

unbreakable
bond

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HOPE FORD

UNBREAKABLE BOND

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CONTENTS

1. [Kanan](#)
2. [Emerson](#)
3. [Kanan](#)
4. [Emerson](#)
5. [Kanan](#)
6. [Emerson](#)
7. [Kanan](#)
8. [Emerson](#)
9. [Kanan](#)
10. [Emerson](#)
11. [Kanan](#)
12. [Emerson](#)
13. [Kanan](#)
14. [Emerson](#)
15. [Kanan](#)
16. [Emerson](#)
17. [Kanan](#)
18. [Emerson](#)
19. [Kanan](#)
20. [Emerson](#)
21. [Kanan](#)
22. [Emerson](#)
23. [Kanan](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Hope Ford](#)

[JOIN ME!](#)

[Be a Hottie!](#)

[About the Author](#)

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CHAPTER 1

KANAN

I'M JEALOUS. There's no other way to explain it. Seeing big ol' grumpy-ass Davis smiling and happy as his bride-to-be walks down the aisle to him causes a pang in my chest. I reach up and rub my palm over my heart because it hits me fast. It feels like a kick, and it catches me off guard. It takes me a minute to remember I'm standing in the front of the room, right next to the groom, and I slowly lower my hand down to my side, trying not to draw any attention to myself.

There is no hesitation for Davis. As soon as Abby is within reach, he grabs her and draws her into him. The way they're looking at each other seems too private to witness, and I pull my eyes off them, but it doesn't help any. I'm right across from Olivia. She's the maid of honor and also the girlfriend of my friend, Jason. Instead of watching the bride and groom, her eyes are on Jason, who's standing right next to me. It's obvious to everyone they are in love. I gave Jason some shit earlier because as Davis' best man, I'm supposed to dance with the maid of honor. When I told him the song we're dancing to is eight minutes long, I was pretty sure he was going to throat punch me.

The ceremony is fast, and when it's over, I escort Olivia down the aisle, but as soon as we're to the end, she's leaving me for Jason. "Sorry, Kanan."

I laugh and shake my head. "It's fine. Trust me, the last thing we need is Jason losing his cool, and I think he will if I have you on my arm much longer." I point at him. "Look, he's so mad."

Olivia laughs, and Jason turns to us. He may not be able to see, but he is one hundred percent attuned with anything Olivia.

She walks over to him, and I watch as Jason opens his arms to her, the lucky son of a gun. I let out a deep breath. All I have to do is make it through the reception with a smile plastered to my face, and then I can go back to my little cabin, have a beer, and do my best to not think about the past.

I walk over to the edge of the room and lean against the wall. Everyone is laughing and talking around me, but I might as well be alone. The reception hall is next door, and guests are leaving the church to walk over. I know I should go be with the rest of the bridal party, but I need a few minutes to try and collect myself. Socializing is hard, and I think I've done more of it today than I have in the last two years put together.

I try to take it all in. I never would have believed this was possible for any of us. My friends and I were on a mission, and our friend was killed, leaving the rest of us injured in one way or another. We shouldn't have even survived that day, but here we are.

Davis is now married.

I'm pretty sure Jason and Olivia will be next.

Jason hollers for me, and my time to reflect is over. I make my way back over to the crowd, and it's time for more pictures. I smile, and we all do as we're told because none of us want to upset an excited Abby.

As soon as the photographer dismisses the bridal party but keeps the bride and groom, we make our getaway.

As the bride and groom smile for more pictures, I walk toward the reception area. I find the guys there, all of them standing against the wall, each of them with a beer already in their hands.

"You doing okay?" Elias asks.

He gestures to my arm, and I realize that I'm rubbing the knots out of my forearm with my other hand. I grimace and force myself to let go. "Yeah, sure, I'm good. You okay?"

Elias nods once and then turns away. He looks about as happy as I am to be here. Elias hates being out in public more than any of us. He's extremely self-conscious with the scars on his face, and it's obvious he doesn't want to be here, but just like the rest of us, he's here for our friend. "You know the pain may not be as bad if you didn't bench so heavy. You lift weights like you have something to prove."

I just shrug. Elias is right. I know he is. The doctor has said the same thing. I'm pushing the muscles in my arm too hard too fast, but for a year, I couldn't do anything with my arm. Once I was able to do something, I took it to the limits. Yeah, sometimes my arm goes numb, and it freaks me out when it happens, but I'm not going to stop.

"How long?" Colter asks.

I turn to the man on the other side of me. He never says much. He suffered from a traumatic brain injury in the incident two years ago, and when he talks too much, he stutters. "How long do we have to stay here?" I ask him, making sure I understand what he's asking me.

He nods without looking at me.

I shrug and look around the room. There's a buffet, a cake table, and a dance floor. The party could go on for hours. "I don't know. Maybe until after the toasts at least. Right?"

The men around me all grunt their agreement. "Yeah, okay. So an hour... or two tops."

Colter's frown deepens, and I can't say I blame him.

It's only minutes, but it seems longer when the bride and groom finally come through the doors and everyone starts cheering.

"Fuck," I grunt.

Elias slaps me on the back. "You're up."

I feel in my pocket for the folded-up paper and pull it out. "Yep. I'll be back."

I get just a few steps and Colter calls out to stop me.

“Yeah?”

He laughs. “Break a leg.”

It’s automatic, and I don’t even think about it. I raise my middle finger at him. “Fuck you, man.”

All the guys laugh, and I shake my head as I make my way to the front.

Olivia is at the front, and I gesture to her. “Ladies first.”

She doesn’t have to read off a paper. She speaks from the heart, and Abby’s wiping tears as Olivia reminisces about their past. She talks about some book club and Abby finally getting her happily ever after.

When it’s my turn, I suck in a breath. I’ve been dreading this for a while now, but I knew I had to do it. No matter how uncomfortable I am, I owe Davis—and the rest of these guys—my life. Surely, I can make it through a small speech.

I start to read, but it doesn’t feel right. I raise my eyes and look out to the crowd and then force myself to look at Davis. *Just talk to him. It’s just you and the guys*, I tell myself. I fold up the paper and stuff it in my pocket and start again.

“Davis. You of anyone knows I’m not good at these things, but here I am. So here it goes. Two years ago, me, you, the guys—” I gesture to where the other band of mercenaries are all standing against the wall. “None of us thought we would be here. We couldn’t imagine anything past THAT day. It took us awhile to get where we’re at, but we’re here, living for the future, believing in love and forever. Seeing you and Abby and little Alexis”—I gesture to Abby’s daughter—“together is a sight to see. The love you have for each other has healed parts of us that we thought would never heal. Davis, you deserve this. You deserve to be happy and loved. And Abby, I know we’re not much to look at, but I hope you know that we consider you and Alexis our family now. Anytime you need anything, we’re here for you.” I take a deep breath and clear my throat. “So, congratulations,” I end gruffly and turn before I lift my beer to drink.

I don't get far, though, because Abby has caught up to me. "Kanan, wait."

I stop and suck in a breath, forcing a smile to my face. I hate the attention, and I can feel all eyes on me. "Yeah?"

Davis is standing over her shoulder with a smirk on his face.

Abby hugs me, and I have no choice but to hug her back. It's not that I don't care to hug her; it's just that I'm not really a huggy person. She pulls back but doesn't let me go. "I'm honored, Kanan."

My forehead creases in confusion, and she smiles. "I'm honored to call you guys my family."

I nod, and she pats me on the shoulder and then Davis hugs me. Emotion wells, and I go over to where the guys are all standing. They all just give me nods, and I know they are all thinking the same thing I am. We'll never forget that day two years ago.

I'm about to grab another beer when Walker walks up to us. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I'm surprised to be singled out but nod my head. There's no way I'd tell Walker no for anything. "Sure," I say, expecting him to tell me something about the compound. Since he's hired me to take care of the grounds at the compound and the rehab center, it's not uncommon for him to talk to me about things that need done.

We get to the edge of the room, and he gestures toward Davis and Abby. "You got any other duties as best man tonight?"

I look at him strangely. "No, sir. Just a dance, but I'm pretty sure Jason wasn't going to let that happen anyway."

He nods, running his hand through his beard. "Emerson is here."

I swear I stop breathing. I put my hand on the wall, afraid I'm going to fall over. I look around the room, but I don't see her. "Where is she?"

He crosses his arms over his chest. "She's at the compound, and she's asking for you. One of the guys is there with her."

I inhale sharply, thinking the worst. “Is she okay?”

Walker nods. “Yeah, Logan said she was fine.”

When he mentions the medical doctor at the compound, it gives me some relief. I cross my arms over my chest. “What is she doing here?”

Walker shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

I look around the room. “I need to go to her.”

Walker clasps me on the shoulder. “I know you do. Go. I’ll cover for you here. Let me know if I need to know anything.”

I nod and run to the nearest exit. By the time I get to my truck, every thought possible has gone through my head. Emerson is the daughter of my dead best friend. Randall, her father, was the only member of our team that was killed in that mission two years ago, and there isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t think about what happened to him.

She’s supposed to be in Texas.

She’s supposed to be in school.

She’s not supposed to be here in Whiskey Run, looking for me.

CHAPTER 2

EMERSON

I REACH into my backpack and pull out my sweatshirt. The conference room is cold or maybe I'm just nervous. I don't know why I'm so nervous, but I am.

I run my fingers through my hair and try to untangle the mess. I know I look tired and ruffled, but I have been on a bus for 25 hours. I lean back in my seat, arms crossed over my chest. I feel like I've been sitting here forever, but it's only been around twenty minutes.

The man at the front was not happy with me interrupting whatever he was doing on his phone, but as soon as he heard my last name, he did a complete one-eighty. He was on the phone a few different times, and some doctor came to check me out, even though I refused treatment. I mean I'm tired, not hurt or sick—not physically anyway—so I didn't need a doctor. They gave me a pillow and a blanket, planted me on the couch in the conference room with the promise Kanan would be here soon, and I've been waiting ever since.

I'm not sure exactly how it happened, but I must have fallen asleep because when I wake up, Kanan is crouched down beside me, brushing the hair off my face with a concerned look in his eyes.

I blink at him, taking him all in. I thought I was ready to see Kanan again, but I guess I'm not. My heart starts to race, my palms start to sweat, and I can barely form a thought in my head. He's talking, and I try to focus on what he's saying to me instead of the way his eyes are a darker blue than I remember.

I recognize that look. It's the same one he gave me when he saved me all those years ago.

"Emerson, Bug, are you okay? Talk to me."

I clench my eyes shut. *Bug*. As soon as he calls me the nickname from my childhood, I know he'll never ever think of me as anything other than the little kid that used to dig in the backyard. Trust me when I tell you I regret carrying around a little habitat of bugs with me because I'll never shake the name.

I sit up and stretch my arms over my head. I'm not sure how long I was sleeping, but I sure needed it. When I open my eyes mid-stretch, Kanan averts his eyes from me. He grabs a rolling chair, pulls it over toward the couch, and sits down in it.

It's then I notice the suit he's wearing. "Oh shoot, Kanan, you were busy. You didn't have to come." And then a sick thought comes to mind. "Where were you?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Wedding."

I hold my breath. "Who got married?" Surely he's not the one that got married. He wouldn't be here if he did, but if he tells me he did, I'm leaving. There's no way I can stay here and see him with a woman. I know my dreams are ridiculous and it will never happen between me and Kanan, but I'm not going to torture myself either.

Kanan's lips turn up in a smile. "Davis got married."

There's no holding back my surprise. "Davis?" He's another one of my dad's old friends. He's grumpy and set in his ways. I never would have thought of him settling down.

He laughs and nods. "Yep. Trust me, we're all a little surprised. But Abby is great, and he's happy."

I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm sorry for taking you away. I wouldn't have bothered you if I'd known. You should go back."

I'm starting to ramble, and he reaches for me, wrapping his hand around one of mine. "Stop. Emmy, what's going on?"

I shake my head. "I shouldn't have come."

I start to get up, but he puts his hands on my shoulders, holding me where I'm at. He's rolled his chair toward me, and my legs are fitted between his thighs. I'm not small by any means, but being this close to Kanan makes me feel like I am. "Stop. Talk to me. What's going on? Why are you not in school? Does your mom know you're here?"

I scrunch my nose up at him. "Kanan, I'm twenty-four years old."

He nods, not the least bit surprised by the news. "I know exactly how old you are. Answer my questions."

I jut my chin at him. "Listen, this was a mistake. I didn't know where else to go, but—"

He cuts me off. "You're not fuckin' leaving."

His eyes widen, and I think he's as surprised as I am at what he just said. He pushes his chair back and jumps up. He strips off his jacket and tosses it onto the back of a chair. While he walks back and forth, all I can do is watch him as he undoes his tie and tosses it and then undoes the top buttons of his shirt. He looks as if he's about to undo the buttons on his sleeves but thinks twice about it and stops. I'm not surprised. I know he doesn't let people see his arm.

I have no idea what it looks like. I heard people whispering at my dad's funeral that it was mangled, but he's only worn long-sleeve shirts when I have seen him.

He seems to calm himself. "Look, Bug..."

"Don't call me that. I'm not a little girl anymore, Kanan. And you can't tell me what to do. This was a mistake coming here. I should have..." But my voice trails off because I don't know what I should have done. I don't have many choices. Maybe I should have had them call Walker and his wife, Brooklyn, instead of Kanan.

He holds his hands up, and his voice is softer. "I'm sorry, okay? You're right. You're not a child anymore. I know you're not. Talk to me. Tell me what's going on, and we can figure it out. Why are you not at school?"

I lift my shoulder in a shrug. "I got kicked out."

I try to hide the embarrassment I feel about this by staring straight into his eyes, but he sees it. He sees everything. Kanan has always been super observant and in tune with people.

His hands fist at his sides. “Why did they kick you out? It’s your last year. You’re an honors student. You’ve been on the dean’s list every semester since your first year.”

I shake my head in wonder. “How did you know that?”

“Why did they kick you out, Emerson?”

I cross my arms over my chest. I’m feeling every emotion right now, and I’m struggling to stay on top of any of them. “Because my tuition and boarding payment came back insufficient funds.”

“What?”

I nod.

He’s shaking his head. “Did you call the bank? Maybe there was an error.”

I let out a breath. “I did call the bank. My trust fund that was funding my school had been emptied. My car was reposed three weeks ago.”

He’s getting angrier by the minute. “Your car was paid off.”

I shake my head, but then it dawns on me. Of course that makes sense. “Yeah, I tried to tell Mom I thought it was paid off, but she came and got it and said it was being reposed. I went home, Kanan, but everything was boarded up. I barely ever went home, so I don’t know how long she’d been gone, but it’s obvious it’s been awhile. I pried open a window and went inside, but everything was gone... all my dad’s things.” I pause to get myself together. “I didn’t know what else to do. My dad always told me that if I needed anything, I could come to you, but I realize now this was wrong to put this all on you ___”

He holds his hands up to stop me. “Don’t do that. Don’t act like I’m just somebody off the street, Emerson. You know I’ll always be here for you.”

“Unbreakable bond,” I mutter.

He comes to sit next to me on the couch. “What?”

I’m staring at my hands. “That’s what my dad called it. Unbreakable bond. He said that after everything you and I have been through together, we have an unbreakable bond. He said from that point forward you and I had a connection that nothing or no one could come between. He felt so bad he couldn’t be the one to save me.” The memories are all coming back, and I usually try to shove them away, but today, I let them take over. The memories hit me hard. It was the worst experience of my life, but I know it could have been worse.

Kanan reaches for me, and his hand engulfs mine. He brings our hands to his knee and then puts his other one over them, wrapping my one hand with both of his. “Your dad was right, you know. We do have an unbreakable bond, and I’ll always be here for you. I should have known your mom would pull something like this... I should have done something to stop her.”

“My dad...”

He turns toward me and searches my eyes. “Your dad loved you, Em. He would never have wanted you to suffer like this.”

I almost laugh. “This is not suffering. I know what suffering is, and trust me, this is just a blip. I can survive this.”

He leans toward me. “You know. We never talked about it, right?”

I jut my chin at him. “You mean how you saved me when I was fifteen years old? I know it all. It took me a while to figure it out, but I know. My dad was taking down the cartel. He had captured the ringleader and was part of the team that was extraditing him back to the US. The man’s brother is the one that kidnapped me.” I suck in a breath. “I also know that my dad and you and the guys all took them out. It’s like the Romero Cartel never existed.”

His thumb traces along the back of my hand. I can see the internal battle on his face. “I meant we never talked about that kiss.”

I try to pull my hands from his, but he doesn't let me. Two years ago, at my father's funeral, I kissed Kanan. Looking back, it probably wasn't the best decision I've ever made, but I don't regret it. "Please don't throw that in my face, Kanan. Not now. I know you don't want me. I know I practically threw myself at you at the funeral, and I've apologized for it. I didn't come here to embarrass myself some more or to try and trap you or anything. I swear, I had nowhere else to go. I've been on my friend's couch for two weeks and..."

He sits up taller. "This happened two weeks ago?"

I nod. "Yeah, trust me. I've tried everything. I'm down to my last five hundred dollars, and I knew I had to do something. I shouldn't have come here."

"Just don't. You were absolutely right to come here. Have you tried calling your mom?"

I nod and roll my eyes at him. "Yeah, but her phone is disconnected. Trust me, she doesn't care, Kanan. I just need a place to stay for a few days. Just long enough to make a plan."

"How did you get here, Emerson?"

He's not going to like it. I know he's not. I pull my hand from his and get up, putting some distance between us. Not because I'm afraid how he's going to react. I know Kanan would never hurt me, but I do need to put some distance between us. It's either that or I'm going to do something stupid like kiss him again. "A bus."

He closes his eyes, and his face hardens. When he pries his eyes open, he stares at me angrily. "You rode a bus from Texas to Tennessee?"

I shrug, and he jumps to his feet and comes toward me, jabbing a finger in his own chest. "You call me, Emerson. It's not safe for you to ride a bus alone like that. You call me and I come get you."

I can't help it. He looks so serious, and all I can do is laugh. "Kanan, before my dad died, I saw you guys all the time. I would have called you and not thought twice about it. Since the funeral, I've seen and talked to Walker and Brook pretty

regularly, but the rest of you, well, I know you have your own lives. I wasn't just going to call you and expect you to drop everything to come rescue me."

CHAPTER 3

KANAN

I WANT to argue with her and tell her that's not true, but I'd be lying. I haven't seen her in a while, and when I have seen her, I've made sure to not be alone with her. She's way too tempting, and I have no willpower when it comes to her. Yeah, I've thought about her every day—fuck, I've thought about that kiss every day—and I've kept tabs on her, but she doesn't know that. “Fuck,” I grunt, turning away from her. I can barely look at her, afraid she'll see the guilt on my face. If she knew what really happened the day her dad died, she would never have come running to me, but I know I can't turn her away. Not now.

“Where's your stuff?”

She points to her backpack on the floor. “There and I have a suitcase out front.”

I grab my jacket and tie, sling her backpack over my shoulder, and head for the door, ignoring her protests to try and stop me. I know she doesn't deserve this treatment, but until I can get my emotions under control, I don't trust myself to talk to her. She's practically jogging to keep up with my stride. I reach her suitcase and pick it up, but she moves in front of me. I almost knock into her, but I stop just in time, and her hands go to my chest.

“Where are we going? I need to find a place to stay.”

“You can stay with—” The man at the front, the one that called for me, interrupts, but he doesn't get the whole sentence out.

I fix him with a glare. “Don’t fuckin’ think of finishing that sentence, Mac.”

Mac’s face turns red, but he doesn’t stop. “What? She said she needs a place to stay. I’m just doing my civic duty.”

“Fuck off.” I glare at him.

Emerson’s hand is still on my chest. “I can check into a hotel.”

Fuckin’ Mac doesn’t know when to stop. “There’s no hotel in Whiskey Run. There is a B&B, but it’s probably full until tomorrow since the big wedding was tonight. You can stay—”

“Say it and you’ll be six feet under before morning, Mac.” My nostrils are flared, and I move toward him before he finally gets it. Mac holds both hands up and with a scared laugh says, “Got it, got it. She’s off limits.”

I nod. “Damn right she is. Spread the word too.”

I glare down at Emerson. I wasn’t prepared for this. Hell, nothing could have prepared me for this. I’m trying to convince myself I’m so protective of her because of the fact she’s Randall’s daughter, but I know there’s more to it. Looking into her big, trusting eyes, I want to be the man she turns to. I force myself to calm down. “You ready?”

She nods her head hesitantly. “Yeah.”

Great. I’ve probably scared the fuck out of her by now. I stop when we get outside and it’s just the two of us. “Look, I’m sorry for how I acted in there, Emerson. You know I would never take my anger out on you, right?”

She opens her mouth and then closes it again. She’s speechless, and it’s making me second-guess everything. I think I may prefer when she’s rambling than when she’s quiet like this. “Look, if you’re uncomfortable, I can find somewhere for you to stay tonight. Somewhere other than with me. Abby has some girlfriends, I can ask one of them.”

She purses her lips. “Who’s Abby?”

“Davis’ wife.”

Is that relief in her eyes? “Oh.”

I lean down so I can look at her straight on. “Emerson, talk to me. If you’re uncomfortable—”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m not uncomfortable.”

“Are you okay staying with me tonight and we’ll figure something else out tomorrow?”

She nods but looks unsure. “I don’t... I mean... I just...”

“Say it,” I tell her and then regret the gruffness immediately. “Talk to me, Emmy.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and lifts her chin at me. “I’ve already messed up your plans for tonight. If you’re supposed to be meeting up with someone, I’d rather find somewhere else to stay.”

