

He was everything she dreamed of,
until he became her living nightmare.

Wasted MEMORIES

KARLEY BRENNNA

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*You're strong. No matter how hard this world tries to beat you down, you
can do it.*

I believe in you.

Important Note

Wasted Memories is a contemporary romance that contains content that may be triggering to some readers, including, but not limited to, domestic abuse, trauma, death in the family, abandonment, violence, alcoholism, and other mature subjects. This novel contains strong language and sexual themes. Readers who may be sensitive to these subjects, please take note. It is my hope that I've handled these topics with the care they deserve.

Chapter One

EMERSON

Standing naked in my closet, I heard glass shatter in the kitchen. Clutching the dress to my chest in a poor attempt to cover myself, I peered around the door jam.

“Everything okay?” I asked hesitantly into the now quiet house.

“All good, babe. My glass just slipped out of my hand,” Jett replied from down the hall.

Blowing out a long breath, I stepped into my silky dress and pulled my fingers through my tangled Brunette hair to comb it out. It was typical Jett behavior to make my heart fly out of my chest. He was always keeping me on my toes, surprising me at the worst times.

We were going out with our friends tonight, like we did every Friday night. We typically drove ourselves but our truck wheel bearing was loose so Jett didn't feel comfortable driving it tonight. I didn't know much about vehicles, so I assumed if Jett said we couldn't use it, it was really bad. With the condition of that old truck, I was surprised he hadn't stopped driving it sooner.

I headed out of our room to the kitchen, weary of where I stepped, careful not to cut my foot on any glass.

“I cleaned it all up, you don’t need to tip toe.” Jett ambled over to me with a grin on his face, his steps creaking on the old floorboards. He wrapped his arms around my waist, nuzzling his nose into my hair and inhaling deeply. “You ready?”

“Probably would’ve been ready sooner had you not scared the shit out of me.” Chills rose along my arms as he pressed his lips to the side of my neck. Now wasn’t the time to get turned on. Brendt would be here any minute.

I slid out of his arms to grab my purse on the counter, double checking that my phone, wallet, and chapstick were in there. After confirming, I flicked off the kitchen light. Jett was already waiting for me at the front door as I walked toward him, his eyes roaming over my body, taking in my outfit. Slipping past him to head outside, he locked the front door behind us just as his friend was pulling up.

“Is Stella still meeting us there?” he asked.

I nodded and slung my purse over my shoulder, walking to the car idling in our driveway.

Stella was my closest friend. We told each other everything. She probably knew more about me than I did about myself. I opened the rear door and slid in while Jett greeted his friend at the driver window.

“Damn, Jett. You start early?” Brendt joked with him, exaggerating his sniffing of the air.

Jett patted Brendt on the shoulder through the window. “The bar is expensive, dude. You always have to pregame if you don’t want to go broke.” He walked around to the passenger side and hopped in.

I was glad Brendt offered to drive us tonight because that meant I actually

got to drink with them. I usually ended up as Jett's designated driver, but I didn't mind it too much. It made me happy to see him enjoying himself with our friends. Quite frankly, I didn't enjoy hangovers so I really didn't mind having one or two drinks then heading home. Jett, on the other hand, doesn't seem bothered by hangovers. Sometimes I wondered if he even got them because he's always full of life the next day.

I absently toyed with the charm on my bracelet as I stared out the window, the rain starting to come down in a light sprinkle. It rained more often than not in Oldport. Most people complained when the weather was gloomy, but I found myself feeling more tranquil. That might be why I'd never had the desire to leave this town.

I grew up here with my mother and younger brother, Ross. My father left when I was six years old, probably to be with someone better than my mom. She blamed his leaving on me, saying he only wanted a son and was disappointed he had a daughter. It took them years to get pregnant after me, but he left a couple weeks before she got the positive test. At least, that's the story she always told me growing up. I never tried to look for him online because from what I was told, he wanted nothing to do with me.

After he left and my mother had Ross, it felt like life was a blur of motions until I met Jett. My mother resented me my entire childhood and made it clear how she felt about me any time I got in her way. I eventually learned that staying in my room was the best way to keep our dynamic somewhat civil.

Jett was the first person to give me his undivided attention, besides Stella, of course. I quickly grew attached to him. I guess you could blame daddy issues or something.

He actually *heard* the words coming out of my mouth instead of just

absently listening. It made me feel important for the first time in my life, like what I was saying actually mattered. I had no desire to stay in my childhood home, so after a month of dating, I moved into his house.

I heard Brendt flick on the blinker, indicating we were pulling into the parking lot outside D Bar. He put the car in park, noticing Stella's sedan parked a few spots over, next to our friend Luke's SUV.

Brendt turned around in his seat, wiggling his eyebrows at me over the headrest. I laughed and got out, heading inside out of the rain while Jett stuck outside to have a smoke.

Luke and Stella typically drove separately from the rest of us, but if anyone ended up drinking too much, we'd take one car home and leave the other vehicles at the bar until morning.

Since we all started hanging out, I had a hunch that Brendt had a thing for Stella, but he's never acted on it so I couldn't be sure. It's ridiculous that he can hook up with countless girls but only steal glances at Stella, as if he's afraid to admit he's attracted to her or something. Not that Stella particularly wanted to be with him, or so she says.

Once inside, I took off my denim jacket and found Stella sitting at the bar. She turned around in her stool and smiled when she spotted me, waving me over.

The bar was dimly lit with wood accents throughout the space. There were stained oak pillars reaching from floor to ceiling dispersed around the bar, matching the chairs and tables. Hanging pendant lights cast a warm haze through the humid air. The bar itself was worn and looked like it had been polished one too many times to try to erase the etchings on the surface. Like most bars, the liquor was on full display, covering the glass shelves lining the

wall behind the counter. It had that all too familiar smell of stale beer and whiskey.

There were two pool tables on the opposite side of the room, their smooth green felt cloths adorned with chalk marks and scuffs. The guys typically stuck to that side of the room unless they were grabbing another drink.

“A silk dress? On this cold day? You’ve always been a little risk, Em, but I’m cold just looking at you.”

I held up the jean jacket. “It’s not like I didn’t bring a coat.”

“I don’t think too many people wear denim jackets for warmth. I think they’re more so just for looks.” She held a dark drink out to me. “Here, I got you an espresso martini.”

I sat down on the stool and grabbed the drink from her, taking a sip. Jett walked in, heading to the pool table where Brendt was racking balls and Luke was grabbing cues off the wall.

Jett worked construction, which meant some weeks he wasn’t home. Though initially it wasn’t planned, we would always end up at this same bar every Friday when he got off work, so eventually it became our meet up spot with the guys and Stella.

I ordered three beers and brought them over to the table next to where Jett, Luke, and Brendt were beginning their game of pool. Jett kissed the side of my head and grabbed one of the beers, “Thanks, baby.”

“Kind of a habit.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and leaned my head on his chest. He took a sip of his beer, resting his other hand on my head to stroke my hair. I inhaled, the smell of whiskey filling my nose. I lifted my head to look at him. “I didn’t realize you started with whiskey at the house. Do you want me to get you one instead?”

He shook his head and swallowed the gulp of beer, setting it back down on

the table and grabbing his pool cue. “I wanted to switch to beer anyway. You read my mind.”

He bent down to kiss me, tangling his fingers in my wavy hair as he lightly gripped the back of my head to pull me closer. I kept my arms around his waist, fisting his shirt in my hands.

“C’mon, guys. How many times do we need to tell you to get a room?” Luke grumbled, rolling his eyes as he grabbed a beer off the table.

Jett pulled away, dropping his hand as he turned to Luke. “I think you’re just jealous, Luke, always wishing you had a girl to kiss like this.”

Luke laughed and took a long pull from his beer. “That’s your problem man, always thinking everyone’s jealous of you.”

The three of them were always trying to get a rise out of each other, so much so that I didn’t think I’d ever seen them be serious together.

I made my way back to the bar, sliding into my seat next to Stella. Leaning my elbow on the bar, I faced her.

“How’s work been going? Your boss still giving you shit?” Stella asked, nursing her drink.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “Always. I don’t know what his problem is. I handle my tables, keep customers’ drinks filled, and smiles on their faces. He probably hates how I bring in double everyone else’s tips and wishes he had a cut. He’s just an ass, no other way to put it.”

“Amen to that,” she said, raising her glass to clink against mine. “But seriously, I’m glad you try not to let it get to you. Don’t waste your breath on some small townner like him. He’s just upset that the furthest he could go in his boring little life was to manage a restaurant.”

“Stella, we’re small townners,” I pointed out.

“That’s not the point, Em! He’s lame, you’re not. You’ve got a smokin’ hot

boyfriend, a house, everything you could want.”

“I don’t have a car.” Jett would pick me up or dropped me off at work if he was home and I asked, but most of the time, I’d walk the short distance.

“You’ll get one eventually, especially with all those tips you’ve been racking up.”

The bell on the door dinged and Stella swiveled in her chair to see who was coming in.

“Speaking of smoking hot..” She nudged my arm.

I gazed over my shoulder at the door. Filling the entrance to the bar was probably the most attractive man I’d ever seen. No, not probably, he *definitely* was. He had shaggy cinnamon colored hair that was swept back from his forehead with dark scruff on his face, accentuating his jaw line. His lips were pressed in a firm line as he shrugged off his brown coat, revealing tattooed arms and biceps that stretched the sleeves of his dark gray t-shirt.

I had to make sure my jaw hadn’t fallen open.

I could see the green in his eyes from across the room, reminding me of pine trees in the spring. His gaze landed on me and I quickly turned back to my drink, seeming disinterested. Stella, on the other hand, continued to stare.

Seconds later, a stool was pulled out from the bar. I glanced over and saw him sitting a few seats over, noticing he wore broken down cowboy boots, probably as his everyday footwear.

Could that even be comfortable?

I elbowed Stella in the arm. “You’re staring.”

“How could you not?” She smiled and turned back to me, leaning to whisper in my ear, “But seriously, Em, do you *see* him?”

“I do, and I also see my boyfriend behind me playing pool with our friends. You, however, have my permission to do as you please.”

She let out a little shriek and kissed my cheek. “You’re the best friend a girl could ever ask for.”

I took a large gulp of my drink, finishing it off. “That’s what they keep telling me.”

“Watch my drink while I use the ladies’ room?”

I nodded as she got up to head for the restroom.

Playing with the stem of my empty glass, I set my elbow back on the bar, blowing out a long breath of air between my lips.

Feeling like I had eyes on me, I turned around to look for Jett. He was still playing pool, running his hand over his clean-shaven jaw, thinking hard about his next move.

I saw that their glasses were nearly empty so I asked Craig, the owner of D Bar and only bartender on shift right now, for another round of beers. Luke and Jett were too into their game to notice when I walked over with the drinks, but Brendt mouthed “thank you” from the opposite side of the pool table when he saw me setting them down. Giving him a small smile, I turned and walked back to the bar, ordering two more for me and Stella.

“You a waitress who drinks on the job?” A voice that reminded me of smooth, rich whisky asked from a few seats down.

I slowly looked up from my freshly poured beer, my hands cupping the bottom of my glass on the counter. Turning my head to my right, my eyes landed on the man who had no right looking the way he did.

“I’m sorry?” I asked, running my fingers along the cool glass of my beer.

“You’re drinking, but you just brought beers over to those guys,” he clarified.

I noticed he hadn’t ordered a drink yet, but I also realized the bartender hadn’t asked him for his order, either.

“I know them. And no, I don’t work here.” I went to turn back to my beer when he grunted.

“Sorry?” I asked again. I wasn’t sure who shit in his cheerios, but I wasn’t going to let him have some opinion of me when he had no idea who I was.

“Nothin’ to be sorry about, darling.” He waved down the bartender, who continued to wipe down the same glass he’d been cleaning for about five minutes now.

Not looking up from the glass, Craig said, “If you’re looking for a more touristy bar, go down a few blocks. Probably more your cup of tea.”

“Not a tourist.” The grunting not-so-cowboy man tossed a few dollars on the bar. “I’ll have a beer.”

Craig glanced up at him for a moment before turning his attention back on the glass he was still wiping down. “Sure look like a tourist. Ain’t never seen you around.”

“You’re right. I just moved here. I’d like a beer,” he repeated, sounding annoyed he had to ask again.

Craig moved to the tap handle, filling the glass in his hand with beer. Once it was full with more head than any beer I’d seen him pour before, he set it down a bit too hard so that some would slosh out in front of the man. I let out a quiet snort as Stella returned from the restroom.

“Did I miss anything?” she asked as she sat back down on the stool.

“Your new man sure knows how to make a first impression,” I mumbled.

“Baby!” I turned to see Jett grinning from ear to ear while Luke and Brendt rolled their eyes. “You won’t believe who won.”

Stella and I got up from the bar, taking our belongings with us. Their game of pool being over typically meant that we were either going to call it a night

early, or drink a shit ton more and find our way home at some point in the night.

This was a pattern with the three of them. The game would be over and they'd be ready to leave, or they'd want to play five more rounds and end up shitfaced. It all depended on how long of a week they'd had.

"I'll answer that for her. It sounds like Jett won, and now Luke and Brendt are butthurt," Stella said, flipping her pin-straight blonde hair over her shoulder when she saw Brendt watching her. She loved teasing him, but that's all it would ever be. She didn't date brunettes, they were just eye candy to her. If Stella ever had a man on her arm, it was usually a tall, dirty blonde, which made me wonder why she'd never been into Luke. Though, she'd made a strict "no dating the boys" rule to herself after seeing how injudicious they could be after a few drinks.

"We would've had him, but Luke here is a bad shot after one and a half beers." Brendt jokingly hit Luke in the forearm with the tip of his cue, grinning.

"I'm the bad shot? You missed every opportunity you had to smoke Jett's ass." Luke finished off what was left of his beer and checked the time on his phone. "I should get going anyway, got work in the morning."

"Why would you work on a Saturday? You guys just got back this morning," I asked, standing beside Stella with my jacket in my arms.

Jett put the cues back on the wall and came over to me, standing directly in front of me. The smell of alcohol filled my nose as he set his hands on my hips. "We've got a lot of jobs going at the moment. Construction never stops, you know?"

"I guess so." I reached my hand up to curl around the back of his neck, sliding my fingers along his closely cropped black hair. I gave him a quick

peck on the lips, but instead of letting me pull back, he reined me in to him again, kissing me deeper.

I could physically feel the eye roll Stella gave to the guys.

I kicked her shin, my mouth still mingling with Jett's.

"Ow!" She laughed, rubbing her leg.

Breaking the kiss, I pulled my jacket on as Jett headed over to the bar.

"I took care of the bill," I called after him.

"I know, baby."

Stella was chatting with Brendt to my left when I turned to see Jett heading through the door to the back room with Craig. My forehead creased with confusion as I noticed Stella's mystery man was also gone.

"I'll see you ladies next Friday," Luke said, giving both me and Stella a salute.

Needing to keep busy while I waited for Jett to come back out, I brought the empty glasses up to the bar, figuring it'd help make Craig's night a little easier so he could get out of here sooner. I always appreciated it when customers piled their dishes together on the table in a neat tower before they left. It helped me mostly avoid having to stick my fingers in piles of ketchup and touch wadded up napkins stained with God-knows-what.

Setting the last glass down, I wiped my hands on the front of my black dress.

"Thought you said you weren't a waitress?" The voice startled me, causing me to jump.

I swiveled my head to the man behind the voice. "God, you really don't announce yourself when sneaking up on a girl?" I realized I had my hand clutched over my racing heart and pulled it away, trying to act like he didn't just scare the shit out of me.

“A woman.” His focus was solely on me, like we weren’t standing in a bar full of better things to look at.

“What?”

“You’re a woman. Not a little girl. Don’t give yourself less credit than you deserve.”

When I didn’t reply, he raised an eyebrow at me, waiting. I’m sure that look made lots of *women’s* panties fall off but all I felt right now was annoyed.

“I’m not a waitress. I mean, I am, just not here.” He didn’t need to know any of that, I just needed to fill the silence that was making my skin crawl. Who even was this guy? “Whether I am or not, it’s really none of your business,” I added, then quickly regretted it. I was rambling. I glared at him, not sure why he thought he deserved answers out of me.

He was silent as he stared at me. Naturally, I stared right back.

Was I really having a staring contest with some stranger in a bar right now?

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to get some kind of reaction out of me, but I wasn’t going to give it to him.

“You ready to go, baby?” Jett interrupted, causing me to break eye contact with the wanna-be cowboy. Jesus, did nobody bother to announce themselves?

“Yep.” I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jacket, suddenly feeling cold even though we hadn’t left the bar yet.

Jett slung his arm around my shoulders, steering me toward the door. If he saw my interaction with the guy, he didn’t give any indication.

Stella walked out behind us, pulling out her keys. “I’ll text you later, Em.”

“Looking forward to it,” I joked.

She got in her car, starting the engine.

The night air was cold on my bare legs as Jett leaned some of his weight on

me. I looked up at him, his dark brown eyes trained ahead as I grabbed the hand dangling over my shoulder. “What were you doing in the back with Craig?”

“Just catching up. Seeing how things were going with him and the wife. Luke already leave?”

Typical Jett behavior to change the subject. I knew if I pressed, I wouldn’t get anywhere, so I nodded.

“I’ll have to give him shit tomorrow for not saying goodbye.”

“You work tomorrow too?” I pouted. It seemed like he was working more than he was at home lately.

He kissed the side of my head as we headed for the car, brushing his lips across my olive skin as he said, “I’ll be home before dinner, I promise.”

I opened the passenger door for him as he removed his arm from over my shoulder. Brendt was already in the driver's seat, the heater blasting warm air throughout the cab. As Jett slid into the seat, I got in the back, holding my hands in front of the heater after buckling myself in.

Stella was right, a silk dress was not a smart move on a forty five degree night, but when all I wore during the week was a waitress uniform, I liked to dress up a little when we went out.

Jett loved it. He loved showing me off, so naturally I had to dress like the whole town was looking. Mostly because they were. Everyone knew everyone around here, and we knew when someone was out of place. There were shops for out-of-towners and shops for the locals. They didn’t mix, and if you were caught lying about being from here, the locals didn’t take it lightly.

We took pride in being a small, close-knit town.

My mind wandered back to the man in the bar as Brendt pulled out of the

parking lot. He'd said he just moved here, but why?

From someone who grew up here, I could see the appeal, but this town was just a gas station stop for many. More people moved away from Oldport rather than moved in.

Whatever the reason was, I hoped the town wasn't too hard on him. Newcomers learned all too quickly that the people of Oldport didn't take it lightly when people came in trying to change our ways.

Chapter Two

EMERSON

Saturday morning hit me like a truck.

I'd only had two drinks but my head pounded like I'd drunk a whole handle of whiskey. I guess that's what I got for mixing an espresso martini with beer.

Groaning, I blinked the sleep from my eyes. I felt beside myself to find I was alone in bed.

Jett had already left for work.

Typical.

Getting out of bed, I pulled on one of Jett's t-shirts, heading to the bathroom to brush my teeth and take a shower in the hopes it would wash my hangover away. Jett was probably up before the sun, hangover free. I wondered if Stella felt the same way I did every Saturday morning after our bar nights.

I grabbed my phone to send her a text on my way to the kitchen when I saw my coworker, Jessica, had texted me six times. Rubbing the blurriness from my eyes, I read through them.

Jessica 6:45am: I need you to cover my shift, if you're free.

Jessica 6:47am: If I call out and don't have back up, I'm pretty sure Mr. Bossy Pants will can my ass.

Jessica 7:03am: I wouldn't ask if it wasn't an emergency.

Jessica 7:10am: You really gonna make me beg?

Jessica 7:13am: I'll cover any shift you need me to, any time, I just need this solid from you.

Jessica 7:17am: Jeez Emerson, you better be sleeping and not ignoring me right now.

I looked at the time. Her shift was in fifteen minutes. Without the truck, it'd take me at least twenty to walk there. I typed back a response, agreeing to cover her, and hurried to get ready.

I threw on some light makeup and tugged my hair up in a ponytail, not bothering to mess with the disaster I knew it was. Pulling on my skin-tight jeans and black crop top that had the restaurant name splayed straight across my boobs, I grabbed my jean jacket and headed out the door.

I wasn't too concerned about disappointing Elijah, my wonderful boss who seemed to always have a stick up his ass, but I also didn't want to pull Jessica under the hate cloud with me, so I started speed walking.

I'd been living with Jett for almost a year when I started working at the Tavern. He was making enough money to cover all our bills and take care of me, but I missed having a social life outside of our Friday nights at the bar.

As glorious as it sounded, being home all the time gets boring when everyone else around you has a job and a life. Without too many places to work in this town besides the hardware store, the grocery store, or one of the tourist shops, I immediately agreed to work at the restaurant when Jett said he could get me a job there.

I guess I shouldn't hate my job because aside from my boss, I had a good time working there. I just wished it offered more than serving drinks, cleaning tables, and taking orders. The tips were good, which made up for it. The more skin you showed, the less clothing you wore, the better the tips would be.

I had my regulars on the weekends: the truck drivers home from their long days on the road; the fishermen who docked for the weekend; the women enjoying the two days off from their office jobs. We had more tourists pop through on the weekdays. This town wasn't a final destination in most people's vacations. It was a fun pit stop on their way to their weekend destination.

Sometimes I wondered if that was why my dad left, Oldport being so boring and all.

My mother didn't teach me much growing up, but she did engrave in my head that in order to be recognized in this world, you had to make memorable first impressions. Every person I met, every place I went, I had to stand out. If I didn't, what was the point? To blend in? I didn't know about anyone else, but I didn't meet too many people who got a lot out of life by just blending in.

The cool breeze blew my long ponytail over my shoulder, stray hairs coming loose in the wind and brushing across my face.

I wanted to live a life worth remembering. I had to, because my childhood was something to forget. My mother's world revolved around Ross and making sure he had everything he needed to be successful in life.

I didn't get the same treatment. Ross could sleep in until noon, lull around all day in his pajamas, then stay up playing video games until the sun began to rise. She'd claim she was letting him enjoy his childhood because life only

got harder as you got older. She bought him anything he asked for, cooked him whatever he felt like for dinner.

The opposite was for me. I did chores to earn an allowance, ate whatever was on my plate, and imagined a life where my dad was here. I always dreamed that one day, he'd come back. He'd turn my mom around and we'd all live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, I didn't get happy ever afters. I got told I needed to stop dressing like a boy, to act like a lady, to smile sweetly even if my day sucked. So far, the world had chewed me up and spit me out, but it made me the person I am today. I'd be damned if I let anyone look at me the way my mother looked at me every day growing up.

I didn't just dress up for Jett or the men around town. I put effort into my image because confidence exudes purpose. If I looked like I had my shit together, people would believe it and not think twice.

In reality, I had no idea what I was doing aside from being a waitress and a girlfriend.

Walking through the back door into the break room of The Tavern, I quickly pulled my jacket off and shoved it in my locker, grabbing my apron to tie it around my waist.

"Why are you here? You're off today," Elijah asked as he walked through the dark hallway just as I was about to head to the floor.

"Jessica asked me to cover her shift, said she had an emergency," I explained. I was out of breath from jogging to get here.

"Well, you're late to her shift." He walked by me, his shoulder slamming into mine in the narrow hallway. I stopped walking and took a deep breath, trying to relax the tension that seeped through my bones.

If I let it bother me, I'd lose my job. Not that I really needed this job for the

money, but to keep my sanity, I let it go.

I headed out to the floor where the dark leather booths lined the wall along the windows, the hum of conversation filling the air. Seeing that Jessica's section was already filled with the morning rush, I grabbed a pitcher of water and filled glasses, settling into the routine I knew so well.

I had twenty minutes left of Jessica's shift when Elijah asked me to work a double. Apparently, a majority of my coworkers had emergencies on a Saturday.

What a coincidence.

I agreed to stay even though my feet had started throbbing hours ago. I shot Jett a text to let him know I'd picked up a shift since I hadn't had time to text him on my way here, and explained I was now working a double.

About seven hours later, I finally got the chance to check my phone.

Jett 9:30pm: Let me know when you get off so I can pick you up.

Heading back out to the floor after the quickest bathroom break of my life, I saw the last person I wanted to see here. The tall drink of water from the bar last night.

He was standing there with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his dark wash jeans, acting casual as if every female with half a brain wasn't staring straight at him.

He was wearing the same duck brown jacket, half zipped to reveal a black t-shirt that hugged his broad chest. His physique was something to admire, even under all those layers of clothing.

What was I going on about? I shouldn't be standing here discreetly eye-fucking a man that got under my skin for absolutely no reason. Though, I was

only noticing features that stood out to the common eye. Like the way he was now staring directly at me.

Snapping out of it, I grabbed the tray of drinks waiting for me at the bar, turning directly into my coworker, Rita, who was making her way around the corner with a handful of dirty plates.

The drinks slid as I maneuvered the tray to keep them from falling

“Something distracting you, Em?” Rita called behind her, rushing off to the kitchen, as I worked to regain my usually perfect balance.

“Just ready to go home. It’s been a long day,” I replied.

I brought the drinks over to one of my tables, then wrote down the order of the family next to them. Turning around, I noticed someone had seated the mystery man in my section.

Lovely.

Heaving a sigh, I made my way to his booth. He didn’t look up from the menu as I approached, so after about fifteen seconds of standing there in silence, I cleared my throat to get his attention.

Polite was not in my vocabulary after our interaction the night before.

He slowly laid the menu flat on the table, angling his head at me. Even standing here, we were almost eye level. Granted, I was pretty short at five foot one. The guy had to be at *least* a foot taller than me.

“Can I get you started with something to drink?” I asked, pasting on a smile as I poised my pen above my little notepad.

“Water, please,” he replied. He didn’t smile or frown or make any sort of facial expression, just stared at me with a blank face.

“That’s it?” I blurted. *The man wanted a water, was that really a problem?*

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s what I asked for, darlin’.”

That fucking look.

“It’s a Saturday night. You don’t want a beer or something a bit stronger than just water?”

He shook his head and went back to looking at the menu. Man of few words. Got it.

My notepad slapped against my thigh as I dropped my arms. Turning on my heel, I made my way to the bar and waved down Logan, The Tavern’s best and only bartender. If he wasn’t here, the waitresses had to figure out how to make the drinks, so he was working as many doubles as he could recently.

We used to have a second bartender but our asshole of a boss made him quit on the spot two weeks ago when he said his spicy margarita wasn’t spicy enough. Well, that wasn’t really the *only* reason, but it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

“Tell me, what’d that beast of a man order? I want to know his taste.” Logan licked his lips. “In drinks, of course,” he added, smiling as he leaned into his hands placed in front of him on the edge of the bar.

“Just a water, Lo.”

“That man, the one we both see right there, in that booth, only wants a water?”

Logan thought he could judge people’s characters by what drink they ordered: if they ordered a margarita, he deemed them outgoing; if it was wine, they were a gossip; gin and tonic, they were invigorating.

He held his hands up, turning around to fill a glass with water. “Alright. If that’s what the ravenous beast wants.”

Grabbing the ice water from Logan, I walked it over to the booth, setting it down and seeing that he was still studying the menu. “I’ll give you a minute to decide.”

I took one step to turn when he said, “I’m ready.”

Pausing a moment before turning back to him, I pursed my lips together and waited for him to speak. After standing in silence for a good ten seconds, I asked, “What can I get you?”

“What do you recommend?”

“Thought you were ready to order?”

Silence.

“The burger is pretty good, lots of locals like it.”

“Then I’ll have the burger.”

I gave a curt nod and walked to the POS system by the bar, putting in his order.

I wasn’t sure what this guy’s problem was, but if he was trying to give me a headache, he’d succeeded. The sooner he ate and left, the better.

Checking my watch, I let out a sigh of relief seeing that the restaurant was closing soon. After closing, once I’d cleaned all my tables and swept the floors, I was good to go. I couldn’t wait to get home and take these shoes off. I’m pretty sure my feet would be sore for a year.

Hearing RJ, our chef, call my name, I grabbed the warm plate and brought it over to my quiet, infuriating customer.

“Thanks,” he said as I set the plate down.

“Can I get you anything else or are you ready for the bill? Take your time, of course. I just need to start closing everything out.”

He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, pulling out his card and setting it on the table in front of me. I didn’t take it at first. Instead, I stood there biting the inside of my cheek.

Could it kill him to say anything more than a couple words? I couldn’t say why it bothered me, it just did. This guy strolled into our little town on the

coast of Washington and thought he could be all uncanny and closed off. It was almost like he thought he was above us.

Grabbing the card off the table, I headed to the POS. I swiped the card a little too aggressively, then closed out his bill.

I wasn't sure why I did it, but I checked the name on his card. Wesley Barton. I'd definitely never heard the name around here so his story checked out. So far.

Oldport was such a wet, cold place - you'd be crazy to move here willingly. The locals adapted to the weather, loving to watch the storms roll in from the ocean. We appreciated being in walking distance to everything we needed; and delighted in knowing that mostly everyone who visited here was just passing through.

Until Wesley Barton, I guess.

I brought his card back to him and began clearing the dirty tables, piling plates and utensils in a plastic tub. Rita was sweeping the floors while Logan washed and dried glassware at the bar. I untied my apron, the material getting in the way as I cleaned, and tossed it on the leather cushion of the booth closest to the bar.

Herald, one of the old fishermen who frequented here, sat at the bar finishing off his beer.

"How's my favorite smokeshow doing?" he asked, giving me a smile as he angled his body in his barstool to face me.

"Trying to close this place up so I can finally get out of here. You gonna babysit that beer all night so I'm stuck here?" I joked, blowing a stray strand of hair out of my face.

Herald had been coming to the Tavern any time he was in town since well before I worked here. He flirted too much for his own good, but he didn't

mean any harm by it. I took no offense to his comments, I was used to it by now.

With the reputation I held in this town, the nickname was expected. The guys around Oldport flirted with me more often than not, but anyone with a lick of common sense knew it wouldn't go anywhere. Jett made that clear to everyone when we started dating.

They could look, but they couldn't touch.

Herald downed the last of his beer in one gulp, set some money on the bar, and got to his feet, pulling his coat on. "Doll, you know I would never hold you up. Enjoy your night. Say hey to Jett for me, will you?"

I gave a closed lip smile and nodded, grabbing his glass off the bar as he headed past me for the front door. I looked over my shoulder to check if Wesley had finished his meal and saw he was standing up, adjusting his jacket. I started to walk over, intending to grab his plate, but stopped in my tracks as I got closer to him.

I had definitely underestimated how much he filled the room. Standing this close to him, I had to angle my face all the way up like I was practically staring at the ceiling, just to look at him. If I didn't, I was practically staring right at his chest.

I had been drawn to Jett's physical features since the day I met him outside the bar all those years ago. He was muscular in a blue-collar type of way, but nothing drastic. He had bronze Italian skin that tanned easily in the summer and close shaven dark brown hair that matched his eyes. Wesley and Jett were like night and day in terms of physical appearances.

While Jett reminded me of a stiff tiger always ready to pounce, Wesley made me think of the quiet calm before a big storm.

Wesley's short facial hair covered the entire lower half of his face, which

accentuated his emerald eyes. His hair was messy, but it only added to his careless demeanor. I felt sorry for whoever got stuck dating him. He didn't look like he had a humorous bone in his body.

To my surprise, he picked up his plate and glass.

He turned around to face me and I realized I was still standing there like a deer in the headlights. "I can bring it over to the counter, if you'd like. You look like you could use a second off your feet," he said, gesturing to the kitchen.

"As much as I would appreciate that, I can't let you. My boss probably wouldn't be too happy seeing a customer cleaning up after themselves. Thank you, though." I grabbed the dishes from him, the tips of my fingers brushing over his as I grabbed the glass.

I pulled the cup to my chest as sparks crawled up my arm with awareness. My pulse raced for seriously no good fucking reason. Was I an idiot for thinking I felt something? The answer was yes.

He gave no indication that he had the same reaction. Afterall, it was just our fingers grazing each other.

Just your hangover fucking with your head, Emerson.

He nodded once and turned to leave. Clearing my throat, I brought the dishes to the counter by the kitchen. Inhaling a deep breath, I went back to his table to wipe it with disinfectant.

About twenty-five minutes later after finishing my end of the night duties, I headed outside into the brisk Washington air. The slight breeze blew the stray hairs that had made their way out of my ponytail throughout the day into my face and I swiped at them.

Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I dialed Jett. After five rings, it went to voicemail. Heaving a sigh, I sat down on the cement step outside the

back of the restaurant.

I hoped he hadn't fallen asleep. I knew his phone was on because it rang when I dialed, which at least meant his phone wasn't dead. I could walk home, but my feet were throbbing and it being dark out didn't make me feel good about walking alone. Though Oldport was a particularly safe town, I didn't want to risk it. I'd give it a few minutes to see if he'd call back. If he didn't, I'd call Stella.

There was movement in my peripheral vision, but I wasn't in the mood to engage with anyone, so I kept my gaze trained on my phone. Whoever it was could keep on walking.

"Do you need a ride?" an unfortunately now familiar voice asked.

Angling my head up, I made eye contact with Wesley.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I have a ride."

Looking back down at my phone, I tried to make it obvious I wasn't in the mood for small talk. I wasn't going to get in a stranger's vehicle anyway, especially this late at night.

Noticing he wasn't going anywhere, I looked up at him again.

He made a show of looking around. "Don't look like that's the case, darlin'."

Rolling my eyes, I replied, "He's on the way. Why? Were you planning on taking me home on some trusty steed?" I glanced at his boots, then back to his face.

He was crazy if he thought I'd actually get in a car with him. For all I knew, he was some predator on the run. What was stopping him from abducting me? Nothing, and I didn't plan on making an appearance on one of those true crime shows all the mothers in this town watched.

He grinned, letting out a low chuckle under his breath. "Don't have a

horse.”

“Then why are you wearing boots?” I gestured to his feet.

“Am I not allowed to wear boots?”

“I don’t see the point in wearing them if you don’t have- you know what, never mind. I have a ride. You can go on with your night.”

My phone buzzed in my hand. *Finally*. I answered Jett’s call on the first ring.

