling with pain and confusion.

"Why you? Because I wanted to see what it was like to be a hero."

Misty wanted to argue with him, but she'd learned a long time ago that giving someone that full of piss and vinegar and argument wasn't going to help him communicate.

They'd shout down the heavens if they thought someone was challenging their viewpoints.

"Thank you."

She shook her head and looked at him. "What?"

He grinned, that almost-plastic looking snarl of his lips. "You should tell me 'Thank You' for putting you back in the public eye. You saw the newspaper, right? Still, you don't live here and all people were talking about for days was... was my dog."

There was a moment then, an electrically charged moment when she knew that he'd somehow lost his hold on reality.

"I thought we explained it to you back then. There's a certain temperament-"

A shot rang out in the car, shattering the window to her right.

*Holy shit!*

He started to laugh, softly at first, then loud enough to make her wince. The pistol shot, followed by the deep belly laughter, was unnerving enough on its own.

"You said I was too abrupt. Too forceful. Well, you know what. You were exactly right."

Misty didn't know what to think at that moment.

He wasn't trying to hide who he was. And as much as she really wanted to tell him, 'I told you so,' she didn't think it was a good idea.

And not ever when it came to him.

He turned his head toward her again, wild eyed and seething.

"It's your fault you know. It's your fault! I was going to hit you." He nodded and looked up and out the windshield before he turned back to her. "I was going to hit you and not-"

"Oh my god!"

The realization hit her in the gut as he cracked her across the face.

"Roya! Avalon!"

She felt panic clawing at her. Cold, jagged fear clutching at her heart.

"I hit them because of you!"

Misty lurched up toward him, but she didn't make it far.

A sharp pain cut into her wrists and yanked her back.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw the handcuff that was holding her to the door.

"That's right, bitch." He sneered at her. "You're not going anywhere."

A few shallow pants of breath was all she could manage.

"If I can't have that dog, I'll just have to make you pay for it again!"

"It? It!" She shook her head. "You say you want Roya but you call her an it?"

"That's your problem, you know! You give things more importance that it should have. It's a dog! You're an obstacle! And my dad? Well, he was a total shit show!"

She didn't know why he'd gone there, but she didn't have to ask a question

or even wonder long.

He leaned over the steering wheel, pushing breaths through his clenched teeth. His eyes glaring at something through the glass.

No, she had a feeling what he was angry about something deep inside himself.

"For years... YEARS, I wanted a father. I wanted his name! I wanted kids to stop teasing me for not having a dad. That was the least he could do!

"But did he?"

He let that question hang in the air.

Panic built inside of her.

He wasn't sane.

He just wasn't.

"I was going to make a name for myself. Went through college. Got a degree in Forensic Science and Technology for all the damn good it did for me. My grades," it sounded like he was grinding his teeth together, "were barely high enough to get me a low level tech job. So I struggled. I put in all the extra hours trying to get ahead."

Misty sat quietly, trying not to draw any attention. She had a feeling that it was better to be quiet and let him talk.

"And what did those hours get me?"

She bit into her lip. She had no idea what to do.

"I said," he yelled and his fist slammed down on the steering wheel, making the horn flare to life, "what did those hours get me?"

*I don't know* wasn't the answer that he was looking for.

She had to think quickly. Figure something out.

Her mind grasped for a decent retort. "Nothing."

She flinched when he turned his head toward her, expecting something to happen.

But it didn't.

"You're right." His voice was softer than it had been seconds before. "Nothing. It got me fuck all. Because I wasn't special. I didn't stand out enough. Do you know what it's like to feel like that?"

She opened her mouth to agree.

"No, I bet you don't. *Hero.*"

Misty was beginning to understand where the animosity was from. Well, most of it.

"And then I jumped through hoops to get that position on the search dog

training. I spent real money for recommendations. I did everything I could to claw my way to the top. So after all of that shit, I get to the training and I have one question for you."

Misty was feeling a little lightheaded, but she was determined to hold herself together.

"What did you do?"

She wasn't ready for the question. She certainly didn't know how to answer. "I'm sorry, what?"

Pain exploded in her cheek and her temple. With her wrists handcuffed to the handle above the window, she didn't have anywhere to hide.