I start walking to my truck. She’s worrying about things she shouldn’t be worrying about. No matter what I have planned, she would come first. I put her suitcase in the back of the truck, open the passenger door, slide her bag off my back, and put it on the floorboard. When I turn, she’s still standing where I left her.

I motion for her to come over, and she does, but she stops outside of my reach. “Kanan, you can’t just bark orders at me and expect me to listen to you. I just came here because I had nowhere else to go. If you have plans, I can call Walker and Brooklyn. They would let me stay with them.”

“I don’t have any plans.”

I gesture for her to get in, but she doesn’t budge.

Impatiently, I ask her, “What is it now?”

She looks at me uneasily. “Is anyone going to be mad that I’m going to your house?”

My first thought is her father, but I shake that thought from my head. “Who would be mad?”

She shrugs and is looking everywhere but at me. “I don’t know. Your girlfriend... or someone?”

“Emmy.” I say her name, wanting her to look at me, but she doesn’t. I repeat her name again. “Emerson.”

She rolls her eyes and finally looks at me. Fuck, she's beautiful. It's going to take every bit of self-control I have not to drown in the blue depths of her eyes. And fuck, keeping my hands off of her is going to be the hardest thing I've ever done. "There's no one. No one will be mad that you're staying with me."

She searches my face, and I wonder what she sees. Can she tell I'm attracted to her? Does she know that it kills me to know everything she's been going through and I had no idea? Does she know I would do anything for her and it's not just because of the guilt I hold on to every day? Finally she nods her head and climbs into the truck. I resist putting my hands on her waist to help her up.

When she's settled, I close the door and try to collect myself as I walk around to the driver's side.

We're both quiet as I pull around the compound and into the parking lot of the rehab center. It's all lit up, and Emerson is leaning up to look out the front window. "Where are we? What is this place?"

I might as well tell her all of it and get it out in the open. I pull into a parking spot that is close to the path that leads to the cabins and apartments. When I turn off the truck, I start to talk. "All the guys are here. I didn't know if you knew that or not, but I don't want you to be surprised or caught off guard. Everyone that was on that last mission with your dad is here now. Well, except Zach. He's still doing missions."

Her mouth falls open, and she looks at the rehab center sign. She shakes her head. "I don't understand. How did you all end up here?"

I shrug and try to explain it in the simplest terms. "Walker."

She scrunches up her nose. "Walker?"

I nod and look out at the property. "Walker did all this. And after two years of us throwing our lives away, Walker brought us all here. He's brought in therapists, specialists, everything he can do to help us get back on track."

She points with her thumb over her shoulder. “So you all live here?”

I start to nod and then stop. “Well, Davis moved into Abby’s house. Jason and Olivia live at the apartments. I have a cabin here.”

“Cabin?”

I nod. “Yeah, the cabin came with the job.”

She looks confused. “So you work here?”

I laugh. “Yeah, I take care of all the grounds for the rehab center and the compound.”

“Compound?”

I nod because I don’t know how else to explain it to her. “Yeah, the place we just left.”

She nods and looks out the window. She’s thinking, and I don’t want to interrupt her. When she turns back to me, she looks so sad, I wish I could pull her into my lap and hold her, but I know I can’t. “So are you guys okay? Are you getting better?”

There’s so much I could answer her with. I could tell her that Davis will never get his leg back, that my arm will always be mangled and sometimes be useless, or that Jason will never get his eyesight back. Elias will have to live with the scars on his face for the rest of his life, and we have no idea how Colter’s brain injury will affect his future, but I know that compared to her and what she’s lost, I can’t tell her any of those things. “Yeah, we’re okay. We’re doing better.”

She nods. “That’s good. My dad would want you to be okay.”

As soon as she says it, she’s climbing out of the truck, and I just sit here with what feels like a swift kick to my gut. She’s right. I know she’s right. Regardless of everything else, Randall would want us all to be okay.

CHAPTER 4

EMERSON

TWO YEARS HAVE GONE BY, and you would think it would get easier. And in a lot of ways it has, but then there are some days that the emotions are so overwhelming all you can manage to do is breathe to make it through.

As I get out of Kanan's truck, I try not to let myself get caught up in it all, but it's overwhelming, to say the least. I walk to the back of the truck and try to reach my suitcase, but even after going to my tiptoes a few times, I can't quite reach it. Kanan comes up beside me and grabs it and then points at a gravel path. "We're down that way."

I follow behind him and keep my head down, looking at the path as I go. When we get to the clearing, Kanan keeps walking, but I stumble to a halt. "Kanan."

He turns instantly as if he expects something bad to be happening to me, but I'm pointing at the pond. It's huge with a dock, and the moon showcases the mountains behind it. There are apartments to one side, and the cabins on the other give off a beautiful homey feel to it all. "Wow. This is where you live?"

He laughs. "Don't get too excited. I mean, the cabin is nice, but it's small. There's only one bedroom and one bathroom."

My stomach does a little flipflop. *There's only one bed.*

We move along the path, and he stops at the very last cabin. After standing to the side, he points to the steps. "This is it."

I walk up the steps, and his voice booms behind me. "It's unlocked. You can go on in."

“You leave it unlocked?”

He laughs. “This place is full of veterans. Trust me, you won’t be safer anywhere else.”

I push open the door and take it all in. It’s an open concept with the living room, kitchen, and dining room all in an open space. There’s a door off to the side, and I assume it’s the bedroom and bathroom. I walk across the living room to the back of the cabin and look out the window. “Oh my God!”

Kanan doesn’t ask me what I’m talking about because he knows when I press my hands to the floor-to-ceiling windows and look outside. “Kanan, this is amazing. It’s beautiful.”

He drops the suitcase to the side and comes to stand beside me. We both just stand here and look at the bright moon and the mountains. “This is a perfect place to write. I would sit out here all the time if I lived here.”

He flips on the back porch light. “There’s a couch, chairs, and a table on the deck. You can sit out here while you’re here.”

I’m hoping he skipped over what I confessed, but I should have known Kanan pays attention to everything. “What do you mean, write? What are you writing?”

I tilt my head to the side, hiding my face from him. “I write stories. I haven’t had any published or anything. It’s just something I enjoy doing.”

He moves closer to me. “What are your stories about?”

I’m still not looking at him. I can’t. “Love stories... romance.”

I see his reflection in the window, and he’s nodding his head. “If it’s something you like to do, you should do it. I’ve learned the last couple years that life’s too short to waste. Do what makes you happy, Emerson.”

I close my eyes and try to remember the last time I did something that makes me happy, but nothing comes to mind. I’m twenty-four years old, just got kicked out of school, I have no idea where my mom is or what she’s doing, my father was killed two years ago, and I have no car or place to call home.

“Right now, I don’t have the luxury of doing what makes me happy. No, right now I need to find a job and a place to live.”

Kanan puts his hand on my shoulder, and the comfort I feel under the weight of his hold is instant. I want to lean into him, but I don’t. “Emmy, I know it feels like your world is falling apart, but I’m here, and I’m going to help you.”

I turn and look up at him. “I’m not your responsibility, Kanan. I wasn’t thinking by coming here. You have so much you’re dealing with already, I don’t need to add to it—”

He cuts me off. “You’re not.”

I shrug. “Well, thank you for that. Really, it means a lot, but I’m going to stand on my own two feet. I’m going to find a job tomorrow and a place to live. I’ll be out of your hair.”

He opens his mouth and then shuts it. I wait for him to say something, but when he withdraws into himself, I walk away, putting some distance between us. “Do you care if I take a shower? I feel disgusting after riding on that bus for twenty-five hours.”

His jaw tightens, and I regret bringing up the bus again. He obviously has issues with the fact that I rode it all the way from Texas to here. He grabs my suitcase from where he left it and starts wheeling it toward the bedroom.

“You can have the bedroom.”

I’m following behind him and am shaking my head. “No, I’m not kicking you out of your bed, Kanan. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“You’re not sleeping on the couch,” he says.

I grab my suitcase from his hand and pull it toward me. “Well, I’m not kicking you out of your bed. If you tried sleeping on the couch, your feet would hang over the edge, and you’d be uncomfortable. That’s ridiculous. I’ll sleep out there,” I tell him as I point toward the living room.

I say it with finality, but Kanan just laughs. I think he’s as surprised as I am when the sound escapes from his mouth. We both stare at each other before he walks over to the door.

“You’ll sleep in here, Emmy.” He holds his hand up when I start to talk. “Trust me, I won’t be able to sleep in here, knowing you’re out there on the couch. That will make me uncomfortable.”

I want to argue with him. I really do, but I can’t. I brought my problems here, and it’s too late to do anything different. All I can do is get a job and get out of his way as quickly as possible. “Okay,” I mutter to him.

He must be expecting me to argue because he looks at me, confused. “Okay?”

I shrug. “It’s one night... tomorrow I’ll be gone.”

He grits his teeth, shakes his head, and then pulls the door closed behind him. I keep myself busy, opening my suitcase and getting some pajamas out. When I sit down on the edge of the bed, I take the time to look around the room. There’s no pictures on the wall, no trinkets on the dresser, nothing.

I spread my hand across the bed, feeling the softness under my palm. How many times have I thought about sleeping with Kanan? At least a hundred times. But in my dreams, he was always here with me. I would be in his bed with his arms wrapped around me, and for the first time, I wouldn’t feel completely alone anymore.

I lean over and press my nose into the pillow, inhaling deeply. The scent of Kanan fills my nostrils, and I wish I could wrap myself in it. I won’t have him next to me, and this will probably be the closest I’ll ever get to having my dreams come true. Somehow, it’s going to have to be enough.

CHAPTER 5

KANAN

SHE'S TAKING a shower in the very next room. No matter how busy I try to keep myself, that's all I can think about. If I close my eyes, I can imagine the water sliding down her body, the relief she feels from the hot spray.

I grit my teeth and shake my head, trying to get the thoughts out of my head. When I've straightened everything I can straighten, I sit at the table and unconsciously rub at the muscles on my arm. *You can handle this, Kanan. Just do the right thing.*

I jump off the chair and go in search of an extra sheet, blanket, and pillow. I'm making up the couch when the bedroom door opens. *Don't look. Don't you fucking look.*

I keep working on the couch and ask her, "Feel better?"

"Yes." She moans. "I feel so much better."

No matter how hard I try to not look, I have no choice. My eyes are drawn to her, but as soon as I see her, every muscle in my body constricts. She doesn't realize the shift in the room because she moves over to the chair next to the couch I've now fallen in. She pulls her legs up under her, and all I can do is look at her.

She's going on about how good the shower felt, and it's not helping matters. I interrupt her. "You have anything else to wear?"

She looks down at her body, and I do the same. She has on short shorts and a tank top. Everything is covered. Heck, she would show less in a bathing suit, but I have no trouble

imagining what she looks like under her clothes. When I first met Emerson, she was fifteen and a mission for me. I was supposed to save her. Normally, I never see the target again, but this was different.

I worked with her dad and got to know her. She grew up, and when she turned eighteen, it's like something clicked inside me. I no longer saw her as the young girl I saved. She became a woman that I couldn't keep my eyes or thoughts off of. But she's one of my best friends' daughters. She was off limits. I kept my distance from her anytime I've seen her through the years, but it hasn't stopped me from thinking about her. All the times her dad talked about her, showed us pictures of her, and now here she is in my house, half-naked.

She's looking at me with her mouth hanging open, but before she can hide it, I can see the hurt on her face. I get up from the couch and walk through the house into the bedroom. I jerk one of my T-shirts out of the closet, and with it clenched in my fist, I make my way back to her.

“Here. Put this on.”

She pulls the shirt from my hand and stands up. The tank top does nothing to hide her ample breasts or thick waist. I shouldn't be looking, but all I can do is stand here, staring at her, challenging her with a look.

She puts the shirt over her head and pulls it down her body and glares at me. “Satisfied?”

I take a few steps back from her and just grunt because I'm anything but satisfied. I count to ten and then go into the kitchen and make her a sandwich.

When I walk back into the living room, she's standing with her back to me, looking at the bookshelf. I stop mid-stride. Nope, this is not any better. I didn't even pay attention to the shirt I gave her, but seeing my name on her back is like a shock to my system. She looks good wearing my name. The green shirt covers her, but the way the material stretches over her ass takes my breath away. “Here.”

She turns to look at me, and when she sees the sandwich, she smiles. “Oh God, Kanan. Thank you, I’m starving.”

I pull out the chair at the table for her and gesture for her to sit down. When she does, I shove her toward the table and then sit down next to her. The thought of her starving pisses me off, and so I sit here, glaring at her.

She lifts the sandwich to her mouth, but with one glance at me, she stops. “Uh, are you going to eat anything?”

“No,” I answer, shaking my head and then nod toward her plate. “Eat.”

She lifts the sandwich again, and all I can do is watch her. When she stops again, I lean toward her. “Emerson, eat your food.”

She rolls her eyes. “I can’t eat if you’re staring at me.”

I avert my eyes, but I don’t want to. There’s a need inside me to see her eat and know she’s nourished. I’m going crazy, that’s all I can think. I’ve never felt an urge like this, but I can’t stifle it. “All right, I’m not watching. Can you eat now?”

From my peripheral vision, I see her lift the sandwich and take a bite. Relief settles over me.

I keep my eyes averted while she eats some more. When she’s eaten half the sandwich, she sets it on her plate. I get up to grab her a drink, chips, and fruit from the kitchen. I set it all down in front of her and then remember the cookies in the cupboard. I go grab those and then set them down in front of her too.

She’s looking at me wide-eyed. “What are you doing? What is this?”

“I want you to eat.”

She laughs. “I am eating, but if I eat all this, I’ll gain ten pounds.”

“Can we talk?”

She grabs a napkin from the table, wipes her mouth, and sets it down. “Yes.”

I push the fruit toward her. “You can eat. I’ll talk.”

She picks up a strawberry and bites off the end of it. I avert my eyes from her lips. “Okay, so house rules.”

She stops chewing, starts again, and then swallows. “House rules? You want to make house rules when I’m only going to be here for tonight?”

I don’t want her to leave. That’s the first thing that comes to my mind. I run my hand across my scruffy chin. Ignoring her comment, I continue, “So house rules. You can’t leave.”

Her jaw drops, and then I realize how that sounded. “I mean, of course you can leave. I’m not holding you as a prisoner or anything, but I mean, no running. If you don’t want to live here, okay. We’ll work it out, but I need to know you’re safe.”

She frowns at me, but she doesn’t disagree, so I keep going. “You eat when you’re hungry.”

She bursts out a laugh. “You’re going to make me eat.”

I wave my hand toward her. “I don’t want you to be hungry. If you want something to eat, you eat. If you want something I don’t have, tell me and I’ll get it. But you don’t go hungry.”

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “I really don’t think you have to worry about me eating, Kanan. Have you looked at me? I eat.”

“Yeah, and you’re perfect.”

She starts to stutter, and I know I’m saying too much. I push my chair back and walk away from the table. “So no running, and you eat.”

She looks confused. “So I can’t just run away, and you want me to eat.”

I nod.

She shrugs. “Sure, okay. Sounds easy enough.”

I move to the couch and sit down. “I need to sleep.” I know I sound like an asshole, but I need to put some distance between us. She grabs the leftover food and carries it to the kitchen. I watch with hooded eyes as she goes back and forth between

the table and the kitchen, putting all the uneaten food away. I shouldn't be thinking the things I'm thinking, and I clench my eyes shut and try to get the image of her, the one burned in my brain, out.

She walks to the bedroom. "Well, good night, Kanan. Thank you again, and I promise I'll be out of here soon."

I don't answer her. I'm holding my breath and don't let it out until she shuts the bedroom door. I sit up and slide my shoes and socks off. I hate the idea of Emerson seeing my arm, but there's no way I'll be able to sleep with long sleeves on, so I undo the button-up and pull it off. When I get to my T-shirt, I leave it on. After tugging off my pants, I force myself to lie back and try to clear my mind, but it's fuckin' impossible. She's lying in my bed, her face is on my pillow, and I wonder if I go in there tomorrow if her scent will be left on my bed. My cock hardens, and I reach down, wrapping my hand around my girth. The need to come is overwhelming, but I'm not going to do anything about it now. I can't.

I release my hold on my cock and cross my arms over my chest. I burrow into the lumpy couch and know that no matter how hard I try, I'm not going to be going to sleep anytime soon. No, because all I'm going to be thinking about is a curvy Emerson in my bed and how badly I wish I was in there with her.

CHAPTER 6

EMERSON

I'M EXHAUSTED, and I thought I'd be able to go to sleep easily. I thought as soon as my head hit the pillow, I would be out of it, but that's not the case. For the first hour, I tossed and turned. The comfort I thought I'd get from lying in Kanan's bed and being surrounded by the smell of him excited me more than relaxed me. The second hour, all I can think about is how my life has gone to hell and I'm not sure how I'm going to fix it. My mom is gone, and I have no idea where she is. I have five hundred dollars to my name, and I have no car and no home. I've pretty much pushed myself onto Kanan, and I know I've put him in a bad place.

I roll over, flip the pillow over, and then punch it with my fist and lie back down again. But no matter how many times I turn or flip the pillow, I can't get comfortable.

I give up and drag myself out of the bed. After digging my journal out of my backpack, I hold my breath as I open the bedroom door, hoping it doesn't make any noise. I finally release the breath I'm holding and tiptoe out of the bedroom, past the couch and then make my way to the backdoor. I slide it open and step out into the night, pulling the door closed behind me.

I go past the couch and chairs and instead sit down on the steps that lead into the back yard. I set the journal down on the step and then wrap my arms around my knees.

The moon is still bright, and as I look up at the sky, emotion overwhelms me, and the tears start to fall. I've tried to be strong. I haven't cried since my dad's funeral, but it feels that

everything is piling on top of me, and I can't seem to hold it back anymore.

I don't try to stop the tears and instead let them fall down my cheeks.

When I hear the back door open, I frantically start to wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. I sniffle and try to contain myself as Kanan stands behind me.

I can just imagine what he's thinking. He's probably wishing I'd gone somewhere else and that I'm already more trouble than I'm worth. I sniff again and try to sound calm. "Hey, Kanan, I'm sorry for waking you up. I couldn't sleep."

He doesn't say anything, and I hang my head between my shoulders. I expect him to go inside, but he surprises me when he comes to sit behind me. His legs are on each side of me, my back pressed to his front. His arms come around me, and he holds me to him. I'm tense and stiff against him, but he whispers in my ear, "Let it out, honey. I got you."

I slowly lean back against him, and he tightens his hold on me. His arms and legs are bare, and he's completely wrapped around me. My heart starts to race, and I know it's going to happen. I'm going to start crying again. And this time when it starts, there's no stopping it. I cry for what seems like forever, but Kanan doesn't let me go. He keeps a hold of me, running a hand through my hair and tries to soothe me by telling me I'm okay and he's got me.

Now that I've started, I can't stop.

"Emmy, baby, I know I said I got you.... Fuck." He blows out a breath. "Come here."

When I don't move, he tries to pull me up, and I know it's hurting his arm, so I start to stand up, but I don't get far. He slides to where I was sitting and then pulls me to his lap. He turns me until we're chest to chest and holds me to him.

With my face against his neck, he holds on to me. "I know I said for you to let it out, but you're breaking my heart here, Emmy."

He keeps soothing me by stroking my hair and whispering softly to me as I try to calm myself down. When I lift my head, I know I'm a blubbering mess. "I'm sorry. I don't know ___"

He cuts me off and tips my chin up with his hand. "Don't apologize. You've been dealing with a lot, and I'm sorry I haven't been there for you."

"It's not your place. I'm not your responsibility."

He frowns as if he hates what I'm saying. "It is my place. I'm sorry that I didn't keep better tabs on you. I should have... I wanted to."

He wanted to? I want to ask him about it but I don't. I have my hands on his shoulders, and we're so close, all I'd have to do is lean in a few inches, and I could be kissing him, but instead I lean back. "I'm going to get up. I know I'm killing your legs."

His hands tighten around my waist for just a second, but then he releases me. I move off his lap, and this time, I sit next to him instead of in front of him. "I can't believe I fell apart like that. I don't normally cry, but it all just became too much, I guess." I bring my knees up and wrap my arms around them. "That's one thing: My dad wasn't around a lot, but when he was, I didn't have to worry about anything. He took care of everything."

Kanan is holding his injured arm against his chest as if he's hiding it from me. The other one is resting on his leg. "Your dad loved you, Emerson. He loved you more than anything. The job we had then, we didn't have a lot of downtime, and I know it's not fair to you, but he saved so many lives."

I nod my head. "Oh I know how important his job was. I never blamed him for being gone, and I know he loved me the best way he knew how. I just wish he was still here." I roll my eyes. "Geez, one second I'm trying to convince you I'm an adult and then the next I'm acting like a child."

He reaches over and puts his hand on my knee. "No, you're not. You're not acting like a child."

My whole body flushes from the contact, and when I turn to look at him, he pulls away and turns to look out into the night.

“Kanan...”

“Yeah?” he answers, still without looking at me.

I turn my body, pulling my leg up between us so I can look at him head on. “Will you let me look at your arm?”

He tenses next to me and shakes his head. “I was worried when you came out here. I’m sorry, I should have taken the time to put my shirt back on.”

“I want to see it.”

He finally looks at me. “Why?”

I shrug. “Because it’s a part of you, Kanan. And you’re one of the best men I’ve ever known—”

He grunts, and if possible, he tenses even more. “I’m not a good man, Emerson. Trust me when I tell you I’m not.”

Because I can’t hold back, I wrap my hand around his arm that is not injured. “I know you are. I wouldn’t have ridden a bus across the US if you were a bad man.” I take in a breath and then let it out slowly. “Let me see your arm, Kanan.”

His frown deepens. “It’s not pretty, Em.”

I love the way he shortens my name. I hold my hand out to him and wait for him to give me his.