“Hey baby, what’s up?” Was he serious? He should’ve known why I was calling. He’s the one who offered to pick me up after work.

“Can you come get me?” I realized I was bouncing my leg and forced it to stop, glancing over at Wesley. He was staring right at me, arms crossed over his chest. Well, he knew I was lying now.

“Where you at? Stella’s?”

“I told you I picked up a double today. I’m at the Tavern.” I looked away from Wesley and stood up, turning my back on him.

“On my way, baby.”

I hung up the phone and slid it back in my pocket. *If he said anything-*

“Sounds to me like you didn’t have a ride, Emerson.”

Asshole.

Spinning around, I pinned him with a glare. “How the hell do you know my name?”

He gestured to the name tag still pinned to my shirt. I pulled it off and shoved it in my pocket. This is exactly why waitresses shouldn’t have to wear the damn things.

“It’s not polite to stare at a woman’s chest, Wesley,” I said in the hopes of catching him off guard.

He chuckled, his gaze falling to the ground before he met my eyes again.

“Got it off my card, huh?”

Frustrated with this entire conversation, I went to walk around him to head to the front of the restaurant so I could see when Jett pulled up.

Right as I stepped around him, my left knee buckled. He caught my upper arm before I could go down, sending those damn sparks down my arm and into my fingers.

This was just great. First the embarrassment of lying about the ride home, now almost falling splat on my face. When I got home, I was going to bury myself in my sheets for the next five years.

Braving a look up at him knowing my cheeks were on fire, I swallowed audibly.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to..” I trailed off. I stood there like an idiot staring up at him, losing my train of thought.

There was nothing I wanted more right now than to be at home, standing in the shower washing off the shit show of a day I’d had. If Jett had just answered my first call, all of this could have been avoided. I could have clocked out and ended my day with that, but naturally, it had to go further south than it already was.

Wesley let go of my arm as we heard a motorcycle approaching. Snapping out of the staring contest we somehow got locked into again, I cleared my throat and continued on my way toward the sidewalk out front.

“Is that your boyfriend?” I heard him call as I walked away.

“What’s it to you?” I replied with a glance over my shoulder just as Jett was pulling up to the curb. I swung my leg over the back of Jett’s motorcycle and grabbed the helmet he held out to me, shoving it on my head. Flipping the visor down, I took one last look at Wesley, who stood there with a stupid cocky grin on his face, watching as we sped away.

Chapter Three

WESLEY

I never saw myself as a mechanic, but here I was, sitting in my truck outside Jim's Auto Body waiting for my first shift to start.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed working on vehicles in my free time. Tinkering on old cars was probably my only remaining hobby after I dropped riding horses, I just wouldn't have chosen it as my career.

Given the limited businesses hiring around here, I didn't have too many options. I saw this place was looking for mechanics and walked right in to apply. They hired me on the spot, scheduling me for my first shift starting Monday.

So here I stood, thirty minutes early to my already too-early-in-the-day shift.

Seriously, who started a mechanics shift at six in the fucking morning?

I couldn't sleep very well the past few nights. I had a particular little woman stuck in my head. When I say stuck, I meant stuck like horse shit on the bottom of your boot. You could try to get rid of it, but some part of it

would stick in those little grooves. Emerson was stuck in the grooves of my mind.

I was trying to avoid drama. Women were complicated and I didn't want any part of that mess. I had too much going on in my life to deal with butthurt boyfriends, and this particular woman certainly had a boyfriend.

I knew she was with that drunk from the bar, so why did my dumbass bother asking if that was her boyfriend when it was pretty damn obvious?

She had a big attitude for someone so damn tiny, seemingly not taking anyone's bullshit, especially mine. I'd given her a hard time at the restaurant just to see how she'd react, but after overhearing her tell a customer she'd been there for fourteen hours at that point, I lightened up a bit.

She had looked exhausted but I figured it was due to the fact she'd been out the night before, not because she'd been waiting on tables all damn day. Respectfully, whoever suckered her into working a double on a Saturday deserved to go to hell.

She wore those light washed jeans that looked like they were painted on her body, showing off the curve of her ass. I hated to admit that I'd watched the muscles in her legs move as she bussed tables. It was almost like I could see through the fabric to those tan legs I'd glimpsed Friday night.

Women like Emerson got in men's heads and made them do crazy things. The way she dressed, how she held herself. It was all a façade meant to lure them in. I'm sure she survived off of all the compliments men gave her.

It didn't make sense to me why her boyfriend would let that shit go on. If she was mine, I'd make every damn person in this town back the fuck off.

It was a good thing that'd never happen. I was here to lay low and clear my head of all the shit back home.

Could I even call it home anymore? My father passed away a little over a

month ago, which left only my mother back home. I had an older brother, Easton, but he left ages ago and made a family of his own, abandoning us and leaving his old life behind. We hadn't spoken since before he moved out, and I was completely fine with that.

My father's funeral was practically last week and my mother was already boning some middle-aged hippy coffee shop owner.

"People grieve in different ways, Wes," she had said. "You can't hate me for needing someone after all we've gone through."

"Hell yes, I can," was my only response.

That was the last thing I'd said to her. I packed a bag that night and drove away. I didn't care which direction I was going, I just wanted to get out of there.

Growing up, my parents were the kind of parents every kid dreamed of having. They loved each other more every day, if that was even possible. They never fought, or if they did, they didn't do it in front of me and Easton. They were high school sweethearts. Inseparable, madly in love, crazy for each other.

All the things I'd never have.

My dad worked two jobs so my mom could stay home with us. My brother and I were both surprise pregnancies. They had my brother when they were still teenagers, and I came along four years later. They called me their little miracle baby since it took so long to conceive me and proved every damn day that they wouldn't take me for granted. Whoever wanted two kids when they were barely twenty years old was crazy.

Then I turned twenty seven and my dad got sick.

That's when the fights began.

He couldn't work anymore with his condition, so my mom had to pick up a

couple jobs. Between working all the time and taking care of my dad, you could physically see the stress piling on top of her shoulders.

When he passed a year later, some could say it was like a weight was lifted off of us with how hard it was to balance taking care of him and doing everything else on our twenty acre property, but not enough fucking weight to move on entirely.

Just because the man was dead didn't mean he never existed.

I understood moving on from a lost loved one. I got that people grieved in different ways. But sleeping with a new man not even forty five days after your husband passed away? I couldn't even begin to sympathize with that.

Looking out my truck window, I saw a gray SUV pulling in. Assuming it was the owner of the shop, I hopped out.

Walking over to him as he opened his door, I held my hand out to shake his hand. "You must be Jim. I spoke with the assistant manager the other day, he said to meet you here."

"Jim? Where'd you get that name, boy?" He looked me up and down while he packed his lip full of chew.

"The name of the shop, sir? I assumed because you own it-"

He let out a loud laugh, cutting me off. He patted me on the back and led me toward the shop.

"I'm just jerkin' you around, the name's Jim. And I take it you're Wesley."

"Yes, sir." I watched as he unlocked the door, slid up the shop's garage door, and headed for the coffee machine in the tiny office.

To my surprise, the shop was pretty bare. There were some tools out on the workbenches that lined the walls scattered with metal signs, a stack of tires toward the front, and boxes of oil sitting by the bathroom door. Other than

that, the area was cleared, enough space for maybe two or three vehicles at a time.

“Well, today we’ve got just a couple vehicles coming in. An 85’ F150 and Ms. Feeney’s old Camry,” he read off the clipboard by his desk.

As if on cue, the Ford rolled into the lot, pulling into the empty shop.

I cursed under my breath when I saw who was driving it.

Out stepped Emerson’s boyfriend with a smug look on his face.

“You ready to work on my shitbox, ol’ Jimmy?” he asked a little too loud, his voice echoing through the garage.

“I think I’ve worked on your truck more than I’ve worked on my own damn cars, Jett. What’s the problem this time?” Jim walked up to the truck, lightly nudging the tire with the toe of his shoe.

“Wheel bearing is loose. Don’t want to be driving my little smokeshow around and have that sucker fall off.” For proof, he put both hands on the tire and jiggled it back and forth.

Jett was lean but had some muscle on him which showed he at least put some effort into himself. His goatee was trimmed, the rest of his face clean shaven aside from the scruff above his lip. He smelled faintly of a cigarette and from what I’d seen of him so far, he seemed reckless and egotistical.

Two things I didn’t care to associate myself with.

“This is Wesley, the new hire.” Jim gestured to me. “Ray said he’s over qualified, which is rare to come by nowadays, so he better have been telling the truth on his resume.” He grinned, shooting me a wink before he spit in the bucket by the workbench. I don’t know how anyone could enjoy chewing. Shit tasted nasty.

Jett held his hand out in my direction. “Jett. Pleasure to meet you, man. I haven’t seen you around. You new to town?”

Grabbing his hand with a firm grip, I shook it. He reciprocated the gesture. I wondered if he was too drunk on Friday to remember me being at the bar. If he recalled seeing me, he didn't say anything.

I dropped his hand from mine. "Yep. Kind of stumbled upon this place and decided to stay a bit."

"Well, Oldport welcomes you. I'm guessing you don't know too many people around here. If you want to stop by my place Thursday night, I'm having a few friends over to watch the game."

I wasn't into watching sports solely due to the fact that people typically did that in groups. Group settings weren't really my thing, but I couldn't turn him down without coming off as a dick.

"Sounds great." I gave a close lipped smile and went to grab the tools to start working on his truck.

The two of them walked into the office as I got to work, closing the door behind them. I guess whatever it was they had to discuss was personal and didn't want me overhearing, not that I was much of an eavesdropper anyway.

A few hours later, I knocked on the office door to let them know the wheel bearing was fixed.

Popping my head in the door, I said, "I can write up the bill if you've got a breakdown cost sheet."

"Not necessary." Jim waved his hand. "We don't charge Jett. He makes up for it."

He didn't elaborate and I wasn't going to push it. They'd obviously been doing business together for a while.

Jett said his goodbye to Jim and patted me on the shoulder as he passed by.

"Thanks for fixing ol' blue, Wesley. She's got more problems than she's worth but she's got a special place in my heart. You got a phone? I can text

you my address for the game.”

I nodded and we exchanged numbers.

After he drove away, I checked the contact he'd entered into my phone.

I reread it twice. “Jett, Emerson’s Boyfriend”.

Either he knew I'd spoken to Emerson at the bar, or he wanted to make it real damn clear who she belonged to before I entered his home.

Chapter Four

EMERSON

Turning the water off, I got out of the shower and wrapped myself in a towel. Jessica and her boyfriend were picking me and Stella up on the way to the bonfire tonight. With a quick glance at the clock on my nightstand, I saw that I had about ten minutes left to get ready.

I left my hair loose around my shoulders, letting it dry naturally. The ocean air always made my hair curl more than usual so there was no point in styling it. Knowing the beach was freezing at night, I wore flared jeans with white sneakers and a gray sweatshirt, layering a tank top underneath. I put on a bit of mascara and blush, keeping it light since it would be dark out anyway.

I headed out to the living room and sat next to Jett on the couch, curling my leg under myself and facing him to give him a peck on the cheek.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” I pouted, batting my eyelashes to try to persuade him to give in and come along. “There’ll be beer.”

“I’m good. Besides, I’ve got beer here.” He draped his arm along the back of the couch, running his fingers through my hair.

I leaned into his hand, sighing. “You know, I still have about seven minutes

to spare..”

He gave me a knowing look and smirked. In less than a second, he had my back laying against the couch cushions. He pulled his shirt off, tossing it to the floor as I worked to take my sweatshirt off. I looked up at him, my eyes trailing down to the tattoo over his heart. I reached my hand out, tracing my fingers over it.

“No time for romantics, baby.” He bent down to kiss my neck as he unzipped my jeans, pulling them down slightly. I angled my head back to expose more of my neck while I fumbled with his sweats.

Once they were down, I ran my hand down the length of him through his boxers. He stopped kissing my neck and pulled back to look at me, his breath quickening as I stroked him. He moved his hand to the inside of my thighs and pushed my panties to the side as I pulled at the hem of his boxers to release his cock.

Right as he was lining himself up with my entrance, my phone started ringing from the pocket of my sweatshirt on the ground. He cursed under his breath and paused, eyeing me to see if I wanted him to continue.

As much as I wanted to, I knew that was Stella calling me to tell me they were here. I had a different ringtone for her number, just like I did for most of my contacts, so I knew which calls to ignore without having to look.

As soon as the phone stopped ringing, they began honking outside.

“I guess they’re a little early. I’m sorry I got you all worked up.” He pulled his sweats up, pushing back into a sitting position so I could get off the couch. I grabbed my sweatshirt off the floor and slipped it back on, then fixed my jeans. “I’ll make it up to you when I get home later, promise,” I leaned over to kiss his cheek. “You’re still picking me and Stella up later, right?”

His gaze was already trained back on the TV, his shirt still on the ground.

“Yep. Just give me a call when you’re ready.”

“You’re the best. I’ll see you in a few hours.” I turned on my heel and headed out the door.

Thankfully, it wasn’t too windy tonight, but that didn’t stop the cold from seeping through my clothes. I was glad we had the heat emanating from the fire as well as the alcohol to warm us up.

I’d already had three beers and a shot of vodka I was suckered into. Apparently, the new rule for bonfires was if you complained about the cold, you had to take a shot. I learned my lesson the hard way.

Stella came back with two more beers, holding one out to me. I took it from her after she sat down on the log next to me, huddling close for extra warmth.

“So, did Jett tell you I went on a date last night?” Stella asked.

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Why would Jett tell me- Oh my God! You and Brendt? Stella, you gave in!”

“I did.” She laughed, leaning her head on my shoulder. “We just got dinner, nothing happened. He talked a lot more when it was just the two of us. Maybe he’s just nervous around you and Jett. No one can compete with you guys.”

“Oh, stop. I’m sure he just feels like he can express his feelings when the guys aren’t around to make fun of him for it.”

She shrugged, taking a long pull of her beer. “Probably.”

“Besides, I don’t know if that’s true, that no one can compete with us. I feel like all Jett does nowadays is drink if he’s not at work. He hasn’t been

himself recently.” I trailed my fingers over the condensation running down the neck of the bottle.

“Probably stress or something. Guys don’t know how to talk about their feelings, so they drink.”

I laughed. “You got that right.” I chugged the rest of my beer and threw the bottle over at the trash bin sitting ten feet from us, making it in. I stood up, grabbing Stella’s hand to drag her with me.

“I need to get moving or I’ll become an actual ice cube.”

She gave me her signature mischievous look and yelled, “We need a shot over here!”

I cursed as Jessica’s boyfriend, Todd, brought a bottle of vodka over, the group chanting “shot” over and over again.

Todd popped the lid off the bottle and held it up.

“No glass this time?” I eyed the bottle and took a deep breath, preparing myself for the burn down my throat.

“It’s your second fuck up, gotta take it like a champ. Open wide!” He positioned the bottle above my head, ready to pour.

I tilted my head back and opened my mouth, closing my eyes tight - I figured he probably didn’t have the best aim being intoxicated.

He tilted the bottle just enough, the liquid burning its way down my throat, warming my chest. My mouth was filled with vodka by the time he stopped pouring. I swallowed what was left, wincing at the taste.

Todd gave me a high five as I grabbed for Stella’s beer to use as a chaser, swishing the brown liquid around in my mouth. “I’d tell you not to slip up again, but I really don’t mind having to give you another shot.”

Jessica smacked him in the arm and he rubbed the spot, a huge grin pasted on his face.

A smile on my face, I shook my head as I grabbed Stella's hand, pulling her over to the bag I brought with me. I pulled out a few sparklers and handed her a couple.

"Shall we?" I lit mine with the lighter in my pocket, then used my sparkler to light hers. The sparks flew out in all directions and I marveled at them.

We started this tradition of lighting sparklers at the beach every time we were here together a few months back after the Fourth of July.

Sparklers didn't get the recognition they deserved. I didn't understand why people really only used them around that time of year, or on New Years'. Life was too short to wait a whole year for just one day to do something that was fucking beautiful.

I've never had a moment where I wasn't smiling when I had a sparkler in my hand. You can dance with them, write your name in the air, chase people around with the fear of getting hit by a spark. What's not to love?

I was spinning in circles - which probably wasn't helping the mixture of light and dark alcohol in my system - waving my sparkler around when I heard Stella yell, waving her sparklers in the air almost like she was trying to get someone's attention.

I stopped spinning and looked in the direction she was facing. I quickly wished I hadn't.

I tried to act like my heart hadn't stopped when Wesley's truck pulled into the parking lot.

Chapter Five

WESLEY

I was driving home from a late shift at work when I looked out my driver side window and spotted a bonfire on the beach. Checking my dash, the temperature gauge read forty three degrees. Whoever was out there was out of their goddamn mind.

I looked both ways at the four way stop sign when my eyes caught on someone waving some kind of light in the air like they needed help. Squinting my eyes to get a better look, I saw that it was a sparkler.

Whoever it was faced my truck, waving me down. I turned into the lot and parked, killing the lights before I got out.

“Hey, you!” the woman yelled. I heard music coming from the direction of the bonfire as I made my way over to her.

It was fucking hard to walk in sand with boots on.

As soon as I reached her on the beach, her sparkler fizzled out. “I didn’t think I’d be able to get your attention.” She bent over with her hands on her knees, presumably out of breath from acting like a bat out of hell.

“Everything okay?” I asked. From the way she flagged me down, I

would've thought the damn sand caught fire.

“Having the time of our lives. Thanks for asking.” Her speech was slightly slurred as she spoke. “You can join, unless you're a party pooper.” She poked me straight in the chest. Was that necessary?

I recognized her, but I couldn't remember where I'd seen her before.

“Not really my scene, but thanks for the invite. Y'all be careful out here.” I turned to leave but paused when I saw who was near the water.

Emerson was spinning in circles with her eyes closed, a sparkler in each hand and a beer propped in the sand near her. She looked peaceful, like nothing could ruin the trance she seemed to be in.

“Name's Stella.” I saw her hold her hand out from the corner of my eye. “I'd introduce you to Em, but it looks like you two already met.” She followed my line of sight to Emerson.

Turning back to her, I shook her hand. “Nice to meet you, Stella.”

“And your name is..?”

“Wesley.”

“Well, Wesley, care to stay now?” A smirk bloomed on her face as she wagged her eyebrows at me.

“No. Get home safe.” I nodded once at her, keeping my expression blank, and headed back to my truck. Halfway there, I heard a scream behind me that stopped me in my tracks. I quickly spun around to see Emerson now lying flat on the beach, a lit sparkler in one hand, a beer in the other.

Stella was looking back and forth between me and Emerson, clearly waiting for me to decide to stay.

I could stay and make sure none of them decided to drive this inebriated, or I could leave and sit in my basically empty house thinking about shit I didn't

want to think about. Neither of those options sounded ideal, but I couldn't leave in good conscience. Choosing the former, I made my way to Emerson.

She was laughing to herself when I appeared next to her, her sweatshirt covered in something wet. The amber light lit her features, her eyes illuminated by the reflection on the sparkler.

She looked up at me with a pouty lower lip, trying to hide her giggles as she pulled on her sweatshirt where the stain was. Her laugh would've been contagious had I not been so concerned. She was laying on wet sand and it was fucking freezing out.

"I spilled," she slurred. Her first sparkler must've died out, and the other wasn't too far behind.

If it was anyone else, I would've thought they looked like an idiot, but from where I stood over her, with the sparkler and the moon the only source of light, she was captivating.

"I'm all wet now," she pouted. I raised an eyebrow, which elicited a glob of wet sand being thrown at my leg. "Not like that! My sweatshirt."

I held out a hand to help her up. She reached up and grabbed it, her fingers like ice cubes. She put no effort into standing up, but she was so light it didn't take much to lift her.

"You must be having the time of your life," I said as I let go of her dainty hand.

"I never get to be the careless drunk." Was she talking about herself? She made a small gasp and covered her mouth with her wrist, her hand still gripped around the beer, her blue eyes wide. With her wrist still over her mouth, she mumbled, "I didn't mean to say that out loud." Lowering her arm, she continued, "I just mean that I'm always the DD."

She was rambling, but it was pretty cute. She didn't seem like the caretaker

type at first glance, but looking closer, I noticed she was glancing at the group of people by the bonfire, like she was checking on them. I didn't need another reason to find her attractive, but here I was.

Her physical appearance and the way she held herself gave the impression that she only cared about herself and her image, but if I had to guess after what she just confessed, she didn't give a damn about any of that on the inside.

"You don't talk much, huh?" She was staring up at me, her hair all messed up.

"Sometimes people just need someone to sit and listen, and right now I think you're one of those people."

She moved her gaze to the black water, deep in thought.

"I need another beer."

My mouth lifted at the corners. "Well, let's make that happen." If I was stuck here and she wanted to have fun, the least I could do was make sure she was being safe about it.

She took my hand and brought me over to a blue cooler propped against the logs of wood surrounding the bonfire.

"You sound like you could use a drink, too." She grabbed two and held the second one out to me.

"I'm alright." I grabbed the beer and set it back in the cooler, closing the lid.

She pinned me with her eyes. "Do you *ever* drink?"

I nodded. "I do, but-"

She cut me off. "No buts, Wesley Barton." I tried to hide the smile that pulled at my lips knowing she'd remembered my name. "When we wake up tomorrow, everything from this moment is going to be a memory. Don't you

want to make every day memorable, instead of playing it so damn safe all the time?" She paused like she didn't know what words just came out of her mouth, then made her way to the log closest to us, taking a seat. I didn't need booze to live in the moment. If anything, alcohol made you forget some of the greatest moments of your life if you over indulged.

She took her sweatshirt off, laying it next to her on the log. She was left in a tank top that hugged her in all the right places. I tried not to noticeably look but found it difficult keeping my eyes off her.

She must be ten drinks past drunk if being in a tank top out here felt better than the wet sweatshirt. She crossed her arms over her chest, her gaze locked on the flames. "It's cold and I'm tired and I'm pretty sure alcohol is the only thing keeping me warm right now."

As if on cue, a guy came stumbling over with a handle of vodka. "Oh, Em, you do this to yourself." He held the bottle up like he was about to pour it over her head.

"Oh, come on, Todd. I'm vodka'ed out." She threw her hands out, looking up at him from where she sat.

He shrugged. "I didn't make the rules."

Before she could tilt her head back, I stepped between them, causing Todd to stumble back a step. "She said she's done."

"Technically, I said I'm vodka'ed out," she pointed out quietly behind me right before she hiccupped.

"Hey, man, I don't make the rules, I just enforce them. Can't have fun if you're complaining, can you?" He went to move around me but I angled my body to block his way.

"Peer pressuring someone to drink isn't a good look, Todd. I'd suggest you walk away."

Emerson stood up behind me, but she must have tripped because she set both of her hands on my back to steady herself. I reached a hand behind me, setting it on her waist to keep her upright.

I could feel her cold skin through the fabric of her top. I took my jacket off and turned to face her, wrapping it around her shoulders. I looked over my shoulder to see Todd walking away.

She wrapped my jacket tighter around her, staring up at me with those damn eyes as her teeth chattered. “He wasn’t trying to be mean. He’s right, it’s a rule we have at our bonfires. He was just going along with it.”

“Sounds like a pretty stupid rule to me.”

“It is if you’re Wesley Barton.” God, I loved the way her mouth looked when she said my name.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’re a party pooper, like I suspected,” Stella interrupted, coming to stand next to Emerson. Stella looked at the sweatshirt draped over the log, then moved her gaze to my jacket on Emerson, putting the pieces together. “Smooth move,” she commended.

Emerson shot her a look that screamed “shut up.”

“What? I just meant Jett-“

“Stella, really?” Emerson cut her off and fished her phone out of her back pocket. “Shit. I didn’t realize how late it was. We should go.” She looked up at me. “Thanks for the jacket, Wesley, but you can have it back. I’ll be okay for a few minutes until our ride gets here.” She began to unwrap herself from my coat.

“Keep it. I’ll get it back from you some other time.”

I saw chills rise on her arms the moment she took it off, holding it out to me. “I can’t.”

“Why?” I didn’t take it from her. No way in hell was I leaving her out here in a fucking tank top.

“Jett will get mad,” Stella piped in, answering the question for her.

“Seriously, Stella?” Emerson pushed the jacket at my chest and I grabbed it in my fist, not taking my eyes off her. Stella’s comment seemed to sober her up real quick.

“I’ll be right back, I have to let him know we’re ready to leave.” Emerson walked away and put her phone up to her ear.

I turned to Stella, who was finishing off her beer while watching Emerson. “You see her mood change?” I wasn’t sure what she meant until I looked back at Emerson.

It looked like her confidence had poured right out of her, her shoulders slightly slumped, her fingers making anxious taps on her thigh. I didn’t know what to say back to her because I didn’t need Stella to know that I did notice it and that I was pissed about it. She was fine minutes ago, enjoying herself. Now she had an entirely different aura about her. “I think he’s drunk.”

“Who?” Everyone here was drunk. She was going to have to be a little more specific.

“Jett,” Stella answered.

Taking the phone away from her ear, Emerson turned around and walked back over to us, not making eye contact.

“We have to walk. Everyone here is too drunk to drive, and I don’t feel like sleeping on the beach with the rest of them.”

“What about Jett?” Emerson didn’t reply. It was pretty obvious Stella already knew the answer to that.

Emerson grabbed her sweatshirt off the log and hugged it to her stomach in a tight ball.

If she really thought she could walk home buzzed, wearing the thinnest top known to mankind, in this cold, and get there before sunrise, she was crazy.

This was definitely not how I imagined spending my night.

“I’m not drunk,” I pointed out. They looked confused, so I guess I had to spell it out for them. “I can drive you two home.” I didn’t have anything else going on tonight and I couldn’t drive away knowing they were out here trying to make it home on foot.

“You don’t have to do that,” Emerson said as Stella spoke over her.

“That’d be amazing.”

They were eyeing each other, looking ready to start throwing daggers at each other, when I handed my jacket back to Emerson. She had this guilty look in her eye when she took it from me. What was the harm in a drive home?

Chapter Six

EMERSON

Stella sat in the passenger seat, cramming me into the middle between her and Wesley. Of course, it was my luck that he didn't have a back seat in his truck. The only bright side was that the heat was cranked, thawing my frozen skin.

I was still irritated that she'd insinuated those things about Jett in front of Wesley. My relationship was none of his business, and I didn't know what Stella was trying to do. Leave it to her to stir things up.

That's why I loved her though. She kept life interesting with her unpredictable scheming.

"You can drop me off first, my place is closer than Em's."

I rolled my eyes. I should've seen that coming, but the alcohol was tampering my better judgment. She had that conniving look in her eye whenever she was up to something. Whatever she was thinking, I wished she'd stop. Despite us being best friends, I didn't need her interfering with this part of my life. I was fine with the way things were.

Jett put so much on the line to help me when we got together. He got me

out of my mom's house and found me the job at the Tavern. Not to mention he put a roof over my head. Stella could have her reserves about him but I wouldn't let it bother me.

Jett and I met years ago when Stella and I offered to drive him and Luke home from this dive bar downtown. We had stopped in there after a movie to grab a quick drink when Jett started hitting on me. Luke had just picked him up from the airport where Jett had flown in from the east coast. Instead of taking him to the house he'd purchased sight unseen, Luke brought him straight to the bar instead.

Jett had gotten into some trouble back home so Luke persuaded him to move to Oldport. They'd met years before and kept in touch, so naturally Luke offered him a place to stay, but instead of moving in with Luke, Jett bought the house we now lived in together.

They were both drunk, and I remembered Jett telling me that he only smokes when he drinks, which made me feel better about him lighting a cigarette outside the bar. I couldn't stand the smell of cigarettes. Come to find out, he had at least one drink a day, so you know what that meant.

After we met that night, Jett and I talked nonstop. It was only a week after meeting him that I started staying the night at his house. His place was more peaceful, quieter than mine solely due to the fact that there was no nagging mother judging every move I made or every outfit I wore. It was just me and him under his roof, creating a life together.

A couple weeks later, I moved my stuff into his house, and that was it. We'd been together ever since. I knew from the beginning that he had a drinking problem, but it had only gotten worse over the years. Now, a day didn't go by that he didn't have a beer in hand or a glass of whiskey ready to go when he got home from work. We never talked about it because he didn't

like it when I brought up the drinking. He didn't like that I'd call it what it was - a problem. So I dealt with it. I took care of him when he drank too much because that's what you do for the people you love.

Besides a few occasions, the drinking didn't bother me much because up until this point, it rarely affected his daily life. But tonight was different. He promised to stay sober so he could drive us home. Maybe he forgot he was supposed to pick us up, or maybe he had a bad day at work. But now Stella and I were in a strangers truck in the dead of night, and I was sitting here making excuses for him.

What could go wrong?

My knee brushed up against his leg every time we turned or hit a bump, but I kept my gaze forward, not chancing a look at him. I didn't want him to know I noticed when our legs touched. Thankfully, it wasn't too long of a drive before we were pulling up at Stella's house.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" she yelled as she jumped out of the truck. I didn't miss the wink she sent my way as she slammed the door shut.

"I would take that statement lightly. There is little she wouldn't do." I scooted to the passenger seat and buckled myself. I could have stayed in the middle but the more space I put between us, the better.

He pulled off, keeping both hands tight on the steering wheel. "Seems like it. You two seem close."

Now he wanted to make small talk?

My buzz was wearing off and I wasn't in the mood to talk, but I also didn't want to come off as rude and keep quiet. "Yeah, we've been friends since middle school. She's like a sister to me."

I risked a glance at him to find his eyes were trained on the dark road ahead of us. "Those kinds of friendships are hard to come by nowadays."

“I’m surprised you’re actually forming complete sentences with me,” I joked as I fiddled with the sleeves on his coat I had put back on.

Being in some random guy's truck was the last place I wanted to be right now. Jett would be furious if he found out, which reminded me. “Can you park a couple blocks away from my house?”

“Scared of something, Em?”

I snapped my head toward him. “I’m not scared.”

“You sound nervous. Is it because of that boyfriend of yours, or me?”

I ignored his question, moving my gaze to the passenger window. “You can park on Calaway Lane.”

I saw him shake his head in my peripheral. I was annoyed at the fact that he thought he could ask questions like that. We weren’t friends. Hell, we weren’t even acquaintances. He was the *last* person I’d confide in. He didn’t know me or my situation and it was best that it stayed that way.

I forgot he wasn’t from around here when I caught him putting the street name into the maps app on his phone. “I can tell you where it is if that’s easier.”

He didn’t acknowledge what I said, just kept driving with both hands white knuckled at ten and two. It didn’t look natural for him to be driving like that, like he was a one-hand-on-the-steering-wheel kind of guy. I wondered if he did it to make me feel more comfortable with his hands being in plain sight. He was keeping his hands to himself, which shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. Not that I should have any concern there about Wesley. So far, he seemed like a guy who had a great deal of respect for women.

He pulled up at Calaway and parked against the curb, turning off the truck. We sat there in silence, not looking at each other. I felt restless, like I wanted to spill all my baggage on this man and run away from him at the same time.

“What are you doing?” I blurted. Silence was rarely deafening to me, but I couldn’t take it in this truck with him.

I shouldn’t want to know more about him, but something about him made me curious. He was a mystery to me. Hell, he was a mystery to all of Oldport.

This time, his gaze landed on me. “I’m dropping you off,” he said, but it sounded more like a question.

I faced him in my seat. “No. What are you doing in Oldport?”

“There’s no gate at the town line, Emerson. People can move here without a motive, you know.”

“It doesn’t feel like that’s the case here.” I couldn’t tell if I was talking about the town or this innocent drive home.

“You’re looking further into it than you should.”

Maybe I was. It was probably the alcohol, combined with my agitation at Jett, and the fact that it was three in the morning.

“Thanks for the ride.” I turned to reach for the handle on the door when I felt his rough hand gently grab my arm.

“I didn’t mean to upset you if I did.” He was staring at me like he could see every confession I ever had written on my forehead. God, I hated how it made me shiver with awareness. I was used to men looking at me, ogling over what they couldn’t have, but Wesley was different. He had a thousand words behind those eyes but clearly kept them to himself, locking his lips and throwing away the key.

“You didn’t upset me,” I said quietly.

“Then what is it?” He had this concerned look on his face, his brows drawn together and his eyes boring into me like he could find the answers in my eyes if he looked hard enough.

My gaze dropped to his hand on my wrist and after a moment, I pulled my

arm free, which took little effort considering he was barely holding me.

This was a mistake. I shouldn't be sitting here in his truck.

Keeping my eyes downcast, I said, "I appreciate the ride, Wesley. Can we just leave it at that?"

I could tell he was conflicted between pressing further and letting it go. Without giving him a choice, I pulled off his jacket and set it on the stretch of leather between us. I got out of the truck and pulled my sweatshirt back on, the wet portion of the sweatshirt cold against my skin.

I hesitated with my hand on the truck door. A part of me didn't want to go home to find Jett passed out on the couch with beer cans littering the living room. But I had to. There were no other choices, especially none that included staying in this truck for just a little longer.

"Goodnight, Wesley," I said, not meeting his eyes.

"Night, Emerson."

Closing the door, I walked the two blocks home.

Chapter Seven

WESLEY

During my next shift, Jim suggested we all go to lunch at the Tavern together. “We” meaning Ray, Jim, Sebastian, and myself. We walked there, taking advantage of the sun being out before the storm rolled in tonight.

Today was my first day working with Sebastian. He was short, a bit pudgy in the midsection, and always had a cigarette in his hand. So far, he was a decent guy to work with. He didn’t make too much small talk, which I liked, and got the jobs assigned to him done pretty quickly.

While Sebastian and I worked on the vehicles that came through the shop, Ray and Jim sat on their asses in the small office, typing away on their computers and talking to each other as if they were shouting across a football field.

I get that they took care of the business side of things, but would it kill them to work on a car or two themselves? Did they even know how? That was a pet peeve of mine - managers sitting by rather than participating in the hard labor part of their business.

I didn't miss the hour and a half they spent laughing and talking about the game this week, either.

