

A three-tiered pink wedding cake with white frosting and red roses. On top of the top tier are a groom and a bride figurine. The background is a solid blue color.

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS,
SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE

HAPPY

(FAKE)

WIFE

HAPPY

(FAKE)

LIFE

DONNA SCHWARTZE

Author of TRUTH OR TEQUILA

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Happy Fake Wife, Happy Fake Life

HAPPY FAKE WIFE, HAPPY FAKE LIFE

DONNA SCHWARTZE

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Created with Vellum

HAPPY FAKE WIFE, HAPPY FAKE LIFE

DONNA SCHWARTZE

*For the strong ones, may we all find someone who creates a safe space for us
when we need to be weak.*

“Being vulnerable is the only way to allow your heart to feel true pleasure.”

— Bob Marley

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About the Author

NIX - Before

Five Years Ago

*Boston College
Boston, Massachusetts*

I hear them before I see them. Well, I hear him screaming—almost nonstop. Something about how it's not his fault. Every time the woman tries to talk, his voice gets louder and a little more unhinged.

As I turn the corner, I see them by the library stairs. His arms are flailing as he paces in circles. The woman's grabbing at his body, trying to get him to stand still.

My car's parked on the other side of the plaza. I scan the area for a way to get to it without having to pass anywhere near them. I've already had way too much drama tonight. I don't want to get involved in this, too.

I just played the last regular season hockey game of my college career—a loss in overtime. Only our third loss this year. I took the final attempt in the shootout. When the game's on the line, I never miss. Until tonight. My shot went wide left. It was the difference in the game. I'm pissed and hungry and fucking cold. The temperature has dropped at least ten degrees since I went into the arena.

The guy spins around to face the woman when she gets a firm grip on his arm. "I can't believe you're doing this to me."

"Doing this to *you*?" The woman releases his arm, then gives it a good whack. "Is that really what you want to say to me right now?"

Judging by the testiness in her voice, I'd say the only sane answer to that question is a resounding no.

"What else do you want me to say?" The guy paces again. "Just go to the clinic and take care of it."

Ah, fuck. Now I really don't want to be involved. She probably tested positive for something. I'm guessing chlamydia. Our coaches keep telling us to make sure we always use protection because, apparently, it's raging around campus.

"Go to the clinic and take care of it?" She's trying to get in front of him, but he keeps turning away from her. "Seriously?"

"This is not my fault," he says, pointing at her. "Payton told me you're cheating on me. Maybe it's his fault. Who else are you fucking, Emory?"

Damn, man. Lower your voice. You don't need to put her on blast like that.

"What are you talking about?" Emory leans over and rests her hands on her knees. Her shoulders heave. She looks like she's going to throw up or hyperventilate or maybe both. "You're the only person I'm sleeping with. You know that, Connor."

Whether or not that's true, I'm guessing this asshat gave her the STD. He looks like the kind of guy who would be raw dogging it all over campus.

"Do I? Do I *know* you haven't been with someone else?" Connor puffs out his almost microscopic chest as he scowls at her. "I constantly have to pull you away from other men. You flirt with every guy you see."

When she straightens up and takes a step back from him, I finally see her clearly. She's pretty. Very pretty. Way too pretty for this douche. He must have a lot of money or he's packing some serious equipment in his shorts.

"I don't flirt with other guys," she says, her voice dropping a few octaves into an impressively menacing snarl. "They flirt with me. Or more accurately, they talk to me. You're just overly suspicious and fucking immature."

That's more like it. Scorch him, honey. He's not even close to being worthy of you.

"Connor, are you ready yet?" A pack of guys is milling around on the other side of the plaza. "Seriously, man, this is supposed to be a guys' night."

"Yeah, come on, Emory," another guy yells. "Let us get to our bar crawl. Whatever fight you're in, I'm sure it's Connor's fault."

Connor glances over at his buddies, then back at Emory. "We're done talking about this."

“No we’re not. Do not walk away from me right now.” She grabs his arm again. “Connor, stop!”

He pushes her away so forcefully that she literally flies backward into a snow drift.

“What the fuck?” I yell as I charge over to them.

When I yank Connor back from her, I get a snowball right in my throat.

“Sorry!” Emory covers her eyes with her bright yellow mittens. “That was meant for him.”

I push Connor back another few steps, then crouch down beside her. “No worries. Are you hurt?”

She uncovers one eye. “I don’t think so. The snow broke my fall.”

“You fell pretty hard. Can you stand up?” She hesitates when I offer her my hand but finally takes it and lets me help her up. “Move around a little bit and make sure nothing’s broken. I can take you to the hospital if you need to go.”

“I’m good. Just a little wet,” she says as she brushes the snow off her jeans. When she gives me a glimmer of a smile, two perfectly matching dimples spring to her cheeks. “Sorry again about the snowball to your face.”

“To my throat,” I say, grabbing my neck. “You have a strong arm. I think you bruised my larynx. I won’t be able to talk for a week at least.”

“How about you stop talking right now?” Connor asks, weaving his way in between us and grabbing her arm.

I shove him back. “Don’t fucking touch her again. Do you understand me?”

“What?” He cocks his head and tries to pop out his tiny chest again. “This is none of your business, bruh.”

“This became my business when you hit her, *bruh*.”

I barely bump him with my chest, but somehow, he still manages to lose his footing and ends up on his knees.

Connor’s three friends charge over to us. They’re glaring at me—arms crossed over their chests.

“Oh my god,” one of the friends says, taking another step toward me. “You’re Nix Fuller.”

“Yeah, I know who I am,” I say, positioning myself in front of Emory. “Back the fuck off.”

The guy takes two exaggerated steps back. “Believe me, we’re not trying to start anything with you. We’re huge hockey fans. We were at your match

tonight. Tough loss, man.”

I ignore him and nod to Connor. “Do you want to apologize for knocking her to the ground?”

“It was an accident,” Connor says, his face flushing. “Seriously, man, she slipped. I was trying to keep her from falling.”

“That wasn’t an accident,” I say, closing the distance between us until I’m hulking over him. “Do you knock her around like that all the time?”

Connor looks up at me—his face somehow becoming an even deeper shade of red. “What? No. I don’t knock her around. I told you. It was an accident.”

“Why don’t I shove you like that?” I growl. “Then you can tell me if it feels like an accident.”

“Emory,” he says, his eye twitching, “tell him I don’t do stuff like that.”

“He doesn’t,” Emory says from behind me. “I mean, he hasn’t before.”

I try to soften my face when I turn back to her, but I’m getting angrier by the second. My little sister’s high school boyfriend backhanded her once. And I mean only once because when she told my brother and me, we almost wiped the guy off the face of the earth.

“Emory? Is that your name?” I ask, smiling down at her. “That wasn’t an accident. And even if he’s never done it before, that’s how it starts. And then he’ll do it again and again. Do you want me to call the cops?”

“What?” Connor squeaks. “Why would you call the cops? I didn’t do anything.”

Emory shakes her head. “Thank you, but I’m fine. I need to talk to Connor alone.”

“Not a chance,” I say, blocking her as she tries to walk around me. “You’re not leaving with him right now. He’s drunk and angry, and he assaulted you. It’s not happening.”

“This is ridiculous,” Connor says. “I’m not letting you ruin my night with this bullshit. Do what you want, Emory. Come on, guys. We’re out of here.”

I grab Emory’s shoulder when she tries to follow him. “Let him go. You can do whatever you want tomorrow, but you need some space from him right now.”

She watches Connor and his friends walk out of sight before she presses her hands to her eyes again. Then the waterworks start. I try to think of something to say, but my brain absolutely shuts down when women cry.

“It’s fine,” I say, patting her back awkwardly a few times. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!” She throws her hands down. “Nothing’s fine.”

“I mean,” I say, shifting my feet, “maybe not right at this second, but it will be. You’re better off without him. Believe me.”

“Leave me alone,” she says, her body shaking as the sobbing intensifies.

“Uh, are you cold?” I slip out of my coat and silently curse myself for only wearing a T-shirt underneath it. “Here, you can wear my coat over yours.”

When I throw the coat over her shoulders, it immediately slips off. She looks up when I reach down to try to zip it over her.

“What are you doing?” she demands, twisting away from me.

I throw up my hands. “I swear I’m not reaching for anything except my coat’s zipper. It’ll keep slipping off you if it’s not zipped.”

“I can do it myself,” she says as she tries to get ahold of the zipper with her mittened hands. “Why are you only wearing a T-shirt? It’s like fifteen degrees out here.”

“Actually, I was wearing a coat a few seconds ago,” I say, smiling as the zipper keeps slipping out of her hands.

“I didn’t ask you to give it to me. You can have it back.”

“Keep it,” I say, nudging her hands out of the way as I quickly zip the coat around her. “I don’t need it.”

“Why? Are you immune to the cold? Did you grow up in Antarctica or something?”

“I grew up in the desert in California. I hate the cold more than almost anything in the world. Can we please get out of it now?” I nod across the plaza. “My car’s over there. I can take you home.”

She looks up at me, her scowl deepening. “I’m not getting into a car with a stranger. I can walk. I don’t live very far from here.”

“Fine,” I say, motioning her ahead of me, “but I’m following you to make sure you get there safely.”

“How do I know you’re not the one I need to defend myself against?” She weaves her arms through my coat until her hands pop out of the sleeves. “Were you trying to immobilize my arms by wrapping this around me?”

“Yep. Looks like it didn’t work, though,” I say, pulling my arms under my T-shirt. “Here, I’ll immobilize my arms, so I can’t stop any additional snowball attacks you might launch against me.”

“Stop talking,” she says, marching away from me—my coat twisting back and forth on her little body. “You can follow me home to get your coat back,

but you're not coming inside. I don't need a shoulder to cry on, and I definitely don't need a rebound. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say, staying a few paces behind her. "No shoulder, no rebound. I'm protection detail only."

She makes it about a hundred yards before the sniffing starts. By the time we get to her apartment, she's full-on sobbing again.

"He's not worth all this," I say as she shimmies out of my coat and hands it to me. "Dump him. You'll be over him in a week. I promise."

She collapses down on her front steps, wraps herself into a little ball, and rocks back and forth. "It's way more complicated than that. You don't understand."

I take a deep breath and blow it out before I cover her with my coat again. It's pretty clear I'm not leaving any time soon.

"Well, make me understand," I say, sitting down next to her. "I don't have anywhere I need to be. We can talk all night."

Chapter One

EMORY

Current Day
Asheville, North Carolina

The cute little senior couple is whispering about me. And who can blame them? I've been pacing in front of their airport gate for the past ten minutes.

After my plane landed, I made it within a hundred feet of the security exit, but I can't seem to get any closer than that. I'm supposed to attend my friend's wedding this weekend. I don't want to go. I haven't wanted to go since I received the invitation.

I give the couple a quick wave. "Don't worry. I'm not a terrorist or anything. I'm just being indecisive."

The old man's eyes twinkle as a mischievous smile springs to his face. "I didn't peg you as a terrorist. I'm thinking you can't decide if you want to go back and get something you left on the plane."

The woman nudges his shoulder. "Frank, stop. This is none of our business."

Frank continues undeterred. "Janet thinks you're a mother who doesn't know if she's ready to go back to the family after a relaxing beach vacation with your lady friends."

"Frank! I did not say that. Tell her I didn't say that."

Frank blocks his mouth with his hand so Janet can't see it. *She said it*, he mouths to me as he motions his head toward her a few times.

"Honestly! I can't take you anywhere," Janet says, pulling his hand down before she looks back at me. "Please forgive us. We're not normally this

nosy.”

“She’s lying again,” Frank says, winking at me. “We’re always this nosy, but we usually don’t get caught.”

“Frank!”

“You’re good,” I say, holding up my hand to try to calm Janet. “I’d be talking about me, too. It’s neither of those things by the way. I can’t decide if I want to leave the terminal.”

“Do you have some kind of phobia?” the woman sitting next to them chimes in. Her T-shirt features a dancing avocado exclaiming, *I know guacamole is extra, but so am I*. “My cousin has, uh, it’s something like agoraphobia. Like she can’t go out in public places.”

“Agoraphobia,” Janet says, exchanging a knowing look with Guacamole Woman.

“No. I don’t think that’s it,” Frank says, flipping his cane back and forth between his hands. “I’ve changed my mind. I think there’s someone she doesn’t want to see on the other side of security.”

I touch my nose. “Ding, ding, ding.”

Frank thrusts his arms into the air, his cane in one hand. “Winner!”

Janet’s mouth drops open. “Frank! *Please* stop.”

“Who don’t you want to see on the other side? Ex-husband?” Guacamole Woman asks, patting the seat next to her. “I have one of those, too, and I’d be thrilled if I never had to see him again.”

I plop down on the seat next to her. “No, I’ve never been married. Just a bunch of people I went to college with who I haven’t talked to since I left five years ago.”

Guacamole Woman offers her Cinnabon box to me. It has one mini roll left in it. “Why do you have to see them?”

“Wedding,” I say, licking the icing off the roll before shoving the rest of it into my mouth.

“It’s always the weddings,” Guacamole Woman says. “I swear, sometimes they cause more stress for the guests than happiness for the couple getting married.”

“Right?” I take a big gulp from my water bottle to wash down the Cinnabon. “I don’t even know why the bride invited me. I haven’t talked to her or any of these people since I left college and then a wedding invitation appears out of nowhere.”

“She’s doing a deep dive to get more presents.” The redheaded woman

who has been eavesdropping on our conversation finally jumps in. “That always pisses me off. Like I haven’t seen or talked to you in years, and now I have to buy you a present whether or not I come to your stupid wedding.”

“I don’t think that’s always the case,” Janet says, her soothing voice somehow getting even more intoxicating. I swear I could curl up next to her and listen to her talk all day. “Maybe the bride misses you. Weddings can be perfect places to rekindle old friendships.”

“Or romances,” Frank says, his sweet old eyes sparkling again as he takes Janet’s hand. “Janet and I dated in high school, then didn’t see each other for almost fifteen years. We started dating again after reconnecting at a friend’s wedding, and now we’ve been married almost forty years. Maybe you’ll rekindle some flames with an ex-boyfriend.”

“No, thank you,” I say, shuddering. “My ex-boyfriend from college is a complete idiot. If he were invited, I wouldn’t get anywhere near this wedding. Honestly, I don’t want to go, even without him there.”

Guacamole Woman’s forehead crinkles up. “So why are you going?”

“My parents are making me. My dad literally pulled me out of his car at the Boston airport this morning and shoved me toward the terminal. They want me to get out of my comfort zone and try to have a fun weekend for once.”

“The nerve of them,” Frank says, throwing his hand over his chest. “They sound just awful.”

I smile as he gives me another wink. “No, they’re wonderful. And they’re probably right. I do need a break.”

My phone vibrates. A text from Mom. I swear she had some kind of listening device implanted in me as a baby. She always knows when I’m talking about her.

Have you landed? Text us. How was the flight? Drive carefully and have so much fun, Emmie. xoxo

“Where’s the wedding?” Janet asks.

“Uh,” I say, looking up the reservation on my phone, “The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa.”

“Oh!” Janet puts her hand over her mouth to try to cover her gasp. “I’m so jealous. I’ve wanted to stay there since it opened. We’ve only seen it from the outside. It sits right on a lake overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. It’s

absolutely stunning. You have to leave this terminal if only to stay there for a few nights.”

“She’s right,” the redhead says. “It’s the best resort in the area. Very richy rich. And if you’re not into the whole wealth thing, the resort’s a few minutes from a town called Champion Cove. It’s really laid back. There’s a cool bar right in the middle of town. I can’t remember the name of the place. It’s something about Ashes. A retired hockey player owns it. My husband’s a huge fan, so we have to go in there all the time. Maybe he’d quit taking me there if he knew what I’d like to do to the hockey player.” She lets out a long whistle. “I mean, this guy’s smoking hot.”

Janet looks over her shoulder as the gate agent makes a boarding announcement. “I’m afraid that’s us. I’m sorry we can’t stay and help you work this out, but it would be a shame if you didn’t get out and at least enjoy Asheville. It’s a charming city.”

Frank gives me a half salute as he pushes himself to a shaky standing position. “Janet’s right. Your parents are right. Go forth and conquer, soldier.”

“Thanks for the advice, Sergeant,” I say, saluting him back. “Have a safe trip.”

Frank links his arm with Janet’s as they shuffle toward the boarding gate. The way they’re leaning against each other makes it look like they’re almost connected—like their many years together have molded the curves of their bodies into puzzle pieces that snap perfectly into place.

I see that kind of bonded love every day with my parents. It’s comforting and depressing at the same time. I haven’t even come close to finding that. Of course, most of that’s probably my fault. It’s not like I’m out in the dating world actively looking for Mr. Right.

When my last serious relationship ended, I wrapped myself in the kind of fierce independence that grows out of not trusting anyone. I’m not sure I can ever get that trust back, so until—or if—that happens, I’ve learned to take care of myself.

“They might be the most precious couple I’ve ever seen,” Guacamole Woman says as Frank and Janet disappear into the jetway.

“Might be? I’m about to bawl just watching them walk away,” I say, sighing. “Where can I find a Frank my age?”

“Right?” Guacamole Woman shakes her head. “The good ones don’t come along often, and sometimes when they do, you don’t recognize them as

good until it's way too late."

I stretch back into my seat as another text comes in.

Go crazy, E. For one weekend. You deserve it. Don't worry about a thing here. You know we have it handled.

And fuck the haters. You're strong. You can do this.

Dad must have stolen Mom's phone. She would absolutely never type or say the word fuck.

The last two texts are from me, your dad. Your mom made me clarify that she wouldn't say fuck. And she's mad at me for saying it.

Now I said fuck twice and she's really mad. I guess that's three times. I'm in big trouble, E. Save me.

"Who's coming with you to the wedding?" Guacamole Woman asks.

The redhead's eyes narrow when she sees my face drop. "Oh, honey, please don't tell me you're going alone."

"I'm afraid so—no husband, fiancé, or boyfriend."

"That's a mistake," Guacamole Woman says. "Don't you even have a gorgeous guy friend you can bring as a plus one? You have to arrive fully loaded if you're facing your past."

"I know I should have invited someone, but it's too late. Where am I going to find someone now?"

Guacamole Woman grimaces. "Do you at least have a fuck-you dress to wear?"

"I forgot about my dress! It's absolutely a fuck-you dress. It's a rich cranberry color—off the shoulder, deep V-neck, mid-calf length with a long slit on one side, and clingy in all the right places." I spring out of my seat. "Damn, I think you two cured me. I want to wear that dress."

"Then get out of here and wear the thing," Guacamole Woman says. "You never need to arrive on a man's arm if you're wearing the right dress."

"Exactly," the redhead says. "And if you're wearing the dress just right, every man in the room will be yours anyway."

“Thanks for the confidence, ladies,” I say, giving them quick fist bumps before I turn toward the exit.

Made it to Asheville. Getting ready to leave for the resort now.

Flight was uneventful except a guy tried to fuck me out of my aisle seat.

There, Dad. I said it once, too, so Mom can't be mad only at you. Love you both. Call you tonight.

I take a few steps toward the security exit, then a few more until I break into a sprint. With my roller bag flying behind me, I weave through the other passengers like I'm competing in an obstacle course.

The security guard keeps his eyes glued to me as I charge over the point-of-no-return line. When I stop and look back at the terminal, he puts up his hand.

“Ma'am, you can't go back—”

“I know,” I say, taking a second to catch my breath. “There's no going back, but it's probably time to crawl out of my bunker and at least face the past, right?”

“Uh—”

“No need to answer,” I say as I continue on. “I was talking to myself.”

Chapter Two

Current Day
Champion Cove, North Carolina

The streetlamp closest to my bar has been out for almost a week. I called the city to ask them to fix it. They said they'd send someone by the middle of the week. It's Thursday. No one's come. I'm fixing it myself.

"Who do you want me to contact when you get electrocuted?" My bar manager, Mika, is watching me—her hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun that's starting to peek over the mountains.

"I won't get electrocuted."

"Famous last words." The co-owner of the bakery next door joins Mika on the sidewalk. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Yes, Fran. I know how to change a lightbulb."

"You're a hockey player, not an electrician," Fran says as she lifts a hand to shade her eyes. She's standing exactly like Mika. They look like they're saluting me.

"I don't play hockey anymore—"

"Honestly, you didn't really play hockey even when you were in the league," Fran's husband, Clive, walks out of the bakery. As usual, his apron's completely covered with flour already. I'm convinced he rolls in it every morning before he starts baking. "I've checked your stats, Nix. You didn't score very much."

"I was a defenseman, Clive. I've told you that at least fifty times. It's like expecting a linebacker to have as many touchdowns as a running back."

“He doesn’t listen, Nix. I have to repeat everything,” Fran says. “I swear he hasn’t listened to me the entire thirty-eight years we’ve been married.”

Several other townies have stopped to watch me. I’m guessing Champion Cove is the only town in the world where changing a light bulb causes the morning commute to all but come to a halt.

Our mailman, Percy, cracks open the door of the bakery. “Fran, you’re out of decaf. Mind if I make a pot?”

“Help yourself. You know where it is.”

“What’s up, Nix?” Percy glances up at me. “Did you find a bird’s nest up there? Those poles are the perfect place for them to build. They’re too slick for squirrels to climb. Have you ever seen them try? It’s so funny—their little furry paws move so fast, but they fall every time. I just stand and watch them sometimes.”

“That would explain why I get complaints every day about people’s mail being late.” I hear my buddy, Jake, behind me. I was hoping to get this done before he started his morning rounds. “Nix, get down from the ladder. That pole’s owned by the city. If you get electrocuted, I’ll have a full day of paperwork—two days if you die.”

“Well, Mr. Mayor, if the city did its job, I wouldn’t have to do it myself.”

“Fuck you,” he says, joining my other observers in the circle that’s formed around my ladder. “We’ll get to it. Have some goddamn patience for once.”

“You better stop talking like that in front of the ladies,” I say, gesturing to Fran and Mika, “or they won’t vote for you in the next election.”

He rolls his eyes. “If that were true, I’d be cussing every other word.”

“No such luck,” Mika says, sliding her arm around Jake’s waist. “You’re our choice for mayor no matter what words come out of your mouth.”

“Absolutely true,” Fran says, encircling him from the other side.

Jake’s been the reluctant mayor of Champion Cove since his dad died in office a year ago. He didn’t even declare candidacy. Everyone just wrote in his name. He only had one vote against him. I’m guessing it was from his high school football rival. They’re both in their thirties now, but football and grudges both run deep in this town.

When I get the lamp cover off, I hand it down to Jake. “We still on for poker tonight?”

“What do you think?” Jake hands me one of the lightbulbs from the sidewalk. “We play poker every fuck—every Thursday night. Sorry, ladies.

I'm trying to clean up my mouth, but Nix brings out the worst in me."

"How many bulbs are out?" Trinity, the hardware store owner, walks out of the bakery with the remnants of a bagel in one hand and her normal vat-sized coffee in the other. "I keep spares in the back of the store. Jake never orders enough at one time."

"The town works on a budget, Trin."

"Your dad always found a way around it." She shoves the last of the bagel into her mouth. "It's called being prepared, Jake."

"Dad's 'way around it' was to almost lead the town into bankruptcy." Jake sighs as he backs away. "I'm late for a meeting. Give Nix whatever he needs and charge it to our account."

"You got it," Trinity says. "How many, Nix?"

"I need two more."

"Be right back, *Captain Fuller*," Trinity says, saluting me as she heads toward her store.

"Clive," I say without looking back at him, "have you been searching my background online again?"

"Yep," he says as he hands me another lightbulb. "You never told us you were the captain of your hockey team. That's impressive. I saw a picture of you with the 'C' on your jersey—"

"Sweater. Hockey jerseys are called sweaters."

"See? You're teaching me stuff," Clive says. "You need to talk more about your hockey days. It's pretty much always been just football and basketball around here."

"I'm good if we keep it that way. You know I don't like to talk about myself."

"Understatement," Mika mumbles. "Clive, what else have you learned about him? Keep a girl up to date, please."

"Well," Clive continues, lowering his voice a little, "I found an article that said Nix was pretty much a captain off the ice, too. Apparently, he was very much a ladies' man in Chic—"

"Clive!" I bark as I march down the ladder. "No one wants to hear all that gossipy shit."

"Speak for yourself," Mika says, positioning her five-four body in front of me. "Keep talking, Clive."

"No, don't keep talking." I grab Mika's shoulders and point her toward the bar. "Aren't you supposed to be prepping for open? That's why I pay you,

right?”

“Well, for that and for my engaging personality,” she says, batting her eyelashes at me. “Stop by later, Clive. I want to hear the rest of the story.”

Clive winks at her, then whispers to me, “I’ll keep the juicy stuff to myself, but from what this article said, it sounds like you had a different woman every night.”

“Don’t believe everything you read. That’s not even close to being true.”

I didn’t have a different woman *every* night, but Clive’s not far off. My scoring percentage was way higher off the ice. I played my entire four-year career in Chicago where the fans are crazy about their teams. Ash Carlson, the team’s superstar goalie, was my chief running buddy. Women loved us, flocked to us, hung off us. And honestly, the constant parade of women got old after about a month.

“Nix?” Trinity’s standing in front of me, holding two lightbulbs up to my face. “You good?”

“What?” I shake my head to clear the memories. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Do you want me to finish up?” She holds onto the lightbulbs as I try to take them from her. “You look kind of out of it. Clive told me you had a few concussions playing hockey. Do you think you’re getting an episode? Maybe you should sit down.”

“I’m fine, Trin. Just give me the damn lightbulbs so I can be done with this.”

She holds onto them for another few seconds but finally releases them to me. “I’ll stay here in case you fall.”

I stomp back up the ladder. “Are you planning to catch me?”

“Hell no. Your big ole body would flatten me like a pancake. I’ll try to keep your head from hitting the concrete, though. It sounds like it’s been through enough already.”

“No truer words have ever been spoken.” I hear Cardi laughing behind me. “Nix, I thought Jake told you to stop fixing things around the town.”

When I don’t answer, Trinity jumps in. “He did. Jake literally just told him to get down from the ladder.” She points at me as she backs toward her store. “Nix didn’t budge, though. He’s so stubborn, but why am I telling you? You know him better than anyone.”

Cardi smiles up at me. “I definitely do. Absolutely no patience at all.”

“You’re one to talk,” I say. “I thought you weren’t coming in until tomorrow.”

“I wanted to surprise you. You sounded lonely when we talked last night.”

“We were texting, Cardi,” I say as I head back down the ladder. “How does someone sound lonely on text?”

“I can always tell.” She gives me a quick hug, then tilts my chin down so she can look directly into my eyes. “See? You have the lonely eyes again. It’s my job to fix that.”

“You’re not my mom—” I try to suck the words back in, but it’s already too late.

Her hands fly to her hips. “The fuck I’m not! How dare you say that to me, Phoenix. Who kept you alive when our dear parents were out in Joshua Tree,” she says, throwing up air quotes, “on their spiritual retreats?”

When I don’t say anything, she slams her hands into my chest. She’s crazy strong for as skinny as she is. I guess she got that from growing up sandwiched between two asshole brothers.

“And who put you in hockey so you could work out your aggression on the ice and not get kicked out of school for punching every kid who dared to look at you? Who did that with her own money?” She puts her finger in my face. “Yeah, that was me, too. And I’m the one who drove you to every practice and bought you every pair of skates you owned until you hit college. Is your memory getting a little better or do I have to knock some sense into that thick skull?”

“You know I appreciate everything you did for me,” I say, lowering her arm, “but I’m a grown man now.”

“Debatable. And did that selective memory of yours manage to forget how we work? Your brother and your sisters have your back forever, whether you like it or not. Do you understand me?” She whacks the side of my head to make sure I heard her. “Nod your head to show agreement.”

I throw my head back, then move it up and down in two slow, exaggerated nods.

“Very good,” she says as she heads toward her car. “I’m going to drop my stuff at your house, but I’ll be back for a late lunch—like two-ish. Ask Don to save me a meatloaf sandwich.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, smiling as she marches away. She’s by far the toughest person in our family, and that includes our brother, a highly decorated Navy SEAL. “Hey, Cardi.”

She turns around as she opens her car door. “Yes, little brother.”

“I’m glad you came up early.”

“I know you are.” She blows me a kiss. “And you won’t be lonely forever. I promise. Someday when you least expect it, the right one will show up. And she’ll be worthy of you. Not like all that trash that followed you around in Chicago.”

Chapter Three

EMORY

Champion Cove, North Carolina

The GPS is taunting me. When I left the Asheville airport, the resort was forty-three minutes away. Now it's only twelve. My anxiety's been rising with every minute that ticks off the clock. It's pretty much at full tilt as I drive into the last little town I have to pass through before I arrive at wedding central.

Welcome to Champion Cove, North Carolina.

Population: 1658

The welcome sign features soaring, snow-capped mountains with a goat in the foreground standing on his hind legs. His back hooves are buckled into snow skis with poles dangling from his front legs, and ski goggles covering his eyes.

For a second I think the GPS might have led me in the wrong direction. The sign looks like it belongs in the French Alps more than in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

As I park my car, I see a stream running through the center of town flanked by a span of two-story buildings that are linked together like row houses. The flat stone facades are each painted a different pastel color—pink, yellow, blue, purple, green, orange—with steep terra-cotta roofs and towering white chimneys. On the street level, the oversized windows feature flower

boxes overflowing with multicolored petunias and long trails of ivy. I don't think I've ever seen a more heavenly setting.

The orange building has a sign hanging on its door that says *From The Ashes — A Bar and Restaurant*. That must be the bar the redhead at the airport mentioned. The yellow building next door is called *Clive's Cakes*.

I'm not sure if anything will completely calm my anxiety, but liquor and baked goods seem like good places to start. I head over to Clive's and jiggle the door handle a few times. It seems to be locked. I jiggle harder.

"You look lost." I hear a woman's voice behind me. "Or just really in need of sweets."

"The second one," I say as I press my face against the bakery window to see if there's anyone inside who might open up for a desperate woman.

"Clive's closes at two," the woman says. She's dressed head to toe in black—a stark contrast to the fairytale burst of colors around us. "The restaurant next door's open, though. That's where I'm headed."

"Do they serve cake?"

"Nope," she says, "but they have good burgers."

"How's their tequila?"

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Cake and tequila? Sounds like someone's in need of a little comfort."

More than a little.

I jiggle the door handle again in hopes that Clive's has magically reopened.

"I got this cupcake before they closed," she says, holding up a little white box. "It's for someone else who's having a bad day, but he'll live without it. You can have it if you're that desperate."

"That's nice, but save it for him. I think I need to move onto the drinking portion of my day, anyway."

"Come on," she says, nodding toward the bar. "I'll buy the first round. I'm Cardi."

"Emory," I say, taking her outstretched hand. "Cardi's a cool name. Like Cardi B?"

"I wish I were as cool as her. Sadly, not even close. It's short for Cardinal."

"Somehow even cooler. I think this is the first time I've ever met someone named Cardinal."

She rolls her eyes. "My parents are straight up hippies. Four kids and they

named us all after birds.”

“That’s better than being named after the university where you were conceived,” I say, sticking out my tongue. “Now, every time Emory’s in the news, I have to think about my parents having sex.”

She laughs as she grabs her phone out of her pocket. “Don’t be an attorney. My damn clients never leave me alone. I need to take this. I’ll meet you inside in a few minutes. Don’t start without me.”

“No promises.”

When I walk into the bar, the twenty or so patrons turn to look at me. I mean every single one of them. And their stares are so intense that my fight-or-flight instinct kicks in. I stand at the door to consider my options for a second. Based on their unabashed gawking, running seems like the best option, but I’ve already been shut out on cake. I won’t be shut out on tequila, too.

The woman behind the bar waves her hands over her head to get my attention. “Ignore them. They’ll settle in eventually. Do you want a table? Or you can sit at the bar.”

Her beautiful smile is framed perfectly by an abundance of coiled black curls that jet out in every direction, forming what almost looks like a halo around her head.

“Bar’s fine.” I take a few cautious steps across the room. “Did I do something wrong? Why’s everyone staring at me?”

“You didn’t do anything except walk in. We don’t get many new faces around here,” she says as I slide onto a stool. “I’m Tamika, but everyone calls me Mika.”

“I’m Emory. How’d you know I was new?”

“With a population of only sixteen hundred fifty-seven people, we don’t miss the new ones.”

I nod my head back toward the door. “The sign driving into town said sixteen fifty-eight.”

The man sitting next to me twirls his bar stool around. He has the thickest mustache I’ve ever seen. It looks like a giant salt-and-pepper caterpillar’s taking a nap above his lip. “One died last year. It was the mayor’s dad. I’m not sure he’s ready to change the sign yet.” He leans closer to me and raises his equally bushy eyebrows. “You could move here and save him the trouble.”

“Back off, Burt.” Mika shoves his chin in the other direction. “And quit

staring at her. She's not a fucking zoo animal."

He immediately turns his head back to me and extends his hand. "I'm Burt. Named after Burt Reynolds. My mom had a huge crush on him. She said she met him once, but I think she was probably making that up. People say I look like him. What do you think?"

He tilts up his chin and rotates his head back and forth so I can get a better look at his face.

"Uh, hi, Burt" I say, finally shaking the hand he refuses to drop. "Sorry, I don't know who Burt Renner is."

"Not Renner. Reynolds!" He yanks his hand away from me. "He was a very famous movie star."

I look back at Mika. "Do you know who he is?"

"Only because Burt tells every person he can about his namesake. You never should have engaged with him. Once he's been activated, it's hard to shut him down. What can I get you, Emory?"

"Shot of Patron, please."

"Yep," she says, turning around to find the bottle, "that's the only effective way to deal with Burt."

Burt tugs on my arm. "*Smokey and the Bandit? Cannonball Run?*"

"What are these words you're saying to me, Burt?" I ask as I lean farther away from him.

"Movies that Burt *Reynolds* was in," he says, closing the distance I just created. "What planet are you from?"

"This one," I say, immediately shooting the tequila when Mika slides it over to me. "Was Burt Reynolds from another planet? Maybe that would explain why I've never heard of him."

"Are you trying to upset me?" Burt's so distracted that he guides the straw from his iced tea into his nostril as he tries to take a drink. "I don't think we can be friends if you don't know who Burt Reynolds is."

"Well, I guess our relationship had to end eventually."

The guy across the bar laughs. He has a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, so all I can see is his unkept beard. Well, that and the sculpted arms that are bulging out of his T-shirt. I'm guessing he's the hockey player who owns the place. Everything about his jacked body screams professional athlete.

When I lean across the bar to get a better look at him, he takes off the cap, revealing a mess of curly dark hair that matches his beard in color and lack of grooming. He smiles, but before I can smile back, Burt spins toward me

again and almost knocks me off my stool when his legs crash into mine.

“Jesus, Burt!” I shove his legs away. “Give a girl some warning before you pounce at her.”

He runs his fingers over his mustache. “Did you say your name was Emily?”

“Emory, like the university in Atlanta.”

He nods as he slurps his iced tea through the nostril straw. “That’s supposed to be a good one. Did you go to school there?”

“No, I went to Boston College—”

He slams his hand on the bar. “No way! That’s where Nix went to school, too. He was the star of the hockey team.”

“Shut up, Burt,” the guy with the baseball cap growls. “That’s ancient history.”

“Did we know each other in college or something?” I squint as I try to recognize his face. “Is that why you’re staring at me?”

“I’m not staring at you.”

“You’re literally staring right at me,” I say, moving my fingers back and forth to illustrate the stare line between us. “You have been since I walked in.”

He tugs his cap back on and mutters, “Someone’s kind of full of herself.”

“Whatever,” I say, trying to look away as he stretches his arms over his head, revealing his ripped abs.

“And, by the way,” he says, looking back at me, “the only way you’d know if I’m staring at you is if you’re staring at me, too.”

“Gross,” I say, pointing to my glass for a refill. “Is that the pickup line you use with all the women who come in here? Because if it is, I’m guessing your batting percentage is pretty low.”

“Not a line. More of an observation,” he says as he moves his fingers back and forth to mimic my illustration of our stare line. “And my batting percentage is just fine.”

I look back at Mika. “Can you please get him to stop staring at me?”

She whirls around and throws her bar towel at him. “Nix, stop intimidating the guests. We’ve talked about this. It’s bad for business.”

He catches the towel and sets it down next to him—the entire time not taking his eyes off me.

Cardi slips onto the bar stool on the other side of me. “Everyone stop staring at her. That’s the reason no one ever moves to this crazy town.”

“Cardi!” Mika leans over the bar to give her a hug. “Nix didn’t tell me you were coming in.”

“You’ve known him almost a year, Mika. You must have figured out by now that he’s not much of a sharer.” She motions toward me. “Emory’s first round is on me, and I’ll join her for one.”

“I’m afraid our new friend has already finished her first round,” Mika says. “That’s her second.”

Cardi smiles. “I thought I told you not to start without me.”

“I was trying to wait,” I say, draining my second shot. “Then I met Burt.”

“Understandable,” Cardi says. “The town should make him wear a warning sign or something.”

“Seriously. This is the weirdest place,” I say, glancing over at the hockey guy whose eyes are still locked on me. “It looks like a dollhouse on the outside, but it’s almost uncomfortably edgy on the inside.”

“Honestly,” Cardi says, throwing back her tequila. “You’ve pretty much just described the entire state of North Carolina.”

Chapter Four

Champion Cove, North Carolina

I recognized Emory the second she walked into the bar. I'm not kidding. That very second. The door hadn't even closed behind her when the synapses started firing.

The silky honey-colored hair. Check. The deep-hazel eyes. Check. The adorable dimples that pop out on her cheeks if she even gets close to smiling. Check. And the impossibly long legs that lead into her perfectly rounded backside. Check. Check. Check.

She looks over at me again. "What's your name? Nick?"

"Nix. N-I-X."

She scrunches up her face. "That's a weird name. Is it short for something?"

"Mainly patience," Burt quips, then shakes in silent laughter.

"Good one, Burt." Emory give him a fist bump as his body continues to vibrate in silent laughter. "Actually, that name kind of rings a bell. What's your last name?"

"Fuller."

"Nix Fuller," Emory says, tapping her chin with her fingers. "Nope. It's not connecting. Are you famous or something?"

I mumble, "No," as everyone else around the bar says, "Yes."

"He played professional hockey in Chicago," Burt says. "He's a big deal. Women come into the bar just to see him."

"Is that right?" Emory slides her shot glass back and forth between her

hands. “Well, I’m not much of a sports fan, and I’m definitely not a fangirl, so can the staring be done now?”

“Nix.” Burt tries to lower his voice, but somehow his whisper is always louder than his normal tone. “Seriously, man, pull back. You’re looking at her like she’s on tonight’s dinner menu.”

I take one more long look at her before I finally turn away. It’s obvious she doesn’t recognize me. And why would she? I think she only looked at my face a couple times in the seven hours we knew each other in college. Most of the time, she had her head buried in my chest wailing about her idiot boyfriend.

“Mika,” I say, nodding toward the Bridge Club ladies sitting by the window. “Fran’s trying to get your attention. I think they need more iced tea.”

“I see her.”

“Then do you maybe want to go over there and refill their glasses?” I bark, then lower my voice. “Please.”

Mika leans against the back bar and crosses her arms. “You’re way grouchier than usual. Don’t you think so, Cardi?”

“Yep,” Cardi says, “way grouchier and that’s saying something.”

“Right?” Mika looks back at me. “What’s up, buddy? Tell Mika all your problems. I’m here to listen.”

“You’re here to wait tables,” I say, pointing at the iced tea pitcher, “not to be a therapist.”

“I can do both.”

“Really? Because you’re definitely not doing the waiting tables part right now.” I grab the pitcher. “Stay where you are. I’ll do your job.”

Mika smooches a kiss at me as I walk away. “Thank you, honey.”

The Bridge Club ladies are giggling about something when I finally make it over to their table.

“Thank goodness, Nix. I was about to help myself,” Fran says as I start to refill their glasses. “Are we missing some good gossip over at the bar or something?”

“Not at all. As usual, you ladies are the most interesting people in the room.”

“Oh, Nix,” Iris says, laying her hand on my forearm, “if I were thirty years younger, I’d tie you up and never let you go.”

“That sounds like kidnapping, Iris.”

They giggle again. They laugh at everything I say. They're the only people in the world who think I'm funny.

Iris squeezes my arm a few times before she lets go. "Believe me, sweetie, I'd be willing to go to jail for one night with you."

"Iris! You know how easily he gets embarrassed," Fran says, pointing at the cards on the table. "Play a card. You bid one heart."

When I turn around, Emory's peeking back at me. I try to smile at her again, but she turns around the minute I catch her looking.

"Emory?" Mika's waving a hand in her face. "I asked you a question."

"Oh, I'm sorry. What?"

"Do you want me to keep your tab open?"

"Definitely," Emory says, glancing at me again as I slide back onto my bar stool. "I think I'll need at least a few more."

"Tequila shots at three in the afternoon," Mika says. "Sounds like you have something interesting going on."

"Not too interesting. I'm headed to a college friend's wedding."

"Not a very good friend if you're throwing back tequila like water in anticipation of her wedding," Cardi says. "Why don't you want to go?"