"Bitch!" He shook out his right hand, hissing in pain. "Answer the damn question."

"I don't-"

"Answer me!"

Misty shook her head, shaking in pain, anger, or fear. She didn't know. "What do you mean?"

The car swerved wildly as he glared at her. "What did you do to make that dog hate me?"

*That was the question? That was what he wanted to know?*

It was so damn easy to answer, but it might just be the straw that breaks him and then what would she do?

A moment of clarity hit her, and she realized that it probably didn't matter. He didn't want reality. He wanted a fantasy and she couldn't give him one.

His head swiveled toward her, and her stomach sank when she saw the look in his eyes. "The only question is, where do I take you? We need some time alone, together."

She closed her eyes when he raised his hand toward her.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Brody was following behind two marked squad cars and watched the first one turn onto the next road before he caught sight of the accident scene in the grass.

Pulling his ambulance over, he threw the gear into PARK before he leapt out of the cab. He circled around back to grab his case and sprinted over to the scene.

He knew the other EMT was there, but he didn't know that she was a woman.

"You must be Brody."

He shook his head, confused for a split second.

"Brody..."

Shit. Avalon. He moved to her side and lay his kit down in the grass. Avalon was conscious, reaching out to him.

He took her hand and gave her a determined smile. "Hey, Cuz."

The EMT looked up. "You two are related?"

He smiled and nodded. "She's marrying my cousin. And she's always been family."

"Brody," Avalon tugged on his hand.

"You need something?" He'd already assessed what the other EMT had done. He'd seen the bandages and other medical paraphernalia that she'd brought out of her kit and used. Her immediate medical needs were covered.

"Check on Roya."

"Roya?"

Avalon pulled his hand and pointed him in the direction of the dog.

The EMT looked up again. "All I could tell is that the dog is breathing. I

needed to keep my focus on Avalon."

He nodded. Drawing Avalon's hand closer, he placed a kiss on the back of her hand. "I'll check. You stay still."

She gave him a grateful smile as tears ran down her cheek toward her hair. "The man took Misty."

He nodded. "Gabriel's gone after her."

Avalon immediately relaxed. "Good." She sighed and he could see her relief. "He'll bring her home."

As he moved, he lifted his kit from the ground and crouched down beside the EMT. "Need help setting her leg?"

She looked up at him with relief shining in her eyes. "Yes. I didn't want to do it on my own at the side of the road unless I had to."

"Well, I'm here now. You're not alone."

There was something that changed in her expression, but he didn't understand what it was. He barely understood the full and heavy feeling he felt in his chest when he had to move away from her.

Brody put those feelings away in the back of his head as he moved to Roya's side.

The beautiful dog was limp in the grass. The only sign of life was the shuddering rise and fall of her ribs.

"What happened to you two?"

Pulling on his gloves, he reached out to examine the dog. It helped that he'd seen his father do the same for years. When he laid his hand on the side of Roya's face, the dog's eye opened slightly and he could see the glossy look in her eye.

She was suffering.

Badly.

How bad?

He didn't know animals that well.

But if she were a human, he'd be very concerned that she might not make it back into town. He hoped so, but he just didn't know.

"Hold on, girl. Hold on, okay? Someone's going to get my dad. He'll come and take a look at you. You'll be okay."

Roya closed her eye and her head seemed to sink into the grass under her head.

Brody swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. "Hold on."

Stripping off his gloves, he pulled out another set and pulled them on

over his hand.

Avalon saw him moving closer and winced.

"Hey there, I haven't even touched you yet." He tried to keep his tone upbeat, but he could tell that Avalon wasn't buying it.

She made a vague gesture down toward her leg and then clapped a hand over her eyes. "You're going to set my leg."

"Look at you, being so smart." He moved to a place where he could grab the opposite side of the break from the other EMT. Squatting down, he saw that she had a brace out and ready to fit around Avalon's leg. He nodded and met the EMT's dark eyes. He grinned when Avalon called out.

"Just do it already."

Chuckling, he grinned. "It's like you really are my relative."

Avalon groaned and he smiled. "I know you're rolling your eyes behind your hand."

She lifted it for a moment and glared at him. "How did you-"

With a nod from the other EMT, they gave both sides of her leg a good sharp tug.