He lifts his shoulders and lets them drop. “I warned you.”

He brings his arm up from his side and then places his hand in mine. Instead of looking at it, I look into his eyes. “Are you okay with this?”

He doesn’t even blink. “Yeah, I trust you.”

I lean into him and look at his arm. With my other hand, I run my fingertips along the scars and mangled skin. It takes everything I have not to start crying again. I turn his arm over and do the same to the other side. Most of it is around his wrist and lower arm, but on the underside, there’s a trail that leads up to his shoulder. I keep lightly tracing the skin, and it’s then

when he starts to loosen up a little. I feel his body lean into mine, and his hand is no longer held in a tight fist. I keep tracing his skin, and when I get to the top of his arm, I touch the hem of his shirt.

“Do you have scars under your shirt too?”

He lets out a little pant as if he’s been holding his breath and nods.

I pull on his shirt sleeve. “Let me see.”

He points to his arm. “It’s ugly. Why are you doing this to yourself? I don’t understand why this is important to you.”

I’ve thought about this for a long time, and I’m hoping it doesn’t sound silly. I lift my shoulders. “I don’t know how to explain it. I think about you all the time, Kanan. I know I shouldn’t, but I think my dad is right—at least for me. We do have an unbreakable bond, and ever since the accident, I’ve worried about you. I worried if you’d be okay or not. I’ve worried if you’d eventually lose your arm or if you’d be in pain for the rest of your life. I’ve worried if you were able to move on. I guess just seeing it, knowing you’re okay, will give me some kind of relief.”

He’s just staring at me, and I force myself to look away. “I’m sorry. It sounds dumb, doesn’t it?”

His voice is gruff and filled with emotion. “You’ve been worried about me?”

I gasp in surprise. “You didn’t know?”

He shakes his head. “How would I know?”

I’m not going to lie to him, so I try to get the conversation back on course. “Will you show me or not? If it makes you uncomfortable...”

I let my voice trail off. I told him what I wanted—what I needed. Now what he does with it is up to him.

CHAPTER 7

KANAN

IT KILLS me knowing she's worried about me. I've tried to keep my distance from her since that kiss. I kept tabs on her, but I did it from a distance because I didn't trust myself being near her. I had fought the attraction I had for her, knowing she was off limits, but that kiss tested me.

I had already let Randall down. No one has put it together that I'm the reason he died. But I did, and I live with that knowledge every day. And then I kiss his daughter at his funeral. I'm probably the worst kind of human.

She's looking at me, waiting for me to give her what she wants.

I hate showing my scars to anyone, but if it helps her, I'll show her. Heck, she doesn't know it, but I'd do anything for her. I lift the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head. With it gripped tightly in my hand, I turn so she can look at me.

Her fingers trace over the mangled skin of my arm and up to my shoulder. She gasps when she gets to the bullet wound that was just inches from my heart. "Kanan."

I can't look at her. "It's fine, Emerson. I survived."

She circles the wound with her finger, and I hate the way her voice is thick with emotion. "But you almost didn't, did you? A few inches and you would be gone too."

I don't disagree with her. "It should have been me that day."

Her intake of breath is audible in the still night. "How can you say that?"

I finally meet her eyes. “It’s true. I should have died that day. Maybe then, your dad would still be here.”

She’s shaking her head side to side before I even get it all out. “That’s not true, Kanan.”

There’s true pain reflected on her face, and I regret my words because I know I’m the reason she’s looking so distraught. I reach up and cup her cheek in my hand. “Please don’t cry. I can’t handle any more, and I won’t be the reason you’re sad. I don’t deserve your tears, Em.”

Her mouth falls open, and she snaps it shut. She’s clearly frustrated with me. “How can you say that? To me, of all people? All those years ago, you saved my life, Kanan. You deserve my everything.”

I knew she felt like she owed me. I’m sure that’s one of the reasons she kissed me when she did. She was upset about losing her dad, and I was there for her. It obviously clouded her judgment.

“Emerson, there’s things you don’t know about me and if you did, you wouldn’t think the same of me.”

She lifts her chin at me. “Try me. Tell me and then you’ll know. You won’t wonder. Tell me what you did that was so bad, and then you’ll know exactly what I’m thinking.”

I open my mouth. How many times have I wanted to talk about this with her? Since I got to the rehab center, I started talking to the therapist here. She knows I’m the reason Randall died. She doesn’t agree that it was my fault, but there’s no swaying my thinking on that. But at least someone knows now, and it’s freed some of the weight from my shoulders. But sitting here, looking at Emerson and seeing the trust in her eyes is like I’m buried under the guilt all over again. If it wasn’t for me, she would still have her father here. He would be alive. I want to tell her. I’ve held on to this for too long, but seeing the way she’s looking at me, I know I can’t.

I shake my head and look away from her.

The sigh she lets out is soft and defeated, but it doesn’t stop her from her exploration. Her hands trail along my upper body

and then linger when they come across one of my scars. My body tenses under her touch, but I don't have it in me to stop her. I sit and let her touch me until I feel that I'm going crazy.

Her voice is softer now. "Did all these scars come from that day?"

I shrug. "Most of them. I may have had a few before then, but most of my scars are from that day."

She leans into me, and having her curves pressed against me is too much. Her breath is like a breeze across my chest when she starts to talk. "I know you think you're some kind of bad man, Kanan, but you're not. You're one of the best men I've ever known. And yes, I know that you, Dad, and the others have had to do things that could be considered morally gray, but there's not a doubt in my mind that anything you did, you did with love and compassion. That's just who you are."

I hold in the sigh. She thinks I'm living with regrets of things I've done, but it's not like that. Yes, we've had to do a lot of questionable things, but I always knew it was my purpose. Just like bringing her home all those years ago. I had to kill to get her out of there, but I don't regret a single death that came from my hands because she survived. I don't know what to say to her, so I say nothing. I know if I tell her about her dad, she'd leave. It would kill me losing her but also because I know she has nowhere to go. I can't tell her the truth. Not yet. When she's settled, then I'll tell her.

She turns her head, and I wait for her to speak, but I'm surprised when I feel her lips touch my chest. I suck in a breath, but she doesn't stop. She moves and presses her lips to the bullet wound right next to my heart. I know the kiss is meant to soothe me, but it doesn't. I tense next to her and force myself to move away. "Emerson..."

I start, but when I look at her and see her wide eyes staring back at me, I stop. How do I explain to her that I want her lips on me more than anything else in this world but I can't? I'd be betraying my friend but also, she deserves more than anything I can offer.

She looks down at her hands that are held tightly together in her lap. “I’m sorry, Kanan. I told you I wasn’t here to throw myself at you, and the first thing I do is try to kiss you again. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking... it won’t happen again.”

I clear my throat. I need to get up and go inside, but if I get up right now, she’s going to know how I react to having her lips on me. “Tomorrow, I’ll take you back to school.”

Her mouth drops. “What? I’m not going back to school.”

“It’s your last year, Em. You need to finish.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and looks out into the night. I pull my T-shirt back over my head and down my torso. She waits until I’m done before she starts talking. “I can take my last few classes online. I’m not going back to Texas. I understand if you don’t want me here, but I have no one, Kanan. The only people I have are you guys... my dad’s family. And you’re all here.”

I jam my hand through my hair. “I can pay for you to finish school.”

She’s shaking her head and looking out into the dark night. “I’m not going back to school until I can pay for it, and when I do, I’ll finish online. I didn’t come here for anyone to give me anything. I can earn my way.”

She gets that from her dad. He was the exact same way, and I respect it. “Fine. Tomorrow, we go find you a job.”

She nods. “And a place to stay.”

The thought of her living in Whiskey Run, away from me, forms knots in my stomach, but I know it’s the best thing for her, so I agree. “And a place to stay.”

She sighs and rests her chin on her raised knee. I want to hold her and tell her everything is going to be okay, but I’m barely resisting her as it is. I stand up and walk to the door I left open when I came out. “You going to be okay out here by yourself?”

She laughs, but it doesn’t sound happy at all. “Yeah, I’m fine, Kanan.”

I turn to leave, but before I go inside, I remind her, “No running, Em.”

She doesn't look at me; she just nods her head. “I'm not the one running.”

I clench my fists at my sides. I could deny it, but she's right. I am running, but for the first time in a long time, I'm wondering if maybe I need to stop.

CHAPTER 8

EMERSON

HE'S GONE. I got up this morning and put on my running clothes, and when I came out to the living room, all evidence that he slept on the couch was gone, and he's nowhere to be found. I go into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water when I see the note.

Emerson, I had to go into work for a bit. Call me if you need me. Don't leave. K

I roll my eyes because he's still trying to tell me what to do. More determined than before, I pull on my sneakers and make my way to the front porch. I take a few minutes to stretch and look around the big pond as I do.

Kanan is on the other side, working on the dock. I lean against the railing to watch him, and even from a distance I can see he's rubbing his arm. He did that a lot last night, and it kills me to think that he's living in pain every day.

I walk slowly off the porch, stretch some more when I get to the ground, and then start walking to warm up. I debate whether I'm going to say anything to Kanan when I pass, but I find that I'm not going to have much of a choice.

I know the first second he lays eyes on me. It's like my body is completely attuned to him because I feel at least ten degrees hotter and flushed. Heck, I haven't even started running yet, so I know it's just a pure reaction to him.

When I get around to the other side of the pond, Kanan is walking up the dock with a fierce look on his face. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Surprised, I'm taken aback for all of two seconds before my temper gets flared. I put my hand on my hip and jut my chin at him. It would be so much easier if he wasn't so handsome. "What? You said no running, but I didn't think you meant that literally. I thought it was more of a metaphorical order."

He's still coming at me, and he doesn't stop until we're toe to toe. I practically have to suck in air as he trails his eyes down my body and back up again. I bite onto my lower lip, and I swear he gets even madder. What the hell is his deal?

He's gritting his teeth, and I don't even know how he's forming words. "Go inside, Emerson."

I cross my arms over my chest. He glances down and back up again. His once blue eyes are now black. "Look at you."

He doesn't say it like a compliment, but I refuse to back down. I don't know why he's got a problem with the way I look, but he obviously does. I've never let what a man thought about me or my body stop me in the past, and I'm not going to now. Instead of rising to the bait, I push past him to walk out onto the dock. It's obvious what he's been doing. There's plenty of decayed and rotten wood on the dock, and he's taking up the old to replace it with the new. I drop down to my knees, pick up the hammer he'd dropped, and start extracting nails from the wood.

"Emerson." He grunts at me.

At this point, I'm holding back tears. I'm trying to remain neutral and act as if I don't care what he thinks about me, but it's the furthest thing from the truth. Obviously because I'm plus size he thinks I need to cover my body, and maybe I'm being ridiculous, but if I give in now, he'll think he can tell me how to dress all the time. I'm not going to hide my body just because he doesn't like it.

"Emerson," he says again.

I drop back on my haunches and gesture to the wood. "Kanan."

He drops down beside me. "Go get dressed."

I continue to glare at him. "I am dressed."

He tries to take the hammer from me, but I'm too fast and pull it from his reach. "Forget it. I'm not going in, I'm not changing my clothes. I am going to stay here and earn my keep, even if it was only for one night."

With more force than necessary, I pry out another nail with a huff. "Are we taking out these nine boards?" I point at the last of the decayed boards.

He just stares at me with his nostrils flared, but I'm not going to let his glare stop me. "Kanan, I'm helping. These nine boards?" I ask him with a sweep of my arm.

He nods, and I get to work pulling the nails. Kanan picks up the decayed boards, and since we're working together, it takes no time to get the old boards out.

I stand up as he picks up the last board, and as I'm walking up to the pile of new boards, I see Walker walking down the path. The smile comes easily, and I jog over to him as he catches me in his arms. My dad loved Walker—heck, everyone does—and ever since my dad died, Walker and his wife Brooklyn have made a point to check in on me, randomly stopping by at school to see me. When he releases me, he's smiling. "Well, look at you. I knew you'd eventually come to your senses and come to Whiskey Run."

Kanan is gruff as he comes to stop next to me. "You knew she was coming?"

He clears his throat and looks away, telling me he's not about to tell me the whole truth. "I figured eventually she'd show up here."

Kanan is standing with his arms over his chest, and he's obviously not happy. "Did you know she was getting kicked out of school?"

Walker's surprise is evident by the shocked look on his face. "Kicked out?"

I shrug my shoulders. "It's a long story, but..." I look at Kanan, and he nods his head, so I continue. "Well, uh, I'm pretty sure my mom has taken my trust money that Dad left me. That's where my school payments were coming from, and

it seems the account is empty.” I can feel my face heat as I ramble on, but I try my best to hold my head high because I know none of this is my fault.

Walker is angry. That much is obvious by the way his jaw tightens. “I’ll look into it.”

I could argue with him, but I know better. All I do is nod my head.

Satisfied, he nods. “Okay, so what do you need until we get that worked out? I can fly you back to school...”

I don’t let him finish. I know most people don’t cut off Walker, but I’m not most people. He has a soft spot for me, and in this case, I’m going to take advantage of it. “I’m not going back to school. I told him...”—I point at Kanan, who’s still standing next to me with his arms crossed over his chest looking all angry—“that I can finish online when I get everything sorted out.”

Walker starts to talk, and I hold my hand up. “I’m not going to let you pay. I want to earn my keep.”

He shifts to his other foot. “Okay, so how about a job then? You can work here. I saw you working on the dock. You want to do something outside? Or I can probably find you an office job.” I cringe, and he laughs. “Okay, outside it is. Well, Kanan has been looking for another landscaper. It’s hard work, but...”

Kanan is shaking his head. “She can’t work for me, Walker. It’s hard work.”

My mouth falls open. Is he kidding me right now? Does he think I’ve never worked hard before? I’ve had to work for everything I have. I glare at him and then look at Walker. “Even though Kanan thinks I’m lazy, he is right. I can’t work for him. I don’t have a car to get me back and forth, so I’m going to have to find a place to work close to where I live.”

I try to appear confident even though I’m feeling anything but. I have no idea where I’m going to live, I don’t have a car, and I’m not sure what I’m going to do for work, but I am sure I can survive this.

The longer Walker stares at me, I realize he sees right through my confidence. “You’ll work here. You’ll stay here.” He’s nodding his head as if he’s come to some kind of conclusion. “The women’s apartments are full, but I do know that Colter has a two-bedroom.”

I’m shaking my head. “It’s fine. Really, I can find work in town.”

Walker holds his hands up. “Look, I know you don’t want a handout, and I’m not offering you one, but I can’t just put you out, Emerson. Let me do this for you. I have plenty you can do around here. And like I said, Colter has two bedrooms. Trust me, that man would do good to have some company.”

I pause, and then it’s like all the fight goes out of me. I know he’s right. Working here and living here would be the easiest thing, but I can still earn my keep. “If I do this, I’m going to work, Walker. I’m not going to just sit on my butt and do nothing.”

Walker claps his hands together and nods. “Sure, I completely understand.”

“She can stay with me... she can work for me.”

Walker and I both turn to Kanan, and my mouth drops. He’s staring at me, daring me to argue but I’m too stunned to do anything but stare at him. “You’re staying with me, Emerson. You’ll work for me.”

I don’t know what to say to him so I just stand here, unsure of what to do.

“Emerson,” Walker says.

I whip my head around to look at him, and his gaze is filled with curiosity. “Yeah?”

“What do you say? You okay working for Kanan and living at his cabin?”

I look at Kanan, and he nods his head. Before I can talk myself out of it, I’m nodding my head and murmuring, “Yeah.”

“Great. Great. I’ll feel so much better having you close, and I know Brooklyn is going to be thrilled to have you here.”

I'm nodding my head, and I can tell the way Walker and Kanan are exchanging looks, they have something to talk about. I point over to the docks. "I'm going to get to work. Thanks again, Walker."

He nods, and I walk away, avoiding Kanan's gaze as I go.

CHAPTER 9

KANAN

I HAVE to drag my eyes off Emerson when she walks away. I cross my arms over my chest and look down at the ground between Walker and me. Looking him in the eye is not something I can do right now. There's no doubt he'll see the guilt and betrayal that I just can't hide from him.

"Kanan."

Fuck. "Yeah?" I say as I look at him guardedly.

"Ask me."

It's not a question, it's a command, but I have no idea what he means by it. "Ask you what?"

"Ask me how I knew she would be coming to Whiskey Run eventually."

I uncurl my arms from around me and let them fall to my sides. "How did you know Emerson would be coming to Whiskey Run?"

He smirks and takes a step toward me. He drops his voice so there's no way Emerson can hear us. "I knew she would come here because she has called me every week for the last two years."

My heart starts to race, and my whole body feels hot. The thought of Emerson calling Walker to talk bothers me. I don't want to try to analyze why it bothers me so much, but it does. My jaw is pulled so tight I practically grunt out my response. "Why has she called you for the last two years?"

He laughs and shakes his head. “One reason and one reason only. She called every week to check on you and to see how you were doing.”

I shrug. “We’re friends, and of course—”

He cuts me off before I can get it all out. “Bullshit. That’s bullshit, Kanan, and you know it. You may have started off as friends, but I see the way you two look at each other. I know how protective you are of her. There’s more to it than friendship.”

I suck in a breath and then another. It’s like I can’t get enough oxygen into my lungs. “Nothing... I mean nothing has happened between us. I would never...” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I would never betray Randall—”

As soon as I say his name, Walker tenses up. Randall is still hard for any of us to talk about. Losing him changed everything, and it sucks because I know we’ll never get over it. Especially me. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to get past it.

Walker looks angry. “Come with me.”

He doesn’t wait for me to respond; he starts walking down the path, and I don’t have any choice but to follow him.

When he stops, he rips into me. “You forget that I knew Randall too. Probably better than you. And the one thing I have zero doubts about are how he felt about you and how he felt about this daughter. You know he loved you like his son. You may have been closer to his age, but that doesn’t change how he felt. And he would want Emerson with someone that would love her and protect her.”

I’m shaking my head. “Love... I don’t...”

He grunts, and he practically spits out the words. “Don’t even try to lie about it. Yes, you love her. You’ve loved her since she was fifteen and you saved her, Kanan. I think it’s a different kind of love now, and you can deny it all you want, but it’s obvious by the way you look at her. The way you stuck by her side at the funeral. It’s obvious to everyone but you.”

Fuck, all this time I thought I hid it well. And I don’t even know what to make of the fact that she has been checking on

me with Walker. But none of that matters. “Walker, listen, I know you want her close, and you want to know she’s okay. We all have guilt about Randall... me more than anyone, but...”

I let my voice trail off, and when Walker starts to talk again, it’s like the anger has left him. I sort of wish it was anger instead of the pitying tone he’s giving me now. “What really happened that day, Kanan? Tell me what happened. You were there, and you’ve hinted about the guilt you feel... let it go. Talk to me.”

I open my mouth and then close it. I can’t talk to him about this. I just can’t. I shake my head, and I know he sees the struggle on my face because he doesn’t ask again.

I point a thumb over my shoulder. “I need to get back to work.”

He nods. “Sure, yeah. But before you go, I need you to know that you’re right. We all have guilt about that day. I sent all of you on that mission... and Randall didn’t come back. That’s something I have to live with every day. But I’m also not going to let it stop me from living. Fuck, Kanan, if anything, I have to make sure I live my life to the fullest. You do too. Randall wouldn’t expect any fuckin’ less.”

I know he’s right. Everything he’s saying is true, and I can tell myself the same thing over and over, but I can’t make myself do it. “You’re right. I know you are.”

At least temporarily satisfied, he nods his head. “Why are you doing the dock? You have employees, you know that, right? You’re supposed to manage them.” He points to my arm that’s covered in my sleeve. “You don’t have anything to prove.”

I shrug. “I needed to do some manual labor today.”

He nods in understanding. “Okay. Get back to work.”

I turn on my heel and make my way to where Emerson is working on replacing the boards on the dock. I’m pissed off and in a bad mood, and seeing her work in clothes that barely cover her body is not helping matters.

She raises up when I get close. “You okay?”

I grunt and nod my head. “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s finish this, and then we need to talk.”

She puts her hand on her hip. “Talk?”

I nod. “Yeah, talk. If you’re going to live with me and work for me, we need to have some ground rules.”

“Ground rules?” she asks, and she doesn’t look happy.

I nod. “Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

She huffs and gestures to the dock. “Can I finish now?”

I nod, and when she walks away, my eyes go straight to her ass. The pants she’s wearing leave nothing to the imagination, and my dick comes to life. Fuck me, I’m not going to be able to survive this.

We work side by side, and I do my best to keep my head down and my eyes off her. When I nail in the last board, she’s looking at the finished project with pride on her face. “Wow, it looks great.”

Gruffly, I stand up beside her and inspect it. “You did a good job.”

“Thanks. We make a great team.” She lifts her elbow and hits me in the side playfully.

I turn to look at her. “Now we need to talk.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, and doing so pushes her cleavage up to the opening of her sports bra. *Don’t look, don’t look*, I tell myself, and I have to move to put some distance between us. “I’m going to clean this up. I’ll meet you at the house, and we’ll talk there.”

“Geez, Kanan, you’re making this ‘talk’ sound really bad or something. I promise you it’s going to be fine. I’m a hard worker. I’m punctual. I give everything a hundred percent.”

I’m nodding my head. I already know everything she just said, and honestly, she works harder than some of the men I’ve already hired, but that’s not what this is about. “I know all that. We’re going to talk about boundaries... and clothes.”

She scrunches her nose up in distaste. “Is there a uniform?”

I shake my head and pick up my tool bag. “No. Go ahead, I’ll meet you at the house. And change clothes while you’re at it.”

She looks down at her body and then back up at me. “Change clothes?”

I nod. “Yes, change clothes. You can’t walk around here like that, Emerson.”