"Oh, you know, the normal things," Emory says, shifting on her stool. "I don't have a date, and I have to see a bunch of people I haven't seen since college. And it doesn't help that I'm at least twenty pounds heavier than I was back then."

"Pshh," I snort. If she's put on twenty pounds, it's definitely gone to all the right places, like those beautiful curves that are peeking out of the neckline of her shirt.

Emory spins her head toward me. "Do you have something to add to this?"

"I mean," I say, tugging on my cap, "you're obviously begging for someone to tell you that you look good."

Her bottom lip juts out. More synapses. Firing. Exploding. I remember that damn pouty lip and how I had to restrain myself from tasting it that night.

"Not that it's any of your business, Nixxx," she says, hissing out the last part of my name, "but I don't *beg* for anything."

I shrug. "Then you're obviously sleeping with the wrong guys."

"Nix!" Mika picks up the bar towel and whips my arm with it a few times. "Oh my god! Stop. No one wants to hear about your sexual

preferences.”

“Second that,” Cardi says, trying to catch my eye. “Hey, Nix. I need to talk to you alone for a second.”

“No, you don’t.” I point at Emory as she motions for another refill. “That’s your last round. You need to have something to eat before you drink any more.”

“And you need to mind your own business,” Emory says. “Why don’t you save the alpha-male bullshit for the rink?”

“He doesn’t play anymore,” Burt says. “He just retired.”

“Retired?” Emory grabs a lime slice out of the fruit tray. “How old are you, Grandpa?”

“Settle down. I’m a year older than you—I mean from what you look like—like your age or whatever.”

“Oh, yeah?” Emory’s eyes meet mine as she slowly licks her hand and sprinkles salt on it. “How old do I look?”

“Don’t answer that, Nix.” Burt’s head has been flipping back and forth between us like he’s watching a tennis match. “It’s a trap. If you don’t guess her age at least five years younger than you think, she’ll be mad.”

“I’m twenty-five,” she says as she licks the salt off her hand. “That makes you twenty-six if your calculations are correct. Are they?”

Yeah, my calculations are correct. You’re eye-fucking me right now. So you either want to sleep with me or you’re trying to play me to get more tequila. I’m guessing the latter.

She gives me a little smile before she shoots, then slams the glass back on the bar. “Another!”

“Nope.” I wave off Mika, who’s still holding the Patron bottle. “She’s cut off.”

Emory glares at me as she sucks on the lime. “Didn’t I tell you to mind your own business?”

“I own the bar. This is literally my business. You’ve downed four shots in under an hour. That’s plenty.”

When she bares her teeth and lets out a slow growl, things get a little too active south of my belt. I’ve had a semi building since she walked in, and seeing her tongue in action didn’t do a damn thing to tamper it down. I need to get out of here before I nut just looking at her.

“That’s not even close to my shot record,” she says, the growl still in her voice. “I can hold my liquor.”

“Not at that rate. You only weigh like a buck—”

“Nix! No!” Burt throws his arms in the air. “Just no. Guessing a woman’s age is bad enough, but her weight? Good god, man, are you new at this? No wonder you don’t have a girlfriend.”

Mika looks back and forth between Emory and me—the tequila bottle still in her hand.

“I said no, Mika,” I snarl. “Put the bottle down. Now.”

“Damn. That’s the death stare.” She slowly returns the bottle to the shelf above the bar and holds her hands in the air. “Sorry, Emory. Boss says no. Why don’t I get you something to eat?”

Emory tilts her shot glass back to try to get the last drop of tequila out. “Is he always this much of an asshole?”

“Not usually this much,” Mika says, leaning on the bar next to her. “I think you’ve gotten inside his head.”

“Less talking. More working,” I say, pointing at Mika. “The ice needs to be refilled. If I have to do it for you again, I’ll fire you and hire someone with muscles.”

Mika pushes herself off the bar and saunters over to me. She curls her small but impressive bicep. “If you don’t cheer the fuck up, this muscle’s going to propel a quick jab to your jaw.” She gasps when a smile tries to break onto my face. “Oh my gosh, Cardi, was that a smile?”

“Not possible. It must have been an involuntary twitch.”

When I finally look over at Cardi, her eyebrows are raised almost to her hairline. She knows. She always knows. I swear she’s been able to read my mind since the day I was born.

Emory’s knees buckle when she slides off her stool. “I need more tequila. I’ll go to another bar. There has to be one with a more agreeable owner.”

You’re not fucking going anywhere. At least not until I get some answers. Let’s start with why you disappeared after that night we spent together in college.

She fumbles around in her bag and produces her credit card and car keys. “Close me out, Mika.”

Mika reaches for the card, but I get there first and cover it with my hand. “Get her whatever she wants to eat. Everything’s on the house.”

“That’s not necessary.” Emory swats at my arm as I snatch the keys out of her hand. “Stop! Give those back.”

“You can have them back when you sober up.” I nod to Mika. “Let me

know when she eats a full meal. I'll be in my office.”

“What the fuck is his problem?” I hear Emory ask as I walk away.

“Oh, honey,” Cardi says, “how long do you have? Just eat a damn burger. You'll never win an argument with him.”

Chapter Five

EMORY

Champion Cove, North Carolina

Nix has barely disappeared around the corner when Cardi excuses herself and follows him.

“They seem to have some kind of connection,” I say, my gaze following Cardi until she disappears into Nix’s office. “Are they dating?”

“Not that kind kind of connection,” Mika says, laughing. “They’re brother and sister.”

“Huh,” I say, exhaling the breath I was holding for some reason. “Cardi’s a lot older than him, right?”

“Say that to her face,” Burt says, letting out a long whistle. “I dare you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that—”

“It’s fine,” Mika says, patting my arm. “And yeah, Cardi and Nix’s brother are about ten years older than him and his little sister. I guess the parents took a break or something.”

She leans on the bar in front of me and smiles. “And just FYI, Nix is completely single if that’s why you were asking. Why don’t you take him as your plus one to the wedding?”

“Pass.”

“Wait,” she says, putting her hand in my face, “hear me out. You said you needed a date—”

“I didn’t say that, and I definitely don’t need to spend any more time with that asshole.”

“Pshh,” she says, waving her hand dismissively. “That’s all an act. He’s

gruff on the outside, but he has a tender little heart. I think he'd be the perfect plus one for you."

"I'll be your plus one," Burt says, pulsing his eyebrows. "We can dance the night away and see where that leads—"

"Nope. You just crossed the perv line." Mika motions to the stool on the other side of him. "You know the rules. Move one stool away from her."

"But—"

Mika grabs the soda gun from underneath the bar and points it at him. "Don't make me ask you twice, Burt. One stool down. Now."

Burt lets out an exaggerated sigh as he shifts onto the other stool. When he tries to drag his iced tea along with him, Mika grabs it and dumps it into the sink.

"You know you can't sleep at night if you drink caffeine after three." She nods to the clock on the wall before she turns back to me. "I swear half of my job is taking care of grown men."

I grunt. "Seems like it would be more than half with Burt and Nix hanging around."

"Yes, let's get back to Nix," she says, her sparkling smile returning. "You *have* to invite him to the wedding. He would be such a fun date."

"On what universe would he be a fun date?" I ask, my mouth dropping open. "Seriously? Are we talking about the same guy? Are there actually women who want to spend time with him?"

"Literally every woman who walks into this bar. Every. Single. One." She pounds the bar to accentuate her last three words. "Have you taken a good look at him?"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, he's hot—like almost stupidly so—but he's so arrogant."

"He's definitely that," she says, grabbing my burger and fries as the cook pushes them onto the pass-through counter. "But like I said, he also has a sweet side for those who deserve to see it."

"Have you ever seen it?" I ask.

"Many times. Nix is more like a big brother than a boss. You could do worse."

"I could do better, too," I say, glancing back at his office again. "I bet he's a whore. He seems like the type."

Burt leans over the stool in between us and tries to whisper. "Clive said he had a different girl every night when he was playing in Chicago."

“See,” I say, giving him a fist bump. “Burt knows.”

“First of all, Burt knows nothing,” Mika says, pointing at him, “and second, Nix probably was a whore when he was playing, but I don’t think he is now. Since he moved here last year, I’ve only seen him with one woman, and I think that was a friends-with-benefits situation.”

She looks up as the bells on the door jingle. “Hey, Jake. Will you watch the bar for a second? I need a potty break.”

“Yep,” a husky voice says from behind me.

When I turn around, a guy with tightly clipped hair is walking toward the bar. He’s wearing jeans and a golf shirt featuring the mountain goat from the town’s welcome sign. He’s perfectly clean cut except for the tip of a tattoo that’s peeking out of his right sleeve. It looks like a wing of some kind.

Mika taps the bar in front of me. “Don’t let Emory talk you into any more liquor. Nix shut her down. And don’t let Burt have any more iced tea. He’s overcaffeinated. I already moved him one stool away from Emory for breaking the perv rule. Move him down another if he acts up again—probably two to be safe.”

“Roger that.” Jake’s eyes linger on Mika until she disappears into the back, then he turns to me. “Hey. I’m Jake. Why did Nix shut you down?”

“Because he’s a controlling asshole.”

“That’s a spot-on description of him,” he says, chuckling. “You obviously know him well.”

“I don’t know him at all. I’m just passing through on my way to a wedding.”

“Jake’s the mayor of Champion Cove,” Burt offers. “He’s the most important person in town.”

Jake shakes his head. “Believe me, it’s more of a burden than an honor.”

“What’s the deal with the mountain goat?” I ask. “I saw him on the town’s welcome sign, too.”

“That’s Champ, our town’s mascot,” Jake says, pulling out his T-shirt so I can get a closer look. “He’s actually a chamois—a mountain goat native to the Alps.”

“Is that why he’s wearing skis?” I ask. “I didn’t think there were any slopes around here?”

“There aren’t,” Jake says. “The town was originally named Chamonix—after a ski village in France. I guess over the years, the French language of the first settlers faded away and no one could pronounce Chamonix, so they

changed the name to Champion Cove.”

“Huh,” I say, nibbling on a fry. “I thought the town was maybe named after a champion who lived here or a championship team.”

Burt jumps in. “I think the only champion who’s ever lived here is Nix. He won the hockey championship when he played in Chicago. And Clive tells me he was the captain of that team.”

My mind processes Nix’s face again. “So he’s famous? Maybe that’s why I recognize him.”

“He’s not famous in Champion Cove,” Burt says. “I’m not sure many of our citizens could tell you what a hockey puck is.”

“Which is exactly why he moved here,” Jake says. “He was tired of the attention that came from playing professional hockey. He wanted to blend in and he does in this town. He’s only lived here a year, but he seems happy.”

“He has a funny way of showing it,” I mumble into my burger. “Is he always so disagreeable?”

“He’s harmless,” Jake says. “He’s actually a good guy.”

“All evidence to the contrary.”

Jake grins as he spreads his hands wide on the bar. “I like you, Emory. Are you always this feisty?”

“Why?” I tilt my head. “Does it turn you on?”

“It turns me on,” Burt says. “I’m interested if Jake isn’t and even if he is, it’s fine. I don’t mind sharing.”

“Burt!” Jake points at the stool one farther away from me. “One more stool down.”

“What?” Burt’s shoulders sag. “How’s that fair? Nix can openly leer at her and you can hit on her, but I can’t get a shot in?”

Jake continues to point at the other stool, his face as stern as his tone. “Move and stop being a pervert. You’re at least forty years older than her.”

“Some girls like a daddy—”

“Two!” Jake barks as he lunges toward Burt. “Two stools. Now!”

He watches Burt slowly pull his body two more stools down, then turns back to me. “Sorry about him. His bark’s much worse than his bite. And for the record, I wasn’t hitting on you.”

“I know,” I say, motioning to where Mika disappeared. “You’re obviously into Mika. Does she know?”

A light flush springs onto Jake’s perfectly shaven cheeks. “What? I’m not into Mika.”

“Tell your eyes that. They were pretty much glued to her ass until she turned the corner. Right, Burt?”

Burt nods. “They’ve been glued to every part of her since she moved here a few years back.”

“Shut up, Burt,” Jake snarls as Mika walks back into the room. “First and only warning.”

“Warning about what?” Mika looks back and forth between them. “Two more stools down, huh? I must have missed something.”

“Just Burt being Burt.” Jake heads out from behind the bar, his eyes focused on the floor. “I probably need to get back to work.”

“What?” Mika frowns. “You haven’t even eaten yet. Sit down. I’ll get your usual.”

Jake tries to keep his gaze off Mika, but peeks up when she turns around. He watches her until she disappears into the kitchen.

I lean toward Burt and whisper. “He can’t take his eyes off her even when he’s trying. He’s crushing so hard.”

“It’s been like that for a while,” Burt whispers back to me, “but he won’t make a move.”

Jake slides onto the stool next to me. “You two need to quit whispering to each other. Nothing good can come out of that.”

“Come on, Jake,” I say, nudging him with my shoulder. “Man up and ask Mika out. You’d be such a cute couple.”

“Mind your own business. Both of you,” Jake says, pointing between Burt and me. “New topic. Emory, where are you from?”

“Concord, New Hampshire. That’s where I grew up. I moved back there after college.”

“She went to BC with Nix,” Burt says.

Jake’s eyes narrow. “I thought you said you didn’t know him.”

“I don’t. I mean, he maybe looks a little familiar, but that might be because he’s famous.”

Mika busts back through the kitchen door carrying a club sandwich with a side of fries. “We’re out of strawberry jelly, so I gave you blackberry. I know that’s your second favorite.”

“Jelly?” I look at his plate. “Why jelly? Do you dip your fries in it?”

Mika smiles as she pours Jake a glass of iced tea. “He puts it on his sandwich like a five-year-old. Isn’t it adorable?”

“Soooo adorable,” I say, leaning on my hand as I gaze at Jake’s

increasingly flushed face. “Mika knows your favorite kind of jelly. Isn’t it so nice the way she takes care of you, Jake?”

“Enough talk about me,” he says, giving me a quick kick underneath the bar. “Emory, where’s the wedding this weekend?”

“The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa. I think it’s a few miles from here. Do you know it?”

“Yeah,” he says as he carefully spreads jelly on each layer of the sandwich. “One of my best buddies, Phil Mastoy, is the GM there. I’ll make sure he looks after you.”

“Thank you. I’ll probably need someone to look after me.”

“Nix would look after you,” Mika purrs. “I mean he couldn’t take his eyes off you until he went back into his office.”

“Pass.”

“Jake, I’m trying to get her to take Nix as her plus one to the wedding,” Mika says, pouting. “Make her do it.”

“Why are you passing, Emory?” Jake asks, shoving my arm. “Man up and ask Nix out. You’d be such a cute couple.”

I shove him back. “Do you really want to go there after what we were just discussing?”

“Oh! What were we just discussing?” Mika leans on the bar in front of us. “I love gossip. Fill me in.”

When we ignore her, she pounds on the bar. “Hell no! Why are you two already speaking in code when you met like five seconds ago? There will be absolutely no secrets withheld from the bartender. Start talking.”

When we continue to ignore her, she marches down to Burt. “What were they talking about when I was in the kitchen?”

“I have no idea,” Burt says, shrugging. “Maybe if you hadn’t moved me alllllll the way down here, I could have heard them.”

Chapter Six

Champion Cove, North Carolina

There's a white box in the middle of my desk tied with a yellow ribbon. When I untie the bow, the box falls open revealing a strawberry cupcake with vanilla icing. My favorite combination. It has been since I was a kid. There's only one person who knows that.

"Eat the damn cupcake." Cardi marches into my office without knocking. "The sugar might make you bearable for at least ten minutes."

"What did I tell you about the key to my office?" I growl. "It's for emergencies only."

"This is an emergency. I've never seen you this cranky." She falls back onto the couch next to my desk. "You obviously knew her in college, right?"

"Knew who?"

"Really, Nix? Do we have to take the slow road?" She exhales slowly as she looks at the ceiling. "Emory. How do you know Emory? And why doesn't she remember you? I mean with all the girls you've slept with, I could understand you not remembering her, but they always seem to remember you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, looking at my feet. "I've never seen her before."

She wings a pillow at me, hitting me square in the face. "How, how, how have you still not figured out that you look at your feet when you're lying? Everyone knows except you. It's why you never win at poker."

I jerk my head back up. "That's not true. I win sometimes."

“Rarely and don’t try to change the subject. Spill it. You haven’t stopped staring at her since she got here.”

“She’s pretty. I notice pretty women.”

“You weren’t staring at her because she’s pretty,” she says, rolling her eyes. “And by the way, she’s not pretty. She’s beautiful.”

“If you think that, maybe you should hit on her,” I say, folding my arms over my chest. “She might play for your team.”

“She doesn’t and you already know that. Just tell me the story already, dummy. You slept with her, right?”

“I didn’t sleep with her.”

“Well, at least I’m happy to hear you’re not that forgettable in bed.” She swings her feet onto the couch and stretches out. “Keep talking. I’m not moving until you tell me how you know her.”

“Why are you always in my business?” I throw the pillow back at her. “Just leave it alone.”

She hugs the pillow to her chest as she snuggles deeper into the couch. “This couch is so comfy. I could stay here forever.”

I turn toward my computer to try to ignore her, but I know it’s a losing battle. She’s the most aggressively persistent person I know. It’s why she rarely loses a case in court.

“I met her in college,” I huff. “Okay? Are you happy?”

“Very much so. Please continue.”

When I ignore her again, she throws the pillow back at me. This time it hits me perfectly in the middle of my shoulders. She’s always had much better aim than I have. I’m guessing if she had been the hockey player in the family, she would have broken every scoring record out there.

“I have all day, Nix.” I can almost feel her eyes boring a hole into the back of my head. “You know I’m much better at this game than you are.”

“Fine. Anything to stop your nagging,” I say, turning back toward her. “Honestly, there’s not much more to tell. I met Emory right before I graduated. We didn’t date or have sex. I was only around her for a couple hours.”

“A couple hours and you recognize her five years later? That doesn’t add up.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. That’s what happened,” I say, grabbing the hockey puck off my desk and tossing it into the air. “For some reason, she’s stuck in my head all these years.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about her?” Cardi sits up and leans toward me—elbows on her knees. I suddenly feel like I’m on the witness stand and she’s about to start her cross examination. “Did you ever see her after college? Or look for her? Or at least stalk her on social media?”

“I didn’t even get her last name that night. She was really upset. I walked into the middle of a fight between her and her boyfriend. I didn’t want to get involved, but then he shoved her—”

“What?” Her face drops into the patented sneer that’s usually reserved for her opposing counsel in court. “Did someone have to bail you out of jail like I had to when that asshole backhanded Robin?”

“No, it didn’t get to that. I ran him off, then walked her home,” I say, stretching back into my chair. “And then we talked—for hours.”

“About him?”

“About him, about life, about . . . Man, I don’t even know. I just remember it was so easy talking to her. I’ve never felt that comfortable around anyone,” I say, pausing for a second. “I guess it doesn’t matter now. It was a long time ago and she obviously doesn’t remember me.”

“What happened after that night?” She’s leaning so far forward that her butt’s barely on the couch at this point. “Did you talk to her again?”

“Nope. The day after we met, the team left for our conference championships. I was on the road for a week. When we got back, I went to check on her, but her roommate said she left college.”

“What do you mean left?” She stands up and starts pacing. “Like left for the summer?”

“No, like totally left. The roommate wouldn’t tell me anything except that Emory wasn’t coming back to BC. She told me to move on, so I did.”

“Not very successfully if this is how you react to seeing her.” She points at the door. “Go out there and tell her you recognize her. She might not remember your face, but she’ll remember that night. Do it before it gets creepy.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you have a short window of opportunity here. If you go out now and say, “Hey, I thought I recognized you. I think we met briefly in college,” then you’ll be fine, but if you wait much longer, it gets stalker and weird. Don’t make it weird. You always make things way weirder than they need to be.”

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do,” she says, intercepting the puck when I toss it again. “Tell her.”

“Or,” I say, grabbing the puck back from her, “I could not tell her and when she leaves, everyone gets on with their lives again. She doesn’t recognize me for a reason. Obviously that night didn’t mean anything to her.”

“Oh, quit being such a baby. Is your fragile athlete ego destroyed because one woman doesn’t remember you?”

“Kind of,” I mumble.

“Well, get over it. It doesn’t matter if she doesn’t remember you. There’s a reason that you remember *her*.” She points at the door again. “Get out there and make a move before it’s too late.”

When I don’t reply, she holds out her hand. “Okay, if you think you can get on with your life after she walks out the door, give me her keys.”

“She can’t have them yet,” I say, grabbing Emory’s keys off my desk. “She needs to sober up first.”

She closes in on me—her hand still extended. “I’ll make sure she’s sober before I give them back to her. You just stay in here and brood your life away.”

“This is my bar,” I say, shoving the keys into my jean’s pocket. “I’ll take care of her.”

She puts her hand right into my face. “You can’t hold her hostage forever, Nix. Either make a move or give me the keys.”

“I’m not holding her hostage,” I say, fighting the urge to look at my feet. “I’m being a responsible bar owner.”

“No,” she says flipping up my chin with her finger, “you’re trying to figure out how to get what you want by controlling the situation instead of just being vulnerable and letting it unfold. It’s your pattern. You’ve been doing it since you were a little kid. Don’t you want to know why she left school so suddenly? I want to know and I just met her.”

“Don’t even think about saying anything to her, Cardi.” I slam the puck back onto my desk. “This is my deal. Stay out of it.”

“I won’t say anything to her, but why would she have left that suddenly? And why was the roommate so evasive about it?”

“What does it matter? Everyone leaves.”

When she whips around to face me, I try to backpedal. “I meant, she left. Not everyone—”

“Phoenix,” she says, her voice getting softer. “I’ve told you a million

times that our parents not being around when we were kids is not your fault. They're just selfish, emotionally immature people who probably never should have had kids in the first place."

"That's not what this is about—"

"That's exactly what this is about. You never put yourself out there because you don't want to risk being abandoned again. And for the record not everyone leaves. I've never left you. Robin's never left you. Hawk's never left you. And we never will. And I assure you that whatever Emory's reason was for leaving, it had nothing to do with you." She opens the door and motions me out. "Take a risk for once. You don't always have to hide behind that fortress you've built around yourself."

When I don't say anything, she hisses out a long breath through her teeth. "You're the most stubborn person I know. It's fucking exhausting. Do what you want, but if you blow this opportunity, you'll regret it for the rest of your life." She slams the door behind her, then gives it a deafening pound and yells, "You know I'm right!"

Yeah, I know you're right. You're always right. That's what's fucking exhausting.

I sulk for a few more minutes before I head toward the door. I guess I can't hold onto Emory's keys forever. Telling the truth seems to be the only option to keep her here for a little bit, but honestly, I'd rather do almost anything else.

When I walk out into the bar, there are two women standing behind a very oblivious Emory. They're whispering and pointing at her.

"Emory?" One of them takes a step toward her. "Emory Hart?"

Emory freezes—her hand stopping halfway to her mouth with a french fry dangling from it.

"Oh my god, Brenna," the woman groans as she edges closer to Emory. "Do you think Natalie invited her to the wedding?"

"Payton, come on," Brenna says. "There's no way. No one's seen her in five years."

Emory's still frozen—mouth open, fry in her hand. When she finally turns around, Brenna throws her hands over her mouth.

“It is her! She has to be here for the wedding.”

They’re standing maybe five feet in front of Emory, but they’re acting like she can’t hear every word they’re saying.

“Unless she lives here or something,” Payton says, tilting her head and examining Emory like she’s a painting in a museum.

“She doesn’t live here,” Brenna says. “I told you she still lives in New Hampshire with her parents. At least that was the scoop as of about a year ago.”

Payton snaps her fingers in Emory’s face. “Seriously? Are you going to pretend like you don’t remember us?”

Emory finally comes to life as she shoves Payton’s hand out of her face. “Believe me, no one could forget you, Payton. No matter how hard they tried.”

“Right back at you,” Payton sneers. “Did Natalie really invite you?”

“She really did,” Emory says, finally tossing the fry into her mouth. “Did she really invite you?”

“Ugh, you haven’t changed at all. You’re still a huge bitch,” Payton says, projecting loudly enough for the people in the next county to hear.

“Don’t start it all up again,” Brenna says, grabbing Payton’s arm. “Let’s get out of here. Tom’s probably getting impatient.”

Emory’s eyes widen. “Please don’t tell me she’s talking about Tom Bryant?”

“Yes, she’s talking about *my husband*, Tom Bryant,” Payton says, her hands flying to her hips. “Do you have something to say about that?”

“Sooooo much,” Emory says, nodding as her hands cover her cheeks. “You actually married him? Tom was the worst boyfriend ever. He cheated on you like every other day in college.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk. I seem to remember you doing a little cheating of your own,” Payton spits out. “Maybe if you hadn’t run away, you could have worked things out with your boyfriend.”

Emory lets out a long whistle as her body shudders. “I had no desire to work things out. Getting away from him was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Chapter Seven

Champion Cove, North Carolina

Well, damn. I knew I'd have to deal with my college frenemies eventually this weekend, but I didn't think I'd have to do it in front of the entire population of Champion Cove.

"I can't believe Natalie invited you to her wedding." Payton takes a deep breath, then puffs it out a little at a time. "Why would she do that?"

"Honestly, I have no idea," I say, glancing around the bar. Everyone's staring at me again, including the sweet ladies playing bridge over by the window. "I haven't talked to Natalie since I left college. I was shocked when I got the invitation. I didn't even want to come."

"Then why did you? You could have RSVP'd no," Brenna whines. "You're bringing back a lot of drama that no one needs this weekend."

"Ooookay," Jake says, turning around on his stool. "I think that's plenty. It seems to me that you two are bringing most of the drama right now. Why don't you give it a rest?"

"And who are you?" Payton's hands are still firmly planted on her hips. "Her husband?"

"Actually, we just met, but—"

"Good lord, she's still *single*." Payton says single like it's the equivalent of being a serial killer. She turns to Brenna and huffs, "I bet she'll be all over Tom this weekend."

"I doubt that very much." I feel a warm hand squeeze my shoulder. When I look up, Nix is standing over me. "I'm the only person who gets that

privilege. Right, baby?”

I pull my head back. “Baby?”

Before I can get anything else out, he weaves his hand through my hair until it’s cupping the back of my head. Without hesitation, he presses my face to his and basically tries to inhale me with his mouth.

I make a feeble attempt to push him away, but as he wraps his other arm around my back, my lips start moving. It’s like they’re working independently of my brain. Or more accurately, I think my brain just melted right out of my body.

When he tugs me against his chest, it feels so comfortably familiar that my body immediately presses into his. My legs wobble as his lips become even more insistent. He wraps both of his arms under mine as I start sinking toward the ground, then gives my bottom lip a little tug with his teeth before he finally pulls back.

“Sorry it took me so long.” He keeps one arm around me as he reaches over to the bar and grabs a white box, sloppily tied together with a bright yellow ribbon. “The bakery was closed, but I made them reopen because if my wife wants a cupcake for dessert, she’s going to get a damn cupcake.”

My mouth falls open as I look from the box to his eyes. “Your wha—”

“You don’t need to thank me,” he says, covering my mouth with his hand. “Being your husband is all the thanks I ever need.”

“This is your husband?” I hear Payton’s voice floating somewhere above me.

Nix leans down and brushes his scruffy cheek against mine. “Go with it,” he whispers. “These bitches deserve to be fucked with a little bit.”

He turns me around in his arms and pulls me back against his glorious chest. “Why don’t you introduce me to your friends?”

“I didn’t know you were married, Emory,” Payton says, slowly scanning our intermingled bodies. “Much less married to Thor.”

“Huh-uh,” Brenna says, her gaze frozen on Nix’s arms. “He’s much better than Thor. I’m Brenna, by the way, and this is Payton.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Nix, Emory’s husband,” he says, kissing the top of my head. “Do you want anything else before I close out our tab, baby?”

I look up at Nix, then back to Payton and Brenna. Their faces are flooded with jealousy. I guess Mika was right. Every woman who walks in here does want to fuck him.

Nix strokes my arm a few times. “Em, you good?”

Don't say it. This is wrong. You know this is wrong. It will backfire. Don't say it. Don't say—

“I’m fine,” I say, looking at Payton and Brenna. “And thanks for the cupcake. You’re just the best husband in the world.”

“Anything for you, baby.” Nix nods at Mika. “We’re done. Can I get the bill?”

“Oh, you’re definitely done.” She slides a piece of paper and a pen across the bar. “Remember to tip generously. The asshole I work for doesn’t pay me enough.”

Nix scribbles on the fake receipt.

I just gave you a raise. Quit bitching.

When I turn back to Payton and Brenna, they’re still ogling Nix.

“You probably shouldn’t keep Tom waiting,” I say, motioning toward the front door. “He’ll think you left him or something.”

“Yeah, w-we should go,” Brenna sputters, backing toward the door. “I guess we’ll see you at the resort—*both* of you.”

“I guess,” Nix says without looking back at them.

When they finally clear the door, everyone in the bar collectively exhales as they turn their heads toward me again.

I stare at Nix for a few seconds—my mouth gaping—before I finally get out, “What the hell was that?”

“There it is!” Mika slaps her hand on the bar. “Let the take down begin.”

My arms fly into the air as I take a step back from Nix. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I don’t think so,” Nix says, patting his temples as he leans back against the bar. “It seems to still be in there.”

“There’s no way there’s anything left in here.” Mika grabs his head and shakes it a few times. “I mean, I’ve seen you do some stupid shit, but that whole performance was next level.”

“Yeah, bold move, man,” Jake says. “You’re lucky you didn’t get a knee to the balls. It’s not too late for that, by the way. I’ll hold him for you, Emory, if you want to take a free shot.”

I look back at Nix—my mouth still wide open. “Do you always grab women and declare them as your wife?”

“No, not always,” he says, a cocky smile covering his face. “In fact, this

was my first time, but I think it worked out pretty well, don't you?"

"No, I don't," I say, shoving his chest. "And I know you better wipe that smile off your face."

"Settle down," he says, the smile remaining. "You looked like you needed help, so I jumped in."

"I didn't need help, especially from you." I put my finger in his face. "What did I say about that smile?"

He rubs his hand over his mouth to try to hide it. "They were pummeling you, and you were panicking. I could see it all over your face."

"Really?" I ask, my mouth dropping open. "How could you see anything with your face buried in mine?"

"She has a valid point, Nix," Burt says as he ambles over to us. "You just dove right in there. Seriously, I didn't think you were going to let her come up for air, although, honestly, she didn't seem to mind it too much."

"Shut up, Burt!" He takes a quick step back when I glare at him. "No one asked for your input."

"And no one ever does," Nix says from behind me. "He's not wrong, though. You were kissing me back."

"I was not kissing you. I was trying to get some air into my lungs after you tried to suck it all out."

The bells on the front door jingle as Cardi walks back into the bar.

"Fucking clients," she says, holding up her phone. "What did I miss?"

Mika busts out laughing. "Oh, girl, I don't even know where to start."

"You didn't miss anything." Nix grabs my arm and tugs me toward the back area. "We can finish this in my office."

"Finish what?" I ask, planting my feet. "We're completely finished with everything."

"No, we're not." Nix points at my feet. "Move them or I'm carrying you back there."

I try to yank my arm away from him. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Last warning. Get those feet moving right now."

When I start lowering my butt to the ground, he closes in and throws me over his shoulder in one quick move.

"You can't say I didn't warn you," he says, tightening his grip around my legs as I start squirming.

"Put me down, you jerk," I say, pounding on his back as he carries me away.

“Jerk?” He chuckles as he unlocks his office door. “Come on. You can do better than that.”

“Asshole,” I say, pounding harder. “Bastard. Jackass. Motherfuck—”

“Muuuuch better. I knew you had it in you.”

He motions to the couch as he takes a seat behind his desk. I look at the door. It’s closed but not locked. I can easily get away, but my feet don’t seem to want to move in that direction.

“That was completely out of line. And if you think I enjoyed any part of that, you’re wrong.”

“Not any part of it, huh?” He clasps his hands behind his head, causing his arms and chest to somehow get even bigger. “You sure about that?”

“Positive.” I deepen my voice to try to accentuate my point. “This ends here. You’re not coming with me to the resort.”

“Okay,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “What are you going to tell your friends when they ask where your husband is?”

“I’ll tell them the truth. That it was a joke—a really stupid joke.”

“Didn’t feel like a joke to me,” he says, spreading his legs wide. “You were definitely into that kiss.”

“No I wasn’t!”

My eyes scan down his body until they fix on his enormous thighs. His jeans are almost straining to hold them in. All I want to do is crawl up on that magnificent lap and feel his arms wrap around me again.

“What?” I jerk my head up when he clears his throat. “I wasn’t looking at anything.”

“Okay,” he says, his eyes dancing. “I thought you might be in a trance there for a second.”

“You’re an asshole. I’m leaving.”

When I turn toward the door, I hear rattling behind me. I look over my shoulder to see him holding up my car keys.

“Give them to me,” I say as I march over to him. “Right now.”

“Nope, you’re not sober yet. Either you stay here for another twenty minutes or I’m driving you to the resort. Your choice.”

“I choose neither,” I say, grabbing my phone out of my back pocket. “I’m calling the cops.”

“Good idea. The sheriff’s name is Ben Willis. You’ll like him. He’s one of my best friends. In fact, he’ll be here for our weekly poker game tonight if you want to wait for him.” He grabs his phone off the desk. “Or I’ll call him

for you now, but I think he'll agree with me that you're not fit to drive yet."

"I'm not staying here for another minute, much less twenty of them." I turn back toward the door. "I'll call an Uber."

"Another good idea. We have one driver in Champion Cove. It's Burt." His smile expands when I whirl back around. "I'm not looking so bad anymore, am I?"

"I just want to get out of here," I say, folding my arms over my chest. "You can drive me if you promise not to try to kiss me again."

"Deal," he says as he stands up. "I promise I won't kiss you again until you beg me to."

I roll my eyes. "Well, then you'll never kiss me again because that's not happening."

"If you say so—"

"I say so." I point at him. "Not happening. Do you understand me?"

"Understood." He motions me toward the door. "So am I just dropping you off or am I playing fake husband for the weekend? I'll need to pack a bag if I'm staying."

"You're not staying," I say, flinging the door open and marching out of his office. "You're dropping me off and leaving, then I never want to see you again."

Chapter Eight

Champion Cove, North Carolina

When I climb into her rental car, Emory's sitting in the passenger seat looking straight ahead. One of her hands is curled into a fist with keys popping out between her fingers.

"Are you going to use the brass knuckles on me?"

"Thinking about it," she says, her eyes staying fixed on the dashboard. "That's up to you. Are you going to try to kiss me again?"

"I told you, not until you beg me to."

She spins around and leans back against the door. "Did you get hit in the head a lot playing hockey? I think I told you that was never going to happen."

"My bad." I throw my arms up as her key fist rises. "Please don't use those on me. I have a low threshold for pain."

"You do not. You played hockey for four years, and with how obnoxious you are, I'm guessing you got punched a lot."

"Not really. Honestly, I was the one throwing the punches most of the time."

She grunts. "That figures. You seem like you have issues with anger management—and impulse control. And control issues in general."

"Thanks for the analysis."

"You're welcome," she says, smiling.

Her dimples are back and they're so deep right now. All I want to do is run my tongue through them.

She lowers her key fist. "Why did you only play four years, by the way?"

Did you suck or something? Or did you get hurt? Is that why you're a pain wimp? Or did the club kick you out for being extremely disagreeable?"

"Do you want me to jump in at any point to answer those? Or do you just want to keep firing questions at me?"

She sweeps her arm toward me. "Do what you want. No one's stopping you."

Do what I want? Are you sure about that? Because it definitely doesn't involve talking.

"Stop looking at me like that!"

"I'm looking at you normally," I say, trying to keep my grin under control. "And to answer one of your many questions, the average hockey player lasts about four years, and that about sums up my career—pretty average."

"Whatever." She crosses her arms over her chest—the key fist still on display. "Burt says you won a championship and that you were the captain of the team."

"Burt talks too much."

"Please tell me you're not just figuring that out," she says, her mouth gaping. "When you stole my keys and disappeared into your office, Burt basically offered to be my daddy for the weekend."

"Damn," I say, letting out a slow whistle, "then I bet you're glad I'm the one who stepped up and claimed you."

"Claimed me?" Her eyes sink into slits as her fingers close more tightly over the keys again. "Seriously, you're the most arrogant person I've ever met. I wouldn't be married to you if you were the last man left on earth."

"Noted. I'll file for a fake divorce after I drop you off at the resort."

She shifts dramatically on the seat until she's facing forward again. "Just stop talking."

"Yes, ma'am. Should we get on the road, then?"

She waves her arm at me. "I'm not the one driving. Start the damn car already. It's hot in here."

Emory hasn't said a word to me in the ten minutes it's taken us to get to the resort. I'm actually impressed by her commitment to the silent treatment. I'm

positive this is the longest she's gone in her entire life without talking.

"We're here," I say, looking over at her as I head into the resort's circle drive. "I'll leave your car in the parking lot and walk back into town."

"Fine," she snips, then slams her hands on the seat and screams, "Stop!"

When I whip my head back around, I see Phil stepping in front of our car. I throw my arm across Emory's chest as I slam on the brakes.

"What the fuck, Phil?" I yell through my open window. "Are you trying to get run over?"

"Welcome, sir," he says, walking over to my window—a clipboard clutched to his chest and a cheesy grin covering his face. "I'm Philip Mastoy, the general manager of the resort. May I have your name so I can check you in?"

"Are you high?" I ask, looking back at Emory. I slowly lower my arm when I realize it's still covering her chest. "I've known you for the better part of a year."

"I don't think so, sir," Phil says, leaning into my window to get a better look at Emory. "I knew a guy who looked like you, but I'm pretty sure he wasn't married."

"I see the news already got here," I say, shoving him with the car door as I open it. "Did Mika call you? Or Cardi?"

"Both," Phil says, gesturing to the car that just pulled in behind us, "and we conferenced in Ben in case your new wife comes to her senses and wants to file charges against you for, oh, I don't know, let's see, bad judgment, stupidity, extreme arrogance . . . Ben, can you think of any more charges?"

"I think that about covers it." Ben rolls out of his sheriff's car, an equally obnoxious look on his face. He walks around to Emory's side and extends his hand through her window. "Ma'am, my name's Ben Willis. I'm the sheriff here. Please tell me if you'd like me to arrest Nix. Honestly, nothing would make me happier."

"Not yet," she says as she shakes his hand. "But can I get your number in case he tries to kiss me again."

"Absolutely." Ben takes a business card out of his wallet and hands it to her. "I'm just a call away if he tries to force you to marry him or anything. Oh wait, that's already happened, hasn't it?"

"Will you both go away?" I growl. "You're not helping this situation."

"And we're not even trying," Phil says, following me around to the back of the car. "We're firmly on her team for this one. Right, Ben?"

“One hundred percent,” Ben says, opening Emory’s door and offering his hand to her. “May I help you out, Mrs. Fuller?”

“It’s Hart. Emory Hart.”

“It was smart to keep your own last name. You won’t have to change everything back when you eventually fake divorce Nix.”

“Turn it down, Ben,” I say, taking Emory’s suitcase out of the trunk. “It was a joke. No one’s married. I’m dropping her off, then I’m leaving.”

“Oh, no,” Phil says, his hand covering his heart. “Has the fake marriage already ended? I was hoping to get so much more mileage out of this over the next few days.”

“Just check her into her room, asshole.” I look at Emory. “I’ll leave your keys at the front desk.”

She nods but continues the silent treatment.

“Look, I’m sorry I did all that,” I say, looking at my feet. “Do you want me to come in and tell your friends that it’s my fault? I’m happy to take the heat so you won’t look bad.”

“They’re not my friends. I don’t care what they think of me.”

“Okay, well,” I say, my eyes still focused on my feet, “I’m sorry I kissed you. That was out of line.”

“It’s fine,” she says, her voice getting softer. “Let’s forget it happened.”

“Oh my goodness,” Phil says, his hand still firmly pressed against his chest. “This is so sad. I feel like I’m watching an actual breakup.”

“Will you do your job?” I whack his arm and point at Emory. “Like maybe help her with her bag.”

Emory throws her shoulders back. “I don’t need help. I can manage it myself.”

I pry her hand off the handle and hand the bag to the valet who’s been lingering next to us. “Or maybe you could let this man do his job.”

When I take a twenty out of my wallet, Emory dives at it. “Stop. You don’t have to tip him for me.”

“I don’t have to, but I just did,” I say, restraining her with my arm as I hand the money to the valet. “Let’s say it’s punitive damages for kissing you.”

She puts an elbow into my side. “That’s not nearly enough for punitive damages. And it’s way too much for a tip. There’s only one bag and it rolls. Do you not know how to figure out appropriate tipping levels?”

“Apparently not. Maybe you could have taught me if we had stayed fake

married.”

“Pass. Figure it out on your own.” She turns to Phil. “May I please check in now?”

“Yes, ma’am, but for the record, I could watch you verbally whip Nix all day long. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time,” Phil says, laughing as I flip him off. “Follow me, Emory. I’ll get you checked in.”