Avalon cursed and then clapped her hand over her mouth again.

Brody could still hear her words even behind her palm.

"I don't like you anymore, Brody."

"Aww... I love you too."

"Mama?"

Brody turned his head and saw a small child on the other side of the road, standing beside the car.

"Hey, buddy."

The boy waved at him.

"Chipper!" The other EMT stood up and put her hands behind her back.

Brody could see the blood on her gloves from Avalon's scrapes. No doubt she wanted to shield her son from the nightmares he could have.

"Please, Chip. Get back in the car. I know it's taking a long time."

He shrugged. "I've got books." With another wave toward Brody, he climbed back into the car and tugged the door shut.

Yeah, there was more to this new EMT than met the eye, but he wasn't so upset at new blood coming into the station house.

When he turned back to look at Avalon, she was holding hands with the new hire, talking up a storm about her son.

\* \* \*

THE MAIN ROADS were blissfully empty.

Knowing where he'd come from and where he might be heading back to, he floored his gas pedal.

Misty's phone hadn't appeared again on the app, but at this point, he was going on instinct.

It felt like they'd all been blind to this man's plans.

How long had he been stewing?

How long had he been planning?

They probably wouldn't know until this was all over and he had Misty back.

Or they might never know.

Gabriel didn't know if it would matter to him as much, but he knew it would matter to Misty. And that mattered to him.

A quick look at the speedometer on the dash of his car and blew out a breath. He was nearing three digits and wondered how high he'd have to go.

When the road curved slightly to the right he felt his shoulders tense up. He could see the tail end of an old car. Some older Caddy or something like it. The car fit the visual description of the car that had taken off from town. It was older which made it easier to see and identify. It wasn't built for speed, but it was built like a tank.

Well that was just too bad.

It didn't matter if the man was driving a tank, Gabriel was going to stop it.

He wasn't going to let that car get away from him.

Not if Misty was in that car.

A quick look down at his phone told him that her phone hadn't popped up yet.

Okay.

That didn't mean that he had the wrong car.

He called on the radio to Patrick. "Did the guys at The Cellar get a license plate number?"

There was a moment of silence before he heard a response. "They said it was a Virginia plate. There was an X and an R and a 42 something at the end. That's all they could see as it drove away. Sorry, Gabriel."

"Don't be sorry," he leaned harder on the gas pedal as if it wasn't already moving at full speed, "that's enough."

And it was. The license plate of the car ahead of him had a 42 on it and the beginning was AXR.

Good.

Very good.

"I'm coming to get you, Misty. Just hold on."

\* \* \*

MISTY USED her tongue to test the cut on her bottom lip.

It hurt. A lot.

Bleeding too. She could taste it and she hated... hated the taste of blood. She'd read her share of vampire stories, but had never wanted to be one. With her luck, she'd gag and not look sexy enough.

Misty almost laughed but stopped herself knowing that it would get his attention and she'd had her share of his attention.

She was trying to find a way to sit up on the seat of the car, maybe even find some way to grab a hold of the seatbelt.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing." The word came out as a reflexive answer, leaving her feeling like a little child.

"Well, stop your 'nothing.' Your boyfriend's behind us."

"Gabriel?" She found a way to plant her feet on the floor of the car and push herself up higher on the door. She really wanted to see him. She almost made it, but having her wrists shackled to the door made it difficult.

And the fact that she'd been cuffed in while she was out cold meant that she was stuck where he'd put her and trying to push up high enough for her to see out of the back of the car was more than difficult, it was painful. She might end up tearing her arm out of its socket if she moved much more.

"Looks like we're not going to get a chance to have some fun together." His smile said otherwise. "Still, I'm going to get what I want."

She didn't want to ask.

She certainly didn't want the answer.

In the end she didn't have to do anything.

He just told her what he had in mind.

"I'm going to one up my deadbeat, psychopathic father."

Misty certainly didn't want to know, but morbid curiosity and his

narcissistic need to brag made her have to listen.

"I'm going to be fucking famous for doing this in the light. No hiding away from the world and burying bodies in the backyard. I'm going to take both of us out in a fucking fireball." He turned to look at her and grinned as if he'd just won a game. "You and me, Misty. Boom!"