Sebastian had mentioned this wasn't the only business they were running but didn't elaborate further. Like I said, not much small talk out of him.

Jessica, one of the waitresses at the small restaurant, seated us at a booth, taking our orders right away. I guess they frequented here enough for her to know they were ready to order their usuals without a glance at the menu.

I ordered the burger as I honestly wasn't sure what else was on the menu. I was completely distracted the other night while I was trying to read it.

Emerson was an off-limits distraction, and I wouldn't let myself think otherwise.

I could understand why Emerson didn't want to open herself up to me the other night in my truck. To her, I was just some stranger interrupting the perfect little life she'd built in this mopey town. Although, after getting a small peek into her personal life, it didn't seem all that perfect.

If I had to be honest with myself, I wanted to keep running into her. The three times I'd interacted with her, she'd been so flustered - and I'll admit - I liked it. I was attracted to her and I shouldn't be. I didn't want a relationship and I especially didn't want to be involved in drama, *especially* small town drama. Besides, she had a boyfriend, so it wasn't a possibility. I doubted I'd even see her again. Up until now, all of our run-ins had been pure coincidence.

I wasn't into girls like Emerson, who walked around practically begging for all eyes to be on her. I tried to keep a low profile myself, and having a girl like that? I'd practically be right there with her, begging for everyone to look my way.

I needed to focus on my own problems and deal with the issues at hand in

my life, not get tied up in flirting with some girl who was in a relationship.

But damn, I really couldn't help it. I liked the look she got on her face when she was taken off guard, opening and closing that pretty mouth of hers searching for words. Her cheeks would turn a deep shade of crimson, making those sky blue eyes pop.

I could still smell her on my jacket, hints of vanilla and mango body wash. When I'd gotten it back, I decided I was never going to wash it again.

Was that creepy?

Yes, you idiot.

"Jett invited Wes to watch the game at his place tomorrow night," Jim announced.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I nodded once. "Sounds like a few people are going to be there. He was just being polite."

"Nah, man, he's inviting you to get a feel on ya. Jett isn't a fan of newcomers. He's probably going to try to lay down the law, but don't take it personally," Ray said, chuckling.

"You want to tell me something or keep talking all ominously?" I said as I tore off a piece of my napkin and rolled it between my fingers.

"He wants to see if you'll go after his girl. He does it to everyone," Sebastian said blatantly.

I dropped the scrap of napkin from my fingers, bringing my hands to my lap and fisting them under the table. "So, he uses her as bait, basically."

"You could say that," Jim muttered, lifting his glass to take a sip of the drink Jessica had dropped off during our conversation.

Well, that explained the contact name he put in my phone. I knew Jett's game now. He used Emerson as a chess piece, moving her around to best suit himself. Did he really think he could judge peoples' characters by how much

they drooled over his girlfriend? If she knew about it, I didn't know why in the hell she'd be okay with it. She seemed smart enough not to stay with a guy who used her like that. At least, I hoped she was.

Looking over at the bar, I saw the old man she'd spoken to the other night during her shift. I'd heard him call her a smokeshow and was baffled she'd let that shit slide. Did she really just sit around and take that bullshit?

I watched the dark ink on my arms flex as I opened and closed my fists, trying to shove down the anger I felt building in my gut. I'd lost my appetite at this point. God, for being so adamant that I didn't like her, I was damn sure thinking about her a lot.

After we finished off our food, Jessica brought over the bill before taking away our plates. My coworkers got up to leave, not paying any mind to the bill she'd set down, so I pulled out my wallet. I guess the new guy got to cover lunch.

Before I could set my card down, Jim picked up the tab, crumpling it in his hand.

"We don't pay here. The owner's got it covered," he said matter-of-factly while Ray and Sebastian chuckled.

"He owe the shop or something?" I asked, confused what he meant by that.

"Elijah went running his mouth about Jett, so it's on the house." Jim shrugged, acting like it was a casual thing to dine-and-dash.

Sebastian and Ray were already on their way out of the restaurant, Jim following suit. I looked back at the table, gnawing on my bottom lip.

I didn't want to press further and get involved, but this didn't feel right.

Making sure they'd exited the restaurant, I found Jessica punching something in at the POS system. I pulled cash out of my wallet and walked over to her, handing her the money.

“You can keep the change,” I said before heading toward the doors.

“Thank you!” I heard her call out behind me.

I pushed through the doors, taking a deep breath of the cool Washington air.

I’d need all the self-control I could muster to not lose my shit on Thursday.

Chapter Eight

EMERSON

As soon as I closed the door to the house behind me, Stella's ringtone erupted from my phone in my back pocket. I wanted a few minutes to myself so I ignored the call. Whatever it was could wait.

Thankfully, Jett had let me take the truck to work today because after the day I'd had, the last thing I wanted to do was walk home.

I tossed my phone and keys on the kitchen counter and headed to the bedroom to change out of my work clothes into black leggings and an oversized navy blue crewneck. I walked back to the kitchen to grab a glass of water when I saw Stella was calling again. Sighing, I answered before it could go to voicemail.

"This better be an emergency. I don't take lightly to people interrupting my quiet time," I said into the phone.

"Jett's okay."

"Why wouldn't he be okay?" I asked.

I could hear her inhale deeply before speaking again. "He got in a fight at the bar. The other guy is fine, but you should probably come get him. He's

harassing Craig for more drinks but he cut him off.”

“What? Why’d he get in a fight? I can be there in a few minutes; just tell him I’m coming.” I was already grabbing my shoes before she could respond.

“Do you really want to know why?”

Honestly, I didn't. "I'll be there in five." I headed back out the door as I hung up the phone.

I put the truck in park outside the bar, pulling the keys out of the ignition. I didn't get out right away, needing a moment. I leaned my head back against the headrest, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. I savored the silence, not knowing what I'd be walking into.

Jett was drunk more often than he was sober, but the bigger issue was that he didn't want to admit he was an alcoholic.

He didn't open up much about his past with anyone, including me, but what little I did know was that his mother was an alcoholic as well. She was rarely home, so Jett practically raised himself. She was often too intoxicated to play the role of a mother.

It took a toll on him growing up, especially because his dad wasn't around either. When his dad was home, which was rare, things would get ugly. Last I heard, Felix was in prison. I just couldn't wrap my head around why Jett would continuously drink this much when he knew how his mothers drinking had affected those around her.

Figuring I should get in there, I forced myself out of the truck. As soon as I opened the driver door, I could hear Jett's voice carrying through the small parking lot from inside the bar. I made my way inside to find him standing at the bar, hands gripping the edge, with Brendt by his side. Brendt seemed to

be on high alert, keeping a close eye on Jett but doing his best to act nonchalant about it.

Stella mouthed “I’m sorry” from where she was sitting at a high top table by the pool tables. I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. It wasn’t her fault Jett was being an idiot. Come to think of it, it wasn’t mine either, but here I was.

My gaze caught on the man standing casually beside one of the pool tables, one end of the cue resting on the ground between his legs. Wesley had his eyes trained on me instead of the game in front of him, where his opponent was waiting for him to make a move.

I chewed on the inside of my lip. Showing up to practically drag Jett out of here was not something I wanted Wesley to see. It made me look like a fool for putting up with this. But Jett was my boyfriend, and I’d stick by his side and be there when he needed me.

Pulling my attention away from Wesley, I walked up behind Jett and said his name, trying to get his attention. Brendt was standing a few feet from Jett and even he could hear me.

Jett was too busy practically yelling at Craig for another drink to pay any mind to me, so I placed my palm against his shoulder blade. Before I could blink, Jett spun around, nearly knocking me off my feet. I took a small step back to get my balance.

A cue fell to the floor somewhere behind me at the same time a chair scraped across the ground. I glanced behind me to find that Stella was now standing, Wesley next to her looking ready to murder someone. I really didn’t need another fight on Jett’s hands tonight.

I turned back to Jett and noticed his busted lip from the fight. “Let’s go home, baby. You need some rest.” I put my hand out for him to take it.

“I’m not leaving. We were just getting started, but Craig here won’t give

me a damn whiskey and coke.” He threw his arm in the air toward Craig for emphasis, grazing the back of my outstretched hand. The pungent smell of whiskey on Jett’s breath made my nose scrunch on instinct.

“I think you’ve had enough, honey.” I had to keep my voice calm, because if I didn’t, he’d just revolt to try to prove some stupid point.

His eyes locked on mine, fire spreading through them. “I decide when I’ve had enough. Not Craig, and definitely not you.”

I felt my neck heat, the embarrassment of Jett refusing to be mature and know his limits creeping up on me. I wasn’t sure I could convince him to leave. Hell, I didn’t think anyone could. Not when he got like this.

Brendt held a glass of water out to Jett, grabbing his bicep to turn him. “Man, we’re all drunk. Drink some water and let Em take you home, otherwise you’re going to be sleeping on the curb.”

Jett shrugged him off, turning his back to me so he could continue harassing Craig. I took a deep breath, trying to keep the frustration at bay.

I lightly set my hand on Jett’s arm, my fingertips grazing his warm skin as I trailed to his hand.

“Please be the man I need you to be right now. Don’t let the alcohol consume-” Jett whirled on me, and I felt the sting before I could finish my sentence. I stumbled back a step, bringing my hand to my cheek to try to ease the burn of his hand colliding with my skin.

Wesley was there in an instant, grabbing Jett by the collar of his shirt and slamming him into the wall. Brendt stayed by me, holding onto my arm like he was steadying me.

In the next second, Stella was beside me, guiding me to a barstool. I was too stunned to sit down as I watched Wesley pin Jett face first against the wall, his arm cocked behind him at an awkward angle.

My fingers brushed my cheek and I winced. My cheek fucking *stung*.

“Ice, Craig. I need ice.” I heard Stella say. Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion. Moments later, Stella was holding a plastic baggie filled with ice to my burning cheek.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Wesley and Jett. I couldn’t believe what just happened, that my boyfriend slapped me in front of a bar full of people. And I thought I was embarrassed before?

“Get the fuck off of me!” Jett yelled, his hand smacking against the wall.

“I’m not letting you touch her again,” Wesley seethed through gritted teeth.

Jett tried to grab Wesley’s shirt, but Brendt ran over, grabbing Jett’s other arm before he could get ahold of him. “You need to calm the fuck down. Realize what you just fucking did.”

This was only going to get worse if I didn’t get him home. Stella tried to follow me with the ice as I slowly walked over to them. I felt like I was in a trance, having some sort of out-of-body experience. Was this what shock felt like?

“Emerson, don’t come over here,” Wesley warned.

I stopped a few feet behind them. “He didn’t mean it. I just need to get him home.” My voice was trembling as I tried to get the words out.

Wesley was looking at me with concern in his eyes as he kept Jett pinned against the wall. “You’re crazy if you think I’m letting you go home alone with him.”

“I’ll go with them,” Brendt offered. “I’ll make sure they get home okay.”

Wesley didn’t acknowledge what Brendt said. He kept his eyes trained on me. I could see a thousand things racing through his head right now. He probably thought this happened all the time, but this wasn't the Jett I loved.

He never behaved like this. I didn't know what got into him, but I did know I didn't want to be in this bar any longer. I needed to get us home.

Jett calmed down enough to where Wesley wasn't having to use force to keep him pinned. I gave Wesley a pleading look, trying to keep him from making this a bigger deal than it had to be. I could tell he wasn't going to let it go easily. He eventually backed off of Jett, keeping his eyes on me as he spoke to him. "You going to apologize to her?"

Jett brushed his hands on the front of his shirt, turning to face me. I could tell he was seeing red as he stared me down. He'd blame me for this. Jett had a hard time taking ownership of his actions when he was this inebriated.

A lump formed in my throat. I couldn't cry here, not in front of everyone. It was already bad enough.

I needed air.

I spun around and aimed for the exit, bursting through the bar door. I walked to the middle of the parking lot before I bent over, setting my hands on my knees and inhaling deeply to keep the anxiety at bay. I hadn't realized I was suffocating until the cool air hit my lungs.

Behind me, the door to the bar opened. Footsteps sounded beside me before the door could swing shut.

"Emerson." Wesley didn't touch me, he just stood there, and for some reason, his presence calmed me. "I know you're not okay, so I'm not going to ask that. But I am going to ask if he's put his hands on you before, and I need you to tell me the truth because I can't let you get in that truck until I know the answer." I could see Wesley's breath coming out in little clouds as he spoke.

I straightened, pulling my hand through my hair. I blinked away the ebbing tears. "No. He's never done that before," I lied. The dark corners of my mind

held some of the memories with Jett that I'd chosen to push away and tried to forget.

Wesley stared at me, his lips pursed so tightly I thought he might bite them clean off. He shook his head. "Why don't I believe you?"

"You don't know me, Wesley. You didn't need to get involved."

"Are you serious? You think I'd just stand by and be okay with any guy doing that, not just to you but to any woman?" He must've not realized he was raising his voice because he took a deep breath, regaining his composure. "I may not know you well, but I couldn't stand there and not do anything. The look you have in your eyes, Em, you shouldn't *ever* feel like that. You shouldn't be standing in a fucking bar parking lot having a goddamn panic attack because of your boyfriend."

"I know." I was burnt out, defeated, and overly exhausted. I didn't have the energy to keep going tonight. "I just need him in the truck so I can leave."

His gaze landed on my cheek, and I hated the look in his eyes. He nodded once and turned to head back to the bar. Before he reached the door, he paused. "I'm giving you my number."

"What? Why?" That was the absolute last thing I needed right now.

"If he ever does anything like that again, I want you to call me."

"He's not going to do it again. I told you he's never done this before." My cheek was throbbing where I knew a bruise was probably already forming. I hoped makeup would cover it well enough for work. If only makeup could cover the mental toll this took on me, too.

"If he did it once, he'll do it again. I just hope I'm wrong."

I sat in silence again, but this was a whole different kind of silence than it was an hour ago.

We pulled into the driveway twenty minutes ago. Brendt offered to bring Jett inside so I could have some time alone. I knew Brendt was pissed at Jett too, but friends didn't leave friends out on the curb when they needed them the most. When he hit me, the first thought that filled my head was that I wanted to leave him at that bar and never see him again, but after the sting of the impact wore off, I realized he needed me more than ever right now.

It was hard to watch him drink every day, but his addiction wasn't voluntary. It ran in his blood. He didn't leave me when times were tough in the beginning. I could only return the favor and be by his side through this.

Maybe I was a fool for staying, but I didn't want to believe he'd do it again this time. I had taken Wesley's phone number with no intention to ever call him. I wanted to prove him wrong. I wanted to show this whole town Jett wasn't the monster they saw him become tonight.

I hadn't realized I was crying until I felt the tears hit my arm. I swiped them away and tried to get myself together.

After a few minutes of counting my breaths, I got out of the truck and walked inside to find Brendt in the kitchen filling a glass with water.

"You may need to clean the toilet, and the sheets, and probably the rug too." He had a sympathetic look on his face. We knew things were getting bad. We didn't need to say that part out loud.

"Thanks for helping with him," I said as I took a seat at the table. Brendt sat next to me, offering me the glass of water.

"I've never seen him this bad, Em."

I stared at the glass in front of me. "He must've had a bad day. He doesn't usually get in fights, even if he's shitfaced."

Brendt sighed and faced me in his chair. “I’m going to tell you this because I care about you, but you can’t get mad at Jett for it.”

I leaned my elbows on the table, burying my face in my hands. “Can this wait? I’m really not in the mood right now, Brendt.”

“Someone should’ve told you a long time ago. Hell, Jett should’ve been the one to tell you.” He paused. “Before you and Jett got together, he wasn’t just drinking and smoking cigarettes. He was doing harder things that he shouldn’t be mixing. It seemed like he had stopped when you two met, but then he got back into it. He’s not just taking them, Em. He’s dealing them.” I lifted my face, his words hitting me like a brick to the stomach. “He has his clients, people he sells to. He’s tried to get me in on it but I won’t do it. Luke started going with him on runs and now they supply anyone in town that wants some.”

Jett may overindulge in alcohol, but drugs? Was Brendt serious? He had to be drunk, talking out of his ass.

I shook my head, staring at the table like it’d save me from this shit night. “But he has a job, Brendt. He doesn’t have time for that on top of construction.”

“He quit that job months ago. Took dealing on full time once the numbers got up there.” *What the actual fuck?*

“But he leaves town to work onsite. Tell me that’s not a lie.” I gave him a pleading look. Where the fuck would Jett be going if it wasn’t for work?

“He has clients out of town, deliveries he picks up. The guy who runs the whole thing, he lives about an hour from here. He goes to his place, grabs a load every so often, and distributes it to his people. I really didn’t want to be the one to tell you, but he’s keeping you in the dark and you deserve nothing but the truth, especially with the way he acted tonight. I think he may be

mixing because of the stress. I don't actually know if he's using, but why else would he act like that? It isn't safe for him to be doing any of this and I don't know how to get through to him."

I couldn't process what he was saying. If Jett was using, that could be why his drinking was worse than it had been in the past. His family had a history of addicts to all sorts of things, but I had always hoped he wouldn't go down that same road. At least not with drugs.

His father was in prison for the same shit Brendt was claiming Jett was doing. He always told me he didn't want to be like him, but I guess that was a lie, too.

"I won't tell him you told me," I assured Brendt.

"If for any reason you think things are going south with it, get the hell out of here. You don't want to be around if he's getting his hands dirty."

I nodded slowly, trying to take all of this in. This home that was once safe to me was now quickly proving to be the opposite.

Chapter Nine

WESLEY

The house I was renting was owned by a sweet elderly woman, Deanna. It had come unfurnished, save a few cross-stitch photos on the walls that I presumed she had made herself. I found her ad online and couldn't pass up the cheap rent. She had handed me the keys less than an hour after I'd arrived in town.

I had a large chunk of money saved up, plus my dad's inheritance, so I wasn't too low on cash, but I didn't want to blow through it all in a week. I kept the furniture buying at a minimum and purchased a king-sized bed, a couch, and a TV.

I slept on the couch fully clothed last night, keeping my phone plugged in and listening for it to ring. I don't know why I thought being on the couch would get me there any quicker than being in the bedroom if Emerson needed me.

I replayed the look on her face after he'd slapped her, the way her head snapped to the side, the redness that enveloped her cheek, over and over again in my head. She put up a hard exterior but deep down, we were all

struggling. Even she couldn't hide that with her little dresses and gleaming smiles. She made a show as if everything in her life was perfect, but last night proved that to be wrong.

I *hated* that her seemingly perfect life was just an image. She deserved it to be her reality.

Jett couldn't have just been drunk to have been acting so damn crazy. His eyes were bloodshot the entire night, and it only got worse with the more he drank. Before Emerson showed up, he was talking up a storm to anyone who would listen. He was so loud the whole damn block probably heard him.

He was knocking back whiskeys like they were water. After what was probably his sixth drink, he had wandered over to a group of college kids. I kept an eye on him from my spot by the pool table. When people drank like that, they meant trouble.

He was showing them something on his phone in their little huddle when all of a sudden, his mood switched and he started yelling at them to get out. It went downhill from there. One of the guys stood up to him, then fists started swinging. I stayed out of it - bar fights were not my scene. I wasn't here for trouble and I didn't want to give Jett a reason to put me on his bad side.

The bartender and some shaggy haired guy pulled them apart and the group of kids left. After that, Craig cut him off. I watched him go from person to person in the bar, trying to get someone else to order him a drink.

Shortly after the fight, Emerson walked through the door wearing a crewneck that swallowed her petite frame and leggings that hugged her heart shaped ass. No matter what she wore, the attention was always on her. She could come in after a 5k run through the mud and heads would still swivel her way.

When she saw me standing there, her expression quickly turned to

something like embarrassment, like she wanted to shrink into herself and disappear. She was ashamed of the situation, of her boyfriend, that she was here to drag his ass home because he didn't know his limits.

When Jett put his hands on her, it took all I had in me not to cut his fucking hands off. That look on her face broke me into a million pieces and all I wanted to do was wrap her in my arms instead of hold her batshit crazy boyfriend against a fucking wall.

I wish I had asked for her number instead of just giving her mine. I wanted to make sure she was okay.

I got off the couch to make way into the kitchen when my phone started ringing. Alarms went off in my head as I grabbed for it, my heart pounding out of my chest at the thought it might be Emerson.

I really needed to get better control of myself. I just met the damn woman.

I checked the screen and saw it was my mother calling. Sighing, I debated letting it go to voicemail. It was too early to go through the same old questions she asked every time we spoke on the phone.

How are you?

Fine.

Are you eating?

Yes, mom.

Have you been flossing?

Yes, mom.

Are you folding your laundry or leaving it in the basket?

Obviously I'm folding it.

She didn't need to know it sat piled in my closet. To be fair, I'd just done laundry yesterday. I'd get to it at some point.

The questions were an excuse to call me. She'd been doing it ever since I

moved out years ago. But our relationship was different now. Everything was different. Answering the call, I pressed the speaker button and set it on the kitchen counter.

“Hey, mom.” I tried my best to sound cheery as I grabbed the carton of eggs from the fridge.

“Don’t you ‘hey mom’ me, Wesley Barton. Where the hell did you go?” She sounded frantic.

“I drove west, ended up in some town on the coast.” I waited a beat, then added, “And before you ask, I’m fine. I’m renting a house.”

“Renting a house? So you’re staying there?”

“I don’t know, mom. I needed to get out of there for a bit.”

She sighed into the phone. I didn’t want her to feel like it was solely her fault that I’d left. There were a bunch of things that factored into my decision.

“Well, I’ll support whatever you decide, honey. Just know that I miss you.” I tried to ignore the choke I heard in her voice as she said the words.

“I miss you, too, mom.”

“So, what made you decide to stay wherever you ended up at?” Thank God she changed the subject before this got too sentimental.

“Oldport. I decided to give living on the coast a shot. Thought a change of scenery would be nice.” That was a lie. I’d been driving so long that night, I had to find somewhere before I passed out behind the wheel. This was the first place I happened upon that wasn’t a major city or completely run down.

She was silent for a moment before saying, “Does this have something to do with your dad? Easton thought you might be acting out.”

“Easton is known to overreact, mom. Please don’t listen to him.”

“He’s your brother, honey. He’s naturally going to be worried about you.”

Yeah, my brother was so damn worried that he hadn't spoken to me since he moved away.

Not wanting to talk about my relocation any further, I changed the subject. "How's coffee boy doing?"

I could practically see her eye roll through the phone. "I know you're not happy with my decisions, Wesley, but you have to understand where I'm coming from on this. I lost your father the moment he was diagnosed. He wasn't the man I knew anymore; he became a stranger. I was grieving the man I loved since before his first surgery." She gave me these same reasons before I drove away.

I started thinking about my dad and all the memories we had together. All the fishing trips, picking me up on the last day of school to go camping every summer, working on the old cars he always had too many of.

Not wanting to turn this day into an emotional mess, I made up an excuse to get her off the phone. "I've got to head out the door for work."

"Please promise me you'll call at least once a week."

I didn't want to make any empty promises to her, but I had a feeling she wouldn't let me off this phone until I agreed.

"I'll do my best. Talk to you later, mom."

"Bye, sweetie."

I finished cooking my eggs and ate them straight out of the pan, not wanting to dirty more dishes than I had to.

Things were already going to shit here in Oldport, and here I thought I drove away from all my problems. In the back of my mind, I had a feeling my problems were just getting started.

Chapter Ten

EMERSON

Jett dropped me off at work five minutes before my shift was supposed to start. We'd gotten distracted in the grocery store looking for snacks for the game tonight and lost track of time. I'd asked to work a shorter shift today in the hopes I could get home earlier, using the double I picked up on Saturday as a way to convince Elijah. I was shocked when he said it was fine.

I tried to push what Brendt told me the other night out of my head. Jett and I had been getting by so far, and if I asked him about it and made a big deal out of it, I wouldn't get anywhere. I also had a feeling Jett would be livid if he found out I knew he'd been dealing.

I walked through the back door of the Tavern and grabbed my apron out of my locker, stuffing my phone and wallet in there. I was about to head out to the floor when I heard raised voices coming from Elijah's office next to the break room. On my way over to his office, my knee hit the edge of the small table. I cursed under my breath, pausing a moment to see if they heard the table legs scrape across the floor.

The office door swung open.

Of course, they heard.

“Just who I wanted to fucking see.” Elijah turned around and threw what looked like a crumpled receipt on his desk.

I stopped in the doorway to the dimly lit office, looking between Elijah and Jessica. “You seem more pissed than usual.”

“Jett’s wonderful friends are still refusing to pay for their shit.” He ran his hands down his face, heaving a sigh. “I’m going to have to start turning them away. I can’t keep losing money on them.”

What other problems could Jett cause for me in the span of twenty four hours?

“I’m really sorry, Elijah. I’ll talk to him again.”

I wasn’t sure I could change Jett’s mind about paying for their food. I didn’t even know what the reason behind it was. Jett wouldn’t tell me why he started this feud with Elijah but the least I could do was try to put an end to it. It was petty to me, for them to continue going to the man’s restaurant but then refusing to pay. And all for what? To send him a message and prove he wasn’t happy with something he did?

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Did this have something to do with what Brendt told me? I really fucking hoped not.

I loved Jett, but that didn’t mean I agreed with everything he and his friends did.

“Em, you don’t have to do that. Elijah is the owner of this place; he should be the one to handle it with his customers. Just because you two are dating doesn’t mean it’s your job to have that conversation with him,” Jessica said, her eyes catching on the blue haze on my cheek that I tried to cover with makeup.

Despite Jessica being a few years older than me, we always got along. She

was confidently curvy and always wore her ginger hair down with subtle beach waves that hung messily against her freckled cheeks. She had a bold demeanor, always speaking what was on her mind.

Elijah shook his head, keeping his eyes on me. “No, Emerson should do it. Prove that she really cares about her place of work.”

I bunched my eyebrows together. He seriously wanted me to confront my boyfriend to prove to him that I valued my job? I was surprised he was able to open a restaurant with how incredibly stupid he was.

“It’s fine, Jess. I’ll talk to him tonight when I get off.”

She opened her mouth to retort, but I cut her off by turning around and walking out to the floor full of customers.

The restaurant was packed, not a single table was empty. Everyone was here to watch the game and enjoy some drinks. I didn’t even want to think about how crowded the bar would be tonight. The Tavern and Craig’s bar were the only two places of business in town with TVs, so naturally they filled to capacity on game nights.

I was thankful we were watching the game at home with a few friends instead of here with the ego-filled crowd. Despite what people may think, I hated large crowds. I may give off the persona of loving to party because we frequented D Bar, but I just enjoyed hanging with our friends, keeping it small.

The people in my life molded me to be what they wanted and I let them. In order to keep up in this world, I had to put my own feelings aside and deal with it. Deal with having to put the person everyone wanted me to be first, and the person I truly was second.

I used to want to leave this town. I wanted to get out of here like my dad so luckily had the opportunity to do. He must’ve known what this place was

doing to him and left before it could sink its claws into him, too. My only wish was that he would have taken me with him.

Even if I did leave, I had nowhere to go. I didn't have enough money saved up to get a hotel or rent my own place. Every paycheck I received, Jett had me deposit a majority of it into our joint account and I never saw the money again. It wasn't "joint" if I didn't have access, but I wouldn't be the one to call him on it. He would just say it was going toward our bills and I didn't want him to think I didn't trust him.

I'd come to accept that I wasn't going anywhere, so I fell in love with the simple things, like the rain, the weeds growing out of cracked sidewalks, the flowers that bloomed outside the coffee shop in the spring. I found so many tiny details to fall in love with that I convinced myself I never wanted to leave in the first place.

With the rush of customers, the hours flew by, and by the time I knew it, I was clocking out and saying goodbye to my coworkers.

The rain fell in buckets on my walk home, my hood doing little to keep me dry. I wanted to get this conversation with Jett over with so we could enjoy the evening with friends. I'd had this talk with him before, but this time I had to get my point across so I'd never have to bring it up again.

Chapter Eleven

WESLEY

I showed up to Jett's house at five o'clock on the dot. There were already cars lining the block, so I parked five houses down from his.

I sat in my truck for a minute, not wanting to go in. I knew how the night might end if he really did end up using Emerson as a spectacle to see who'd try to take a bite. I'd beat his ass, and that really wouldn't get me any extra brownie points around here. Even if I didn't want to necessarily be with her, no man should treat a woman like that, and if no one else was going to defend her, I guess I'd have to be the one.

It disgusted me that the people here were fine with it. Sure, they appreciated the way she looked, but they could at least have the decency to be respectful about it. Treat her like a human instead of some fucking pawn.

Getting out of my truck, I walked over to his house. The lawn was cut short, the bushes trimmed in perfect squares, telling me they had a gardener that tended to them frequently. The house itself was a one-story cookie cutter home.

The front door was opened wide, showing the front entry way that led to the

bustle of people gathered in the living room. There was an ivory sectional that took up most of the living room, facing a massive TV that hung on the wall. Behind the living room was the kitchen, a marble island standing front and center.

Beer cans cluttered the counters, plates strewn about with forgotten food. There were a few slow cookers in the kitchen but upon looking further, they were emptied, only scraps of food left, which made me believe this get-together had started a lot earlier than Jett told me to arrive.

I heard Jett's voice above everyone else, which didn't surprise me. He looked like he was already drunk and the football game hadn't even started yet.

"Wes, my man! You made it. I was wondering when you'd show up." Jett made his way over to me as he spoke. "Want a beer?"

"You guys must've started early."

I hadn't answered his question about the beer but he pulled one out of a cooler and handed it to me anyway.

"Nah, we started on time. You're the one who's late. Jim was just telling me about your lunch with the guys today. You liking everything so far? The Tavern has some pretty delicious options, huh?" He took a long swig of his beer, not breaking eye contact as he waited for my response.

He wasted no time trying to get a feel of me. "Food's good, yeah. Not too many choices around here but I'm not picky."

I cracked open my beer and took a long pull as he got wrapped up in a conversation with some ginger haired guy. I leaned against the edge of the island, watching the crowd.

I already knew I wouldn't be here long. I was popping in to say hi to be polite, and once this beer was empty, I'd leave. Jett was looking for trouble

and I was not going to be the one to give him that tonight.

I heard the front door shut and moved my gaze in that direction, seeing Emerson walking in. With the look she had on her face, I was starting to think she'd be the one delivering that trouble instead.

She marched her pretty little ass right into that living room and stood directly in front of the TV, staring at Jett, who was now sitting on the couch, as she crossed her arms. Suddenly, all the commotion in the room quieted and everyone's heads swiveled in her direction.

"How was work, sweetheart? Why don't you go change out of those wet clothes and join us?" Jett lazily looked up from the TV, cocking his head ever so slightly, seemingly annoyed.

She was dripping wet from the downpour that started minutes ago. Her hair clung to her shirt, the ends dribbling little drops of water onto the rug.

"Oh, work? I had a wonderful conversation with my boss, who also owns the restaurant, who told me that you and your friends are still refusing to pay for what you order. It has to stop, Jett." She was pissed, that much was obvious. Her hands curled into fists under her arms, but now that I was watching her, I didn't think she had her arms crossed to emphasize how angry she was. She was hiding her shiver, but Jett was more focused on his game than anything else.

Jett laughed, shaking his head as he grabbed for the remote on the coffee table. "No, we don't, baby. We can talk about this later. Go clean up." He went to turn up the TV but she stepped in front of the direction of the remote, blocking the sensor.

I raised an eyebrow. She was feisty. Her attitude shouldn't be hot, considering the situation, but it was. I tried to hide my smile by taking a swig of my beer.

“Yes, you do, or Elijah won’t serve you anymore and I really don’t need the extra stress at work. He already gives me shit every day. I don’t need you all adding to it. I’m not moving until you all agree to pay going forward.”

Jett draped his hand holding the remote along the back of the couch. “Not happening.”

He was very obviously trying to keep his cool in front of everyone, but smoke was practically blowing out of his ears. I set my beer on the counter behind me, not taking my eyes off the two of them. I didn’t want to get involved for Emerson’s sake, but I’d stay to make sure Jett didn’t try any shit.

She took her eyes off of Jett for the first time since she walked in and looked around at everyone, her gaze landing on me last. She stood there for what felt like minutes just staring at me, our eyes glued to each other. I wish I knew what she was thinking. She was clearly uncomfortable, doing her best not to show it to the whole room, but I saw it.

Her face changed and all of a sudden, she looked like she was about to cry. She didn’t look back at Jett before she turned on her heel and headed down the hall. Jett acted like she hadn’t even been standing there, turning the volume up on the game.

I tried to keep my thoughts from showing on my face as I stood there, but damn I wanted to punch that smug look straight off his face right now.

How he just acted toward her proved what kind of fucked up guy he was. A man like that didn’t care about women. He may give the impression that he did by the public displays of affection, but behind closed doors, this was how it was. Her voice was ignored, not just by him but by half the damn town, too. No one in this room attempted to stand up for her, back her up, tell Jett

see he was being an asshole. They all just sat there, watching like it was some fucking climax in a movie happening live before their eyes.

The fact that every single person in this room went back to what they were doing before she had walked in pissed me off. Not one person went to see if she was okay. They all just stayed in their places, continuing their conversations, as if him treating her like that was okay.

After the halftime show, I asked Brendt where the restroom was.

He acted like he was grabbing something off the counter behind me when he leaned in close. “If you’re planning to go check on her, don’t. It’ll piss him off more. Take a piss outside if you really have to go. I’m just as pissed as you are, but the only way you don’t end up on his bad side is to not get involved.”

I kept my voice down, staring straight ahead as I spoke. “Not get involved? Is that your genius plan here? He treats her like shit and you turn your head the other way?”

“Unless you want to wind up a missing person, I’d suggest you do the same.” He walked away with a handful of peanuts.

Knowing Brendt wasn’t oblivious to the way Jett treated her made me feel a bit better but it didn’t excuse the fact that no one did anything about it. I shook my head and made my way towards the hallway.

“Where you going, Wesley?” Jett asked from the couch, not taking his eyes off the TV.

“Need to use the bathroom,” I clipped, not pausing to look back at him.

I lightly tapped my knuckles on the first door on the right. When no one replied, I moved to the next door and tapped again.