When they get to the entrance, Emory glances at me over her shoulder before she disappears into the hotel.

“Damn, Nix,” Ben says, shaking his head. “It’s too bad you jumped the gun on that one. She’s something else. You maybe could have had something there.”

“Naw,” I say as I head back to the car. “She doesn’t have any interest in me.”

“I don’t know. That look she just gave you would suggest otherwise.”

“Maybe,” I say, shrugging, “but I fucked it up, so I guess we’ll never find out now.”

As I’m walking across the parking lot to leave Emory’s keys at the front desk, Cardi’s Prius pulls up next to me.

I exhale loudly. “Why are you here?”

“I thought you might need an attorney.” She edges the car in front of me when I try to keep walking. “Is Emory pressing charges against you for being a dumbass?”

“It’s not like that. You always take things way too seriously.”

“That’s almost literally in my job description,” she says, rolling the car forward again when I try to get around it. “You made it weird.”

“I did not.”

“So fucking weird. And to be clear, the window for telling her the truth is completely closed. You need to keep that shit to yourself at this point,” she says, easing the car in front of me again.

“Are you trying to run over my feet?” I ask, pounding on the car’s roof with my fist.

She doesn’t even flinch. “If that’s what it takes to stop you. Unfortunately, I can’t do that anymore without a few tons of weight backing

me up.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t even try,” I say, finally getting around her car. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine. Give it a rest, Cardi.”

“Nope,” she says, leaning out of her window. “And if you keep acting like this, I’m calling in the only person who can stop you physically.”

I point at her through the windshield. “Don’t call him, Cardi. You know how busy he is.”

“He’s never too busy to knock some sense into his little brother. That’s in *his* job description,” she yells from behind me. “Keep acting like a jackass, Phoenix, and I’m sending up the Hawk Signal. Don’t test me. You know I’ll do it.”

Chapter Nine

EMORY

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

As I follow Phil into the resort's lobby, a loud shriek stops us both in our tracks.

"Emory!" My college roommate, Natalie, is running toward us—her long white sundress flowing behind her. "I can't believe you actually came."

"I can't believe you actually invited me," I say as she yanks me into a suffocating hug. "We haven't talked since college."

She pushes me back—her hands gripping my shoulders. "I know, but when I was putting the guest list together, I thought it would be a good opportunity to get the old gang back together. We had so much fun in college before you left. I'm not the only one who thinks that, right?"

"You're not," I say, smiling. "Our first two years in Boston are still some of my favorite memories."

"Oh, honey, me, too. They were the absolute best years of my life. I mean, I guess until I met Edward. And even then, that time with you might still be my favorite." She lowers her voice. "Don't tell him I said that when you meet him."

"Promise," I say, making a zipping gesture over my lips. "Now, tell me all about him. Is he a BC guy?"

"No, he went to Princeton. I met him when I moved to New York after graduation," she says, her face glowing as she shoves her engagement ring into my face.

The round diamond which has to stick up at least a half inch off her finger is surrounded by oversized baguettes that stream down each side of the platinum band.

“Good lord, Nat. This ring is gigantic. Is it making your left arm longer?”

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” She holds her hand out to look at the ring. “No one else will tell me the truth. You never had a problem with that. Is it too big?”

“When have you ever had a problem going big?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. “And when have you ever cared what other people think of you?”

She makes two checkmarks in the air. “Never and never.”

“Exactly. Obviously Edward knows his woman very well. I can’t wait to meet him.”

“You’ll love him. He’s just the best,” she says, squeezing my hands. “And you’ll never guess who he works with now.”

“Natalie!” Her mom’s waving a bouquet of pink roses at her from the other side of the lobby. “We need to finish the flowers.”

“I should go. Mom’s on the verge of a breakdown. We can catch up more tonight. Are you coming to the bachelorette party?” She holds up her hand as she backs away. “Wait, don’t answer. It wasn’t a question as much as a bridal demand. You’re coming. Meet us in the lobby at seven. We’re going to a bar Brenna and Payton found in that cute little town down the road. I keep forgetting the name—like Championville or something.”

“Champion Cove,” I say, grimacing. “Is the bar called From The Ashes?”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” she says as she backs away. “I think it’s kind of a hole-in-the-wall. Very casual. Wear jeans or whatever. See you at seven!”

“Well, damn,” I mutter. “Is there any way this weekend could get worse?”

“Emory. Fucking. Hart.”

When I hear his voice behind me, I swear my heart stops beating for a few seconds. I grab the table next to me to steady myself.

“That’s not quite the reaction I was hoping for.” His voice gets closer to me. “Or you know what? Maybe it was. It’s good to see I still make you weak in the knees.”

I slam my eyes shut as I grip the table tighter.

Wake up, Emory. This isn’t real. You’re having a nightmare.

“Are you going to turn around?” His voice still gets sharper when he’s

getting impatient.

Keep your eyes closed. You're imaging this.

“Don't get me wrong,” he says, letting out a low wolf whistle. “I could look at your ass all day. It's still one of the most beautiful sights in the world.”

When I whip around, he's standing about a foot from me. My arms fly over my face as I take a few quick steps back.

“Get the fuck away from me, Connor.”

“Aw, come on, Em,” he says, opening his arms for a hug. “Is that any way to greet your long, lost love?”

“Back off,” I command as he continues moving toward me. “Don't even think about touching me.”

“But that's all I'm thinking about right now,” he says, a smile creeping onto his face. “How is it possible you're even sexier now than you were in college? These past five years have been soooo very good to you.”

I can't say the same for him. He was never a big guy, but he almost looks emaciated now. His light-green eyes that were so captivating five years ago now bug out so far from his gaunt face that he almost looks like a cartoon character. And his beautiful blond curls have been shaved off into what looks like a military cut.

I twist away from him as he tries to put his arms around me. “Didn't I hear you have a fiancée now? I doubt she'd want you telling another woman that she's sexy.”

“I'm flattered that you're keeping up with my life, but your sources are a little behind. I don't have a fiancée anymore. I broke up with her a few months ago.” He runs his tongue over his lips as he slowly scans my body. “It seems no matter how hard I try, I can't find anyone as good as Emory Hart.”

When I turn to walk away, he grabs my arm. “Don't walk away from me. I came to this wedding just to see you. I was thinking we could have a little fun this weekend. You know? For old times' sake.”

“That's not going to happen,” I say, yanking my arm away from him, “this weekend or ever.”

“Come on, Em. I've stayed away from you like a good boy. At the very least, I deserve a hug,” he says, springing forward and looping his arms over me like a lasso.

When I feel his arms around me, the horrid memories of the last day I saw him flood through my mind.

“Get off me,” I say, slamming my hands into his chest.

He tightens his hold around me. “Ahh, there it is—the promised land. I’ve missed this body so much.”

I try to knee him in the groin, but he quickly turns to the side.

“Not this time,” he says as my knee connects with his hip. “I learned my lesson on that one. The last time you kneed me, I thought my baby-making days were done for good.”

“Emory?”

With the shock of seeing Connor again, I forgot about Nix for a few minutes. When I hear his commanding voice behind me, my body unclenches a little bit.

“Who’s that guy?” Connor asks, his arms loosening enough for me to get away from him.

“Stay away from me, Connor,” I say, pointing at him as I back away. “Don’t touch me. Don’t look at me. Don’t talk to me.”

When I turn around, I run smack into Nix. He puts his hands on my shoulders and bends over so he can look right into my eyes.

“Hey. What’s wrong? Is that guy bothering you?”

“Did you find a parking spot, baby?” I ask, throwing my arms around his waist.

He narrows his eyes. “Uh, yeah. Your car’s in the front row. You can’t miss it.”

“My car? You mean *our* car,” I say, getting on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “Thanks for parking it. You always take such good care of me. You’re the best husband in the world.”

“Do you want to catch me up?” he whispers as he wraps his big arms around me. “I thought we were headed for divorce court.”

“I changed my mind. Just go with it,” I plead. “Please.”

“Why are you shaking? Are you cold?” He runs his hands over my back a few times. “And who’s the guy in the Red Sox hat?”

My forehead crashes onto his chest. “It doesn’t matter. Please just be my husband for the weekend again. I’ll pay you any amount of money you want.”

When he pulls me closer, the blissfully familiar feeling I had at the bar earlier surges through me again. His arms seem to have the magical effect of making everyone and everything around me disappear.

“No payment necessary,” he says, giving me one more squeeze. “Believe

me, this will be my pleasure.”

Connor’s still standing about ten feet away, but now he’s glaring at me—his arms crossed over his chest.

“Do you have a problem?” Nix growls as he moves me behind him.

Connor digs his fists under his biceps to try to make them look bigger. “What’s it to you?”

“I’m her husband, asshole. That’s what it is to me. If you fuck with her, you fuck with me.” Nix spreads his arms wide. “Do you want to fuck with me?”

Connor takes a few quick steps back, his arms dropping to his sides. “You’re her what?”

“You heard me,” Nix says as he closes in on Connor—his steps slow and deliberate. “If I see you near her again, this is going to end with you in the hospital. Are we clear?”

Connor lunges to the side so he can see me around Nix. “You’re married? For how long, Emory? And why am I just finding out about this now?”

Nix moves to the side to block Connor’s view of me again. “I think I told you not to talk to my wife. Do you have a hearing problem?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sheriff Ben hustling across the lobby. “Is there a problem, Nix?”

“Nix?” Connor’s mouth falls open. “Wait, are you Nix Fuller?”

Ben eases his way in between them. “Yes, that’s his name, sir. May I ask your name?”

“I knew it,” Connor barks as he points at me. “I knew you were fucking him.”

Nix grabs Connor by his shirt collar and shoves him backward. “Disappear. Now.”

“Sir, if you’re not a guest here, I’ll have to ask you to leave,” Ben says, standing about five inches in front of Connor. “Or we can go down to the station and discuss this further.”

Connor’s face drains of color. “There’s no problem, officer. Just a misunderstanding. I’m a guest at the resort. I’m headed up to my room right now.” He backs up a few more steps, then sprints toward the elevators.

Ben looks at Nix. “I see you’re still making friends everywhere you go.”

“He was fucking with Emory,” Nix growls. “No one gets away with that.”

“Who is he?” Ben asks. “Do you know him, Emory?”

Payton and Brenna have been watching everything unfold from about ten

feet away. When I don't say anything, Payton storms over to us.

“His name's Connor Albrecht. He's Emory's ex-boyfriend. They dated for about six months in college before she dumped him out of nowhere and completely broke his heart.” She looks over at me. “Didn't you know he would be here? He's a groomsman. He works with Edward.”

Chapter Ten

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

The second I heard Connor's name, the memories of that night flashed through my mind in such vivid detail that it felt like it just happened yesterday. I especially remember the violent way he pushed Emory into that snow drift, and from the way she's reacting to seeing him, I'm wondering what else happened after I left her the next morning.

"Of course I knew he was going to be here," Emory says, her voice trembling. "If you'll excuse me, I, uh, we need to check into our room."

"Yeah, let's get checked in, baby," I say, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and leading her over to the front desk.

Phil's face scrunches up as we approach him. "What the—"

"We're checking in," I say, loudly enough for the onlookers to hear. "Emory and Nix Fuller."

"Oh, shoot." Emory's voice is so quiet that I can barely hear her. "I think I made the reservation under my maiden name. Sorry, it's probably under Emory Hart."

Phil looks down at his computer. "Yes, ma'am, but it looks like your husband called and upgraded you to the presidential suite. We'll have it ready for you in a few minutes."

"The presidential suite?" The two women who were harassing Emory in my bar are still swarming around us. The one who keeps touching my arm leans on the desk next to me. "Not only are you gorgeous, but you're rich,

too? How did Emory get so lucky?”

“Believe me,” I say, turning my back to her. “I’m the lucky one.”

She weaves her way into our space again and splays her hand over my forearm.

“Emory, why didn’t anyone know you were married to this god?” she purrs. “I just texted Natalie. She didn’t even know. How is that possible?”

“Yes, how is that possible, Emory?” A woman in a long white dress holding a mass of pink flowers streaks across the lobby toward us. “I can’t believe I have to find out this news from Brenna. Why didn’t you tell me you were married? You only RSVP’d for one.”

“Entirely my fault,” I say as I extend my hand to the newcomer. “You must be the bride. I’m Emory’s husband, Nix Fuller. I had another obligation that canceled at the last minute, so I decided to tag along. I hope you don’t mind me crashing your wedding.”

Emory jumps in, her voice regaining a little of its strength. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you he was coming, Nat. It was so last minute. You don’t have to change the seating chart or anything. He doesn’t even have to come to the dinner part of the reception.”

She swats Emory with the flowers, causing pink petals to fly everywhere. “Are you kidding me? I don’t care about any of that. Of course he’s coming. I already know who to bump from your table.” She beams up at me. “It’s so nice to meet you, Nix. I’m Natalie. Now, tell me everything immediately. How long have you been married? And why wasn’t I invited to the wedding?”

“My fault again,” I say. “I’m not a big fan of crowds, so we had a small wedding with family.”

“Yes, a small wedding in *Concord, New Hampshire*,” Emory squeaks, her eyes widening as she looks up at me. “Concord, New Hampshire—where we live.”

“Yep, good old Concord,” I say, squeezing Emory’s shoulders. “I’ve lived there since we got married last August. So I guess we’ve been married almost a year now.”

Natalie’s forehead wrinkles up. “You kind of look familiar, Nix. Have we met?”

“I don’t think so,” I say, looking over at Phil. He’s leaning against the back wall sipping on a cup of coffee. “How are you doing with those room keys?”

“Are you sure?” Natalie continues. “I think I’ve definitely seen you somewhere.”

Emory collapses the rest of the way into me. I think I’m pretty much holding her upright at this point.

“Nix went to BC,” she says.

“Oh, that must be it,” Natalie says. “So, did you two meet in college?”

“Briefly. We didn’t get together until later,” I say, glaring back at Phil. “How about those room keys, buddy?”

Phil takes another sip of his coffee. “Oh, I don’t want to rush you, sir. Please take all the time you need to catch up with your old friends.”

“I think we’re all caught up,” I say, my jaw tightening as his smile grows. “If you have those keys, we’d like to go to our room now.”

“Of course, sir.” Phil takes the keys out of his jacket pocket and slides them across the desk. “Do you need help with your bags? I see you only have the one. You must be *very* efficient packers.”

“Very,” I snarl. “Em, are you ready to go to our room?”

“Yes, please.”

Natalie hits Emory’s arms with the flowers again. “Wait, before you leave, I’m confirming that you’re coming to the bachelorette party tonight. We have so much to catch up on.”

Emory looks up at me—her face somehow getting even paler. “Natalie was telling me her bachelorette party is at From The Ashes—that bar where we had lunch today.”

“Jesus,” I grumble, rubbing my hand over my face. “This just keeps getting better.”

“So much better. Just so, so very much better,” Phil says, another grin exploding onto his face. “Sir, we have a group that plays poker at that bar every Thursday night. We’re always looking for new players if you want to join us tonight. The bar’s kind of a dump, but it’s fine if you want to throw back a few beers.”

“Oh, I definitely want to throw back a few beers,” I say, shaking my head. “I just might join you.”

“What?” Natalie shrieks. “Nix, you can’t be at the same place we are. It’s a bachelorette party. Ladies only.”

The arm toucher circles back around. “Unless you want to be the stripper for the evening, Nix,” she says, running her hand over my bicep. “I’m sure we could all get behind that.”

“Pass,” I say, flipping her hand off me. “And no touching. My wife’s the only one who puts her hands on me.”

“You’re no fun at all,” she yells at my back as we hustle away.

When we get into the elevator, Emory leans against the back wall—her hands going to her knees. “There’s no way we’re going to pull this off. I might go home tomorrow.”

“Breathe,” I say, putting my hand on her back. “We’ll be fine.”

She sinks lower until she’s squatting. “I don’t think so. That whole thing was brutal.”

“Yeah, especially the part with your ex.” I try to control the anger in my voice before I continue. “Do you want to tell me what’s going on there? You seemed a little uncomfortable around him.”

“A little? I must be a good actress if you thought that was a little uncomfortable.” She puts her hands over her eyes. “I never would have come to the wedding if I knew he was going to be here. Did everyone hear my conversation with him?”

“I don’t think so. No one was around when I walked into the lobby. What happened between you two? Fill me in so I know what we’re dealing with here.”

When the elevator opens into the suite, she drops to her hands and knees, crawls off, then falls facedown onto the floor. “We’re not dealing with anything. I have it handled.”

“Yeah, it seems like you have it handled,” I say, scooping up her limp body and depositing it on the couch. “Tell me what’s going on. What did he do to you?”

“Can we talk about something else?” She edges her way back on the couch until she’s nestled into the mound of pillows arranged on one end. “Anything. Please?”

“Sure,” I say, softening my tone as I sit down next to her. “We can talk about anything you want.”

She tugs the blanket off the back of the couch and throws it over herself. “Thanks for switching it up back there, by the way. You must think I’m a total flake. I’m sorry I put you on the spot like that.”

“It’s fine,” I say, pulling the ends of the blanket down so it covers her feet. “I put you on the spot in the bar, so now we’re even.”

“Not even close,” she says, nudging my hand with her foot. “You tried to suffocate me with your mouth. I just confused you a little bit. We have a long

way to go before we're even."

"Fair enough. What would make us even? Do you want to punch me?"

"Kind of," she says, her eyes brightening a little. "Actually, way more than kind of. I very much want to punch you."

I open my arms to give her a clear shot. "Fire away. Kicking's fine, too."

A smile starts to edge onto her face before it disappears into an extended yawn. "I'm too tired to put my best into it right now. Can I get a rain check on the punching?"

"Yep. Any time." I motion toward the array of beverages arranged on the table in front of the couch. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Are you trying to get me drunk again?"

"I'm pretty sure I didn't get you drunk the first time," I say, raising my eyebrows. "You did that all on your own. Although I can't say I blame you now that I've met these people."

"Right? This whole situation begs for liquid therapy." She sits up and takes a bottle of champagne out of the ice bucket. "Hey, should we get to know some basics about each other since we're supposed to be married?"

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I'm guessing by your less-than-subtle hint in the lobby that you live in Concord, New Hampshire."

She pushes my hand away when I try to help her with the champagne. "That's where I was born. I moved back after college."

"You mean after you graduated from BC?"

"I didn't graduate from there," she says, her face twisting up as she tries to tug the cork out of the bottle. "I left my junior year."

"Oh, yeah," I say, trying to sound casual. "Why'd you leave?"

"Uh, my parents couldn't afford BC's tuition anymore. So I finished college back in New Hampshire."

I watch her struggle with the bottle for a few more seconds before I grab it. "Let me open the damn thing before you bust a vein. Are you always this stubborn?"

"I'm not stubborn," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm independent."

"Is that what you call it? You know you can let other people do some things for you, especially when they make their living doing that exact thing."

"You do pour a drink very nicely," she says as I hand her a glass of champagne. "How long have you owned the bar?"

“Since I moved here last year.”

“Where were you before?”

I pop open a beer and rest back on the couch. “I was in Chicago for about four years while I was playing, but I grew up in California—a little town called Twentynine Palms.”

“Twentynine Palms?” She giggles over the top of her champagne glass. “Come on. That’s not a real place.”

“I’m sorry to say that it is. It’s right on the edge of the desert—near Joshua Tree National Park.”

“Why are you sorry? That seems like a cool place to grow up.”

“I guess,” I say, shrugging. “Honestly, I wasn’t there a lot after I got to middle school. I spent most of my time in a car with Cardi driving back and forth to the only ice rink anywhere near us. Cardi and my big brother, Hawk, basically raised my little sister, Robin, and me.”

Her hand flies over her mouth. “Bird names! Cardi told me your parents named you after birds. Is Nix short for Phoenix? It is, right? And From The Ashes is a play on your name? Like a phoenix rising from the ashes? How did I miss that?”

“You have a habit of rapid firing questions without allowing the other person to respond,” I say, laughing. “But yeah, you cracked the code. My name’s Phoenix.”

She snuggles back into the pillows and exhales slowly. She seems to have recovered from her encounter with Connor—at least temporarily.

“This suite is bigger than my entire place back home,” she says, glancing around the room. “I know there’s no way I can afford it. I probably should have thought about that while we were downstairs, but I was just trying to survive the onslaught of questions.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure Phil gave us a free upgrade because no one’s using the suite this weekend. And it’s better for our situation, anyway. If we want to pull off this fake marriage, I should probably stay at the resort. This way, I can sleep on the couch.”

A flicker of disappointment flashes across her face.

“I mean,” I say, looking at the bedroom, “unless you want me to share the bed with you—”

She recovers quickly. “We’re not sharing anything. You’re sleeping on the couch. Remember, this is a *fake* marriage. There will be absolutely no consummation.”

“Alright,” I say, smiling, “but I don’t want to see you tiptoeing out here in the middle of the night, trying to snuggle up with me.”

“Shut up.” Her foot taps me harder this time, then rests against my leg. “Believe me, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Excellent,” I say as I rest my hand on her foot. “I feel safer already.”

Chapter Eleven

EMORY

Champion Cove, North Carolina

When Nix parks in front of From The Ashes, I don't want to get out of the car. Hanging out with him for the past couple hours has been surprisingly enjoyable. The asshole who I met this afternoon seems to have been replaced by an interesting, funny, and almost soft-spoken man.

"Keys, please," I say, holding out my hand. "You have to give them to me now. I'm completely sober, and I plan to stay that way all night."

He lets out a low growl before he finally relinquishes my rental car keys to me. "Don't try to drive back to the resort if you're drunk. Call me and I'll come and get you. Promise me."

"What did I just say? Seriously, I really think you have a hearing problem."

He grabs my arm as I open the door. "I heard you, but if you change your mind—"

"I know. I know. I'll call you. You've told me that like a million times," I say, smiling. "Quit nagging me, Fuller."

"I'll nag you as many times as it takes to get it through that stubborn—I mean *independent*—head of yours," he says, squeezing my arm before he releases me. "As I already told you, you don't have to do everything for yourself. Let people help when they offer."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Debatable." He points at me over the roof of the car. "If you get in a tight spot, my bouncer's name is Riley. I told him to look out for you. Big

bald guy with full sleeves of tats. You can't miss him."

"Unbelievable. You're still trying to help," I say, my arms flying in the air. "Quit bossing me."

"Honestly, I think you could use a little bossing, Mrs. Fuller."

"Mrs. Fuller? Oh, absolutely not," I say as I back toward the bar. "Save that for when we have an audience. Fake marriage, remember?"

He taps on the hood of a black SUV. "This Yukon's mine. So now you know what to look for when I have to pick you up tonight."

"You definitely got hit in the head too much playing hockey. For the gazillionth time, I'm not drinking tonight," I say, putting up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

"Were you even a scout?" he yells from behind me.

"Irrelevant," I say, waving my hand to dismiss him as I open the door to the bar.

When I walk in, no one turns to look at me like they did this afternoon. It's definitely a different crowd—younger and a whole lot rowdier.

Natalie's standing over by the pool tables. She's sporting an itty-bitty white dress, accessorized by a veil that's sticking up almost a half foot over her head.

"I'll show you how to shoot," a guy says, trying to force a pool stick into her hand as he circles his other arm around her waist. "Bend over a little bit. You're in good hands."

"I don't know, Nat," I say, rushing over to her. "I wouldn't bend over too far in that dress."

"Emory!" She shoves the pool stick out of her way. "I thought you were blowing me off when you didn't meet us in the lobby."

"Not a chance," I say, glaring at the pervert who's still trying to press up against her butt. "I wanted to drive myself. I'm a little tired from my day of travel. I'm not sure how long I'll stay."

She takes my hand and leads me over to the benches in the corner. "Well, I'm just glad you came. I want to know everything I've missed in the past five years. Let's begin with that gorgeous creature you married."

"Nat," I whisper, "we're not married."

She almost spills her wine as she lurches backward. "What?"

"Shh," I say, scanning the bar to make sure no one heard her. "It started as a joke when we ran into Payton and Brenna earlier, then it kind of exploded. You're the only one who knows the truth. Are you mad?"

“Not even a little bit. You know how much I like messing with people. I’m just sad you’re not actually married to him. He’s gorgeous and he seems sweet. Any potential there?”

“I just met him today.”

“Wait,” she says, motioning to the waiter for a refill, “I thought he said you knew each other back in Boston.”

“I think he made that up to cover our asses. That whole scene in the lobby caught us off guard,” I say as I lean back against the wall. “I should probably come clean. I don’t think it’s worth all the angst.”

“Don’t you dare. If lying means you get to hang out with—and maybe do many other things with—a man who looks like that, you’re going to lie your ass off all weekend. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

A huge bald man covered in tattoos makes it over to us with Natalie’s wine and a glass of water which he hands to me. “I’m Riley. Nix told me to give this water to the woman who just walked in wearing, and I quote, ‘the black shirt with no sleeves or top or anything.’ I’m guessing that’s you.”

“That’s me. Looks like I need to teach him some fashion terms—starting with strapless.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Riley says, snatching a pool stick away from a man who’s waving it like a Jedi warrior. “Save the *Star Trek* stuff for your mom’s basement. This is only to be used to play pool.”

The guy twirls around to confront him, then freezes when he gets a good look at Riley’s massive frame.

“Yes, sir,” he says, taking a step back, “but I think you meant *Star Wars*.”

“Do I look like I give a crap which star thing developed your asshole behavior?” Riley shoves the pool stick back at him. “Wave this around again and I’m breaking it over your head before I throw you out.”

As Riley stomps away, Natalie coos, “Mmmm, if I’m going to have one last fling before I get married, I think Riley has stepped into the lead. I mean, unless you want to give me access to the fake hubby. Nix seems like kind of a control freak, too, and Mommy really likes to be told what to do sometimes.”

“Ew, don’t ever call yourself Mommy again,” I say, swatting her hand. “And stop fantasizing about other men. You’re getting married in two days.”

“Oh, I’ve missed you, Emmie,” she says, holding up her glass for a toast. “We have so much to catch up on.”

“So much.” I clink my glass with hers. “Let’s start with the fact that Connor’s at your wedding. Why didn’t you tell me he was going to be here? I

never would have come.”

She boops my nose. “Which is precisely why I didn’t tell you. I wanted you to be here so badly, and I know how much you hate him now. I don’t know what went down with you two back in college, but Connor has matured. He works with Edward at the equity firm. That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier.”

“He hasn’t matured. I saw him in the lobby today. It was pretty awful.”

“On whose part?” She leans back on the wall next to me. “Connor wanted me to invite you. I think he wants to mend fences.”

“He doesn’t want to mend anything. He wants to fuck with me.”

“I don’t think so, Em. He’s engaged, and his fiancée, Stephanie, is amazing.”

My eyes widen. “Oh yeah? When I saw him this afternoon, he said he broke up with his fiancée.”

“What?” She sits bolt upright. “No, he didn’t. We were just out to dinner with them like a month ago.”

“Is Stephanie here with him?”

“No,” she says slowly. “Connor said she has a bad case of food poisoning and couldn’t make it.”

“Well, he’s lying to one of us,” I say, exhaling slowly. “And either way, he’s still completely unbalanced, even if he’s convinced you otherwise.”

“Huh,” Natalie says, springing off the bench. “I’m calling Stephanie to see what’s going on. I’ll be right back.”

When she walks out of the bar, I look at the group of women gathered around the pool tables. They’re all wearing sashes that say, “Bridal PARTY!” The only two I know are Payton and Brenna, and since I have absolutely no desire to hang out with them, I wander over to the dart boards in the corner of the room. I grab a handful of darts and start slinging them at the board, oblivious to all the craziness around me.

“We meet again. And this time it looks like your worse half isn’t with you.”

Before I can react, Connor puts his hand on my back and lets it slide down until his fingers hook on the elastic of my strapless top.

“Get your hands off me, Connor,” I say, holding up a dart. “I have weapons this time.”

“Weapons you don’t know how to use,” he says, tugging at my shirt before he finally releases it. “You didn’t even hit the board with that last

one.”

“Connor!” Payton romps over from the pool tables. “This is the bachelorette party. No guys allowed.”

“Oh, man. I must of heard Eddie wrong,” he says. “I thought he said the bachelor party was here.”

“It’s not,” I snarl. “And no one wants you here.”

“That’s not very nice, Em,” Connor says. “I’m sure Payton wants me here.”

Natalie’s suddenly beside me again. “It isn’t Payton’s decision. This is my bachelorette party and I want you to leave. Now.”

“Settle down, Nat,” he says. “I just got the place wrong. You know I’m bad with directions. Steph always handles that.”

“Although apparently not anymore,” Natalie says, holding up her phone. “I just talked to her. She says she broke off the engagement two weeks ago. I thought you said she had food poisoning.”

“Both can be true, and Stephanie didn’t break it off. I did,” he says, turning back to me. “And can you blame me? I mean, I knew my gorgeous ex-girlfriend would be here. Why would I want any other woman with me?”

Natalie steps in front of me. “You need to leave. Emory doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

“I don’t think that’s true at all,” Connor says, winking at me. “We already share so many things. Don’t we, Em?”

“We don’t share anything, asshole.”

He cocks his head. “You sure about that?”

“Excuse us.” I push Connor to the corner of the room.

“Okay, okay,” he shouts as he puts his hands in the air. “You don’t have to get rough with me. I’m yours for the night. Take me.”

“Are you forgetting our agreement?” I whisper. “I don’t tell anyone what you did if you stay away from me.”

He leans back against the wall and grins. “Seems to me you’re the one who’s trying to get me alone right now, and believe me, I’m all in favor of that. Maybe we can duck into the bathroom real quick.”

“You’re disgusting. Leave me alone,” I say, jabbing my finger into his face. “This is your last warning. You skated by last time, but never again. If you keep harassing me, I’m calling the cops.”

When I turn to walk back to the dart boards, the entire bachelorette party crew is staring at me.

“What was that about?” Natalie asks. “What does he mean that you two share something?”

“He doesn’t mean anything,” I say, trying to smile as I hand her a dart. “Let’s play. It’s your turn.”

When she doesn’t make a move to throw the dart, I throw one of mine.

“Emmmm,” Connor says, slithering back over to us. “Your form’s all wrong. Let me help you.”

“My form’s fine,” I say, turning my back to him. “I don’t need your help—with anything. Never have. Never will.”

He plucks a dart out of my jeans back pocket where I have the extras stored. “Here, I’ll show you how to throw,” he says, circling his arm around my waist.

I’m getting ready to put my elbow into his stomach when he suddenly flies backward. When I turn around, Nix has him flattened against the wall—his massive forearm to Connor’s neck.

“If anyone’s going to teach my wife how to throw a dart, it will be me.” He grabs the dart out of Connor’s hand and sidearms it into the bullseye on the board. “Wanna keep playing with me, Connor? Then let’s do this, but fair warning, my next two darts are going right through those wandering hands of yours.”

Chapter Twelve

Champion Cove, North Carolina

After I dropped Emory off at the bar, I headed to my office through the back entrance. For some reason, I knew something was going to go down tonight. My suspicions were confirmed when Riley alerted me that a guy in a Red Sox hat was messing with Emory.

I shove Connor's neck one last time before I release him and turn to Emory. "You okay?"

"Why are you still here?" She runs over and crashes against my chest. "Never mind. I'm just glad you didn't leave."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say, wrapping her up in my arms.

"Same shit, different night. Nix Fuller rides in on his white stallion to save the day," Connor huffs. "I really thought you didn't know her that night in college. Brilliant acting job. Like an Oscar-worthy performance, bruh."

Emory turns around in my arms to face Connor. "What night in college?"

"Don't try to act innocent, Emory," Connor says, a vein popping out on his forehead. "I'm so fucking tired of taking the blame for everything."

When I whistle, Riley thunders over to us. "What's up?"

I nod at Connor. "It's time for him to leave."

"On it," Riley says, pushing his T-shirt sleeves up as he closes in on Connor.

"What? Why am I getting kicked out?" Connor points at me. "He's threatening me. Kick him out."

"Yeah, I'll get right on that," Riley says, sweeping his arm toward the

door. “Would you like to leave on your own or do I need to help you?”

“Fuck y—”

Riley grabs Connor’s throat before he can finish. “Looks like I’ll need to help you.”

“This isn’t over, Emory. Not even close,” Connor squeaks as Riley shoves him toward the door. “I knew you were fucking him in college.”

“Who?” Emory looks up at me. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

“Not here, Em,” I say, glaring at the bachelorette women who are drinking in every second of the drama. “We can talk about it later.”

“Talk about what later?”

“Keep moving,” I say, guiding her toward the front door. “We need to get out of here.”

She’s looking up at me—her face all scrunched up. I can almost see the wheels turning in her head.

“Nix, stop.” She plants her feet when we get to my truck. “What’s going on?”

“Please get in,” I say, opening the passenger side door. “I don’t want an audience.”

“An audience for what? I’m not getting in until you start talking,” she says, leaning back against the truck. “Did you know Connor at BC?”

“Kind of,” I say, sighing as I shake my head. “Do you remember the night in college when you were fighting with Connor in front of the library? He pushed you into a snow drift.”

“Yeah.” Her face scrunches up again. “How do you know about that?”

I inhale a deep breath and blow it out slowly. “Do you remember a guy running up and getting in between you two?”

“Yeah.” She closes her eyes. “How do you know about that guy?”

“Because it was me,” I blurt out. “I’m that guy.”

Her eyes snap open. “That’s not true.”

“Yeah, it is,” I say, putting my hand on the roof of the truck and leaning over her. “I’m the guy who got in between you two that night.”

“No you aren’t.” She sounds a little less convinced this time. “Prove it. Tell me something else about that night.”

“You hit me in the throat with a snowball. I gave you my coat. You got mad when I tried to zip it up for you. You accused me of trying to immobilize your arms. I walked you home. We talked for hours. You fell asleep on my chest. You—”

“Stop talking,” she says, putting her hand over my mouth. “Just stop talking.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell—”

“What part of stop talking don’t you understand?” She pushes at my chest. “Back up before I completely lose it on you.”

“Why don’t we talk more about this on the way to the resort?”

She ducks under my arm. “Fuck you.”

“Em, stop,” I say, grabbing her shoulder. “I can explain. I was going to tell you, but—”

She jerks away from me. “I was just starting to think you were a good guy and you lie to me. How long have you recognized me? Did you just put it together tonight?”

“No, I recognized you the second you walked into the bar yesterday.”

“Unbelievable,” she says, her hands flying to her hips. “Why didn’t you tell me then?”

I look at my feet. “I don’t know. I should have.”

She starts walking away, then spins back around. “How did you even know it was me? That was so long ago.”

I shrug. “For some reason, your face has stayed fresh in my mind all this time.”

She backs up a few steps. “Have you been stalking me?”

“No,” I say, reaching out to her. “Of course not.”

“I don’t believe you,” she says, swatting my hand away.

“You walked into my bar, remember? I wasn’t looking for you. I didn’t even know your last name until yesterday.”

“I can’t deal with this right now. I’m leaving,” she says, twirling back around and heading down the street.

“Your car’s in the other direction.”

“I’m walking back to the resort,” she says, her heels clicking angrily on the pavement. “Don’t follow me.”

“You’re not walking anywhere,” I say, getting back in front of her. “Connor’s probably still out here somewhere.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure who I should be more concerned about right now.”

“You know that’s not true,” I say, putting my hand on her shoulder. “I’m a dumbass for not telling you the truth, but I would never hurt you. And I won’t let anyone else hurt you either.”

She lowers her shoulder and fires a quick jab into my gut.

“Fuck,” I say, grabbing my stomach. “Where’d you learn to punch like that? That hurt like hell.”

“Good. Touch me again and my aim will be about six inches lower.”

I follow her as she continues to click down the street. “Will you at least give me back my darts before you leave?”

She jerks one of them out of her back pocket and hurls it toward our town’s welcome sign. It lodges right into the town mascot’s eye.

“Nice shot,” I say. “You have a few more darts. Maybe try for his other eye.”

She grabs the remaining darts out of her pocket and rapid fires them into the ground to accentuate each of her words.

“Leave. Me. Alone.”

Nope. Not a chance, but I’ll give you a few minutes to reconsider.

When I turn around to head back to my truck, Ben’s pulling up in front of the bar. “What’s up, Nix? Riley told me you had some trouble.”

“Yeah, the same guy from the resort today. His name’s Connor Albrecht. He left about ten minutes ago.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for him.” Ben nods to the hand that’s still covering my stomach. “He take a shot at you?”

“No, Emory did this damage.”

“Well, you probably deserved at least one good punch from her,” he says as he motions down the street. “Is that her? Where’s she going?”

“She thinks she’s walking back to the resort.”

“In the middle of the mountains at night? Naw, that’s not happening.” He flips his headlights on bright. “Looks like she’s already having trouble navigating those rocks. Want me to give her a ride?”

“No, I’ve got her. I need to apologize to her for being a jackass.”

“Honestly, you need to apologize to all of us for that,” he says, chuckling as he drives away.

When I pull up next to Emory, she’s carrying her shoes in her hand, tiptoeing across a rocky part of the road.

“You still have about six miles to go,” I say as I slam the Yukon into park. “You’ll never make it at this pace. Please get in my truck before you hurt yourself.”

As if on cue, she yelps and yanks her foot up to her hand.

I jump out of the truck. “Did you twist your ankle?”

She tries to hop away from me but ends up crashing down on her butt in the gravel.

“Stop!” She holds up her foot to try to block my advance. “I mean it, Nix. Don’t get near me.”

“Em, come on,” I say, taking another small step toward her. “I think your foot’s bleeding. Let me at least take a look at it.”

“No.” She pushes herself up and hobbles a few more steps down the road. “Go away. I’m fine.”

“Emory Hart, get in this truck right now,” I order. “I’m done playing with your stubborn ass.”

“Ow, ow, ow,” she whimpers as she limps away from me.

“You have ten seconds to turn around. Ten, nine.”

She quickens her pace. “You can’t make me stay in your truck.”

“The fuck I can’t. I’ll strap you in if I have to,” I growl as I close in on her again. “Eight, seven, six.”

“Strap me in?” She looks over her shoulder. “I think that’s called kidnapping.”

I throw my arms open wide as I continue to close in on her. “Add it to the growing list of my offenses against you. You have five more seconds to decide on your own. Five—”

“Stop counting!”

“Four, three.” I pause for a second to let her reconsider. “Your last warning.”

“Fuck you.”

“Two, one.”

When I go silent, she hops faster. I quickly close the distance between us and sweep her up into my arms.

“Stop it! You can’t just pick me up.”

“Looks like I just did,” I say, tightening my grip as she twists around in my arms. “I’m putting you down on the car seat. Stop struggling or you’ll hit your head.”

She stops struggling long enough for me to put her down, but the minute her butt hits the seat, she tries to slide off.

“Emory,” I say, pressing my body against her knees to prevent her escape, “I know you’re pissed at me, but you’re not walking back to the resort in the dark. In addition to Connor lurking around, there are bears and bobcats and snakes—”

She raises her feet when I mention the snakes.

“Seriously? Out of that list, the snakes scare you the most?”

“They’re the sneakiest,” she says, raising her feet higher. “At least I could see the others coming.”

“I won’t even try to argue with that logic,” I say, holding out my hand. “Give me your foot and don’t kick me. I’m still recovering from that gut punch.”

“You really are a pain wimp,” she says, making no attempt to raise her foot.

“And you’re a lot of work,” I say, grabbing her foot and holding it up to the light. “It’s bleeding, but it doesn’t look like there’s anything lodged in there. You probably just stepped on a sharp rock. Jake can meet us at the resort and look at it. He was a medic in the Air Force. Just please stay put until we get back there.”

She snatches her foot back from me. “Fine. You can drive me back if you promise you won’t say another word to me.”

I put my finger to my lips, then mouth, *I promise*.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re the worst person I’ve ever met.”

“Then you need to get out more,” I say, tucking her legs into the truck, “because I can name ten people in Champion Cove alone who are way worse than me.”

“Impossible,” she yells as I close her door. “And I thought you promised not to talk anymore.”

Chapter Thirteen

EMORY

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

When I woke up, I was still angry. Mainly at myself. I never should have come to this wedding. If I had stayed at home, Connor and Nix would both still be in the past where they belong.

My best move is probably to get out of town today, but the airline change fees cost almost as much as my original flight did. As I'm scrolling through my phone to check the prices again, a text comes in from Natalie.

I told Edward how Connor was treating you last night. He removed him from the wedding party and asked him to leave. The resort confirmed he checked out this morning.

What??? He didn't have to do that. I was planning on leaving today anyway.

There's work stuff going on that I can't talk about, but you were right. I think Connor's losing it. He's gone, so you can enjoy yourself now. Please don't

leave. Promise?

I take my first truly deep breath in about twelve hours.

I promise. I'll see you at the rehearsal dinner tonight.

Since I apparently don't have to worry about Connor stalking me anymore, I decide to take a walk around the lake. Fresh air usually helps me make some sense out of the thoughts swirling around in my head.

When I head past the front desk, Phil looks up. "Good morning, Mrs. Fuller. Is your worthless husband sleeping in this morning?"