"No!" Misty forgot about sitting up. She forgot about looking for Gabriel behind them. If she didn't stop him now, she'd never see Gabriel again. "No!"

Dropping her shoulder down onto the car seat, she got one leg up and off of the floor and kicked him in the thigh.

The car jerked and slowed.

"Stop it!"

"You, stop it!" She kicked again and nailed him in the hip, or the waist, she couldn't really see. "You're just lucky I'm wearing sneakers!"

"Stop it, bitch!" He pushed her back. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"I hate that word!" She kept kicking, even when he wrapped an arm around her leg and tried to hold it in place, she struggled, trying to get her bottom leg up from the floor and past the stick shift. "Just stop the car!"

"That's the last thing I'm doing."

He kept struggling with her and looking in the rear-view mirror with a hard set to his jaw.

"For once, just do what you're supposed to do." He tightened his arm around her leg and she felt like her muscles might tear loose if she didn't get him to let go.

She struggled and turned on her side, trying to get him to lose hold of her, but it didn't work.

She struggled and jerked, but it just felt like she was stuck in place.

She heard the siren then, drawing on the reassuring feeling that Gabriel was close by, she gave one last savage kick.

Her knee felt like it had shattered into pieces, but the pain and surprise of it disappeared when she felt the car start to tip, and dip, and fly.

"Oh my-"

Her voice was lost in the shattering of glass. The groan of metal folding.

And the sudden shift of direction.

They were rolling.

Oh god! They were rolling.

All Misty could do was close her eyes, curl up into a fetal position,

tucking her head down, and praying that she'd survive this.

\* \* \*

THE CALL WENT OUT for assistance. EMT and Fire units were dispatched.

All Gabriel could do was find a way into the crumpled mess. He went to the driver's side first.

He had to assess the threat before he saw to Misty. She mattered more, but he couldn't let him hurt her even more than he already had.

The man was slumped forward over the steering wheel. His jaw was broken and slack, his eyes unseeing.

Even though he didn't think it was necessary, he reached out and searched for the man's pulse in his neck.

Nothing.

Gabriel didn't feel sorry for the man one bit.

"Misty?"

"Ga... Gabe?"

"Shit." He saw her through the busted passenger side window. "Can you move?"

She groaned and he swore he'd never heard a more beautiful sound. "I don't want to move."

"That's fine." He got down on his knees and move closer to the wreck. "Just stay put."

"He... he handcuffed me to the ... to the thingy in here."

Gabriel managed a smile then. He leaned in reaching for his own handcuff key. He tried it in the lock and couldn't get it to turn. A look at the cuffs told him it was just a different kind. Something older. Almost a museum piece.

He reached out and touched her hand. "Stay here and I'll search him for keys.

As he moved away, he heard her call out to him. "Make it quick, Armstrong."

"Quick?" He answered back. "I'll do what I can."

As he reached in and picked through the man's pockets, he heard sirens coming in their direction. "EMT and Fire are coming, baby. If I can't get the cuffs off then fire has stuff that they can use to free you from the door."

"Well, when you put it that way," he heard her struggling to joke, "it takes all the fun out of it."

"Fun you can have when we get back home and I don't have to worry about a crazy guy trying to take you away."

"He's dead though... right?"

He heard her voice waver. "Yeah, he's gone."

"Good!" He heard her bravado, but her voice was rasping and her breaths were too quick. "How... how is... What happened to-"

He'd already gotten a heads up from Brody, who used the radio in the ambulance. "The new EMT showed up before Brody got there. They're transporting Avalon to have her leg put in a cast."

"Oh no..."

"She had other bumps and bruises, a few cuts. She'll be fine."

He finally grabbed the key out of the man's back pocket and moved back around to the passenger side.

Misty's eyes were tracking him as he moved. "And Roya?"

No matter how much he tried to school his features, she read into the look on his face.

"My uncle has her, baby. Brody helped. He was at his dad's side for years taking care of animals. And my uncle loves Roya just as much as any dog they've ever had. We'll get you to a hospital and-"

Misty turned her head away from him.

"Baby, we have to take you." He got back down on his hands and knees and removed the cuffs carefully, supporting her wrists as he unlocked each. She'd taken a tumble, several tumbles, and he was already cataloging the various and sundry ways that she might have been hurt in the crash.