She laughs, but I see the hurt on her face. “How exactly am I supposed to dress?”

I shrug, forcing my eyes off her. “I don’t know. But you need to cover up. I do know that.”

She purses her lips together. “I’m sorry. You want me to cover up?”

I’m barely hanging on here. “Yes, you can’t walk around here like that.”

She juts her chin at me, and her eyes are sparking mad. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I hadn’t planned on walking around here. I’m going for a jog.”

She turns and starts jogging away. I shouldn’t watch, but I do, and no matter how much I know I shouldn’t be looking at her, nothing could make me take my eyes off her right now. Fuck, I’m in so much trouble.

CHAPTER 10

EMERSON

THE NERVE OF HIM...

I'm jogging way faster than I'm used to, but I guess being pissed off gives you an adrenaline rush. I'm into my third mile before I start to calm down. I'm drenched in sweat, and I stop running to try and catch my breath.

I don't know why I'm so bothered by this, but I am. It's not like it's the first time a man has been disgusted by my body, and I'm sure it won't be the last. But to hear Kanan tell me I needed to cover up almost broke me. I never expected him to treat me like that.

As I round the path and Kanan's cabin comes into view, I see him sitting on the porch, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, and instantly I feel guilty. No matter how he feels about me, he's still willing to help me. He could have told Walker no, that I couldn't work for him, and he could have had me go somewhere else to stay. But he didn't.

By the time I get to the cabin, the anger is gone. In its place is a world of hurt, but that's not Kanan's fault. He can't help the way he feels.

When I get to the bottom step, he lifts his head to look at me. Before he can say anything, I start to talk. "I'm sorry for blowing up. You're going out of your way to help me, and I'm acting shitty. I mean, you literally just gave me a job and I went for a run. That's not me. I apologize. If you can give me ten minutes, I'll shower, get dressed, and be ready to do whatever you need me to do."

I start to walk up the stairs, and he stands up and moves to the side to let me pass. He follows me inside, but I don't stop. With my head down, I keep walking. I'm almost to the bedroom when he stops me. "Wait, Emerson, we need to talk."

Shoot, that's right. I pull out the dining room chair and sit on the edge of it. "Right, you said that. Go ahead."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "What's going on with you?"

I lift my chin, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice and off my face. "What are you talking about?"

He comes over and pulls the chair out next to me, moves it around, and sits down so we're facing each other. I get a scent of his manly smell and try not to let it affect me. He always smelled good.

He points outside. "I mean, what happened? You were ready to go to blows with me and now you're acting like some meek little mouse. What happened?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Nothing happened. I realize that you didn't ask for any of this, and I shouldn't be giving you any trouble. Thank you for the job and thank you for the place to stay. I promise not to be here longer than necessary."

"Fuck that. You knew I wouldn't kick you out. You can stay here as long as you need to. Now tell me what happened. Why do you look like I kicked your puppy or something?"

I glare back at him. "Fine, you want to know what's wrong with me? I'm tired of men that think it's okay to ridicule women because of their body—"

He cuts me off and jumps to his feet, fisting his hands at his sides. "Who? Who the fuck said something? I'll take care of it."

My mouth drops open. Is he for real right now? "You, you fool. You're the one that thinks just because I'm fat, I need to cover up my body."

He deflates in an instant, shaking his head. I swear I can hear the pity in his voice when he says my name, dragging it out.

“Emerson.”

I get up and hold my hand up, palm out, to him. “Stop. You can’t take it back now. I get it, and I understand. I will be covering up my fat body from this point forward. Now if there are any other rules, we can talk about them when I get out of the shower.”

I go to walk away, and he stops me. He grabs on to both of my shoulders and pulls me against him. His front is to my back, and the warmth from his body envelops me. His voice is gruff in my ear. “I wasn’t telling you to cover up because... I didn’t mean...”

When his voice trails off, I turn in his arms and look up at him. He rests his hands on my shoulders again, and I don’t even breathe, afraid he’ll push me away. “What? You didn’t mean what?” I ask him in a whisper.

He sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly. He’s staring down at me, his eyes almost black. His nose is flared, and there is a vein popping out of his neck. He’s tense, and I’m not sure exactly why. “I want you to cover your body because I don’t want other men looking at you. You’re beautiful, Emerson, and when a man sees you like this, they may—”

I cut him off with a laugh. I roll my eyes and slap my hand on his chest. “Right. Good one, Kanan. I get it. I won’t wear anything like this anymore... you don’t have to lie to me to make me feel—”

He lowers his hands to my waist and pulls me against him. The first thing I notice is the hard prod of his manhood pressed against my belly. “Feel that? Seeing you like that does this to me. There’s no faking it or making things up. I mean, this is not something that just happens. But I see you like that... and this happens.”

I should probably pull away, laugh it off, or move away, but I don’t do any of those things. No, instead I lean into him, pressing my body closer to his. He grunts, and I stare up at him wide-eyed. “Wait.. you’re telling me... I did that.”

He nods his head up and down real slowly, but I swear I'm having trouble understanding it all, and I want him to spell it out for me. My face flushes red. "So, uh, you don't think I'm fat."

He shakes his head. "I think you're fuckin' perfect."

As soon as he says it, I can see the regret on his face, but I refuse to let him pull away. My hands go to his waist to hold him where he's at. We're staring at each other, and the air between us is sizzling. I'm not sure who moves first. I raise on my tiptoes, and he leans over, but it results in us touching our lips together in a frenzied kiss. It's nothing like when I kissed him at the funeral and he ended it pretty quickly. This is completely different. It's like he's lost complete control and finally letting himself free. His hands are everywhere, and mine stay plastered to his waist in hopes he doesn't change his mind and pull away.

He pulls back just to grunt at me, "Open your mouth," and when I do, he devours me. His tongue slides along mine, and there's no holding back the satisfied moan that comes from me. He's holding me so tightly, but I don't dare to complain. How can a kiss make me feel safe and protected while also making me feel wild and free at the same time?

When I slide my hands under his shirt and touch the bare skin of his abdomen, he freezes. And even with my eyes closed, I can feel the shift in him.

He pulls back and is staring at me wide-eyed. It's almost like he's in a daze as he wraps his hands around my upper arms and forces me away from him. "Fuck," he says.

All I can do is stare back at him as every emotion shows on his face. He releases me, jams his hand through his hair, and then walks away from me. He sits heavily in the chair and rests his head in his hands. "I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry, Emerson. I shouldn't have touched you."

I practically choke on the words. "What? Why not?"

He lifts his head and glares at me like he despises me instead of the fact that he just rocked my world with just a kiss. "You

know why not. You're too young... you're my best friend's daughter, for fuck's sake. I can't... we can't..."

He's mumbling all the reasons why this, why we, can't happen, and all I can do is stand here, dumbfounded. Kanan, the man I've been in love with since I was fifteen, the man I've compared every other man with, the man that I would do anything to call mine, is attracted to me. I start to walk toward him, and he jumps up from the chair and starts walking backward away from me. He has his hands up as if to ward me off, but there's no hiding his reaction to me. The bulge is still there in his jeans, and the way his eyes are practically eating me up is a dead giveaway.

My nipples are hard, and the thick texture of my sports bra is not helping matters, but I still jut out my chest, and Kanan is practically salivating as he stares at me. "Emerson, what are you doing? Stop right there."

But I don't stop.

I make my way to him, and when we're toe to toe I lean my head back to look up at him, but I make sure not to touch him. "You want me."

I say it matter-of-factly, and he doesn't deny it.

There's no way I can keep the smile off my face. As soon as the corners of my lips start to come up, he's shaking his head. "You're not listening. It doesn't matter how much I want you... nothing is going to happen between us, Emerson."

I laugh. "Okay. I'm going to go shower."

I walk over to the bedroom door and stop before going in. I look at Kanan over my shoulder. "Oh, I may be a few minutes longer. It seems you got me all hot and bothered so I'm going to need to take care of that while I'm in the shower. But I'll be ready to work when I'm done."

His mouth drops open, and I go into the bedroom and shut the door behind me. I can't believe I basically just told Kanan that I'm going to go masturbate, but that's exactly what I did. And I wasn't lying because my whole body is tingling, and I have

to do something to take the edge off. Too bad he's not willing to help me with it.

CHAPTER 11

KANAN

I SLAM out of the front of my house and stomp across the porch. Adrenaline is racing through my body, and I feel like I could run a marathon without any trouble at all. I need to do something to wear myself out. There's no way I can sit in that house knowing Emerson is in the other room touching herself. Fuck me, what have I gotten myself into?

I'm pacing back and forth, and I don't know how long I do it, but I freeze when the front door opens and Emerson comes outside, smiling ear to ear.

I let my eyes travel down the length of her body, and she has more clothes on but not nearly enough. Her shorts are too short, and the T-shirt she has on is tied up, showing her midriff.

She bounces down the stairs and looks up at me. "I'm ready. What's on the agenda for today?"

She seems so relaxed, and I'm the exact opposite. If anything, I'm completely on edge. "Rules. Rules are the first thing on the agenda."

She nods. "Okay, rules. Let me have it."

I grit my teeth. How is she acting like the whole kiss didn't even affect her? I'm completely unbalanced because of it. I clear my throat, "So, the majority are men that work for me. There's only you and one other woman. I need you to be professional."

She scrunches up her nose. "Professional?"

I nod. “Yes, professional. No flirting with the guys. No fraternizing.”

She laughs. “Fraternizing?”

I start to explain what fraternizing means, but she shakes her head. “I know what fraternizing means. Is this a new rule you’re implementing today, or was it already in place?”

I shrug. “Does it matter? It’s a rule. If anyone bothers you, you come to me. Anyone makes you feel uncomfortable, you come to me. You need anything, you come to me.”

Her eyes are twinkling, and I know I’m screwed when her lips twist in a smirk. “So anything I need, I come to you?” She’s nodding her head. “I got it.”

“I’m going to get you started, and then I have an appointment. Can you stay out of trouble until I get back?”

She doesn’t even try to hold back. Her eyes about roll back in her head when she rolls her eyes at me. “Yeah, I think I can handle it.”

“All right, let’s go.” I’m walking down the path, and she’s huffing trying to catch up with me. I slow down so she can keep up, and when her breathing evens out, she asks, “Do you like it here, Kanan?”

I shrug but keep moving. “Yeah, Whiskey Run is nice. All the guys are here. I have a job when I thought no one would ever hire me, so yeah, I like it.”

“So you’re here to stay.”

I stop walking. “Yeah, I plan to. Why all the questions?”

She holds her hands up with a laugh. “Geez, I’m just making small talk, that’s all.”

I’m about to push up my sleeves and then stop before turning around to walk again.

“You know it’s too hot for long sleeves.”

I keep moving. She’s jogging again to keep up, and I force myself to slow down.

“You know why I wear long sleeves.”

“No, not really. You shouldn’t have to hide your scars, Kanan. Not from me... or anyone else for that matter.”

I keep my eyes in front of me. “You say that now. I bet if you had to look at them all the time, you’d have a different opinion. They’re ugly. You saw them last night in the dark. Trust me, in the harsh light of the day, they’re even worse.”

“At least you have a good reason for yours. You earned yours. No one, and I mean no one would make fun of your scars. If they did, they’re the assholes.”

I hear the pain in her voice. We’re almost to where we’re going, so I stop and look at her. “What do you mean?”

She shakes her head in confusion.

I repeat what she said. “You said, at least I have a good reason. What do you mean by that?”

She opens her mouth, closes it, and then starts again. “I mean, you were hurt serving our country. You risked your life, over and over, to save people... to save me... to save my dad.” She reaches for my arm and runs her finger up and down the sleeve. “No one will judge you for how this looks. If they do, come talk to me. I’ll take care of it.”

Shocked, all I can do is stare at her. She’s protective of me, just like I am of her. There are so many things I should tell her, but I can’t bring myself to do it, not yet. “I want you to be safe today. Please don’t get hurt while I’m at my meeting.”

She nods. “I’ll be fine, Kanan. I know that by looking at my life right now, it looks like I have no clue what I’m doing, but I can work.”

I nod my head, and then we walk the rest of the way to the shed. Ricardo and some of the other guys are in there, and I stop next to my right-hand man. “Ricardo, this is Emerson. Emerson, Ricardo.”

He smiles real big at her and puts his hand out for her to shake. I put myself between them. I might as well get this started on the right foot. “She’s off limits to everyone, and make sure

they know it. If I'm not here, I expect you to look out for her ___”

Emerson moves to my side and puts her hand on my arm. “Ignore him. I can take care of myself. What would you like me to start with, Ricardo?”

He looks between Emerson and me, and it's obvious he doesn't know what the right thing to do is. “She can work on the garden until I get back.”

Ricardo nods but doesn't look at her. “Right, you can start on the garden.”

I give him the order to get her started, and then after telling them I'll be back as soon as I can, I walk away.

But no matter how fast I walk, I can't escape my thoughts. When I get to the therapist's office, I stop in front of the assistant's desk. “Hey. Does Dr. Kline have time to see me?”

The woman, Nancy I think her name is, searches my face and then holds her finger up. “Give me a minute.”

I watch her disappear into Dr. Kline's office, and she's only gone a few seconds before coming back out. “She has a few minutes. You can go on in.”

I nod my head at her and tell her thanks before going into the doctor's office. I hear the door shut behind me, and I sit heavily in the chair across the desk from the doctor. “She's here.”

Dr. Kline shakes her head. “Who's here?”

“Emerson. Randall's daughter. She's here.”

The woman's eyes light up. “Oh, she's in Whiskey Run?”

“No... I mean yes, she's in Whiskey Run, but she's here. She's staying with me, and she's working for me.”

She blinks at me, but her expression is guarded. “Oh.”

I nod and jump up from my seat to pace. Yeah, pacing makes me feel better, so I walk back and forth, glancing out the window. Fuck me, there she is. From this spot in the window, there's a perfect view of the gardens, and there is Emerson,

already working on digging up weeds. With my palms pressed to the window, all I can do is watch her work.

I don't even realize that the doctor came to stand next to me. "Have you told her how you feel?"

Fuck, there's no denying it. I know since I've been here, I've been more open with her than with anyone. I haven't tried to hold back or hide anything because holding it in for two years was just too damn much. It was killing me.

"No, I haven't told her. And I haven't told her about her dad either."

"What do you think you need to tell her about her dad, Kanan? That you tried to save him and were unsuccessful? I'm sure she knows that."

I force my eyes off Emerson and turn to the doctor. She's standing with her arms crossed over her chest challenging me, and I shrug. "I need her to know everything. I have to tell her and after that, nothing else will matter. She won't want to be anywhere near me."

"Kanan, if she's half the woman you claim she is, she won't be going anywhere. She'll see through your guilt for what it is."

"I don't deserve—"

She stops me with her hand held up. "And that right there is your holdup. I've told you once, and I'll tell you a hundred times. You're living with survivor's guilt, Kanan. You think you don't deserve to be happy, you're eaten up with guilt, and you have to find a way to get past it."

I plant my feet and match her stance, arms over my chest. "I don't deserve to be happy."

She lifts her shoulders. "Then tell her. Tell her what happened the day her dad died. At least get that off your conscience."

"I am. I'm going to tell her."

She leans over to the look out the window. "She's right there. What's stopping you?"

I can't resist. I go back to the window to watch Emerson. "She's having a rough time. Her mom left and took her money, and she got kicked out of school and has nowhere to go. I need to help her get her life back together... and then I'll tell her."

We stand here, side by side, watching Emerson work. I see the guys watching her, and it pisses me off. I guess Ricardo's warning wasn't enough. I'll have to let them know too.

"Okay, Kanan. I have an appointment soon. Can I just leave you with this?"

I don't answer her because I know she's going to tell me anyway.

"When you finally talk to her about this, tell her everything and then listen to what she has to say. You may be surprised."

I nod my head. "Okay. I can do that." I would do that anyway. I figure after I tell her, she's going to have quite a bit to say to me.

She walks back over to her chair. "Okay, now get outta here. I'll see you at our scheduled meeting later this week."

"Thanks, Doc," I tell her as I walk out of her office. I nod at Nancy when I pass her and then I keep walking. There's a thousand things on my to-do list, and there's plenty I can do on the other side of the compound. I won't even have to see Emerson the rest of the day if I don't want to, but I'm a fool because I know exactly where I'm going when I leave here. I'm going straight to the gardens. I can say it's to check on progress, but I'd be lying. I'm going to check on Emerson.

CHAPTER 12

EMERSON

“I BROUGHT YOU LUNCH.” I look up and Brooklyn is coming toward me, with her arms full of bags.

I get up from my knees from where I’ve been pulling weeds. After wiping my hands on my pants, I run toward her. “Brooklyn!”

She holds her arms out, and I hug her waist. She’s laughing as she holds on to me and all the bags. “Okay, okay. Let me put these bags down and get a proper hug.”

I step back just long enough for her to put the bags down, and then we hug again. When I pull back, she brushes the hair off my face. “Okay, well, here I was so worried about you, and you look just fine. As a matter of fact, you look—dare I say it—happy.”

I shrug, unable to keep the smile off my face. “I don’t know how, but yeah, I am.”

She starts with a frown on her face. “But school...”

I hold my hand up. “I’ll finish. I promise I’ll finish. I’d be crazy not to. I just need time to get it figured out, that’s all.”

She bends down and grabs Wet Wipes out of her bag. “Here you go, get cleaned up. I’ll get our food out. I heard you were working in the garden and thought this would be a perfect place to have lunch. I may have to get Walker to put some tables and benches out here.”

I look around worriedly. “I don’t know if I should eat yet. I should probably ask Kanan or...”

She smirks. “So if you ask Kanan if you can eat, what do you think he’s going to say?”

I blurt out a laugh, because I know exactly what he’d say. Especially after that crazy rule he insisted on. “You’re right. Let’s eat.”

She pulls out thick sandwiches, and we start to eat. We talk about my mom, school, and Whiskey Run.

She takes a bite of her pickle, chews, and swallows. “So I was surprised you didn’t come to our house when you got here. You know you’re always welcome, right?”

I blush because how do I explain that I never even questioned what I would do when I came to Whiskey Run? I knew from the moment the decision was made that I would come to Kanan. Brook points at me, “Oh, don’t go blushing or get embarrassed, I get it. I do. Kanan will take care of you, I have no doubt about that.”

I sit up a little taller. “I should probably start taking care of myself.”

She nods, like she knows something I don’t. “You will. You have, Emerson.”

I scrunch my nose up. Brooklyn is just being nice because we all know if I was taking care of myself, I wouldn’t have had to come here and ask for help.

She touches my arm. “Don’t do that.”

I pick at my sandwich. “Don’t do what?”

She points at me. “That. You forget that I know you, Emerson. Your father was a great man that traveled a lot. I know your mother, and I know that you practically had to raise yourself. You’ve been taking care of yourself for a long time.”

I nod. “Yeah, and not doing a very good job of it either.”

She sets her sandwich down and takes a drink of water before continuing. “You’ve done a great job, Emerson. Look at everything you’ve survived.”

I shrug. “What? The kidnapping? I survived that because of Kanan.” I let out a breath. “I think...”

When I don’t continue, she encourages me. “What do you think? You can talk to me.”

I shrug. “I don’t know. My dad said Kanan and I have an unbreakable bond, but I think it’s one-sided. I just... I’m afraid I’m being a pest or something... not that he would ever tell me that.”

She sits back and crosses her arms over her chest. “Do you know how Walker and I got together?”

I nod. “You worked for him, right?”

She laughs. “I still do, and he couldn’t make it without me. But that’s not how we met. We got together after I was kidnapped.”

My mouth drops. “You were kidnapped?”

She nods. “Yeah, right here in Whiskey Run. When Walker and the guys found me, Walker wouldn’t let me out of his sight then. He had loved me for a while, but it took almost losing me for him to come to his senses.”

I bite my lip and try to come up with my own conclusion, but I’m having a hard time making sense of it. “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me. I do know that I definitely don’t want to get kidnapped again so Kanan will figure out he can’t live without me.”

She laughs. “I’m not saying that, and I don’t think you have to worry about Kanan figuring it out. Anyone with eyes can see how he feels about you. What I’m telling you is that these guys—they’ve been through hell, and for whatever reason, they think they need to suffer. Just give him time. He’ll figure it out.”

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. I already know Kanan wants me, there’s no doubt about it after that kiss. But I also know that doesn’t necessarily mean he wants more. He’s already said nothing can happen between us.

The emotions must reflect on my face cause Brook is shaking her head. “No way, none of that. You were smiling earlier. Let’s go back to that.”

And just like that, I’m thinking of that kiss with Kanan and him telling me he wants me. There’s no keeping a smile off my face after that.

Brook laughs, “Oh wow! Okay, I’m not sure I want to know what that smile is about, but yeah, whatever you’re thinking about, keep thinking about it.”

I hold up my half-eaten sandwich. “Thanks for lunch today, Brook. And for the company.”

She pulls a tomato off her sandwich and eats it. “I’m glad to have you in Whiskey Run. “You’ll have to go out one night with Cassie and me.”

When she mentions her sister, I ask her with a knowing smirk, “How are your brother and sister?”

She rolls her eyes. “Har, har! Funny. They were STEP-siblings before getting married. They’re good. I know they’d love to see you, and now that you’re in Whiskey Run, we’ll all be able to do things together.” She reaches for my hand again. “You’re not alone, Emerson. We all love you, and we’re here for you.”

I pull her in for another hug. “I know. Thanks, Brook. For lunch, for coming to see me, for everything.”

She holds me tight. “Aw, you’re welcome, honey. Everything’s going to turn out like it should. Just you watch and see.”

Man, I hope she’s right.

CHAPTER 13

KANAN

I WAIT until Brook is gone before I go to see Emerson. She's back to work, and she's already made a lot of progress on the garden just since this morning. "You doing okay?"