"Uh," I say, biting my lip, "that whole thing kind of blew up in our faces last night. I'm back to being single."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Emory." He holds up his hand. "I'll stop. I play too much. Nix is such an attractive target to tease, but I didn't mean to sweep you up in it. How's your room? Is there anything you need?"

"It's gorgeous, but I should have told you yesterday that I wanted my normal room. There's no way I can afford the suite. Can I switch today?"

"No need. Nix texted me this morning and told me to charge your portfolio to his card."

"Absolutely not," I say, rushing over to the desk. "I don't want Nix paying for anything. I'll give you my card when I get back from hiking."

"You can give me anything you want, but your bill's already prepaid. I'm afraid I can't charge you for a zero balance." He motions me to follow him to the other side of the desk, then whispers, "And by the way, that Connor guy who's been messing with you checked out of the resort this morning."

"What?" I take a step back. "How did you know about that?"

"Riley told Mika what happened in the bar last night, and she told me," he says, leaning over the desk and peering down at my feet. "She also said you hurt your foot last night. Should you be hiking?"

"Unbelievable," I say, shaking my head. "Are there any secrets in the town? Riley wasn't even there when I cut my foot."

"I'm sure Jake told Mika after he left your room last night. He tells her everything."

“Not everything,” I mumble under my breath.

“You know something.” He glances around the lobby to make sure we’re alone. “What doesn’t he tell her? Start talking.”

“I will not start talking. Unlike the citizens of this fair town, I like to practice discretion,” I say, smiling as I back away from him. “And my foot’s fine. Just a small cut and it’s already healing. Will you get that information out so the rest of the town doesn’t think my injury was fatal?”

“Sending up the smoke signals now,” he says, pointing at me as I back through the exit doors. “And just FYI, discretion isn’t something we tolerate in Champion Cove. Give us another twenty-four hours and I guarantee we’ll break you.”

When I’m about halfway around the lake, the path leads into a meadow full of buttercups. I’m taking a minute to watch the bright yellow flowers sway in the cool breeze when I see something springing toward me. Every few seconds a head pops out of the flowers, then disappears back into the tall grass.

A woman’s voice cries out. “Hulk! Stop!”

This time when the head pops up, I see it’s a dog with a fuzzy golden face and tall pointy ears.

“Slow down, you crazy animal,” the breathless woman says from somewhere in the trees.

“Well, hello, sweet thing,” I say as the dog explodes through the last bunch of grass and circles my legs. “Are you Hulk?”

When she hears her name, she immediately rolls over on her back and starts shaking her hind quarters. “You are Hulk, aren’t you? That doesn’t seem like the right name for such a pretty girl.”

“It’s actually Princess Hulk.” The woman’s voice is right behind me now. “And it’s the perfect name for her—half spoiled princess and half fiercely protective hulk. We think she’s a Golden Retriever/German Shepard mix.”

When I turn around, Cardi’s smiling at me.

“She wants you to give her a belly rub,” she says, motioning to Hulk, who’s continuing to wiggle around on the ground. “That’s an extreme compliment. I’ve never seen her warm up to someone this quickly.”

“Well, I will take it as an extreme compliment because you’re the sweetest thing in the world,” I coo as I sit down next to Hulk and start in on her fully exposed belly. “She’s so adorable. How long have you had her?”

“Nix found her not too far from here the week he moved to Champion Cove.”

My eyes dart around the meadow when I hear his name.

“Don’t worry. He’s not with me.”

“Why would I be worried about that?” I ignore her persistent gaze. “So he found Hulk in the woods?”

“Yeah, she was cowering in some bushes. Some redneck shot her in the leg. I’m not sure if Hulk escaped him or if he dumped her out here to die, but either way, I’d like to beat the crap out of him. Hulk was so skinny when Nix found her and scared of everything. She still has enormous trust issues until she’s known someone for a while. Although, you seem to be an exception to that.”

Hulk finally rights herself and takes off toward the ducks that are trying to sun themselves on the shore of the lake.

“So do you want to tell me what went on between you and Nix last night?” Cardi asks, sitting down next to me. “He was upset when he got back to the house.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say, watching the ducks waddle into the water as Hulk closes in on them.

“I see you’re a fan of the slow road, too.” Cardi lets out a long sigh. “Emory, I’m one of the best corporate attorneys in the country. I work with high-stakes pathological liars all day, every day. You’re not even close to fooling me. Tell me what happened.”

“What did he say?”

“I couldn’t get it out of him,” she says, lying back in the grass. “He’s a bad liar, too, but he’s the most stubborn person I know.”

“I’m stubborn, too, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

She laughs. “Nice try. You’re dying to talk about it.”

I manage to stay quiet for about eight seconds before the words spew from my mouth. “He recognized me from college the second I walked into the bar yesterday, but he didn’t tell me until last night. I know he’s your brother, but isn’t that weird?”

“So weird—”

“And,” I say, holding up my hand. “That’s not even the worst part. We

spent the night together in college, but not like sex or anything. I had just fought with my boyfriend, and Nix kind of came to my rescue. He stayed awake with me most of the night just talking. He remembers all of that, but he didn't say anything. That's creepy, right?"

She looks up at me. "Emory, my dear brother always makes things weirder than they need to be, but not because he's a creep. He's the furthest thing from that. Trust me."

Hulk ambles back over and stretches out between us—her head landing on my legs.

"Then why did he keep all that from me?" I ask, lying back next to her in the grass. "I was just starting to think he was a good guy, then I find out he's been lying to me the entire time."

"He wasn't really lying to you. He was withholding information."

I turn my head toward her. "Is there a difference?"

"To him there is. I've never known Nix to lie about something important. Not once. But he withholds a lot of information, especially when he thinks it will make him vulnerable. Actually, it's a pretty natural response to being abandoned at a young age."

"What do you mean? Who abandoned him?"

"Our parents pretty much abandoned all of us, but that's a story for another day," she says as a now-snoozing Hulk's legs start moving. "We're not sure if she dreams about running away from her former owner or chasing ducks, but her legs move nonstop when she sleeps."

"She's so sweet," I say, running my hand over her soft fur. "I'm thinking about getting a dog for my suh, I mean, for myself."

"For your suh? It seems Nix isn't the only one who likes to withhold information." When I don't reply, she pats my hand. "You don't have to tell me, but full disclosure, I ran a background check on you yesterday."

"You did what?" Hulk lets out a low growl when I sit up, causing her head to drop off my legs. "Why?"

"It has nothing to do with you personally," Cardi says, her eyes locking with mine. "I run background checks on everyone who tries to get near me or my siblings. I'm a highly suspicious person."

"Whatever," I say, looking out at the lake. "I mean, it's not like you found anything on me."

She sits up next to me. "You already know what I found. There's a sealed case with your name on it in the New Hampshire courts. Care to tell me what

that's about?"

I look down as Hulk claims me as her pillow again. "I don't know what you're talking about. Maybe it's a different Emory Hart."

"Connor Albrecht's name is on the file, too. Ben told me that's the name of the guy who's been harassing you this weekend. Connor's name actually came up quite a few times in my search. Did you know he's being investigated for embezzlement in New York?"

My mouth drops open. "What?"

"Yep, very serious felonies, and a woman filed assault charges against him about a month ago. Her name's Stephanie. I'm forgetting her last name. Ring any bells?"

"That's his fiancée," I say, covering my face with my hands. "Well, ex-fiancée. She apparently broke off the engagement."

"Sounds like the right move," she says, pulling my hands down. "Emory, is that what the sealed case is? Did he hit you?"

"Even if I wanted to talk about it, I couldn't. There's a gag order on that case. If I say anything to anyone, the agreement's off."

"Understood. Do you have any money on you?"

"What?" I look back at her. "Why do you need money right now?"

"I don't. You need money to hire me as your attorney, then I'm bound by attorney-client privilege not to divulge anything you're about to tell me." She unzips her fanny pack and takes out a dollar. "And it's your lucky day. I'm having a sale—unlimited legal advice for only a buck."

She lays the dollar bill on top of Hulk. "Look, Hulk found a dollar. She wants to give it to you. Pick it up before it blows away."

"Do you swear you won't tell anyone?"

"No one. I won't risk being disbarred by breaking privilege."

I narrow my eyes. "Not even Nix?"

"Not even Nix. I'm loyal to my siblings, but I'm also loyal to my career."

"Fine," I say, snatching the bill off Hulk and handing it back to Cardi. "I would like to retain you as an attorney."

"I'm on the job," she says, shoving the bill back in her bag. "Now start talking."

EMORY - Before

*Five Years Ago
Boston College
Boston, Massachusetts*

When I wake up in the morning, he's gone. I think it might of been a dream until I see a note scribbled on the back of a Chinese carryout menu.

Had to get to hockey practice. Didn't want to wake you. I'll be gone for a week with conference playoffs. I'll check on you when I get back. Call me if you want to talk before then.

He left his phone number, but not his name. Was it Nick? I don't remember much about last night except bawling so much that I think I passed out on his chest from dehydration.

My phone vibrates from the coffee table by the couch. I dive at it, thinking it might be him before I remember that I didn't even give him my number.

The text is from my roommate, Natalie. It's the latest in a series that she's left overnight. I push myself off the couch and head back to my bed to read them.

Hey. I'm sleeping at Jeremy's tonight after I get off work. Let's do a girls' night tomorrow. I'm craving Chinese.

*Em? Why no response? Where are you? Are you still looking for Connor?
You never told me what you wanted to talk to him about.*

*Where are you? Are you okay?!! I texted Payton. She said you and Connor
got into a very public fight tonight. Want me to come home?*

*It's going around the group that you're cheating on Connor. I told everyone
it wasn't true and to STFU. I tried to call you. WHERE ARE YOU?*

*Payton said you left with some guy after you and Connor fought. What guy?
Are you really with someone else?*

*She said the mystery guy stayed at our apartment last night... WTF???!!! Is
he still there? Did you and Connor break up? Rebound?*

**EMORY JOY HART. RESPOND TO ME RIGHT NOW OR I'M SENDING IN
THE SWAT TEAM.**

*Sorry, I just saw ALL your texts. Yes, Connor and I fought last night. No,
we're not broken up and no, I'm not cheating on him.*

Yes, a guy stayed here last night, but nothing happened. We just talked.

*How did Payton even know about that? I swear she planted cameras in our
apartment.*

I jump when I hear someone pounding on our front door.

“Emory!” Connor’s voice explodes through the apartment. “Open the door.”

*Connor just got here. Don't come home yet. I need to talk to him alone. Give
me a couple hours. I'll text you when the coast is clear.*

More pounding. Even louder this time. It sounds like he's trying to kick in the door. "Emory!"

When I walk into the living room, Connor's peering through the glass panes at the top of our door.

"Open the fucking door," he yells through the glass. "Now!"

"I'm coming. Quit yelling or the neighbors will call the cops."

When I unlock the door, he pushes it open so suddenly that it smacks into my face.

"Connor!" I grab my cheek as the pain shoots through it. "You just hit me with the door."

He ignores me and charges down the hall into my bedroom. "Where is he? Did he already leave?"

"Where's who?"

I stop in the bathroom to look at my face. No bleeding but it's already pounding. I move my mouth around a little bit to make sure nothing's broken.

"You know who." Connor rushes into the bathroom. "Payton said he slept here last night."

"Settle down." When I try to get around him, he blocks me with his body. "I didn't sleep with him, Connor. Nothing happened. I needed someone to talk to—about you. Did you forget what an asshole you were last night? And are continuing to be right now, by the way."

I slide under his arm and walk into the kitchen to get an ice pack for my face. He stalks behind me.

"How long have you been sleeping with him?"

"I told you I'm not sleeping with him. I met him last night at the same time you did." I grab a bag of corn out of the freezer and hold it to my cheek. "Do you want to apologize for hitting me in the face with the door? And shoving me into the snow last night?"

He marches out into the living room. When I get out there, he's holding the Chinese menu.

"Is this note from him?" He crumples up the menu and spikes it into the couch. "He's going to check in on you? For what? What did you tell him about me?"

"I don't even remember. Last night's kind of a blur."

He grabs the bag of corn out of my hand and throws it across the room. "The door barely hit you. You're trying to make way too big a deal out of everything right now."

“What’s wrong with you? You’ve never been like this. I seriously think you’re losing it.”

“You know I’m being recruited by every top equity firm in New York,” he says, putting his finger in my face. “They have spies everywhere. I don’t need you spreading rumors about me around campus. Tell me exactly what you said to him.”

“Do you have a hearing problem?” I swat his finger out of my face. “I just said I don’t remember what we talked about. Can we move on from this? We have more important things to talk about.”

When I turn around, he’s right behind me—sweat pouring down his forehead.

“You need to settle down, Connor. Maybe come back later when you can have a conversation like an adult. We have to figure out what we’re going to do—”

He grabs my arm. “I already told you what we’re going to do. Go to the clinic and take care of it. I’ll pay if that’s the problem.”

“Do you think the money is what I’m worried about?” I yank my arm away from him. “I haven’t decided what I want to do yet.”

“It’s not just your decision,” he says, stomping to the other side of the room. “I don’t have the mind space for this right now.”

“Well, you need to find it because you’re in this, too.”

“I’m not in this!” He puts a stranglehold on the coat rack and throws it to the ground. “How do I even know it’s mine?”

“We can get all the blood tests you want. The baby’s yours.”

He glowers at me. “Did you skip a pill or something? Are you trying to get a little chunk of my fortune?”

“I think you mean your dad’s fortune,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Have you ever even had a job?”

He charges over to me. “We’re going to the clinic right now.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I say, folding my arms over my chest, “and I’m not making a decision until I talk to my parents.”

“Your parents? The kindergarten teacher and the cupcake maker? Did they put you up to this? I bet they’d like a little bit of the Albrecht fortune, too.”

“Fuck you. My parents don’t want or need anything from your dysfunctional ass family.”

He follows right behind me as I recover the bag of corn and press it back

to my face.

“And to think, I was about to introduce you to them. I’m so glad I waited because you’re not even close to being good enough for my parents, Connor. And you know what? You’re not good enough for me, either. We’re done.” I wave my hand toward the door. “Leave. Your involvement is no longer needed in this situation or in my life in general.”

“Except for my money. I know how that works,” he hisses. “You’ll sue me for support if you decide to have it.”

“You know what? I think I’ve decided to have the baby,” I say, throwing my shoulders back. “And I don’t want a dime from you. In fact, I don’t ever want to see your face again.”

He springs forward and throws me against the wall—his hand gripping my neck. “You’re not ruining my life.”

“I don’t want anything to do with your sad life,” I squeak. “This is over. Get out of my apartment. I never want to see you again.”

When he increases the pressure on my throat, my instincts take over. I knee him hard in the crotch and push him away with such force that he falls over a table and ends up sprawled out on the floor.

“Leave,” I cough out as I clutch my neck. “Now.”

He writhes around on the ground for a little bit, then pushes himself up into a crouching position. He looks like he’s about to pounce.

“If you don’t walk out that door right now, I’m calling the cops.” I grab my phone out of my pocket. “Let’s see you get hired with an assault charge on your record.”

As I start to dial, he lunges at me and punches me hard in the stomach. As the pain shoots through my body, I think I hear myself scream before I crash against the wall and sink to the floor.

“Now, this is over,” he snarls as he backs toward the door. “You know what they say, never leave any loose ends.”

When he slams the door shut behind him, I crawl over and lock it before I call Dad.

“Emmie!” Dad answers on the first ring as always. “So you do know how to use the talk part of your phone. I was beginning to wonder if you had that part removed since all we ever get are texts.”

“Dad,” I say, my voice trembling. “Will you come and get me?”

“Em, what’s wrong? Are you hurt? Where are you?”

“I’m at my apartment, but I need to get out of here and I don’t think I

should drive—” That’s all I manage to get out before the sobbing starts.

“I’m walking out the door right now,” he says, his voice deepening. “I’ll be there in an hour. Stay on the phone. Okay, sweetie? I’m coming to get you. Whatever’s going on, we’ll figure it out. I promise.”

Chapter Fourteen

Current Day
Champion Cove, North Carolina

I'm an idiot. I'm sorry.

I've typed about fifty versions of that text in the last fourteen hours, but I haven't sent one of them. Frankly, a text is too easy to ignore, and I don't want to give Emory that opportunity. I'm determined not to let her leave town until I can try to explain my asshole behavior again.

After I watched her get into the elevator with Jake last night, I sat in front of the resort for two hours, trying to think of a reason to go up to her room. But like the texts, none of my excuses seemed good enough to persuade her to give me a second chance.

"He's been sitting there staring at his phone for at least an hour," Clive whispers from behind the counter. "He's probably waiting for her to text him."

"Doesn't sound like that's going to happen," Trinity whispers back to him. "From what Ben told me, they got into it last night and then she went up to her room with Jake—"

"I'm sitting two feet from you," I grumble, erasing my last attempt at a text. "I can hear every word you're saying. And FYI, Jake only went up to her room to look at her foot. He left fifteen minutes later. There he is. You can ask him yourself."

Jake laughs as he walks into the bakery. "I didn't see you in the lobby

when I left, but I knew you were probably still lurking around somewhere.”

“I was in my truck.” I look at my phone again to see if Emory has texted in the last three seconds. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t get any ideas.”

“Come on, man. You know I wouldn’t try to get with her when you’re all love struck and shit.” Jake refills his mug from the coffee pot that’s always warming at the entrance to Clive’s. “And, anyway, the bride woman was in the room almost the entire time I was there. So even if I wanted to do something, I think it would have needed to be a three-way situation, and honestly, I didn’t have the energy for all that last night.” He pulls out the chair across from me. “Maybe tonight, though.”

I grunt.

“Come on. You can do better than a half-ass grunt. That was some top-shelf humor right there.” He whacks my arm. “We good?”

I grunt again. “We’re good. How’s her foot?”

“Fine. Minor cut. Phil said she’s walking around on it like normal this morning.” He turns to Clive. “Do you have any of that pie with the eggs and ham and stuff?”

Trinity clocks his shoulder with her bag of doughnuts. “It’s called a quiche, Jake. I’ve told you that like ten times. Do you ever listen to me?”

“Uh—”

“Stop. It was a rhetorical question. And Nix, nut up and text her already. I swear the men in this town are so high maintenance.” She blows Clive a kiss as she backs toward the door. “Except for you, Clive. You’re perfect in every way.”

“Pshh,” Fran says as she comes out of the kitchen. “If she lived with you for one day, she’d change her mind about that real quick.”

“You better take that back,” Clive says, swatting Fran’s butt. “You’ll have to deal with me all day, every day when I retire next year.”

“Good lord, save me.” Fran’s voice fades as she disappears into the door that leads up to their apartment over the bakery.

“Have you found a buyer for the bakery yet?” Jake asks as Clive sets a slice of quiche in front of him. “Losing you is bad enough. I’d hate to lose your place, too.”

“You’re not losing me. I’ll probably be in here every morning critiquing the new owner—if I can find one. No one in town has the skills. I guess I’ll have to start looking outside our little hamlet.”

“Look carefully,” Jake says, shoving a huge bite of quiche into his mouth.

“This town has a delicate balance. One bad apple and the entire ecosystem will implode.”

“Clive, you know I’d rather see this stay a bakery,” I say, picking at the remains of my sandwich, “but I’ll buy it from you and expand the bar if you need an out.”

“Appreciate it, Nix. I’ll keep looking for now, but nice to know I have a backup pl—” He whirls around as Cardi busts through the door. “Good lord, Cardi. You almost gave me a heart attack. Everything okay?”

“Sorry, Clive. Everything’s fine.” She forces a smile. “I’m in a hurry. Can I get a large coffee to go?”

Every part of her body is clenched, including her fists. I haven’t seen her this riled up in a while.

“What’s wrong with you?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. “Do I need to kick someone’s ass for you?”

“When have you ever needed to kick someone’s ass for me? You know damn well I do my own ass kicking.”

I push out a chair with my foot. “Why don’t you sit down and tell me what’s going on?”

“No time,” she says, grabbing the coffee from Clive. “I need to get back to Raleigh. New client.”

“Can’t you start on Monday?” Jake asks. “You always work too hard.”

“No, this one’s pretty urgent,” she says, taking a long sip of coffee.

As the coffee hits her system, she inhales a soothing breath. She’s the only person I know who mainlines caffeine to calm herself down.

“Who’s the client?” I ask, nudging the chair toward her again. “Sit down. You look like you’re about to kill someone.”

“No one you know. Just some corporate stuff,” she says, dismissing me with her hand. “By the way, I ran into Emory on my walk with Hulk this morning.”

“What?” I sit up straighter. “Where?”

“She was hiking around the lake. Hulk saw her from across that field with all the yellow flowers and took off like a rocket. When I finally caught up, she was on her back, demanding that Emory give her a belly rub.”

“What?” Jake looks up from his plate. “It took Hulk at least two months to warm up to me. Why’s Emory getting special treatment?”

“No idea, but Hulk was into her immediately,” Cardi says. “I think it might have been love at first sight.”

I get that, Hulk. I'm beginning to think it was for me, too.

"I need to have a serious discussion with my girl, Hulk," Jake says. "I don't want anyone taking over my BFF status."

I look back at Cardi. "What did she say?"

"Uh, she mainly barked at the ducks and stuff."

I snarl. "I meant Emory."

"I know what you meant, dumbass," Cardi says, swatting my shoulder. "I'm trying to get you to lighten up."

"He doesn't have much of a sense of humor this morning," Jake says. "He apparently screwed something up with Emory again."

"Does he ever have a sense of humor?" Cardi asks. "And yeah, Emory told me what happened last night."

"Did you try to force kiss her again?" Jake asks. "Or are you on to some other bullshit now?"

"Fuck you." I look up at Cardi. "What'd she say happened?"

"That you made it weird, as usual. Why don't you ever listen to me? But she's settled down now. I told her your fragile little male ego was just injured when she didn't recognize you immediately."

"Wait," Jake says. "Did you know her before yesterday?"

"Why are you still talking? Just eat your egg pie." I point at the one bite of quiche remaining on his plate. "And you better not tell Mika any of this."

"He will," Cardi says. "He tells her everything."

"Not everything," I mutter.

Jake backhands my arm. "That's vaulted information. Keep your mouth shut."

Cardi rolls her eyes. "Mika would break both of you in a hot minute if I told her you had secrets, but I don't have time to get into your man dramas right now."

"Man dramas?" Clive circles back around to clear our plates. "Are we talking about how Nix keeps fumbling the ball with Emory or how Jake won't even pick up the ball with Mika?"

"This fucking town," Jake says, dropping his head back. "Who told you?"

"No one had to tell me," Clive says, chuckling. "You can't tear your eyes away from Mika. Everyone knows. But you better make your move soon. A woman like that won't be on the market for very long."

"What he said. Mika's way too good for you. You better lock it in before she figures that out," Cardi says, backing toward the door. "Nix, Emory's

going to the rehearsal dinner later. Why don't you offer to be her escort?"

"I doubt she wants that."

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself and apologize to her again. You'll be fine," Cardi says. "And she could probably use a little protection tonight, anyway."

"Protection?" I shove my chair against the wall and leap up. "For what? Is she okay?"

"Sit down. She's fine, but Riley told me about the guy who was harassing her at the bar last night. He thought it might be her ex or someone."

"Yeah, it was her ex. It's the same guy from college," I say, my jaw tightening. "He's been harassing her all weekend."

She takes another sip of her coffee. "Then it's probably a good idea to stay near her in case he's around."

I've never been able to tell when Cardi's lying or withholding information, but I'm definitely sensing that she's not being completely honest right now.

"What aren't you telling me?" I ask, my voice deepening. "What's really going on?"

"I don't know what you mean." She pushes the door open with her back. "I need to get on the road."

"Cardi," I bark as I follow her out into the street. "You're holding something back. What did she tell you?"

"Get out of my way," she says, trying to weave around me to get to her car. "I'm in a hurry."

"You're not leaving until you tell me," I say, grabbing her arm. "Start talking."

She looks up at me—her eyes not blinking. "You know what I know. Riley told me that Connor was messing with her last night."

"I didn't tell you his name," I say, raising my eyebrows. "Did Emory tell you?"

She stares at me—her eyes still not blinking.

"You know something else, Cardi. What is it?"

She continues to stare until it finally registers with me.

"Oh, damn," I say, releasing her arm. "She hired you as her attorney, didn't she?"

She finally blinks. "I need to go, Nix. My new client's case is urgent."

"Yeah, you better get on the road, then," I say, opening her car door.

“Drive safely.”

“Yep. I’ll text you when I get home.”

Before I close her door, I lean down and whisper, “I know you can’t talk about it, but please do whatever you have to do to make sure she’s protected.”

“I don’t know who you mean,” she says, locking her eyes with mine. “But as a totally unrelated reminder, I never lose in court, and I don’t intend to this time.”

Chapter Fifteen

EMORY

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

When I open the door to head down to the rehearsal dinner, Nix is leaning against the wall opposite my room.

“What the fuck?” I yell as I fall back against the door.

He charges across the hall to steady me. “What’s wrong? Did I scare you?”

“Yes, you scared me,” I say, placing a hand over my pounding heart. “Why are you standing in the hallway?”

“You said last night you didn’t want me in your room, so I thought I’d wait for you out here.”

“Wait for me?” I ask, slowly scanning his body. “For what?”

He’s wearing a tailored navy suit over a crisp white shirt that’s unbuttoned at the neck. His hair’s slicked back and it even looks like he trimmed his beard. Honestly, he looks so beautiful that it’s making me a little lightheaded.

“To take you to the rehearsal dinner,” he says, offering me his arm. “Are you ready to go?”

I take a step back. “Who said you’re coming with me to the rehearsal dinner?”

He rakes his hand through his neatly combed hair, causing a few strands to fall onto his forehead. “I talked to Cardi. She said—”

“She said what?” I ask, my mouth dropping open. “What did she tell

you?”

“Uh,” he says, looking at his feet, “just that she ran into you on her walk this morning and thought you might want an escort for dinner. We didn’t talk too long. She was in a hurry to get back to Raleigh. Apparently, she has a new client whose case needs urgent attention.”

Yes, my case. I’m the client.

Cardi was appalled when I told her about the agreement I signed with Connor five years ago. Apparently, my neighbor, a tax attorney, was not the best person to draw up the document. Cardi’s rewriting it to close the loopholes she found.

“Em?” Nix puts his hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I narrow my eyes as I look up at him. “Are you sure Cardi didn’t tell you anything else?”

“I swear.” He holds up his right hand, then lowers it. “Oh, wait, she also told me that my dog’s obsessed with you.”

The stress in my body melts away as I think of sweet Hulk. “I’m obsessed with her, too. She’s the cuddliest dog in the world.”

“She’s been pouting all afternoon. I think she misses you. We both do.”

When I don’t reply, he dives back in. “Look, I should have told you I recognized you the second you walked into the bar.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Then why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” he says, looking at the ceiling. “I think I was probably embarrassed that you didn’t recognize me. Or I’m just an idiot.”

“It’s probably the latter.”

“Yep, that’s the safest bet,” he says, smiling as he looks back at me. “I’m really sorry, Em. If you give me another chance, I promise I won’t lie to you again.”

I shrug. “I guess you didn’t really lie. You just withheld a little information. We all do that sometimes.”

I know I do. I’m doing it right now. Although, mine’s part of a legal agreement.

“Oh yeah?” His forehead wrinkles up. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Nope,” I say, shaking my head. “But you know what? Cardi was right, I would like an escort tonight.”

“I’m all yours,” he says, taking a tie out of his pocket. “Mika told me I should wear a tie, but I hate them. I brought one just in case. Yes or no?”

“No tie tonight, but yes for the wedding,” I say, pausing. “I mean if you’re available tomorrow.”

“I’m yours for as long as you want me,” he says, holding out his arm again. “You look beautiful, by the way. I mean, like you always do, but fancier.”

“Thank you,” I say as I slip my arm through his. “You look fancier, too.”

When the elevator stops on the floor below us, a bunch of young guys in suits swarm into the elevator. The smell of cheap cologne mixed with alcohol is so overwhelming that I throw my hands over my nose.

Nix pulls me behind him. “What’s wrong? Do you see Connor?”

“No,” I croak. “Toxic cologne fumes. Please save me.”

He unbuttons his jacket and holds it open. “In here.”

As I dive underneath, I take a deep breath. He smells like fine leather mixed with vanilla mixed with another ingredient that’s making me want to lick him from head to toe.

“Is she okay?” one of the cologne pigs asks.

“She’s fine,” Nix says, running his hand up and down my back. “She gets cold easily.”

Sweat. That’s the secret ingredient. A few drops of virile-as-fuck sweat.

“My sister’s like that. She’s always cold,” the guy says. “You here for the wedding?”

“Yep,” Nix says. “You?”

“Yeah, we’re the groomsmen minus one. Not sure what happened there. The groom said the other guy had to leave—a family emergency or something.”

“Connor,” I whisper. “I think he’s talking about Connor.”

“Oh yeah?” Nix tightens his arms around me. “Which guy had to leave?”

“His name’s Connor,” the guy says as the elevator door opens. “It’s not a big loss. Honestly, he was kind of a dick.”

Nix keeps his jacket over my head as he slowly backs me off the elevator. “So Connor’s not here anymore?”

“Apparently not,” I whisper. “Natalie texted me. I’m not sure what happened, but he checked out this morning.”

“Well, that just makes this night even better,” he says, finally uncovering me. “Looks like the cologne brothers are headed over there. Should we follow them or make a run for it?”

“Hmm, my head says run, but I think I have to at least make an appearance,” I say, pointing at him. “But be ready to bolt just in case.”

“I’m always ready to escape dinner parties,” he says, putting his hand on the small of my back. “Just give me the go sign.”

When we walk into the ballroom, Natalie’s kissing on a guy who I’m assuming, and hoping, is Edward.

“Well, well, well,” she says, grinning as she looks over at us. “Mr. and Mrs. Fuller have arrived.”

“You know we’re not married, Nat,” I say. “He’s my date, uh, friend for the night.”

“You better define that a little better before someone else asks you,” Natalie says, laughing. “Em, this is my fiancé, Edward. He’s been dying to meet you.”

“It’s so nice to meet you, Emory,” he says, taking my hand. “Natalie has told me so many good things about you.”

“Same,” I say. “She absolutely gushes about you.”

He grins as he looks up at Nix. “And no need to introduce this guy. I’m a huge hockey fan. The Rangers are my team, but I’ve always been a Nix Fuller fan.”

“Appreciate it. And thanks for letting me crash your wedding,” Nix says, his hand sinking until it’s resting on my butt.

“We wouldn’t have it any other way.” Natalie kisses Edward’s cheek. “Baby, will you show Nix where the bar is? Emory and I could both use a glass of champagne.”

“On it,” Edward says. “Follow me, Nix.”

“Right behind you,” Nix says, giving my butt a little squeeze before he walks away.

“Fuck me,” Natalie groans. “Nix Fuller in a suit might be too much for me to handle.”

“One more reminder that you’re getting married tomorrow and shouldn’t be looking at other men,” I say, my eyes fixed on Nix. “But you aren’t wrong. Do you see how good his butt looks in those pants?”

“Do I see it? I can’t take my eyes off it.” She tilts her head until it’s resting on my shoulder. “That’s the textbook example of a hockey butt—

high, tight, muscular, and so, so very squeezable.”

Another woman walks over to us. “Are you looking at that fine ass standing next to Edward at the bar? I’ve never seen anything like it. Please tell me that man’s available.”

“First of all, Margie, you’re not available. And second, the man candy belongs to her,” Natalie says, bumping me with her hip. “He’s her friend or date or husband, depending on what day it is.”

“Honey, you need to figure that shit out,” Margie says as she continues to leer at Nix. “Because if you don’t, I’m stepping in.”

Natalie raises her eyebrows. “Are you forgetting about your fiancé?”

“Are you?” Margie asks, pointing at me as she backs away. “You have until the wedding reception. If you’re not all over him by then, I will be.”

“Ignore her. She’s all talk,” Natalie says. “But she’s not wrong. You do need to figure it out. How did this even happen? You were so pissed at him last night. You never even told me what he did, by the way.”

“Nothing really,” I say, waving her off. “Just male ego stuff. It’s no big deal.”

She nods. “He was probably thinking with his little brain instead of his big brain. Of course, I’m hoping both of his brains are of significant size. Will you confirm that to me once everything is revealed?”

I roll my eyes. “Nothing will be revealed that isn’t already visible. I think we’ll probably keep it as friends.”

“Really?” she asks. “Do you let all your friends grab your ass?”

“He didn’t grab my ass.”

“Total grab. His hand was just resting there at first, but don’t think I didn’t see that little squeeze before he walked away. Just watching it got me all hot. You have to be ready to self combust.”

“Honestly, I’m about to pass out. He smells so good. Would it be wrong if I licked him?”

“Not at all.” She fans me with her hands. “I’ll be disappointed if you don’t lick every part of him before the weekend’s over.”

“Believe me, I want to,” I say, puffing out a few short breaths, “but my life’s so complicated right now. I don’t have space for a relationship.”

“Who said anything about a relationship?” she asks, twisting up her face. “Use that man for his glorious body, then walk away.”

“I don’t know,” I say, my eyes still fixed on Nix’s backside. “I don’t want to use him. He seems kind of sweet and—”

“Shut up,” she says, whacking my arm. “Believe me, no man will turn down casual sex no matter how sweet he is—especially with someone who looks like you.”

“So, what’s the best-case scenario here?” I huff. “We have a one-night stand, then I head back to Concord?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding enthusiastically. “That’s absolutely the best-case scenario. Have amazing sex with a smoking hot man, then go back to your life refreshed and a little bit tingly from your encounter with both of his brains.”

“Stop talking about his body parts before he hears you.” I point to Edward, who’s motioning to her from the head table. “Go. Your fiancé needs you.”

“Fine, but we’re finishing this conversation later. Until then, this is my gift to you. You can duck out of this dinner any time, even now if you want. I’d prefer you spend your time uncovering Nix’s *assets*.” She grins as she backs away. “And please send me a picture of it when it gets uncovered.”

“What’s getting uncovered?” Nix asks as he makes it back over to me.

“Nothing,” I say, chugging my champagne.

“I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to sip that,” he says, grinning.

“No time. Natalie gave us permission to blow off the dinner.” I point to his whiskey. “Kill that.”

He tilts it back and slams the empty glass on a table. “Done. Where are we going?”

“I want pizza and wine and comfortable clothes,” I say, counting my requests on my fingers. “And cake if possible. I almost always want cake.”

“Done. What else?”

I gesture toward the full moon that’s beaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. “Can you find us somewhere outside to eat with a view of the mountains?”

“I can and will find anything you want. You know what they say—happy fake wife, happy fake life.”

Chapter Sixteen

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

When Emory makes it down to the lobby, I'm waiting at the front desk with a large pizza, a bottle of wine, and half a cake.

"How?" Her mouth drops open. "It only took me like ten minutes to change."

"Phil had his chef make it for us. She just brought it up."

"Pizza and wine and," she says, pointing at the cake box, "please tell me that's cake."

"Yep. It's from Clive's. The resort orders most of its desserts from him."

"That looks amazing," she says, eyeing the cake as I open the box. "Can I taste?"

"Have at it."

She immediately runs her finger through the fluffy chocolate icing, and groans as she licks it off. "That icing is scrumptious. Please get me the recipe, so I can give it to my mom."

"On it." I motion her toward the exit door. "Does your mom like to bake?"

"Yeah, in fact, she does it for a living. She owns a bakery in Concord."

"Hold up," I say, pointing to her face. "You have some icing on your cheek."

Her tongue circles around as far as it will reach. "Did I get it?"

"Nope, it's still there," I say, trying not to focus on her tongue as it keeps

circling.

She tilts up her face. “Just get it for me.”

I swipe the icing off and am about to clean my finger on my pants when she gasps.

“Stop! Don’t rub it on your nice trousers.” She grabs my finger and flicks the icing off with her tongue. “And never waste icing.”

I raise my eyebrows as a smile starts to curl onto my lips.

“What? Quit looking at me like that. I like icing.” She heads toward the door. “Let’s go. I’m starving. Where are you taking me?”

I shake my head as she bounces out the door. The jogging shorts she changed into are barely covering her perfectly ample ass.

“Did you hear me?” She twirls back around. “Tell me where we’re going.”

“Stop being so bossy,” I say as I follow her out the door. “You’ll know when we get there.”

“This looks like a make-out spot,” Emory says as I turn into a scenic outlook overlooking my favorite part of the mountain range. “Is this where you bring all your women?”

“If by ‘all your women’ you mean Hulk, then yes,” I say, backing into a parking spot. “She’s not a very good kisser, though. Very sloppy.”

“Why are you backing in?” She points over her shoulder. “The mountains are that way.”

“Oh, damn. Is that what those are?” I ask as I slide out of the truck. “I’ve got the pizza and cake. Grab the wine and meet me out back.”

“Out back of where? Wait, where are we going?”

It takes her a few minutes, but she eventually makes it back to me—wine in hand.

“You said you wanted to eat somewhere outside with a view of the mountains.” I wave my hand in the air. “Outside. Check. Mountains. Check.”

“Turn your truck around so we have some place to sit while we look at the mountains.” She scans the area. “Unless there’s a picnic table or something.”

“We don’t need a table,” I say, opening the tailgate. “We can eat in here.”

She shoots me a side eye. “Why is there a bed in the back of your SUV? This is your move, isn’t it? You bring women out here for dinner and reveal the bed at the last minute.”

“Yep, and Hulk falls for it every time,” I say, straightening the foam mattress and blankets. “We sleep back here when we go camping. My back’s too messed up from hockey to sleep on the ground.”

“Aww,” she says, her bottom lip jutting out. “That’s so sweet. How often do you go camping with her?”

“A couple times a month at least. I love being outside.”

She pushes herself up and shimmies back until she’s leaning against the pillows propped against the front seats. “This is actually really comfortable. Way better than sleeping in a tent.”

“Way better,” I say, crawling in next to her. “And honestly, Hulk has become such a diva, I don’t think she would tolerate sleeping on the ground at this point.”

She twists off the wine cap. “Do you have glasses? Or are we sharing the bottle?”

I hand her two plastic cups out of the overhead compartment. “And there are cup holders in the doors.”

“Very fancy,” she says, running her hand over the side of the truck. “If I ever go camping, this is the way I want to do it.”

“You’ve never been camping?”

“Not once,” she says, handing me a cup of wine.

“Not even as a kid?”

“Nope. My parents are city people.”

“Huh, I’m not sure about all that,” I say, starting in on a slice of pizza. “I might need to have a talk with them.”

“Go for it. You would love them,” she says, her dimples deepening. “Everyone does. They’re the coolest people.”

“That’s awesome. I love hearing stories about good parents. Mine are so far from that. It’s just nice to hear those kind of parents exist.”

“Oh, Nix. I’m sorry,” she says, resting her hand on my leg. “I didn’t mean to open up old wounds.”

“You didn’t,” I say, putting my hand on top of hers. “Those wounds have been sealed shut for a while. I just hope I won’t be anything like my parents when I have a kid.”

She rests back on the pillows. “You won’t be. You’ve seen what bad

parenting is, so now you know what not to do. Like breaking generational curses and stuff.”

“I hope that’s true. My sister Robin’s an amazing mom, so I guess there’s hope for me yet.”

“You’ll be a great dad,” she coos, “and this will be the perfect place to raise kids. It’s unbelievably beautiful.”

“It’s by far the best place I’ve ever lived.” I pause to give myself a second to reconsider saying this next part, but I decide to dive in anyway. “You know we’re always looking for new people to move here. I mean people we like, not just anyone. Everyone seems to love you. Maybe you should move here.”

“Oh, I’d love to,” she says as she grabs another slice of pizza, “but my entire life’s in Concord—my family, my job—”

“Your boyfriend or fiancé or husband?”

“All three of them actually,” she says, smiling. “You just never know which one you’re going to need.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“You didn’t really ask it,” she says, pointing her pizza at me, “but for the record, I don’t have any of those. I have a fake husband in North Carolina, though.”

“Oh yeah? What’s he like?”

“Kind of grouchy sometimes,” she says, tilting her head as she looks up at me, “but he does a superior job of finding me cake when I need it.”

“Sounds like a keeper,” I say, nodding. “So you’ve never told me what your job is back in Concord.”

“I do the marketing for my mom’s bakery.”

“That’s right. You said your mom owned a bakery. You know, Clive’s getting ready to retire. Maybe you could buy his shop and start a franchise of her business here.”

“If I start my own business, it definitely won’t be a bakery. I’m a horrible cook. I burn everything.” She pushes the pizza box away as she finishes her third slice. “I’m almost out of room. Bring on the cake before my stomach fills up completely.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, handing her the box.

She shoves an enormous bite of cake into her mouth without hesitation. I’ve never been with a woman who throws down food in front of me like she does. It’s unbelievably sexy, like every other thing about her.

She looks up and catches me grinning at her. “What? Do I have icing on my face again?”

“Nope. You’re all good.”

She pushes the cake box away, too. “I’m so full. Please remove all the food from my grasp.”

“I’ll ditch the pizza box,” I say, scooting out of the truck, “but I’m assuming you want to keep the leftover cake.”