He didn't want his mind to go there.

Even worse, he didn't want her to hurt, but it seemed like it had to happen.

"We'll call my uncle once we get you to the hospital and he'll keep us in the know."

She turned back to look at him, tears glittering in her eyes. "I just want her to be okay."

"That's what we all want, baby. All of us. My job right now is to make sure that you're going to be okay."

She reached out her hand to him and he took it. They held on tight until the fire department arrived and then he stayed as close as he could while



everyone else did their jobs.

## EPILOGUE

The next morning, when Gabriel returned to Misty's room from a quick run to the coffee shop at the corner, he found all of the available chairs occupied.

He went straight to her bedside and set his offerings on the rolling table. Earl Grey tea for her and a few scones. Coffee, hot and black, for him.

He gave the interlopers a baleful look. "Sorry, if I knew you were coming I would have brought coffee for all of us."

When he looked a second time for a spare chair to use, he heard the soft thump of Misty's hand against the bed. "Don't be grumpy," she told him, "sit down here."

He sat and ignored the smile that his chief tried to hide.

Gabriel carefully found a seat next to Misty and felt his heart swell when she leaned against his side.

Simon started first. "Chief Detective Sorvino thought we could meet here and get most of this out of the way."

Misty lifted her cup of tea to her nose and drew in a deep breath.

Gabriel tried to ignore the red, swollen skin where she'd been cuffed, but it was impossible.

"I have a report that sums things up, but I thought I'd go over the big points that we understand now. I'm sure more will come to light later."

Gabriel looked at the Chief Detective and nodded.

"It took a while for them to dig up the bodies that Roya found."

Gabriel wrapped an arm around her shoulders to give her support. Roya had to be transferred to an animal hospital where they could fix the problems that went beyond his uncle's care. He'd kept her alive and stabilized the search dog, but the car had done extensive damage that had to be taken care

of at another facility.

"It'll take even longer to identify some of them, but one came back quickly. The owner of the property."

"They think he was buried a couple of years ago." Simon added.

Misty lifted her face to look at him and he was just as surprised as she was.

"I think," she hesitated, "I'm pretty sure that Tim killed his dad."

Gabriel let out a breath. She'd come to in the middle of the night with the name Tim Gault on her lips. She'd remembered everything about how they met and Gabriel wasn't sure he was glad that it happened that way.

Sitting beside her, he listened as she filled them in on the things he'd said in the car, some of which the Chief Detective jotted down in a notebook. "He'd wanted to impress his dad and then when that didn't happen, he just wanted to be famous. He thought that I was."

The two chiefs looked at each other, but Simon spoke. "He had a whole wall about you and Roya. Newspaper articles and pictures. It must have taken him a long time to put all of that together."

"So this wasn't a mistake." Misty said the words, but no one thought she was asking a question, just coming to terms with it. "He wanted more in his life. He had no idea what it was like to be me. To work with Roya. He saw the articles, but he didn't see the hundreds and hundreds of hours we spent training."

"I remember him. At first I remembered his face, but it wasn't until I was chained up in that car with him that I remembered more. He'd been the final person in the search for Roya's handler. We worked the two of them together, but Roya wasn't taking to him. Not really."

Simon grumbled under his breath. "If a dog as sweet as Roya doesn't like you-"

"She knew what kind of man he was."

Misty nodded. "The non-profit gave him back the money he'd spent to fly out and train with her after I saw him nearly lose his temper with her. We don't allow our dogs to be abused."

"No one should." Chief Sorvino nodded. "The DA has his body on ice at the morgue. We'll be digging up evidence on him for a long time. We've gotten in several thousand files from across the country, missing person reports for us to cull through. I hope when this is all over, we help some of these families find their loved ones."

Simon nodded.

"Wait," Misty hesitated, looking between the two chiefs, "if the property owner was buried a few years ago, how does that explain the neighbors saying that they'd seen him walking around?"

Simon gestured to the chief detective.

"There were a few wigs, body pads, and old clothes in the basement room."

Gabriel shook his head. "He was impersonating his father?"

"A father who never gave him his name." Misty shook her head. "It's amazing what can happen when parents don't care about their kids."