She is on her knees, and when she hears me, she looks up at me with an instant smile on her face. "I'm doing good. Who knew working outside could be this much fun?"

I cross my arms over my chest. It's either that or I'm going to reach for her. "Fun? You think this is fun?"

She laughs. "This is a lot of fun, actually. And Ricardo said I can pick out flowers to put in here."

I grimace. I don't know why it bothers me that Ricardo is getting the credit, but I'm not going to let it slide. "I told Ricardo I wanted you to have free rein of the garden. Do whatever you want here."

She claps her hands together excitedly. "Brook said she's going to have Walker put some tables and benches out here. Wouldn't that be perfect?"

Before I can agree, she's up on her feet walking past me. She grabs something out of a small cooler, turns, and hands me a sandwich. "Here, I asked Ricardo for a cooler so it's been in it. This is the half of my sandwich I saved for you."

I don't put my hand out. "You saved half your sandwich for me?"

She nods and blushes prettily. "I figure if you're going to worry whether I eat or not, I should do the same for you." She

holds it out. “Here. Eat it.”

I take it from her and hold it in my hand. “So you’re okay?”

She nods with confusion on her face. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” She gasps. “Oh, you mean because of earlier. Where you kissed me and then told me that nothing can come of it?”

I wince because it sounds really bad when she puts it that way.

“That’s not exactly what happened.”

She walks over to me and stops when her chest is pushed against me. I have a swift intake of air and then hold perfectly still. “That’s exactly what happened, Kan. You dug your fingers into my waist until it hurt, but it was a good kind of hurt. Then you pulled my body up against yours, and I could feel how hard you were for me.”

She leans into me, pressing her hips to mine. “Sort of like now. And then when your lips touched mine, I thought for sure I was going to spontaneously combust right there. I literally thought I was a goner. I mean, I thought it would be good. When I dreamt about it, I knew kissing you would be good. But I had no idea it would be that good.”

Her finger is rubbing back and forth across my chest. I can feel her body tremble with every breath she takes, and it’s taking everything I have to stop myself from reaching for her, but I hold my ground, trying to act like I’m not fazed.

She places her palm flat over my chest, right above my heart. “You’re breathing hard, Kanan.”

I grit my teeth together.

She starts tracing her finger again, doing different shapes, and it’s driving me crazy. “I know all about breathing hard. When you turned me away today, I thought I would be okay. But when I touched myself in the shower, I was like a ticking time bomb. It only took a few flicks and a little bit of pressure, and I was exploding. After I came, it took me a while to get my breathing back to normal.”

She whimpers as if she’s feeling it all again. “Did you hear me, Kan? Did you hear me when I came? I had planned to be

quiet, but I couldn't hold it in."

I gulp. "I went outside because I knew if I didn't..."

My voice trails off, and a knowing look comes over her face. "Because you knew you would give in to temptation, right? That's what I'm hoping for, Kan."

I groan and drop my forehead to hers. "Emerson, we can't. I can't."

She pulls back. "Oh, I know. That's what you said earlier, but that doesn't mean I can't try and change your mind."

Fuck, I want to. I wish I could say fuck it all and take her right now. But she deserves better than me. If I give in and take what I want, I'm the worst kind of man. "I need to get to work."

Her smile dims, and she steps back. "Yeah, I know. Eat your sandwich, Kan. I'll see you later."

She walks away, and I watch her go, wishing things could be different. Wishing I could be the man she needs, but in the end, I know I'm going to come up short.

CHAPTER 14

EMERSON

IT'S BEEN A LONG WEEK.

I'm still surprised by everything that's happened, but things are starting to look up. The job has been a breath of fresh air. Literally. I never realized how much I would enjoy working outside, but I do. The living arrangements are pretty intense, but we're making it through. I'm not going to lie, though. Ever since I realized that Kanan is attracted to me, I've been on edge, hoping that something is going to come of it. Every chance I get, I'm brushing up against him, teasing him, tempting him.

So far, he's holding on strong. He hasn't touched me since that kiss, and no matter how hard I try to get close to him, he's not having it. It's sort of turned into a game because if I walk toward him, he's hightailing it in the other direction. I didn't know I had this kind of power, but it's going to my head, that's for sure.

"Okay, I have good news," Kanan says when he comes in.

I'm sitting cross-legged on the couch, writing in my journal, and I close it up and set it on the end table. "What is it?"

He sits in the chair farthest from me. "Okay, so Walker found your mom."

My mouth drops. "Where is she? Is she okay?"

He nods. "Yeah, I'm not sure of all the details or how Walker knows, but he was worried about what she's gotten herself into. He had her picked up, and she's at a drug and rehab facility."

I nod. “I knew it was drugs. Tell me the truth, Kanan. How bad was she?”

He blows out a breath. “I asked because I knew you would be worried. She was fully coherent, just making bad decisions. Walker did say he’s seen way worse bounce back, so we’ll see.”

I nod, and he continues. “She feels bad about the trust fund and your car. Walker told her to get clean and then come talk to you.”

I wrap my arms around myself and just nod. I feel numb. I’m worried about my mom, and I know I should be there for her, but it’s hard after everything we’ve been through. “I should probably go see her, right?”

Kanan gets up and comes to sit next to me. He puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “There’s no perfect way to react here, Emerson. Your mom hurt you, and no one expects you to just forgive her.” I nod, knowing he’s right, but he continues. “But she’s in a maximum security facility. She had to agree to go in, and that means for ninety days she doesn’t come out and no one gets in to see her.” He gestures to my journal. “You can write to her, though.”

I nod, completely lost in thought. When I look at Kanan, it’s obvious he’s not telling me something. “What? There’s more?”

“Yeah, there’s more. The money that was taken has been put into an account for you.” He pulls out what looks like a checkbook out of his front shirt pocket, hands it to me, and then walks across the room to sit at the dining table.

I open it, and the top line is filled out. “What is this? There’s more money than what I originally had in the account, Kanan. This isn’t right.”

He doesn’t even blink. “Your truck too.”

I wave the checkbook around. “I’m not dumb. I know my mom didn’t just give you this money. And she had to have spent most of it by now anyway.” I toss the book onto the coffee table. “I’m not taking that.”

He shrugs. "It's there, and it's yours. No one can touch it but you. I don't care what you do with it, but now you know you have options. You can go back to school. Get a place to live. Buy a car. Save it. Give it away. Do whatever you want to with it. But it's yours."

I sit back like I've been kicked in the stomach. "You want me to leave."

Instantly, he's shaking his head. "No, I don't want you to leave, but I want you to have options. You don't have to stay here, Emerson. You can do anything with your life you want to."

I look down at my hands. "And if I want to enroll in an online school to finish my degree..." I pause, waiting for his response.

"You should do it."

I nod. "And if I want to start writing in my spare time."

He nods. "You should buy a computer."

"I sold my laptop so I would have money."

He grits his teeth. "I'll buy you one."

"No, I will do it." I know I should leave. There's no doubt that Kanan is attracted to me, but that doesn't mean he wants me to stay here with him. "I can look for another place to stay."

I search his eyes, but there's no expression on his face. His jaw is pulled tight when he asks me, "Do you not like living here?"

I have to be honest with him. "I love living here. I love being here with you. I love doing the work I'm doing. I feel safe here."

He gets up and moves into the kitchen, and I call after him, "Your food is in the oven."

He grips the counter. "You don't have to take care of me, Emerson. I can feed myself."

"I know, but after therapy, you always seem so tired. I thought I'd help out a little."

He has his head down. It's obvious he's been fighting his own internal demons since I've been here. I can't help but wonder if me being here makes it harder for him to get over the past. "Would it be easier for you if I was gone, Kanan?"

His head turns so fast, I rear back in surprise. He grunts at me. "Why would you say that?"

I shrug. "I dunno. Am I a constant reminder for you? Do you look at me and see my dad?"

He laughs, but it's bitter sounding. "I definitely don't see your dad when I look at you."

I uncurl my legs and set my feet on the ground, moving to the edge of the couch. "But me being here makes it harder for you. Just be honest and tell me the truth. Would it be easier if I left? I can go into town and find a place to live. I ate at Red's Diner the other day with Brooklyn, and she said the owner had an apartment upstairs. I could see if it's open."

"Do you want to leave, Em?"

I suck in a breath when he shortens my name. He hasn't done that since the night I arrived in Whiskey Run. "I just told you I don't want to leave, but me staying here doesn't make sense. You can't sleep on the couch forever."

He leans against the counter and crosses his arms over his chest. "I can talk to Walker about moving us to a bigger cabin."

"You would do that? I mean..."

He moves around the kitchen, grabbing his plate from the stove, and then he raises up. "There's two plates in here. Did you eat?"

I'm embarrassed now. I could have easily eaten. After working outside all day, I'm usually starving by the time I'm off work, but I enjoy eating with him. "No, I didn't eat."

He grabs both plates and brings them over to the table. "One of the rules was you eat. Remember? Come sit down."

I get up from the couch and go the short distance to the table, sitting down in front of the plate. The table is already set with

napkins and silverware, so he sits down next to me. “Go ahead, eat.”

I start to cut the hamburger into bite-size pieces as he digs into his. It’s after I’ve eaten a few bites before he continues the conversation. “So I’ll talk to Walker about getting a bigger cabin.”

I nod. “I’m sorry, Kanan. I know I’ve completely taken over your life, and that wasn’t my intent.”

“You haven’t,” he says, trying to make me feel better, but I know he’s lying.

“I have.”

He’s staring down at his plate. “I like having you here.”

I lean forward because I’m not sure I heard what I thought I just heard. “What?”

He lifts his eyes up to mine. “I like having you here. Probably more than I should. I know you need to move on and do what’s best for you, and I’m being selfish by telling you this, but I like having you here. You said yourself, you feel safe here. Stay. For as long as you want to, I would like for you to stay. When it’s time for you to move on, you can then.”

I sit up a little straighter in my seat. “Okay, and if you want me gone before that, you need to tell me.”

He doesn’t smile. His lips don’t even curl up in a smirk. He stares back at me without showing any kind of emotion at all. “Okay.”

I wish he would tell me what I want to hear. I want him to say that he never wants me to leave and he can’t imagine his life without me in it, but that’s wishful thinking on my part. There are so many things holding him back, and he’s put a wall up between us. I’m not sure what I can do to get through to him or even how to begin, but maybe by me being here, I can slowly start to break it down. “Okay,” I repeat and then continue to eat. We sit in a comfortable silence, each eating our food. In my mind, though, it’s a completely different story. I’m imagining us holding hands, sitting on the couch together after dinner, laughing and talking. It’s like I can see how

perfect we could be together, but somehow, I have to convince him.

CHAPTER 15

KANAN

TODAY HAS BEEN a hell of a day. It started with a call early this morning from one of the guys that said there's a water line break in the office building and the problems haven't stopped since. I've worked tirelessly all day, and Emerson has worked right beside me. At least today has been a good arm day. I started a new physical therapy last week, and I can already tell a difference. I still have bouts of pain, but it's becoming bearable. At times, I even think I'm getting more strength back, but I'm wondering if that's all in my head.

"You okay?" I ask her for the tenth time today.

She nods her head without looking at me.

"Em, look at me. You okay?"

She wipes her arm on her brow, and when she drops it, there's dirt on her face. I can't stop the smile. She's sweaty, her hair that started in a slick ponytail this morning is sticking up in all directions, and she's covered in dirt. But she's still smiling. And she's still beautiful.

She nods her head. "I'm good."

I shake my head as I finish tightening the bolts on the tractor and then jump down from the side. She climbs down from the tractor, but when she gets to her feet, her legs buckle. She says my name and then falls back, collapsing on the ground.

I drop down beside her, calling her name over and over. I feel the back of her head and there's no bump. She's a pasty white, she feels clammy, and she won't open her eyes. Fuck.

I pick her up, and there's nothing graceful about it. I'm struggling as I lift her over my shoulder and rise to my feet. If my fuckin' arm wasn't so useless, it would be a piece of cake, but it doesn't matter. I have to get her some help, and I'm not going to just leave her here.

I get up and start striding to the cabin. Ricardo sees me and comes running, and I wave at him. "Call the doctor. Quick."

I carry her the rest of the way to the cabin, and when I get her inside, I set her on the couch and then lay her back.

Crouching down beside her, I say her name over and over, pleading for her to wake up.

She moans, but that's it.

I go grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator and then go back to her. I lift her shoulders up. "Em, baby, you have to drink something."

She suckles the water and then leans her head against my chest. Her breathing has picked up, and when she says my name, I swear it's only then that I let out a breath of relief. I'm gasping for air as if I've been holding it this whole time. "I'm here, Em. I'm here. Ricardo went to get the doctor, and he'll be right here."

Hardly any time passes and I hear two sets of boots on the porch. The door is hanging wide open, and Logan strides into the room. "What's going on, Kanan? How long did she lose consciousness?"

I don't let her go. I'm still on my knees next to the couch, holding her against my chest. "Fuck, I don't know. It seemed like forever. Maybe three minutes, though."

He comes to stand next to us. "Okay, you need to let her go so I can examine her."

I lay her back on the couch and whisper to her as I do, "Logan's going to take a look at you honey. I'll be right here, though."

She grabs on to my hand, and even though I know I'm going to be in the way, I refuse to pull away. I move as far as the

coffee table and sit on it. “This is as far as I’m going.”

Logan smirks but nods his head. “Got it.”

Ricardo is still standing at the doorway. “Thanks, Ricardo. I appreciate your help. Can you take care of everything the rest of the day?”

He nods. “Sure thing, boss. I’ll take care of it. I hope Miss Emerson is okay. She’s the best worker we have.”

I nod and watch the man leave. Everyone has come to care about Em. She’s made her way into their hearts, and there’s no doubt each and every one of them would do anything for her.

I focus my attention back on her while talking to Logan. “She collapsed, and I wasn’t fast enough to catch her. She may have hit her head.”

I sit and watch as Logan examines her. She starts to come around again, and when she sits up, she’s still grasping my hand.

Logan asks her questions, and when she says she forgot to take her water bottle this morning and skipped lunch, he goes over the importance of staying hydrated. He goes to the kitchen and grabs a drink with electrolytes and has her drink it. Almost immediately, she starts to perk up.

Logan turns to me. “She should rest the remainder of the day.”

I nod my head. “She will.”

After a few more instructions, Logan leaves, shutting the door behind him, and I’m still sitting here with her hand in mine.

I soften my hold because I know I’m squeezing her hand too hard. “What did I say about eating?”

She looks at me worriedly. “I know. It’s my fault. I had a story in my head, and instead of eating on my break today, I wanted to get it on paper.”

I lean toward her. “I could have fixed you a sandwich.”

“Kanan, today was crazy. I wasn’t going to give you something else to do.”

I open my mouth, and she's shaking her head. "No, don't try to turn this around. This was not your fault. I keep telling you I'm an adult, and I should act like it."

I'm not happy about it. I should have kept a better eye on her. "I'm going to fix you a sandwich and then you're going to bed."

She releases my hand, and I go to the kitchen. Shakily, I make her a sandwich and pile it extra high with turkey, cheese, and tomatoes. I grab some cut fruit and carry it all back into her. "Here. Eat it all."

She reluctantly starts to eat but smirks. "Do you realize you have some kind of fetish about me eating? Most people would try to get me to eat less but not you. You're trying to shove food down my throat at every turn."

I'm not going to be swayed. "Eat."

I hold my hands together and sit down on the coffee table in front of her, but she continues to eat.

She's watching me closely. "You're shaking. Did you eat something?"

I shrug, flex my hands, and then squeeze them into fists. "I'm fine. You scared the hell out of me, that's all."

She looks at me curiously but continues to eat. When she's done, I have her drink some more from the bottle with electrolytes.

She rolls her eyes but does as I ask.

After picking up everything, I come to stand next to her. "All right. Time for bed."

She looks down at herself. "I really want to shower."

I openly cringe. There's no way I can help her with that and keep my hands to myself. "Uh, uh, well, I can call Brooklyn."

She shakes her head. "She and Walker are in Jasper for the day."

"Uh, okay, I can call Doctor Kline to come and help you."

“Your therapist?”

I nod, and she shakes her head in refusal. “Kanan, no way. I’m not having someone I’ve never met come to help me with a shower.”

She starts to get up, and it’s obvious she’s not so steady on her feet. I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her against me, but she’s not stopping. “Em, you can’t shower by yourself.”

She keeps going. “Well, it’s good I’m not by myself.”

I pull her to a stop next to me. “Wait. You’re not suggesting that I... I mean you don’t want me to help you, do you?”

She puts a hand on her hip. “Well, I’m sure Ricardo would help me if you want to call him.”

My jaw tightens, and I’m shaking my head. “No way. That’s not fuckin’ happening.”

She nods. “Okay, well, I’m not showing the goods to just anyone. Today’s your lucky day.”

My mouth drops, and I know I’m not going to make it. She smacks me on the chest. “Relax. You can sit in the bathroom just in case I need you. I’ll be behind the curtain, and you won’t have to see a thing.”

I help her to the bathroom and sit her on the closed lid of the toilet seat. “Stay. I’m going to grab some clothes.”

She calls after me, “It’s in my suitcase.”

Fuck, she’s been living out of a suitcase. I should have made room for her in the closet and the drawers. That’s the first thing I’ll take care of as soon as she gets some rest. I open her suitcase, and right on top is the shirt I gave her the first night she came here. It’s the one that has my name on the back of it. I should pick something else, but right now, there’s an urge inside me to have her in something that’s mine. I grab it and then take a deep breath as I search for a pair of underwear. I find them in the top pocket of her suitcase and pick out a black pair with pink lips on them. With the items clenched in my hand, I go back to the bathroom.

I set the items on the counter and then drop down to my knees in front of her. “Okay, lift.”

She lifts her foot, and I take off her shoe and sock. She does the other, without me even having to ask. Once I have her feet bare, I try to remind myself that she’s not feeling well. I have to do this, and I have to consider her a patient. Not as a woman that I’ve jacked off to all week.

I reach for the hem of her shirt, but she stops me. “I can do this myself.”

Relieved, I release my hold on her shirt and turn my back to her. “Okay, but I’m not leaving.”

I can hear the rustling of clothes, and I walk around to turn the water on. “You want to shower or bathe?”

“Shower.”

I turn the spray on and test the water temperature. After it warms up, I tell her, “It’s ready.”

She shifts behind me, and I move, afraid she’s going to touch me. With my back to her and facing the wall, I reach my arm out. “Hold on to me when you get in.”

She holds on to my arm as she climbs in and she moans under the hot spray. “You okay?”

She moans again. “Yeah, I’m good. Man this feels good.”

She’s quiet as she does whatever she’s doing. I keep asking her, and she keeps telling me she’s okay.

“Do you have to go back to work, Kanan?”

I clench my eyes shut. “No, I’m staying here with you.”

“Will you...” she starts but doesn’t finish.

I look at the shower curtain between us. “Will I what?”

“Will you lie down with me?” she asks in a rush and before I can answer, she continues. “I’m not doing any funny business, I just want to be held, that’s all.”

I can’t lie down with her. I mean, I can, but I shouldn’t be trusted to. “I’m dirty.”

The curtain moves, and she peers out at me. “You can jump in here and shower. I mean, when I’m done.”

I look at her doubtfully, but she’s not having it. “You’re the one that said you were dirty. I don’t care if you’re clean or not. I’m just feeling overwhelmed, Kanan, and I need....”

Her voice trails off, and I can tell she’s still shaken from everything. “Sure, honey. I can lie down with you until you fall asleep.”

She nods and disappears behind the curtain again. For the remainder of her shower, I’m giving myself a talking-to. No matter how much I want her, I will not touch her.

It doesn’t take her long and she’s turning off the water.

I grab the towel and hold it out to her, turning my back to the curtain. She takes the towel, and I stand off to the side while she gets ready.

“All right, your turn.”

I turn around, and she’s sitting on the toilet, brushing her hair. My shirt barely comes to her thighs, and I force my eyes off her. “Do you want me to help you to the bed?”

She stands up. “I’m good.”

She grabs the hair dryer from under the counter and then I walk with her to the bed. She sits down on the edge, and I plug in her dryer for her. “Does it reach okay? I can dry it for you.”

She yawns. “Nope, I can get it. Go ahead and shower.”

I nod and grab some clothes before going back into the bathroom. I make quick work of showering, and the whole time, I’m hoping that she’s asleep when I get out. I promised her I’d lie down with her, but it will be a lot easier if she’s asleep.

When I open the bathroom door and peer out into the bedroom, the lights are off. She’s moved to the opposite side, and the covers are turned down so I can get in.

I move softly and lie down gently next to her.

I'm holding my breath, and once I'm settled, I let it out in a huff.

"Thank you, Kanan."

I freeze. "For what?"

Her voice is soft and tired. "For taking care of me."

"I'll always take care of you. No matter what, Em."

She makes a sound as she burrows under the covers. We lie here for a few minutes, and I'm wondering if she's fallen asleep or not when she starts to talk again. "Can you hold me, Kanan? I'm not asking for anything else. I just haven't been held in a long time."

There's no way I can say no to her. I scoot over to her, and she lifts the cover to let me in. When I'm close enough, I put my arm around her and bring her flush against my body. It's going to be pure hell holding her and knowing I can't do what I want to do, but if this is what she needs, then I'll do it.

Even if it kills me.

CHAPTER 16

EMERSON

I LIFT MY LEG HIGHER, and there's the sound of rumbling under my ear.

I raise my head just a little and realize I've completely turned Kanan into my pillow. My head is resting on his chest, and I have his body cradled between my legs. I press my hips to his, and his hand at my lower back presses into me. "Em." He moans.