“You assume correctly,” she says, nestling back into the pillows. “I might eat it for breakfast.”

When I return from the trash can, she’s lying on her back—eyes closed with her hands over her stomach.

“You asleep?” I ask as I stretch out next to her.

She stays quiet for a few seconds, then shifts around until her head’s resting on my chest. “I remember you from that night in college.”

“Liar,” I say, snaking my arm around her. “You don’t have to say that to make me feel like less of an idiot.”

“I’m not lying.” She tilts her head up to look at me. “I mean, obviously I didn’t remember your name or face, but I remember this. I remember how we talked all night.”

“Prove it. Tell me something we talked about.”

She scrunches up her nose. “Hmm. I remember you told me some crazy stories to try to make me laugh.”

“Now I know you’re lying because I don’t remember you laughing once that night.”

“It doesn’t mean you didn’t try. Wait,” she says, sitting up suddenly. “I remember you told me a story about how you and your brother tried to blow up a palm tree.”

“Wow, okay. You do remember. Because we definitely tried to do that—a couple times. Once with bottle rockets and once with roman candles.”

“Which worked better?” she asks, laughing as she snuggles back onto my chest.

“Neither worked, but we both managed to get some good burns on our hands. Cardi had to drive us to the hospital. She was so pissed at Hawk for letting me hold the fireworks. I was like ten years old.”

“Eek. I would never want Cardi mad at me.”

“No you would not,” I say, sighing. “I’ve been on the receiving end of her anger many times. Once she sinks her teeth into you, she will not let go until

you fold. That's why she's such a good attorney. She's absolutely brutal until she gets the outcome she wants."

"That's good to hear—" She stops suddenly. "I mean it would be good to hear she's that persistent if you were her client or something. You know?"

"Yeah," I whisper, pulling her closer to me. "I know."

I know you're her client.

I know your case probably involves Connor.

I know it might be because he hit you.

And I know if that's true, I'm going to fucking kill him.

Chapter Seventeen

EMORY

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

When we get back to the resort, Nix walks me up to the suite. He takes a key out of his pocket and swipes it over the keypad.

“I still have a key. Do you want it?”

“You can keep it,” I say, leaning back against the door. “For emergencies or whatever.”

“Or whatever?” He slips the key back into his pocket. “Care to be more specific about that?”

“Nope. I think you need to figure it out for yourself.”

He taps his fingers on his lips. “Huh. There are a few ways I could go here.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, smiling up at him. “Do you want to review them with me? Maybe I can help you decide on the best course of action.”

He puts his forearm on the wall over my head. “I like the word action, but I think you know what you need to do before any action begins.”

“I do?” I narrow my eyes. “What? Do I need a special password to activate the action?”

“No password, but I told you I wouldn’t kiss you again until you—”

“Shut up,” I say, pushing at his steely chest. “That’s not happening. There will be absolutely no begging.”

He leans in and whispers right into my ear, “Then there will be absolutely no action.”

“Fine,” I say, trying to duck under his arm. “Then you can go home.”

He blocks my escape. “I’m pretty sure you don’t want me to go anywhere.”

“You don’t know that,” I say, scowling as I push at his chest again. “Maybe I do.”

He leans against me, trapping my arms between us. “You don’t. And just FYI, pushing isn’t the way to get me to leave.”

“Well, if you’ll let me have use of either of my arms, I can try slapping you.”

“That could be fun,” he says as his hands skim down my back. “But to get me to leave, all you have to do is ask.”

“Ask? I thought you wanted me to beg.”

“You can ask me to leave, and I will, but you have to beg me for any other action.” He digs his fingers into my butt and pulls my midsection against him. “I want to make sure I have the green light this time.”

“The light’s fucking green,” I groan as I feel him hard against my stomach. “Just kiss me already.”

“That’s not begging,” he whispers as he rubs his cheek against mine. “That was more of an order.”

“Can we finish this conversation in the room?” I plead as my hips start moving against him.

“We’re not going anywhere until you do what you have to do.”

He lifts my body and flattens me against the wall. I try to keep my legs from wrapping around his waist, but they, like every other part of my body, seem to be working independently of my brain.

“Nix, stop,” I moan as I arch against him.

“Are you sure?” He shifts his hips until his erection is hitting me in just the right spot. “It doesn’t feel like your body wants me to stop anything.”

“I mean, stop for now until we get into the room,” I whine. “The resort probably has cameras in the hallways.”

He laughs. “Then security’s getting a really good show right now.”

“You’re absolutely the worst,” I whimper as my hips thrust harder against him.

“I think you’ll change your mind about that real quick once we get inside.”

The elevator rings from down the hallway. “Fuck, someone’s coming. They’ll see us.”

“That’s entirely up to you,” he says, rocking my hips harder against him. “You know what you have to do.”

“Okay. Fine. Please give me the sex.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. That was more of a frustrated request. I know you can do better.”

It sounds like the elevator people are just about to turn onto our wing of the hallway.

“Okay,” I say, blowing out an exasperated breath. “I’m begging you to —”

He swipes the key again and has me pressed up against the door inside the room in under ten seconds.

“There,” he says as he takes my face into his hands. “Was that so hard?”

As our tongues start exploring, I weave my hands through his hair and press his head tighter to me. I can’t seem to get close enough to him right now. I want to consume every part of his body.

“Hmm,” he says as he yanks my shirt over my head. “You’re kissing me like you did at the bar yesterday.”

“I was not kissing you like that,” I say, working on his belt. “In fact, I wasn’t kissing you at all.”

“Liar. You’ve been into this from the beginning. You’re just too stubborn to admit it.”

“Not stubborn—”

“Right, right.” His hand slides around my back and unhooks my bra with one twist. “I forgot. Not stubborn. Independent.”

When I finally get his pants to drop to the floor, I run my hand over him a few times before I reach in and take him out.

“Fuck me,” I mumble as it keeps uncoiling in my hand. “Where does it end?”

He smirks as he steps back and yanks his dress shirt over his head. “Believe me, you can more than handle all of this.”

“Well, I’m definitely willing to try,” I say, leaning back against the door. “When’s the last time you were tested?”

“Last year, but I’ve only been with one woman since then and I wore a condom every time.”

“I’m clean, too.”

“I didn’t ask. I trust you,” he says, holding his hand out to me. “I want to be inside you without a condom, but it’s your call. I just want to be with

you.”

“Without,” I say, my back still against the door. “I trust you, too.”

“Then come here,” he growls. “Right now.”

“I’ll come when I’m ready.”

He raises his eyebrows. “No, you’ll come when I’m ready. Get over here. Now.”

I’ve never liked to be told what to do, but if my panties are any indication, I really, really like it right now.

“Don’t boss me,” I say, trying to sound even a little bit convincing.

“Honestly, I think you could use a little bossing, Mrs. Fuller,” he says, tugging his undershirt over his head.

I suck in a sharp breath when I finally see the full splendor of his body. His enormous chest tapers down perfectly to his abs that disappear like a chiseled staircase into his boxers.

He crooks his finger at me. “I told you to come here. Don’t make me ask you again.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, almost skipping over to him.

He lowers me back onto the couch, then yanks my shorts off and tosses them across the room.

“Do you always go commando?” He scans my naked body as he towers over me. “I don’t want another guy having that kind of easy access to you.”

“They’re jogging shorts. The undies are built in—”

“In fact,” he says, ignoring me, “I don’t want another guy having access to you at all from this day forward.”

“I’m not sure that’s your call,” I say as he lowers his massive body on top of me.

“Well, we’ll just have to make you sure.”

“Good luck with th—”

My body slams against him as he plunges a few fingers deep inside me.

“What was that?” he asks as his fingers start pumping. “Please finish what you were saying.”

“I, uh—”

My body slams against him when his thumb rubs over my clit.

“You what?” he asks as his free hand massages my breasts. “You agree with me? I’m the only guy who gets access to this from now on. Fine. Then it’s settled.”

He knows he has me right on the edge and he’s exploiting every bit of his

power over me. When his thumb starts rubbing me faster, a wave of pleasure crashes so hard inside me that my eyes slam shut.

“Open your eyes, Emory,” he orders. “Look right at me. You’re never forgetting this face again.”

My eyes pop open. “Nev-v-v—”

That’s all I manage to get out before my body explodes into a trembling mess.

“I don’t want to be just your wedding weekend fuck.” His husky voice rumbles against my ear as he flattens me with his full body weight. “Tell me this is more than that to you.”

He enters me with such a ferocity that it takes my breath away for a second. I bury my face in his wavy hair as he fills up every inch of me.

“Say it,” he orders as he watches me fall apart underneath him. “Say this is more to you.”

“M-m-more,” I moan as my body starts vibrating again.

I’ve never had an orgasm when the guy’s inside me unless he’s working some other area, but just the feeling of his massive butt muscles working so hard under my hands is making the tremors start again.

“Don’t wait for me,” he whispers into my ear. “Let go, baby.”

Just as he says it, it happens again—the tremors pulsating all the way down to my toes.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” I say, panting right into his ear. “That’s never happened before—so close together.”

“Like I told you, you’ve been with the wrong guys.” He wraps his arms around me and barrel rolls me on top of him. “I think we should try to get you another one.”

“Shut up,” I say as I ride on top of him. “It’s your turn now.”

“Is that right?” He grabs my hips and yanks me off him. “Nope, I definitely think it’s your turn again.”

“Nix,” I moan as he pulls me up his body, “I’m not sure how much more I can take. My legs might not even hold me up at this point.”

“Grab the side of the couch, then,” he says, pulling me down onto his face. “Believe me, this isn’t going to take long.”

After he brings me to yet another orgasm in an embarrassingly short amount of time, he sits up and positions me back on his lap.

“That’s how it’s always going to be with us,” he says, sliding back inside me. “You get three times as much of everything. All I want to do is spoil

you.”

He lays his head back on the couch and watches me work for a few minutes—my breasts bouncing in his hands as I ride on top of him.

“Now, it’s my turn,” he says, finally letting out a series of satisfied grunts as he explodes inside me.

“Good god,” I say, collapsing on top of him. “I need water. Right now.”

“I’ve got you. We need to keep you hydrated. We have a lot more to accomplish tonight.”

“Are you serious?” My mouth drops open as he shifts me off him. “I had three orgasms in under twenty minutes. Is there more?”

“So much more,” he says, his beautiful butt teasing me as he walks to the kitchen.

“I won’t be able to walk tomorrow if there’s very much more.”

“That’s fine,” he yells. “I can carry you.”

As he’s returning with the water, my phone beeps from the table.

“Turn off your phone,” he says, pulling me back on top of him. “No interruptions tonight.”

“I need to peek at it just in case—”

“In case what?” His voice echoes in my ear as he hooks his head over my shoulder. “Show me who it’s from.”

I tilt up the screen so he can see it. “It’s from the airline telling me that boarding starts in less than two days.”

“Change your flight,” he says, tossing my phone back onto the table. “Or better yet, cancel it because after what we just did, there’s no way I’m ever letting you leave.”

Chapter Eighteen

Champion Cove, North Carolina

Before I left the resort this morning, I tucked Emory in and left her a note on the back of the room service menu. The last thing I wanted to do was to get out of that bed, but a water pipe broke at the bar last night. I texted her about an hour ago to see if she wanted to get breakfast. I'm getting into my truck when my phone finally beeps.

Good morning. How's the bar?

Finally. I was thinking maybe I tucked you in too tightly and you might have suffocated. Did you just wake up?

I've actually been awake for a couple hours. It took me all that time to get my arms free from your blanket prison. I felt like I'd been swaddled.

I like a tight tuck. And at least now I know how to immobilize your arms.

I knew that was your goal from the beginning.

Food? We're probably looking at lunch at this point since you slept so late.

Settle down, it's only ten. Lunch doesn't start until noon.

Meet me at Clive's in an hour?

Your car's still in town. I'll grab some food and bring it to you.

Aww, that's the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me.

We're definitely going to have to work on that.

Why don't we eat at my place? Hulk wants to see you again.

Yes!!! I want to see her, too. Pick me up in like thirty?

Sounds good. I live on the lake. If you packed a swimsuit, bring it.

And if I didn't?

Even better. See you in thirty.

When I pull up in front of the resort, Emory's leaning against a wall wearing just my dress shirt and flips-flops. She has her hair piled on top of her head in a twisty thing with a bright-orange bag slung over her shoulder.

"You came back," she says, smiling as she walks toward the truck. "I was beginning to wonder if you were one-night standing me."

"You know better than that. I want to spend every second I can with you," I say, pushing open the door for her. "Please tell me you're wearing something under my shirt."

"Huh-uh," she says, pulling up the shirt until it's almost at her bikini line. "I'm completely naked under here. I want to give all the guys easy access."

The valet in front of the hotel has his eyes locked on her backside waiting to see what she's going to reveal.

"So not funny. Get in the truck right now," I say, pulling her in and slamming the door shut behind her. "Are you really naked under there?"

She crawls onto my lap and straddles me. "See for yourself."

"That's not much of a swimsuit," I say, peeking into the shirt's neckline,

“but at least there’s something covering you.”

“After last night, I would think you would want me completely uncovered.”

“When we’re alone, I want you naked all the time,” I say, squeezing her butt as she places kisses all over my face. “But when we’re in public, I’d prefer you wear a bulky coat and sweatpants.”

“Good lord, get a room.” Phil’s voice booms across the parking lot. “Oh that’s right, you already have one. Maybe you could wait until you get up there to ravage each other. You’re about to give my valet a heart attack.”

“We’re headed to my house,” I say as Emory shifts off my lap. “Forget you saw this.”

“If only I could—”

“And more importantly, don’t tell anyone what you saw,” I say, pointing at him.

“I promise,” he says, winking at Emory. “You already know I’m the soul of discretion.”

“I’m already mad at you for one thing, Phil,” she says, pointing at him. “Don’t make me double mad at you.”

“Only one thing?” Phil pokes his face into my window. “I’m relieved. It could be so much worse.”

“What’d he do, Em?” I ask, pushing his face back. “I’ll take care of him for you.”

“It’s actually what both of you did,” she says, raising her eyebrows as she looks at me. “Phil told me that you tried to pay for my room.”

“Nope. I didn’t try. I did pay for your room.”

She pouts out her bottom lip. “But I don’t want you to pay for my room.”

“Don’t care,” I say, shrugging. “It’s already done. Nothing you can do about it now.”

“There’s always something I can do.” She looks back at Phil. “Will you please reverse the charges on his card? I’ll give you mine when I check out tomorrow.”

“Hmm, I’m sorry, ma’am. I’m not sure our system will allow me to do that,” Phil says, grinning. “And just in case I’m not here when you check out, I’m permanently closing your portfolio so you can’t talk someone else into doing that for you.”

“Phil,” she whines, “I thought you said you were on my side.”

“Always and forever except when it comes to taking Nix’s money,” Phil

says. "I better get going. Calls to make. You kids have fun today."

I shake my head. "He's about a minute away from calling everyone to tell them we were making out in front of the resort. There's not an ounce of privacy in this crazy town."

"Actually, I kind of like it," she says, running her hand up my leg. "It must be nice to have people looking out for you all the time."

"It depends on the people," I say, leaning over to give her another kiss. "Not just anyone is welcome in my life."

"Hmm," she purrs when she feels me rock hard under her hand. "Tell me more about this exclusive club. I'd like to be considered for membership."

"Oh, believe me," I growl, "you more than fulfilled the membership requirements last night."

"Really?" she asks as she starts stroking me. "Because I think there's one or two more requirements that still need to be fulfilled. Maybe you can find some place a little more private, so I can check one of those off right now."

"Yep," I say, blowing out a long breath as her fingers make it to my zipper. "I'm sure I can find a place."

"You're going to want to get there fast, baby," she says, her head sinking into my lap as I drive away quickly from the resort, "because I don't think you're going to be able to operate a motor vehicle in a few minutes."

When we finally make it to my house, Hulk's at her normal lookout post—lying on top of the couch with her head pressed against the front window.

Emory squeals when she sees her, then jumps out of the truck almost before I have it parked and runs toward the door. If anyone else did that, Hulk would snarl and bare her teeth, but when she sees Emory, she jumps about three feet in the air, then starts whining loudly enough for us to hear her through the double-paned window.

"Unbelievable. I've never seen her react to anyone this way," I say, unlocking the door. "You must have cast some kind of spell over her. Get ready. Incoming."

When I open the door, Hulk shoots out and circles Emory's legs for about a minute, crying the entire time. She finally flips over on her back and writhes around on the ground.

“Very subtle, Hulk,” I say, rolling my eyes. “She’s a belly rub whore.”

Emory falls to her knees and starts in on Hulk’s stomach. “You can have all the belly rubs you want because you’re just the best girl in the whole world.”

“Don’t encourage this behavior,” I say as Hulk’s tail slaps against Emory’s leg. “She’s already a complete princess.”

“Yes, you are,” Emory coos. “And princesses get special treatment, don’t they?”

“Enough.” When I whistle, Hulk springs up and dashes into the house. “That’s the food whistle. She doesn’t like anyone or anything as much as she likes food.”

Hulk’s doing pirouettes by her food bowl when we get to the kitchen.

“Let’s eat outside,” I say, scooping some kibble into her bowl. “Believe me, you don’t want to witness her dining habits. She’s a savage.”

Hulk sits obediently until I whistle again, then dives headfirst into her bowl as we walk out onto the patio.

“Oh my god,” Emory says, throwing her hands over her mouth. “Your view is unbelievable.”

My house sits right on the lake overlooking the mountains. It’s surrounded by dense forest with not another house in sight.

“Yeah, it’s not bad, right?”

“Not bad?” she groans. “It’s heavenly. And this patio is amazing. Did you design it?”

The patio has three levels that lead down to the lakeshore. The top level has a long dining table and an outdoor kitchen built into the side of the house. The middle level is covered with lounge chairs pointed out toward the lake. And the bottom level has a cabana and an outdoor shower to use before and after swimming.

“Nope,” I say. “I bought the house as is. It’s only a couple years old. The guy who built it was transferred out to the West Coast a month after it was completed.”

“Sad for him, but lucky for you,” she says, heading down to the lounge chair level. “How long have you lived here?”

“About a year. I bought it right after I retired.”

She plops down on a double wide chaise. “Did you know about Champion Cove before you retired?”

“Right after. My brother and I were visiting Cardi in Raleigh,” I say,

stretching out next to her. “We came up to the mountains to fish and stumbled across this place. I’m not a big believer in destiny, but that’s what it felt like. I made an offer on the house that day.”

“I can understand why. If I moved here, you could never get me to leave this chair.”

“And I wouldn’t try,” I say, pulling her onto my chest. “You’re welcome to move here any time you want, by the way.”

“If only,” she says, laughing. “Do you think you’ll stay here for the rest of your life?”

“That’s the plan for now,” I say, kissing the top of her head. “Unless there’s a really good reason to move.”

Hulk makes it down to us and jumps up on our chair. She circles around a few times, then shimmies her way up against Emory’s back.

“I can’t imagine any reason that would ever get you to leave,” Emory says, slinging her leg over me and her arm over Hulk. “I’m in heaven. This place is just magical. You have everything you need here.”

“Not everything,” I say, pulling her tighter to me, “but I’m getting closer and closer every day.”

Chapter Nineteen

EMORY

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

Nix makes it back across the dance floor at Natalie and Edward's reception, carrying two pieces of wedding cake.

"What did I tell you? My fake husband is just the best," I say as he slides a piece in front of me. "He always finds a way to bring me cake."

"I told you he was a keeper," he says, pulling me onto his lap. "He'll even feed it to you if you're a really good girl."

"I guess I'll have to feed myself, then," I say, tugging on his ear with my teeth. "Because I have no plans to be good tonight."

"Enough." Natalie forces her arm in between us. "You two have been on each other all night. You're not supposed to be happier than the newlyweds."

"Sorry, Nat," I say, smiling up at her. "We can take this upstairs if you'll give me an early release like you did last night."

"Not yet." Natalie points at the dance floor where a bunch of women are gathered. "Didn't you hear the announcement? It's time for me to throw the bridal bouquet."

"Pass."

"You can't pass," she says, tugging on my arm. "Unless you and Nix got real married sometime today, you're still single."

"What's happening?" Nix asks. "And it's going to have to be something really good to get her away from me right now, Natalie."

"All the single ladies in the room try to catch the bridal bouquet," Natalie

says. “The one who catches it will be the next one to get married. It’s tradition.”

“Leave me alone. You have plenty of contestants.” I wrap Nix’s arm around me in an attempt to counteract Natalie’s freakish strength. “There are at least two dozen women out there begging for that bouquet.”

“I will not leave you alone,” Natalie says, yanking my arm so hard that it almost leaves its socket. “I want you to catch the bouquet.”

“Nix, hold me,” I say, trying to activate his insanely protective arm. “She’s winning.”

He puts his hands in the air. “I’m not getting involved. Isn’t it a wedding rule that the bride gets what she wants?”

“Yes, it is, Nix. Thank you,” Natalie says as she finally gets me out of my seat. “He’s not going to save you this time. Get your ass out there.”

My mouth gapes as I look back at Nix. “You haven’t let me get more than two inches from you all night, but now when I need you, you’re all of a sudden lax about your protective services.”

“I’m still trying to protect you,” he says, nodding to Natalie. “This time from her. I don’t want to see what happens if she doesn’t get what she wants.”

“You definitely don’t.” Natalie points to the single ladies. “Get out on that floor right now, Emmie, or I’ll drag you the rest of the way.”

“You’re a traitor,” I say, sticking my tongue out at Nix. “I won’t forget this.”

“Bring home a winner, baby,” he says, blowing me a kiss.

As I trudge toward the other single ladies, the photographer pulls Natalie into her throwing position, then shrieks, “Count down from five, ladies.”

“Five. Four—”

Natalie glares at me as I try to hide behind the other contestants. She doesn’t even wait for the countdown to end. She just winds up and whips the bouquet right at me. When I lunge out of the way, the bouquet hits another woman right in the chest.

Natalie stomps over to me. “This isn’t dodge ball, Emory. That was intended for you.”

“I told you I didn’t want it. And you can’t make me take it.”

“The hell I can’t. This is my wedding.” Natalie snatches a pink peony out of the bouquet and hands it to me. “Take it. I don’t care what you say. I want you to be the next one to get married. I hope it’s to Nix, but if it’s not, find

someone who's worthy of you. And if you don't invite me to your real wedding, I'm hunting you down. Do you understand me?"

"Loud and clear, bride," I say, saluting her.

She points at me as she backs away. "We're never losing touch again. I'll call you when we get back from our honeymoon."

Nix's arms slip around my waist from behind. "What does one flower mean? Like you're the next one to go steady with someone?"

"I think it means Natalie's satisfied, at least for now," I say, turning around in his arms, "but I should probably hide from her for the rest of the night just in case."

"Do you want to hide on the dance floor?"

"What?" My eyes widen as I look up at him. "Somehow, I can't imagine Nix Fuller knowing how to dance."

"Not only do I know how to dance," he says, offering me his hand. "I'm actually pretty good at it."

"You keep revealing shocking new information about yourself," I say, laughing as he twirls me under his arm. "How do you know how to dance?"

"I grew up stuck in the middle of two sisters who treated me like their third sister. I know how to dance, sew, cook, and I know the lyrics to a disturbing amount of Taylor Swift songs."

"You're way more of a renaissance man than I ever dreamed you would be," I say as he circles his arm around my waist. "You might just be the perfect man."

"Just trying to keep up with you, baby," he says, pulling me against his chest. "I never dreamed I would find someone who looks this good in a dress and can still throw a punch that would put most guys on their knees."

I shrug. "I'm a woman of many talents."

"You definitely are that."

We float around in slow circles for a few minutes without saying anything. I swear I'm almost asleep on his chest when I hear his voice above me.

"Did you say something?" I ask, looking up at him.

"I said I could get used to this," he says, smiling. "I love the feeling of you resting against my chest."

"It's a very comfortable chest," I say, laying my head back down. "Big and warm and it smells so good. I'm going to miss it."

He tightens his arms around me. "You don't have to miss it if you move

here.”

“Nix, we’ve covered this. My family’s in Concord.”

“So?” He pushes me back and looks down at me. “Maybe your parents can move here, too. We need some fresh blood in this town.”

“What? No one’s moving anywhere,” I say, my forehead crinkling up. “Be serious.”

“I am being serious, Em,” he says, taking my face into his hands. “I think we could have something if we were in the same town.”

“Whoa, you need to pump the brakes. I’ve only known you for two days.”

He narrows his eyes. “Five years.”

“No, you’ve known me for five years. I’ve known you for two days.”

“Wow, okay,” he says, dropping his hands. “I thought you said you remembered me.”

“Nix, come on,” I say, grabbing his arm. “You know what I mean. We really just met for the first time on Thursday. Don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not,” he says, letting out a long breath as he pulls me to him again. “I just don’t want you to leave tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to leave either, but it’s not like either one of us wants to wait five years before we see each other again. Right?”

“I don’t want to wait five minutes,” he snarls. “In fact, if you can’t make it back here, I’ll come to Concord to visit you. How does next weekend sound?”

“Excuse me,” a voice says from behind me. “Do you mind if I cut in, Nix?”

“Yes,” Nix snaps but then steps back when he sees it’s Edward. “Sorry, man. The groom’s the only person who I’ll let do this, and even then, I’m only giving you two minutes.”

“Understood.” Edward waits for Nix to leave the dance floor before he turns back to me. “I’m sorry to interrupt your night, Emory, but I wanted to get you alone for a second. First, I want to apologize for how Connor was treating you.”

“Thank you,” I say, smiling. “I already said this to Natalie, but I hope you didn’t kick him out of your wedding party on my account.”

“Not entirely,” Edward says, lowering his voice as a few people spin into our dance space. “There’s some stuff happening at our company that I just found out about a few days ago. I can’t really say any more than that, but if it’s true, Connor’s in serious trouble.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but I don’t really have anything to do with him anymore. I hadn’t seen him for five years before this wedding.”

He nods. “That’s what I understand, but I just wanted to warn you about our conversation. After I found out he was harassing you, I told him he had to stay away from you for the rest of the weekend. He completely lost it. I’ve never seen anything close to that level of anger. He made some threats against you. He might have just been letting off steam, but I wanted to warn you just in case.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I say, exhaling slowly. “I’m sure he was just venting.”

“Maybe,” he says, then leans down and whispers right into my ear, “but he was yelling something about a kid and how it was time for the three of you to become a real family. Natalie thinks he was hallucinating. She said you don’t have a kid.”

“You’re getting a little close there, man,” Nix says, pushing us apart. “Your time’s up. She’s mine for the rest of the night.”

“I definitely don’t want to fight Nix Fuller. I’ve seen what you do to your opponents.” Edward locks his eyes with mine as he backs away. “It was nice talking to you, Emory. Please take care of yourself—and your family.”

“What does that mean?” Nix asks as he takes me back into his arms. “Does he know your family?”

“No, but I’m sure Natalie told him about my parents,” I say, trying to smile. “Hey, I’m really tired all of a sudden. Do you mind if we get out of here?”

“You okay?” he asks, the lines on his forehead deepening. “You look really pale again—like you did that first day when you saw Connor.”

“There are so many people in here,” I say, fanning myself with my hand. “I think I’m just a little warm. Let’s go up to the room. I’m sure I’ll feel better when we get there.”

“Okay. Stay close,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and guiding me through the mass of people. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Chapter Twenty

*The Blue Ridge Resort and Spa
Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina*

When I wake up, Emory's no longer spooned up next to me. I feel around for her, but I'm alone in the bed.

"Em?" I flip on the lamp next to the table and do a quick sweep around the room. "Emory?"

No reply.

The bathroom door's closed, but it doesn't look like the light's on. "Are you in the bathroom?"

Still no answer.

I leap out of bed and open the bathroom door. She's not in there and all her makeup and hair stuff is gone.

"Emory!"

My voice booms around the empty suite as I run around checking under the bed, behind the curtains, in the closet—like she's hiding from me or something.

I finally see a note scribbled on the back of the room service menu that I used to leave her a note yesterday.

N -

I didn't want to wake you. I need to get back home. Thank you for being

the perfect fake husband this weekend. I'll text you when I get back to Concord.

- E

I run back into the bedroom and grab my phone. No texts. No missed calls.
“Fuck!” I’m sure everyone in the resort heard that and I don’t even care.

Where are you? I thought your flight didn’t leave until this afternoon.

My eyes almost burn a hole into the phone waiting for the three reply dots to pop up. Nothing. I try calling her. It rings the full cycle without an answer.

Are you at the airport? I'll come down and keep you company until you take off.

I give the dots about twenty seconds to pop up. That’s about much patience as I have for this right now.

Seriously? Are we doing this again? You just disappear?

Nothing. Just a screen full of my texts with no replies.

My clothes are scattered all around the room. I find my pants and undershirt, but my dress shirt’s missing. I throw on what I have and head down to the lobby.

The woman working the front desk looks up when I charge toward her.
“Is anything wrong, sir?”

“I’m looking for Emory Hart. Did you see her leave?” I hold up my hand to chest level. “About this tall. Brown hair.”

“She had our valet drive her into town about four this morning. That’s him,” she says, pointing to a kid who doesn’t even look old enough to drive.
“Charlie, do you remember the woman you drove into town this morning? The one wearing leggings and the white button-up shirt that came down to her knees.”

He lopes over to us. “Yeah, I took her to get her car. It was parked in

front of From The Ashes—that bar in Champion Cove. Do you know it?”

“Yeah, I know it,” I snarl. “Was she headed to the airport?”

“I didn’t ask,” Charlie says, shuffling his feet. “She was kind of upset. Like crying and stuff.”

I lunge at him. “Crying about what?”

“I don’t know,” he says, throwing up his hands. “I swear I didn’t do anything to her.”

“Sorry, man. I know you didn’t do anything. I’m just pissed. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.” I reach into my wallet and grab a twenty. “Thanks for giving her a ride.”

He hesitates. “She already tipped me.”

“Take it,” I say, pressing it into his hand. “And sorry again for yelling at you.”

I dial Ben as I’m running out to my truck. He picks up on the first ring.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d be up this early,” he says, chuckling. “Phil said you were getting very close with Emory yesterday.”

“She’s missing. Can you put out an APB on her car or something?”

“What do you mean missing?” His voice deepens. “Where’s the last place you saw her?”

“Here. At the resort. I woke up this morning and she was gone. All her stuff, too.” I pause for a second when it registers how insane I sound. “I guess she’s not really missing. She left when I was sleeping and didn’t tell me. I mean, she left me a note, but she’s not answering her phone and—”

“Have you worked out the case by yourself yet, detective?” he asks, yawning. “Because if so, I’d like to go back to bed.”

“Forget I called.”

“I wish I cou—”

When I hang up, my phone vibrates. It’s a text from Emory.

I didn’t disappear. I had to get back to NH. Family emergency.

What emergency? Is everyone okay? Are you at the airport?

My grandpa's in the hospital. He had a heart attack last night.

I couldn't get an early enough flight, so I'm driving back.

I just stopped for coffee. I need to get back on the road.

I'm so sorry, Em.

Why didn't you wake me up? I would have driven you home.

Where are you? I'll meet you and drive you the rest of the way.

I'm already in Virginia. I need to get going.

If I grab a flight, I can be there tonight.

The reply dots pop up, then go away, then pop up again about ten times. Finally she hits send.

I had more fun with you this weekend than I've had in such a long time, but I need to get back to my real life now.

Probably better to let this weekend be what it was—an absolutely perfect moment in time.

Thank you for riding in on your white stallion and saving me again. I promise I won't forget you this time. I couldn't even if I tried.

“Fuck that,” I yell as I get to my truck. “This is not happening.”
I take a few deep breaths before I text her back.

I'll give you some time with your family, but this isn't over.

Text me the second you get home. I mean that very second.

I won't be able to think straight until I know you're safe.

If I don't hear from you, I'm getting on a plane.

I hope your grandpa's okay. Please drive safely.

I wait a few minutes for her to reply. Nothing. She must have put her phone away or she's ignoring me. Either option makes me want to put my fist through the windshield.

When I FaceTime Cardi, a woman with long dark hair and a nose piercing answers. “Cardi’s phone.”

“Who are you?” I bark. “Where’s Cardi?”

“I’m Priya. Cardi’s in the bathroom. You’re one of her brothers, aren’t you? I can never tell you apart in pictures.”

When I don’t reply, she yells, “Cardi, one of your brothers is on the phone. He seems really grouchy.”

“That doesn’t distinguish between them, baby.” Cardi’s voice floats in from somewhere in the distance. “Does he have a full beard or just growth?”

Priya looks back at me. “Full.”

“That’s Nix. Ask him if he’s in jail.”

“I’m not in jail,” I yell. “Why is that always your first guess? I’ve only been in jail once.”

“He’s not in jail,” Priya says, walking across the room. “And he’s mad that you thought he was. Are you indisposed or can you take him off my hands? I don’t think he wants to talk to me.”

Cardi walks out of the bathroom and points at the phone. “Quit being rude to my girlfriend, asshole.”

“I wasn’t rude to her.”

“Yes, you were,” Priya yells from off screen.

“No, I wasn’t, and since when do you have a girlfriend?”

“Since about six months ago,” Priya chimes in. “She doesn’t want to tell anyone because she doesn’t like people in her business.”

“Really? Because you’re always in my business.”

“I am not,” Priya says. “I don’t even know you.”

“I was talking to Cardi,” I growl.

“Is your other brother this intense?” Priya asks. “What’s his name? Crow?”

“Hawk,” Cardi says, laughing, “and he’s not nearly as intense as Nix.”

“What are you talking about? Hawk’s a Navy SEAL. How can you think I’m more intense than he is?”

Cardi settles into a chair and finally focuses on me. “Why are you calling, Phoenix? You almost never use the actual phone, and I didn’t even know you knew how to use FaceTime. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I say, trying to control the irritation in my voice. “I just want to know what I’m missing.”

“Is this multiple choice or essay? Because I could fill up at least two notebooks on that question alone.”

Priya giggles in the background.

“With Emory,” I grunt. “What am I missing with Emory?”

“Why don’t you roll over and ask her? Mika told me you two have been shacking up this weekend.”

Priya’s suddenly sitting on the arm of Cardi’s chair. “They had sex? You didn’t tell me that. I thought you said Emory was pissed that he made it all weird. Catch me up.”

“I’m right here,” I shout. “Still on the phone.”

Priya waves me off without looking at the camera. “I’m not talking to you until you apologize for being rude to me.”

“I wasn’t—” I exhale slowly. “I’m sorry for being rude to you, Priya.”

“Thank you,” she says as she spins to the camera. “It’s nice to meet you, Nix. Cardi’s told me so much about you.”

“Don’t believe any of it,” I say, trying to smile. “And it’s nice to meet you, too.”

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” She leans down and gives Cardi a kiss. “I’ll be in the backyard if you need me, baby. Bye, Nix.”

“Nice first impression,” Cardi says. “And you wonder why I didn’t tell you about her.”

“Sorry,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “I have a lot on my mind this morning.”

“I’m assuming we’re talking about Emory again. Why isn’t she still with you?”

“She left early this morning. Her grandpa had a heart attack.”

“Oh, damn.” Cardi pulls her legs up and rests her head on her knees. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know. She’s on the road right now. I told her I’d meet her in Concord, but she doesn’t want me to come.”

She nods. “Well, I guess she has a lot on her plate right now—like with her grandpa.”

“There’s something else. I know she wants to be with me, but there’s something in the way.”

“Yeah, like a thousand miles,” she says, rolling her eyes. “No one wants to be in a long-distance relationship. They suck.”

“That’s not it, either. You know what it is,” I say, glaring at her. “Tell me or I’m going to Concord to find out for myself.”

“Leave it alone, Nix. You had a fun weekend. Get on with your life and let her get on with hers.”

“Not happening. I finally found someone worth fighting for. I’m not letting her get away this time. Tell me, what don’t I know. Is she married?”

She sets the camera down, so now I’m staring at the ceiling. “She’s not married.”

“Then what? Does she have a kid or something?”

No response. Complete silence. I don’t even hear her breathing.

I close my eyes. “Is the kid his?”

Nothing. I look back at the camera. Her phone’s still pointed toward the ceiling.

“Fuck,” I yell, slamming my hands against the steering wheel. “Did he hurt her or the kid? Is that what your case is about?”

Not one sound.

“Say something, Cardi, so I know you’re still alive.”

“I’m still alive.”

“Tell me where Connor lives,” I say, starting the truck. “I’m going to kill him.”

She finally picks up the phone. “I don’t know where he lives, and even if I did, I sure as hell wouldn’t tell you. You need to stay where you are and let

the law do its work.”

“Fuck that. I’m driving to New York right now and I’m going to absolutely tear him apart.”

“If you do, you won’t have a chance in hell with her.” She locks her eyes with mine. “You know I’m right, Nix. Please listen to me this time. You need to stay as far away from this as possible. If you get involved, it will only make things worse for Emory.”

I don’t reply, but I know she’s right. She’s always right.

“Nod to show agreement.”

I grunt, then nod a few times.

“Very good. Lay low for a little bit and give her some space. I’ll let you know what I can,” she says, smiling. “Now go home and be with Hulk. I’m sure she’s missing Emory, too.”

Chapter Twenty-One

EMORY

Concord, New Hampshire

When I charge into the hospital room, a nurse looks up from where he's checking Grandpa's chart. His eyes widen when he sees me.

"Ma'am, do you need the emergency room? It's down one floor."

The nine cups of coffee I've had since I left Champion Cove are finally starting to wear off. I'm suddenly so tired that it's hard to even formulate a reply. I look from the nurse to Grandpa and finally to Mom who's sleeping on a chair next to Grandpa's bed—her head resting on one of his hands.

"Ma'am?" the nurse asks, taking a few steps toward me. "You look like you might be in distress."

I glance at the mirror on the bathroom door. Only half of my hair's still in a ponytail. The other half's falling in clumps around my face. Nix's shirt that I stole this morning has a huge coffee stain on the front and what looks like Cheeto dust on one of the sleeves. And somehow I'm not wearing shoes.

"I just drove fourteen hours straight to get here," I say, staring blankly at the nurse. "I'm not sure where my shoes are."

"Are you family?" he asks.

"Granddaughter," I whisper as I get my first good look at Grandpa. "I'm his granddaughter."

"Okay," the nurse says, turning his focus back to the chart. "Only two family members in the room at one time in the ICU."

I look around the room. It's only Mom and me unless he's counting himself as a family member.

“There’s only two—”

“I know. I’m telling you for the future. He’s had a lot of visitors.”

That doesn’t surprise me. Everyone loves my grandpa. He’s one of those people who makes you feel like you’re the only person in the room when he’s talking to you.

“Is he sleeping?” I whisper as I slowly approach the bed.

“Medically induced coma,” the nurse says.

I run my hand over Grandpa’s forehead to push back the one curl that always escapes from his neatly coifed hair. He looks like he’s aged ten years since I saw him a week ago.

“Will he hear me if I talk to him?”

The nurse shrugs. “I’m not sure, but there are studies that say people in comas can hear what’s going on around them. It’s worth a try.”

“Grandpa? It’s Emmie. I’m here,” I say, taking his hand. “Can you hear me?”

I think I see a slight smile curl at the corners of his mouth.

“I think he smiled. Is that possible?”

“Maybe, keep talking to him,” the nurse says, patting my arm before he turns to leave. “Let us know if you need anything.”

“Grandpa, I’m so sorry I wasn’t here when it happened, but I’m here now,” I say, squeezing his hand. “I was in Asheville for that wedding I told you about. Remember? The one I was dreading. It turned out not to be as awful as I thought but a whole lot crazier. Long story. I’ll tell you later.”

His hand moves, but I’m not sure if he hears me or it’s involuntary body movements.

“Nothing to worry about.” I lay my head on his chest so I can hear his heartbeat. It’s faint, but it’s still there. “Well, maybe one thing. So, I basically stole a rental car. I was supposed to return it to the Asheville airport today, but I took it and drove it back here. That’s bad, right? Can I return it here in Concord? Or am I going to get arrested? You always know this stuff.”

I hear him laugh, but I know it’s only in my head.

Whenever I’m in trouble, he always closes his eyes, laughs, and says, “Oh, Emmie. I’ll take care of it for you.”

Tears start trickling down my cheeks again. So far, I’ve willed away the full-on sobbing collapse my body wants to have. No one needs to see me like that right now, especially Mom.

“Em?” Mom says, looking up at me. “When did you get back?”

“A few minutes ago,” I say, running over to her. “I came right to the hospital.”

She wraps me up in a hug. “Sweetie, I’m so glad you’re back safely. We were worried about you on the road by yourself.”

“I’m never leaving Concord again,” I say, rubbing her back. “What do the doctors say? When’s he going to wake up?”

“They’re keeping him in a coma until his heart gets stronger.”

“But it’s going to get stronger, right?” I whisper.

“It doesn’t look too good, Em,” she says, her voice shaking. “He’s almost eighty, and he had a major heart attack.”

“What can we do?” I take her hands and squeeze them until they almost break in half. “There has to be something more we can do.”

“Just be here with him. That’s all we can do now.”

Dad peeks through the door. “Em! When did you get back?”