She lifted her cup for another sip and then changed her mind, setting it down. She even moved the table away.

"I'm not hungry anymore."

Gabriel looked up at the other men and saw them packing up. He smiled, knowing that the two didn't want to overstay their welcome.

As soon as his chief closed the door behind him, Gabriel got up from the bed and turned so he could sit down facing her.

It took a moment or two for her to look up at him.

"What are you thinking about?"

She started to shake her head, but stopped. When she spoke to him, he heard the bravery in her words.

"My family wasn't a great one. It wasn't anything like your family. When I could get away, I did. I wanted to make my own life. I think, in that way, I'm kind of like Tim. We were both trying to put it behind us and-"

"No." He shook his head. "No, you're nothing like him."

She was going to argue. This beautiful woman was going to argue with him!

He couldn't let her do that.

"He did what he did to one up his dad. Did you train animals to do that?"

"No..."

"He wanted to hurt his father. He killed his father! Did you do that?"

She shook her head, incredulous. "No, of course not, but-"

"But what?"

\* \* \*

SHE WANTED to keep arguing with him.

She didn't want to let herself off of the hook.

Tim hadn't.

Tim blamed her for what she'd done.

But what *had* she done?

Misty thought about all the things she'd done since she'd struck out on her own in the world. She looked at her actions and her motivations from one direction and then the next.

And then she did it again.

She tried to find fault but didn't understand why.

No, she did.

When she was in that car, struggling with the bone numbing fear of death, she wanted to believe that what he'd done had been for a reason. She wanted it to make sense and it didn't.

She wanted her world to make sense and during so many times growing up, it hadn't.

Looking up at Gabriel's face.

His dark and haunting eyes. His strong features and the gentle way he held her when he thought she was hurting.

She looked at him and knew that this... this thing between them made sense.

This...

"I love you, grumpy man."

Gabriel seemed shocked by her words. Maybe not the words, but her timing.

Actually, Misty smiled at him, it didn't really matter why he was shocked, she just had to tell him her true feelings.

"I love you. And when I was in that car, I was struggling to hold onto hope, but then Tim said that my 'boyfriend' was coming up behind us and I knew that it would be okay. I held onto you, even when you weren't there, Gabriel."

"And I held onto the idea that you were just too stubborn to do anything but survive what he had in mind."

That made her smile. "Too stubborn?" Her mouth gaped open. "That doesn't sound so sweet."

He reached for his phone and opened up a browser.

"What are you doing?" She craned her neck, trying to see.

"I'm looking up thesaurus dot com. If stubborn doesn't work, I'll find

other words."

She took the phone from his hands and tossed it on the sheets. "Okay, I'll change it to silly instead of grumpy."

"Not dopey?"

She chuckled softly and held his hands. "No. You'll never be dopey."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "But I'm happy around you too, Misty. If I hadn't been so grumpy when we first met, maybe things-"

She touched her fingertip to his mouth. "No what ifs," she told him. "We're taking this moment and moving on. We're going to help take care of Avalon. We're going to take care of Roya when she gets out of the hospital. And we're going to move forward from this. Right?"

"Right." He smiled as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers in a deep, searching kiss. "We're going to move forward together because I love you, Misty. I love you like crazy."

She smiled and grabbed a hold of his shirt and pulled him closer. "Oh, crazy is another awesome word to describe you... or maybe me, since I love you like crazy too."

"Thank god."

Neither of them said a word for a while.