“Restroom is on the left.” I heard Emerson's muffled voice through the door in response to my knock.

I set my hand on the door knob, taking a deep breath. Was I really going into the room Emerson and Jett slept together in?

I pushed the thought aside. Twisting the knob, the door cracked open. Emerson sat on the end of the bed, her work uniform still plastered to her skin. Her head snapped up when the door hinge creaked.

“You can’t come in here.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, those baby blue eyes wide.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I opened the door a few inches further.

“Wes, you have to go.”

“Are you okay, Emerson?” I asked more firmly this time, my voice thick with concern.

She looked back down at her lap, toying with her fingers. “I’m fine.”

God, I hated seeing her sitting there like that. Her hair was still dripping while she noticeably shivered. I wanted to go back out there and give Jett a piece of my mind. I should’ve done it that night at the bar. When he put his hands on her, the only two thoughts in my head were to get him as far away from her as possible and make sure she was okay. I didn’t know her past with Jett, but I knew she didn’t deserve this. No one did.

I slipped inside the room, clicking the door shut behind me. I walked over to the bed she was sitting on and grabbed a blanket.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her glassy eyes on the blanket in my hand as she splayed her hands on the comforter on either side of her.

I tossed the blanket on her lap and paused, wishing I had some way to make this better for her.

“I can talk to him if you want me to,” I suggested.

“No. No, please don’t. It’s okay. I’ll get it sorted out. Elijah will take it out of my paycheck for now.”

“I didn’t mean the bills, Emerson.”

She fisted her hands in the blanket, looking away from me as she unraveled it to wrap it around herself.

I couldn’t tell how she felt about any of this. She looked more disappointed in herself than anything. It was almost like she was used to this kind of shit happening and would take the fall for it time and time again.

“You’re okay with that?”

She sighed. “How else am I supposed to feel? You saw how he can be. He’s not going to stop, neither will his friends. They’re trying to prove some point to Elijah.”

“What would they need to prove a point about?”

Her body tensed and she froze for a split second before continuing. “I don’t know. Jett doesn’t tell me. I don’t ask.” She was holding something back, that much was clear, but I wouldn’t press her on it.

I stood there a second longer, taking her in. Even soaked and upset, she was still gorgeous. Her walnut hair was starting to frizz around the frame of her face and her mascara was slightly smudged beneath her eyes from the rain, but that was all surface level. I was quickly learning that Emerson was more than just pretty dresses and flirty smiles.

I turned to leave, making my way to the bedroom door. Before I closed the door behind me, I looked at her one last time, her eyes catching mine. She looked so damn sad, and it hit me right in the gut.

“You don’t need to stay with someone who treats you like that, you know.”

I didn’t think she’d reply so I went to close the door, but then she whispered, “I don’t have anywhere to go.”

An hour later, after watching the end of the game, I made my way back to my truck. I sat in the driver's seat, listening to the rain pelt the windshield,

when I vowed to myself that I'd help her in any way I could if she'd let me.

Chapter Twelve

EMERSON

Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I saw that the clock on my nightstand read half past midnight. I knew the house would be a mess and I didn't want to have to clean it before work in the morning, so I forced myself out of bed.

My eyes were swollen from crying. The rush from confronting Jett in front of everyone got to me the most. I probably could have waited to talk to him, but I wanted all of his friends to hear that it had to stop. Everyone in that room saw how he talked to me, how he disregarded everything I said. Sometimes it felt like Jett lived in an entirely different world, following his own rules and not giving a damn what anyone else had to say about it.

In the beginning, I was attracted to that side of him. It felt like I was living in a fairytale when we first started dating. He swooped in and rescued me from the big, bad wolf, a.k.a. my mother. Because of that, it just felt right to continue being with him, even if a small part of me questioned it sometimes. Everyone goes through their bad boy stages, I guess I just never grew out of mine. I often wondered what it would be like if I hadn't moved into his home.

Would I still be with him after all the hard times? The arguments? The disagreements? Or was the house we shared the reason I didn't leave?

Despite all of that, he still chose to be with me. I knew why I questioned our relationship sometimes; I just didn't want to admit the reasons. Over time, as we grew out of our honeymoon stage, I started really getting to know who Jett was. We had our first fight and made up quickly afterward, but the more arguments we had, the harder they were to recover from. It was like the more comfortable we became, the less of a filter we had around each other.

It wasn't always bad, though. Our good days outweighed the bad, which made us forget all the shitty things we said during our fights. I'd remind myself that couples don't always get along and that some conflict was normal, and that was enough to excuse it all.

I started cleaning in the kitchen, collecting the empty beer cans into a garbage bag and placing dirty dishes in the sink to be cleaned after. This was one of the things I hated about big get-togethers. The aftermath. You open your home to people, and this is what you get in return: a mess.

I needed to get out of my head, so I pulled up my playlist on my phone, hitting shuffle. "The Story Of Us" by Taylor Swift came on as I got to working on the dishes.

It didn't dawn on me that the feud between Elijah and Jett might be because of the shit Jett was dealing until Wesley asked me what it was about. I didn't want to think about any of it. The stress of it all was hurting my head.

I scrubbed to the beat of the music, singing softly. A door closed in the hallway and I looked up to find Jett coming down the hall.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge, and tapped the screen on my phone to turn the music off, facing me with an elbow propped on the counter. He was

trying to act calm, but I could see him fuming inside. His knuckles were white with how tight he was gripping his beer.

“I was listening to that.” I gestured to the phone with the sponge in my hand.

“Why’d you do that, Em?” The second he opened his mouth, I could smell the mixture of alcohol. Now that I looked closer, I could see him swaying even as he used the counter to hold himself up. His eyes were bloodshot. Was he high?

I knew what he was referring to, but I asked anyway. “Why did I do what?”

That ticked him off. He slammed his beer down, liquid sloshing out onto the counter. He grabbed my upper arm and I dropped the plate in my hand, the ceramic shattering into a million pieces in the sink.

Keeping his grip on my arm, he practically dragged me to our bedroom, his fingers digging into my skin. Before I could register what was happening, I was being shoved toward the bed. The door slammed as I tripped over my feet, landing face first on the bed. I quickly twisted around to prepare myself for whatever was coming next.

“What the fuck, Jett?” What I did earlier did *not* warrant this reaction, but he was drunk. It wasn’t an excuse, I *knew* this was wrong. But did he?

He practically spit at me as he slurred his words. “Don’t be fucking stupid.” Did putting my foot down for once really warrant this?

For once, I wasn’t going to back down. I’d been doing that my whole life and I was tired of it.

“You need to pay Elijah, it’s as simple as that. I don’t care what feud you two have, but it needs to stop. It’s hurting his business.”

He laughed. He was actually *laughing* at the idea of putting his ego aside to

end whatever was going on between them.

“His business? What about what he did to my business, huh?” He was looking at me like I grew another pair of eyes. Although, in his current state, I’m sure I did.

“You mean the drugs?” I should’ve kept my mouth shut about it, but I was mad. Mad that he didn’t tell me, didn’t trust me with the information. He thought he could keep me in the dark about all of this and that I’d never find out.

His face blazed a bright red, the anger causing him to shake. “You have no fucking idea, Emerson. You’re all looks and no brain. There’s not a single useful thought in that pretty little head of yours. I should’ve listened to your mother when she told me you’d only drag me down.” He was yelling so loud, I was sure the neighbors down the block could hear us.

He was just saying things to hurt me. He wanted a reaction, and I didn’t want to give one, not when he was in this state and very clearly high on top of being intoxicated. But there was no hiding the pounding of my heart as fear crept in.

He just voiced everything this town thought of me because of him. He wanted me to look the part of a perfect, ignorant girlfriend, to keep my mouth shut and let him handle everything. Well, he was about to be sorely mistaken. I wouldn’t keep up the façade anymore.

“I’m the stupid one because you won’t tell me anything? You’ve been lying to me for years! I won’t let you try to bring me down anymore.” I pushed off the bed and went to make my way around him, but he grabbed both my arms and backed me up, slamming me up against the wall, the force shaking the door beside me.

I was pinned beneath him, his size swallowing all my oxygen. I didn’t want

to be scared – he was my boyfriend. He should make me feel safe, protected, not afraid. I took as deep of breaths as my lungs would allow, trying to push aside my feelings and be strong.

“Where are you going?” He was too close to my ear, the scent of whiskey and beer burning my nostrils.

“I’m leaving for the night to give you time to think.” I managed to step out to the side, away from him. He let me go, spinning around to grab his whiskey glass off the dresser. I watched as he tossed his head back, swallowing the amber liquid. Raising his arm, he threw the empty glass at the door next to my face. Glass sprayed everywhere, the crash so loud my ears were ringing.

I froze as fear and shock enveloped me wholly. I stood there, taking in the glass that littered the floor. I couldn’t look at him and see the monster he had just become. My lungs felt like they were filled with water as I struggled to get any air.

I gathered my strength and pulled myself away from the wall I had plastered myself against. As I opened the door, the glass crunched under my shoes. This shouldn’t be a reason to feel grateful for wearing shoes in the house, but here I was.

I carefully walked out, leaving the door open behind me. Halfway down the hall, Jett yelled, “Try finding some other prick that will put up with your shit! Don’t fucking come back here, Emerson.”

I didn’t grab a single item of mine. The only thought on my mind was that I needed to get out of this house and away from him.

Luke was sitting casually on the couch, his arm draped over the back. He didn’t take his eyes off the phone in his hand when he said, “Shouldn’t have been such a bitch, Em.”

Keeping my eyes down, I rushed out the door as nausea rolled through me. I had nowhere to go, but I'd figure it out. I always did.

Chapter Thirteen

EMERSON

I couldn't call Wesley. I couldn't admit to him that he was right, especially so soon after the first time. Instead, I called Stella, knowing she'd let me crash at her place until I figured something out. She picked up on the second ring.

"I was just thinking about you! We've got some sixth sense thing going on, I swear." I let out a strangled sob, trying to keep myself from breaking down on the phone. "Em, what's wrong?"

I swallowed to try and clear the rock in my throat. "Can you come get me?"

Her tone changed, now less cheerful and more laced with concern. "Of course. Where are you? I'll leave right now." I'd walked so far trying to process what happened that I wasn't sure. I looked at the street sign closest to me and relayed it to her as her car started in the background of the call.

After we hung up, I sat on the curb waiting for her. I didn't know how I was going to explain everything to her. She wouldn't force me to tell her if I

didn't want to, but once I did, she'd be livid with Jett. As upset with him as I was right now, I didn't want to make everyone else turn against him too.

Stella pulled up to the curb beside me after what felt like hours. She went to get out of the car as I stood up, but I motioned for her to stay in. I didn't want to be out here longer than I had to, not with the possibility of Jett coming to look for me.

I got in the passenger seat and she turned the overhead light on.

"Oh my God. You're bleeding." She grabbed my hand and gently pulled my arm closer to her, slightly twisting it to examine me further.

I hadn't realized I was bleeding. It must've been from the glass when it shattered everywhere. My upper arm was still sore from where he'd pulled me, but I didn't want to worry her further so I kept quiet.

"Did Jett do this?" she asked. I couldn't look at her, couldn't speak. I was afraid that if I voiced what happened, I'd break down, and I was trying so hard to not fall apart. She must've realized because she let go of my wrist, not pressing for an answer. She turned the overhead light off and began driving.

What did I do to deserve any of this? The person who promised to be by my side through it all shouldn't be the same person causing me harm.

We pulled up to her house and got out of the car. I felt like a zombie as I walked inside behind her. She flicked the lights on in the kitchen and grabbed me a granola bar and water as I sat at the island.

"If you don't want to talk about it tonight, we don't have to, but I should take a look at your arm so it doesn't get infected."

She went into the guest bathroom and came back a minute later with first aid supplies. She sat next to me and gently laid my arm on the cold granite. I watched silently as she poured rubbing alcohol on a cotton swab and blotted my cuts, my eyes squeezing shut against the sting.

“He didn’t mean to hurt me,” I said quietly, my eyes still closed.

“Oh, honey, I know.” She ran her free hand down my hair soothingly as she let my cuts dry. “I don’t think he’s well. He’s got some things of his own he needs to figure out and I don’t want him taking you down with him.”

I looked at her, trying to read what she wasn’t saying. “You know?”

She nodded. “Brendt told me. He wanted me to keep an eye on things, make sure no one was targeting you when we’d go out. I know you don’t want to hear it, but Jett’s made enemies doing what he does. He’s in worse trouble than we think and it’s only a matter of time before it catches up to him.”

I knew there was more to the story, but I couldn’t take all of this at once tonight. A few days ago, I had no question in my mind about being with Jett. I was so confident in our future together. In a matter of days, that all changed. Now, I didn’t know what to think.

Was I a fool to want to keep trying with him? I wasn’t honestly sure if that was even what I wanted. I wanted things to go back to how they used to be, before his drinking got this bad, before I knew he was dealing, and possibly using.

“I just don’t get why he didn’t tell me. I thought he trusted me.”

“I’m sure he does trust you. I think things progressed quicker than he thought they would, and now he’s in over his head with no idea what to do about it.” She covered my cuts with small bandages after applying ointment.

“Is it alright if I go to bed?”

“Guest room is all made up for you.” She hesitated, biting the inside of her cheek as she watched me. “I know it doesn’t do much, but I’m sorry this happened. You can stay here as long as you want, okay?”

I nodded and got off the chair to hug her. I didn’t know what I’d do without

Stella. I could come to her about anything and she wouldn't judge me. Friends like this were few and far between. I'd never take her for granted, not after everything we'd been through.

After I let her go, I headed to the guest room and locked the door. I didn't lock it because I didn't want Stella coming in. I locked it in case Jett came here looking for me because I had no doubt in my mind that he'd be out there scouring the streets for me soon.

Chapter Fourteen

WESLEY

I didn't sleep much last night. I was stuck thinking about Emerson for far longer than I'd like to admit. The look on her face when I left her in her bedroom was ingrained in my mind. I had to fight everything in me not to wrap my arms around her and take her far away from Jett.

It made my stomach turn to think she felt bad about herself because of the way he had treated her. That was the shitty part about some men, they turned things around to take the blame off of themselves, to make the woman feel at fault for something they didn't even do.

Growing up, my parents had a healthy relationship, but that didn't mean I was oblivious to how bad relationships could be. The chances of a relationship heading south were too great for me to want to take the risk with anyone. I'd been with a few women here or there in my twenty eight years of life, but nothing long term. It'd been well over a year since I'd even done anything with a woman. Once my dad got sick, the focus moved to him and I didn't have time for any of that.

I walked into the Tavern to pick up lunch for my coworkers. Though I

knew they would say otherwise, I was going to pay for the damn food. I swear this town was full of children disguised as adults.

The waitress at the front walked away with a family of four to seat them, so I rested my arm on the counter, tapping my fingers to an invisible beat while I waited for her to come back. Emerson was walking past when she saw me, stopping in her tracks. My fingers paused their thrumming, catching the worried expression on her face before she pasted on a smile.

“Table for one?” She tried to sound cheery but it seemed like something was off. Maybe she felt awkward after our conversation?

“To-go order. I can wait for your coworker to grab it if you’re busy. I don’t want to bother you.”

She walked behind the counter, checking the names on the bags of food before grabbing the one for me. “Not a bother at all. I can ring you up.” Squinting at the receipt, she read off how much I owed. I handed her the cash, not missing the way her fingers slightly trembled.

She counted off my change and held it out for me, but she let go before I could grab the coins balancing on the bills. They clattered to the floor, bouncing in all directions. “Shit, sorry.” She crouched down to pick them up as I did the same.

I grabbed a few coins before looking at her with the intention of telling her she didn’t need to be sorry, but the words disappeared from the tip of my tongue. My eyes were glued to the purple fingerprints dotting her upper arm. She must’ve not realized her jacket had fallen off her shoulder because she didn’t move to fix it.

“Emerson.” My jaw was clenched so tight I could hear my teeth creak as they threatened to break.

She didn’t acknowledge I’d said her name as she gathered the last of the

change. She held it out to me when she saw my expression, where my eyes were fixed. She followed my gaze to her arm. “Who did this to you?” I knew the answer, but I wanted her to admit it. She couldn’t stay with him. Not with fucking bruises on her arm barely a few days after her cheek was painted blue.

She quickly fixed her coat and stood up. She placed the change on the counter and went to walk away.

“Emerson, wait.” I could see her shoulders tense as I stood up as well. “Was it Jett?” My voice was barely above a whisper, trying not to bring attention to us. I didn’t have to ask her that question because I was one hundred percent sure it was him. I just needed confirmation before I planned how to fucking kill him.

Hurt flashed in her eyes before she looked away. “I can’t talk right now, Wes. I’m on the clock.”

“Then talk to me after. What time do you get off?”

She gave me this pleading look that read “this is none of your business.” I mean, she was right. It wasn’t. But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t at least try to be there for her. Did she really expect me to just stand by and watch as new bruises formed on her body every day?

“I don’t need your help. Can you please just respect that?” She was asking for respect from the wrong guy, but I wasn’t going to point that out.

There was no point in fighting it. “Alright. See you around then.”

I walked out with the food and brought it back to Jim’s shop. I told them they could have my sandwich because I had to leave early to take my cat to the vet.

I didn’t have a cat.

Emerson would be seeing me around sooner than she probably thought.

Chapter Fifteen

WESLEY

“Holy shit, Wesley.” Emerson had her hand on her chest like she was trying to keep her heart from jumping out of it.

“You’re not on the clock now, so talk.” I wasn’t in the mood to dodge around the topic. I’d waited for her to get off work. I wasn’t going to let this go as easily as she wanted me to.

She blew out a breath, shaking her head. “Give me a second to clean up the shit you just scared out of me.”

“Okay, ew?”

She rolled her eyes. “It was a joke. Don’t take it seriously.”

I waited, staring at her expectantly.

“I’m not going to try to lie to you about what happened because I get the sense that you’re a very persistent guy, but I don’t need you trying to protect me from something I don’t need protection from.”

She couldn’t be serious. “It doesn’t seem like that’s the case based on the fifty shades of purple your arm is currently painted.” She narrowed her eyes.

“Is it wrong for me to worry about you after witnessing what he did the other night?”

She sighed and sat on the step below the door to the back of the restaurant.

She was nervously twisting her fingers together as she spoke. “Please believe me when I say it's never been this bad until that night in the bar. I don't know what's gotten into him lately.”

I sat down next to her on the cold slab of concrete and grabbed one of her hands so she would stop the nervous tick.

“I believe you.” That must have surprised her because she turned her attention to me. “But that doesn't mean you have to stick around now that he's shown this side of himself.”

“You don't have to worry about that,” she said quietly.

It dawned on me what she meant. I squeezed her hand. “You're brave for leaving, Em.” Her gaze shifted to focus down at her knees.

After a few minutes of silence, she pulled her hand out of mine and wrapped her arms around herself. “I'm staying at Stella's until I can figure things out.” I remembered dropping Stella off at her home, how far it was from Emerson's house.

“Isn't her house further from the restaurant than yours?” She didn't have a car. People didn't just willingly choose to walk home in the cold rain after every shift if they had other options.

“Not really much I can do about that. I'll save up and get a car eventually. I just need to change where my checks are going first.”

I stood, offering my hand to help her up. “Let me drive you to Stella's.” Once she was standing, she let go of me and shoved her hands in her coat pockets.

“I'm only saying yes because I really don't have the energy to fight you on

it right now.”

Jett’s murder could wait one more day. Emerson was my only priority at the moment. A big part of me wished that she was my priority every day, but I would take what I could get.

As soon as she closed her door and buckled in, her scent filled the cab.

She was quiet as we drove to Stella’s. I wondered if she realized she was playing with her fingers again as she stared out the window. She was sitting in the passenger seat, but it felt like she was a million miles away, stuck in her thoughts.

We were at the stop sign, about to turn onto Stella’s street, when Emerson ducked down. “Shit. Go straight. Don’t turn.”

I wasn’t sure why she said that until I saw Jett’s truck sitting a few houses down. Cursing under my breath, I turned my blinker off and went straight like she asked.

“He must’ve figured I would be staying at Stella’s. How the fuck am I supposed to get in there?”

She asked the question more to herself, but I figured I’d answer anyway. “You’re not.”

She was still in the fetal position when she let out an emotionless laugh. “I don’t have money for a hotel.”

“Rent’s covered.”

“Where the hell am I going to go that’s...” Her voice trailed off as the realization hit her. “No.”

I was already heading in the direction of my house. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“Give me time to think of an idea. Drive around or something.” She was quiet for a few seconds before she sat up and turned to face me. “Do you know how pissed he’d be if he found out I was staying with a guy?” I didn’t usually jump to conclusions but it sounded like she was considering it. Well, considering it or not, I wasn’t giving her an option.

“I get the feeling he’s already pretty pissed in general, and I can’t take another night of no sleep worrying about you.” I saw her expression change and quickly wished I hadn’t said that.

“Wesley..” She started, her ocean eyes staring up at me. I felt my blood run south. Now was *not* the time to get hard.

“Don’t flatter yourself, darlin’. I’m only saying it’s a good idea so you can get space from him. I’m the last person he’d think you’d come running to.”

I could tell she was pondering over the idea. After several minutes, she sighed, assumingly accepting defeat. “One night.” She emphasized each word.

“One night,” I agreed.

Chapter Sixteen

EMERSON

I made a lot of dumb decisions in my life, but this topped them all by a long shot. I was about to walk into Wesley's house not even twenty four hours after ending things with Jett. To be fair, I wasn't here to sleep with the man. I just needed a roof over my head for one night, but believe me, if I had a car to sleep in, I would've chosen that option.

I wasn't sure where I'd go tomorrow night, but I'd figure it out when the time came. My head hurt from all the chaos that ensued in the past couple days. My current stage in life seemed almost perfect up until a few days ago. But now it felt like a tornado had sucked me up and I was waiting for it to finally decide to spit me out.

He lived in a quaint little house a few blocks from the beach. The house matched the color of the sea, its charm making me feel like I was checking into a mini vacation. I had to remind myself this was only for one night, and it was anything but a vacation.

Inside, the place was quite bare. He didn't have any family photos, no magnets on the fridge or mail littering the counters. There wasn't a bit of

clutter in sight. Either he was a minimalist or this was the first place he'd landed after getting out of Dodge.

He set his keys on the island and faced me. "I don't have any furniture in the guest room so you can have mine."

I was standing awkwardly in the living room, not sure what to do with myself. I felt like a nuisance being here. The last thing I wanted to do was inconvenience him further. "You don't have to do that. I'm fine on the couch."

He watched me from where he stood in the kitchen, a worried expression etched across his face. I hated it. I didn't want to be pitied by anyone. It was bad enough he had seen the bruises, and now I was in his house like some poor damsel in distress and he was my knight in shining armor.

That's why this had to be a one night thing. Jett would eventually give up on Stella's house and move on, then I'd go back to Stella's and come up with a long-term plan.

During my shift, I had Elijah switch the account my paychecks were going to. If I had it my way, Jett would never see another dime of my money. I'd be perfectly fine never seeing him again, and that's what I think hurt me the most. Up until a few days ago, I'd never doubted our relationship and everything we'd built together. I quickly learned I had limits I wouldn't let even Jett cross. I could've stayed through the alcohol, but I couldn't take the abuse.

Wesley walked over to me and took my hand, leading me to the couch. "Relax for a little, okay? I know your head is probably going a million miles a minute right now, but you're safe here. I doubt he'll come looking for you here, and even if he does, I'm not going to let him anywhere near you."

God, I hated this. I hated that this was my situation with someone I loved,

and that some stranger felt like he needed to keep me safe.

I couldn't look at Wesley as I sat down. I didn't want to see the concern in his eyes. "Up until last night, I counted on him for everything. My mind can't comprehend that all of a sudden, that's not the case anymore."

He pulled a sherpa blanket over my lap and sat next to me, leaving a few inches of space between us. "You don't have to have everything figured out right away, Em. You can take all the time you need."

I was tired of talking about this. I'd had enough of Jett clouding my mind the past few days. I shifted so my legs were curled up beneath me, leaning my elbow on the cushioned arm of the couch to find Wesley's eyes trained on me like he could see my mind trying to process my entire world crumbling down. "I feel like you know so much about me while I know nothing about you."

He gave a close-lipped smile, seemingly glad I changed the subject as well. "What would you like to know?"

"Where'd you come from?"

"How'd I know that'd be the first question you ask?"

"You act like showing up out of nowhere doesn't warrant my curiosity."

He turned his attention to the blank wall in front of us. "Well, to start, I drove a few hundred miles west with no plan. I grew up in a small town in eastern Washington called Fortsworth with my parents and older brother."

It felt like he was holding back, so I pressed further. "Why'd you leave Fortsworth?"

His gaze fell before he spoke again. "My father passed away."

"So you lost a parent and ditched the rest of your family?" It probably wasn't the right thing to say with his confession, but I wasn't sure why someone would run after the loss of a parent.

He turned his attention back to me as he explained. “It wasn’t like that. My brother left home a while ago. He’s older than me and is starting a family of his own. That just leaves my mom, and she’s already moved on, seeing some fucking hippy barista.”

“And you couldn’t handle that,” I guessed.

He leaned back against the couch with one arm draped over the back. “It just doesn’t seem fair to my dad. They’d been together since high school.”

I could see where he was coming from, but I didn’t know the whole story to judge either side.

“It can be hard to understand someone else’s thought process while they’re grieving, but I’m sure she’s not intentionally trying to disrespect your dad.” I could tell his mom was a sensitive subject just by the look on his face. I didn’t want him to think I expected a response, so I did what I do best. Deflected. “I think Stella might be a little jealous when she hears where I’m staying tonight.”

Watching his demeanor change with the smirk on his face, the heaviness in the air disappeared.

I was getting out of the bath Wesley had drawn for me when my phone dinged with a million texts from Stella asking where I was and why Jett was parked on her block. I replied with an explanation and assured her I’d be okay for the night. She replied back instantly, promising that her lips were sealed on my whereabouts if he asked. I tried to ignore the winky face she added at the end.

I had fallen asleep hours ago on the couch after Wesley and I were done playing twenty one questions. Through our conversation, I learned he loved

tacos, his childhood dog's name was Rex, and that his favorite color today was blue. He made it a point to tell me his favorite color changed daily, and that I'd have to ask him every day to keep up with it.

I think he just wanted an excuse for me to talk to him more.

He woke me up with a steaming plate of chicken parmesan, which I inhaled after my stomach reminded me I was surviving off a granola bar. After I practically licked the plate clean, he'd led me to the bath.

It didn't dawn on me while I was with Jett that I liked these kinds of things. Dinner being made by someone other than myself, a bath ready to sink into. I was used to being the one to take care of him and it felt weird switching roles to being taken care of.

I could get used to this.

But I couldn't. I couldn't let myself get used to this treatment and fall for Wesley. Things were too complicated right now. My head was whirling with all of my conflicting thoughts and my sanity was hanging on by a thread.

I pulled on the clothes I'd been wearing prior to the bath and found Wesley sitting at the kitchen island. He had a book in his hands and was wearing what I presumed to be reading glasses. I didn't think something as simple as glasses could physically make me melt, but clearly I was wrong because I felt my cheeks heat at the sight of him. I cleared my throat, trying to hide the effect he was having on me.

"Thank you," I managed to get out, my voice scratchy.

He set the book down as he shifted his attention to me, placing the bookmark in between the pages he had been lost in. I watched as his fingers brushed across the page as he closed the book.

My southern region was clearly not on the same page as my brain. He was just being nice, trying to help me get my mind off of everything. I shouldn't

take it any other way.

But it was hard not to with him sitting there like some sexy teacher and I was the student pining after him. That fantasy was always repulsive to me, but seeing him in those reading glasses? That fantasy didn't seem so far fetched now.

I wasn't into him like that though. Or was I? At least my head wasn't. My body was an entirely different story, but I was smart enough not to act on it, especially so soon after what happened with Jett.

"Don't mention it. If you're tired, like I said, you can take my bed. I don't mind."

"But *I* mind. I can't ask you to sleep on the couch. Plus, I don't think you'd even fit." He glanced at the couch like he was mentally measuring it. He stood up, set his glasses on the counter, and walked past me to head into the bedroom. Not sure what his plan was, I followed him down the hall.

He laid a blanket and pillow on the floor next to the bed, leaving the comforter and the second pillow on the bed. "That work for you?"

I nodded, stepping past him to get myself situated on the ground.

He chuckled behind me. "I'm taking the floor, Emerson. You're sleeping up there."

Too tired to argue, I climbed into the bed, pulling the comforter over myself. Wesley switched off the lights and shuffled over, getting situated in his makeshift bed on the floor.

Laying in the same room as him felt awkward, but I tried to ignore it, closing my eyes as the silence weighed on me, keeping sleep from claiming me. I turned on my side to face away from the side of the bed he was less than a foot from and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

"Goodnight, Emerson," he mumbled sleepily.

“Goodnight, Wesley.”

After what felt like forever, I drifted into sleep with the image of him wearing those damn glasses, tattooed arms holding a book in front of him.

I was screwed.

Chapter Seventeen

EMERSON

The tears fell uncontrollably as I stared at the steering wheel of Jett's truck, nausea rolling through me in waves. Jett was at the bar every night this week, and if he wasn't there, he was home with a whiskey and coke in hand.

Tonight was my breaking point.

Brendt had called me to come pick him up from D Bar, but Jett was so fucked up, he couldn't get his own ass in the truck. Brendt had helped him in and came home with us to help me get him inside.

As soon as we'd pulled into the driveway and Brendt had the passenger door open, Jett had keeled over and emptied what had to be a gallon of beer and whiskey onto the concrete. It still sat there, the passenger door wide open after Brendt had to practically carry him inside.

My bones felt numb, but my mind was reeling. How could I get the point across to Jett that this was a problem without making him feel shitty for putting me and our friends through this?

Mustering up the strength, I wiped my tears and climbed out of the truck,

closing the driver's side door. I came around the other side, shutting the passenger door and grabbing the hose from by the house to rinse off the driveway.

Once the majority of it was washed away, I turned off the hose and made my way inside our house. The house that was slowly making me feel like I was drowning. But for Jett, I'd stay afloat. For him, I'd push my own feelings aside. He needed me right now.

"He's in bed," Brendt said, coming down the hall.

I pasted on the best smile I could fake right now, hoping he couldn't see that I'd been crying. It wouldn't do me or Brendt any good if I couldn't handle my own emotions. Hiding them away was easier than dealing with them sometimes. "Thanks."

"You don't have to do that, Em."

"Do what?" I feigned confusion, but we both knew what he meant.

His eyes softened. "You're allowed to not be okay. You don't have to be at your best all the time. You're allowed to break, too."

"I can't break when I have to be here to keep his broken pieces together."

"That's not your job, Emerson."

"It is. I'm not just going to leave him high and dry when he needs me most."

He closed the distance, wrapping his arms around me. "You can't run yourself dry in the process. Who's taking care of you?"

I let him hug me for a minute, wrapping my arms around his torso. I couldn't respond to his question because I didn't have an answer. I was taking care of myself, and for now, it was working. But tonight, I broke. I just needed one night of breaking, then tomorrow I'd put myself back together, too.

Brendt took a step back, studying my face. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

I nodded, unable to form words. I was so damn tired.

He stepped past me, heading for the front door and closing it behind him. I’m sure Luke would come pick him up, but I felt bad not offering him a ride home.

I flicked on the lights in the kitchen, my eyes immediately landing on the handle of whiskey sitting on the kitchen island. My hands clenched into fists and I grabbed it with more force than necessary, untwisting the cap and tipping it over the sink, watching as the amber liquid flowed down the drain.

My ears were pounding so loud, I didn’t hear Jett come up behind me, but there was no missing his grip on my arm as he yanked me back, the bottle clattering to the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he yelled in my face, the alcohol on his breath stinging my nose.

“Why do you do this? Why do you drink yourself to death every goddamn night?” I screamed back. I never screamed, but God, I couldn’t hear my own thoughts over the pounding in my head.

He dropped my arm. I hadn’t realized he was holding me on my tiptoes until I stumbled back against the counter. “I work my ass off every day, I deserve a drink or two.”

“Two drinks wouldn’t put you on your ass like this.”

“Maybe if you worked a hard job and weren’t just some waitress, you’d understand.”

I tried not to take his comment to heart, but it stung. I quieted my voice. Yelling wasn’t going to get us anywhere. “The people around you suffer because of your drinking, Jett. You need help.”

His hand raised, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

I shot up, gasping for breath. My heart felt like it was beating two feet out of my chest.

A hand pressed against my back, another on my leg. “Deep breaths.” Wesley.

I was in Wesley’s house.

It was just a nightmare.

But it wasn’t. It was a memory I’d blocked out because I didn’t want to remember the first night Jett showed his ugly side, and now that I was safe, my mind let it seep back in.

My eyes found his in the dark as I tried to get control of my breathing.

“You’re okay. You’re safe.” His voice was soft as he rubbed circles on my back.

Once my heart stopped feeling like a drum about to break out of my chest, I looked down at my hands shaking in my lap. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

He shook his head, lightly grabbing my chin to bring my eyes to his. “Don’t be sorry, Em. For as long as you’re in my house, I’ll be here every time a nightmare wakes you. You’re not alone anymore.”

God, I hated how those words made my heart squeeze.

“You think you can fall back asleep?” he asked.

I nodded, laying back on the bed. I was half inclined to ask him to sleep next to me, but it was the wrong time. It felt so empty up here.

“If you need me, just wake me up, okay? I don’t mind.”

“Thank you,” was all I managed to say before he laid back on the floor.

I was thankful he didn’t ask what the nightmare was about because I didn’t want to relive it again. I feared going back to sleep with the thought of that night rushing back to me, but I couldn’t stay awake forever.

At some point, I'd have to let the darkness claim me.

Chapter Eighteen

EMERSON

I was sitting at the kitchen island trying not to stare as Wesley made breakfast when my phone rang. Seeing it was Stella, I hit accept.

“Hey, I should be there in a couple hours,” I said into the phone.

“About that..”

“Oh God, now what?”