“A few minutes ago,” I say as he wraps his arms around both of us. “Where’s AJ?”

“He’s sitting out in the hall with Violet.”

Violet is Dad’s sister and Mom’s best friend. And she’s one of AJ’s favorite people because she has homemade sugar cookies waiting for him every time we visit her.

“AJ said he wanted to see Grandpa if it’s okay with you,” Dad says.

Grandpa’s first name is Bob. Baba was what came out of AJ’s mouth when he was a baby and he’s never stopped calling him that.

“I think he should see him, but we can wait until you guys need a break,” I say, kissing Mom’s cheek. “I’ll be out in the hallway.”

AJ’s sitting on a bench swinging his Croc-clad feet while he hums the theme from his favorite cartoon. He’s still dressed in his trunks from his Sunday afternoon swim class.

“Mommy!” His eyes pop open as he hops off the bench and runs over to me. “I won. At swimming. I won!”

I take his face into my hands and place kisses all over it. “Of course you won. You’re the best swimmer in the world. I missed you so much, sweetie.”

“Miss you,” he says, letting me hug him for about ten seconds before he wriggles away. “Baba’s sick.”

“Yeah, baby, he is,” I say, running my hand over his damp curls. “Do you want to see him?”

“Pop said I can if you say yes.”

“Of course you can see him,” I say, picking him up and holding him close to my body. “It will make him so happy. You’re Baba’s favorite person in the world.”

Dad’s hugging Mom over in the corner of the room when we walk in. She’s sobbing. Mom and Grandpa have always been close, but they got even closer when Grandma died a year ago.

“Why does Nan cry?” AJ whispers.

“She’s sad that Baba’s sick.”

“It’s okay to cry if you’re sad, Nan,” AJ says, repeating one of the mantras I’ve been teaching him since he was little. “Crying makes it better.”

“Thanks, honey,” Mom says, rubbing her tear-streaked cheek against his hair. “It makes me feel so much better just to see you. And Baba will be so happy to see you, too.”

Dad guides her toward the door. “I’m taking your mom to the cafeteria to get something to eat. We’ll be back in about a half hour.”

AJ’s peering at Grandpa over my shoulder. “Why does Baba have stuff on his face?”

“Those are tubes that help him breathe and eat.”

He tightens his arms around my neck as we get closer to the bed. “Why does he need help?”

“He’s really sick, baby,” I say, putting AJ on my lap as I sit on the bed. “He might need help for a while.”

“Is he taking a nap?”

“Yep, but you can still talk to him.”

AJ inches a little closer to him. “Does he want to hear about swimming?”

“You can tell him anything you want,” I say, wiping a few tears off my face. “He can’t talk back right now, but he’s listening to every word you say. I promise.”

AJ closes his eyes as he considers this information. That’s what he does when he’s trying to figure something out. He’s been the deepest thinker and the most deliberate processor since the day he was born.

“Hi, Baba.” He opens his eyes and waves his little hand at Grandpa. “I won swimming this morning. Not everything. Just one thing. It’s the bobby contest.”

“Bobbing, baby. It’s called bobbing,” I say, smiling at him before I turn my face away to wipe off a few more tears.

“Bobbing.” AJ puts his hand under Grandpa’s hand as he continues. “You

go up and down and up and down in the water—over and over until people quit. I never quit. I kept going and going, and coach said I won.”

“AJ, that’s amazing,” I say, wrapping my arms around him. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Baba?” AJ’s body slumps against me. “Did you hear me? I won.”

“He heard you, and he’s so proud of you. Remember when Baba taught you how to swim?”

“In Aunt Viowet’s pool?”

“Violet, honey—with an l,” I say, kissing the top of his head. “Remember what the l’s sound like?”

He closes his eyes again. “Viow—Viollllet.”

“Good job, baby.”

“It’s hard,” he says, sighing. “Do you think Baba remembers me?”

“Oh, sweetie, he remembers every second of everything he’s ever done with you. You’re his favorite person.”

AJ’s gasps. “He squeezed my hand. Baba did! He heard me.”

“I told you he did.” I look down at their hands. Grandpa’s hand is twitching. Actually it looks more like it’s convulsing, and his body’s starting to shake, too. “Hey, why don’t we let Baba sleep for a little bit? Okay? I bet Violet will take you to get a snack.”

He looks up at me after I set him on the ground. “Should I get Baba a snack? He sneaks my grapes sometimes.”

“Yeah, baby. You better get him something. He’ll be hungry when he wakes up,” I say, leading him out into the hall. “Aunt Vi, will you take him to the cafeteria for a snack? He wants to get something for Baba, too.”

“Yep, let’s go, AJ,” she says, taking his hand. “I bet they have chicken nuggets. Do you still like those?”

AJ nods enthusiastically. “The most out of any food. Except ice cream. And maybe cookies. And cupcakes, but not the part on top.”

“The icing?” Violet grins down at him. “That’s my favorite part. If you eat the cake and I eat the icing, we’ll be the perfect cupcake-eating team.”

When I get back into the room, I take over Mom’s chair and rest my head on Grandpa’s hand. That’s the last thing I remember until right now.

“How long have I been sleeping?” I slept so hard that I’m having a hard time remembering what day it is.

“A couple hours,” Mom says, brushing the hair off my face.

“Where’s AJ?”

“Violet and your dad took him home. He needed a bath after swimming.”

“I could have taken him home,” I say, stretching my arms over my head.

“We didn’t want to wake you. You obviously needed some sleep.”

I look down at myself. I’m still wearing Nix’s coffee-stained shirt, but my flip-flops are back on my feet.

“Your dad went out to your car to get them. I tried to clean your feet before I put them back on you, but it was a lost cause,” she says. “Honestly, you’re in worse need of a bath than AJ. Why don’t you head home and come back in the morning? Visiting hours are over in thirty minutes, anyway. The hospital said I could sleep on the couch tonight, but only me.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“It’s okay, Em. I want to spend some time alone with him.” She holds up my bag. “Your phone’s been dinging nonstop for about an hour with texts from someone named Nix. Who is he?”

“He’s a friend from college,” I say, grabbing the bag. “I ran into him again at the wedding.”

“A friend, huh? His texts sound like he’s way more than a friend.” She smiles when I raise my eyebrows. “Yes, I was snooping. I needed to get my mind off all this for a few minutes. Just give me this one, okay?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

One Week Later
Champion Cove, North Carolina

After Emory texted to tell me she'd arrived home safely, she asked me to give her a little space to be with her family. I haven't heard from her since.

It's been six days. Six grueling, exasperating days. I've never been in this bad of a mood. All I want to do is punch things, and for that reason, I've pretty much kept away from everyone.

Every morning, I lock myself in my office before the bar opens and only come out if there's a problem. Mika's brought me lunch every day, but I haven't been hungry. All I do is stare at my phone—trying to will Emory to text me.

That's what I'm doing now when my locked office door suddenly flings open. Mika charges in and stands right in front of my desk, hands on her hips. If she were wearing a cape, she'd look exactly like Mighty Mouse.

"Enough feeling sorry for yourself," she says, pounding her fist on my desk. "Get your ass out of this office right now."

"No, I—"

"Did you not hear me?" She marches over and tries to pull me out of my chair. "Get the fuck up. I mean it, Nix. I'll get backup if I have to, but you're leaving this office. You've been barricaded in here for days."

"That door was locked and Cardi's not here," I say, glaring at her. "How'd you get in?"

She holds a bunch of keys and jiggles them. "Did you forget you gave

Jake a backup key?”

“Jake!” I slam my chair against the back wall as I charge out of my office. He’s sitting at the bar eating the same damn thing he has every day—a turkey club with jelly and extra fries. “That key’s for you, and you alone. It’s only to be used in an emergency. Was I not clear about that when I gave it to you?”

He spins his bar stool toward me as he pops another fry into his mouth. “How is this not an emergency? We’ve barely seen you in almost a week. There’s a rumor going around that you’re dead. Glad to see you’re still with us, man.”

I grab the keys out of Mika’s hand and remove my office key from the loop. “Your privileges have been revoked.”

“I’ll live.” Jake laughs as I throw the rest of the keys at him. “You look like hell. When’s the last time you took a shower?”

“Mind your own business,” I growl, pointing from him to Mika as I head behind the bar. “Both of you.”

“Have you heard from her?” Burt asks as I pass by him.

I slam my hand on the bar next to him. “What did I just say, Burt?”

“You told Mika and Jake to mind their own business,” he says, sipping on his iced tea, “but you didn’t say anything to me.”

“It goes double for you. Everyone needs to back off.”

Mika grabs the coffee pot out of my hand as I try to pour myself another cup. “Let’s lay off the coffee. The caffeine’s making you even angrier. Maybe have something to eat.”

I grab the coffee pot again and box out Mika as I pour an extra full cup. “I’m a grown-ass man. You don’t need to tell me when to eat.”

“Maybe you need to talk about her a little bit,” Burt offers. “Talking usually helps me.”

Burt sits in here every day from noon until about four, sipping on that damn iced tea and telling people how to live their lives. It annoys me on a good day, but today it’s making my head feel like it’s about to explode right off my body.

“Burt! Do you have a hearing problem? I told you to back off. If you can’t do that, get the fuck out of my bar.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Mika say, grabbing my arm. “That’s over the line. I’m sorry things aren’t working out with Emory, but we’re just trying to be supportive friends—all of us, including Burt. You owe him an apology.”

I blow out a breath through my clenched teeth. “Fine. I’m sorry, Burt, but

for the record, my mood has nothing to do with Emory.”

Everyone in the bar laughs, including the Bridge Club ladies sitting by the window.

“Oh, sweetie, bless your little heart,” Iris says, her hand covering her chest. “It has everything to do with her. I haven’t seen anyone this brokenhearted since I left my third husband.”

Fran nods in agreement. “Have you told her how you feel? Maybe you should go to New Hampshire and talk to her.”

“Absolutely not,” Mika says. “He can’t go there when she’s not even returning his texts. That’s way overplaying his hand. Cardi agrees with me.”

Fran purses her lips. “I didn’t know she wasn’t returning his texts. I’m sorry, Nix. That does seem bad.”

“Not that it’s anyone’s business, but she did return my last text,” I snarl as I head back to my office. “I haven’t texted her since then. She can’t return my texts if I’m not sending her any.”

“Why aren’t you sending her any, honey? That doesn’t seem like a good strategy—”

Fran’s voice fades away as I get to my office. I’m just clicking the lock when someone raps on the door.

“Mika, I swear to god if you don’t leave me alone, I’m going to fire you,” I bark, swinging the door open.

Burt’s standing in the hallway. He walks in without invitation and lowers himself bit by bit into one of the chairs across from my desk.

“Bad knees,” he says, grimacing. “I like the bar stools better. You can just slide right on.”

I stand at the door to give him a chance to leave. He doesn’t.

“Burt, I apologize again for snapping at you, but I’m in the middle of something.” I open the door wider. “If you need anything, ask Mika.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, dismissing me with his hand. “If I had to apologize every time I was an asshole to someone, that’s all I’d be doing.”

Despite the fact that I’m still holding the door open for him, he makes no attempt to stand up again. He stretches his legs out and points to his right knee.

“Blew that one out in ’Nam,” he says, trying to straighten it. “And the left one is worn down from me trying to overcompensate for the other one. I’m in my sixties, but most days, I feel like I’m ninety.”

“I understand,” I say, sighing as I head back behind my desk. “My knees

and back are shot from hockey, and I'm not even thirty yet."

"Stretching's the key. That's where I went wrong. I sat on my ass after the war and felt sorry for myself for a few years. Everything including my knees went to hell after that."

I met Burt the second day I was in town. I think I've seen him every day since then, but I didn't know a thing about him until right now.

"I didn't know you fought in Vietnam."

"Unfortunately, I got in on the very end of it," he says, shifting in his chair. "I don't talk about it much. Not many good memories there."

"Yeah, my brother's a SEAL. He doesn't like to talk about his service, either."

"A SEAL. Very impressive. Those guys are a different breed," he says, nodding. "Is he still active?"

"He officially retired from the Navy, but he's still doing something. I don't really know what. He doesn't talk much about that either."

"Yeah, those special forces guys are a secretive bunch," he says. "I'd like to meet your brother if he's in town sometime. I always like talking to fellow veterans."

"I'm sure he'd love to meet you."

About a minute passes with neither of us saying anything. I'm not sure if he thinks we're hanging out or what.

"Is there something I can help you with, Burt?"

"Not at all, but I'm hoping I can help you," he says, straightening up in his chair. "Mika and Cardi are wrong. Please don't tell them I said that because I'd like to live to see at least one more year on this earth. Honestly, I've never been more scared of anyone in my life, especially your sister. She's a little skinny thing, but I swear she could destroy me."

"With her mouth alone," I say, smiling for the first time in days. "I won't tell them, but you made a bold statement. Mika's rarely wrong and Cardi's never wrong."

"They're wrong this time," he says, running his fingers over his mustache. "If you feel this strongly about that girl, you need to go get her."

I close my eyes to try to keep from barking at him again.

"I know you don't want me in your business and I appreciate that," he continues, "but brother, you need to hear this. We don't meet people very often that fit. I only met one like that, and I waited too long to tell her how I felt. By the time I got around to it, she was already married to some other

guy.”

My eyes pop open. He somehow just tapped into my biggest fear—that I’ll give Emory too much space and she’ll forget about me again.

“Why’d you wait so long? Did someone give you bad advice?”

“Naw, I did it to myself,” he says, sighing. “She was my girlfriend before I left for the war, and waited for me the entire time I was gone. But I was messed up when I got back. She tried to help me for about a year, but finally gave up. By the time, I came out of my fog, it was too late.”

“Damn, Burt. I’m sorry to hear that. I had no idea.”

“I don’t like to talk much about myself. That’s why I’m always into other people’s business.” He pushes himself out of the chair, his skinny arms trembling under his body weight. “That’s all I wanted to say. I’ll leave you in peace now.”

“You know if you strengthened your arms, it would make getting up and down out of chairs a lot easier,” I say, rushing around my desk to help steady him. “Jake and I work out at my house every Tuesday night if you want to join us next week.”

“I might do that one week,” he says, smiling, “but I don’t think you’re going to be in town next week. Go get her, Nix. Don’t make the same mistake I did.”

As the door closes behind Burt, a text comes in from Cardi.

Emory’s grandpa died. Service on Monday.

She’s not in a good place. Lots happening on all fronts...

She needs someone to lean on. I think it’s time for you to go to Concord.

Chapter Twenty-Three

EMORY

Two Days Later
Concord, New Hampshire

Everyone loved my grandpa. Everyone. And they all want to tell us how much they adored him. We greeted mourners for almost three hours before the funeral started and the line was still out the door. Mom decided to stay after the service to give everyone else an opportunity to talk to the family before we head to the cemetery.

We're already into hour two, post service. Everybody has a story about Grandpa. And they're sweet and funny—just like he was. At first, I found them comforting. Now I find them exhausting. I'm barely even listening at this point.

Dad makes his way over to me. "Sweetie, you need to take a break. You look like you're about to fall over."

I glance at Mom. "I can't leave her."

"Looking after her is my job," he says, pulling me out of the receiving line. "You're no good for anyone if you collapse. Go outside for a few minutes and get some fresh air."

I head into the back room to check on AJ. He's sitting on the floor by Violet's chair, running his toy truck up and down the legs of the food table that's set up for the family.

"Hey, baby," I say, kneeling next to him. "I'm going outside for a little bit. Do you want to come with me?"

"I'm bored," he says, his little body collapsing onto the floor. "Can we go

swimming?”

“I know you’re bored, but we just have to get through today. You’re being so good. I promise I’ll take you swimming tomorrow.”

“And ice cream?”

Violet laughs from above us. “You’re raising a master negotiator, Em. He’s already talked me into four cookies.”

“Four?” I ask, my mouth dropping open as I look down at AJ. “That’s three more than I said you could have.”

“It’s a hard day, Mommy,” he says, sighing. “Pop said so.”

“You’re right, sweetie. It’s definitely a four-cookie kind of day.” He breaks out into giggles when I rub my nose against his. “Do you want to come outside with me or stay here?”

“Here,” he says, sliding across the floor on his butt to recover one of his trucks.

I told him to try to keep his pants clean all day. It looks like that’s definitely not going to happen.

“Vi, will you watch him for a few more minutes?”

“Yep,” she says, squeezing my hand. “Take as long as you want. He’s fine.”

As I walk outside, the sun blinds me. I’ve been in the church so long that I forgot it was still daytime. As my eyes adjust, I see a man leaning on a wall across from the church wearing jeans, cowboy boots, aviator sunglasses, and a crisp, white button-up.

“Hey, sorry I didn’t tell you I was coming,” he says, removing the sunglasses. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

When I hear Nix’s voice, the sobbing breakdown I’ve been holding back for a week takes over my body. He’s on me in under five seconds.

“I’ve got you,” he says, wrapping his arms under mine as I start to sink to the ground. “Everything will be okay.”

“No, it won’t,” I say as my forehead crashes down onto his chest. “There’s too much happening. I can’t deal with it all.”

“And you don’t have to—at least not by yourself,” he says, rubbing my back. “I’m here and I’m not going anywhere. Tell me what you need. Absolutely anything. I’ll make it happen.”

“I left again without telling you,” I say, gulping for air between words. “I keep abandoning you like your parents did. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s nothing like what my parents did,” he whispers. “They were running

away from their family. You were running toward yours.”

“But I forgot to text you immediately when I got back here and—”

“Shh, none of that matters. Just breathe. I’m so sorry about your grandpa, Em. Tell me what I can do to make you feel better right now. I’m here to help.”

“Emory!”

I look around Nix to see Dad running across the church yard. I’ve never seen him move this fast in my life.

“Dad, what’s wrong? Is Mom okay?”

“She’s fine,” he says, glaring at Nix as he makes it over to us.

Nix removes his arms from around me and extends his hand to Dad. “Sir, I’m Nix Fuller. I’m—”

“I know who you are,” Dad says, making no attempt to shake his hand. “I need to talk to my daughter alone.”

“Yes, sir,” Nix says, putting his hands in the air as he backs away. “I’ll be over here if you need me, Em.”

Dad pulls me farther away from Nix, then whispers, “Your mom told me someone named Nix was texting you. Since I’ve only ever heard of one Nix, I figured it was Nix Fuller. Do you know him from college?”

“Kind of,” I say, looking back at Nix. “We met briefly at BC, but reconnected this weekend at the wedding.”

Dad takes my shoulders into his hands. “Is that him?”

“Is that who?”

My mouth drops open as it registers what he means. “Oh my god, Dad, no. That’s not him. Nix isn’t AJ’s dad.”

He locks his eyes with mine. “You’ve hidden that asshole’s identity from us for five years. Tell me the truth, Em. I need to know. I’ve been waiting to meet him, so I could repay him for what he did to you.”

“Which is exactly why I won’t tell you his name. I don’t need you committing a felony and ending up in jail. AJ needs his grandpa more than you need to get revenge.”

Dad looks over at Nix, then back to me. “Do you promise me that it’s not him?”

“I swear,” I say, holding up my hand. “Nix would never hurt me. He’s the sweetest man in the world—next to you.”

Dad nods. “Okay, I believe you. And now, since I know he’s not the asshole, I want to meet him properly. You know how much of a hockey fan I

am.”

Nix pushes himself off the wall as we walk over. “Sir, I’m sorry to be intruding on your family time.”

“You’re not. I just needed my daughter for a second,” Dad says, extending his hand. “I’m Emory’s dad. You can call me Jim.”

“Thank you, sir, uh, Jim,” Nix says. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Dad says. “I’m a big hockey fan. I played a little goalie in high school. Your former teammate Ash Carlson is my favorite player. Best goalie I’ve ever seen.”

“Ash is my favorite player, too,” Nix says, smiling for the first time since Dad walked up. “He’s way more skilled than I ever was. I had to rely on throwing guys around a little bit.”

“Yep. No one checked players into the boards like you did. I’m still trying to figure out how some of those guys stood back up,” Dad says, chuckling. “It was nice to meet you, Nix. I should get back inside to my wife.”

“My pleasure,” Nix says, shaking Dad’s hand again. “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you or your family.”

Dad gestures to me. “This is the first time I’ve seen her smile in a week. Keep building on that and you’ll be good.”

“I’ll be right back in, Dad. I need a few more minutes.”

“We’re leaving for the cemetery in about a half hour. Don’t come back in until then. You deserve a break,” Dad says, looking over his shoulder as he walks away. “Nix, we’re having a gathering at our house after everything’s done. You’re welcome if it’s okay with Emory.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nix yells after him. “Jim. Thank you, Jim.”

“You can stop sucking up now,” I say, smiling. “He can’t hear you anymore.”

Nix lets out a long whistle. “What was that about? He looked like he was about to punch me when he walked up to us.”

“He thought you were Connor.”

“What?” he asks, his jaw tightening. “Why did he think I was that jackass?”

“Well, he didn’t exactly think you were him. He knew you were Nix Fuller, but he thought you were the one who—”

I sink down into the grass and lean my back against the wall.

“The one who what?” he asks, sitting down next to me.

“I have a kid,” I blurt out.

He circles his arms around my shoulders. “I know, Em.”

“Did Cardi tell you?”

“No, but I guessed and she didn’t deny it.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “He’s Connor’s son.”

“I figured. Is your agreement with him a custody thing?”

“Yeah, he agreed to stay away from us and not try to seek custody if I didn’t file assault charges against him for the stuff back in college.”

“What the fuck?” he growls. “He violated that at least twice over the wedding. How often does he contact you?”

“He hadn’t contacted me once in five years before the wedding,” I say, looking up at him. “I swear.”

“Is he trying to go back on the agreement now?” he growls. “Is that why Cardi’s involved?”

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. “She said there were a few loopholes in our agreement regarding custody. She’s trying to close those so there’s not a chance Connor can get near AJ.”

“And?”

“She sent the new agreement to his attorney a few days ago,” I say, biting my lip. “Apparently, Connor lost it when he saw the new terms.”

He narrows his eyes. “Has he tried to contact you again?”

“Not yet,” I say, resting my head on his shoulder. “I haven’t seen or heard from him since that night at the bachelorette party.”

“Are you expecting him to contact you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know,” I say as he kisses the top of my head. “Apparently, Connor’s being investigated for embezzlement, too, and I think the charges are pretty serious. It sounds like everything’s piling up on him and he’s about ready to blow.”

“Mommy!” I jerk my head up when I hear AJ’s voice. He’s standing on the steps of the church, scanning the front lawn for me. When he finally sees me, he comes tearing across the grass, holding something high over his head. “Five! Five!”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Concord, New Hampshire

“Mommy!”

Emory’s head pops off my shoulder when she hears the excited scream. There’s a little boy standing in front of the church. His head swivels back and forth until his gaze lands on Emory. When he sees her, his face lights up just before he thunders toward us.

“Mommy! Five! Five!”

His little legs are moving so fast that they almost look like they’re forming one big spinning wheel.

“Slow down, baby. I’m right here,” Emory says. “Five what?”

He crashes into her legs and holds up a half-eaten cookie. “Aunt Vioww-Violllet says I can have five cookies.”

He’s leaning fully against her, but his legs haven’t stopped yet. They’re still kicking up grass behind him.

Emory grabs his shoulders and tries to still him. “Baby, you can have as many cookies as you want today. Tell Aunt Violet I said so.”

“This one has green sugar dots on it,” he says, putting the cookie directly into her face.

She steals a quick bite. “They’re called sprinkles, remember?”

He giggles as he snatches the cookie back from her, causing two dimples to pop out on his cheeks. They match Emory’s exactly. In fact, almost everything about him matches her, except for the mop of blond curls on his head. Those must come from Connor’s gene pool, and hopefully that’s the

only thing he inherited from that asshat.

He extends his noncookie hand to me. “My name’s AJ Hart. I’m awwmost—” He pauses, closes his eye for a second, then opens them and continues, “awllmost—four and a half. I’m not very good at l’s. We’re working on it.”

I close my hand over his. “It’s nice to meet you, AJ. My name’s Nix. And I think you’re doing a great job with your l’s.”

“It’s hard.” He looks me right in the eyes as we continue the handshake. “My center name’s James—”

“Middle name, sweetie,” Emory says, licking her thumb and using it to wipe something off his cheek. “Not center. James is in the middle of Aaron and Hart.”

“Middle,” AJ says, scrunching up his face as he closes his eyes again. After about ten seconds, they pop back open. He puts his hand on my knee. “Middle name. Not center. Mommy’s middle name is Joy. We both have J’s. What’s your middle name? Does it start with a J?”

“Can you believe I don’t have a middle name? My parents didn’t give me one.”

His eyes widen. “Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I say, shrugging. “I never asked. Do you think I need one?”

“Maybe.” He narrows his eyes. “Do you like cookies?”

I feel like our potential friendship rests entirely on this answer.

“I love cookies. Do you think I can have five, too?”

He looks up at Emory, then whispers to me, “Were you good in church?”

“The entire time,” I whisper back. “I didn’t talk once.”

He exhales. “Maybe, then. I talked three times and Aunt Violet gave me five.”

“Good job with your l’s, buddy,” I say, giving him a high-five. “You nailed a couple of them in a row.”

“Emory!” A woman’s standing at the church entrance waving her hand at us. “Your mom needs you. They’re closing the cas—”

“Be right there,” Emory yells, springing to her feet. “Do you mind if AJ stays here for a second? I don’t want him to see—”

“Not at all,” I say, squeezing her hand. “Do what you have to do. We’ll be fine.”

“Just for a second. I’ll be right back,” she says, her face suddenly twisted

with grief. “AJ, stay here with Nix. He needs someone to talk to for a bit.”

AJ leans against the wall next to me as we watch Emory rush toward the church. “That’s my mom.”

“That’s what I gathered,” I say, looking down at him. He’s trying to mimic the way I’m standing—back against the wall, feet spread wide, hands resting behind me. “I bet she’s a good mom.”

“She makes me eat peas.”

“Aww, man, that sucks,” I say, muffling a laugh. “Peas are the worst.”

“They’re squishy.”

“The squishiest.”

I cross one of my ankles over the other to see if he’ll do it, too. He tries, loses his balance, and falls over.

“Oops,” I say, reaching under his arms to pull him back up. “You good, bud?”

“Standing’s hard sometimes.”

“Sometimes.” I put my hand over his head and turn him like I’m opening a lid on a jar. “You got a little dirt on your pants.”

“Mommy said I have to stay clean,” he says, whirling around as he tries to see the back of his pants.

“You’re good. It’s just a little.” I hold him in place with my hand still on his head. “Brush it off like this. No one will notice.”

He watches me brush my pants, then does the same to his.

“Good job. Do you want to sit on the wall with me to wait for your mom? There’s less dirt up here.”

He holds his arms out and lets me lift him into place. When we’re both situated on the wall, he looks over.

“Did your mom make you eat peas?”

My mom didn’t make me do anything. I rarely saw her when I was little.

“Yep, they’re what made me strong,” I say, rolling up my shirt sleeve and giving him a little flex. “My muscles got big like this just because I ate peas.”

He watches my muscle move up and down, then sighs like the weight of the world is on his shoulders.

“Baba’s in heaven.”

“I know, bud,” I say, putting my arm around him. “I’m sorry he’s not with you anymore, but I know he’s still looking out for you.”

“That’s what Nan says,” he says, leaning against me. “She says he can hear me if I say something to him.”

“She’s right. I talk to my grandpa all the time.”

He looks up at me, his eyes wide. “Is he in heaven, too?”

“Yep, he has been for almost fifteen years.”

“Do you think he knows Baba?”

“My sister told me our grandpa hid in the clouds so he could have a good view of everything we did,” I say, pointing to the only cloud in the sky. “I bet he’s in that cloud with your Baba and they’re watching us right now. They’re probably friends already just like we are.”

He nods. “We’re friends aww-allready.”

“Your l’s are getting so good, AJ. I can tell how hard you’re working at it.”

He beams up at me. “Can you come our house so we can play trucks?”

“Yep,” I say, patting his head. “Any time you want.”

Emory heads back over to us, tears streaming down her face.

“It’s okay to cry, Mommy,” AJ says, running his hand over her face. “It makes it better.”

“I know, baby, but thanks for reminding me.” She lifts AJ off the wall and points toward the church. “Pop’s waiting for you inside. He said he’d play trucks with you until we have to leave.”

“Can Nix play trucks with us, too?”

She smiles as she wipes a few tears off her cheeks. “Maybe sometime, but I need to talk to him right now.”

He starts to walk away, then turns back around. “Are we riding in the big black car?”

“Yeah, baby. We’re riding in the big black car soon. Like twenty minutes. Okay?”

“Okay.” He takes off again, then spins around when he’s about ten feet away. “Mommy, I want to eat peas now.”

“Okay, sweetie. Thank you,” she says as we watch him march toward the church, dirt still covering his backside. “He hates peas. I’m not sure why he changed his mind. Did you have anything to do with that?”

“Yeah, I told him I ate peas when I was young and that they make you have big muscles.”

She lays her head against my arm. “Well, you definitely have those.”

“He’s a great kid, Em. Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“I don’t know,” she says, sighing. “I wasn’t trying to hide him. He’s the most glorious thing that’s ever happened in my life. I guess I didn’t see the

point. I didn't know if we'd ever see each other again."

"I told you we'd see each other," I say, kissing her forehead. "I'm not giving up that easily. What we have is worth fighting to keep."

She looks up at me. "I'm so glad you're here, Nix, but nothing's changed. I can't move to Champion Cove. I hope you understand why now. My entire support system's here."

"I want to be with you," I say, pulling her against my chest. "If you want to be with me, we'll figure it out."

"I want to be with you, but I don't see how—"

"Em, you have so much on your plate right now," I say, tightening my arms around her. "Let's take one thing at a time. Okay?"

She nods against my chest. "He is a great kid, isn't he?"

"Amazing. He's so smart."

"That's because of my dad," she says, smiling as she looks up at me. "He's a kindergarten teacher."

"He's a kindergarten teacher and your mom owns a bakery? Those are seriously some of the coolest jobs grandparents could have. AJ's pretty lucky."

"Yeah, he is," she says, her voice getting softer. "Connor didn't even want me to have him. In fact, he even tried to prevent it. That's the part of my story I haven't told you yet."

"He tried to prevent you from having the baby?" I ask, every muscle in my body clenching. "Like through a court order or something?"

"Not through a court order." She doesn't say anything for about twenty seconds, but finally continues, "After you left my apartment that morning, Connor showed up. That was the last time I saw him until Natalie's wedding."

I look at the sky and exhale slowly. "Please tell me the story. I need to know. Tell me exactly what happened after I left."

"I'll tell you if you promise you won't try to get involved."

"That depends on what you tell me," I growl.

"No, it doesn't. Promise or you can leave right now," she says, raising her eyebrows. "I'm serious, Nix. I'll do anything to protect AJ. And you getting involved will just make Connor angrier and more irrational. I can't have that."

"Fine," I say, hissing out a breath. "If staying away from him protects you and AJ, I'll stay away, but if he tries to do one more thing to you, I'm going

to kill him. Now please tell me the entire story.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

EMORY

Three Days Later
Concord, New Hampshire

AJ and I are snuggled up in bed watching TV while we wait for cinnamon rolls to finish baking. It's been our Saturday morning routine almost since the day he was born.

When I left college, I moved into the detached in-law suite behind my parents' house. It was supposed to be a temporary fix, but after I had AJ, it was so amazing having support right across the backyard that I decided to stay for a little while longer. Now, almost five years later, we're still here.

It was more than enough room when AJ was a baby, but it's getting a bit too tight now. I know we need to move into our own place soon, and it's killing me. AJ's gotten so used to living across the patio from Pop and Nan, as he calls them. And frankly, I have, too. They've absolutely saved me these past five years.

"Nan comes," AJ says, his eyes flickering toward the window before they lock back into his cartoon.

When I sit up, I see Mom tearing across the patio. It can't be more than forty degrees out, but she's only wearing a tank top, pajama pants, and flip-flops.

"Emmie," she says, panting as she bursts in, "there's someone at the front door to see you. He wouldn't tell me his name."

Nix flashes across my mind. He left right after the funeral to give me some time alone with my family. He apparently had some things he needed to

take care of in the area. He said he would stop by Concord again on his way back to North Carolina.

“Is he like six, three with dark hair and a beard.”

“No, this guy’s shorter than your dad, so maybe five, ten,” she says, curling her lip. “I hope you don’t know him very well because frankly, he’s not very polite.”

“Always be puhwhite.” AJ recites our motto without looking away from his show.

“That’s right, baby,” I say, kissing the side of his head before I roll out of bed. “He needs to be polite. I’ll tell him that right now.”

I’m pulling a hoodie over my pajamas when I hear yelling. When my head pops out of the neck opening, Connor’s voice booms across the yard.

“Tell me where she is or I’m searching the house.”

“Fuck!” I say, plunging my feet into my slippers. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

“Bad word,” AJ mumbles, his eyes still locked on the TV. “Four times.”

“Yes, very bad, sweetie, but excellent counting,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Mom, will you stay here with AJ? Close the shutters and lock the door behind me. Okay?”

“What?” Mom throws her hand over her chest. “Do you recognize his voice? Who is he? Is he dangerous? Should I call the police? Are we safe?”

I’m just realizing where I get my habit of rapid firing questions at people without giving them a chance to answer.

“It’s him, Mom.” I raise my eyebrows and nod my head toward a still spellbound AJ. “The one who I’m trying to get to sign that new agreement.”

“Him *him*?” She sucks in a breath as her fingers dig into her chest. “I’m calling the police. Even the old agreement says he’s not supposed to be anywhere near you or A—”

“Mom, stop. Let’s not make this worse than it needs to be. I’ll take care of it.” I look at AJ again. “Please keep him here. The cinnamon rolls have a few more minutes.”

“AJ,” Mom says, starting to close the shutters. “I’m going to watch cartoons with you for a while, okay?”

“Kay.”

Lock the door, I mouth to her as I close it behind me.

When I get to the back door of the main house, Connor’s charging into the kitchen. He stops cold when he sees me standing outside.

“Don’t come in, Emmie,” Dad says, holding up his hand. “I’ve got this.”

“Dad, it’s okay,” I say, cracking open the door. “I’ll handle him.”

“The fuck you will,” Connor snaps as I edge into the kitchen.

Dad steps in front of him. “You will not use that language when you’re talking to my daughter. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Your grandson’s father,” Connor says, leaning within an inch of Dad’s face. “That’s who the fuck I am.”

Dad looks at me over the top of his reading glasses. “Is this him?”

“Yeah,” I say, getting in between them. “His name’s Connor Albrecht and he was just leaving.”

Connor explodes across the room. “Your parents don’t even know my name? Are you fucking kidding me, Emory? We have a kid together.”

“No, we don’t,” I say, grabbing Dad’s arm as he tries to go after Connor. “I have a kid. You were just the sperm donor.”

Dad shakes me off and charges over to Connor. “Are you the monster who hit my pregnant daughter in the stomach? Not to mention the black eye and the marks on her neck. Was that you? Because I’ve been dying to return that favor for almost five years now.”

“That’s the reason they don’t know your name, Connor,” I say, jumping in between them again. “Because if they knew who the worthless piece of shit was that assaulted their pregnant daughter, they would have both tried to commit several felonies against you.”

Connor snorts as he reaches around me and jabs Dad’s chest. “Come at me, old man. Let’s see how that ends.”

The door creaks behind me. When I spin around, AJ’s peeking into the kitchen.

“AJ!” I run over to him. “Where’s Nan?”

“Potty,” he says as he slides into the room. He looks over at Connor. “Why did he hit, Pop?”

“Oh, sweetie, he didn’t hit him. Everything’s fine.” I try to usher him back out the door when I see Mom running across the patio. “Will you please go back to your cartoons with Nan? I’ll be there in a minute. Save me a cinnamon roll, okay?”

“Pop said he was a monster,” AJ says, pointing at Connor. “Then he hit Pop. I saw.”

When I look over at Connor, his cold eyes are fixed on me. He’s never seen his almost five-year-old son, but he’s not even looking at him.

“AJ,” I say, pushing him toward the door as Mom makes it over to us.

“Go with Nan, okay?”

AJ wraps his arms around my legs and buries his face in between them. “Don’t stay with the monster man, Mommy.”

“What the fuck did he call me?” Connor yells, starting toward us. “Is that the kind of manners he’s learning in this house?”

“Back up, Connor,” I say, pushing AJ behind me. “This is between us. Leave him out of it.”

Dad grabs Connor’s shoulder. “Don’t get near my grandson.”

“Oh, I’m going to get near him,” Connor snarls. “In fact, I’ve decided to file for custody. It looks like it’s high time—” Connor stops and looks at AJ. It’s clear he hasn’t even picked up on his name. “It’s high time *he* had a real man in his life.”

Mom screams when Dad lunges at Connor.

“Everybody stop!” I squat down next to a now wailing AJ and pull him against my chest. “It’s okay, sweetie. No one’s mad at each other. We just need to remember to use our inside voices. I want you to go with Nan now, please. Pop will come, too.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with him,” Dad says from behind me. “Not a chance.”

I try to stand up, but AJ has a death grip on me.

“Dad, please take AJ outside,” I plead. “Connor and I need to talk alone. You can stay right outside the door on the patio if you want.”

“I want,” Dad growls as he holds up his phone. “And I have 911 pre-dialed if he makes any wrong moves.”

AJ’s still clinging to me. “Baby, if you go back to our house with Nan, we can get ice cream this afternoon. And we’ll go to the place that crumbles cake on top of the ice cream.”

He lifts his head off my shoulder. “Two scoops?”

“Two scoops. I promise. I’ll be with you again in exactly five minutes. Nan will help you count it off. Okay?”

He nods and takes Mom’s hand. Dad follows them outside and positions himself directly outside the door—staring in at us.

“Why are you here?” I turn back to face Connor. “This is a serious violation of our agreement. I’m calling my attorney right after you leave.”

“Which agreement, Emory?” He spits out my name. “The one we’ve had on the books for five years or that new one you sent me. I can’t get within a mile of you or him? That’s ridiculous.”

“Why is that ridiculous?” I wave toward the door. “You don’t want anything to do with AJ. You’ve never tried to see him. You barely looked at him today. You’re even struggling to remember his name. Why would you want to see him?”

He leans back against the counter and crosses his arms over his chest. “I want to see you, and if he comes with the package, I guess that’s fine.”

“You haven’t contacted me in five years,” I say, glaring at him. “What’s changed?”

He shrugs. “I saw you at the wedding and something clicked. I want to be with you again. And I damn sure don’t want you to be with that fucking Nix Fuller.”

“There it is,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You couldn’t give a crap about AJ or me. You just don’t want Nix in our lives.”

“You deserve better than him.”

“And that’s you?” I almost choke on the words. “You’re not even close to being the man he is.”

His face reddens as a vein pops out on his forehead. “Payton told me you’re not really married to him. What was that bullshit about?”

“Honestly, I just didn’t want you near me. If I had to fake marry someone to get you to leave me alone, it seemed like the right thing to do.”

He hisses at me. “I don’t want him near my son.”

“Do you see him here?” I motion around the kitchen. “He’s back in North Carolina living his life, and I’m here like I have been for every day of the past five years just trying to raise my son. And yes, he’s *my* son, not yours. You didn’t even want me to have him. Are you forgetting that you tried to get me to miscarry?”

“What?” He scrunches up his face. “I didn’t do that. And if you want to bring that up in court, I hope you have video evidence because no one will believe you.”

I point at the front door. “You need to leave. Right now.”

When Connor heads toward me, Dad opens the door. “That’s close enough. It’s time for you to leave. If you ever come back to this house or harass my daughter or grandson in any way, I’ll get the police involved. They should have been involved from day one.”

Connor glances at Dad, then looks back at me. “I’m filing for joint custody. If you want to see *our* son every day, you’ll have to move to New York. It would probably be easier if you just moved in with me.”

“That will never happen,” I snarl. “Never.”

Connor heads toward the front door. “I’m filing paperwork tomorrow to get a paternity blood test, then we can move on from there. But you’ll need to get used to living alone, Em, because that kid will be in New York with me at least half the year.”

If he had stabbed me directly in the heart, the pain couldn’t be any worse.

“Leave, Connor,” I manage to say as I try to get air into my lungs. “Leave. Right now.”

“I’m leaving,” he says, not looking back. “You’ll hear from my attorneys tomorrow.”

Dad locks the door behind him, then leans up against it. “Emmie, call that new attorney you hired right now. See what she suggests, but I think you need to get out of here. Disappear with AJ, so he can’t get a blood test.”

“Dad, I can’t run,” I say, finally releasing the tears that have been welling up in my eyes. “The courts wouldn’t like that.”

“It’s not running,” he whispers as we hear Mom and AJ coming into the house. “Let’s just call it taking a vacation with your son.”

“They’ll ask you where I am—”

“And I’ll tell them I don’t know because you’re not going to tell me or your mom where you’re going on purpose” he says, looking over his shoulder. “Although I wouldn’t be surprised if you ended up at Uncle Matt’s house in Florida, but again I don’t want to know.”