I lay my head back down and wonder if I act like I'm still asleep will he lie here a little longer? I almost fell right asleep when he lay down, and I'm kicking myself now, wishing I had stayed awake to enjoy being in his arms.

"Em," he says again.

I smile against his chest. "I like it when you call me that. Everyone calls me Emerson. I like that you shortened it."

He grunts, but his arms tighten around me.

I lift my leg higher and press up against the bulge of his manhood. He wraps his hand around my bare thigh to hold me still.

He's so still I wonder if he's even breathing. "Kanan."

He has to hear the need in my voice. "Em... we can't."

I lean up and look at him. "We can, though."

He's struggling. He's a good man, and I know he feels like he's doing the right thing by telling me no, but somehow, I need to prove him wrong. I told myself that the next time, if he

wanted to kiss me, he would have to initiate it, but having him this close, I can't resist. I turn my head and press my lips to his chest.

His whole body trembles, and I trail kisses along his shoulder.

"Em," he says, his voice strangled.

"Please, Kanan. I just want to feel good. Make me feel good."

I barely get the words out and he's shoved me to my back and raises over top of me. He's breathing like he's been running, but he's staring down at me like he still hasn't decided what he's going to do with me.

I plant my feet on the bed and raise my hips to meet his. "Please, Kanan," I beg.

He leans down and whispers, "I can't tell you no."

When his lips seal to mine, I feel as if I'm in heaven.

His lips are ravaging mine, and with my arms looped around his neck, I refuse to let go.

He kisses across my cheek, down my neck, and I turn my head to give him better access. He stops and pulls away, but I hook my legs around him. "No, please, Kanan. Please." I beg.

He's huffing and puffing, and I don't think he realizes it, but he's grinding his dick into my belly. "If you stop now, Kanan, I'll never forgive you."

He kisses my shirt-covered chest. "I'm not stopping."

I cry out in relief. "Thank goodness."

He crawls down my body and loops his fingers into the waistband of my panties. "Lift," he demands.

I lift my hips, and he pulls my panties down my legs and tosses them across the bed.

He's hovering over me, fitting his body between my legs. He's just staring down at my body, and I start to shift. "Kanan, you can't..."

"I can't what?"

I try to pull him back up my body, but he's not budging. "I can't what?" he repeats.

I raise up on my elbows. "I was going to say look at me, but I mean, you're right there."

"Look where? Here?" he asks, pressing a finger to my sex.

I throw my head back. "No, I mean yeah, damn, you have me so confused. Yes, you can look there, but ignore my belly."

He removes his hand from between my legs, and obviously I said the wrong thing because he's now inspecting my belly. "Kanan, stop," I tell him, trying to roll out from under him.

He holds on to me, stopping me from moving. "Your belly is beautiful, Em. Everything about you is beautiful."

Just to prove his point, he presses his lips to the roundest part of my belly. Over and over, he kisses me across my middle until I start to relax underneath him. When he goes down farther, I'm holding my breath in anticipation, waiting for him to get where I really need him.

I feel his hand first and he slides his finger through my slit. I moan, pressing the back of my head into the pillow. My hands clench the sheets, and I pull at them as he strokes his finger across my swollen clit.

When he leans down, pressing his tongue to me, I lift my hips up to meet him. "Kanan."

He doesn't stop. If anything, he picks up speed and increases the pressure. The way he touches me is everything. I rip my hands from the bed and spear my fingers through his hair, holding him to me.

My whole body is pulled taut, and I'm so close to an orgasm, I can feel the heat rushing through me. "Yes," I groan. "Don't stop."

He starts to talk as he does his thing. The vibrations take me over the edge, and I wrap my thighs tight around his head. My body convulses, and it doesn't stop. As soon as I start to come down, he's at me again. "Kanan, I can't. I can't," I tell him, my breathing coming out in little pants.

“One more. Give me one more,” he says.

He doesn't let up. First my feet curl, my body gets even hotter, and the orgasm that shoots through me is even stronger than the last. My pussy clenches, and I start to writhe uncontrollably. I come until there's no strength left in my body and I fall limply onto the bed.

I look through hooded eyes at Kanan, and he lifts his head, staring at me like he's seeing me for the very first time. His eyes are wide, and he has a look of surprise on his face. “Kanan,” I say as he climbs off the bed backwards. The tent of his shorts tells me that he needs relief, and I sit up reaching for him. “Where are you going?”

He doesn't answer me. He is running his hands through his hair, just staring at me. “Kanan, you're freaking me out. What are you doing?”

He goes to the other side of the room and sits down.

His body is practically heaving as he tries to catch his breath. I move to the edge of the bed. “Kanan, talk to me. Are you all right?”

He nods and holds his hand up when I start to come toward him. “Stop.”

I freeze and sit back down on the bed. Dumbfounded, I stare at him.

“This can't happen again.”

His words are like a punch in my gut. “What?”

He's shaking his head with regret.

I draw my knees up and wrap my arms around my legs.

He's staring at me. “Cover yourself up, Emerson.”

It's then I remember that I'm naked from the waist down. I pull the cover over and wrap it around me. “Kanan, talk to me. Why can't this happen?”

He looks angry. “Because you're twelve years younger than me.”

I laugh. “Yeah, but I’m an adult, and I have been one for awhile now.”

He doesn’t care. “You’re my best friend’s daughter.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “What? And you think he wouldn’t approve? He loved you.”

I say it without any doubts, but it doesn’t comfort him. If anything, he looks even more tormented. “Em, listen to me.”

I sit and wait for him to continue, and he seems to be collecting his thoughts.

“Talk to me,” I plead with him.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He looks so sad, and I would give anything to go to him, but all I can do is sit here and wait for him to tell me what’s going on.

His voice is hard and thick. “It doesn’t matter how much I want you, Em. Or how much I can imagine a future with you. You deserve better, and I’m not going to let you settle for me.”

I choke it out. “Settle? What are you talking about? Kanan, being with you would be everything. I wouldn’t be settling—”

He gets up from the chair and walks over to the door of the bedroom. He won’t look at me. “Are you okay? I shouldn’t have... I mean, you passed out earlier, and I shouldn’t have—”

I shake my head, feeling like I’m in an alternate universe or something. “No, I’m fine,” I stutter.

“Okay, holler if you need anything.”

He walks out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. If anything, I feel more alone than I’ve ever felt before. I don’t have the energy to fight, and I crawl into the bed and lie back. It’s been a roller coaster of a day, and it feels like I’ve been hit with every emotion, but all I can think about is the man in the other room that somehow believes he’s not worthy of my love. He doesn’t know it, but there’s no other choice for me. Kanan will always have my heart... whether he wants it or not.

CHAPTER 17

KANAN

I'M PACING around the pond. It's early in the morning, and I'm pretty sure I'm losing my shit. I can't get everything that happened off my mind. All I can do is think about having Emerson in my arms, feeling better than I've ever felt in my life. For a short time, I let myself believe we could be together. I kissed her, tasted her, and satisfied her, and when she exploded underneath me, I came to my senses. No matter how much I want her, no matter how much I wish things were different, she can never be mine. I should have just told her the truth about her dad, and I wouldn't have to worry about this. She wouldn't want anything to do with me if I did that, but I couldn't bring myself to hurt her like that.

"What the fuck, Kanan?"

I void any expression off my face and turn to Elias. "Thanks for coming."

He's pissed, and I can't say I blame him. I called him in the middle of the night and asked him to meet me this morning. I'm just a few steps from my cabin, but it gives me some privacy to talk to Elias.

He's shaking his head, but it doesn't hide the curious gaze he's giving me. "I'm sure you have a good reason for calling me in the middle of the night and having me meet you at the butt fuckin' crack of dawn."

"I do. I need a favor."

He nods. He's looking straight at me, which is not something he does with most people. He usually tries to look away to

hide the scars on his face. “Whatever. You got it. What’s up?”

I feel sick even saying it. “I want you to go out with Emerson.”

He’s incredulous. “Excuse me? What?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Look, she’s going to be out here in a minute. I need you to ask her out.”

He points his thumb at his chest. “Why the fuck me?”

“Because I know you won’t touch her.”

He blurts out a laugh. “Do you know how insane you sound right now?”

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. He’s right. I do sound insane, and fuck, maybe I am losing my mind right now. “Look, can you do it or not?”

He moves closer to me. “Explain this to me. Why do you want someone to ask out your girl?”

I raise my hand to interrupt him, but he stops me. “Don’t. Don’t even try to act like she’s not your girl because she is. Everyone here knows it. We all know she’s off limits, so what I’m trying to understand is why you’re trying to push her onto me.”

I flex my hands into fists at my sides. “I have my reasons.”

“So basically you’re not going to tell me why?” He measures me with a look, and he finally agrees. “Okay, yeah, sure, I’ll take her out.”

The pain in my chest is quick and sharp. I rub my hand over my chest. “Okay, so there’s rules.”

He smirks. “Of course there are. I mean, when you come up with stupid shit, I’m sure you’re just going to pile on some more stupid shit.”

I ignore his attempt at humor. “You can’t touch her, Elias.”

He rolls his eyes.

“I’m not joking about this. You don’t touch her. You treat her with respect. Take her out, show her a good time, show her

there's better men out there than me.”

He's glaring at me. “You're a fuckin' idiot, you know that, right?”

I nod. “I'll agree with you on that.”

He throws his hands up in the air. “Sure, what the fuck ever. I'll take her out, show her a good time, hands to myself. I got it.”

We both turn when the door to my cabin opens. Emerson has her head tilted up to the sky, and even from here, I can see the sadness on her face. It guts me knowing that I'm the reason for that look. “Go,” I tell Elias.

He walks over to her as she comes down the steps of my porch. It takes everything I have to stay rooted in my spot when all I want to do is run over to them, throw her over my shoulder, and take her back to bed for days on end.

I watch them talk, and Emerson looks at me. I'm sure she's waiting to see if I'm going to interrupt or anything, but I do what I think is best. I nod my head and encourage her with a small smile.

When Elias walks away, he doesn't even look my way.

I wait for Emerson to come over to me. “You ready for work?” I ask her.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Yeah, uh, you okay?”

I nod and start walking. It's either that or I reach for her.

She walks beside me, and I go slowly so she can keep up. “I had water coolers delivered to the worksite. Lunch is being delivered to the garden at noon. I figured if you want to write during your lunch, you can eat while you do it.”

Surprise registers on her face, but she nods. “Thanks, Kanan.”

I keep walking and stumble when she says the next words. “Elias asked me to go to the drive-in in Jasper with him tonight.”

I knew it was happening. Hell, I put him up to it, but it still hurts. And why the fuck did he pick the drive-in? I obviously

didn't think this through. Of course Elias would take her somewhere where they would be secluded. "Oh yeah?" I answer her, trying to act uninterested.

She reaches for my arm, and we both stop. "It's just a movie, but I told him I wanted to ask you what you thought first."

I bite my tongue until I'm sure it's bleeding.

"Kanan, what do you think?"

Through gritted teeth, I tell her, "You should go. You haven't had a night out since you got here."

Her eyes widen and darken in pain. "You want me to go out with him?"

I nod. "Yeah, sure. Elias is a great guy." *And I'll fuckin' kill him if he touches you*, I say to myself.

This time, she's the one that starts walking away. "Okay, I'll be out late tonight then, but I'll be sure to be quiet when I get home so I don't wake you."

I jog to catch up with her. "You have to work early in the morning."

There's anger in her voice. "I won't be late."

"You'll call me if you need anything."

She picks up her pace. "I get it, Kanan. I'm not dumb."

"You get what?" I ask her.

She comes to a stop and glares at me. "I know you think I'm too young to understand, but I get it. Somewhere between last night and this morning, you decided you're done with me, and you're pawning me off on your friend."

I reach for her, and she jerks away. I move to block her path. "It's not like that."

Her laugh is filled with anger. "Yeah, right. Whatever. You could have just let me go, Kanan. You could have just told me it was time for me to move on. You didn't have to get your friend to ask me out. I'll start looking for a place to live, Kanan. Then you won't have to deal with me anymore."

She pushes me to the side and starts jogging away.

I not only hurt her, I fuckin' demolished her. I don't know what I was thinking, but I fucked up. And this time, I don't know if I'll ever come back from it.

CHAPTER 18

EMERSON

AFTER WORK, I get ready for my date with Elias. I take extra time to look my best mostly because I need a pick-me-up. It's been a shitty day. I went out of my way to avoid Kanan, even working with crews I've never worked on before. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't completely get away from him. He kept popping up, giving me bottles of water, electrolyte tabs, and then even showing up at the garden at lunchtime to make sure I was eating.

It's like everywhere I turned, he was there. It makes it really hard to be mad at him when he is going out of his way to be nice to me.

Last night and this morning is all a big jumble to me, and it's very confusing. I probably shouldn't be even going out tonight, I should be looking for a place to live, but I already told Elias I would go with him, and I refuse to back out. If Kanan wants to play games, I'll play them.

Kanan had some kind of meeting, and I make sure to leave the cabin before he gets home. I'm pacing around the parking lot when Elias comes walking from the path I just came from. "Hey," he says.

I nod my head and cross my arms over my chest. "So what did he have to do to get you to ask me out? This whole thing is embarrassing, and if you'd rather not go, I'm fine with it."

It all comes out in a ramble, and I have no doubt my face is red from embarrassment. He has to think I'm so hard up that his friend had to ask him to take me off his hands.

Elias has his head turned to the side, but I'm used to it. He talks like this to most people. He thinks his scars are worse than they are. I swear I don't even notice them anymore. He stops in front of me. "My friend is a dumbass."

I'm shaking my head, about to defend Kanan, when I stop myself. He literally asked his friend to ask me out... so yeah, he's a dumbass.

"Anyway, I think we should go out. I'll be happy to teach him a lesson."

I put my hands on my hips. "What kind of lesson?"

He holds his arm out, and instead of answering me, he asks, "You game?"

I figure at this point, I don't have a lot to lose. I thread my arm through his, and we start walking to his truck.

He starts driving, and the silence is comfortable enough that I don't even ask where we're going. When we get into Jasper, I turn in my seat. "Thanks for doing this, Elias. I know it's probably the last thing you want to be doing, but I appreciate it anyway."

He shakes his head. "No, it's all right. We'll eat, catch a movie and think about how much this is going to drive Kanan crazy."

I tilt my head to the side. "What do you mean?"

He laughs. "Trust me, you'll figure it out."

Before I can ask him what he means, my phone rings in my purse. I pull it out and see Kanan's name on the caller ID. I hold it up, "It's Kanan."

He shakes his head. "Of course it is."

"I'm not going to answer it." That's what I say, but I can hear the indecisiveness in my voice.

As soon as my phone stops ringing, Elias' starts to ring.

He holds it up, and sure enough, it's Kanan.

I scrunch my nose up. "Are you going to answer it? Maybe there's something wrong."

He shakes his head. “Nope, neither one of us is going to answer it.”

I clench my phone in my hands. “Elias, I don’t know about this. It doesn’t feel right.”

He just laughs again. I swear I’ve heard Elias laugh more in the last few minutes than I ever have before. “Do you trust me?”

I think about it for less than a second. Elias was a big part of my dad’s life. I know him well enough to know he’s a good man. I also know that even though Kanan doesn’t want to be with me, he still wants me protected. He wouldn’t ask his friend to take me out if he wasn’t trustworthy. “Yes, of course I do.”

He nods and points at my phone. “Okay, so hear me out. We grab something to eat. We go to the drive-in and then we go back home...late.”

I lift my eyebrows, waiting for him to continue. When he doesn’t, I roll my hand at him. “And?”

“And well, by that time, Kanan will hopefully come to his senses.”

I turn my nose up. “I don’t know. This is crazy. It’s obvious he doesn’t want me in his life... I mean, we’re friends, but—”

“Bullshit,” he says and then starts to backtrack. “I mean, bullcrap.”

Laughingly, I shove him in the shoulder. “Really, Elias. I think I’ve heard worse. First of all, you knew my dad. And you know the company I’m keeping these days. I’d say shit is probably one of the nicer words I hear around work.”

He pulls over to the side of the road, puts the truck in park, and turns in his seat. “Anyone that has been around you and Kanan any amount of time knows you guys are meant to be together.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Kanan doesn’t see it that way.”

He lifts his shoulder. “Oh, he knows. There’s no doubt he knows. But he’s got shit holding him back.”

“What kind of shit?”

Elias smirks. “Oh no, I’m not telling any secrets. I’m just trying to prove a point to him. So are you game?”

For the second time tonight, I think about how I don’t have anything to lose. “Sure, I guess so.”

He bangs his hand on the steering wheel. I never really see Elias excited about things, but he sure is enjoying this. “All right, what do you want to eat?”

I turn back to look out the window. “Hamburger, French fries, and a milkshake.”

He rolls down the window, hangs his arm out and smiles. “Well, this might be the best date I’ve ever been on.”

“And,” I start, knowing how much he hates going out in public, “I think we should get them to go and go to the park to eat them. Maybe feed the ducks before we go to the drive-in.” Shoot, maybe I’m pressing my luck. “I mean, if that’s okay.”

The relief is evident on his face. “That actually sounds perfect, Emerson.”

We go to a local fast food restaurant and order food before going to the park. Elias and I talk about nothing and everything. The longer the night goes, the more talkative he gets. Both our phones keep ringing, but Elias convinces me to turn the ringer off. He knows I’m about to give in and answer it.

We talk about my dad, Elias’ computer hacking skills, and our wishes and dreams.

When we get to the drive-in, it’s already packed, and we park closer to the back. The movie is good, but I fall asleep in the middle of it. When I finally wake up, the credits are rolling for the second movie. I gasp and sit up. “Elias, it’s midnight.”

He’s smiling ear to ear. “Yep, you ready to go home?”

I yawn and nod my head. “Yep, let’s go. I can’t believe I slept through the whole second movie.”

He jokes, “And most of the first.”

“I had a really good time, Elias. You’re actually a pretty good date. How are you still single?”

He snorts. “Right.”

I turn to look at him in surprise. “I’m being serious. I don’t get it.”

He points to himself. “There’s not a woman out there that would want to look at this all day, every day for the rest of our lives.”

I’m shaking my head. “Elias…”

He interrupts. “I have mirrors. I know what I look like.”

“But,” I start.

He cuts me off. “Forget it, Emerson.”

I huff out a breath. Elias is being way too hard on himself, but it’s obvious he’s not going to listen to me. I sit back and think about the day’s events.

We’re almost home before I dig my phone out of my purse. “Oh my God.”

Elias isn’t even fazed by my surprise. “How many?”

“What?” I ask him.

“How many missed phone calls?”

“How did you know… fifteen missed calls and five texts.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I had more… this is going to be so good.”

Nerves settle in, and I’m unable to sit still the rest of the ride home. I go between reading the texts, looking out into the night, and worrying about Kanan. This is what he wanted. He’s the one that asked his friend to take me out, and now he’s flipping out about it. I start to read the texts again.

Call me, Em. We need to talk.

Are you ok?

Where are you at?

Emerson, are you on your way home?

If he touches you, I'm going to break every bone in his body.

I read the last one again. He sure doesn't sound like a man that doesn't want anything to do with me.

When we finally pull into the parking lot, Elias comes around the truck as I climb down.

He holds his arm out to me. "Ready?"

He's smiling ear to ear, but there's no part of me that feels like smiling. I inhale and let it out sharply. "Yeah, I'm ready."

And even though I try to say it with confidence, I'm not feeling it.

I'm not completely sure what I'm supposed to be ready for.

CHAPTER 19

KANAN

I'M GOING to kill him.

I'm pacing across my porch, thinking of all the ways I'm going to torture my friend. I asked him to take her out and show her a good time. That didn't mean for him to avoid my phone calls and bring her home the next day. I mean, it's only a little after midnight, but it's technically the next day.

I see the lights of a truck coming from the parking lot, and I lean over the banister, with my eyes on the walking path.

As soon as Elias and Emerson come into view, I'm off my porch stomping toward them. Fuck, she's beautiful, and the thought pisses me off even more.

When I get in front of them, I shove my friend. "Asshole."

He just smirks at me, and it takes everything I have to not throat punch him. I grab Emerson's arm, lace our fingers together, and start walking back to the cabin. She turns and waves over her shoulder. "Thanks, Elias. I had a great time."

I don't even recognize the sound that comes out of me. It's a cross between a growl and a grunt, but there's no doubt she knows how unhappy I am with the chain of events.

She's practically jogging to get next to me. "Kanan, slow down."

I do, but I also throw my arm around her shoulder and walk with her the rest of the way to the cabin. When we get inside, she's pissed. She stops next to the couch and glares at me. "What is wrong with you?"

“Did he touch you?”

Her mouth drops. “What?”

I move toward her and don't stop until I'm towering over her, glaring down at her. Most people would be intimidated by me. “I said, did he touch you?”

She puts her hands on her hips. “What if he did?”

My nostrils flare, and every muscle in my body flexes. “Don't fuck around because I will gut him, Em. I'm not playing. Did he touch you?”

She's still glaring at me, and it's obvious she wants to challenge me, but I can see her weighing the options, wondering if I'd really kill my friend or not. She must see it in my eyes because she finally tells me. “No, he didn't touch me. But what do you care, Kanan? You don't want me... but what? You don't want anyone else to have me either?”

I reach for her, holding her face in my hands. “Fuck, Em. Don't want you? How can you even think that?”

Her eyes are wide. “Because you pawned me off on your friend. Instead of you asking me out, instead of you finishing what you started last night, you had your friend take me out on a date.”

The pain is evident in her eyes. It was a dick move on my part, and I know I fucked up. Tonight, knowing she was out with another man, was the worst kind of pain I've ever experienced. I have to tell her how I feel. “I love you, Emerson. I've loved you for what seems like forever. You deserve more than me, you deserve better than me, but I can't let you go. Fuck, I should let you go, but I can't.”