**The Armstrong Men**

*Falling for Joshua*

*Falling for Gabriel*

**San Antonio First Responders**

*Justice for Sloan*

*Justice for Miranda*

*Shelter for Viviana*

*Justice for Hildie*

*Justice for Blyss*

*Shelter for Aylin*

*Shelter for Kylie*

*Shelter for Thora*

**Delta Force Hawaii**

*Rescuing Hi`liani*

*A Hero For Ku'uipo*

*A Hero for Summer*

*A Hero for Olena*

*A Hero for Samira*

*A Hero for Lilinoe*

*A Hero for Tehani*

*A Hero for Mahina*

**Warriors Series**

*Ghillie*

*Surge*

*Slate*

**Sylvan City Alphas**

*The Tiger's Innocent Bride*

*Too Much to Bear*

*The Fighter*

*Bear His Mark*

**Sylvan City Shifters**  
*The Tiger's Innocent Bride*

**Center City First Responders**

*Wild Hearts*  
*Her Rock*  
*The Man For Her*  
*Silent Night*  
*Burn for Her*

**Mystic Mountain**

*Winter*  
*Xavier*  
*Locke*

**Three Rivers Express**

*Always, Ransom*  
*Always, Wyeth*  
*Always, Ellis*

**Orsino Security**

*Her Unbearable Protector*  
*His Unbearable Touch*  
*Their Unbearable Destiny*

**St. Raphael, CA**

*Finding Home*  
*Playing With Fire*  
*Healing Hearts*  
*Taking a Chance*

**Shapeshifters of Arcadia**

*Beneath the Surface*

**Ellingsford, Montana**

*Stay With Me*



Her Gentle Heart  
Hold Her Close

**Other**

Too Much Bear  
Home to Roost  
Loving Graystoke's Heir  
Jesse  
The Mechanic  
Gingerbear Christmas  
Fall in Love  
Sanguine Scent (Spellbound Sensuality Series)  
She's the Boss  
First Blush  
Bossed by the Dad Bod  
Ridley's Mystic Roots  
Defending Casey (Team Trojan)  
Cygnys Six (Athena Project)  
Claimed by the Dad Bod

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who would have thought that I'd start off as a painfully shy child writing stories and end up as a painfully shy adult writing books and publishing them for others to read? Crazy? That's me!!

When I was a little girl, I read every book I could get my hands on and if I didn't have one available to read, I'd get out my pencils and paper and write down stories and scenes. Waiting for my mom to finish working, I'd duck into the ladies' break room and use the typewriter. I'd feel like Jessica Fletcher, happily tap, tap, tapping away until I got to 'The End.' Couldn't quite get the flourish after that and end up tearing the paper, but it was cool and scary to sit down and read the book or give it to my friends to read.

Now my 'typewriter' doesn't clack the same way and the I don't even have paper to pull out of it with a nod of satisfaction, but I have the joy and excitement of sharing my characters and books with people all around the world!

I hope you'll enjoy reading my books, because I'm going to keep writing as long as the characters are feeling chatty!



*There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to [www.AcesPress.com](http://www.AcesPress.com)*

*You can also visit our Amazon page at:  
<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalpha>*

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Linzi Baxter: [Dangerous Rescue](#)

Misha Blake: [Flash](#)

Anna Blakely: [Rescuing Gracelynn](#)

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Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

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Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: [Protecting Honor](#)

Rayne Lewis: [Justice for Mary](#)

Ireland Lorelei: [The Detective](#)

Kristin Lynn: [Worth the Risk](#)

Callie Love & Ann Omasta: [Hawaii Hottie](#)

JM Madden: [Rescuing Olivia](#)  
A.M. Mahler: [Griffin](#)  
Ellie Masters: [Sybil's Protector](#)  
Trish McCallan: [Hero Under Fire](#)  
Naomi McKay: [Twist](#)  
Rachel McNeely: [The SEAL's Surprise Baby](#)  
KD Michaels: [Saving Laura](#)  
Olivia Michaels: [Protecting Harper](#)  
Annie Miller: [Securing Willow](#)  
MJ Nightingale: [Protecting Beauty](#)  
C.K. O'Connor: [Delaney's Bodyguard](#)  
Melinda Owens: [Betraying Katie](#)  
Victoria Paige: [Reclaiming Izabel](#)  
Danielle Pays: [Defending Sarina](#)  
Taryn Rivers: [Savage Cove](#)  
Lainey Reese: [Protecting New York](#)  
KeKe Renée: [Protecting Bria](#)  
Taryn Rivers: [Savage Cove](#)  
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: [Extracting Mateo](#)  
Ariana Rose: [Chasing Paige](#)  
Deanna L. Rowley: [Saving Veronica](#)  
Angela Rush: [Charlotte](#)  
Rose Smith: [Saving Satin](#)  
Tyler Anne Snell: [Cowboy Heat](#)  
Lynne St. James: [SEAL's Spitfire](#)  
E.M. Shue: [Discovering Tyler](#)  
Bella Stone: [Rexar](#)  
Jen Talty: [Burning Desire](#)  
Reina Torres, [Rescuing Hi'ilani](#)  
LJ Vickery: [Circus Comes to Town](#)  
R. C. Wynne: [Shadows Renewed](#)