AJ charges around the corner. “Mom, it’s been eight minutes. You said five.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, forcing a smile as I tousle his hair. “Did you save a cinnamon roll for me? Or should we go straight for the ice cream?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

New York City

I've spent a lot of my life angry, mainly at my parents, but I haven't known anything close to the fury I felt when Emory told me what Connor did to her and what he tried to do to AJ. I promised I'd leave Connor alone, but I can't.

When I left Concord, I drove straight to New York. A quick search online told me where Connor worked—right in the middle of the financial district. I've been leaning on a wall outside his office building for the better part of a day. I don't have a plan except that when I see him, I'm going to beat him senseless.

I lower my sunglasses to check out another slightly built man as he exits the building's revolving door. It's not Connor. Just another Wall Street clone—tailored suit, tightly clipped hair, and a gaunt face.

“Surveillance works a lot better if you're concealed, dumbass.”

Hawk's familiar growl vibrates around me. I push myself off the wall and turn completely around, but I don't see him.

“See what I mean? The threat's much more effective if you can't see me.”

There's a group of guys standing about ten feet from me, but they're all smaller than I am. There's no way my enormous brother's hiding behind them.

“Did you and Cardi implant a tracker in me at birth?” I ask, still turning around trying to find him.

“Naw, it would have been a good idea, though, with all the stupid shit you do.”

I stop spinning. “Where the fuck are you?”

His arm’s suddenly around my throat. “Did you not listen to anything I taught you when we were growing up? The threat’s almost always from above.”

I glance up the twelve-foot barrier wall I’ve been leaning against. “How? There’s barely room up there for a kid.”

“Trade secrets,” he says, squeezing my throat once before he releases me. “So I’m guessing your target hasn’t left the building yet since you’re still here and not in jail.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, leaning back against the wall. “Why are you here?”

“You know why I’m here. You pushed Cardi too far,” he says as he leans against the wall next to me. “Your mistake was not returning her texts. You know how suspicious she is. She’ll let one text slide, maybe two, but five? Come on, man. You know she’s going full scorched earth after that.”

“I turned my cell phone off,” I snarl. “Specifically so she couldn’t find me. Care to tell me how you tracked me?”

“Did you forget what I do for a living?” he asks, laughing. “I can find anyone, anywhere.”

I grunt as I head over to the coffee cart on the plaza. This will be number five for me today.

“Man, I think you might be a caffeine addict,” the coffee guy says as I approach. “You sure you don’t want a frequent buyer card? I can give you credit for the others. I think you’re only one away from a free cup.”

“No card. He won’t be back after today,” Hawk says, shoving me out of the way as he grabs for his wallet. “So what’s your plan, little brother? Are you going to wait for him to walk out and jump him?”

I shrug but don’t reply.

“Let’s see,” he says, motioning around the plaza, “I count one, two, four, six cops just on this plaza. How long do you think you’ll have before they pull you off him?”

“I figure I can get in at least five good punches.”

“Three tops,” he says, mimicking a punching motion, “and that’s if you don’t slow roll them like you usually do.”

“I was the most effective fighter in the NHL,” I say, pushing his fist out of my face. “I don’t need advice on how to throw a punch.”

“The hell you don’t. You’ve got the power, but I’ve told you a hundred

times to decrease your wind up so you can get more punches in.”

“I don’t care how many I get in,” I say, standing up straighter as another Connor-looking guy exits the building. “I’ll make them count.”

“And then what? You’re in jail and the jackass who should be there is still walking free. That’s seriously the worst plan I’ve ever heard.”

I know he’s right and it pisses me off. “Man, go back to California and leave me alone.”

“When have I ever left you alone?” He laughs again. “I mean, since the day you were born, I haven’t left you alone for a second.”

“Then maybe it’s time to start. This is something I have to do.” I pause for a second. “He tried to choke her, Hawk. And then he tried to force a miscarriage by punching her in the stomach. Would you let that stand?”

He lets out a long whistle. “Not a chance, but you’re smarter than me. You always have been. You’re Cardi-level smart when you don’t think with your dick.”

“I don’t want to be smart right now,” I say, looking up at the sky. “Emory’s kid, man. His name’s AJ. He’s the coolest little guy. And she’s the best mom. Every time I think about what he tried to do to them, it makes me furious.”

“I get it, but this isn’t happening,” he says, pushing himself off the wall. “Come on. This is stupid. We’re leaving.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can come with me of your own accord,” he says, cracking his knuckles, “or I’ll put you in a headlock and drag you out of here. Your choice.”

I push myself off the wall and square up with him. “You still think you can do that shit to me? We’re the same size now and I’m ten years younger than you, old man.”

“Old man? Damn those are fighting words.” The Southern drawl’s so deep that it can only belong to one person. “Take your best shot at him, Nix. Hawk needs a beat down every now and again.”

Butch Harrison is Hawk’s best friend. They’ve known each other since basic training in the Navy, and served together for almost the entire twenty years they were in the SEAL teams. He’s the only person I’ve ever met who annoys and entertains me in equal measure.

“You brought backup?” I ask, shoving Butch away as he tries to get me into a headlock.

“Psh, I don’t need backup for you,” Hawk says. “I can still take you down with one move.”

Butch motions around the plaza. “Hawk, I think I can get a pool going. I’m guessing all these suits will take Baby Bird, especially if you let him get in a few good punches before you shut him down. We could clean up.”

I shake my head. “Both of you need to go away.”

“So no fight?” Butch asks. “Come on, Nix. I’ll go eighty-twenty on the profits with you. I’d even be willing to go seventy-thirty if you can break Hawk’s nose.”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes. “You two flew all the way from California for this bullshit?”

“We were at a meeting down in Virginia Beach when Cardi called,” Hawk says. “I brought Butch as our getaway driver. I figured we’d need one when you did something boneheaded.”

“Nix?”

The voice is coming from the front of the building.

“Nix!”

A guy’s waving at me as he speeds across the plaza. He looks a little taller than Connor, but a similar build.

“You’re not touching him, Nix,” Hawk says, grabbing my shoulder. “Not even one punch.”

The guy takes off his sunglasses as he continues toward us. “It’s Edward. Natalie’s husband. Remember? I met you at our wedding.”

“It’s not him,” I say, trying to push Hawk’s hand off my shoulder.

“Hey, man,” Edward says, extending his hand. “I thought that was you. And now, I’m thinking I’m seeing double. This has to be your brother.”

Hawk slowly releases my shoulder but stays glued to my side. “Hawk Fuller, Nix’s older brother.”

“Edward Markey,” he says, shaking Hawk’s hand. “How weird is it to randomly run into you? What are you doing here?”

Hawk jumps in. “I had some business in New York. Nix came along to keep me company. We’re looking for the 9/11 Memorial. Isn’t it right around here?”

“Yeah, right around that corner,” Edward says. “I can walk you over there if you want.”

“I think we can find it,” I say, finally noticing that Butch has flanked Edward. He’s standing about ten feet behind him, looking like he’s about to

pounce. “Why aren’t you on your honeymoon?”

“We leave in ten days. Natalie wanted to get back here and decompress for a week or so before we head out,” Edward says. “I can’t tell you how happy she was that Emory came to the wedding.”

“Emory was glad she came, too,” I say. “She had fun. We both did.”

“Except for the crap with Connor.” He looks over his shoulder, then takes a step closer to us and whispers, “Have you heard the latest on him?”

Hawk’s hand goes to my shoulder again as my body clenches. “What latest?”

Edward looks over his shoulder once more before he continues, “He was indicted for embezzlement. Can you believe that? I had no idea. The Feds questioned me because Connor and I are—well, were—friends, but I swear I didn’t know anything.”

“When did this happen?” I ask, my body decompressing a little bit.

“Two days ago. They came into our office, cuffed him, and hauled him out,” he says, lowering his voice again. “I heard he got released on bail, but he hasn’t come back to work. I’m guessing he’s not welcome. Honestly, I’m just keeping my head down and minding my own business. The last thing I need is to be associated with all this. It’s unbelievable, man. I had no idea.”

“Edward!” A man’s waving at him from across the plaza.

“Hey, man, I have to go,” Edward says. “Nice to see you, Nix. Let us know if you’re in New York again. When we get back from our honeymoon, maybe we can get together.”

“Sounds good,” I say. “Have fun on your trip.”

Butch ambles back over to us. “I’m guessing that wasn’t the guy.”

“Nope and it sounds like our guy won’t be back here any time soon,” Hawk says. “Nix and I are headed to North Carolina if you want to join us, Butch. There’s great fishing in the lake behind his house.”

“You had me at great fishing. I’m in,” Butch says. “And I’m looking forward to seeing Robin and Cardi again. It’s been way too long.”

“What?” I ask, spinning my head to Hawk. “Why are they coming in?”

“You know why they’re coming in—because you really stepped in it this time,” Hawk says, grabbing the back of my neck and pushing me across the plaza. “You know how Cardi gets when she’s pissed. She called a mandatory family meeting just to get you back in line.”

“Oh, damn, Nix, you pissed off Cardi?” Butch asks, letting out a slow whistle. “Even I’m not that stupid.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

EMORY

Champion Cove, North Carolina

Sometimes when I'm driving, I arrive at my location and can't remember how I got there. This is one of those times.

AJ and I were about halfway to my uncle's house in Florida when we crossed the North Carolina border. I saw the signs pointing west to Asheville, and that's the last thing I remember until right now as I'm pulling up in front of Nix's house in Champion Cove.

I called Cardi right after Connor left the house. She agreed with Dad that it would be a good idea to take a "vacation" with AJ to buy us a little time. She asked me not to tell her where we were going, but specifically told me not to go to Champion Cove.

I'm not sure if she doesn't want Nix involved in this or if she thinks Connor would guess that I would flee to him. Honestly, it's probably a combination of both, and I'm guessing it's why Nix came directly back to North Carolina instead of stopping by Concord first.

There's a car parked in front of Nix's house. It's not his or Cardi's. The worst-case scenario surges through my mind. It's only eight in the morning. The car might belong to the woman Nix shacked up with last night. Maybe he's out getting them coffee and muffins at Clive's.

I sit in the car for a few minutes to decide if I want to be an adult and knock on the front door or slam the car in reverse and get back on the road to Florida. My brain's telling me Florida's probably the best option, but I'm so tired. I don't think I could drive another mile right now.

I drag myself to the front door and knock quietly in hopes that no one will hear it. No such luck. It opens almost immediately. The man who swings the door open is maybe an inch taller than Nix, but other than that they could be twins.

“Uh,” I mumble, “you’re not Nix.”

“And I thank god for that every day.” He leans against the doorframe, a wide smile covering his face. “I’m his much better looking brother, Hawk. And I’m guessing you’re Emory.”

“I am,” I say, my eyes narrowing. “How did you know?”

Before he can answer, another man walks up behind him. He doesn’t look as much like Nix, but close enough to be related.

“Are you Nix’s brother, too? I thought he only had one.”

“Girl, that’s just rude.” The second man has the deepest Southern accent I’ve ever heard. “I’m definitely not of the Fuller gene pool.”

“Sorry,” I say, getting on tiptoe to try to see around their massive bodies. “Is Nix home?”

“He’s not, but you’re welcome to wait. He went into the bar for a minute.” Hawk taps the other guy’s arm and points at me. “Butch, Emory’s the reason my baby brother has been moping around like a lovesick schoolboy.”

“Well at least I can understand why young Phoenix has his briefs all in a knot,” Butch drawls. “She’s definitely worth the grief.”

“Emory?” I jump when I hear Nix’s voice behind me. “What are you doing here?”

“Uh, I just—” I say, whirling around. “I mean, I just got here. I didn’t know you had family in town. I should have told you I was coming.”

He rushes over and wraps me up in his arms. “You never have to tell me when you’re coming.”

“Yeah, I feel like that’s something you should be able to hear loud and clear,” Butch says. “I mean, if Nix has any talent in that area.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Nix growls, pointing at him. “Why are you even answering my door?”

“We answered the door because this lovely young woman knocked on it.” Butch looks at Hawk. “Does Baby Bird not know how doors work? I know he’s a little slow.”

“Get inside. Now,” Nix says, shoving them back. “And don’t eavesdrop at the door.”

“We’ll go back in,” Hawk says, “but no promises on the other.”

“Yeah, my eavesdropping skills are getting a little rusty,” Butch says, pulsing his eyebrows. “This will be a nice refresher.”

Nix shoves them again. “Inside. Now.”

“Emory, run while you have the chance,” Hawk says, winking at me as he backs into the house. “You can do way better than this grumpy asshole.”

“Way better,” Butch says, chuckling as Nix slams the door in their faces.

“Sorry about them,” he says, leaning down to kiss me. “They were unexpected guests. What are you doing here? I thought you said you needed some time alone with your family.”

“I did. I do,” I say, looking back at my car. “But I need a place to hang out for a while with AJ. I was driving to my uncle’s house in Florida and somehow, I ended up here.”

He looks out at my car. “Is AJ with you?”

“Yeah, he’s sleeping. Don’t wake him up. It’s been a stressful week.”

He peeks into the car to make sure AJ’s okay, then pulls me back into a hug. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“No,” I say, collapsing against his chest. “Connor showed up at our house yesterday.”

He pushes me back—his steely eyes locking with mine. “What the fuck did he want?”

“To scare me mainly. I guess he saw the new agreement from Cardi and lost what was left of his mind. He just showed up and was threatening me and my dad, and saying that he was filing for custody of AJ.”

“He’s not getting custody of AJ,” he snarls.

“He can’t, Nix,” I say, my voice shaking. “He just can’t. When he said he was asking for a court-ordered blood test, I panicked and left Concord. I know I can’t hide from him forever, but I didn’t know what to do. I’m sorry I just showed up here.”

“I’m not. I’m glad you’re finally coming to me when you need help.” He takes my face into his hands. “He’s not getting near you or AJ when I’m around. You can stay here as long as you want.”

“Mommy!” AJ’s panicked voice fills the air.

“I’m right here, sweetie,” I say, rushing to open the car door. “Did you have a good nap?”

“Nix!” His little face explodes into a grin. “You came to see me.”

“No, bud. You came to see me,” Nix says as he unbuckles AJ’s car seat.

“You’re at my house. You and your mom are staying with me for a little bit. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” AJ says. “Do you have cookies here? I’m hungry.”

“We have tons of cookies here,” Nix says, lifting AJ out of the car. “I own a restaurant that’s right next to a bakery. They have cookies and cupcakes and all kinds of good stuff.”

AJ looks at me. “How many cookies can I have?”

“None right now, baby. You need to eat dinner. Maybe I can make you some scrambled eggs.”

He sticks out his tongue and whispers to Nix, “Eggs are yucky, but she makes me eat them like the peas.”

“That sucks,” Nix whispers back as he holds up the bag in his hand. “I have some burgers in here. If you help me eat mine, I can probably get you a cookie when your mom’s not looking. Deal?”

“Yes,” AJ says as he looks around the yard. “Why do you have water by your house?”

“That’s a lake.” Nix shifts AJ up on his hip as he walks toward the house. “It’s where I keep my fish.”

“You have fish?” AJ’s eyes widen. “Can I pet them?”

Nix smiles. “I’m not sure they’ll want to be petted, but we can sure try. Do you want to meet them later?”

“Can I, Mommy?”

“Sure, baby,” I say, following them onto the porch. “You can meet the fish.”

“Did someone say fish? That’s absolutely my favorite thing to talk about,” Butch says, flinging open the front door. “And who’s this big guy? Hey, man. My name’s Butch.”

AJ extends his hand. “My name’s AJ. Mommy says it’s okay if I pet the fish.”

“Pet them?” Butch grins as he swallows up AJ’s hand in his. “That’ll be a first for me, but I’m always game for new adventures. Actually, I was getting ready to walk down to the dock right now to watch the sun set. If your momma doesn’t mind, maybe you can come with me.”

AJ’s head spins toward me. “Can I, Mommy?”

“I don’t know,” I say, looking up at Nix.

“He’ll be fine,” Nix says. “Butch grew up on the water. He knows what he’s doing.”

“I’ll go with them,” Hawk says, appearing at the door. “He’s in good hands, Emory. Trust me.”

“Okay,” I say, turning to AJ. “Promise me you’ll listen to Butch and Hawk and do everything they tell you to do.”

When AJ nods, Butch holds out his arms. “Walk, carry, or shoulder ride, brother. Your choice.”

“Shoulder ride!”

AJ squeals as Butch sweeps him onto his shoulders and gallops toward the lake.

“Get ready, fish,” Butch yells. “We’re coming to pet you.”

When they disappear around the corner, I can still hear AJ giggling. I haven’t heard that sound since Grandpa died.

“He’s obsessed with fish,” I say, looking back at Nix. “I’m not sure if I’ll ever get him to leave here now.”

“Are you talking about AJ or Butch?” he asks, laughing as he sits on the front stairs and pulls me onto his lap. “You and AJ can stay here forever, but Hawk and Butch have already overstayed their welcome, and they’ve only been here about twelve hours.”

“What are they doing in town?”

“Cardi called a family meeting,” he says, sighing. “She and Robin are coming in tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, damn,” I say, trying to stand up. “I need to leave then. She told me specifically not to come here.”

“What the fuck?” He tightens his grip around me. “Why’d she say that?”

“I don’t know,” I say, glancing at the lake as AJ’s laughter fills the air again. “I think probably she doesn’t want you involved in my nightmare of a life.”

“She needs to mind her own business,” he says, running his hand over my face. “You’re not going anywhere.”

My phone beeps. “Damn, it’s Cardi. She must have heard us talking about her.”

“Don’t answer it.”

“I have to. She might have news about Connor,” I say, putting her on speaker. “Hey, Cardi.”

“The Feds indicted Connor for embezzlement two days ago,” she says. “I’m guessing that’s why he showed up at your house. His attorney contacted me today about the paternity test. I can put him off for a few weeks, maybe a

month, but it sounds like Connor's getting desperate. Has he come back to your house?"

"I don't think so. AJ and I left last night."

"Good," she says. "Just don't tell me where you went."

"I won't," I say slowly, "but you'll figure it out for yourself tomorrow morning."

"Fuck, Emory," she groans. "What did I tell you?"

"I can leave if—"

Nix grabs the phone and shouts into it. "She's not going anywhere, Cardi. This is the safest place for her and AJ."

"Safest maybe, but not the smartest," Cardi says. "That will be the first place Connor looks when he finds out you're not in Concord."

"She's right. I need to leave."

"No, you don't," Cardi says. "If you leave now, it will look like you're a fugitive on the run. Since you're already there, you need to stay. If anyone asks, you just wanted AJ to spend some time with Nix."

"I do want that," I say, laying my head on Nix's shoulder, "so at least I'm telling the truth."

"Stay put until I get there," Cardi says. "Robin's flight lands tomorrow morning at six. I'll pick her up and we'll be there by seven. Nix, make sure they don't leave before I get there."

"On it," Nix says, holding me against his chest. "They're not going anywhere."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Champion Cove, North Carolina

The front door flies open and AJ sprints through it with Butch and Hawk close behind him.

“I pet them, Mommy!” AJ jumps over to Emory on one foot, his arms flailing wildly. “The fish. I pet them.”

“Baby, that’s amazing,” Emory says, kneeling in front of him. “You actually touched them?”

“Touched! They did this when I pet them,” he says, wiggling his entire body.

Emory throws her hand over her chest. “Oh my gosh. What did the fish feel like?”

“Wet and squishy.” He hops on the other foot, then crashes to the ground when his legs get tangled up.

Emory looks up at Butch. “How did you catch them?”

“I threw a few peanuts on the water and grabbed one when it came to the surface,” Butch says, shrugging. “I have good reflexes.”

AJ tugs Emory’s arm. “And then, Mommy, guess what happened next?”

She sits down next to him. “I can’t believe there’s more. Tell me.”

He leans against her legs and whispers, “Then I kissed them.”

“You kissed the fish?” she asks, her eyes widening. “Show me how.”

“Like this,” he says, puckering his lips. “And the fish lips kissed back.”

She throws her hands over her mouth. “You kissed the fish on its lips?”

“Yes! And then Butch throws it and it flies through the air into the

water.” He collapses back on the floor. “It fly, Mommy. In the air. It fly.”

“Wow,” she says, lying down next to him. “That’s so much to happen in twenty minutes. I’m exhausted just hearing about it. I bet you’re so tired.”

“I’m hungry,” he says. “And Nix said I can have cookies.”

“Hmm,” she says, “let’s get you something else to eat first, then we can talk about the cookies. Okay?”

“Come on, bud. I’ll make you something,” I say, pulling him up. “What do you like to eat?”

“Peanut butter and jelly, no crusts,” Emory says, grabbing Hawk’s hand and letting him help her up. “And wash his hands *and his mouth* before you let him eat.”

“On it,” I say, throwing AJ over my shoulder as I head to kitchen sink.

“Thank you so much for taking him down there,” Emory says from behind me. “That’s the first time I’ve heard him laugh in days.”

“Our pleasure,” Butch says, tapping Hulk’s arm. “You know, I’m kind of hungry, too. Hawk, how about you treat me to dinner and a round of pool at Nix’s bar?”

“Please don’t leave on our account,” Emory pleads. “We’re the ones who are intruding on a family gathering.”

“You and AJ are part of our family now and family can never intrude,” Hawk says, squeezing her shoulder. “Nix, we’ll be back late. Don’t wait up.”

“Is he asleep?”

“Finally,” Emory says, plodding down the hallway from my guest room. “And Hulk’s curled up right next to him. I think AJ’s replaced me as her favorite person.”

“You’re still my favorite person,” I say as she straddles my lap.

“So you never told me what your family meeting’s about,” she says, running her hands down my chest. “Do you have those often?”

“Only when someone pisses off Cardi,” I say, sighing. “Then the entire world has to stop until she’s satisfied that everyone’s in line.”

“Oh, damn. Who’s she mad at?”

“Usually everyone,” I say, laying my head back on the couch, “but I’m the reason for this meeting.”

“Uh-oh. What’d you do?”

“You’ll be mad at me, too, if I tell you,” I say, staring at the ceiling. “I did something really stupid.”

“What?” she asks slowly.

“After I left Concord, I drove to New York to look for Connor.”

“Nix!”

I wrap my arms around her when she tries to shift off my lap. “Let me explain.”

“Explain what?” she yells, then looks back at the guest room and lowers her voice. “I told you specifically not to go after him. This whole thing is about ready to blow, anyway. If you get involved, it will make it so much worse.”

“I know,” I say, grunting as I rub my hands over my face. “It’s just, when you told me what he did to you, and what he tried to do to AJ, I lost my mind for a day. All I could think about was making him pay. I guess I should have stayed in Concord since that’s where he was headed.”

“Oh my god,” she says, groaning. “I’m so glad you weren’t there. Dad already tried to punch him.”

“Good man,” I say, nodding. “Maybe we can team up.”

“Nix,” she says, covering my mouth with her hand. “I’m not going to say this again. If you want to be with me, leave Connor alone and stay out of it. I understand if this is all too much. I’ve piled a lot on you this last week, especially with AJ. If that changes things between us, I get it.”

“Yeah, it changes things,” I say through her hand. “It makes me want to be with you even more. He’s such a great kid. Any guy would be lucky to be around him.”

“You can’t be anywhere near him if you don’t honor my wishes.” She covers my mouth with both hands when I start to say something. “No, let me finish. You don’t have to agree with what I’m saying, and you can secretly want to kill Connor, but you have to stay away from him. Don’t say you will if you don’t mean it. That’s the last time you get to withhold information from me. Do you understand?”

She drops her hands when I nod. “Say the words back to me.”

“I understand and I’m sorry,” I say, pulling her against me. “I’ll do anything to be with you, even if that means doing nothing.”

Emory was asleep almost before her head hit my lap. She's been out for about an hour now. I'm about to doze off myself when I hear little footsteps tearing down the hallway, followed closely by the clicking of dog paws.

"Mommy!" AJ flies around the corner with Hulk on his heels. "Mommy!"

"Your mom's right here," I say as they both rush up to the couch. "She's sleeping."

AJ exhales when he sees her face, then looks up at me. "The monster's in my bed. He tried to take me—"

"Slow down, bud," I say, lifting him onto my lap. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Hulk jumps up on the couch and hooks her head over AJ's shoulder.

"I had to fight the monster. Just me," he says, squeezing his eyes shut. "Pop wasn't there."

"The monsters are gone now," I say, rubbing his back. "They only come when you're asleep and you're awake now. Open your eyes, okay?"

He opens one, looks around the room, then opens the other.

"See? All gone. The monsters aren't real. They're only in your dreams."

"The monster is real," AJ insists. "He came to our house and hit Pop."

"He came to the house where you live with your mom?"

I'm suddenly realizing he's talking about Connor. I didn't know AJ had seen him.

"Yes. He yelled and said a bad word," he whispers. "Then the monster said he would take me, and Nan cries and cries and cries."

"No one's taking you, AJ. You don't need to worry about that anymore. And the monster isn't here. He can't get into this house. Do you want me to come back to the bed and make sure he's not there?"

He wraps his arms around my neck. "I want to stay here with you and Mommy. Pop's not here to fight the monster."

"I'll fight him for you. I promise," I say as he lays his head on my chest. "The monster's never getting near you or your mom again. I won't let him. And Hulk won't let him, either."

AJ looks up at me. "Do you promise?"

"Yeah, I promise," I say, rubbing his back. "It's so late. Why don't you close your eyes again and go to sleep?"

He lets out a long yawn. "Don't let Mommy take me back to the bed. I want to stay with you."

“I won’t let her. Everyone’s sleeping here tonight, including Hulk. Close your eyes.”

“Okay.” His body gets heavy against mine. “Can we stay at your house forever?”

“You can stay as long as you want. Go to sleep, okay?”

“I want to stay here forever with you and Huk. Hullllk. That’s a hard one to say.”

“Really good job working it out, bud.”

His body melts farther into mine. “Can I pet the fish again tomorrow?”

“We can do that, but only if you go to sleep now. You don’t want to be tired when you pet them, right?”

“Right.” His breathing’s getting slower and steadier. “Nix, do you have more kids than Hullllk?”

“Nope,” I say, smiling. “Hulk’s the only one so far.”

He lifts his head to look up at me—his eyelids are heavy. “Do you want more?”

“Yep.” I kiss his forehead, then gently push his head back down on my chest. “I want lots of them.”

“I don’t have a dad. You can be my dad if you want,” he says, his voice trailing off.

“I’d like nothing more than that,” I whisper. “Now go to sleep.”

When he finally drifts off, I tuck him in next to Emory before I walk around the house to make sure all the doors and windows are locked. No monster’s getting in here tonight—real or imagined.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

EMORY

Champion Cove, North Carolina

When I wake up in the morning, I'm in Nix's bedroom. I vaguely remember him moving AJ and me here at some point last night, but AJ's not curled up next to me anymore.

With Connor's threats still on my mind, my first thought is that AJ's been kidnapped. I run down the stairs to find AJ sitting at the kitchen island between Hawk and Butch. They're eating pancakes and talking about fishing.

"Hey, you must be Emory," a woman says, smiling at me from the stove where she's cooking sausage. "I'm Nix's sister, Robin."

"Nice to meet you," I say, trying to clear the panic that's still swirling around in my head. "Are you okay, AJ?"

"Hi, Mommy," he says without looking at me. "Butch takes me fishing in a boat today. Okay?"

Butch ruffles AJ's hair. "I told you you needed to ask your momma's permission first."

"I did." AJ turns around to look at me—his eyes pleading. "Okay? He said I can touch the worms."

"The worms?" I scrunch up my face. "Are you sure you want to touch something so gross and slippery?"

"That's what she said," Butch and Hawk say in unison.

Robin slaps their hands with the spatula, then points it at them. "Kid on the premises. Clean it up. Now."

"Sorry, AJ," Hawk says, patting his head. "Force of habit."

AJ continues, unfazed. “The fish eat the worms when we put the worms on the hook. Right?”

He looks up at Butch for support.

“Nailed it,” Butch says, giving him a fist bump. “Maybe your mom wants to come fishing with us.”

“Pass” I say, wrapping my arms around AJ, “but of course you can go, baby, if you wear a lifejacket.”

AJ looks up at Butch again.

“I’ve got you covered, brother,” Butch says. “We’ll get you a lifejacket, a hat, sunscreen—everything you need.”

“Thank you, Butch,” AJ says, stuffing the last of his pancakes into his mouth.

“It’s my pleasure, kiddo,” Butch says. “You’ll be a better fisherman than I am by the time we get back.”

“Where’s Nix?” I ask, shaking my head to try to clear the brain fog.

“He had to run into the bar for a minute. Cardi went with him,” Robin says. “Are you hungry? I can make you something better than pancakes.”

“Better than pancakes?” Butch’s mouth drops open as he looks down at AJ. “I can’t believe there would be such a thing.”

AJ breaks into giggles when Butch walks his fingers over to AJ’s plate and swipes a sausage link.

“I might get something later,” I say. “I need to clear my head first. I think I’ll take a walk.”

The second I say walk, Hulk springs off the couch.

“Aww, do you want to take a walk with me, sweet baby?” I ask as she circles my legs.

“Sure, but I don’t think Nix will like you calling me sweet baby,” Butch says, slapping Hawk’s arm and pointing at me. “See, I told you I’d be the first one to get her to smile. No woman can resist this charm.”

“And I’m guessing you don’t let them, even if they try,” I say, smiling fully for the first time in days. “AJ, do you want to walk with Hulk and me?”

“Can we throw rocks in the lake?”

“Of course. Anything you want,” I say, pointing back to the bedroom. “Go get your shoes.”

He slides off his stool with help from Hawk and tears down the hallway.

“Maybe I should come with you,” Hawk says.

“That’s nice, but we’ll be fine. Finish your breakfast,” I say, patting his

arm. “This is Champion Cove after all. I’m not sure they have any bad people here. And we have Hulk just in case.”

“Okay, but don’t go too far,” Hawk says, “and take your phone just in case we need to track you.”

We took a wrong turn from the lake path and ended up on a dirt road that looks like it might lead back into town. I’m trying to get my GPS to work when a car pulls up behind us. I glance back at it as a text pings on my phone. It’s from Nix.

Just got home. Where are you? I’ll meet you.

We were walking around the lake, but somehow ended up on a dirt road. I must have taken a wrong turn.

What dirt road? The one by the mill? Drop a pin.

Hulk growls as I hear the car door open. I look over, but no one’s gotten out yet. They’re parked in a makeshift lot that looks out over the town in the distance. It’s a beautiful view. I’m guessing they’re just stopping to take a picture or something.

I’m about to send a pin to Nix when Hulk yanks on her leash and sends my phone flying into the undergrowth on the side of the road.

“Hulk, it’s okay,” I say, tugging her over to where my phone landed. “AJ, will you help Mommy look for her phone?”

When I turn around to look for him, he crashes into my legs so hard that both of us end up face down on the road.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?” I ask, trying to untangle myself from Hulk’s leash and AJ’s limbs.

“Monster,” AJ whispers, clinging to my leg. “Monster.”

“You’re not very good at the fugitive life, Em?” Connor’s walking toward us when I look up. “I knew you would come here to hide.”

“Back up, Connor,” I say, increasing my grip on Hulk’s leash as she bares her teeth. “She’ll rip you apart if I let go of her.”

Connor reaches into his waistband and produces a gun. “If that happens, you’re going to have a dead dog on your hands.”

AJ wails the minute he says it. “Monster shoots Hulk.”

“He’s not going to shoot him, baby,” I whisper, trying to quiet him. “Stay right next to me. Okay?”

“Shut him up.” Connor waves his gun at AJ, then points it at Hulk. “And tie the dog to that street sign. We’re taking a ride.”

I glance over my shoulder to try to find my phone. “We’re not going anywhere with you.”

“Huh-uh,” Connor says, closing in on us. “Leave the phone where it is.”

When Hulk slips out of her collar and lunges at him, Connor trips backward and fires the gun into the air. As I throw my body over AJ, Hulk lets out a piercing yelp. I look up just in time to see her dashing into the grass on the side of the road.

Connor scoffs. “Some guard dog you have there.”

“She was shot as a baby, asshole,” I say, glaring at him. “Put the gun away. You’re scaring her.”

He holds the gun in the air. “I’m going to fire again if you don’t get your ass in this car.”

When I don’t move, he walks over to where Hulk’s hiding. “Come here, mutt. Let’s see how fierce you are now.”

“Connor, stop,” I yell. “Put the gun away before you kill someone.”

He turns around and points the gun at the car. “If you don’t get in the car right now, I’m shooting the dog.”

“AJ, baby,” I say, hugging him to my chest as his sobs intensify, “we’re going to take a ride with Connor, okay?”

“No, Mommy,” he manages to get out through his sobs. “Not go with monster.”

I feel the gun barrel on the back of my head. “Get up, Emory. And that mongrel’s not coming with us.”

“That’s fine,” I say, taking a shaky breath. “Hulk can stay here.”

“That’s not the mongrel I’m talking about,” Connor says, tearing AJ away

from me and throwing him to the side of the road.

“AJ!”

As I lunge toward him, Hulk springs out of the grass and flies into Connor’s body. I’m closing in on AJ when I hear the gun fire again.

AJ screams as I throw my body over him. “Monster shot her.”

When I look over my shoulder, Hulk’s writhing around in the dirt. Connor’s closing in on me, gun still in his hand.

“Get up,” Connor demands. “We’re leaving without either of them.”

“I’m not leaving them,” I say, trying to drag AJ over to where Hulk’s whimpering on the ground. “We need to get her to a vet.”

“Get up,” Connor says, pointing the gun at me. “Or I’m shooting the other mongrel next.”

When he grabs my arms and tries to yank me up, I hug AJ tighter. “Baby, Mommy has to go with Connor for a second, but I’ll be right back. Stay here until Nix finds you, okay?”

“No!” AJ wraps his arms around my neck. “Mommy, don’t go.”

Connor’s dragging me on my butt toward the car as AJ tries to keep hold of my foot.

“AJ, wait with Hulk, okay?” I twist around in the dirt, trying to stop Connor’s progress toward the car. “Nix will find you. Stay right here.”

“Mommy,” AJ pleads as he dives after me and ends up face-planting in the dirt. “Don’t go with the monster.”

Connor holds the gun to my head again. “I’m tired of fighting you. Get in the fucking car, now.”

“I’m getting in,” I say, scrambling to my feet. “Just put the gun away. Please.”

Connor opens the passenger’s side door and shoves me in.

“AJ, I’ll be right back,” I yell, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. “Stay with Hulk. Nix will find you.”

When Connor speeds away, the last thing I see is Hulk dragging herself across the road with her front legs to get to AJ who’s sitting in the middle of the dirt bawling.

Chapter Thirty

Champion Cove, North Carolina

When Cardi and I walk back into the house, Hawk and Butch are washing dishes and Robin's sitting at the kitchen island typing furiously on her phone.

"Hey," Robin says. "Emory and AJ took Hulk for a walk around the lake. They left about twenty minutes ago."

"Yeah, I just texted her," I say, grabbing the last sausage link off a plate sitting on the counter. "She must have taken a wrong turn because she said they ended up on a dirt road. I'm guessing it's the one that leads past that old mill. She was supposed to drop me a pin, but nothing's come in yet."

Hawk looks over his shoulder. "Maybe she's having cell service issues. It's pretty spotty up here. I'll come with you if you want to look for—"

A loud blast interrupts him. It sounds like someone shot off a firecracker.

"That was gunfire," Hawk says.

I shake my head. "I think it was fireworks."

"I've been a sniper for twenty years," Hawk snarls. "I fucking know gunfire when I hear it."

Robin looks up from her phone. "Maybe it's a hunter."

Every muscle in my body tenses. "There's no hunting allowed in this area."

"Yeah, and that wasn't a shotgun," Hawk says. "It was a pistol. Maybe the sheriff has something going on."

"Rarely in this town," I say, texting Emory again. "I don't think Ben has

fired his gun in the year I've lived here."

Another shot rings through the air.

"Definitely a pistol," Butch says, dialing his phone. "Nix give me Emory's cell number."

"Hey, buddy." A woman's voice comes through Butch's speaker phone. "How's North Carolina?"

"Raine, I need a location," Butch says, reading Emory's number to her. "As exact as you can get it."

"When have I ever given you an inexact location?" I hear typing on the other end of the phone. "Let's see. One point two five miles northeast of your location. Stationary position. Phone belongs to Emory Joy Hart, age twenty-five. Do you want me to get eyes on her?"

"No, just text the coordinates to Hawk and me for now," Butch says. "We'll be in touch."

"Done. Call me if you need backup."

Hawk points at Cardi. "I'm texting you the coordinates. Call the sheriff and tell him to meet us there. Butch, Nix, let's go."

"Call Jake, too," I say, following them out the door. "And tell him to bring a gun."

Hawk pulls his car up slowly to the targeted area. It's a little opening near the back road that leads to my house from town.

"It doesn't look like there's anyone around," I say. "Maybe they kept walking."

"Hold up," Butch says, grabbing his phone.

"Yep." Raine answers on the first ring.

"Is the phone moving now?" Butch asks.

"No. It's still in the exact location. Looks like you're right on top of it."

Hawk grabs my arm as I try to get out of the car. "Not yet. Raine, pull up a satellite. Are we alone?"

More typing on the other end. "I don't see any cars for at least a mile in all directions, and no visible people. Let me pull up the thermal. Yeah, I don't see anything. Hold up. I'm getting a little clump of heat a hundred feet from you on the south side of the road. Looks like something's in a bunch of grass."

It's too little to be an adult. It might be an animal."

"Got it," Butch says, putting the phone back in his pocket. "Nix, call Emory's phone."

When I dial her number, a faint phone sound rings out from behind us.

"I've got the phone," Butch says, taking a pistol out of the glove compartment. "Hawk, you check out what's up ahead."

Hawk grabs a gun out from underneath his seat. "Come on, Nix. Let's check this out."

As we get about fifty feet down the road, I hear whimpering. It sounds like a dog.

"Hulk, is that you?" I yell.

The whimpering stops.

"It's okay, Hulk. It's just me." More whimpering. "Where are you, girl?"

"Nix?" A little voice squeaks out of the clumps of grass over to our right.

"AJ?" I charge toward the voice. "It's Nix. Where are you?"

When he peeks his head out of the grass, Hulk grabs his shirt and tugs him back under cover.

"Hulk, release," I command.

I fall down on my knees in front of their hiding spot just as Hulk lets go of his shirt.

AJ runs to me and collapses against my chest. "Monster shot Hulk and took Mommy."

"What monster, buddy?" I say, stroking his head with one hand while trying to coax Hulk out of hiding with my other. "Was it the same monster that came to your house?"

He nods against my chest as his sobbing becomes louder.

"Her ex-boyfriend," I say, looking up at Hawk as I hold AJ closer to me. "His name's Connor Albrecht. Lives in New York. Went to BC. Can you track his cell phone?"

"We'll have him locked in under a minute," he says, drawing his pistol as a car approaches.

"It's Jake," I say, lowering his arm. "Get Connor's location."

Jake jumps out of his car, carrying a rifle. "What's happening? Cardi said to meet you here."

"It looks like Emory's ex took her and shot Hulk," I say as Hulk finally limps out of the grass and presses her body into my legs. "Come here, baby girl. Let's take a look at you."

“Looks like the bullet just grazed her hindquarters,” Jake says. “She might need a few stitches, but she’ll be good. I’ve got her. Go after Emory.”

“You’ll be okay, girl,” I say, hugging Hulk to me. “Go with Jake. I’ll see you soon.”

“Leave that rifle with me,” Hawk says to Jake as he walks back over to us. “You can take my pistol.”

“I’m good. I’ve got another gun in the truck,” Jake says, scooping up Hulk. “Come on, Hulk. Let’s get you fixed up. You’ll be good as new.”

AJ tries to follow them. “Mommy said to stay with Hulk.”

“And you did such a good job of that,” I say, hugging him to me, “but Jake will take care of Hulk now. You need to stay with me.”

“Connor’s cell phone is in New York. He must be using a burner,” Hawk says. “We’re sweeping the area for cars right now.”

Butch makes it back over to us, holding Emory’s phone. “Found it about a hundred yards back. And Cardi just got here.”

“Answer your phones, idiots,” Cardi yells through the window as she brings the car to a short stop. “I’ve been calling you for five minutes.”

She leaps out of the car, followed by Robin.

“Ben said Burt dialed 911 from his cell phone. He didn’t say anything, but he kept the phone live. Ben’s headed to that location now, but he’s about thirty minutes out. He said GPS is putting Burt’s phone right near an old water mill. Nix, do you know where it is?”

“Yeah, it’s about ten miles from here taking the roads. You have to wind around the lake for a bit,” I say, pointing to the steep incline to our south, “but it’s only about a half mile on foot over these mountains. It will put you right above the mill.”

Hawk steps up. “Butch and I will go over the mountains. Nix, you go by road. Cardi and Robin, take AJ to the bar and lock yourselves in Nix’s office. Don’t go to the house.”

“Roger that. No one’s getting anywhere near AJ,” Cardi says, looking at Hawk. “Do you have a piece for me?”

Hawk hands her his pistol. “Five rounds left. Use them wisely.”

When Cardi tries to take AJ’s hand, he wraps himself around me.