Wesley stopped scrambling the eggs to turn around and face me, leaving the pan on the heat.

“Jett’s truck was around all night. He drove by a few times, revving his loud ass engine. I think Luke was with him for a while, too. It might be better if you stay there, at least for a few days. The moment he stops coming around for longer than a few hours, I’ll call you.”

I ran my hand through my hair, tugging at my scalp. This was really not the news I wanted to start my day with. He was obsessing over me, as if this was some kind of hunt.

“Maybe I should talk to him.”

“No,” Stella and Wesley said in unison.

I pointed a glare at Wesley. “How else is he supposed to calm down? Maybe he just wants to know I’m okay. I can’t stay away from him forever.” Sooner or later, I’d run into him. It’d be better if it was on my terms and not when I’m taken off guard.

“I can see why you might think that’s a good idea, but if I were you, I’d give it a few days. He’s heated, and as we both know, heated Jett doesn’t play by the rules.”

I sighed into the phone and leaned my elbow on the counter, pressing my forehead into the palm of my hand. “I just hate that this is happening.” I felt a tightness in my throat and closed my eyes. I didn’t want to cry in front of Wesley.

“I know. It won’t be like this forever though, I promise. I have to go in to work now, but I’ll text you later.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Stella. Love you.”

“Love you always.”

I set the phone down and lifted my head, the tightness in my throat easing. Wesley glanced at me as he divided the eggs onto two plates with some bacon and a slice of toast.

“You can make your own decisions, but I hope you’re not planning to go see him.”

“I’m not. Stella’s right. Now’s not the time, especially so soon after everything.”

He slid one of the plates to me. “I have to go to work for a few hours. If you need anything, call me.” I had my fork an inch from my mouth when I looked up to find Wesley's hard stare. “I mean it this time.”

“Okay. I’ll call.”

He nodded once, satisfied with my answer, and dug in.

Wesley left for work shortly after he finished his breakfast. He tried to do the dishes before he left, but I insisted he leave them. It was the least I could do with everything he was doing for me.

I was still picking at my bacon when I decided I knew exactly what I needed to do today.

Despite Stella and Wesley's wishes, I had to go to Jett's house.

Jett owned the house; I was technically only a renter. He bought it right before we met, so we both furnished it after we got together. I didn't want any of the things we had bought together, though. I just needed my clothes; he could keep the rest.

The front door was unlocked, but Jett's truck wasn't out front, indicating he wasn't home. I walked here, trying to keep myself relatively hidden whenever a car passed. I didn't think Jett would do anything to me if he did happen to find me, but I didn't want to take my chances.

I didn't want to have to explain to him why I wouldn't be coming back. He probably thought what he did didn't warrant this kind of reaction. In all honesty, I wasn't sure what the outcome of all of this would be. I just didn't want to be around him for a long, long time, and if that stretched into forever, then sobeit.

I was silent as I hurried toward the bedroom to gather some of my clothes. Not sure if he'd be showing up any time soon, I decided to move quickly.

I grabbed a duffel bag from the closet and hesitated before throwing a few shirts in. My mind jumped to what this bag could've been used for in the past with the knowledge of what Jett had been doing behind my back. Trying to

push that thought out of my head, I continued stuffing the oversized bag with jeans, underwear, bras, and jackets.

Once the bag was filled, I hung the strap over my shoulder and was about to head out of the bedroom when I stopped in my tracks, my eyes catching on his nightstand. Only Jett would be dumb enough to keep drugs in there. If I found them, it'd be enough to make me never come back. But did I really want solid evidence to back up what Stella and Brendt told me?

The two of them wouldn't lie to me about something as serious as that, but a small part of me didn't want to believe it. I wanted to pretend I'd never heard any of it, like that wasn't one more thing I mentally added to my list of reasons I didn't want to be around Jett.

I slid the strap off my shoulder, setting the duffel bag on the ground. I walked over to the nightstand and paused as my hand closed around the handle of the drawer. I hated that I didn't trust him anymore. Girlfriends shouldn't snoop around in their boyfriends things if they had a healthy relationship.

I guess it was a good thing I wasn't his girlfriend anymore.

I tugged on the handle, the drawer sliding open, and found chapstick and a few condoms laying there. Letting out a sigh of relief that I didn't find anything else, I went to close the drawer, but before it shut all the way, I saw a thin red string pushed up against the front wall of the drawer.

I stuck my hand in and grabbed the string, pulling up on it lightly. The bottom of the drawer pulled up, revealing more items underneath the faux bottom.

There were three Ziploc bags containing various colors of pills, a crumpled piece of paper, and a cellphone. My heart dropped. In a matter of seconds, Jett became a stranger to me.

I grabbed the paper and unfolded it with shaking fingers. There was a list of names scribbled on it, some crossed out, others starred. I skimmed the list, trying to see if I recognized any of the names when I heard the front door open.

Rushing to put everything back, I closed the drawer and quietly slung my bag back over my shoulder. I peered around the door jamb, making sure no one was coming down the hallway. Assuring the coast was clear, I tiptoed my way to the back door and slid out silently.

My heart was pounding in my ears as my fingers struggled to line up the number combination on the lock for the side gate. Once I heard the click, I pulled on the lock and opened the gate, making sure to pull it only far enough so it wouldn't reach the point where I knew it squeaked. After closing the gate, I made my way through the side of the front yard lined with bushes, hoping they hid me from view.

My steps stumbled when I noticed Jett's truck still wasn't in the driveway. There were no vehicles here. Did I imagine the front door opening?

I didn't have the time or desire to try to figure out who could have been inside the house, if anyone. I rushed down the block the same way I had come and beelined to Wesley's house.

Chapter Nineteen

WESLEY

I was wrapping up my fifth and final oil change of the day when Sebastian left. He'd done three himself, and a tire rotation. Thankfully it was an easy, short day because I was completely distracted.

Again.

I tried not to make it obvious I was rushing through my assigned tasks through the day. I was well aware that Jim and Jett were close so I kept our conversations short today. I didn't want Emerson to be brought up somehow and have to lie my way through not knowing anything. My headphones were shoved in my ears practically all day to keep anyone from trying to start up a conversation with me for exactly that reason.

I handed Ms. Roslin her keys back after she'd paid Jim and then got to work cleaning up the discarded oil filters and empty jugs. The quicker I cleaned, the quicker I could leave and get back to Emerson. I'd been biting the inside of my cheek raw with nerves about her being alone at my house. No one knew where I lived, but it didn't settle even an ounce of the anxiety I had.

Emerson could handle herself, but part of me didn't want her to have to. I wanted to be there for her if she needed someone to talk to, my shoulder to be the one she cried on, my house to be the place she felt safe.

I gathered the paper towels I'd thrown on the shop floor throughout the day and brought them over to the trash can by Jim's office. Jim was sitting at the computer with Ray, who was scrolling through his phone, perched on the chair on the opposite side of the desk as they talked.

Pulling out my headphones, I shoved them in my pocket and acted busy gathering up the trash bag to take to the dumpster.

"He's just got a grudge that'll fizzle out. He'll get over it and be back to his usual self in no time," Jim said as he typed something into his computer.

"His ego is too big to let it go. You know that better than anyone. Man's got a temper even I wouldn't want to cross," Ray mumbled.

"Maybe if he'd quit mixing shit, he wouldn't be so damn bipolar."

Ray snorted. "He's a kid dealing with things way bigger than him. He's lucky the shit hasn't killed him yet."

"If the drugs don't, you know who might."

Drugs? What fucking drugs?

A cup fell off the top of the trash as I was trying to tie the strings together. A silent curse slipped out of my mouth as it landed on the ground and bounced a few times before rolling a few feet away. Ray and Jim looked up from what they were doing, staring directly at me.

I cleared my throat, trying not to be captain fucking obvious about the eavesdropping. "Taking out the trash and then I'm heading out."

Jim tipped his chin at me. "Sounds good. See you Monday."

I nodded and retrieved the runaway cup before heading to the dumpster to toss the bag. I got in my truck and started the engine, rolling the windows

down. Sixty five degrees was the new warm, I guess.

Did Emerson know about these supposed drugs? Was it possible she partook in it, too? I doubted she did. Even though she gave off the persona that she liked to party and have a good time, that was something even I didn't think she would get involved with.

Regardless, Jett doing that shit around her could put her in danger. I didn't have to be a genius to know that drugs got your hands dirty more often than not.

Was that why Jim didn't have Jett pay for our services at the shop? At least not in cash. I got the feeling he paid Jim in other ways under the table.

That led me to believe the issue between Jett and Elijah also had something to do with his extracurricular activities, which meant at the time of the game, Emerson didn't know. I couldn't rule out that she was still unaware, though. For all I knew, that could have been what their fight was about.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but it was hard not to when my mind was spinning. I'd talk to Emerson once I got home and get answers about what the fuck was going on.

Speaking of Emerson..

Why the *hell* was she walking two blocks away from my house right now?

I leaned my elbow out the window and pulled up next to her. "Going to the gym?" I eyed the duffel bag.

She jumped, slamming a palm to her chest. "Cheese and rice. Do you enjoy scaring the shit out of me?"

"You should be glad I'm the one who found you."

She shot me a glare. "There's no reason he'd be on this road. I'm not stupid."

I leaned across the passenger seat and opened the door for her to get in. She

tossed her bag on the middle seat and slid in, slamming the door.

“Never said you were stupid.” I glanced at the duffel bag as I eased my boot on the gas.

“You don’t have to say it.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“Clothes.” Straight to the point for once.

I squeezed the steering wheel as I pulled onto my street. “Stores don’t give out plastic bags anymore?”

“I didn’t go to the store.” She had her arms crossed against her chest, her gaze trained ahead.

“What made you believe it was a good idea to go over there and not tell anyone?” I tried to keep my tone level despite the inferno raging inside me.

“What makes you think I didn’t tell anyone?”

I gave her a disbelieving look as I pulled into the driveway. I knew she didn’t tell Stella. She wouldn’t have let her go. She sure as hell didn’t tell me.

“I could have bought you new clothes.”

She stayed seated as I killed the engine. “I don’t want new clothes.”

I faced her from where I was sitting behind the wheel. “Feel like new clothes would have been the better option here.”

Her silky hair was draped over her shoulders, her arms pushing her breasts together. I swallowed, taking a deep breath as I forced my eyes not to stray below her neckline. As if she could read my mind, she dropped her arms, the back of her hands slapping against her thighs as she threw them down.

“I don’t have any fucking options, Wesley. In a matter of twenty four hours, my whole fucking world got turned upside down. I can’t go to the place I’ve called home the past few years. I can’t go to my best friend’s house. I’m wearing the same damn clothes I was two days ago. I feel like I’m

a walking shell of the person I was. I just wanted my own clothes so something felt normal.” Her eyes glossed over, but she wouldn’t look at me as she spoke. “I don’t want any handouts from you because you feel bad for me. I already feel bad enough that I’m staying in your house. I don’t want you wasting your money on me, too.”

After a few moments of silence, I got out of the truck and walked around to her side, pulling open the door. I wouldn’t let her think I was only helping her because I took pity on her.

She swiped a tear from her cheek. “What are you doing?”

Grabbing her hand, I guided her out of the truck, closing the door after she was out. I led her up the driveway to the front door, unlocked it, and pulled her inside. As soon as the door was closed, I wrapped my arms around her. She froze under my embrace.

I didn’t expect a hug back. Sometimes you can just tell when someone needs a hug, and now was one of those times.

I wasn’t much for showing affection but something in Emerson brought it out of me. I could hold her like this in my arms forever and be completely content.

I felt her slowly lift her arms to wrap them around my waist. The tension in her shoulders eased slowly and she laid her forehead against my chest.

I brought one hand up to stroke her hair and took a deep breath, inhaling that mouthwatering vanilla mango scent I loved.

“Don’t feel bad about staying here,” I said after several minutes. “You can stay as long as you want. You’re not a burden to me, Emerson. If you need clothes, I’ll buy them. If you want to talk to him, I’ll take you. If you need to cry, I’ll wipe your tears. I’m going to be here regardless of how you feel about yourself.”

She took her head off my chest and looked up at me, those damn baby blues making me melt. “I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard you say.”

I rolled my eyes as a slight grin grew on her face. “Don’t get used to it.”

“I do have one request that will make me feel better.”

“What’s that?”

Part of me felt like I should be scared to know the answer, but regardless of what it was, I’d do it. I was quickly finding that I’d do anything for Emerson. All she had to do was ask.

“Don’t sleep on the floor tonight.” My forehead creased in confusion as I waited for her to elaborate. “Sleep with me.”

Chapter Twenty

WESLEY

I had the slightest feeling this was a not-so-thought-through idea and didn't want to overthink why she would have asked me to sleep in my bed with her tonight; but here I lay next to Emerson Foley fully clothed in a bed that suddenly felt too small.

I didn't want to make any assumptions about what she wanted out of tonight so I chose to play it safe and keep my hands to myself. Maybe she just felt bad about me sleeping on the floor and really did want to innocently lay next to me. On the other hand, maybe she wanted more and was waiting for me to make the move.

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling in the dark. She was on her side facing me with one arm under the pillow. I couldn't look at her. If I did, I'd see how utterly beautiful I knew she looked right now and not be able to control myself.

"Wesley."

I grunted in response.

"I know you're not asleep, I can see your eyes are open."

Shit.

“Yes?”

“Why are you acting like I have the plague right now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You won’t look at me and you’re literally about to fall off the bed.”

I glanced at the foot of space between us. I guess I was pushing it trying to give her room to be comfortable.

“Just trying to be respectful.”

“I was the one who asked you to sleep in bed with me. Please don’t act like you’d rather be doing literally anything else.”

I shifted over to close the space between us and turned on my side to face her. “I think we both know there is nothing I’d rather be doing.”

She closed her eyes for a moment as she spoke. “I know we’ve been over this but I feel like I’m being a bother staying here. You’re already being overly nice by letting me stay. I don’t want to uproot you any more by having you sleep on the floor, too.” She looked at me then. “I feel better having you up here.”

I knew she meant the sleeping arrangements and not actually having me in bed with her, but of course my cock had a mind of its own and took it the wrong way. I was glad I turned onto my side, otherwise the blankets forming a tent would have given it away.

I cleared my throat and didn’t reply. Instead, I silently willed my blood to stop rushing south.

“I take it you’re back to being Mr. Silent now?”

“Doesn’t part of this arrangement include sleeping?” I managed to mumble. It definitely didn’t include erections.

The glow of the moon through the window cast a slight glow on her

features. Her blue eyes pierced through the darkness and I wished she would close them or do literally anything to make me stop staring at her.

As if she read my thoughts, she flipped over so her back was facing me.

I shouldn't have said that.

"Emerson."

I was met with silence.

"Emerson, please flip over."

"I thought we were sleeping."

Women really took things to the grave, didn't they?

I wrapped my arm around her torso and grabbed her waist, pulling her so she was laying on her back. I sat up on my elbow so I was looking down at her. "I didn't mean it like that, Em. You're not going to get any sleep talking with that pretty little mouth of yours and I know you have work in the morning."

She glanced at my lips and fuck, if that didn't make my dick throb.

"Then shut me up some other way," she whispered.

Did she say that or was I imagining it? I had to be imagining it because she was crazy if she thought I would try anything with her so soon after she just broke up with her ex.

I leaned in closer and dared a glance at her perfectly puckered lips. Her warm breath brushed across my lips as I held my mouth too close to hers. I was playing with fire and had to be smart about this. I knew she wasn't thinking straight, not after everything. If she couldn't look out for herself right now, I guess I had to.

Her lips parted as her eyelids fluttered shut. I stayed there for a few seconds, feeling the rise of her breaths under my arm that was still draped

across her stomach. As much as I wanted to keep teasing her, it was cruel. I had to stop.

But I didn't want to.

My lips brushed hers ever so faintly. It was enough to get her breath quickening, trying to reach up for more. I held her abdomen down under my arm, feeling her abs tense as she tried to lift her head to mine.

God, help me.

I licked my lips, the tip of my tongue gracing her lower lip. She tasted like mint and cherry chapstick.

I internally groaned, hating what I was about to do. "Get some sleep, Emerson," I whispered.

Her eyes flew open with a glare. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

And with that, she turned back over. I could almost feel the scowl I knew she had on her face.

I couldn't make a move on her, not like this. I couldn't deny I was attracted to her. I'd been obsessed with her since the moment I saw her in the bar. But that didn't mean I could take advantage of her in this vulnerable time. She was lonely and lost.

As much as I wanted to know what it was like to kiss her, to be with her in that way, she needed time to figure out what she really wanted. I wouldn't be some rebound. If she really wanted to be with me, it wouldn't matter how long it took for us to get that first kiss.

I'd dreamt about kissing her many times, all in different situations. None of them involved her being in my bed. I never would have thought in a million years I'd have Emerson lying next to me in my bed and I wasn't planting kisses all over her body.

I also didn't want to scare her away. If we went further than how things were right now, there was a possibility of her overthinking it and running. I wanted her to feel safe in my home, not conflicted about which guy she wanted to be with. If I was going to be with her, it'd be when she was one hundred percent done with Jett.

Right now, I wasn't sure if that was the case.

Chapter Twenty One

EMERSON

Today marked the sixth day I'd been staying at Wesley's house. That was five days longer than what I had originally planned for.

Who was I kidding? I didn't plan any of this. As much as I wanted to keep dodging Jett, we needed to have a conversation to give both of us closure so he could stop trying to find me and I could move on without feeling guilty.

Wesley hadn't been as close to me as he was in bed the night we almost kissed. We were both still sleeping in his bed, but we kept enough space between us that our bodies didn't touch. As much as I found him attractive, it was better this way. I needed to be smart about getting into something with another man.

I jumped the gun with Jett and moved in too soon before knowing who he truly was. We learned everything about each other while living together, which probably wasn't the best way to do things now that I thought about it.

I grabbed a handbasket on my way into the grocery store, planning to only grab a few things for the dinner I was going to make Wesley as a thank-you

for letting me temporarily live at his house. Hopefully he liked spaghetti and homemade meatballs.

I waved to Betty at register one as I made my way to the pasta aisle. I knew this grocery store like the back of my hand being it was the only major one we had in this town. They never switched around the aisles like most stores did to confuse you so that every time you needed one item, it took fifteen minutes just trying to find where they'd moved it.

My feet stopped in my tracks as soon as I rounded the corner. Luke was at the end of the aisle with a six pack of beer in his hand. As I took a step back to head in the opposite direction, his eyes landed on me.

His gaze narrowed as he headed straight for me. I didn't know if he had a problem with me, but given what he said when I left Jett's house last week, I had a bad feeling he wasn't going to play nice.

I scrambled a few more steps back before he invaded my space. He dropped the beer, the glass clanking together as they hit the ground, and grabbed my shoulders to turn my back toward the shelves, pinning me between him and the boxes of noodles I now realized I should have come to grab last.

I could practically feel the rage rolling off of him like flames. "Back off, Luke."

"Where have you been staying?" His shaggy blonde hair swooped into his eyes as he spoke.

The basket slipped from my fingers as I tried to push him off me. "None of your business."

"It might not be my business, but it *is* your boyfriends," he seethed.

"He's not my boyfriend anymore." I gave up trying to push him away when he slid his grip to my upper arms. He was less than an inch from my face,

causing me to turn my head slightly to the side as I struggled to keep my breaths even so he couldn't see the effect he was having on me.

Luke never scared me when we would all hang out before. He was always nice and treated all of us with respect. This new Luke frightened me. I didn't know this Luke. I'd never seen him so unhinged before so I wasn't sure how to react.

"Guess you forgot to tell him that," he spat.

"I figured me walking out after he told me not to come back kind of confirmed it."

"Where have you been staying?" he asked again.

I looked directly at him now. "Tell him to ask me if he really wants to know."

"I guess I should bring you to him, then."

He tried to yank me forward when a man's voice interrupted, "Gonna have to ask you to take your hands off her." Luke looked about ready to bite the head off the person behind the voice when he turned to see a tall man wearing a black police uniform.

His features looked somehow familiar. His dark hair was thick and cut short. He was freshly shaven and had dark eyelashes surrounding mossy green eyes. My eyes fell to his belt, holstering a gun, pepper spray, a flashlight, and a variety of other items.

It dawned on Luke that a cop was intervening and he dropped his hands, letting me go.

"Unless you want to end up in county jail tonight, I'd suggest you go about your business and leave her alone," the cop warned.

I kept my eyes to the ground, not wanting to get the law involved with any of this. I hoped that if I didn't make eye contact, he wouldn't strike up a

conversation.

“You got lucky,” Luke whispered low enough for only my ears to hear before he stepped back and walked away, leaving his six pack on the ground.

Taking a steadying breath, I bent down to pick up my basket. “Thank you.”

He grabbed the basket before I could grasp the handle and handed it to me. “Say the words and I’ll arrest him.”

“As much as I would love to say yes, it’s okay. You’ve already done enough.” I looked at him then, trying not to take in the uniform. For all I knew, Luke was into the same shit Jett was, and I did not want to get caught up in any of that with the police.

“Are you going to make it home okay?”

Please don’t offer to drive me home. “Yep, thanks again.” With that, I turned to the pastas, grabbed a box of angel hair noodles, and walked past him to gather the rest of the ingredients I needed for the sauce.

Wesley’s house wasn’t too far from the store. With the look on Luke’s face when he saw the man was a cop, I had a feeling he wasn’t going to try to harass me for a second time today, which meant I could hopefully make it back to his house in one piece.

I also didn’t need Wesley to see a cop driving me to his house after he explicitly told me not to go anywhere without telling him. I wanted to surprise him with dinner and if I’d told him I was going to the store for ingredients, he would have told me to wait for him to go. But it’s not really a surprise if he’s the one shopping for it, is it?

Chapter Twenty Two

WESLEY

My mouth began watering the moment the smell of food hit my nose as I shut the door behind me and locked it. Making my way to the kitchen, I found Emerson pulling a baking sheet out of the oven. She was wearing light gray sweats and a black tank top that hugged her form. The hem stopped right below her belly button, showing a sliver of smooth skin.

I stood in the entryway to the kitchen, watching her cook. She stirred something that was simmering in a pot on the stove, her long hair swaying loosely over her back. She picked up the second pot on the stove after switching off the burner and turned toward the sink in the island when she spotted me.

She jumped, some water sloshing over the rim. “Ow! Fuck!” I quickly closed the distance between us and took the pot from her, setting it back on the stove, then crouched in front of her to analyze her bare foot. “I’m fine, Wesley. Maybe if you learned to announce yourself, shit like this wouldn’t happen.”

“Didn’t think watching you cook would make you burn your damn foot.” I

stood up, grabbing her hand. “Come with me.” She followed me to the bathroom where I had her sit on the edge of the bathtub, pulling her foot up onto the porcelain. I turned the handle for the cold water and grabbed the shower head attached to the hose. Kneeling next to her, I grabbed her foot and aimed the water at the spot where the hot water had burned her.

“You’re overreacting *just* a little,” she said as she watched me hold her foot under the stream of water.

I kept my eyes on the water as I spoke. “It’ll help reduce the swelling.”

“It’s kind of cute.”

I looked up at her then, seeing a smile on her face. It melted my insides, turning all coherent thoughts into mush. If that was the look I got for taking care of her, I’d find any reason to tend to her. She could simply stub her toe and I’d jump at the opportunity.

She wasn’t dressed up, wearing makeup, or trying to impress anyone. The simplicity of her in this moment was more earth shattering than her in some smokeshow outfit.

The desire to kiss her, touch her, was almost too much. I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to gather just a speck of self-restraint. It would complicate everything and I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable.

She bit her lip, keeping those blue eyes on me. That fucking lip was all it took to make me snap.

I dropped the shower head and reached up, bringing my hand to the back of her head, entangling my fingers in her hair. I looked into her eyes, searching for some sort of confirmation that this was okay.

She gave the slightest nod in a silent response. I guided her head down just enough for me to meet my lips with hers. I went in wanting to kiss her softly, to cherish the moment, but once I got a taste of her, a hunger took over me.

Her tongue brushed against my lips as I deepened the kiss. I welcomed her, opening my mouth wide enough to let her in as our mouths clashed together. Standing up, my hands slid under her thighs to lift her up. Her legs wrapped around my waist, her feet crossing behind me.

Our mouths stayed connected as I turned around and pressed her back against the wall, my hands cupping her ass. Her hands were in my hair, tugging just enough to make my dick twitch against the zipper of my jeans. I fucking hated that I wanted more than this. If we did this, we should take it slow, but my mind wanted anything but slow right now.

Setting her down on her feet, she stayed pressed against the wall, forcing me to bend down a few inches to keep my mouth on hers. I cupped her face, tilting it up so I had better access as our tongues danced together.

Kissing her felt like a big drop on a roller coaster that made your stomach do somersaults and stole the breath from your lungs. Her full lips fit like a puzzle piece with mine, our mouths meshing together flawlessly.

“Wait,” she breathed. I stopped, pulling back an inch but keeping my hands on her cheeks.

I knew I’d fuck it up. I should’ve kept my hands to my damn self.

“Is this too soon?” she breathed the question, her chest rising and falling against mine.

I brushed my thumb across her chin, sliding it up to her swollen bottom lip and tugging it down. “Do you think it’s too soon?”

She took a second to think about it, then answered, “I’m tired of putting my life on hold for someone who didn’t want me badly enough in theirs.”

That was a good enough answer for me.

My lips found hers again, the kiss softer this time. “We can just kiss.” I slid one hand into her hair, my other traveling down her body to stop at her hip.

My forehead rested against hers, giving her the chance to pull back if she wanted to. “It doesn’t have to be more. Not right now.”

She nodded and my hand squeezed her hip as my erection throbbed in my pants. I wouldn’t be surprised if my damn zipper broke open.

A bubbling noise sounded from down the hall, coming from the kitchen. Reluctantly, I pulled back. “Did you leave something on the stove?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh shit. The sauce!” She rushed out from between my body and the wall, heading for the kitchen. I followed behind her to see the sauce spraying out of the pot as each bubble popped.

She turned the heat off and grabbed the pot, setting it on a different burner. She grabbed paper towels and began mopping up the sauce that was sprayed over the counter. “I guess this is what I get for trying to do something nice.”

I grabbed the cleaner from under the sink and came up next to her, spraying where she had wiped up some of the sauce. Tearing off a few sheets of paper towel, I began wiping up the cleaning solution. “It’s mostly my fault. Don’t feel bad.”

When we finished cleaning the remaining splotches of red sauce, she leaned against the counter and sighed. “Happen to have any spaghetti sauce in your pantry?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” I opened the pantry door and pulled out a jar, twisting the lid off. “What’s with the cooking?”

“Can a lady not cook?” She eyed me as I waited for the real reason. “Okay, fine. I wanted to say thank you for letting me stay here.”

I poured the marinara sauce into a clean pot and set it on the burner. “With spaghetti?”

She frowned. “I wanted to do a nice gesture, and you’ve been making me dinner every night, and-”

“I know, Em,” I cut her off. “I appreciate it. You don’t have to say thank you or cook to make up for it.” It dawned on me then. I didn’t typically have angel hair noodles, and there sat an empty box on the counter beside the stove. “You went to the store?”

“I had to get some things. I was careful, okay? Jett wasn’t there. The guy never goes to the grocery store.” She grabbed the box off the counter and threw it in the trash.

“You know I trust you, right? It’s him I don’t trust.”

“I have you on speed dial just in case.”

I couldn’t try to keep her locked up in here forever. At some point, something had to give. This wouldn’t work if she felt like a prisoner in this house.

I saw what Jett did to her at the bar. He showed no hesitation when he slapped her and I’m sure he had no second thoughts afterward, either. Then seeing the bruises on her arm.. If he was capable of doing it once, twice, then he was capable of doing it again.

Emerson came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my abdomen. Her cheek was against my back as she spoke. “Get out of your head, Wes. I’m okay.”

“Just be careful, okay?” My voice was hoarse. My hand rested on hers as I stirred the sauce.

“Always am,” she mumbled into my back.

Chapter Twenty Three

WESLEY

I scrubbed the pot under scorching water for the third time, wishing it was Emerson's lips I could scrub off my mind. Though we'd kissed last night and she had seemed into it, I couldn't cross that line with her again.

I was kidding myself, though, because if she asked, I would do anything.

Emerson and I just recently met, but I was already into her in ways I'd never been into another woman. I couldn't explain it, the way I wanted to take care of her, make sure she was safe.

Turning the faucet off, I set the pot on the drying rack. A notification buzzed through on my phone and I pulled it out of my pocket to see that it was my mom, checking in for the hundredth time.

My eyes lingered on my lock screen, the photo of me and my dad at Yellowstone National Park standing on the lookout at Artist Point. We had taken a family trip to Yellowstone a year and a half ago, right before my dad got sick. It dawned on me then that there would never be another family trip. No more family dinners. No terrible dad jokes to lighten a bad mood.

Now I stood here with nothing but those memories and these photos,

wishing we could have just one more family trip. It made me appreciate those moments we had together a little bit more.

When he got sick and we rode those back roads, or when we'd ride our horses, talking for hours on the trails. Those memories are what kept me on the main streets, stopped me from getting in a saddle again. Those things wouldn't be the same without him.

My dad and I had the same nose, lips, and eyes. When the guilt would crowd my mind at leaving my mom back in Fortsworth, I'd tell myself it was probably better that I had left given the similarities I had to him. I was a walking reminder of him. I'm sure the last thing my mom wanted to do was see him every time she looked at me, bringing the waves of pain back.

When he passed, I couldn't handle hearing the speeches from people who barely knew him, saying he always had a smile on his face, lighting up a room.

What those people didn't know was that my dad was the complete opposite. He only genuinely smiled when he was around my mom.

I realized then I didn't know anything about Emerson's past, only snippets of her present. Whenever the subject of family or her childhood was brought up, she quickly changed the topic.

Regardless of what her past looked like, I wouldn't let it affect what I thought of her in the now.

I let other people's images of her cloud my head before and I wouldn't do that again. While she put on a front out in town, I saw how raw and selfless she really was. My initial thoughts of her had been that she was selfish, careless, and only cared about her image and how people saw her. That may be how she wanted others to see her, that she had a hard exterior and wasn't

affected by anything, but after spending the last week around her, I quickly found that wasn't the case.

All she needed was a safe space to feel comfortable enough to be herself. I was glad she found that in my house, with me. I wondered how many people she showed this side of herself to.

A knock sounded from the front door, taking my attention off the photo on my phone. I shoved it in my pocket, deciding to reply to my mothers text later, and made my way to the door.

Emerson had a key and I wasn't expecting anyone, which made me think it could only be one person. I brought my eye to the peephole, squinting to focus the bubble of a person.

Shit.

Why the fuck was my brother standing on my goddamn porch?

I unlocked the door, pulling it open. He stood there with his hands in his jean pockets, looking at me like him standing on my porch was as casual as a neighbor coming by to ask for fucking sugar.

“Wesley.” He motioned to the door, as if I was going to invite him in.

I filled the frame with my body, making it clear I didn't want him inside my house. “The fuck are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“Mom told me where you've been. Landlord Deanna blabs. It's a small town, it's not that hard to find people.”

“Well, you found me. Now get lost.” I didn't need Easton here trying to convince me to go back home. I left for a reason, needing to get away from family, friends, and especially that damn town.

He shook his head, pushing by me to come in, clearly ignoring my displeasure at his sudden appearance. “I'm here for some work, I'm not staying long.”

“You’re damn right you’re not, and you’re not staying here. House is full.” I closed the door and followed him to the kitchen where he was looking around the place.

He laughed, opening the pantry. Our mom probably told him to make sure I was eating. Does no one know how to leave a man alone?

“I’ve got an AirBnB for the time being, but thanks for the offer. You’ve always been so great at showing some good ol’ southern hospitality.”

If only he knew.

“It’s a good thing we aren’t in the south,” I muttered.

He casually cruised over to the kitchen island, picking up the book I had sitting on the counter. “I’m only here for a few weeks doing some work-related business. Thought I’d stop in and check on you given you were in the area.”

I stayed standing on the opposite side of the island from him. “What kind of work would that be?”

“Oh, now you’re interested in being friendly?” He set the book down and eyed me. I should offer him a drink, but if I did, he’d stay longer and I wanted him out of here before Emerson got home from work.

“If you’re referring to our conversation at the funeral, it seemed pretty clear you’re too busy with a life of your own to show any interest in ours.”

He scoffed. “Don’t assume shit, Wesley. We’ve all got our own battles we’re dealing with.”

“Yeah? Is yours so bad that you couldn’t be there when dad was sick? You left me and mom to handle all of it while you played house with your little family.” He sent cards in the mail, called our mom for ten minutes bi-weekly to check on things, and that was about it. He never visited. Never helped out. The last time he saw our dad was on that trip, before he got sick.

“I got a divorce.”

“You didn’t say shit about a divorce at the funeral. How do I know you’re not just telling me some sob story to make me feel bad for you?”

“Do you think I wanted to come to our dad’s funeral and boast about my recent divorce?”

I clenched my fists on the counter, trying to hide the rage building inside me. “You missed out on years of our lives for some marriage that didn’t even fucking last? You didn’t even see dad before he passed away. You’re too fucking late to try and mend some bridges, Easton.”

I don’t care if the woman tied him to the bedpost. He stayed away the entire time our father was sick. My mother needed her boys there and he was nowhere to be found besides a few fucking calls to check-in.

It felt like I was the only person in our family to really miss our dad. My mom moved on in the blink of an eye and my brother never came to say goodbye. Coming to his funeral wasn’t a goodbye. My dad needed him by his side when he was alive, not six feet in the fucking ground.

Easton changed the subject to my earlier question, dodging the topic at hand. “I’m here on a missing person’s case.”

A missing person in Oldport? I hadn’t heard of anyone going missing.

Before I could ask what he meant, the front door opened.

Glancing at the clock on the oven, I saw that Emerson had gotten off of work ten minutes ago. She had told me Stella would drive her home as she wanted to see her and catch up. I figured they would have grabbed a drink or something, but she came straight here.