And it seems all at once, the anger on her face disappears. She reaches for me, grabbing the front of my shirt. “Then don't. Don't let me go, Kanan. I love you, and no matter how many times you push me away, I'll always love you.”

“Never again. I can't do it. Not again.”

Her body reacts to the relief of my words, and she sags against me. “Show me. Show me how much you want me, Kanan.”

She has no idea what she's asking, and all I can do is stand here and take her all in.

She pushes away from me, but she doesn't go far. She pulls off her jean jacket, talking the whole time. "I went out on a date with another man, Elias, but you know what? I wore your shirt because I wanted to be close to you."

She turns so I can see my name on her back. She pulls the shirt up and over her head before tossing it on the couch. When she turns back to me, her hands are at her waist, undoing the zipper of her black jeans. All in what feels like one motion, she's kicking her shoes off and peeling her jeans down her legs. When she stands up, she's in nothing except her black bra and matching panties. "If you don't want me, you need to tell me now."

She unhooks her bra, pulling the straps down her shoulders and then letting it fall to the floor. Her large, rounded breasts sway as she bends at the waist and removes her panties. The shy woman from last night is gone because she has her feet planted, her hands on her hips and her shoulders pulled back. "I love you, Kanan, and I want you to make love to me."

"Fuck." I grunt, taking her all in. She's so fucking beautiful, it hurts to even look at her. I crowd her, pulling her against me. I hold on to her so tightly I know it's probably hurting her or making it hard to breathe, but she doesn't complain. If anything, she holds me just as tightly. I don't want to, but I know it's the right thing to do. "I need to tell you something, Em. Before we do this, we should talk."

She shivers against me, grabs my hand, and starts pulling me to the bedroom. "We can talk later. The only thing I want to do right now is have you inside me, Kan. That's it. Nothing else matters, not to me. I just need you to show me how much you love me. That's it."

A better man would make her listen, but obviously I'm not that man. I follow behind her, watching as her ass sways side to side as she walks to the bedroom.

She climbs onto the bed, lies back, and opens her arms to me. "This is how much I trust you, Kanan. You can have me, heart,

body, and soul. Do whatever you want to do to me, just love me. That's all I want... that's all I need."

I make quick work of removing my clothes, and then I climb up the bed, hovering over her. My cock is hard, seeping in anticipation. The need to be inside her and fully claim her is overwhelming.

I sit back on my haunches and wrap my hand around my hard cock. "Open your legs, Em."

She lets her legs fall open. Her hands are behind her head, and she's watching me watch her.

Her pussy is glistening, and I hold her folds open, then stroke a finger through her slit.

Her hips lift, and she moans when I flick a finger over her swollen clit. She's completely trusting of me, letting me do what I want with her.

Over and over, I stroke her, and then I funnel my finger into her. She clenches all around me and lowers her hips to get away. It hits me then. "Emerson, is there something you need to tell me before we do this?"

She bites on to her lower lip, shaking her head, but I can see the truth in her eyes. "Tell me, Em. Tell me what I need to know."

She lifts her legs and hooks them around my waist, and I get her meaning without her even saying a word. "Trust me, nothing is going to stop me from having you, but you have to tell me."

Her voice is soft. "I've never done this before."

The air escapes my lungs in a big puff of air. "Never? Nothing?"

She reaches for me. Since her confession, I've released my hold on my dick and am no longer touching her. She grabs my hand and pulls me toward her. "Kanan, I was fifteen when I met you. And yes, there were boys, but when they tried anything with me, I couldn't stand it. The only man I want to touch me is you."

I gulp, feeling the power she's giving me. How did I ever think I would be okay if she was with someone else?

I kiss her, putting my heart into it, wanting her to know how I feel because I'm incapable of talking right now. My heart feels as if it's about to explode and I just need to soak this all in. When I pull back, I'm kissing her neck and whispering in her ear, "I love you, Em. I'll love you until the day I die."

Her voice is thick with emotion. "I love you," she whispers back.

I kiss down her body, suckling her breasts, listening to her panting and watching the way her body trembles with every touch. By the time I get to the core of her sex, she's practically writhing underneath me.

While sliding my hand through her soaked slit, I lean over to look at her. "I want to be bare inside you, Em. I don't want anything between us."

Her dazed eyes sharpen. "But I could... I mean we could..."

I swear my dick gets even harder. "Remember when we were talking about the future a few days ago? You said you wanted kids. Hell, you want to be a soccer mom that drives a mini van, if I remember correctly. Let me give that to you." I'm like a deranged lunatic that has no control. I shouldn't be doing this, but there's no way I'm stopping now.

Whether she realizes it or not, her hips start to gyrate, and she's yearning for my touch. She reaches between us, wrapping her hand around my girth. My head falls back, and I shove my hips forward to glide into her palm. "Fuuuck."

"Bare," she says. "I need you bare, Kanan."

Before she can change her mind, I'm pressing the tip of my cock to her opening. Ever so slowly, I push into her.

"Breathe, baby. You need to breathe."

She's smiling ear to ear as she plants her feet farther apart on the bed. I move in, pushing into her. She cringes slightly, and I know I need to get the pain part of this over fast. There's no way I can hurt her any longer than I need to.

“You trust me?”

She nods. “You know I do.”

I slam my body into hers, impaling her on my cock. She scoots up the bed, but I go with her, holding our lower bodies together. “Breathe, Em. You have to breathe.”

Her eyes are wide as saucers, and it takes a minute before her body starts to relax underneath me. She feels like pure heaven, and I’m not sure how long I’m going to last with her tight body sheathed on my cock.

CHAPTER 20

EMERSON

MY HANDS ARE at his waist, and one minute I'm pushing him away and the next, I'm pulling him to me. Every nerve ending is on fire right now, and it's like nothing I've ever felt before. His concern for me is paramount, and he hovers over me, not moving. "You okay, Em?"

I nod and lift my hips tentatively. "Aaawh." I moan because the friction feels too good.

His face is hard, and there is sweat on his brow. He's holding himself so stiffly, I know he wants to move, but he's making sure I'm okay. If anything, I love him even more in this moment. "You can move, Kan."

His eyes darken and his nostrils flare. His voice is gruff and very controlled. "Are you sure?"

I lift my hips, pulling him deeper into me. "Yes."

From that point forward, he's relentless. He thrusts into me, and I meet him with every thrust of his thighs. I hook my heels at his back, pulling him closer, needing more.

He tries to hold back, I see him fighting control, but that's not what I want. I need him to give in to it.

"I'm so close, Kanan. Please don't stop."

His thrusts are big, and he doesn't stop until I'm begging for mercy. He reaches between us, pressing his fingers to my swollen clit. Like a bomb going off, I erupt. The spasms take over and roll all through my body. He takes complete control of my body, and shortly after, he gives in to his release. He

grunts my name as he releases his seed inside me. He's not done with me, though. He leans down to kiss me thoroughly, holding his body on his arms. I know it's not good for his injured arm, and I have to force him to lay his body onto mine.

Reluctantly, he pulls away. "I'm going to squash you."

I still hold him to me. "No, I like having you against me."

We're both panting, and he pulls me against his side as we catch our breath.

I raise up to smile at him. "So does this mean we get to do that anytime we want?" Clueless to what he's thinking, I kiss him before climbing out of bed. "I guess you can tell Walker we don't need that two-bedroom cottage."

I disappear into the bathroom and clean up. When I come out, we pass each other as he goes into the bathroom. I'm still smiling, lost in the satisfaction of what just happened. I'm sitting on the bed when he comes out. "Is it always like that, Kan?"

He sits stiffly on the bed next to me, turns off the lamp, and then lies down on his back. I curl into his side and ask him again, poking him in the chest with my finger. "Huh, tell me. Is it always like that?"

He finally looks at me, and that strange, lost look is back on his face. My smile dims, but I'm still holding on to hope that he doesn't try to retreat from me again. "You want to know the truth?" he asks.

I bite on to my lip. That doesn't sound very promising, but if nothing else, I know I don't want to be lied to. "Yes, of course. I can handle it," I tell him, even though I'm not sure if I can handle it or not.

He rolls to his side and looks at me. His hand comes up to rest on my shoulder. "I've only ever felt that with you, Em."

I hit him playfully in the chest. "Shut up. You can tell me the truth."

He grabs my hand and holds it to his chest, right over his heart. "I am telling you the truth. I've only felt this connection,

this kind of love, with you.”

I raise up a little. “But the others?”

He laughs. “Others? Honey, since the day you turned eighteen, there haven’t been any others. I knew then how I felt about you.”

I lean my head on his chest. “You did?”

He runs his hand through my hair, brushing it off my face, before kissing my forehead. “I did. I knew I loved you, but I also knew you were too young and you were Randall’s daughter. You were off limits. Hell, you probably still are, Em.”

I kiss his chest, wishing he could get over those two facts. Age doesn’t matter, not when it comes to love. And I know my dad. He would have wanted us together. I have no doubt about it.

Kanan tenses under me. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He kisses my forehead again. “We need to talk, Em. There’s things you should know.”

I clench my eyes shut. I don’t know why, but I have a sick feeling in my stomach when he says it the way he does. It’s obvious he’s worried about something, but I don’t want to deal with it right now. I want to enjoy this. We have the rest of our lives to talk about serious stuff.

I let my hand trail down his naked body and wrap around his manhood. Already, he’s hardening in my hand, and he groans as I tighten my hold. “Emerson,” he warns.

I laugh and then move down his body, kissing along the way. “We can talk all you want tomorrow. Tonight, I want to do something I’ve wanted to do for a long time.”

I’m trailing kisses along his belly. His hips lift slightly. “Oh yeah, what’s that?”

I lean down, sweeping my tongue down his happy trail. “I want to kiss you here.”

His hand plows through my hair. “You don’t—”

But I stop him with a kiss to the tip of his manhood. “Oh, I want to. I may do it wrong, but will you let me... let me taste you?”

He’s staring at me through hooded eyes. “You can’t do anything wrong. Not with me, Em.”

I tentatively stick my tongue out, swiping it from his root to his tip. Goose bumps rise on his legs, and a guttural groan erupts from his mouth. His hand tightens in my hair. “I don’t think I can take too much of that.”

It’s a heady feeling, knowing you have that much control over someone. I’ll never take it for granted. “I love you, Kanan,” I tell him right before I open my mouth and take him inside. His hips jerk, but I don’t stop.

Over and over, I bob up and down on him, loving the satisfied sounds coming from him. By the look of him, he’s given up on the idea we need to talk, which is fine by me. The more he brings it up, the more unnerved I get by it. Surely, he’s not already changing his mind about me.

I clear my mind and focus on the here and now, determined to enjoy our time together while hoping it lasts.

CHAPTER 21

KANAN

I GOT up before the sun did.

I'm sitting on the chair across the room, knowing I can't lie in the bed next to Emerson. If I do, I'll wake her up, and she needs her sleep. We were up half the night, but my need for her is not even close to being quenched.

I can't let her go.

I know I have to tell her the truth, and I feel like shit for not telling her already.

Fuck, and most likely she's going to leave me.

That sinking feeling hits me hard, and I'm not sure what to do with it. There's a part of me that wishes I could keep this to myself and not burden her with it, but the longer I wait, the worse it's going to be.

She has to know.

I wasn't thinking last night. I came inside her. Hell, she could be pregnant already, and I should have told her before I could have altered her life altogether.

She thinks I'm a good man, but the truth is, I'm a selfish man. There's no way I can let her go... not now.

I push up from the chair and move closer to the bed. She's still naked, lying on her back with her arm thrown over her face.

I cross my arms over my chest and stare down at her. She's beautiful, way more beautiful than she realizes. There's no

way she has any doubts about how much I crave her body now. I worshiped her, and there's no turning back.

There's no getting her out of my system. With one last look at her, I tiptoe from the bedroom. I've already turned the alarm off her phone. I know she'll probably be mad, but I want her to rest.

I go out into the kitchen and rifle through the junk drawer to find paper and pencil.

I scrawl out a note and leave it on the kitchen table next to Emerson's phone.

I pick up my shoes that are sitting by the door and make my way outside, locking the door on my way out. After lacing up my boots, I walk down the path to Elias' cabin.

After two minutes of pounding on his door, he finally pulls it open. "What the fuck, Kanan? This is two days in a row you've woke me up at the ass crack of dawn. Can't a man get any sleep around here?"

I look at him, not giving him any sympathy. "I think you fuckin' owe me, man."

He smirks. "The rules were don't touch her. I didn't touch her. You didn't tell me when to bring her home."

I push past him. "You could have at least answered your phone."

He follows me in, shutting the door behind him. "Yeah, I could have. But I think you deserved to suffer a little bit for that asinine idea you had. I mean, I've heard of dumb decisions before, but that one takes the cake."

I sit down on his couch, not even caring that he's busting my balls. On all accounts, he's right. I fucked up, but thankfully, it doesn't seem like Emerson is holding it against me.

Elias sits down in the chair across from me, and I'm holding my hands together in front of me. It must be going to rain today because my arm's hurting more than it has been. Of course, it could have something to do with the night I had. With my eyes lowered, Elias claps his hands together. "Kanan,

what the fuck is up, man? It's still dark out. If you wanted to shoot the shit or give me shit about last night, you could have at least waited until daylight."

"I owe you, man. You were right about me being a dumbass, but thank you anyway for taking her out. Maybe it took her going out with someone else to straighten my ass out, I dunno."

He shrugs. "Yeah, sure. No problem. That's what we do, right? We get each other's backs. That's what we've always done."

I nod and gulp. "I want to talk about it, Elias."

He holds his hands up. "Hell, no. It's one thing for you to ask me to take out your woman, but I don't want to hear about y'all's sexual escapades. My part in this ended last night. I did my duty."

I shake my head, not even laughing at his joke. "I want to talk about the night Randall died."

I knew he would be shocked by my request, but I wasn't expecting the pure anguish to come across his face. I shake my head. "Forget it. Shit, I know no one wants to talk about it, I just..."

I let my voice trail off because I'm not sure where to go from here. I need to talk it out with someone that was there. I've seen the reports. Hell, the doctor, Walker, everyone has told me that it's not my fault, but I need to go through it with someone that was there.

Elias moves to the edge of his seat and clasps his hands together in front of him. "What's going on with you, Kanan? It's been two years, do you really want to hash these things out?"

I laugh, but it's strangled and doesn't even sound right. "Honestly, no, I don't. But I feel like I have to."

He huffs loudly, "Okay, well, let's do it."

I shake my head, ready to get up and leave. A part of me is relieved because maybe I'm afraid that Elias is going to see things my way... maybe he knows it's all my fault. "No, it's

fine. I shouldn't have brought it up. I'll let you go back to sleep."

I stand up, and so does Elias. "Sit your ass back down. Fuck, Kanan. Obviously there's something you need to get off your chest, so let's have it. Talk to me."

I glare at him, debating what I should do. Knowing I need to figure this out, for me, for Emerson, for the both of us, I sit back down. "I only have one question."

He sits down and nods. "Shoot."

I clear my throat and decide to just come out with it. I'm looking at the floor between us because I can't look him in the eye. Not when I ask him what I'm going to ask him. "Am I the reason that Randall is dead?"

He leans back, and he's quiet so long I finally lift my head up to look at him. He's staring at me as if I have three heads or something. "Is this what's been eating you? You think you what? Got Randall killed some way?"

There's more to it, but that's the gist of it. Unable to voice it, all I can do is nod my head.

His voice is hard. "You really think you had something to do with it?"

"The shot that killed him. The one that went straight to his heart... That's the one he got while I was carrying him on my back."

He's staring at me without blinking. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I shouldn't make Elias relive this. I should have asked Jason or Davis. They both seem to be in better shape in dealing with all this stuff than Elias and me. When he doesn't say anything, I'm shaking my head again. "You know what? Forget it, Elias. I shouldn't even have asked."

"Sit down," he says when I start to get up again.

I roll my eyes but sit down. "You know what, I'm not going to keep letting you tell me what to do. I could still whoop your ass."

He smirks. "Whoop my ass? Really? How old are you, man?"

I'm quick to respond. "The same age as you, asshole."

He grunts, shaking his head. "Really? Well, quit talking like you're eighty. No one says *whoop your ass* anymore."

"Fuck you. Are we going to talk about this or not?"

He sucks in a breath. "Did the therapist put you up to this? She tell you I'm not talking or some shit?"

My eyes widen. "No, fuck, I had no idea. I mean, I know you're not exactly forthcoming with shit, but I assumed you were following therapy protocol."

He shrugs, and I can't help but wonder how much longer Walker is going to let him off the hook. There's no doubt Walker knows he's not talking, and it was a requirement when we came. Each of us had to go to therapy and all the doctor appointments. Whatever they recommended, we have to follow it.

Elias grunts. "Fine, okay, since I know you're asking for you, I guess we can talk about it."

I hold my hands up, "Fuck, E. I didn't know this was going to be such a big thing for you. If you're not ready to talk about it, we won't talk about it."

He just stares at me. "We're talking about it." He nods and leans forward. "I'm sure you already know this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Randall was dead when you picked him up, Kanan."

I start to argue, but he silences me with a look. "Yeah, he may have been breathing, but you know as well as I do that he wouldn't have made it to the hospital. He had multiple gunshot wounds, a fractured skull, he was bleeding from every orifice of his head. He was dying. If anything, that shot put him out of his misery."

I cringe over the blunt way he says it, but that's one of the reasons I came to Elias. He's as blunt as they come. "So yeah, he was dead when you picked him up, but you made sure he made it home. You gave Emerson, Walker, hell, all of us some closure because we know what would have happened to his body if he was left behind."

I think about what he's saying. I know there's some truth to it. There's no way I would have left him behind. Hell, I couldn't have left any of them behind.

“So no, Kanan. Randall dying was not your fault, and it sucks that you've been living with that guilt when you shouldn't be. I know it's easy for me to say, but you have to get your shit together. That girl loves you. She needs you, and you can't use this as an excuse to give her up. You have to figure this shit out, Kan. Don't let them assholes take this from you too.”

I lean back in my chair, taking it all in. I don't know how long we sit there, but eventually, Elias gets up. “I'm going back to bed. I was up hacking most the night. Stay as long as you want.”

He gets as far as the door to his bedroom when I call out to him. “Thanks, Elias... for everything.”

He nods. “No problem, man.”

He disappears into his room, and I sit here, replaying the events of that night two years ago in my head and trying to figure out if I should have done anything differently. There's a thousand regrets I have, but this is one I've carried with me for two years. Will Emerson see me as the man that tried to save her dad... or his killer? I'm sick to my stomach just thinking about it. I can't lose her... I just can't.

CHAPTER 22

EMERSON

I WAKE up with a jerk and am surprised to see the light streaming through the curtains. I sit up, and every muscle I have reacts to the sudden movement. Looking around the room, I sit quietly waiting to see if I hear Kanan anywhere in the cabin, but I realize pretty quickly that I'm alone.

Climbing out of bed, I grab Kanan's T-shirt off the floor and slide it over my naked body. I take care of business in the bathroom and then start the search for my phone.

It's not next to the bed like usual, so I go into the living room area and see it on the kitchen counter plugged in.

As I reach for it, I see the piece of paper with Kanan's handwriting on it. I grab it and start to read.

Emerson, I turned off your alarms. I thought you needed your rest. Take the day off and I'll see you when I get back. We need to talk. Before anything else, we need to talk about a few things. Please know that I love you. No matter what happens, I love you. Kanan.

I reread the note, and a sick feeling goes over me.

He's doing it again. He's going to push me away and tell me we can't be together. Over and over he's going to come up with asinine ideas of why we can't be together.

As if I'm in a trance, I go to the bedroom and get ready. I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but I do know that I need to get away and think.

I open the app on my phone and order a driver to come and get me since I haven't got a car yet.

I throw my journals in a bag and then walk outside. It's clear it's been raining, and I'm surprised I slept through it. I walk toward the parking lot, hoping I don't run into anyone.

I could call Brooklyn, and I know she'd come running, but that's a hard situation since her husband is Kanan's boss.

When my ride arrives, I get in and ask the driver to take me to Red's Diner. Everyone has talked about this cake they have, and when I ate there the other day, I was too stuffed to try it. Well, today's the day.

The ride into town is short, and when the driver drops me off in the front of the restaurant, I'm a little overwhelmed by the amount of people watching me through the window.

I walk timidly in the door, and there's a woman at the hostess stand. "Hey, honey, just one?"

I nod, and she grabs silverware and a menu. "Follow me."

I follow behind her, ignoring the looks from the patrons around me. I'm not sure what they're looking at, so when the waitress asks what she can get me, I whisper to her, "Why is everyone staring?"

She leans down. "Because you were dropped off by one of them Uber things. Nobody calls crazy Hank for a drive. He's been driving without a license since he failed his vision test and refuses to get glasses."

"Crazy Hank?"

She laughs. "Yeah, but I'm not making fun of him. He calls himself that. He's some kind of daredevil around here and is always doing stuff."

"Stuff?"

She nods. "Yeah, like just last week he set up a palm reading table at town square."

I lean forward. Palm reading? Heck, I could use some help on figuring out my future. "Oh yeah, does he read palms?"

She laughs again. “Not at all. As a matter of fact, he told every customer that they would be donating to the Crazy Hank fund in the near future and then tried charging people ten dollars for the reading. The sheriff had to put a stop to it.” She points to the menu. “You know what you want?”

I nod my head. “I want the... oh shoot, my friend said it’s world famous.”

She cuts me off. “The apple cinnamon Blaze cake? Yeah, it’s pretty famous in these parts.”

I nod. “Yeah, sounds good.”

She starts to walk away, and I stop her. “Hey, by any chance are you all hiring?”