**Delta Team Three Series**

Lori Ryan: [Nori's Delta](#)  
Becca Jameson: [Destiny's Delta](#)  
Lynne St James, [Gwen's Delta](#)  
Elle James: [Ivy's Delta](#)

Riley Edwards: [Hope's Delta](#)

***Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World***

Freya Barker: [Burning for Autumn](#)

B.P. Beth: [Scott](#)

Jane Blythe: [Salvaging Marigold](#)

Julia Bright, [Justice for Amber](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Hadley Finn: [Exton](#)

Emily Gray: [Shelter for Allegra](#)

Danielle M. Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Deandra Hall: [Shelter for Sharla](#)

Jenna Harte: [Dead But Not Forgotten](#)

Amber Kuhlman: [Protecting Paisley](#)

Reina Torres: [Justice for Sloane](#)

Aubree Valentine, [Justice for Danielle](#)

Maddie Wade: [Finding English](#)

***Tarpley VFD Series***

Silver James, [Fighting for Elena](#)

Deandra Hall, [Fighting for Carly](#)

Haven Rose, [Fighting for Calliope](#)

MJ Nightingale, [Fighting for Jemma](#)

TL Reeve, [Fighting for Brittney](#)

Nicole Flockton, [Fighting for Nadia](#)

***As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.***

**SEAL Team Hawaii Series**

*Finding Elodie*

*Finding Lexie*

*Finding Kenna*

*Finding Monica*

*Finding Carly*

*Finding Ashlyn*

*Finding Jodelle*

**Eagle Point Search & Rescue**

*Searching for Lilly*

*Searching for Elsie*

*Searching for Bristol*

*Searching for Caryn*

*Searching for Finley* (Oct 2023)

*Searching for Heather* (Jan 2024)

*Searching for Khloe* (May 2024)

**The Refuge Series**

*Deserving Alaska*

*Deserving Henley*

*Deserving Reese*

*Deserving Cora* (Nov 2023)

*Deserving Lara* (Feb 2024)

*Deserving Maisy* (TBA)

*Deserving Ryleigh* (TBA)

**Delta Team Two Series**

*Shielding Gillian*

*Shielding Kinley*

*Shielding Aspen*

*Shielding Jayme* (novella)

*Shielding Riley*  
*Shielding Devyn*  
*Shielding Ember*  
*Shielding Sierra*

**SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series**

*Securing Caite (FREE!)*  
*Securing Brenae (novella)*  
*Securing Sidney*  
*Securing Piper*  
*Securing Zoey*  
*Securing Avery*  
*Securing Kalee*  
*Securing Jane*

**Delta Force Heroes Series**

*Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)*  
*Rescuing Aimee (novella)*  
*Rescuing Emily*  
*Rescuing Harley*  
*Marrying Emily (novella)*  
*Rescuing Kassie*  
*Rescuing Bryn*  
*Rescuing Casey*  
*Rescuing Sadie (novella)*  
*Rescuing Wendy*  
*Rescuing Mary*  
*Rescuing Macie (novella)*  
*Rescuing Annie*

**Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series**

*Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)*  
*Justice for Mickie*  
*Justice for Corrie*  
*Justice for Laine (novella)*  
*Shelter for Elizabeth*

*Justice for Boone*  
*Shelter for Adeline*  
*Shelter for Sophie*  
*Justice for Erin*  
*Justice for Milena*  
*Shelter for Blythe*  
*Justice for Hope*  
*Shelter for Quinn*  
*Shelter for Koren*  
*Shelter for Penelope*

**SEAL of Protection Series**

*Protecting Caroline (FREE!)*  
*Protecting Alabama*  
*Protecting Fiona*  
*Marrying Caroline (novella)*  
*Protecting Summer*  
*Protecting Cheyenne*  
*Protecting Jessyka*  
*Protecting Julie (novella)*  
*Protecting Melody*  
*Protecting the Future*  
*Protecting Kiera (novella)*  
*Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)*  
*Protecting Dakota*

*New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal* Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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