She stopped in her tracks when she made it to the end of the entryway, her eyes widening slightly before she cleared her throat and walked into the kitchen, setting her purse on the island.

She looked between me and Easton, seemingly confused as she pursed her lips.

“Em, this is Easton, my brother.”

Her eyes were glued to me when Easton said, “We’ve already met.”

Chapter Twenty Four

EMERSON

“**T**he fuck do you mean you’ve already met?”

I could see why he wouldn’t be too happy to hear that. I had no idea how I was going to explain without including my run-in with Luke.

Easton gestured to me as I stood there with my tongue stuck in my throat. “Saved her at the grocery store.”

I blinked rapidly, looking at him and shaking my head in a way-too-obvious manner. He didn’t mind diving straight in, but I did. I would never hear the end of this.

I’d already gone against what Wesley asked of me when I went to Jett’s house to grab my clothes, then when I went to the grocery store. He’ll know I had lied to him because, well, I did. Although, if we were getting technical, I did tell him the truth. I just didn’t tell him every detail.

That *technically* wasn’t lying.

“What do you mean *saved* her?” Wesley asked Easton, then turned his attention to me, pinning me with his emerald eyes.

I sighed, inwardly admitting defeat. It would be better coming from me.

“Luke saw me in the store that night I made you dinner, and wanted to talk about Jett. I told him it wasn’t any of his business, which probably wasn’t the best route to go with that. He doesn’t take highly to being rejected so-”

Easton interrupted me, clearly seeing my struggle with getting the story out. “So I stepped in and he backed off.”

Wesley grunted. “And when were you planning to tell me?”

“I didn’t think I had to. Like he said, Luke backed off. He basically shit his pants when he saw Easton was a cop.”

Wesley snapped his focus to Easton. “You’re a goddamn cop?”

He shrugged. “I was getting to that part.”

“Anything else I don’t fucking know?”

Easton and I glanced at each other. I pressed my lips together in a tight line, figuring silence was the safest route right now.

Wesley looked between the two of us, then turned to the fridge and pulled out a beer. He popped the cap off and took a long sip while Easton and I stayed quiet.

“You and I will talk about this later.” He gestured to me. “And you.” He pointed the mouth of his beer at Easton. “Don’t you have more important shit to do than stand in my house?”

“I’ve been on the clock since before your ass got out of bed this morning. I’m off.”

“Well, consider this over, too. Get out of my house.” Wesley set his beer down, not breaking eye contact with his brother.

I hadn’t seen him act like this before. He was mad, annoyed, and concerned all at once. If I had to admit, it was pretty cute seeing him so frustrated. Regardless, I was not looking forward to our conversation after his brother left.

Easton nodded once before turning to me. He grabbed my hand and kissed the back of it, acting oblivious to Wesley fuming on the other side of the kitchen. “It was lovely formally meeting you, Emerson. Hope we can do this again.”

“It was nice meeting you under different circumstances, Easton. Have a nice rest of your day. Don’t be a stranger,” I said, mostly to spite Wesley.

“Oh, he can stay a fucking stranger.” Wesley stayed rooted where he was, watching Easton stall on his way out.

“Get the stick out of your ass, Wes,” Easton called over his shoulder as he walked to the front door.

Once he was gone, Wesley caught me eyeing the beer in his hand. He set it down, then made his way over to me. He put his hands on my arms, stroking up and down as he leaned back against the counter. “I don’t want you worrying, okay? But I would like for you to be open and honest with me, Em. You don’t have to keep things from me.”

It was like his bad mood instantly vanished the moment Easton walked out the door.

“I know.” I sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about what happened with Luke.”

“While I don’t like hearing about it from my brother,” he paused, searching my face with a worried look. “I’m not mad at you, Em.”

“Just mad at your brother?” I fought the urge to lean into his chest as his calloused hands ran along my arms, giving me goosebumps.

“My brother is the least of my worries right now when it comes to you.”

I knew what he meant without having to say it. His concerns lied in the situation with Jett. Even though Jett told me not to come back, I knew him well enough to know he didn’t mean “move on.” He probably figured I would

have come crying back to him, and it's irritating the hell out of him that I haven't done so yet.

That's what toxic men did. They treated women like shit, then once she'd gathered enough strength to leave, they'd paint her out to be the shitty one. In what world does that make sense?

That's most likely why Luke was so mad about the whole thing, inserting himself into a situation that didn't concern him. His friend lost control of his girlfriend and he felt he had to help pick up the pieces.

"I don't know why you're trying so hard to protect me when we both know what's coming."

His forehead creased in confusion, his eyebrows drawing together. "What's coming?"

"We both know that eventually I'm going to have to talk to Jett. I can't just avoid him in this small town for the rest of my life." I intertwined my fingers with his before I could think twice about it, trying not to lean on him for support. Now that I'd stopped moving, my body was feeling the aches from today.

He looked like he had a thousand thoughts ping ponging around in his head. I didn't have the energy to discuss any of it tonight. My feet were killing me and my head was pounding from the dehydration of working a long shift at an understaffed restaurant.

"Can I go to bed? We can talk about it tomorrow after my shift."

"If you promise to tell me everything that happened at the store."

"You can have the play by play as soon as I get off work." As long as it was after a full night's rest, I'd promise anything.

Seeing the way Wesley took care of me made me wonder why I ever settled for less. The attraction I felt growing for Wesley felt so vastly different from

the way I felt about Jett.

With Jett, it was like I was pining for his love, silently begging for attention he didn't freely give. Of course, he would touch me and show me affection, but I was always aching for more without actually knowing what I was aching for. Maybe it was those nights I spent cleaning up his vomit that I wished it was him taking care of me, or the watered-down beverages I'd stomach so I could be there when he needed me.

Jett took such a mental toll on me and I never realized it until now. I never wanted to leave him when he was so clearly vulnerable, because who would take care of him if it wasn't me? His wellbeing fell on my shoulders day after day, but he wasn't there to shoulder my own.

I pushed any thoughts of finding someone better aside so long ago that I convinced myself that there was no one better than Jett. That there was no other relationship I'd ever feel as fulfilled by. But did I ever even feel fulfilled? Did I feel like there was nothing Jett could do to make me feel any more special? No. I rode the wave of "just enough" for so long that "just enough" became "more than enough."

Chapter Twenty Five

EMERSON

Five hours into my shift, it dawned on me that I hadn't taken my break. The time was flying and for the first time since me and Jett's breakup, I felt like I could let my guard down and be in the moment. I'd already made double the tips I typically made in an eight hour shift. Diners were being oddly pleasant today and Elijah was nowhere to be found - just how I liked it.

I was still trying to process the fact that Wesley's brother was in town, and that said brother looked just as jaw dropping. Their parents should have blessed the earth with a dozen more of their offspring.

Seeing as there weren't too many people seated at the moment, I took the opportunity to squeeze in a five minute break.

I found Jessica grabbing two piping hot plates from the kitchen. "Cover my break?"

"Only if you cover mine after." She walked by me with the plates, heading to a table with a couple that looked like they'd just met on some dating website and neither wanted to be here.

“Deal. Thanks Jess.”

“You going to the fair tonight?” she asked.

“Wasn’t planning on it, but if I do, I’ll let you know.” I was on my way to the sad excuse for a break room when Herald, my favorite fisherman, stopped me from his stool at the bar.

“You seem more chipper than I’ve seen you in a long time. Special day?” He was nibbling on the salted peanuts we left on the bar. No one but Herald ate them, so whenever Logan saw him walk in, he’d put a bowl out. I guess not too many people liked germ-covered peanuts.

“Nope. Just finding joy in the little things, I guess.”

He raised his glass in a toast-like manner. “Glad to hear it, Emerson. Always like seeing my smokeshow with a glowing smile.”

“Right back at ya’, Herald.” I winked. Assuming the conversation was done, I turned to head for the back.

“I didn’t want to pry as it’s none of my business, but we both know gossip spreads faster than an oil leak at sea around here. You and Jett okay?”

I paused before facing him again. “I’m sure you heard we broke up.” There was no reason for my heart to be picking up speed, but it felt like this was more of an interrogation than a casual conversation.

“Mary heard from Luke that you two were taking a small break.” Mary was Herald's ex-wife. If we were counting though, she was his third ex-wife. He raised an eyebrow, waiting for me to confirm or deny. Of course, it was Luke who would spread that. Should I even be surprised?

Instead of answering him, I changed the subject. “You’re still talking to the ex’s?”

He frowned, getting the message that I didn’t want to talk about it. “Don’t be jealous now. I’m single and ready to mingle.”

“I think you should leave the millennial slang to the millennials, Herald. Enjoy your drink.” I patted his shoulder and made a break for it while I had the opportunity.

If Mary knew about me and Jett, that meant the whole town knew. I figured this was going to happen, it just didn't sit right with me that Luke was the one going around freely talking about it as if it was his business to tell.

I wondered if it pissed Jett off as well, but part of me thought Jett might also be the one asking Luke to spread lies. Jett knew as much as I did that we were not getting back together. At least I hoped he knew that. I still hadn't talked to him since I left that night, but it was pretty clear I was done. Especially given I'd been away for a week now, and some of my clothes were missing from the closet.

The more people who knew Jett's story meant less people knew the truth of what happened. Of course, Jett wouldn't want people to know why we really broke up, and since Luke was his closest friend, he was trying to save his ass. If I came out with my side of the story now, it would look like I was the one lying. While a few people saw Jett slap me in the bar, I couldn't necessarily go around saying he was abusive. I left before it could get worse, but I didn't know how many would consider throwing a whiskey glass at a wall and leaving bruises on my arm abusive. People brushed men like Jett under the rug because they didn't experience it first hand or have to go through it themselves. No one knew how scary it could feel when the person you loved turned on you until you're the one living it.

While people in this town liked me, they liked Jett for entirely different reasons, and if I knew anything, they'd stand behind Jett before they stood behind me. Especially if he really was dealing to the people in this town.

I untied my apron from my waist and set it in my locker after grabbing my

phone. Walking out the back door, I inhaled the cool, crisp air, taking in the silence after having been stuck in the clammy restaurant for hours with silverware clinking on porcelain plates ringing above the indistinct chatter of hungry townspeople.

I sat down on the concrete step outside the back door and unlocked my phone. There were four missed calls from my mother and a text asking me to call her as soon as possible. We rarely spoke, and even more rarely was she the one to reach out to me. I only had a few minutes left on my break, but I didn't want to wait until after my shift to call her. I might as well get it over with and see what she wanted.

I dialed her number and before the first ring could go through, she was on the line.

"Emerson?"

"What's wrong, mom?"

"I need you to come home." I could hear that something was wrong by the tone of her voice.

"I'm at work. Can't you tell me whatever it is over the phone?"

"No, Emerson, I need you to come home. This is important and I need you here."

I couldn't just leave work for something my mom deemed important. "Can I stop by tomorrow? I don't have anyone to cover the rest of my shift."

"It's an emergency," her words were rushed, a slight tremor in her voice as she spoke.

Sighing, I checked the time on my phone. My break was over and Jessica wouldn't be too happy if I skipped out on covering her break before I left.

"I'll figure something out."

"Today, Emerson."

“Yes, ma’am.” I ended the call and slipped my phone in my jean pocket.

I had no idea what she could be so worried about. It wasn’t like her to fake an emergency, which meant something truly was wrong.

Heading back inside the restaurant, I left my apron in my locker and grabbed my wallet. I peeked inside Elijah’s office but he wasn’t there. He’d have to hear about my leaving later, which was fine with me. I didn’t need to hear him putting in his smart remarks.

I found Jessica dropping dirty dishes into the sink in the kitchen. When she turned around, she noticeably looked to where my apron should have been.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving.”

“I’m not happy about it, either. My mom claims there’s some kind of emergency. She’s not really giving me a choice.”

She sighed and walked around me, grabbing some drinks off the bar. “I’m only okay with this because I love you.”

“Thanks, Jess. I’ll make it up to you.”

“I should be having your mom make it up to me, but that’ll do. Drinks. Saturday.”

I smiled, thankful that I had the most understanding coworker on the planet. “It’s a date.”

Walking out the front door of the restaurant, I dialed Wesley. I didn’t want to involve Stella in whatever was going on and as much as I didn’t want to admit it, in the back of my head, I had a bad feeling Jett had something to do with this.

Chapter Twenty Six

EMERSON

Wesley killed the engine to his truck but didn't move to get out. My eyes were glued to the front door of my mother's house, contemplating if we should turn around and leave. She never asked me to visit, which worried me. I wasn't sure what could have happened that I needed to be here in person, but I knew I didn't want to do this alone. Time and time again, I was finding ways to be thankful for Wesley.

After I moved out, Jett kept in contact with my mom. Not to the point that they'd speak daily, but they did exchange a few texts back and forth now and then. Jett would tell me when she'd text him. We didn't keep secrets, or so I thought. Now I questioned if drugs weren't the only thing he'd kept from me.

The relationship we had felt like a lie now. I didn't want to admit it to myself because it made me sick to think about it, but he did all of this under the roof we shared. Under the roof he promised me forever, where we promised to be honest with each other, promised there would be no games. Turns out, it was all a game. I was a pawn.

Sexy and clueless. That's how he portrayed me to everyone he sold drugs to. He used me to lure people in. To him, I really was *just* a smokeshow, but to me, he was my world. He took me out of the situation that was my childhood home and for the entire time I was with him, I was thankful. In a way, I still was, but looking at my mother's house, I couldn't help but wonder if I just traded one bad situation for another.

After a few minutes of sitting in silence, I turned to Wesley, who was watching me. I took a deep breath and reached for my seatbelt. He gently set his hand on mine, causing me to pause.

"I don't know much about your relationship with your mother, but I'll be by your side in there, okay? Squeeze my hand three times at any point and we'll leave."

I nodded and he removed his hand, taking his own seatbelt off. I didn't fill him in on any details on the drive over. We were silent the entire way. One thing I liked about Wesley was that he didn't force small talk.

He got out, coming around the front of the truck to open my door. He grabbed my hand as I got out of his truck, and as we crossed the street, I looked down at our hands, a small smile tugging at my lips. This was the first time we'd really held hands like this, and despite the current situation, it made my cheeks feel warm.

My gaze moved back up and noticed the corners of his mouth lifting. I shouldn't be blushing by us simply holding hands, but something about the situation made me want to focus my emotions on me and Wesley. If I could ignore my mother calling me here for an emergency, I would. Believe me.

Stepping onto the small concrete porch, I took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. I wanted to get this over with and go back to my daily life. Whatever that was at this point.

The faded red door swung open after a few seconds, my mom standing there with her graying brown hair in a messy bun. She was wearing a purple robe over pajamas despite it being the middle of the afternoon.

“Emerson. Come in.” She opened the door wider and eyed Wesley as we both stepped in, hand in hand. She brought us to the kitchen, where she gestured to the table for us to sit. “Would you like a coffee?”

I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible, so I ignored her question. “What’s the emergency?” I tried not to look at the piles of mail on the kitchen table, or the dishes stacked next to the sink waiting to be cleaned. My mother wasn’t typically a messy person, and the house had clearly been cleaned in the last few weeks, but its current state looked like it hadn’t been touched in a few days.

She pulled out a honey oak chair at the table, the old wood creaking as she sat down. “Please, sit.”

“I don’t have time for this, mom. What do you need to tell me?”

She sighed and busied her hands, picking at her nails. “It’s about your father, Emerson.”

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. My father hadn’t been around for almost two decades and during those two decades, my mother made every excuse not to speak about him.

“What about him?” My voice sounded too small, too weak.

Her brown eyes stared up at me with a sympathetic look. “I think you’ll want to sit down, sweetie.”

“Don’t ‘sweetie’ me. What the hell is the emergency?” My fingers twitched with the urge to give Wesley those three squeezes.

“They found his body.”

It was like any emotions I had in that moment froze, along with the breath

in my lungs.

Four words.

Four words confirmed the end of a life I never got to know.

She didn't have to say he was dead; she didn't have to go into detail. Someone saying they found a body is an automatic confirmation that there was no soul.

But I wanted those details.

“What? When did they- How did he..? Who's they?” I couldn't get an entire sentence out. A million questions darted around in my mind about the man I never got to know. A man who didn't care to raise me, to take me away from this place.

“Some hikers came across his body on public land in Wyoming. Police confirmed that he died of frostbite. They're saying he must've gotten lost on a trail and ended up in the middle of a field before he couldn't make it any further.” Her eyes welled with tears before she diverted her gaze away from me.

“Why didn't he have a phone? Couldn't he have called for help?” I didn't realize I was shaking until Wesley squeezed my hand, pulling my focus to something other than the ocean waves slamming against the invisible breaking point in my mind. The instant those four words left my mother's lips, the storm had surged, washing away the strength I had meagerly mustered before coming in here.

Wesley pulled me to shore, feeding me a lifeline I so desperately needed right now.

She took a moment before answering, “He didn't have anything on him. No phone, no wallet. They identified him by his fingerprints.” She choked on her

words before adding, “He’s been a missing person for over a month, Emerson.”

“How do you know this? How do you know he was a missing person?” None of this made any sense to me.

She looked up at me, tears streaming down her cheeks. “They called me when it was reported. He wasn’t showing up to work, his friends were concerned-”

“Friends? He had friends? Did you know where he was this whole time?”

She pursed her lips together, not confirming my question, but I knew at that moment that she’d lied to me my entire life. All those days I spent crying about the fact that my father didn’t love me enough to be in my life or let us know where he was, she knew. She knew where he was this entire time and she made the decision not to tell me or my brother.

“Does Ross know?”

“He does now.”

I looked away, focusing on the worn wood floors. I couldn’t stand to see the hurt look on her face, as if this wasn’t something she willingly decided to keep from us.

“I did it to protect you two, Emerson. I didn’t want you involved in the life he was mixed up in.” I could tell by her voice that she was hurting but I didn’t care. *I* was hurting. I was the one who kept getting lied to by the people who should be completely honest with me.

“That should have been a choice left for me and Ross to make, not you.”

My hand squeezed Wesley’s three times, and he squeezed once back. I wanted the hell out of here. We turned to leave and as Wesley opened the front door, Jett’s truck pulled up at the curb directly in front of my mother’s house. I stopped dead in my tracks.

“What is he doing here?” I asked my mom without turning around.

“I couldn’t get a hold of you so I called him. I didn’t know you two were no longer together.”

I bit the inside of my cheek in an attempt to hold back my frustration at this entire situation. “Yeah, well, you lost the privilege to know about my personal life a long time ago.”

Not bothering to close the door, I beelined for Wesley’s truck across the street, doing my best to ignore that Jett was getting out of his truck while staring directly at me and Wes.

“Emerson!” We had just made it around the hood of Jett’s truck when he slammed his door and began to follow us.

“Ignore him,” I muttered to Wesley, trying my best not to bolt for the truck. I wanted the hell out of here. After the news I had just been told, I was not in the mood for a confrontation with Jett.

“Emerson, wait.” Jett was trying to calm his tone. I could tell because he knew I didn’t like when he raised his voice. If he thought softening his tone would make me want to talk to him, he was sorely mistaken.

“She doesn’t want to talk right now, Jett,” Wesley said without turning around to look at him.

“Well, I do.” Of course, Jett wanted to. Why else would he have been trying to find me?

I stopped walking, swinging around to face him. Wesley turned around as well, putting his shoulder slightly in front of me as a sort of buffer between me and Jett. “I want you to leave me alone.”

“I made a mistake, Em. I’m sorry.” His face told me his apology held no weight.

“Mistake or not, I’m not coming back and I need you to accept that and

move on.” I tried to keep the tremor out of my voice but it broke on the last word. Moving on was what I had to do about my now deceased father, whom I never really knew.

“You wouldn’t be on the verge of tears if you really wanted that. I know you, Emerson. Please let me make it up to you.”

“I have other shit going on, Jett. The whole world doesn’t revolve around you and your secrets.” I didn’t mean to add the last part, but I hated him. I hated him for lying, I hated my father for leaving before I got the chance to know who he really was. It was all coming out in one massive tidal wave, and I was taking it out on Jett. Afterall, he did the same thing to me. The only difference was that I wasn't putting my hands on him.

“What else would you be crying about? Him?” He moved his focus to Wesley, who had been glaring at Jett.

I appreciated the fact that Wesley was letting me handle this, between my mother and Jett, I needed to feel the control I had over my own life. I spent too long bending to the likes of others. Wesley knew me well enough now to know I could do what I needed to do on my own and that he’d be there if I needed him.

“Wesley’s the only man in my life not upsetting me at the moment, so no.”

Jett turned his focus back to me and it was clear he took that statement the wrong way. I guess anyone would if they didn’t know the context of the situation. “So you’re living up to your title then? Huh, little smokeshow?” He practically spit the words at me.

Wesley moved in front of me then, keeping one hand against my hip behind him. “That’s enough, Jett. Respect that she doesn’t want you around, and fuck off.”

“Seems like Emerson is doing enough fucking for the both of us.”

Wesley tensed in front of me, and I could feel his need to wipe that smirk off Jett's face rolling off of him. "Wow, Jett, really won me back with that one." I grabbed Wesley's hand and tugged him, signaling that I wanted to leave. He held his place, shooting daggers at Jett. Wesley was hard as a rock, and if I had to be honest, I didn't think I'd try to stop him if he decided to make Jett regret saying that.

He finally turned around, pressing his hand against my lower back as we continued on our way to his truck. He opened my door for me, helping me in.

I didn't have to look to know that Jett was still standing there, hands fisted, watching as Wesley got in the driver's seat and drove away.

Chapter Twenty Seven

WESLEY

Emerson had been staring out the window for the past five minutes, gnawing on her bottom lip while she was stuck in her thoughts. No words could fix everything that just happened, so I set my hand on her thigh as I drove, rubbing my thumb in tiny circles over the fabric of her jeans.

I took the long way home to give her time to sit and process the fact that her mother hid where her father was her entire life. It wasn't hard to put that much together when she admitted she knew details about his life. She may have had her reasons behind it, but Emerson was right. That wasn't a decision for her mother to make, especially now that she was an adult.

"This isn't good," Emerson spoke quietly from her seat, keeping her focus out the window.

"Which part?" I glanced in my rearview mirror to be sure Jett or one of his friends wasn't following us. That was also partly why I took the long way home.

"He knows I'm with you." I briefly looked at her before turning my eyes back on the road, trying not to dwell on the way she phrased that. Like we

were together. Like this was no longer just an I'm-helping-you-out situation. I hoped it wasn't just that, but this confirmed it. At least, I hoped she meant what I thought she did by saying she's "with me."

I cleared my throat. We could talk about that later. "There's nothing he can do about that, Em."

She turned to face me now, her eyes glassy. "Yes, there is. He can figure out where you live, if he doesn't know that already. He can ruin your reputation around here, Wesley. What if you lose your job?" She was rambling. Her head was spinning with thoughts and she didn't know which one to focus on first.

I pulled the truck to the curb even though we weren't at my house yet. Keeping the engine running, I shifted into park. I took off my seat belt and faced her, grabbing her hand in mine. "Breathe, Em. There's nothing that he can do to us." She was clearly focusing on the issue with Jett to try to avoid thinking about her father. I wouldn't bring it up if she didn't want to talk about it, but I also didn't want her worrying herself to death over a shitty ex-boyfriend. She needed a distraction. "Do you want to go to the fair?"

She blinked, taking a second to register what I asked. "The fair?"

I smiled at the confusion plastered on her face. "Yeah, the fair. It's tonight."

"I know."

"So do you want to go?"

Her expression softened as she saw what I was doing. She gave a small nod and I squeezed her hand. Turning back to the wheel, I put the truck in drive.

I felt sympathy for her mother, knowing what losing my dad did to my own mom. The difference was that my father stuck around to be a part of his family. I had memories to mourn of my father, but Emerson didn't have any

of that. She was mourning the idea of her father, and what little things she did know about him.

I couldn't imagine how that felt, and I didn't want her stuck in her head with whatever thoughts she was dealing with. She needed to enjoy herself right now. The rest could come later.

That was the thing about pain, it was always around, waiting to sink its teeth in.

Chapter Twenty Eight

EMERSON

We parked a few blocks away from the event on a side street. The annual Oldport fair drew in tourists from all around, so I wasn't surprised when there was little to no parking available. They set it up on the largest beachfront parking lot in town, which made it convenient for kids to go on rides all day while their parents relaxed on the beach. With how popular it was, I was surprised they didn't petition to keep it up year-round.

The salty breeze of the ocean mixed with the smell of cotton candy, funnel cake, and popcorn. The scent filled my nose as we walked under the arch of the entrance that was lit up by tiny golden lights. All around me, the nostalgic sounds of rides, kids screaming with excitement, and whimsical music luring guests to the carnival booths filled with prizes filled the night air. The early setting sun made the sky look like a canvas of vibrant hues of orange and pink.

Last year, when Stella, Brendt, Luke, Jett, and I went to the fair, we practically spent all our money on alcohol and didn't have enough left over for rides. Thinking about it now, it was probably a blessing in disguise as

being tossed around on a rickety, high-speed ride doesn't sound like it'd mix well with a stomach full of alcohol.

"You look like you're going to be sick," Wesley said as we headed toward the ticket booth.

"Just reminiscing." I had the urge to grab his hand as we walked but I honestly wasn't sure if I could. We had no problem touching each other in private, but I wasn't sure what to do in public. I didn't think he'd mind if I did hold his hand, or even do more than that, but I also didn't want to send mixed signals. I wanted him, but it felt wrong to feel this desire for him so soon. He came into my life at such an awful time, but so far, he had stuck by my side through all of it without batting an eye.

I didn't want to second guess myself, but after seeing how things ended with Jett and what it turned into, I had a hard time trusting my gut feeling. I couldn't hold my experiences with Jett against Wesley, though. He was an entirely different person.

Choosing to think of Wesley as the type of person he's shown me he is instead of letting the fear of what-if's scare me, I hesitantly reached for his hand, intertwining my fingers with his. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and saw a smile tugging at the sides of his mouth.

Hiding my own smile, I moved my gaze to the people around us, spotting Easton in the crowd ahead wearing his black police uniform. He must be on duty as fair security tonight. Wesley must've seen him too, his hand tightening the grip on mine. I guess he really didn't mind if people saw us holding hands, then.

Easton saw us and waved, making his way through the crowd to us.

He smiled but kept his eyes trained on the crowd. "Hey, you two."

"Is it hard work watching for kids trying to steal giant teddy bears?" I asked

him, trying to hide my smile.

He shot me a side glare. “Kids aren’t the only people here tonight, sweetheart. Mostly watching for drunks with a temper.”

“You get a lot of intoxicated people getting butthurt over some carnival games?”

He chuckled under his breath and shook his head. “You’d be surprised. You guys staying a while or just passing through?”

Wesley searched the crowd as well, most likely looking for the two people I didn't want to run into tonight. “Not sure yet, I think Emerson’s afraid of the rides.”

My jaw dropped and I elbowed Wesley in the side. “I am *not*. I love fair rides.” I gazed up at him, a challenging smirk on my lips. “If anything, I think it’s you who’s scared.” He smiled as he rolled his eyes at me.

“I have to say she’s right, man. When mom took us to the fair when we were kids, I distinctly remember you refusing to go on any rides solely due to the fact that you thought they'd fall apart.”

Wesley looked back at Easton, his smile growing a bit. “You can’t use that against me, I was a kid. Plus, that ride practically had the screws coming out of it.”

Easton crossed his arms, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, sure it did.”

I laughed, enjoying the banter between them. It was sweet seeing them act like this, compared to how tense things were the other day at the house. I wanted to hear about all of their memories together, good and bad. It made me remember I really only did know a small portion of Wesley’s life. He had friends back where he grew up, a family, a life. I wondered if I’d ever get to visit there, to see that part of his world.

Behind Easton, I saw Stella standing in line for a piña colada stand.

Excusing myself from Wesley and Easton, I walked through the crowd of people to meet her in line. When she saw me approaching, her face lit up.

She threw her arms around me as she mumbled into my hair, “I didn’t know you were coming tonight!”

“I wasn’t planning on it. Wesley asked and I couldn’t resist.” She stepped back so we could move up in line.

“Do you want a drink? I’ll buy.”

“Sure, just one. I’ll share it with Wes.”

“Where is he?” She looked behind me, but the thick crowd blocked her view of where he and his brother stood.

“He’s by the goldfish booth talking to his brother.”

“He has a brother? And you didn’t introduce me?” She put her hand over her heart, feigning hurt. “I’m offended.”

I laughed as we moved up to the stand. Stella ordered two piña coladas, but paused before paying. “Does his brother want one?”

I shook my head. “He’s on duty.” Her eyebrows shot up so far I thought they’d disappear into her blonde hair. Stella was a sucker for a man in uniform. I’d be hearing about this for weeks, no doubt.

Chapter Twenty Nine

WESLEY

I watched Emerson in line with Stella from where I stood with Easton. Her smile stood out amongst the throng of people, like the north star in an inky black sky. I didn't think I could ever get tired of looking at her. She'd want to talk about today at some point, but right now, she needed this – a break from all the stress crowding her mind.

“You like her.” It wasn't a question. As much as I loathed my brother for leaving, he knew me better than anyone.

“I do.” I faced him, sliding my hands in the pockets of my jeans as something dawned on me. “You said you were here for a missing person.”

Easton's eyes narrowed a bit. “The case is essentially closed, but yes. Why?”

“Does the last name of that person happen to be Foley?”

He hesitated, his lips pressed in a thin line. “I can't disclose information like that, Wesley. You know I can't.”

“Can you disclose it to his daughter?”

“If I were speaking with her, yes. But clearly-”

“Emerson was his daughter, East. Her mom told her today.”

A look of confusion passed over his features, but he kept silent.

“Spit it out, East. What is it?”

He shook his head. “We told Ms. Foley days ago that his body was found.”

That didn’t sit right with me, but given the relationship Emerson had with her mother, she may have waited for a reason. I couldn’t think of any *good* reason she would have withheld that information from Emerson for days, but that’s in the past. Emerson knew now, and how she moved on from this is what mattered.

“They said it was frostbite? He got lost on a trail? Aren’t you curious why he was hiking with no phone, no wallet?”

Easton sighed. “People do a lot of things for weird reasons. Maybe he was on some kind of hippy cleansing journey. Maybe he simply forgot his belongings at home. The station doesn’t want to look further into a dead-end case, so they’re closing it and moving on.”

“That’s not fair to the people that were in his life and you know it. They deserve a better answer than what they were given. It’s a little hard to get lost nowadays.” I crossed my arms, trying to remember that Easton was just a cop. He doesn’t necessarily get a say, as much as I wish he could in this situation.

“That doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen, but in my experience, for her sake, try to drop it. Let her mourn and move on. Finding answers that she may not want to find may only hurt her more.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but I knew there wasn’t much Easton could do without crossing lines and risking his job. I wasn’t sure if Emerson was content with the answer she was given about his death. She gave no

indication that she questioned it, but she did also learn about it only a couple of hours ago.

Behind Easton, I spotted Stella and Emerson walking over with drinks in hand. “Just don’t mention it to her tonight. She needs time to process all of this.”

Easton nodded as Emerson stopped beside me, taking a sip from her umbrella straw. “What are you two talking about?”

“You, of course, darlin’.” He winked at her.

Emerson put her hand on Stella’s shoulder while holding her pineapple drink in her opposite hand. “Easton, this is Stella.”

“Pleased to meet you, Stella.” He grabbed her free hand and brushed his lips across the back of it.

I rolled my eyes. Easton was always one to be a bit on the dramatic side of gentleman-like manners. Stella fluttered her eyelashes at him, so I guess she bought it.

As the two of them got lost in conversation, Emerson offered me a sip of her drink. I tried my best not to cringe at how overly sweet it was. Being a drink from a fair booth, I had to guess there was little to no alcohol in it.

“Can we go on the Ferris Wheel? Please.” She drew out the word as her puppy dog eyes shined up at me.

I looked up at the giant wheel lighting up the sky, slowly turning with every seat filled. I could handle that. How could I say no to Emerson?

“Of course,” I said.

She squealed, grabbing my hand and pulling me in the direction of the ride. We got in line and I pulled her to me, wrapping my arms around her. She rested her head on my chest and I watched the crowd around us.

Life couldn’t get any better than this moment. Us standing here in this

bubble, the rest of the world fading out around us. All our problems washing away for just a few minutes.

After a ten minute wait, we came up to the gate to enter the ride. Emerson handed the ticket guy the two tickets Stella had slipped her. He tore them in half and waved us through.

She tugged me behind her, our hands glued together as we climbed into the metal passenger car. I sat beside her and a man lowered the bar over our laps.

He tugged on the bar to make sure it was secure, and less than a second later, we were moving. It felt a *lot* faster than how it looked from below.

My stomach bottomed out as it suddenly stopped, the people behind us exiting their seats and the man urging a young couple forward.

After a few more carts were emptied then loaded, we were finally moving at a continuous speed. I admired the view and how the lights reflected off the ocean. It was the perfect night.

Emerson laid her head on my shoulder and I leaned into her. “Thank you for this,” she said quietly.

“I’m sorry you’re going through so much right now, Emerson. It’s not fair to you, and it kills me seeing all of this piling on your shoulders and not being able to make it all go away.” She was acting like none of it weighed her down, as if every day she didn’t wake up with a hundred things on her mind.

“You have to go through hard things to appreciate the good.”

I looked down to find her staring up at me.

“You’re my good, Wesley.”

Her words warmed me, washing away any of the doubt I had about her feelings. My thumb stroked circles on her hand and the fair disappeared as I got lost in her. How could the world be so cruel to someone so pure and full of love? She didn’t deserve any of this.

“I wouldn’t want to be anything else.”

We stayed like that for the duration of the ride, studying each other and enjoying the night for what it was. We could deal with the rest tomorrow.

Our gondola arrived back at the bottom and I helped her climb out of the seat.

Before heading back to Stella and Easton, we played a few fair games. I won at the balloon popping booth and Emerson chose a pink teddy bear as our prize.

She hugged the fluffy bear to her chest as we made our way back over to where we left Stella and Easton, the two of them lighting up when they saw us.