She tilts her head to look at me. I’m sure she’s already noticed my red, puffy eyes so I don’t look away. She finally shrugs. “Let me get Violet.”

She walks away, and I sit staring out the window, feeling heartsick. There’s a part of me that hopes Kanan comes to his senses, but his letter gives me a good indication that’s not going to happen. No matter what, he loves me... what does that even mean?

“Here you go. A slice of our famous apple cinnamon Blaze cake.”

A beautiful red-haired woman sets a plate down in front of me with a steaming cup of coffee too. She gestures to the seat across from me. “Mind if I sit?”

My eyes widen, but I nod. Sometimes I have to remind myself that I’m no longer in the big city. Whiskey Run is full of friendly people, and probably here, it’s not weird at all to sit down with strangers.

She holds her hand out. “I’m Violet, by the way. I’m the owner of Red’s Diner.”

I shake her hand. “Oh... it’s nice to meet you. I was asking your server if you had any openings or not.”

She points to the cake. “Go ahead, eat.”

I can't help but laugh, and Violet smiles with me. "What's so funny?"

"Oh nothing... I just spent half my life with my mom telling me not to eat so much and since I got here to Whiskey Run, people keep telling me to eat."

A spark of something registers on her face. "Well, tell me. Have you ever waited tables before?"

I shake my head. I'm not going to lie to get the job. "No, but I'm a fast learner."

She lays her arms on the table. "You from around here?"

I shake my head no, and when she looks at me to continue, I start to ramble. "No, uh, I'm from Texas. I've been living at the cabins at the new rehab center."

She sits up a little straighter. "Oh, are you a veteran?"

I shake my head. "No, uh, my dad was. He served with a bunch of the guys. I've been staying with Kanan."

She nods. "Oh, Kanan? Great guy."

I grimace, and she holds her hands up. "Oh honey, not like that. I'm married. My husband and Kanan met a few months ago and hit it off."

The scowl doesn't leave my face, though, and she reads into it. "Uh oh, what did he do?"

I shrug. "Nothing, it's fine. I just need to find a place to work..." I cringe, hating the idea of moving out but wondering if tonight after we have "our talk" I won't have another option. "And possibly live."

She frowns and leans forward. "He's kicking you out?"

I bite my lip, doing my best not to cry. "No... I mean, no matter what, he wouldn't just kick me out on the street or anything, but he's pushing me away... at least I think he is."

She reaches over and pats my hand. "Eat your cake."

I take a bite even though I've completely lost my appetite. "It's really good. No wonder everyone has told me I need to

try it.”

Violet watches me eat it and then pats the table in front of me. “Look, don’t worry. You need a job, you have one here. You need a place to live, we’ll get you set up in the apartment upstairs. No worries.”

I set down my fork. “Just like that? You don’t even know me.”

She just smiles. “This may be the first time we’ve met, but Emerson, I’ve heard all about you. Trust me, word spread like wildfire as soon as you got into town.”

I take another bite of my cake. “Thanks for the cake.”

She scoots across the booth. “I’ll be right back, okay? I just need to check a few things in the kitchen.”

“Okay, and thanks, Violet.”

She nods. “Sure thing, honey.”

When she walks away, I’m left with only my thoughts and a half-eaten piece of the best cake I’ve ever eaten. I should be thinking about what I need to do, but instead, I’m thinking of Kanan and wondering if he’ll ever come to his senses.

CHAPTER 23

KANAN

THE RAIN HAS PICKED UP, and it's a steady downpour. I'm not sad about it, though, because it means I can go home and check on Emerson. There's no way she's still sleeping.

I get halfway to the house when my phone rings and it's an unknown caller.

"Hello."

"You missing something?"

I pull the phone away and look at it and then put it to my ear again. "Excuse me. Who is this?"

Instead of answering my question, the woman says, "I'm sorry, I mean are you missing someone?"

"Look, lady—"

She cuts me off. "This is Violet, at Red's Diner."

I stop in my tracks. Why would Violet from Red's Diner be calling me? And then I remember Emerson talking about the cake at Red's. "Emerson? Are you saying Emerson's there?"

She gives a sarcastic "Yep," and then before I can get a word in, she continues, "Yep, Emerson is here, eyes red and swollen talking about needing a place to live."

I turn on my heel and start jogging to the parking lot. "She lives with me."

"Oh yeah? If that's true, then why has she been crying like her heart is broken?"

My first thought is someone told her the story about me and her dad. She knows it's my fault and she's ending things. Well, fuck that, she's not ending things without a fight from me. I've thought about this all morning, and somehow I have to find a way to keep her. I loved her dad, and she knows that. I would have done anything to save him. It was a freak accident and I can pray she won't hold it against me.

"I'm going to fix this."

Violet is gruff and straightforward. "Oh yeah, you're going to fix it? Well, I hope you do or else those box seats tickets to the Jasper Eagles game that my husband promised you are going to be given to someone else."

"Don't let her leave," I demand.

"Hurry," she answers in return and then hangs up.

I get in my truck and drive too fast into town. I keep fucking up, over and over, and I'm not sure how many times she's going to forgive me. I should have stayed in bed and talked to her this morning instead of leaving.

I barely get parked out front of Red's Diner and am in the front door in a flash. I look around, and Violet is standing toward the back, pointing to a booth against the windows. Emerson is leaning over, writing in one of her notebooks.

I stop at the table, and I don't even try to hide the pain in my voice. "You're leaving me?"

When she raises her head, I see the torment and pure anguish on her face. I hate that she's been crying. She sticks her chin out at me. "That's what you wanted, right?"

My mouth drops. "Why would you think that? What happened between last night and today?"

"In your letter, you said that no matter what, you loved me. That no matter what happens. Basically, you're pushing me away... again. I was just beating you to the punch this time."

I shake my head and slide into the booth next to her. "That's not what I meant at all in that letter."

She snuffles, and there's no trust in her eyes as she looks at me. 'Oh yeah? What does that mean then? No matter what happens, you love me. It's pretty ominous, if you ask me.'

I lean forward.

"No, listen, come home... to our home."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Why?"

I reach for her hand. "So we can talk."

Her hand tenses at my touch, and that is like a kick in the gut. Her voice drops. "Are you taking me home to break up with me, Kanan? Because if so, just do it here."

I suck in a deep breath. "No, I'm not now or ever going to break up with you. There are things I need to tell you, things I think you should know, and I'm afraid you'll leave me—"

She gasps. "Leave you? I would never leave you... What are you even talking about? That doesn't make any sense."

I take her hand in both of mine. "I hope you feel the same way after we talk, Em. I really do."

She looks worried, but she nods her head. "Fine, let's go."

I slide out of the booth, throw down some cash, and then lead her to the front.

Violet steps in front of Emerson, and they hug. Violet is telling her to call if she ever needs anything, and it's amazing to see the impact Emerson has on people, even people she just met.

"Thanks for calling me," I tell Violet and then lead Emerson outside. We stand under the awning as the rain continues. "How did you get here?" I look around for any familiar cars or trucks, but don't see any from workers at the compound.

"I called a driver."

I take off my jacket and put it around her shoulders before walking her to my truck. I help her in and then take my time walking around to the other side. As I get in and start driving, she turns in her seat to me. "So... talk."

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. “No, when we talk, I need to be holding you, Emerson. And I need you to promise me that you’re going to hear me out.”

She looks unsure. “Kanan, you’re scaring me.”

I reach over the console and thread our fingers together. “Promise me. Promise you’ll hear me out.”

She sounds unsure, but she agrees. “I promise. Of course, I promise.”

We get to the compound, and as we walk to the cabin, I start to get even more nervous. The rain has let up, and there’s a few people milling around, but we don’t stop and talk to anyone. My whole life is about to change. It can go in one of two directions, and the thought is making me sick.

When we get to the cabin, I open the door and let her go on in. I take my time, removing my boots as she takes off my jacket and slides her shoes off.

She turns to me, unsure. “We can forget the talk. I don’t need to know whatever you’re about to tell me. We can just move on with our lives, and everything will be fine.”

She’s scared of what I’m going to tell her, and I can’t blame her.

I reach for her and grab her hand. “I have to tell you...”

She winces. “You’re married, aren’t you?”

My mouth drops. “Married? Hell no, I’m not married. I’ve never been married, and the only way I’ll ever be married is if you agree to be my wife.”

She gasp and then nods. “Yes.”

I can’t help it. I laugh and pull her to me. We walk to the couch, and I sit down. She moves to sit down next to me, but I pull her onto my lap. “We’ll talk while I hold you.”

She sits on my lap, and I brush the hair off her face. She leans into my touch. “No more putting this off, Kanan. Just tell me what you need to tell me.”

I take a deep breath, and even though I've practiced this a thousand times in my head, nothing has prepared me for the dread that is laying heavy on my heart. "What I want to talk to you about is the day your dad died."

Her eyes widen like saucers, and she nods her head.

"For two years... I mean since that day... I've lived with the guilt of that day."

She tenses in my arms. "What do you mean?"

I clench my eyes, wishing I didn't have to do this but knowing I don't have a choice. "I was carrying him on my back when he was shot."

Her eyebrows go up, but that's the only movement. I wait for something, anything, but she doesn't say anything so I continue, hating the words as they come out of my mouth. "I was the reason your dad was killed that day."

Her hands grip on to my arms. "Kanan." She's searching my face. "Oh my God, you truly believe that."

I can't look her in the eye. I'm waiting for her to curse me, to tell me she wishes she'd never met me, and for her to leave me, but when she stays seated in my lap, I lift my eyes to hers. "That's what happened, Em."

She puts her hands on my chest, then across my shoulders and wraps them around my neck. "That's not exactly how it happened, Kan."

My jaw clenches. "I was there, Em. I know what happened."

I wait for her to push me away, but she doesn't. If anything, she pulls me closer. "Tell me something."

I let out a breath. I've already told her the worst part; from this point, I'll tell her anything she wants to know. "Anything."

She lifts her chin. "Did you love my dad?"

"You know I did."

She nods. "And would you... did you... do everything you could to save him?"

I ram my hand through my hair. “Of course I did, but that doesn’t change things. He still died because of me.”

“Kanan, I’ve read the report. I have a copy of my dad’s file. I was going crazy after he died, and I convinced Walker to give it to me. I needed closure. None of you guys were talking, and I had to know what happened.”

I lean back. “So you knew... this whole time you knew?”

She shakes her head, pulling me back toward her. “My dad was shot in the head. It may have not killed him instantly, but it would have killed him. You could have left him there, but you went and picked him up to bring him home to me.” She holds her hand up as if I’m going to interrupt her. “And yes, I know you were doing it for me. It was when you were carrying him that my dad took the hit to the back... it was also when the buck shot went through your arm and shattered all along the right side of your body. But you still brought him home to me.”

I suck in a breath, holding back the tears, and she continues. “Kanan, my dad knew how I felt about you. Ask me what I said to him every time he left on a mission.”

I croak. “What did you say?”

She presses her hands to each side of my face and forces me to look at her. “I made him promise me two things. I made him promise that he would come home safe and then I made him promise me that he would bring you home safe too.” She sucks in a breath, and I know this is hard for her to talk about, but she doesn’t stop yet. “I like to think that he knew he wasn’t coming home and he was going to have to break his promise to me. And I also know my dad. He made sure you came home to me. If he wasn’t on your back, you would be gone too, Kan.”

I can’t help it. Emotions overwhelm me, and the tears start to fall. “I’m so sorry, Em. I’m so sorry I couldn’t save him. Even with my arm shot up, I tried to save him. I couldn’t. I tried, I really tried.”

She wraps her arms around me and holds me to her chest. Her hands push through my hair as she soothes me with her voice. “I know you did, Kanan. I know you loved him. If you could have, you would have saved him. I know you would.”

I look at her in wonder, still not believing it. “You don’t blame me?”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t blame you. My dad wouldn’t either, Kan. I can’t imagine everything you went through that day, but this part, this guilt, you have to let it go.”

All I can do is stare at her, and she smiles softly at me. “I know that’s easy for me to ask and hard for you to do, but living with this kind of guilt is not good for you, and it won’t be good for us.”

I tunnel my fingers through her hair. “I love you so damn much, Em. Please don’t ever leave me.”

She loops her hands around my neck. “I love you, Kan, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m going to mess up.”

She laughs. “I know you are.”

“Sometimes I get so stuck in the past, I almost suffocate from it.”

She nods. “I know you do, but if you let me, I’ll be here for you. To hold you, love you, to show you much you’re needed. Because you are. I need you... our kids will need you.”

My body jerks. “Kids?”

She slaps me on the chest. “Yeah, kids, and if we do much more like we did last night, I would say they’ll be here sooner than later.”

I lean my head against hers. “You know you’re going to have to marry me, right?”

She nods. “Yeah, I know.”

“I love you, Em.”

She smiles ear to ear. “Yeah, I know that too.”

EPILOGUE

EMERSON

Three Months Later

“YOU DON’T HAVE to do this... you know that, right?”

I nod my head and try to humor my husband. “I know that.”

But he’s not giving up. “I’m serious. You don’t need the added stress. You’ve been doing online school, working, writing in your spare time, and if seeing your mom is just too much right now, then it’s too much. You don’t have to see her. You can wait.”

I cup my hand around his cheek. “Kanan, you’re hovering.”

He rubs his hand along my slightly rounded belly. “Emerson, you’re pregnant.”

I gasp as if I am surprised. “Really? Pregnant? And how exactly did that happen?”

“Har. Har. Very funny. I’m just saying if you want to put this off, no one would blame you.”

I shake my head and keep walking. My mom has been in the rehab facility in Vegas for a little over three months. Last week, she was given the option to leave, and she chose to stay. That has to mean something. “I’m doing this, Kan.” I stop before getting to the door. “But listen, if it’s okay with you, I’m not telling her I’m pregnant.”

He looks at me doubtfully. “She’s going to know, Em. You’re fucking glowing.”

I lean into my husband. “I’m glowing because you know how to love me.”

He cups his hand around my cheek. “Whatever you want to do in there, I’m fine with it. You want to leave, just give me the signal.”

I nod, almost guiltily. “I hate hiding this from her, but I need to know she’s clean before bringing her back into my life, that’s all.”

He nods in agreement. “I get it, you’re right.”

Hand in hand, we walk into the facility. When we get inside, I tell the person at the desk that we’re here to see Erika Todd.

They look on their computer and then hit a buzzer on the door. “Through that door. There’s a conference room on the right. She’ll be there shortly.”

I’m a ball of nerves as we walk down the hall and find our way to the conference room. The room is nothing like you’d expect. I thought there would be a table and chairs, but this place is something else. There are couches, televisions, computers, and a kitchen. I sit down on the couch, and Kanan sits next to me. “It’s okay,” I tell him.

He laughs and puts his arm around my shoulder. “I think I’m supposed to be telling you that.”

I’m fidgeting as we sit and wait for my mom to show up.

Kanan goes from rubbing my back, to holding my hand, to rubbing my back again.

When my mom comes in, I’m sort of stunned to see her. “Mom?”

She’s my mom, but she looks nothing like I remember. She’s always been worn-out looking, but she was using most of my young adult life. I knew it even if she tried to hide it from me. But now, she looks radiant. “You look great, Mom.”

She tosses her hair. “Thank you. I just got my tips done. Doesn’t the color look great?”

I sit rigidly, and because Kanan is so attuned to me, he does the same. “Uh, yeah,” I stutter. “It does. How’ve you been?”

She falls down in the chair across from us and claps her hands together. “I’ve never been better. I’m clean as a whistle.”

“Uh, that’s great.”

She nods. “Yep, they told me that I could leave, but why would anyone want to leave this place? All the food I can eat. They offer all the spa treatments, activities, I can come and go as I please. And it doesn’t cost a dime. I’ve got it made... I’m not leaving here.”

I stare at her with my mouth hanging open. I’m not sure, but there’s something off about her. “And you’re staying sober... right? Are they making sure you’re staying sober?”

Her lips lift in a smile, but I can see the look in her eyes that says she’s not telling the complete truth. “Yeah, they drug test me.”

I lean in. “And you’ve quit using. You’re not doing drugs anymore?”

She laughs. “What’s with the twenty questions, Emerson? I’m still your mother. I should be the one asking the questions. Like what’s he doing here?”

I point my thumb at Kanan. “Are you talking about Kanan? You mean, the man that saved me when I was fifteen... the man that had to help me when my own mother decided to steal my trust fund and sell my truck? You’re asking why he’s here? You should be thanking him.”

She rolls her eyes. “Is that what this is all about? You want your money back? You look like you’re doing fine without it.”

I suck in a breath and look at Kanan, and he’s giving a dirty look to my mother before he turns to me. “It doesn’t matter. My money is your money anyway.”

I shake my head. I should be mad because he lied to me, but I know why he did it. In his mind, I needed to have an out if I wanted to leave. Hopefully by now, he knows that will never be an option for me.

I turn back to my mom. “Kanan is my husband, Mom. We got married two months ago.”

“Married? But...”

I raise my hand to stop her. “No, there are no buts. I love him, and he loves me.”

She points at me. “You’ll regret it. Eventually one day, you’ll regret marrying a man that does his kind of work. Because that’s all that matters to them... the job... and nothing else.”

I know her and my dad didn’t have the best of relationships, but I do know that my dad loved her. I stand up, and Kanan stands with me. “You ready?”

I thread our fingers together. “I’m ready.”

My mom leans forward. “Where are you going? You just got here.”

I turn to look at her, and Kanan positions himself between us. He’s always so protective and even more so since we found out I was pregnant. “We’re leaving, Mom. I wanted to come and see you because I was hoping we could start over. I wanted to have a relationship with you, but I don’t think that’s possible.” I tighten my hold on Kanan and try not to get choked up. “I know you’re using, and I know somehow you’re passing the drug test.”

She laughs. “You don’t know anything.”

I shake my head sadly. “Unfortunately, because of you, I know a lot about drugs and how they affect people. You’re high on something. I know you’re using, and I also know you’re taking advantage of whoever’s paying for this. While you’re here, you’d better get things figured out, because it’s not going to last. Walker is not going to keep footing the bill for this.”

With that being said, I turn and walk out. Kanan is right beside me the whole way, and when we get outside, he’s opening the door to his truck and helping me get in. He doesn’t leave me; he just stands beside me, waiting for me to collect my thoughts.

“I’m okay,” I assure him.

He brushes a tear off my cheek. “I know you are. You’re one of the strongest women I know, Em.”

I look at the door we came out of. “I don’t know. I just wanted my mom to be my mom, you know. I wanted her sober.” I look him in the eye. “She’s not, right? She’s on something.”

He nods sadly. “I’m afraid so, baby.”

I sniff and try to hold back the tears. “I thought for sure this would be the thing that healed her.” I grab on to Kanan’s arm and search his eyes. “What if I’m a bad mom? What if I-”

He cuts me off. “That’s not going to happen, Em. You’re already the best mom. You’re already loving her, protecting her, making your decisions around her. You’re going to be the best mom.”

I start to cry, and Kanan looks at me in anguish. He hates it when I cry.

Kanan

I HATE IT WHEN SHE CRIES. I WOULD LIKE TO THINK I’M A strong man, but when my wife cries, I feel so weak. I would do anything to stop the tears but sometimes, I know she just has to let them out.

I turn her in her seat so she’s sitting sideways in the truck. I fit my hips between her legs, trying to get close to her. “Talk to me, Em.”

She shrugs. “I wanted our baby to have a family. I wanted him or her to always have someone they can depend on.”

I think about my parents that live across the country and I know that a grandbaby is not going to change the way they do things. They probably still won’t come around.

“They will have a family.” She shakes her head, but that doesn’t stop me. “Think about it. Our children are going to have the best kind of family, Em. Look at all the uncles that will protect her—”

“Her? You keep saying her,” she says.

I nod. “Yeah, I’m sure we’re having a girl. Elias, Davis, Jason, all the guys are going to be her family. Walker and Brook, they’ll probably want to be honorary godparents. I know we don’t have the normal ordinary family, Em, but I like to think what we have is better. These are people that love us and will do anything for us.”

Her tears stop, and she looks at me. “You think so?”

I roll my eyes. “Em, come on, you know it. Fuck, Jason is making the baby furniture as we speak. Shh, don’t tell him I told you because he wanted it to be a surprise. Olivia and Abby both had shirts made that say *Favorite Auntie*. You know our kid is going to be loved.”

She sniffs and nods her head. “And then there’s us. We already love our daughter”—when she gives me a dirty look, I continue—“or son more than anything. I’m sorry about your mom, I really am. I know you had high hopes, but I’m still here, Em, and I always will be. We’ll get through anything and everything... as long as we’re together. You and me... we’re unstoppable.”

She leans in and kisses me. It’s meant to be a loving kiss, but just like any other time, it goes straight to my head, and I can’t resist her. I cup her face, holding her to me and deepen the kiss. When she pulls back, her lips are swollen, and she smiles at me.

I run my finger soothingly across her lip. “There’s that smile I love.”

She loops her arms around my neck. “I love the way you love me, Kan.”

“Ditto, baby. Ditto.”

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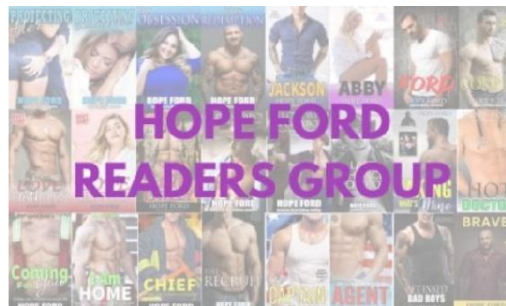
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling Author Hope Ford writes short, steamy, sweet romances. She loves tattooed, alpha men, instant love stories, and ALWAYS happily ever afters.

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