“I want to stay with you,” he says, bawling on my shoulder.

“Bud, your mom will be fine. We’ll get her and bring her back to you.” I brush the tears off his cheeks. “And you know what? When she gets back, she’ll probably want ice cream. Do you know what kind she likes?”

“Green chocolate,” he whimpers, wiping the snot from under his nose with his arm.

“Mint chocolate chip,” Robin says, kneeling beside him. “Come on, sweetie. We’ll go get some ice cream for your mom and I bet you want some, too. What kind do you like?”

“Cake.”

“Birthday cake? That’s my favorite flavor, too,” Robin says, holding her arms open. “Should we get some right now?”

AJ’s arms loosen a little from around me.

“Go with Robin and make sure she gets the right kind of ice cream,” I say, kissing his forehead. “I know your mom will be hungry when she gets back.”

Chapter Thirty-One

EMORY

Champion Cove, North Carolina

Before I left for college, Mom took me to a self-defense class. She thought I might need a few moves for when I relocated to the big city. As it turns out, I needed them for Champion Cove—the smallest town I’ve ever visited.

One of the first lessons the instructor taught us was never get into a car with your attacker. Make him do what he’s going to do at the original location.

And where am I now? In a car, speeding away from the original location. I didn’t feel like I had much of a choice, though. When Connor shot Hulk, his eyes were completely glazed over. It didn’t seem like he was even registering what he was doing. I couldn’t take the risk that he would shoot AJ, too.

We’ve been driving for about ten minutes. I’m hoping Nix has found AJ and Hulk by now, so it’s time to try to save myself.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I say, shifting around in my seat.

Connor’s been babbling a nonsensical stream of words under his breath since we got in the car. He finally shuts it down and looks over at me. “We’re not stopping.”

The gun’s in his lap. I’ve thought about grabbing it, but I’m not sure what I’d do if I got it. If I shot him, the car would likely slam into one of the many huge trees on the side of the road. And if I didn’t shoot him, he could easily just crash the car into one of them.

“Then you’ll have urine all over this car. It’s your choice,” I say, my voice surprisingly calm. “You have about a minute to make up your mind

before my bladder explodes.”

He grips the steering wheel tighter. “You’re trying to get me to stop so they can catch up.”

“Who? Your son and his wounded dog? I doubt they can keep up with us. No one else even knows we’re here.” I cross my legs and lean over them. “Connor, seriously, I’m about to burst.”

“Fuck!” He slams his hand against the steering wheel, then screeches to a stop. “You have one minute.”

When I try to head behind a few trees, he waves the gun at me. “Nope. Out here where I can see you.”

“You want me to pee right on the road? What if someone drives by?”

“We haven’t seen one other car,” he snarls. “Either pee right there or get back in the car.”

I was hoping to have a little privacy for a list of reasons, but the most important is that my bladder’s completely empty.

“You’re not even peeing,” he says, grabbing my shoulder. “Get back in the car.”

“I’m having performance anxiety,” I say, knocking his hand off me. “This is the first time I’ve had to pee with a gun to my head.”

Just as I’m about to dive for his legs, he rushes to the other end of the car. “Fuck. A car stopped. Hurry up.”

“Hey there.” A deep, familiar voice booms through the air. “You having car trouble?”

“No trouble,” Connor says, slipping the gun into his waistband. “My wife had to stop and relieve herself. She couldn’t make it to town.”

The man laughs. “Women have the smallest bladders, don’t they?”

“No need to get out of your car.” Connor’s voice sharpens as he backs toward me. “Looks like she’s done. We’ll be on our way.”

As I stand up, Burt looks at me for a split second, then looks back at Connor. “I couldn’t help but see that pistol you’re carrying. In case you don’t know, the hunting laws in this area are really strict.”

Connor’s hand goes to the pistol as he opens the passenger side door. “Good to know. Em, you ready?”

“You probably couldn’t get much with a pistol, anyway.” Burt takes a few more steps in our direction. “A shotgun is a better bet. But what do I know? I’ve never been much of a hunter. I can’t stand to see the animals suffer.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Connor says, grabbing my arm. “We need to get back on the road.”

Burt continues toward us. “Where are you headed? I’ve lived here for a while. I can give you directions.”

“We don’t need directions,” Connor hisses. “Emory, get in the car.”

“No, Emory,” Burt says, his eyes still fixed on Connor. “Don’t get in that car.”

When Burt walks within about ten feet of us, Connor whips out the gun and points it at him.

“Get back in your fucking car and drive away,” Connor says, his arm shaking. “My wife and I don’t need any help from you.”

Burt raises his hands but takes another step forward. “That woman is not your wife and she’s not leaving with you. Emory, the keys are still in the ignition. Why don’t you take my car and let the men finish this conversation in private?”

Connor tries to steady the gun with his other hand. “Take one more step and you’re dead.”

“You don’t want to do that, son,” Burt says. “Right now, you’re in the clear. I’m sure Emory will agree not to press charges if you let her come with me. Drive away and everyone goes back to their lives.”

“What life?” Connor screams, his arms vibrating harder. “I don’t have a fucking life anymore.”

Burt lunges forward, knocks me out of the way, and tries to wrestle the gun out of Connor’s hand.

As I’m falling to the ground, I hear the gun go off again and see Burt drop to the ground.

“Burt!” I try crawling over to him, but Connor pulls me back. “Oh my god, Connor, what have you done? You shot him. Burt—”

“Emory.” Nix’s steady voice sounds out from behind us.

Connor wraps his arm around me and points the gun at my head. “Back off, Fuller. We’re getting in the car and leaving. If you follow us, I’ll shoot her.”

Nix is walking toward us, hands over his head, his eyes locked with mine. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but he shot Burt,” I say, grimacing as Connor presses the gun tighter against my head. “Did you find AJ and Hulk?”

Nix looks down to Burt, then quickly back up to me.

“AJ’s fine,” he says. “Hulk’s fine, too. Let’s concentrate on you right now.”

“Please make sure AJ gets to my parents,” I whisper, tears starting to pour down my cheeks. “And tell him I love him so much.”

“You and AJ are going back to Concord together, and you’re going to live long, happy lives,” Nix says, smiling at me before he looks back at Connor. “You don’t want to shoot the mother of your child, but I’m guessing you really want to shoot me. Have at it. I’m not armed. I won’t resist. Just take the gun away from her head and point at me.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Champion Cove, North Carolina

Hawk and Butch have probably already reached the high ground above us. I'm guessing Hawk's lining up a shot at Connor right now. Connor's finger is on the trigger. He needs to move the gun away from Emory's head so he doesn't compress it when the bullet hits whatever part of his body Hawk has in his sights.

"Shoot me if you want to shoot someone." I raise my hands higher in the air to show him I'm not holding a weapon. "Just take the gun away from her head. Point it at me."

"I should shoot you," Connor says, his hand trembling on the gun. "You had an affair with my girlfriend. I don't give a fuck if you're Nix Fuller. What's mine is mine."

"You're right." I take another step toward them. "I'm a horrible person. I forced her to be with me. It's all my fault. Shoot me."

Emory's tears are coming with more force. "Put the gun down, Connor. Please don't shoot anyone."

"It's okay, Em," I say, smiling at her again. "Everything will be okay. I promise."

Connor lets the gun drop from her head a little bit. He's almost there. I just need him to point it at me.

I take another step toward them. "Shoot me, Connor. I deserve it. Shoot me."

When Connor extends his arm to point the gun at me, a shot rings out

from the tree-lined berm to our right. As the gun flies out of Connor's hands, he screams, falls to his knees, and covers his head.

I grab Emory away from him and pull her to my chest. "It's okay, baby. That was Hawk shooting. You're safe now."

"Did this asshole just point a gun at my little brother?" Hawk thunders down the hill with Butch following him—both with guns still drawn. "Is that what I just saw, Butch?"

"Looked like it to me, but his gun flew out of his hand for some reason. Can't really understand why," Butch says, picking up Connor's gun that came to rest about ten feet away from us.

When Connor peeks out from under his arms, I land my foot in his face. He screams again and crumples the rest of the way to the ground.

"Nice shot, bro. Looks like you broke his nose," Hawk says. "I wanted to aim for his face, too, but Butch told me to disarm him. He's always trying to ruin my fun."

"Come on, now. You don't want to waste your sniper skills shooting someone's face from only a hundred yards out. That's too damn easy," Butch says as he shows Hawk the gun. "You owe me a hundred. You hit the back half of the barrel."

"The fuck I did," Hawk says, pointing at the gun. "That's front half by at least a centimeter."

"Burt," Emory says, suddenly pushing out of my arms and running to the back of the car. "He shot Burt."

"Hey, brother," Butch says, following her over there. "Looks like he got you on the shoulder."

Burt winces. "Feels like it, too."

Hawk holds out his phone to Butch. "It's the local 911."

"We have one GSW," Butch says, kneeling next to Burt. "Shoulder. Through and through. Bleeding is under control. Patient's alert and talking."

"First responders are one minute out," the 911 operator says. "Hold your position."

Emory drops to her knees next to Burt and kisses his cheek. "Burt, you saved me. How can I ever repay you?"

"That kiss was plenty," he says, wheezing as Butch applies pressure to his wound. "Go find your son."

"AJ." Emory springs to her feet and rushes over to me. "I need to see him right now. Please take me to him."

“Robin and Cardi just took him back to the house,” Hawk says. “Go. We’ll wait for the sheriff and meet you back there.”

When I pull up in front of the house, AJ’s sitting between Cardi and Robin on the front steps. He jumps up and tears across the yard when he sees Emory get out of the truck. AJ crashes into her so hard that they end up sprawled out on the grass.

“Baby, you were so brave,” she says, holding him to her chest. “The monster’s all gone now. I promise. He’s never coming back.”

“He shot Hulk,” AJ says, gasping for air between each word. “And then took you.”

“I know, sweetie, but I’m back and I’m never leaving you again,” she says, looking up at me. “And Nix said Hulk’s going to be okay.”

“Jake just texted me,” I say, squatting down next to them. “Hulk’s fine, AJ. You did such a good job protecting her.”

Cardi streaks across the yard, her phone held high. “What the fuck, Phoenix? Hawk just told me you asked the shooter to point the gun at you. Have you lost every bit of your mind?”

“Language,” I say, nodding at AJ.

She shoves me so hard that I end up on my butt. “I don’t give a fuck about my language, you idiot. You could have died.”

She falls to the ground next to me as tears shoot out of her eyes. I’ve never seen her cry, even when we were kids.

“I couldn’t go on if you died, Phoenix,” she says, throwing herself at me. “I couldn’t go on for one second without you on this earth.”

“I’m fine, Cardi,” I say as she puts a stranglehold on my neck. She’s straight up sobbing against my chest now. “I had to get the gun away from Emory’s head.”

Robin runs over and hugs me from the other side. “Don’t ever do something that stupid again. We would never survive without you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say as Emory and AJ crawl over and attach themselves to me, too. I wrap my arms around all four of them. “I promise. I’m here to stay.”

As the crying dies down, we sit quietly for a few minutes as our bodies

decompress.

AJ breaks the silence. "Cardi said a bad word. Two times."

Everyone, including Cardi, breaks up laughing.

"Sorry, buddy," Cardi says. "I'll try not to do it again."

"It's okay. It's a hard day," AJ says, patting her arm. He looks up at me. "Can we go see Hulk? She's my best friend."

"She's with the doctor in Asheville," I say, untangling myself from everyone as the group hug breaks up. "We can go see her tomorrow. Okay?"

Emory looks up at me. "I want to go back to Concord. I need to see my parents."

"I'll drive you back there as soon as Ben gets your statement," I say, nodding to the sheriff's car that just arrived. "We can stop and see Hulk on the way."

Chapter Thirty-Three

EMORY

Two Months Later
Concord, New Hampshire

AJ's sitting on Dad's lap, working on his reading. Mom's in the kitchen making AJ's favorite dinner—chicken strips with mashed potatoes. It's like every Sunday night we've spent together over the last five years, except for the piles of boxes and suitcases jammed into the corner.

AJ and I are moving to Champion Cove tomorrow. I'm excited but also desperately sad that we'll be so far away from my parents, and more importantly, AJ's amazing grandparents.

After Connor was arrested, I told Nix I needed time alone with AJ to make sure he was recovering from the trauma. Nix drove us back here, then returned to Champion Cove. AJ and I basically slept for a few weeks while Mom and Dad hovered around us.

One day, I woke up to find AJ putting some of his shirts in a suitcase. I asked him where he was going. He said he missed Hulk, Nix, and the fish—in that order—and that they probably missed him, too.

When we called Nix and told him that we missed them, he and Hulk—no fish—headed to Concord that day. They've been living with us for the past six weeks.

It's been so nice having all of my family in one place, but I knew a couple weeks into the cohabitation that I wanted to move with Nix to Champion Cove. When I talked to AJ about it, he got so excited that he dragged out the suitcase again and started packing immediately.

Nix walks back in the front door to carry another box out to the moving truck. He pulls me to him when he sees another tear rolling down my cheek.

“I don’t mind staying here,” he whispers. “I’ve told you that a million times. Mika’s running the bar. We can stay here as long as you want.”

I shake my head against his chest. “I want to live in Champion. It’s where we belong—all of us.”

“If you change your mind, we can move back here,” he says, leaning down to give me a kiss. “I just want to be with you. I don’t care where it is.”

AJ looks over at us. “What are you whispering secrets about?”

“We’re talking about all the fish you’re going to pet when we get home,” Nix says.

My dad’s face falls when he hears the word home.

“Not home. I mean like second home,” Nix says quickly. “This will always be your first home.”

“It’s okay, Nix,” Dad says, looking over the top of his reading glasses. “Helen and I are happy for you. We’ll miss all of you, but we’re so pleased that our daughter and grandson found such a good man to watch over them.”

“I’ll never let anything bad happen to them again,” Nix says. “But I wish you’d at least consider moving to Champion Cove. Em and AJ will miss seeing you every day. Frankly, I will, too. And I know Hulk will. I’ve never seen anyone spoil a dog as much as you have, Jim.”

Dad laughs as he bends over to pet Hulk, who’s sleeping on his feet. “I might miss Hulk more than any of you.”

“Pop, please come,” AJ begs. “Nix has cookies right next to his work and so many fish at his house.”

Dad buries his nose into AJ’s curls. “I want you to introduce me to every one of those fish when we visit at Christmas. Promise?”

“Promise,” AJ says, looking up at him. “How many days until Christmas?”

“Only twenty-eight,” Dad says. “And then Santa comes to your new house.”

I walk over and sit on the edge of Dad’s chair. “You told me that it’s never too late for a new beginning. It might be time to take your own advice. You don’t have to move, but if you change your mind, know you’re welcome in Champion Cove any time.”

“Any time,” Nix echoes. “I mean that. If you want to move there or just visit, call me. I’ll make it happen.”

“We appreciate it, but our entire life’s here,” Dad says, looking over at Mom, who has been trying to hide her tear-streaked face all day. “Helen’s bakery and my teaching job and our friends.”

“There’s a bakery in Champion Cove waiting for you to take it over,” I say, kissing the side of Dad’s head, “and there are plenty of teaching jobs in Asheville. Plus, you’ve put in your thirty years of teaching in New Hampshire. You already have full pension when you want to retire.”

Mom chimes in. “I think it would be better for the three of you to get a fresh start without us hanging around.”

“I told you that wouldn’t be a problem,” Nix says. “You won’t want to leave once you get to Champion Cove. You’ll see over Christmas. It’s the best town. Maybe take an extended vacation there and see what you think.”

“They’re staying with us for the entire month of July next year,” I say, looking at AJ. “Pop promised us. Didn’t he?”

“Promised,” AJ says as he taps the book. “Please read, Pop. We’re not done.”

“Yes, sir,” Dad says. “Your wish is my command.”

As Nix takes another box to the truck, I head over to Mom.

“You know I wouldn’t have survived these past five years without you,” I say, wrapping my arms around her from behind as she puts the finishing touches on the potatoes.

She leans her head against mine. “Yes, you would have. You’re the strongest person I know. You have been since you were just a little thing, but you get stronger every day. I’m in awe of you, Emmie.”

“Thanks, Momma, but I owe everything to you and Dad. I’m not sure how I got so lucky to have the most supportive parents in the world. I don’t know what I’m going to do when I can’t see you every day.”

She turns around and takes my face into her hands. “You’ll be fine and we’ll be fine. It’s time for you to move on to the next phase of your life. Nix is a good man. I see how happy he makes you and AJ. I’m thrilled you found someone who knows how special you are.”

Nix makes his way over to us and wraps his arms around us. “I know how special this entire family is. Staying here this past month has been one of the best times of my life.”

“For us, too,” Mom says, smiling up at him. “The way you love my daughter and grandson has absolutely warmed my heart.”

Dad walks over, carrying AJ on his hip, trailed closely by Hulk. “AJ,

Hulk, and I didn't want to be left out of the group hug."

We stand in the kitchen for a few minutes, arms around each other, no one saying anything. Somehow this is the happiest and saddest I've ever been in my life. But Mom's right, it's time for AJ and me to start the next chapter of our lives.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Three Months Later
Champion Cove, North Carolina

When I look over at the kitchen table, AJ's holding his plate down to Hulk, who's lapping up the last of his scrambled eggs.

"Buddy," I say, packing the rest of his snacks into his lunch box, "we talked about this. Remember? You need to eat what's on your plate without Hulk's help. She has her own food."

"Hulk likes eggs better than I do." He points at her face. "Look, she's smiling."

"She's not smiling. She's drooling," I say, looking toward the stairs as I hear Emory's footsteps. "You better not let your mom see you do that. She told you not to let Hulk lick people dishes."

"But Hulk washes them for us." He holds up the plate. "Look, it's clean. We can put it away now."

"AJ," I say, looking at the ceiling, "have you ever put a Hulk-cleaned plate in the dish strainer?"

"No, I—"

"The truth, please."

"Maybe."

"You can't do that anymore, bud. Hulk has germs in her mouth that need to get cleaned off by the dishwasher."

He shushes me as he looks toward the stairs. "Don't tell Mom. Promise."

"I will not promise. Remember, no secrets between the three of us."

“Four of us,” he says, hugging Hulk’s massive head. “Hulk doesn’t like secrets, either. I tell her everything we talk about to see if she agrees.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, pulling all the plates out of the cabinet for an extra wash. “Does she agree with most of what we say?”

“Yes,” he says, looking down at her to make sure he’s not speaking out of turn. “I told her all about the donor dad last night. Hulk says it’s okay if he goes to jail.”

Emory made the decision to tell AJ everything about Connor—even the bad stuff. I didn’t agree with that decision, but it was hers to make. And as usual, it seems to have been the right one. AJ’s pretty much taken it all in stride.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” I say, sitting down next to him. “Remember? We talked about it being other people’s decision if he goes to jail.”

“The jury?”

“Yeah, buddy. The jury,” I say, smiling. I’m constantly amazed by how good his memory is. “They get to decide so we don’t have to worry about it anymore. Okay?”

“Okay.” He jumps out of his chair and heads over to the refrigerator. “What day is it at Pop School?”

Jim and Helen lasted about a month living in Concord without Emory and AJ. When they came to visit us over Christmas, they asked if we were serious about them moving to Champion Cove. I told them to start packing. We had them moved up here by the end of January. When they got settled in, Jim started a homeschool pre-K class that AJ calls “Pop School.”

“Let’s see,” I say, scanning the school itinerary Jim posts on our refrigerator every week. “It looks like today is matching and patterns, alphabet, counting, and a nature walk.”

“I’m good at counting.”

“You’re good at everything,” I say, patting his head. “Go brush your teeth. We don’t want to be late.”

He gives Hulk another hug. “Can Hulk come to school with me today?”

“You ask that every day,” I say, guiding him toward the stairs. “The answer’s still no.”

He looks up at me, his eyes pleading. “Pop said he didn’t mind.”

“I mind. School’s for learning. Hulk would be too much of a distraction.”

“Please.” His hands are pressed in prayer position under his chin. “She’s

my best friend.”

“I’ll tell you what,” I say, sighing. “Hulk can come with you for the nature walk if it’s okay with Pop.”

AJ and Hulk are dancing around in celebration when Emory walks into the kitchen.

“What’s going on here?” she asks, getting on tiptoe to give me a kiss. “Did they talk you into something else they’re not supposed to do?”

“I told him Hulk could go on the nature walk today if Jim says it’s okay.”

She rolls her eyes. “AJ has you wrapped around his little finger.”

“You both do,” I say, swatting her butt. “Are you excited about your first day at the new job?”

She starts in on the apple slices and peanut butter I have waiting for her on the counter. “Kind of nervous, actually. I’ve never worked for anyone except my mom.”

“You’re working for Jake,” I say, circling my arms around her. “He’s about as easygoing as they come. You’ll be the best Director of Tourism this town has ever seen.”

“I’m the first ever, so I guess I’ll be the best and the worst,” she says, turning around in my arms and looking up at me. “Jake wants me to create events that bring people and money to town, but to make sure the events aren’t too good, because he doesn’t want too many people to move here. I mean, what the hell? How is that even going to be possible?”

“You’ll figure it out. And you already booked that huge group for Lamps on the Lake.”

“For the millionth time, it’s called Lanterns on the Lake, not Lamps. Where would you even plug in the lamps in the middle of the lake?” she asks as she feeds me an apple slice. “And I didn’t book that group. You did.”

“Hawk called you—”

“Hawk called me because you told him to, and it’s only Hawk and Butch and a bunch of their friends. It’s not like I booked a big independent tour group or something.”

“It’s a start. And Butch gave you that lead for someone to maybe invest in the resort—like Ralph or whatever.”

“His name’s Roman,” she says, laughing. “How are you this bad with names?”

“Because the only name I care about is yours,” I say, leaning down to kiss her.

“And mine,” AJ says from below us as he and Hulk circle our legs. “And Hulk’s.”

“That goes without saying. My three favorite names in the entire world,” I say, looking down at him. “Did you brush your teeth yet?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s two maybes already this morning for yes-or-no questions,” I say, putting my hand over his head and leading him to the stairs. “Upstairs. And your teeth better be sparkling when you come back down here.”

Emory’s smiling when I turn back around. “What was the other maybe?”

“He’s been letting Hulk lick the plates clean and putting them in the dish strainer.”

“Eww!” She pushes away her plate. “Was this one of them?”

“No way to tell,” I say, shrugging. “He might have been doing it for a while now.”

“Oh my god,” she says, spitting some of the apple out of her mouth. “We’re sterilizing this entire kitchen tonight.”

I point at the dishwasher. “Already started.”

AJ walks back into the kitchen with his mouth opened wide.

“Let me see them,” I say as he plods over to me. “Yep, they look good. Grab your backpack and we’re out.”

Emory inhales deeply and blows it out.

“You’ll be fine,” I say, kissing the top of her head. “I can’t wait to hear all about your new job tonight.”

Jim’s sitting on the porch of their new house when we drive up. It’s a one-level cottage that sits right on the edge of town. It’s only a five-minute walk to Clive’s where Helen has all but taken over operations.

“Sorry we’re a few minutes late,” I say, unbuckling AJ from the back seat. “It’s Emory’s first day on the new job. She’s a little nervous.”

“No worries,” Jim says, opening his arms as AJ charges toward him. “Helen said she would take Emory lunch from the bakery. She’s making that Dutch bread that Emory likes so much.”

“Damn, I like that, too. I’ll have to stop by and get a sandwich,” I say, following AJ with his backpack and the shoe he doesn’t seem to notice is

missing from his foot. “I saw Clive yesterday. He said the transition of ownership at the bakery is going smoothly.”

“Helen loves him and Fran both,” Jim says. “I know she doesn’t want them to leave, but they’ll still be living in the apartment over the bakery, so I’m guessing she’ll see them every day regardless.”

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head, “they’ll be all up in her business like everyone else is in this town.”

“AJ, Nan left you a treat on the counter,” Jim says, opening the front door for him. “I’ll meet you inside in a second.”

“Bye, Nix,” he says, giving me a half hug as he grabs his backpack and shoe. “Don’t forget to tell Pop about Hulk.”

I smile as I watch him tear into the house. “He’s like a human tornado.”

“Always has been. I mean since the day he was born, he’s been moving constantly,” Jim says. “He seems to be doing so well. Has he had anymore nightmares about the incident?”

“It’s been almost two months without one. I think it helps that Hulk sleeps in the bed with him.”

He nods. “Hulk has been so good for him.”

“Speaking of Hulk, AJ asked if she could go on the nature walk part of the school day with you.”

“Fine with me. We can go on that trail behind your house. AJ likes that little creek with the tadpoles.”

“You have a key to the house. Just let yourself in,” I say, backing toward my truck. “I should get going. I need to run into Asheville to get some stuff before the bar opens.”

“Stay for a second if you don’t mind,” he says, walking down from the porch. “I just wanted to tell you again how grateful Helen and I are for the way you’ve welcomed us to your town. I know having your girlfriend’s parents so close is probably not ideal.”

“It’s absolutely ideal. I’ve told you that before,” I say, pointing at him. “Having you and Helen here makes Emory and AJ happy, and that makes me happy.”

“Honestly, I wan’t sure we were making the right choice for anyone when we decided to move. Helen’s never lived anywhere but Concord except for college. But every day we spend here, we know we made the right decision, not just because Emory and AJ are here, but because this town is so easy. You know?”

“I do know. It’s the reason I moved here after I retired. I’ve traveled all over the world, but I’ve never come close to having the feeling I get when I drive into Champion Cove,” I say, smiling. “And now that my family’s here, it’s the best feeling in the world.”

Epilogue

EMORY

Three Months Later
Champion Cove, North Carolina

Nix and AJ have been on the patio for almost an hour. They're apparently planning a surprise for me. Not only have I been banned from joining them, but AJ also warned me several times not to look outside. Before they disappeared, he very dramatically closed the shutters so I couldn't peek.

The back door finally cracks open.

"You good, buddy?" Nix asks. "We can practice it again if you want to."

AJ sticks his head through the crack, then quickly withdraws it when he sees me looking at him.

"She's there." AJ tries to whisper, but it comes out more like squeal. "She's right there."

"That's good," Nix whispers. "She has to be here if we're going to do this."

"What are you two whispering about?" I demand, flinging open the door. They're crouched in front of it with Hulk in between them. "You've been at this for an hour. It's time to reveal the big secret."

"Alright, man, it's go-time," Nix says, looking at AJ. "You know what to do."

AJ grabs my hand and walks me over to a chair that's positioned away from the table and situated to get the best view of the dance or whatever performance I'm about to witness.

"You sit here, Mommy. This is your chair. Don't move from here."

“Okay, sweetie,” I say as he watches me closely to make sure I’m following his instructions. “I’m sitting and I won’t move until you tell me it’s okay.”

“You’re over here, bud,” Nix says, pointing AJ to what I’m assuming is his starting position for the big show.

AJ takes a deep breath and settles himself into the corner of the patio. Hulk circles him a few times, then sits next to him.

When AJ gives a thumbs-up, Nix starts across the patio. His eyes lock with mine as he strides toward me.

“I asked AJ for permission to do this,” he says, his eyes filling up. “He said it was okay.”

When he drops to one knee, I gasp and cover my eyes with my hands. I thought this might be coming, but I had no idea it would happen this soon.

He pulls my hands down. “I want you looking at me for this.”

“Eyes open,” I whisper. “Always.”

He takes my hands into his. “I probably fell in love with you the first time I saw you back in college, but neither of us were in the right place for a relationship then, so the universe separated us for a while. I never quit thinking about you, and I’m so grateful that the universe put us in each other’s paths again. You and AJ have changed my whole world. I never want to be without either of you again. I made you my fake wife, now I’d like you to be my real wife. Emory Joy Hart, will you please marry me?”

“Yes,” I say, nodding as tears start pouring from my eyes. “So much yes. There’s nothing I want more than to be your wife and the mother to all of our children.”

When Nix pulls me up and wraps his arms around me, AJ shrieks. “My part! Don’t forget about my part!”

“Oh, man, my bad, bud,” Nix says, pushing me back into the chair and dropping back to his knee. “I got all caught up. Your part is the most important.”

AJ looks at me before he starts across the patio. One step, feet together. Another step, feet together. Hulk matches the slow pace of the wedding march until they’re both standing in front of me.

With extreme concentration, AJ unsnaps Hulk’s collar and hands it to Nix.

“AJ and I would—”

“And Hulk,” AJ says, nudging Nix.

“Of course. AJ, *Hulk*, and I,” Nix says, sliding a ring off Hulk’s collar, “would like to give you this ring as a token of our—”

He stops and points to AJ.

“Ever,” AJ says, squinting as he looks up at Nix. “Ever—”

“Everlasting,” Nix whispers.

“Everlasting,” AJ says. “Everlasting love.”

Nix gives him a fist bump. “Perfect. Nice job, buddy.”

As AJ beams up at him, Nix turns back to me and holds up the ring. “Will you accept this ring from all of us?”

“Yes,” I say, my tears coming with more force. “This is even more special because the ring is coming from all three of you.”

Nix has barely slid the ring onto my finger when AJ taps his arm.

“I need to talk to Mommy alone.”

“Oh, okay,” Nix says, the lines deepening on his forehead. “Did you change your mind about me marrying your mom? Because I told you we can wait as long as you want.”

“No,” AJ says. “It’s something else.”

“Okay,” Nix says. “Hulk and I will be down on the dock. Take all the time you need.”

AJ watches them until they get down to the next level of the patio, then leans against my knees and whispers, “When you get married, does that mean Nix will be my dad?”

“Baby,” I say, taking his face into my hands, “do you want Nix to be your dad?”

His head bobs up and down.

“Okay, so there’s this process called adoption that we can try so Nix will become your legal dad. We would have to go into court and they decide.”

“The jury?”

“No, sweetie. In this court, the judge decides, but no matter what happens in court, Nix can be your dad, anyway. I know he wants to be.”

“He does?”

“Of course, he does,” I say, kissing his forehead. “He wants it so much. Do you want to ask him so you can hear it for yourself?”

“What do I say?”

“Hmm,” I say, tapping my chin. “How about, Nix, will you be my dad?”

More nodding, but no words as he closes his eyes to concentrate on memorizing the question.

“Nix, will you be my dad?” he whispers, eyes still closed.

“That’s perfect, AJ. Are you ready now? Or do you want to think about it some more?”

“Now,” he says, taking my hand. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course, sweetie,” I say as he tugs me toward the dock. “You know if Nix is your dad, that will mean you and Hulk are officially brother and sister.”

He either didn’t hear me or he’s so focused that he doesn’t have time for my nonsense right now. From the intense look on his face, I’d say it was the latter.

Nix looks up as we close in on him. “You okay, AJ?”

AJ looks up at me. “Now?”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

He nods again.

“Then fire away,” I say, smiling.

He closes his eyes for a few seconds, then opens them and looks at Nix. “Nix, will you be my dad?”

Nix falls to his knees in front of AJ.

“Yes,” he says, his voice huskier than usual as a few tears escape his eyes. “Nothing would make me happier than to be your dad.”

AJ’s forehead wrinkles up. “Then why are you crying?”

“Because,” Nix says, putting his hands on AJ’s shoulders, “I’m so happy right now that I think the happiness is leaking out of my body. I want to be your dad more than anything in the world. Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes, Mom said we could do apupson—”

“Adoption,” I say from above him.

“Adoption,” AJ continues, “and the judge will decide if you can be my dad, but really you would already be my dad no matter what the judge says.”

“That’s right,” Nix says, nodding. “I can be your dad anytime you want me to start—”

“Like even right now?”

“Yeah,” Nix croaks. “Right now if you want.”

“Okay, now,” AJ says. “Dad, can we have lunch on the island today?”

“Yep,” Nix says, wiping the tears off his cheeks. “I’ll get the cooler in a second if you want to help me pack it.”

“Okay,” AJ says, following Hulk across the dock to scare off a squirrel

intruder.

“Did he just call me Dad?” Nix whispers.

“Yep,” I say, circling my arms around his neck. “You okay?”

“I’m so good right now. I just don’t see how my life could get any better than this.”

Want to know what happens to Connor? [Subscribe to my email newsletter and you’ll get instant access to a bonus scene.](#)

Paperback readers - Go to donnaschwartze.com and click on the Bonus Scenes tab.

And continue flipping pages for an introduction to my next book as told by Emory.

Easy On The Ice is a friends-to-lovers, brother’s best friend hockey romance featuring Asher Carlson, one of Nix’s former teammates.

Happy Fake Wife, Happy Fake Life is my tenth novel. Have you read the other nine? There’s a little crossover with this book:

- Hawk and Butch are introduced in The Trident Trilogy. Their stories continue through The Grand Slam/Blitzen Bay Series.
- AJ/Aaron marries someone from The Grand Slam/Blitzen Bay Series many years down the road. It’s included in a bonus scene from another book. You almost have to read the entire series for it to all make sense, but I promise it’s a happy ending for all.

If you've already read all of my books, thanks for your amazing support!

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What's Next

Thank you for reading this book. I hope you enjoyed it. If you did, will you please [leave a review on Amazon](#)? You don't have to write anything if you don't want to—a star rating is plenty. I really appreciate your time.

This is a sneak peek into my next book, *Easy On The Ice*, as told by Emory. It's a friends-to-lovers, brother's best friend hockey romance featuring Asher Carlson, one of Nix's former teammates. I will release *Easy On The Ice* in 2024. Sign up for my newsletter at donnaschwartz.com to be the first to know when it's published.

Emory
Chicago, Illinois

The ladies in the crowd haven't stopped yelling at Nix for the almost three hours we've been in the arena. One woman wrote her phone number on the back of her oversized fan sign and held it up to where we're sitting in the owner's box. I'm assuming she'll get a lot of calls, but none of them will be from Nix.

Every time a woman tries to get his attention, he holds me closer. When one extremely overserved woman flashed him, he wrapped his arms around me so tightly that I almost couldn't breathe.

“Nix, what’s it going to take, man?” The team’s general manager circles back around to us for probably the tenth time. He winks at me. “Maybe you can help me convince him, Emily. You’re the only one he seems to have any time for right now.”

“Her name’s Emory and she’s not involved in this,” Nix growls. “I’ve told you at least three times tonight and about a hundred times before that, I’m not coming back. I’m done playing. Quit asking, Andy.”

Andy slips into the seat on the other side of me. “I don’t understand it, Nix. You’ve still got at least a year left in those knees. Ash plays so much better with you in front of him.”

“Ash plays just fine without me,” Nix says, nodding to the scoreboard.

“But he plays better with you, right?” He puts his hand on my arm when I don’t answer. “Right, Emory?”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were asking me,” I say. “Honestly, I didn’t even know who Ash was until Nix pointed him out to me tonight. I don’t know a lot about hockey.”

“Ahh,” Andy says as a smug smile covers his face. “So you’re the reason Nix quit.”

“She’s not the reason I quit,” Nix says, shoving Andy’s hand off my arm. “I quit because we’d just won the championship and my knees fucking hurt. I’m not coming back. Quit asking and don’t touch my fiancée again.”

Andy puts his hands in the air. “Alright, Nix. You can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“I definitely can,” Nix says. “Come on, Em. Let’s get downstairs before the match ends. I want to introduce you to some of the guys, especially Ash. He’s going to love you.”

“Nix Fuller.” The Chicago goalie shakes his head as he waddles over to us—a stick in one hand, mask in the other, and protective pads hanging off every other part of his body. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming, asshole?”

“Kind of a last-minute thing.” Nix gives him a quick body-bump hug without letting go of my hand. “Nice game except for that goal in the second. I told you not to close your eyes when the puck’s headed your way.”

“Fuck you. You’re the one who abandoned me and left a huge hole in our

defense.” Ash gives me a quick scan before he continues, “I need you out there throwing your body on pucks for me again.”

“I didn’t throw my body on pucks,” Nix says, laughing. “You know I stopped every advance with my superior stick and foot work.”

Ash lets out a long whistle. “You’ve been out of the game too long if that’s how you remember it. Probably time to get back in. Tell me this surprise visit means you’re coming out of retirement.”

“Not a chance,” Nix says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “I surprised my fiancée with this trip. She wanted to see my old stomping grounds. Ash, this is Emory.”

“Fiancée? How the hell did that happen?” He yanks one of his enormous gloves off and extends his hand to me. “It’s nice to meet you, Emory. Please blink twice if he’s holding you against your will.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I say as Nix pulls me closer to him. “And I assure you I’m here of my own free will.”

“Well, let me know if you come to your senses,” Ash says. “It’s never too late to get out of a relationship.”

“Good to know, but I think I’ll stick this one out.”

“Beautiful and brave,” Ash says, tapping Nix’s shoulder with his hockey stick. “Looks like you found a winner. I’m happy for you, man.”

“Appreciate it.” Nix gestures to a row of women standing outside the locker room. “I see Sarah over there. I guess that’s still going on, huh?”

“Yep.” Ash doesn’t sound too enthused about it.

“You’re going on about two years, right?” Nix asks. “Maybe it’s time for you to lock in a wife, too.”

“It probably is, but I doubt it will be her,” Ash says, looking over his shoulder to make sure no one’s eavesdropping. “I’m not sure what it is, but something’s missing.”

“Damn, that’s cold,” Nix says. “You know that’s what she wants. Cut her loose already if it’s not going to happen.”

“Ash!” A gorgeous, young woman bounces toward us—two phones in her hand and a laptop under her arm. “There you are.”

“What’s up, Pip?”

She types something into one of her phones. “Matt said you need to get into the locker room to do media.”

“Tell Matt to fuck off,” Ash says. “And tell him to quit getting you to do his dirty work.”

“Did you forget Matt’s my boss?” she asks, finally looking up from her phone. “You got me the job. You should know that better than anyone.”

“I know what he is, but it pisses me off that he uses you because he knows I won’t say no—”

“In my book, that makes him a strong strategist.” She smiles at us. “Hi, I’m Pippin Girard. I guess I’ll introduce myself since Ash has forgotten his manners.”

“This is Nix Fuller and his fiancée, Emory,” Ash says. “Nix and I played together for four seasons.”

Pippin slugs his arm. “You don’t have to tell me who Nix Fuller is, dummy. I’ve watched him play since I was a kid—first at BC, then here with you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Pippin,” Nix says, his forehead wrinkling up. “Why does your name sound familiar?”

“Maybe you played with my brother, Jack Girard. He played college at Michigan, but never made it into the league.”

“Right. I remember now,” Nix says, staring at Ash who’s now looking at his feet. “Ash, didn’t you grow up with Jack?”

Pippin jumps in. “Yeah, we all grew up together. Ash was as much my big brother as Jack was. Still is. In fact, I’m living at his house until I can find another place. I kind of got into some trouble—”

“Pippin!” A guy’s standing at the entrance to the locker room with his arms in the air. “You’re supposed to be getting content from the post interviews.”

“Sorry, Matt,” Pippin says, slugging Ash again. “See what you did? Now I’m in trouble. Get a move on, Carlson. I don’t want to have to tell you again.” She nods at us. “Nice to meet you both. Nix, you were always one of my favorite players to watch. You were one of the best defenders ever to play, in my opinion.”

“Appreciate it. Nice to meet you, too.” Nix lets her clear the area before he looks back at Ash who’s still looking at his feet. “Now I see what’s going on. You got her a job and she’s living in your house? How’s she paying you back for all that?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ash says, glaring up at him. “That girl’s like a little sister to me.”

Nix lets out a long whistle. “First of all, she is not a girl—at least not anymore. And second, didn’t you tell me Jack forbid you from seeing any of

his family after that whole thing went down between you two?”

Ash looks at me. “Can you please get him to mind his own business, Emory?”

“I probably could, but I don’t think I want to. I really want to hear the rest of this story,” I say. “And he’s right. You have a major thing for Pippin.”

“You’re both dead wrong,” Ash says, shaking his head. “She got into a little trouble. I’m just helping her out. That’s all.”

“No, that’s definitely not all. I’m rarely wrong about things like this,” I say, tapping my lips. “I’ll tell you what—Nix and I are getting married in October. You’re invited with a plus one. That’s a little more than six months away. If Pippin isn’t your date, I’ll jump into the lake with my wedding dress on.”

He laughs as he takes a step back. “I would love to come to your wedding, and I really hope you can swim.”

“I can, but I won’t need to at the wedding,” I say, tilting my head and smiling up at him. “And if Pippin is your date, which she will be, you have to jump into the lake completely naked. Deal?”

Nix pushes my hand down. “No deal. No one wants to see him naked.”

“Alright, then, how about this? If she’s your date, you have to wear a dress to our wedding and jump into the lake wearing it.” I hold out my hand again. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Ash says, grinning as he shakes my hand. “Nix, I highly approve of your choice of wife. She’s definitely a keeper.”

[All of my books are available on Amazon. Read free on Kindle Unlimited.](#)

About the Author

Donna Schwartze is a graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism. She also holds a Master of Arts from Webster University. With the exception of walking on a beach, Donna would almost always rather be snuggling on her couch with a fluffy blanket and an even fluffier dog. She is an avid yogi and plans to still be able to do the splits on her 100th birthday. Her favorite character from her books is Mack (all the alpha, all the tender) from The Trident Trilogy.