I watched Emerson as she joined in on their conversation, smiling and laughing as Easton cracked jokes with Stella. The corners of her almond-shaped eyes creased with every grin, her chestnut hair cascading down her back in soft waves, the silky strands bouncing as she laughed and enjoyed herself.

In the short time I knew Emerson Foley, it was clear that she didn’t ever give half of herself. She always gave her all, no matter who she was talking to, or what situation she was in. She didn’t hold back any part of her personality. She unashamedly was herself in every aspect of the word. That could be attributed to her childhood or the way she’d been treated throughout her life, but somewhere along the way, she figured out that even if you hide the darkest parts of yourself, it won’t stop anyone from taking one look at you and already deciding who they think you are. It didn’t matter to me anymore how half this town saw her, it only mattered how I saw her. When she was hurt at a bar, or tired after a long shift at work, or smiling with her friends on the beach. She was wholly herself and I admired her for it.

I looked over her head at the crowd, then back down at her, and leaned close enough to her that my lips brushed her ear. “Do you want to get out of here?”

She looked up at me, the apples of her cheeks turning a slight shade of pink, the lights from the fair reflecting in her eyes. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter Thirty

EMERSON

All I could think about on the drive home was his lips brushing my ear, causing chills to travel down to my toes. As soon as he put the truck in park in his driveway, I unbuckled my seatbelt and opened my door, too impatient to wait for him to open it for me. I was halfway up the path to his front door when he finally got out of the truck.

He met me at the door, unlocking it so slowly and casually that I was almost convinced he didn't insinuate we would have sex once we got here. Didn't he? Isn't that why he asked me to leave the fair with him?

I walked inside the house and as soon as he closed the door, I was swiveling on my heel to face him, taking his face in my hands and standing on my tiptoes to bring my lips to his. He had his back to the door, bringing his hands to my waist to push me back a bit to break the kiss.

"What? Is something wrong?" I asked, somehow already out of breath.

"We've got all the time in the world, Em. Don't rush it." I frowned and he used his thumb and forefinger to grab my chin, angling my head up to look at him. "You want me to take my time with you, don't you?"

I swallowed hard, nodding my head.

“I knew you'd be a good girl.”

Holy. Fuck. I could *melt*.

I'd never been called that before, but I didn't need to question if I liked it, because the moment those words passed his lips, I was instantly drenched.

He brought his thumb up to brush my lower lip, tugging it down slightly. As his thumb released my lip, his eyes stayed trained on my mouth. “The things I've been dreaming of doing to that mouth.”

On instinct, my tongue darted out across my lower lip, wishing he'd do all those things to me right now. I didn't care if it took all damn night.

He lowered his mouth to mine, sliding his hand down the front of my neck to my collar bone. He then trailed his finger across my cleavage so slowly I thought I might combust with the need to have his hands touching me everywhere all at once. The tip of his finger grazed over the swell of my left breast, making its way to my right. Chills erupted over my skin from his touch as he slipped his tongue into my mouth.

I tangled my hands in his hair, tugging his mouth even closer to mine . His hands wandered down, gliding along my waist, making their way to my hips, where he pulled me closer. I could feel his cock through his jeans, aching to get out. I moved against him, causing friction where I wanted it most. A moan escaped my lips as he kept his mouth on mine, stifling any sound I made.

Knowing the movement felt good, Wesley ground against me, creating the blissful friction again. “You like that, Em?”

I nodded as he pulled back, breaking the kiss. He grabbed my hand and led me down the hall to his bedroom, flicking on the light as he closed the door. He walked me over to the end of the bed and busied his hands with the button

on my jeans. After he slid them off, he crouched in front of me, looking up to meet my gaze. I stared down at him as he brought his hands to my thighs. This man was kneeling before me, looking at me like I was a five course meal, and my clit throbbed with the need for him to devour me.

He slowly trailed one hand to the inside of my thighs, the touch causing goosebumps to rise as his calloused hands grazed my skin. He hooked his forefinger in the side of my panties, pulling them away from my pussy to make room for his finger.

He cursed under his breath when he discovered how wet I was. “This all for me?”

I bit my lip and managed a nod, unable to tear my eyes away from him kneeling before me. He pulled my panties completely to the side so I was exposed, his finger lightly making contact with my clit. I let out a small whimper and my knees nearly buckled at the sensation. He had one hand on the back of my thigh, keeping me steady.

He pulled my panties down, gazing back up at me. “Take your shirt off.”

I grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head. Wesley could ask me to do anything and I’d do it, that's how fucking gone I was for him.

“Lean back on the bed, Em.”

I bit my bottom lip and did as he said. He was still positioned on the floor as I laid back. “Spread your legs for me.”

I slowly parted my legs, all of me exposed to him. I wasn’t used to being on display like this, all of me bared completely. I closed my legs the smallest bit as doubt of what I looked like before him crept in, but he set his hands on my knees, spreading them back apart.

“Don’t get in your head, darling. You’re beautiful. If you want me to stop at any point, just say the words. Otherwise, I’m going to take my time tasting

every inch of you.”

Before I could take my next breath, his mouth was on me. His tongue was warm as it slid up my center, from my entrance to my clit. I gasped when his tongue flicked at my bundle of nerves, sending sparks to my vision. My head tilted back, moaning as he trailed his tongue down again to my entrance.

I fisted my hands in his hair as he slid one finger inside me, bringing his mouth back to my clit. He thrust his finger in and out slowly, matching the pace that his tongue licked set. My eyes rolled back in my head as I gripped his hair, keeping his head positioned between my legs even though I knew he'd stay there for as long as I wanted.

He sucked the bundle into his mouth and I let out another moan as his beard scraped my inner thighs. It added to the heavenly sensations, bringing me close to the edge.

“Wesley,” I breathed. He groaned, the sound vibrating through me. “Fuck.” He kept sucking my clit as he added a second finger, thrusting in and out. “I want to..”

“Come for me, Emerson. All over my face.” Before he finished saying my name, the pressure built and it released, taking me so far over the edge I didn't think I'd ever recover. Was I screaming? I couldn't tell. My orgasm rippled through me, consuming every nerve ending in my body, all while Wesley kept his mouth on me.

As the waves rippled off, I panted for air, trying to regain my senses. Wesley slid his fingers out slowly and kissed my inner thigh, trailing up to my stomach. He kissed up my body until he met my lips, the taste of me still on him. He pulled away and looked at me, brushing the hair off my forehead.

“You're breathtaking, Emerson. Don't ever doubt that.”

I sat up on my elbows, admiring his messy hair and swollen lips. “Please

fuck me, Wes.”

“You don’t have to ask twice.”

Chapter Thirty One

WESLEY

I pulled my shirt over my head and quickly undid my belt, sliding my pants off. Seeing her squirm under me as I ate her out was such a fucking turn on, I almost fucked her right then. But I wanted her to feel good. I wanted to worship her, make her unravel at the seams.

I grabbed a condom from my dresser, tearing open the foil and slipping it on. She watched me as I moved, her teeth working that bottom lip of hers. Eating her pussy was better than any fucking meal I'd ever had, and I could've done it all damn night.

My hands slid under her knees, pulling her closer to the edge of the bed and angling her slightly upward for the perfect position. Her blue eyes were glazed with desire as she stared up at me.

Not able to resist, I leaned over her, pulling her bra down to expose her tits. God, they were perfect. She was perfect. This whole moment was perfect. I sucked a nipple into my mouth, relishing at the way it puckered against my tongue. My tongue flicked across it, and I damn near came hearing her make

small, breathy moans. My cock twitched, nudging against her clit, which caused her hips to buck against me in the tiniest movement.

I slid my hand behind her back against the covers of my bed, undoing the clasp on her bra with ease. Moving my mouth to her other nipple, I grabbed the strap on her shoulder, delicately sliding the bra down until it slipped off the rest of the way. My teeth gently grazed her nipple, and I looked up at her to see her tilt her head back with her mouth wide open as another moan escaped. Sucking it into my mouth one last time, I pulled back only to line my cock up against her entrance.

She had her eyes closed, her hands fisted in the sheets as she waited. “Eyes on me, Em.” Her eyes popped open, landing on me hovering above her. She looked high off the pleasure and I decided right then, I wanted to see this look on her face every damn day. Every night when I got home from work, every morning before I left. “Do you want me?”

“Mmhm.” She nodded, her lips still slightly parted.

“Say it, baby. Say you want me.” I didn’t know how much longer I could keep myself positioned where I was without burying myself inside her.

She licked her lips before speaking, hunger in her eyes. “I want you, Wesley.”

I grabbed her legs behind her knees, holding onto her as I slid inside her. Inch by glorious inch, I buried my cock deep in her warm, soaking wet pussy. She kept her eyes on me as I pulled out, only to push back into her slow and steady. The pace was like ecstasy and misery all at once, my cock aching to go faster and harder. I groaned, keeping my control as I bottomed out in her.

I watched her grip on the sheets tighten as her head fell back against the bed, her eyes fluttering shut as I picked up the pace. A light sweat broke out against my back as my cock throbbed inside of her. I never wanted this

feeling to end and the way she was clenched around me told me she didn't either.

I let go of her legs, leaning back over her to suck her nipple into my mouth.

"Fuck," she muttered. I grabbed her hands and brought them above her head, holding them there with my hands. She gasped as I flicked my tongue against her nipple again. Picking up my pace, she wrapped her legs around me, pulling me closer to her. I released her tit from my mouth, dragging kisses up her neck until I reached her mouth. My mouth closed over hers as she moaned, my cock repeatedly hitting that sweet spot inside of her.

Her legs clenched as she gripped my cock, her back arching against me as another orgasm rippled through her. I thrust into her faster, pleasure surging through me as I let go, burying myself as far inside her as I could go. Emerson was fucking ecstasy, and I knew I'd never be able to give her up after this. As the pleasure ebbed, I rested my forehead on her shoulder, leaving small kisses on her skin. I pulled out of her, adjusting myself so I was lying next to her, and she curled into my side, laying her cheek on my chest as our breathing evened out.

I never would have thought after laying eyes on her for the first time that she'd be in my bed like this. She deserved to feel good tonight after everything today threw at her. We'd worry about that later.

We. I'd help her through all of this in any way that I could. If she wanted to dig deeper into her father's death, I'd support her. It seemed like most people in her life were always going against what she wanted so as to not inconvenience themselves, but she'd never be an inconvenience to me. She was the spark I didn't know I needed at this time in my life, and I'd do anything to keep that spark lit.

Chapter Thirty Two

EMERSON

I definitely needed my notepad to take orders today. I'd messed up my first two tables' orders when all I could think about was Wesley's tongue devouring me. I felt like a scatterbrain, trying to keep up with orders and cleaning tables and remembering the extra sauces or napkins diners asked for.

My mind was hazy with the need to get back home and jump on Wesley. Every spare second I had, my mind wound up imagining him with his face between my legs, his beard scraping deliciously against my inner thighs.

"You look like you could use a drink."

Jumping out of my thoughts, I turned to see Jessica, who had come up beside me at the kitchen window. "Something like that."

A smile bloomed on her lips. "I'm going to need all the details."

"Is it that obvious?" I pressed my palms to my cheeks, feeling how warm they were.

Jessica cocked her head. "You want to go out with me and Stella tonight?"

All I wanted to do was get off work and have a repeat of last night with

Wesley, but I also hadn't hung out with them in a while. I could use some girl time. I grabbed the plates RJ set on the lip of the window and smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

My shift dragged by, so when I saw that it was finally five o'clock, I was relieved. My entire shift, I pushed any thoughts of my father away. Thinking of Wesley helped, but I'd have to confront my feelings about his death and the secrets my mother kept from me head on at some point. I didn't know what to feel about any of it. I never really knew the man, but he was my father. Without him, I never would have even existed.

It felt like I could process his passing easier than I could handle the fact that my mother lied to me and Ross our whole lives. Maybe she didn't tell us because he didn't want her to, or maybe she didn't want us to know who he really was. Maybe she thought us knowing about him would hurt more than not knowing him at all.

I could make excuses, try to find reasons for why she didn't tell us, or I could ask her. I'd be stuck in my head forever trying to figure out why she did what she did if I didn't ask her upfront.

I didn't know if she'd tell me if I asked, though. She'd hid details for so long, what was stopping her from hiding more?

I untied my apron, tossing it in my locker as I grabbed my phone. Closing the metal locker, I headed out the back door of the break room. There was a slight chill to the humid air, but not enough to bother me without a coat.

I was about to text Wesley that I was off work when I rounded the corner and saw him leaning up against a small car. I looked at him, then the car, then him again, my eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

“That’s.. Not your car?” Where was his truck?

“It is. Well, technically it’s not.” A smile grew on his face as he tossed the keys up and down in his hand. “It’s yours.”

“What?” This had to be a prank. A car? He hadn’t even fully furnished his house yet and he bought me a car?

“It’s a little old but runs great. I figured you were getting tired of asking for rides or walking in the damn rain.”

I was frozen in place as he ambled over to me, standing by my side to face the vehicle. My gaze darted between him and the car again, at a loss for words.

“Why? I mean, how? You need the money more than I need a car.”

He looked at me, grabbing my wrist to face my palm up. He set the keys in my hand, his hand still on my wrist. “It technically wasn’t my money.” I snapped my head to him, even more confused than I already was. “It was my inheritance from my father. I wasn’t planning on using it for anything else and it just makes me feel better knowing you have a vehicle to get around.”

I almost dropped the keys but closed my fist to grab them. “Wesley, I can’t accept this. That’s a *car*.”

“I’m well aware of what it is, darling.”

“Then you’re aware how expensive cars are? I can’t accept you spending that much money on me.”

He laughed, facing me. He cupped my face with his hands, leaning in close. “Do you see that thing, Em? It’s old. It barely made a dent in my inheritance. Please just accept it. For my sake.”

“But Wes-”

“But nothing. I’ll get it transferred to your name and work on it for you if any problems come up.”

I rarely received gifts, let alone an entire *car* as a gift. I couldn't tell if he was crazy or just extremely thoughtful.

"I'm going to pay you back."

He shook his head, laughing. "Emerson, that's not how gifts work."

"Yeah, well, it will make me feel better."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, pulling me closer to him by wrapping his arms around my shoulders. I closed my eyes, blowing out a long breath. "If that'll make you accept my gift."

"It will."

His chest shook as he chuckled. "Stubborn woman."

I smiled against his chest, turning my head with my cheek pressed against him to look at the car again.

It felt good being close to him. He smelled like wood and spice, and I wished I could save the smell in a candle so I always felt close to him even if he wasn't with me.

Life threw me some pretty shitty cards in the past few weeks, but it also gave me some pretty great ones, too.

Chapter Thirty Three

EMERSON

Thunder boomed in the distance as I parked my car in front of Wings & Wine. Contrary to the name, they served all kinds of food and beverages here. I didn't feel like risking running into Jett at our usual bar, so I offered to drive us across town to this place.

“So, tell me again how your pussy is so great that he bought you a car after the first time?” Jessica asked from the back seat.

I laughed, shaking my head as I got out of the car. Stella and Jessica got out as well, all three of us making our way inside after I locked the car. “You don't think he got it for me because of my personality?”

Stella sucked air in through her teeth, taking her coat off as we entered the restaurant. “I don't know about that.. From what I've seen of your personality-” I elbowed her in the side as she laughed.

When this place first opened, the owners didn't know which way they wanted to take the restaurant. They switched the theme between country and old school diner before landing on a more nautical feel. It had a rustic charm with weathered wooden beams overhead the dozens of tables set about the

open floor plan. There were nautical touches on the walls, like old fishing nets and seashells collected from the Washington shores. The cozy bar area had two bartenders crafting cocktails inspired by the sea, their special on the board tonight was an Ocean Waves Vodka Wine Cocktail. It sounded like a headache in a glass to me.

Since the restaurant was open seating, we made our way over to a booth by the wall to the right of the bar. Most of the tables were filled, which didn't surprise me since a thunderstorm was rolling in. Not many people wanted to be caught on the shore when those hit.

A waitress ambled over to our table with a smile on her face. She wore a blue and white striped apron around her waist, going with the nautical theme. "Lovely girls' night, I see. My name is Sam. Can I get you gals started with any drinks?"

Jessica glanced at the drink menu before passing it off to Stella. "I'll have a Cake by the Ocean, please."

Sam scribbled it on the notepad before turning to Stella. "Tipsy Mermaid, please."

She jotted it down, then faced me. "And for you?"

"Just a coconut mojito. Thanks."

"Hey, you're Emerson, right?" she asked after she wrote down my drink order.

"I am." I'd never met this woman in my life. I'd been to this restaurant a few times, but had never seen her working here before tonight.

"My friend, Cherry, is friends with Luke, and he said you cheated on Jett."

I froze at how bold she was. Confusion wrinkled my brow. Cheated? That's the story they were spinning?

"Sam, I know you mean no harm, but kindly put our drink order in and

mind your business,” Stella snapped at her in her I’m-trying-to-be-nice-but-you’re-pissing-me-off voice.

“I didn’t mean to pry.” Sam slipped her notepad into her apron, clicking the top of her pen.

Stella snorted.

“Well, you did,” Jessica said from beside me as Sam walked away.

“What kind of fucking name is Cherry?” Stella scoffed. “No wonder Luke likes her, if her friend gives any indication how stupid their group is.”

I set my elbow on the table and rested my chin in my hand. “I shouldn’t be surprised that’s what he’s telling people.”

“Ah, fuck them. It doesn’t matter what they say. We know it’s not true.”

I looked at Stella, who was sitting across from me. “He thought I was going to go back to him.”

“Seriously?”

“How do you know that?” Jessica asked at the same time.

“He pulled up to my mom’s house as Wesley and I were leaving.”

Stella’s eyes narrowed. “You were at your moms? With Wesley?”

I forgot to tell them about my father. In my defense, I was a little preoccupied in the hours following the news. I filled them in on the details, Stella’s jaw dropping further with every bit of information I told them.

“So, wait.. Your mom knew where he was this whole time?” Jessica asked. She’d turned her body toward mine, sipping her drink that was brought to our table sometime during the bomb I dropped on them.

“I guess so. I don’t really know what to make of it.”

Stella was already halfway done with her cocktail where I had barely taken one small pull from my straw.

Jessica opened her mouth to ask a question but was cut off by Brendt

sliding into the booth next to Stella.

“Long time no see, ladies.”

Stella rolled her eyes. “We’re having a girls’ night, Brendt. Last I checked, you’re not a girl.”

“You checking me out, Stells?”

“I’d rather stab an umbrella toothpick through my eyes than check you out, B.”

A smile pulled at Jessica’s lips as she leaned closer to me, whispering in my ear, “Do they always flirt like this?”

Stella pointed a glare at Jessica. “What was that, Jess?”

She leaned back in the seat, putting her straw in between her teeth. “Oh, nothing. Continue, please.”

Stella had her arm on the table, holding her drink, when Brendt put both his hands on the table, folding his fingers together. Their arms brushed, and I tried not to bring attention to it. Stella hated when the little things were pointed out.

“What brings you to Wings and Wine on this fine evening?” I asked Brendt.

“Yeah, why aren’t you with the guys, Brendt?” Stella asked with a hint of attitude in her tone, accentuating his name.

Brendt cleared his throat. “I’m keeping my distance from them until Jett’s dad leaves town.” His eyes landed on me as he spoke, gauging my reaction.

I tried to act like none of what he said affected me, but from what I’d heard about Felix, he wasn’t the kind of guy you wanted to get caught up with. “His dad’s in town? Since when?”

“Since you two broke up. He’s been staying at Jett’s house.”

My breath caught in my throat. Is that who was in the house when I went to

grab my clothes? Jett's truck wasn't out front, and if his dad flew in, it would make sense why there was no car parked outside.

"I'm going to need another drink," Stella murmured.

"Why don't we like Jett's dad?" Jessica asked, slurping the rest of her drink.

"I've never met him, but Jett has told me some not-so-pleasant stories. I thought he was in prison?" I aimed the question at Brendt.

"He was. He's out now." Brendt didn't look happy about the news either, but I was glad he was staying away from them. Something was going on between all of them and none of us needed to get tangled up in it.

Sam made her way back to the table, giving Brendt a full smile. "Would you like anything to drink, sir?"

He was practically eye level with her from where he sat. She wasn't particularly short, but Brendt was six foot two, just slightly shorter than Wesley.

"Just a water, thank you. And another of whatever those two were having." He gestured to Stella and Jessica. My drink was still more than half full. I wasn't trying to get buzzed since I was driving.

Stella slid an inch away from him. "I don't need you to order my drink for me."

"I know you don't. I wanted to. There's this thing called being polite." Stella rolled her eyes as Sam walked away.

I watched the two of them as I stirred my drink with my straw. "Didn't you guys go on a date a few weeks ago?"

Stella pointed a glare at me and Jessica's jaw dropped. "Why does no one tell me these things?"

"Because you never hang out with us," Brendt admitted.

“Not true. I see Em multiple times a week at work.” She put her leg closest to me up on the seat of the booth, curling her ankle under her other leg.

“Key word: work,” Stella pointed out.

“I’ll try to be better about that. But back to the date, is that why you guys hate each other?”

Brendt threw his hands up. “I plead the fifth.”

“There’s a lot of reasons I hate Brendt.” Sam set the drinks down on our table and Stella immediately grabbed for hers, chugging half of it through her straw. I pressed my lips together to hide my smile. They’d get over it eventually. “How are you and your boyfriend, Jess?” Stella asked to change the subject.

“Todd? We broke up last week.”

“What?” We all said in unison as all our eyes shot to her.

Jessica shrugged. “Yeah. He was too into partying, I’m always at work. It just wasn’t working. But I’m not upset about it, it was mutual.”

“Mutual is what everyone says when it’s most definitely not mutual,” Stella said.

“It started to feel like we were just friends who hung out with each other every once in a while. Plus, I need someone who’s more mature.”

I raised my glass. “To finding men who are more mature.”

They all raised their glasses, including Brendt with his water.

“More mature than Brendt, that’s for sure,” Stella mumbled as we all clinked glasses and sipped. Brendt was smiling as he shook his head. Stella’s sassiness didn’t turn him away, that much was certain.

I couldn’t say how mature it was of me to be ignoring Jett, because it wasn’t. A mature person would have sat down and had a conversation, closed any loose ends, and parted ways respectfully. It was hard for me to grant him

that respect after the way he'd treated me, but I knew he didn't see it that way.

I felt bad for avoiding him. I'd been with him for so long and all of a sudden cut him off, but I had good reason to. To clear my conscience and lay this to rest, I had to talk to him. Then we could all move on.

Chapter Thirty Four

WESLEY

I held Emerson's hand, idly stroking the side of her thumb as she spoke to her aunt at the funeral reception. The funeral service was in Oldport, despite her father not having lived here in almost twenty years.

Emerson was quiet throughout the service, which I expected. She didn't need to speak for me to know that deep down, she was hurting. Hurting for the life she didn't get with him, for the hope that she once had that he would come back one day. There'd be no more wishing she'd run into him at a gas station, or the possibility that he could send a letter in the mail reaching out.

Before, he was gone in a way that gave her hope she still may one day get a chance with him, get to know the man he was, but now, that was no longer an option. He was gone and she never even got to know him.

When we'd arrived and she'd seen the photo of him sitting up at the front of the church, she'd stood frozen for minutes, staring at it. Her mother barely had any photos of him from before he left, and I'm sure he looked vastly different in this more recent photo than he did back then.

I could see the resemblance between the two of them. His blue eyes

matched hers, his dark hair a mirror in color to her own. I wondered if she got any of his other attributes, like his laugh, or his sense of humor, like I did with my dad.

It was hard to tell what she may be feeling. She put up a hard exterior, smiling when family spoke to her, engaging in conversation with strangers that claimed to know him. Did they question why they'd never met her? Why he lived so far from his family? Did they know he abandoned his family, yet still became his friend, laughed with him, made memories with him that his own family didn't get to make?

"Your eyes look just like his." Her aunt was going on about all her memories with Emerson's father growing up. I couldn't tell if Emerson really wanted to know these stories, or keep what she knew of him already. It was harder to cope when you had stories of how he spoke or the way he acted, I knew that much. "Always a deep blue."

Emerson gave the woman a small smile, gripping my hand three times. That was my cue. "He gave her my favorite thing about her, then. Those beautiful eyes, like the ocean before a storm. It was lovely meeting you, ma'am."

"You as well, Wesley. Take care of her. He would've loved you." Her aunt headed in the direction of the charcuterie board sitting on a table against the far wall.

I turned to Emerson, who was staring straight ahead. Her eyes were glassy, full of tears that hadn't fallen. I gently pulled her into me, letting go of her hand to wrap my arms around her. She laid her cheek on my chest, releasing a heavy sigh. "I'm not going to cry," she mumbled into my black button up shirt.

"It's okay if you do," I whispered, my lips brushing against her hair.

"I wish he could have met you."

I closed my eyes, holding her a little tighter. “I wish he could have met *you*. You’re such a resilient, breathtaking woman. He missed out, because no one on this planet could compare to you, Emerson.”

Her hands fisted in the back of my shirt. “Okay, now I might cry.”

I chuckled and she pulled back, tilting her head up to gaze at me. “Thank you for coming.”

I smiled and brought my hand to her cheek to stroke my thumb under her eye to brush away a tear. I wanted to tell her I’d do anything she wanted me to, go anywhere she wanted me to go, but it felt too soon to admit I was head over heels for her. We shared many intimate moments and did things only a couple would do, but I didn’t want to scare her away. She was still going through a lot, and I didn’t want to add to the abundance of thoughts going through her mind.

“I think I’ve talked to enough people and almost-cried too many times to count. We can leave if you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.” I grabbed her hand again and led us through the crowd filling the small house. I saw her mom watching us leave out of the corner of my eye but didn’t make eye contact. Emerson hadn’t spoken to her all day, but I can’t say I wouldn’t do the same if I was in her shoes.

Ross hadn’t shown up at the funeral or the reception. Emerson didn’t think he would attend anyway, due to the fact that their father walked out of the Foley’s lives before he was even born. From what she’d told me, he’d been more content growing up without a father. With the special treatment her mother gave Ross, I didn’t blame him, but for Emerson, I could see why she’d longed for a father figure. Any kid would.

Reaching the door, we walked outside into the brisk air. Winter was coming and it sure made its presence known early around this part of Washington.

Emerson stopped in her tracks beside me, pulling me to a stop. I followed her gaze to the last thing she needed today. Jett was standing on the curb, staring at the house we just exited.

“What are you doing here?” We were close enough to him that he could hear her without raising her voice.

“I came to pay my respects,” his voice was hoarse, his eyes glossy. I could smell the hint of whiskey that blew off him in the breeze.

“You knew him even less than I did.”

He shook his head, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I also came to say I’m sorry, Emerson.”

She scoffed. “At my father’s funeral? You thought that would be the place to make a scene?”

“I don’t want to make a scene.” He took a step forward and I tightened my grip on her hand. “You haven’t exactly been easy to get a hold of recently.”

“I cared about you, Jett. A lot more than you ever gave me credit for. I would have wiped your vomit every damn night if I had to, but then you hit me. You hit me, and that’s where I draw the line.”

“I wasn’t doing well, Em. I would have never done that if-”

She cut him off. “You still did it. You hit me, scared me, and brushed it off like it was *nothing*. I was tired of crying in that damn driveway when you were too fucking drunk to walk your ass inside. Tired of hiding how I really felt, and for what? To save you from the pain *you* were causing everyone around you?”

His gaze was trained on the grass. He couldn't even look at Emerson as she spoke to him. *Fucking coward*. It took all I had in me not to force him to respect her when she spoke. “Just know that I would take it all back if I could. I never meant to hurt you and I can’t tell you how sorry I am that I

did.” He turned away and walked down the sidewalk to where his rusty blue truck was parked.

Emerson blew out a breath, her hand gripped tight in mine. I watched as he got in his truck and drove off. Letting go of her hand, I wrapped my arm around her, rubbing her upper arm as I steered her toward my truck.

Opening the door for her, she got inside, pulling the bottom of her dark gray dress in with her. I stepped toward her and laid my hand on her hip farthest from me as I slid my other hand behind her neck. She turned to face me, our eyes level. “You’re strong, Em.”

She nodded, the tears she’d been holding back finally slipping over the edge. I pulled her to me, my lips colliding with hers. I kissed her deeply and with meaning, hoping she could feel the three words I wanted to say but couldn’t find the courage to speak.

Chapter Thirty Five

EMERSON

The sound of cars racing filled my ears as Wesley, Stella, Jessica, Easton and I walked up the stands to where Brendt had saved us seats.

It was the middle of the dirt track racing season and our group always made time to go on Saturday nights, never missing a local race. Since we clearly weren't much of a group anymore, Wesley, Easton, Brendt, Stella, Jessica and I all came together.

Saturdays were typically the busiest day at the restaurant, but in the winter, business slowed as tourists stopped passing through, so Elijah agreed to give Jess and I Saturdays off all throughout winter, as long as we worked them the rest of the year. If he did need us to work, we'd only do mornings. It worked out perfectly with the racing season. I'd close the rest of the week if it meant I didn't miss the races.

"I thought you guys were never going to show up," Brendt shouted over the engines.

"Blame Stella. She decided to take a thirty minute shower right when we showed up," Jessica said.

Stella glared daggers at Brendt, daring him to poke fun at her. He held his hands up in mock surrender, bringing his gaze back to the track.

Wesley rested his hand on my thigh, his knee touching mine. Easton and Brendt sat on the other side of him, Stella and Jessica to my right. Stella and Brendt were as far as they could get from each other. I didn't miss the glances Brendt sent over our heads at her, though.

The crowd cheered around us as the checkered flag waved, the announcer's voice echoing through the stands as he announced the first place driver in the first race of the night.

Jessica sat forward, eyeing Stella and me. "I'm going to get beer before the next race starts. Want to come?"

"Yeah. Anyone want anything?" Stella asked the rest of us.

"I'll come, too," I said.

Wesley pulled cash out of his wallet and handed it to me. I took it and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you. I'll get you a beer."

Easton held up a finger. "I'll take one, too."

"Want me to go with you guys?" Brendt asked.

"No," Stella snipped as she shuffled to stairs that lead down to the ground.

"Text me if you guys want anything else," I said before following suit, Jessica at my heels.

We made our way through the crowd to the concession stand behind the metal bleachers. After the seven people ahead of us ordered, we made it to the head of the line and ordered six beers. The total being over fifty dollars made me want to quit drinking altogether. They overpriced everything at these events.

"It looks like Brendt is getting along with the guys pretty well," Jessica said as we grabbed two beers each to head back to the stands.

“Yeah, maybe he’ll stick with them instead of going back to Jett and Luke. Is Wesley staying in Oldport?” Stella asked, some of the beer sloshing out of one of her plastic cups.

Before I could reply, an arm knocked into mine, one of the beers in my hand spilling out a quarter of the contents.

“Fucking dick,” Stella said as Luke stopped in his tracks and turned to her.

“Say that again,” he seethed.

“I said you’re a dick. Watch where you’re fucking walking.” Luke got in her face, the drinks in her hands knocking against his chest.

“Come on, Stella. He did it on purpose. Don’t waste your energy on him,” Jessica said as she turned to keep walking.

“You give Jett shit for drinking yet here you three are double fisting.” I hated the way he spit the words out like he was teetering on the edge of insanity.

As soon as I thought it, he plucked a beer out of Stella’s grasp and tilted it slowly onto her shirt, the contents of the cup spilling down her cleavage, onto her white long sleeve top. She shoved him with the other cup still in her hand, that one spilling onto him.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Everyone around us couldn’t either, because they were all starting to stare. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of movement and in a blink, Brendt was between Luke and Stella. He shoved Luke back, so hard that he flew into the chain link fence a few feet behind him.

Brendt got in his face, anger practically rolling off of him. “You disrespect her one more goddamn time and you’ll regret it.”

Luke smiled at him, his teeth flashing. “You used to do it with us, Brendt. What happened to the good ol’ days? Or are you too pussy whipped now?”

Brendt slammed his fist into the chain link fence beside Luke's head. "I'd never act that way toward anyone, *especially* her."

Jessica had grabbed napkins and was blotting at Stella's top, her bra already showing through the fabric.

"You telling me you don't disrespect her little mouth in bed?"

Before Luke could finish his sentence, Brendt's fist collided with the side of his face. His head snapped to the side and he spit blood, laughing. He was fucking insane.

Stella ignored the two of them, focusing on wiping her top off from where we stood a few feet away. I knew she didn't care much about the beer. It looked more like she was trying to busy her hands instead of focusing on what they were saying to each other.

Easton and Wesley rounded the corner, coming through the narrow space between the bleachers toward us. They were talking to each other when they saw what was happening, both instantly springing into action.

Wesley ran over to where I was standing in front of Stella.

"What happened? Are you okay?" He took in the scene as Easton pulled Brendt off Luke, who had his hands fisted in the front of Luke's shirt as he shook him.

"He's not worth it," Easton said to him.

"We're fine. Just spilled some beer," Stella spoke quietly, like she was in a daze.

"You mean Luke spilled beer on you, purposefully," Jessica explained.

Wesley looked to where Easton was with Brendt, then back to us. Brendt was opening and closing his fists like he ached to punch Luke a couple more times. I didn't blame him. I wanted to punch him myself after the shit he just did.

“I’m glad we came down to check on you guys, we were wondering what was taking so long.”

“Would you believe me if I said long line?” He frowned at me and then turned his attention back to Stella. “Are you okay, Stella?”

“I’m fine.” She turned around and aimed for the ladies’ restroom. She was probably embarrassed and starting to get cold. Her shirt was soaked.

“Stella!” Brendt yelled before he pushed away from Easton to run over to her. She tried to ignore him, continuing to the restrooms, but he moved in front of her, stopping her in her tracks. He shrugged out of his flannel, wrapping it around her shoulders. “Take this,” he said in a gentle tone.

I looked back to Easton, not wanting to intrude on whatever moment they were having together. He was walking over to us as Luke walked the other way, his hands fisted as he went.

“Did he say anything to you?” Wesley asked me.

“No.” I crossed my arms, suddenly uncomfortable, bringing my attention to Wesley. “He just said some shit and spilled a beer on Stella. Then Brendt intervened.”

“Well, I’m glad he did. I don’t know if I would’ve had the same self-restraint to be able to let Luke walk away if he did that to you.” Wesley’s body was stiff, his eyes angry as he spoke.

I knew Wesley cared about me, wanted to protect me, but I felt bad having him stuck in the crossroads of this shitty situation. He came to Oldport for a fresh start and all I seemed to do was pull him into this small-town drama.

Easton came up beside us, his gaze landing on me like he was checking to make sure I wasn’t hurt. “The guy doesn’t know how to leave you all alone, does he?”

Jessica walked back up to us after throwing away her wet napkins. “He’s

always been a creep.”

Easton’s eyes raked over her, likely checking for any injuries as well. At least I hoped that was what he was doing, being a cop and all.

Jessica seemed stuck under his gaze, her cheeks heating.

"I'm not on duty, but I'm ready to go arrest his ass. This isn't the first time he's cornered one of you," Easton said.

My gaze snapped to him. "Stella wouldn't want to bring attention to it, but I don't blame you. I'm getting tired of looking over my shoulder everywhere we go."

Wesley tensed beside me, and I knew the thought of Luke coming after me lit a fire in his blood.

“I’m going to take Stella home,” Brendt interrupted as he strode up to us.

“We can all go. I think I’m done for the night.” Wesley put his hand on the small of my back, his thumb rubbing small circles. “As long as you guys want to go, too.” I looked at Easton and Jessica.

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, we can head out.”

Brendt made his way back to Stella. They walked side by side, their arms brushing against each other. She had his flannel wrapped around her, both to cover herself up and keep out the cold that was probably penetrating the wet fabric of her shirt.

Wesley slid his hand from my back into my hand, our fingers intertwining. I felt safe when he held my hand, like I had someone to hold me together if things went south. The thought warmed my cheeks because when things did go south, he was there. He’d be there to hold me when I needed it. I was realizing I needed that in my life more than I thought I did.

We needed to figure out what would make Luke back off. He was unhinged and no longer only taking it out on me. Something else must have happened

for him to be targeting us like this. Ending things with Jett couldn't have caused this kind of reaction from him. At this point, it felt like Jett was taking things better than Luke was, unless there was some other reason for his behavior, aside from trying to get revenge for his friend.

Chapter Thirty Six

EMERSON

Wesley was in the backyard starting a fire in the firepit while Easton and I prepped snacks and drinks inside. We had dropped Jessica off at home since she had to work the morning shift tomorrow. Brendt swung by Stella's house with her so she could change, then they were heading over to Wesley's place to hang out with us for a bit.

"Bit strong of a drink there," Easton observed as he coughed through the burn of the alcohol in his throat.

"Sorry. I guess I'm just used to making them strong."

"You don't have to explain, Em. I know."

I busied my hands breaking up bars of chocolate to make s'mores with everyone.

"Wesley told you." It came out more as a statement than a question.

Easton grabbed a plate from the cabinet. "He mentioned a few things." I nodded as I continued breaking off squares of chocolate. "Just so I was in the loop in case anything came up."

I set down the last of the chocolate, grabbing the plate he was holding out

for me. “I’m not mad he told you.” I began setting the chocolate and marshmallows out in rows while Easton opened a package of graham crackers.

“He cares about you.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“I know I wasn’t there after our dad passed and it kills me every time I look at him. He cares with his entire being, not just small snippets of himself. When he throws himself into something, he’s giving his all. I just don’t want whatever is going on here to consume him to the point he gets reckless to protect you.”

I stopped arranging the sweets on the plate and swiveled my head to look at him. “I wouldn’t let him ruin himself over anything going on here. I promise you that.”

Easton pressed his lips into a thin line, his body still facing the counter but his eyes locked on mine. “Let him love you, Em. But don’t let it destroy him.”

I wasn’t going to be the one to tell Easton it was too soon for Wesley to love me, so instead I nodded and turned my attention back to the plate in front of me.

Was it too soon, though? There were moments with Wesley where I felt like love was the only word I could use to explain my feelings. Was there ever a “too soon” for love? That was the thing about love; it chose to consume you whenever it pleased. You didn’t get to control your emotions that way.

This whole time, I kept telling myself it was too soon. Too soon to feel this way for Wesley, too fast for me to move on. But there was no set time frame

for which people moved on, no stopwatch tracking the appropriate amount of time you sat heartbroken while life continued moving past.

I could put myself on hold for months thinking that was the best way to deal with my emotions, or I could let myself be happy with the bond I'd formed with Wesley. Deciding I was going to live my life the way I wanted to, I chose the latter.

Too many people were already affected by the turmoil Jett caused. I wouldn't let it affect Wesley, too.

"I'm just saying, the best way to have a s'more is to burn the shit out of the marshmallow." Brendt laughed as he attempted to blow out the flame engulfing the marshmallow on the end of his stick.

"I prefer not to eat straight char, thank you very much." Stella stuffed the last of her s'more into her mouth, the graham cracker making a soft crunch. She had changed into a pink sweatshirt and black leggings. Even casual, she looked stunning.

I sat in the chair next to Wesley, my legs dangled across his lap as I silently ate my s'more. He was rubbing my calves as I observed the conversations around me, feeling warmth spread through my chest at how happy it made me feel to have all of us hanging out. Though it wasn't the same group of people I'd known for so many years, I felt at home with all of them. I felt at home with Wesley.

"Brendt's just trying to brush off the fact he doesn't know how to properly toast a marshmallow," Easton teased.

Brendt was assembling his blackened s'more sandwich when he said, "I'm a marshmallow toasting pro. I don't know what you're talking about."

Stella smiled, plunking another marshmallow onto a stick. “Prove it.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you challenging me?”

“If you can brag about your skills, you can prove them.”

A devilish grin grew on his face as he took the stick from her and extended it over the flame. The flame licked at the sugar, then grew over the marshmallow in a matter of seconds. He kept it over the fire for a little longer, then dragged it back, blowing on it with force. The flame disappeared to reveal a ball of blackened sugar. Stella erupted in a fit of laughter.

“All talk and no game, B,” I said while shaking my head with a smile on my face.

Brendt added the burnt marshmallow to his existing s’more, making it a double decker.

“So, Em, have you thought about getting a restraining order?” Easton spoke from his seat next to Wesley, the glow of the fire illuminating his face.

“Way to dampen the mood, East,” Wesley mumbled.

“Today was my fault, not hers,” Stella demanded.

“It wasn’t anyone’s fault,” I said quietly as I stared at the fire. “They’re both just insane and it’s none of our faults.” I could feel Easton’s eyes on me, waiting for an answer. Sighing, I took my legs off Wesley and leaned forward in my seat, my elbows resting on my knees. “I’ve considered it, yeah, but it just feels so harsh.”

“Every way I’ve seen them act towards you is harsh,” Wesley said. I turned my gaze on him, his green eyes glowing in the dim light.

“He’s right, Em. Maybe look into it,” Brendt added.

I turned back to the fire, wishing I didn’t even have to be in a position to think about restraining orders. “I will.”

We sat around the fire for another hour or so, talking and laughing. No one

brought up what happened tonight again, and I was thankful for it. I usually hit things head on, but thinking about a restraining order made me feel nauseous. It felt so final, like I was finally pushing those people out of my life for good.

I hated the way they so easily turned on me, how Luke had gone insane and Jett couldn't seem to understand we're not getting back together. They'd both been in my life for so long, it was hard to distinguish these different personalities I was seeing come to life from them. Had they been like this all along and I was just too blind to see it? Too thankful to Jett for getting me out of my childhood home to admit to myself what I was seeing right before my eyes?

Wesley patted my knee as he stood up, reaching a hand out to help me out of my seat. I grabbed it and stood. "We're going to head inside, but feel free to stay as long as you guys would like."

"I should get going, anyway. Gotta be at the station at eight a.m." Easton stood up, patting Wesley on the shoulder. "See you later."

A smile tugged at the corners of Wesley's mouth. "See ya." It was sweet seeing them getting along now despite their history.

Stella came over to me, wrapping me in a hug. "Thanks for having my back today, Em. Love you."

"Love you too, Stells. You know I'll always back you up."

She let go and headed for the sliding back door.

"Guess I have to go, too. I'm her ride." Brendt hiked his thumb toward the door Stella disappeared through. "Thanks for having me over, Wes. You've got a nice place."

"Anytime, Brendt." They shook hands, doing that weird pat-on-the-back thing guys do.

As they all left, I bent to pick up the plate that the makings of the s'mores sat on. Wesley grabbed my other hand, pulling me close to him so our chests were touching. "We can clean up tomorrow." He bent his head down to press his lips to mine, consuming me with his kiss. He slid his hands up my arms, ghosting across my shoulders to settle on the sides of my neck. I angled my head slightly to the side, arching myself into him. His lips would be the death of me. I was falling hard and fast, but I didn't want to put on the brakes. I didn't want to hold anything back with Wesley. Not anymore.

Breaking the kiss, he grabbed my hand again, turning around to lead me inside. "Can I just put the chocolate away first? My life motto is 'no chocolate shall go to waste.'"

He chuckled, grabbing the plate of leftover chocolate. We headed inside to the kitchen where I grabbed a small plastic bag for him to put it in while he set the plate on the counter. I held the bag out for him and he grabbed my hand with the bag, pulling me in close to him. He rubbed something smooth and velvety across my bottom lip with his thumb. I darted my tongue out to taste the substance, my tongue swiping over my lip slowly as he watched.

A hunger grew in his eyes, a hunger I knew wasn't for the chocolate. Keeping his eyes on my lips, he dipped his finger into the partially melted chocolate on the plate, then brought his hand up to drag it along my neck. My breathing quickened as he dipped his head down to drag his tongue up the column of my throat. I arched my head back, exposing more of my neck for him to devour. Chocolate or no chocolate, I loved the feel of his mouth on me.

Heat grew between my legs and I clamped my thighs together as his fingers skimmed down to the hem of my sweater. He tugged it over my head, letting it fall to the floor.

He sucked in a breath as he took me in. “No bra, Em?” I grinned slightly, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth as his gaze landed on the action. “That fucking lip.” He brought his mouth back to mine, sucking on my bottom lip until his teeth grazed it. I let out a small whimper, enjoying the way his bite felt against my lip far better than my own teeth.

I felt him slide the smooth chocolate over my nipple and then his mouth was moving south. He kissed down my jaw, sliding his warm tongue down my throat and collarbone until his mouth closed over my nipple. I moved my hands to his hair, grabbing a hold of the strands. His tongue flicked over my nipple, licking every bit of chocolate off. I let out a moan, my nerves on fire everywhere he touched me.

His hands slid down my body until they stopped on my ass, where he grabbed me and hauled me onto the kitchen counter, all while keeping his mouth on my tit. His hand came up to palm my opposite breast before moving his mouth to my other nipple. I leaned my head back against the cabinet behind me, my eyes fluttering shut as I ached between my legs.

As if he read my thoughts, he unbuttoned my jeans, sliding his hand between the fabric of my panties and my pants. He cursed and released my nipple, gazing at me. “So wet for me.”

I opened my eyes and brought my gaze to his. “Only for you.”

He began sliding my jeans off, his eyes moving to my lace panties. “That’s my good girl.”

Hearing those words made me want to hear a different set of words, but I pushed the thought aside. Now wasn’t the time to overthink anything. Once my jeans were off and he stood back up, I grabbed the neckline of his shirt, pulling it over his head. I ran my hands down his chest, his warm, tanned skin

smooth against my fingers. He was staring at me, his chest rising and falling as his breathing picked up pace.

Bringing my gaze up from where my hands trailed to his belt, I whispered, “I need you.”

“You’ve got me, Em. All my focus is on you.” He leaned in, pressing his lips to mine again. This kiss was slower, more gentle as he slid one hand behind my head to tangle his fingers in my hair. “You’ve got all my attention,” he said against my lips. I swallowed his words, unzipping his jeans and tugging at them.

He used his other hand to help me pull his pants down. His cock was straining against his boxers, standing straight out. I rubbed my hand along his length, my fingertips grazing his balls.

He pulled me off the counter, wrapping my legs around his waist. I held on, our lips never parting as he carried me to his bedroom. He didn’t bother closing the door this time. He sat on the edge of the bed, my legs straddling him. I moved my hand between our bodies, pulling at the top of his boxers until I slid it back far enough to release his cock. It sprung up between us, settling against my stomach.

I got off of him to slide my panties down and climbed back onto him, pushing against his chest to lie him back on the bed. He stared up at me, his eyes begging for me to keep going. His lips were swollen from our kisses, his hair messed up from my hands. I wanted to keep this image of him in my mind forever.

Sitting up on my knees more, I grabbed his length with one hand, brushing the tip against my clit. I sucked in a breath, my legs quivering slightly. He grabbed my hips, pulling me forward slightly to put himself at the perfect angle to my entrance. I kept my gaze on his as I slowly lowered myself, his

cock stretching me. He cursed, his fingers digging into my hips in the most pleasant way. I sat down completely, his cock as deep as it could go.

His eyes pinned me, and I didn't feel an ounce of doubt. "You're so beautiful, Emerson. Every inch of you."

There was a sheen of sweat breaking out on his chest, his skin glistening in the dim light of the room. I began moving, sliding myself to his tip only to take him all the way back in. He kept one hand on my hip, his other hand gliding over my skin to my clit. He rubbed circles with his thumb and I quickened my pace, riding him.

The feel of him bare inside me was more than I could have imagined. It was so intimate, nothing between us, our bodies mingled together perfectly. I let out a moan, his tip hitting that sweet spot inside me with every thrust. He moved his hips in unison with mine, somehow going deeper than before. I brought my hand up to palm my breast, my thumb and forefinger playing with my nipple. I didn't used to love being watched in bed, that was when I would feel self-conscious, but Wesley watching me only turned me on more.

I felt the pressure build low in my belly as his thumb swiped across my clit, the pace of his finger matching the speed I rode him. He added more pressure to my clit, and I clenched around him, screaming his name as my legs tensed. My body pulsed, his pace never slowing as he took control and thrust up into me, his thumb keeping pace. I rode out the waves of pleasure, breathless as he quickened his thrusts. He moaned, his head falling back as he let go, spilling inside me.

Our bodies stayed intertwined as I bent forward, lying my cheek on his chest. His breathing was evening out, his heartbeat pounding. He brought his hands up to rub over my back in soothing strokes and I closed my eyes, listening to the beat of his heart against my cheek.

If I had it my way, this moment would never end. We'd never have to leave this room and face the real world with its problems. We could stay tangled in this bed, exploring and worshiping every inch of each other.

I fell asleep with his hands on me, our bodies still entangled together as our hearts beat to the steady rhythm of each other.

Chapter Thirty Seven

WESLEY

I had been reading for what had to have been over an hour when Emerson finally spoke from where she was seated at the kitchen island.

“There’s no trail.”

Pulling my reading glasses off to use them as a bookmark, I set my book on the armrest of the couch. “What?”

She twisted in her seat, standing up with the laptop in her hand, and strode over to me. “On the map. There are no trails anywhere near where they said they found my dad’s body. Look.” She angled the screen so I could see the enlarged trail map. She pointed to the screen. “This is where they said they found his body, right?” I nodded. “The closest trail is almost fifteen miles north.”

Even though we hadn’t talked much about her father, I had the slightest feeling she hadn’t bought their bullshit excuse of frostbite and this just confirmed it.

“Do the police know that?” I looked up at her from my seat on the couch, her eyes already on me.

Despite having gotten little sleep last night, she looked as alive as ever. She'd woken up sometime in the middle of the night and rode me again, her moans still echoing in my head. After, we'd showered together, where she'd sucked my cock, and I'd fucked her against the shower wall. It was a good thing I wasn't renting an apartment, because we would have definitely received a noise complaint.

"I'm sure they looked at a map." I didn't want to say anything that might convince her I didn't believe their reasoning, either. Maybe Easton was right. If she found some other reason behind her father's death, it could hurt her more.

I didn't think the police were hiding anything, but I did know they went through so many missing person cases a year that they claimed they couldn't look so in depth to every single one. It was shitty. Families deserved closure, they deserved more than some bullshit excuse as to what ended their loved ones life just so the police could close the case and move on.

"Can you call Easton?"

My brows furrowed. "Easton?"

"I know he was on the case."

"He told you?"

"No, but I'm not stupid. He came into town at the same time my mom told me about my father's death. It doesn't take a genius to put the pieces together."

Sighing, I grabbed my cell phone off the coffee table and dialed my brother.

He answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

I pressed the speaker button and kept my gaze on Emerson as I spoke, "Did you know there were no trails near where they found Mr. Foley's body?"

Emerson's stare burned into the phone as my brother spoke. "I did. Why?"

Emerson spoke up. "Why would he have been found almost fifteen miles from the closest trail?"

"Good morning to you, too, Emerson. He was a missing person. Missing people aren't typically found on a trail. It's not unusual for them to be far from it."

"Were there any other tracks leading to where his body was?"

My eyes widened. Did she think someone could have dumped him there?

"Look, Emerson, I know you're concerned that there may have been more to his death. It's hard to accept that something so simple killed him, but you can't keep searching for answers that aren't there."

"I want to go look."

"What?" Easton and I said in unison.

"I want to go to where his body was found."

I spoke up this time. "Em, it's basically already winter. He was found in the middle of nowhere in Wyoming. The passes are probably already iced over, and even if there was any evidence left, it's most likely long gone by now."

She was giving me a hard look, her blue eyes narrowing the slightest bit.

"Please trust that the police did all that they could in their investigation. Every detail was thoroughly combed through, nothing was missed."

"I don't believe that." God, she was determined, but I must admit, I admired her for it. She wouldn't take no for an answer, not for this. I didn't blame her, but I also didn't want her getting lost in dead ends.

I cut in before this call could go south. "Thanks, Easton. I'll talk to you later."

"Later, guys." I hung up the call and put the phone back on the coffee table.

“My mom could have been looking for him this whole time. Hell, if she had just told me and Ross that he was missing, we both would have been looking for him. What if we had found him before he died, Wes? She kept it from us, and that very well could be the reason he’s dead,” her voice broke on the last word, her eyes taking on a slight sheen.

I stood up and pulled her to me, wrapping my arms around her. She laid her forehead against my chest, her delicate fingers fisting in the front of my shirt. “I know you feel guilty. I hear you. But please don’t blame yourself. None of this was your fault.”

I brushed my fingers through her hair, my cheek pressed against the top of her head. “I’m not doing enough for him.”

“You are, Emerson. He chose not to be in your life and yet you still loved him. You’re probably the only one questioning the answers you were given and I’m sure he’s looking down on you right now, wishing his determined little girl would let him rest. Fighting for answers that may not exist won’t bring him back into your life, Em. He’s just a different version of gone now.”

She let out a silent sob and pressed her head deeper into my chest. When my dad passed away, I was able to say goodbye to a man that I knew. A man that raised me and I had hundreds of memories with. I couldn't imagine what it was like for Emerson to say goodbye to a man she never really got to say hello to.

Chapter Thirty Eight

EMERSON

I stood at the bar with my elbow propped against it, watching the rain drops slide down the glass windows of the restaurant. Winter was officially here and making a grand entrance. We'd already had hail twice today, and the empty tables proved that no one wanted to go outside, not even for a quick bite to eat. Tourist season was officially over. People loved our small Washington town until it got too rainy, and while it was cold a majority of the year, once the rain started coming down for more than half the month, people stopped coming through. Instead, they stuck to the bigger cities where it was easier to get taxis or run from store to store.

"Something got you down?" Logan asked from behind the bar.

I kept my eyes on the window as I spoke. "Nope, just missed the pouring rain."

Logan chuckled, wiping the bar down with a towel. "I think you're the only one."

I turned to him, retying the knot at the back of my apron. "I'm pretty sure no one would live in Washington if they all hated the rain."

Behind me, Elijah shouted, “Emerson. Table three.”

I rolled my eyes as Logan glared over at Elijah. “As if the man can’t hold a pen and paper.”

Logan laughed. “Girl, you know he can’t lift a finger, let alone a whole notepad.”

I smiled and made my way over to table three.

“What can I get started for you today?” The man was sitting alone, wearing a white shirt under a black leather coat with dark jeans. His hair was closely shaven, to the point he was almost bald.

“I won’t be eating today.”

It wasn’t unusual for people to come in here for a hot coffee or cocktail, especially on a rainy day. “Anything to drink, then?”

He ignored my question, his eyes slicing into me. “I heard from a little birdie that you’ve been running your mouth, saying my son doesn’t treat you right.”

I froze, the words stunning me. Did he mean Jett? “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me.”

I inhaled deeply, trying to keep my breath steady. “You must have the wrong girl.”

The man chuckled, the sound deep, vibrating my bones. “Oh, that I most definitely don’t. I’d know the skanky smokeshow my son was sleeping with anywhere.” His eyes raked over my body, distaste coating his features.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. No words came out. This wasn’t just some passerby in here for a hot drink on a cold day.

It was Jett’s dad. Felix. And the way he was looking at me made bile threaten to rise in my throat.

“That’s alright, I’ll do the talking. That mouth is meant for better things,

anyway.” He folded his fingers together on the table, his posture casual. “I’d strongly suggest you go back to Jett.”

I fisted my hands at my sides, trying to calm the tremor that started. “Over my dead body.”

He clicked his tongue three times. “Don’t ask for such things if you don’t want them, little lady.” He paused, looking me up and down again. I hated the way his gaze skated over my body. It made my skin crawl. “Let me make this clear. You go back to Jett and keep your mouth shut about what he does for a living.”

The drugs. Felix was pissed that I knew about the drugs. But how did he know? Did Jett know because of what I said to him at my father’s funeral service? Did he think I’d tell everyone now that I wasn’t with him, try to get him in trouble?

“Say you will and I’ll leave,” he said it like it was that simple.

I couldn’t promise that, not when I wouldn’t do it. Nothing on this planet would make me go back to Jett, and if I told Felix that I would, he’d see it through. He’d know if I didn’t keep my word.

“Don’t ever come near me again.” I turned on my heel and hurried to the break room, my fingers struggling to untie the knot on my apron.

“I’m taking my ten,” I called out as I walked by Elijah’s office.

“I didn’t approve that,” he yelled back.

“Emergency,” was all I got out before I was out the back door, the rain pelting my skin. I headed around to the front of the restaurant, needing a walk to clear my head. Once on the sidewalk, I quickened my pace, checking behind me to make sure Felix wasn’t following me.

“Emerson?” I heard a familiar voice call out. Twisting around, I saw Brendt a few yards away with a plastic grocery bag in his hand. “What are you doing

out here in the rain?” He was wearing a black rain jacket, the hood pulled over his baseball cap.

He closed the distance between us until he was standing a foot away from me. “I-I just..” I couldn’t get the words to form on my tongue.

“Emerson, what’s wrong?”

My eyes locked with his, my fingers trembling. “You were right. Felix is here.”

Chapter Thirty Nine

EMERSON

Realization flash over Brendt's face. "He's in there right now?" He gestured to the restaurant with the bag in his hand.

My nod was all it took for him to start moving. "Wait, Brendt. Wait!" I grabbed his arm, preventing him from going any further. "If you go in there, he'll know I'm already talking. He thinks I'm going to tell people about Jett dealing."

Brendt rolled his shoulders, inhaling a deep breath. "If he's so damn worried about it, maybe he should tell Jett to quit doing it."

I chewed the inside of my lip, trying to calm my nerves. "I think he's in on it," I said under my breath.

Brendt's eyes snapped to me. "What?"

"I think he's-

"No, I heard you. But if he's in on it, that means he's staying."

I shook my head, the rain dripping off the ends of my hair. "His whole life is across the country."

"If he's making good enough money here, why would he go back? Think

about it.”

“Do you know why he was in prison?” I asked, having to raise my voice slightly over the rain coming down faster.

He shook his head. “But I have a feeling it involved whatever it is Jett got himself looped into. You need to get that restraining order, Emerson.”

I looked up at him, squinting my eyes against the drops of rain ricocheting off my face. “Do you really think that’ll help? Some piece of paper telling them they can’t come near me? They’ll think I told the police everything.” My mind jumped to Easton. He worked in law enforcement. “Fuck. If they find out Wesley’s brother is a cop, they’ll think I spilled anyway.”

Brendt shook his head, water rolling off the brim of his hat. “No one will find that out. They’re not that smart.”

I hoped Brendt was right. I could deal with Jett, but I couldn’t handle his dad sending threats my way, knowing where I worked and what secrets I knew. I was scared he’d find out where Wesley lived, where I’d been staying, and make those threats more apparent.

“Go back into work, Em. Act like it didn’t affect you. Don’t let him get the upper hand on you. We’ll figure this out, I promise.”

The last thing I wanted to do was go back into work, especially now that it looked like I took a shower with my clothes on.

“If you need anything, just call me, okay?”

I nodded and threw my arms around Brendt. “Thank you,” I said into his chest. He hugged me back, the plastic bag in his hand brushing against my back.

“You’re my best friend, Em. Don’t mention it.”

I let him go, taking a step back. Brendt may be one of the only good things to come from that part of my life, and I’m glad he was still by my side

through all of this.

I turned around and walked down the alley to the back of the restaurant, careful not to step in the deep puddles despite my shoes being soaked through. I hurried inside, slipping into the bathroom to attempt to dry my hair with the thin paper towels.

As much as I wanted to go home right now, I was the only one working besides Elijah and Logan, and I knew how much Elijah hated interacting with the diners when he had other things to do like payroll.

My hair was still damp and my clothes were soaked through as I made my way back into the seating area. Elijah was taking a couple's order as my eyes combed through the few people in the restaurant. Felix was gone.

An hour later, my clothes were stuck to my skin and my hair was still somewhat wet, but I felt a lot better than I did when I walked back in here. There was only one family seated at a table in front of the windows, which meant cleaning after we closed would go quickly, and I could get the hell out of here. I was waiting for the kitchen to prepare their food when I turned to Logan.

“Have you ever thought of working somewhere with an actual nice boss and better wages?” I asked him. Logan had the bartending skills of a pro, yet he stayed at this small town restaurant. He could go to the city and make a lot more if he really wanted to.

He shrugged. “I’m a small town kinda guy, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there ain’t many bartending jobs open around here.”

I turned to him, leaning both elbows on the countertop. “You don’t peg me for a small town kind of guy.”

“Well, I’m living in one, aren’t I?”

I smiled. “You have a point.”

“Plus, if I got a new job, who would make you the best damn sweet tea you’ve had this far north?”

I was off in thirty minutes but damn if that didn’t make me want one. Elijah didn’t like when we ate or drank on the clock, but I was to the point today that I didn’t care. He was lucky it was just a sweet tea and not a long island. “You want to make me one right now?”

“Clearly I have nothing else to do, so of course.”

He pulled the gallon container of sugar out from under the bar and set it down with a thump. “Please tell me you’re not putting that entire jug in my drink.”

He laughed, grabbing a clean glass to fill it with ice. “It may work better than that shitty coffee in the break room.”

I laughed as I heard the bell go off for my table’s food. I walked over to the kitchen window and grabbed the three plates, then headed to the couple with a young child. I set the plates in front of them. “Was there anything else I could grab you guys?”

The man smiled up at me. “No, this is perfect. Thank you.”

“Let me know if you need anything.” I grinned and headed back to the bar. My drink was sitting on the edge of the bar, condensation already dripping down the glass in the humidity of the restaurant. Logan was scrubbing at a spot next to the sink, his back to the bar, when I grabbed it, taking a long sip.

“This is just what I needed after a long day. Logan’s famous sweet tea.”

He laughed without turning around. “Oh, don’t flatter me.”

Chapter Forty

WESLEY

I brushed my hands off on my jeans, standing up. My left knee cracked after having been crouched down for so long replacing the brake pads on an old Toyota Rav4.

“All set,” I called into Jim’s office. I headed to the sink to wash my hands of the grease that accumulated throughout the day. With the garage door opened, the sound of pouring rain echoed throughout the shop.

“Hey, Wesley.” I turned my head while scrubbing my hands, my eyes landing on Jett, who stood a few feet away. After the day I’d had, he was the last person I wanted to see.

His truck wasn’t on the list of vehicles we were working on today, which meant he was here for either Jim, or me. I had no reason to entertain a conversation with him, but for the sake of trying to keep things civil, I’d be nice.

“Hey.”

“I, uh, just came by to thank you for buying her that car.” He was scratching the back of his head, avoiding eye contact with me.

“Not really something for you to thank me for.” I turned the water off, grabbing a few paper towels to dry my hands. I faced him, leaning my hip against the edge of the sink.

“I know. But it was nice of you, so thank you.”

I nodded once in response, waiting for him to continue the conversation or walk away.

I wasn't sure how he even knew about the car, but I had a question I wanted answered. Since Jett was standing here, not acting insane, I figured now was a better time to ask than any. “So, your dads in town.”

Jett swallowed audibly. “He is, yeah.”

“He going to cause any problems? Because if he is, I don't want Emerson a part of any of it.”

His eyes moved to the paper towel in my hand, then back to my face. “No. No problems.”

I nodded, studying Jett. He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other so slowly you could almost miss it if you weren't looking. I'd come to learn you should always watch people's body language, even if they seemed like they could cause no harm. The most innocent looking people had the biggest agendas.

“Well, uh, that's all I wanted to say.”

He went to turn around. “How'd you know about the car?” I asked.

He stopped, keeping his body angled away from mine as his eyes searched me. “What?”

“The car I bought her. How'd you know about it?”

He hesitated, sliding his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “Small town, I guess.”

I narrowed my eyes. I wasn't buying that, but I got the feeling if I pressed,

his answer wouldn't change.

He walked away, my gaze following him as he did. I pulled my cell phone out of my jacket pocket, glancing at the screen. Emerson would be off work in ten minutes. She'd probably make it home before me, but this downpour might slow her down if the main street in town was flooding.

Slipping my phone back into my jacket, I got busy picking up the trash from the parts I'd used throughout the day. I couldn't help but let my mind wander to the way Jett was acting, almost like he was on something and it was grating his nerves.

I shook my head. After the way he'd been acting the past few weeks, it was odd that he was being nice for a change. Did I believe that he came all the way to the shop just to thank me for something that didn't concern him? Regardless of the reason, I hoped his mood was changing for the better, for Emerson's sake. I didn't know how much longer she could take the stress of all of this.

She deserved a mental break from Jett, from work, from her father's passing and her mother's secrets. Maybe I could convince her to take some time off, I could bring her to meet my mom back in Fortsworth. God knows I'd need her by my side when the time came for me to see my mom again.

I knew Emerson sympathized with me losing my father, but I felt guilty putting that emotional burden on her with everything she'd been through these past few weeks. It wasn't her fault that she didn't have a relationship with her dad, but I couldn't help feeling sorry when memories with my dad were brought up.

Her expression wouldn't change when we talked about those moments. If anything, she seemed eager to hear about them. I wished I could give her those same memories, but with her dad, as a family. She didn't get to choose

the life she was given, and as shitty a hand as she was dealt, she seemed content with it now.

As sad as it was that she learned to be okay with it, I knew there wasn't anything she could do to change it. Especially given the fact that her mother hid so much from her.

Emerson knew a lot about people leaving, but I'd never be added to that list. Truth be told, it takes a hell of a heart to know what a heart really needs, and I know that right now she needs someone solid. Someone to choose her.

My dad taught me to fight when things got hard, to never walk away from someone just because times got dark, so that's what I'd do for Emerson. I'd be by her side through these dark times, if only to walk out in the light with her after all is said and done and see her smile shine brighter than it ever has before.

Chapter Forty One

EMERSON

I pulled off my apron, shoving it in my locker as a wave of nausea coursed through me. I placed my hand against my stomach, hoping the feeling would pass. Grabbing the bottle of water from my locker, I twisted the cap off and took a few big sips. I was probably just dehydrated. Keeping up with water intake was hard when you worked in a restaurant, despite serving water to customers all day.

I turned around to grab my phone off the table behind me, my foot catching on my opposite heel. I tripped forward but caught myself with the chair, causing it to scoot noisily along the tile floor.

A hand grabbed my elbow to steady me. “Let’s get you in a chair.”

Elijah led me to his office, my vision spinning as I followed his lead, his grip on my elbow guiding me. He eased me into the chair facing his desk when another wave of nausea rolled through me. Something was wrong.

“You don’t look so good,” he observed as he leaned against his desk, arms crossed over his chest. He overlapped his ankles, studying me. He looked so relaxed, using a tone of voice he’d never used when speaking to me before.

“Can you call Wesley?” I breathed out, my speech slurring. My tongue felt heavy, my limbs getting a similar feeling.

“Of course.” He walked by me to go back into the break room where my phone was sitting on the table. When he came back in, my vision focused enough for me to see that he had my phone shoved in his back pocket. Maybe he was out there longer than I thought and already called him. Every moment seemed to fuse into one, my thoughts jumbling together like the waves of the ocean, slamming against the shores of my mind.

Something wasn't right. I'd never had a flu come on like this, so it couldn't be that. Another wave of nausea hit me and I bent over, clutching my stomach. My forehead rested on my knee, my hair cascading around my face as I groaned.

“Up you go,” Elijah mumbled as he grabbed my shoulders, pushing me back upright. My stomach tightened as I rolled my head back. I let out a low moan, my mind spinning again. My heavy eyelids fluttered shut despite my protests to keep them open.

“How long ago did you do it?” I heard a raspy voice ask. I recognized that voice, but I couldn't pinpoint who it belonged to.

“Little under an hour,” Elijah replied.

I heard footsteps, my head pounding with each foot fall. “We've got a short amount of time to do this then, if you dosed it right. Go bring the car around back.” I heard keys being tossed, footsteps receding.

I peeled my eyes open, my vision foggy. A male form stepped into my view, his body towering over me. “Looking paler than usual, little smokeshow.”

I blinked rapidly to try to clear my vision. I was able to make out the silhouette, his nearly bald head coming into focus. “Felix?” I mumbled.

I couldn't fight my eyelids any longer. They fell shut as arms grabbed me under my armpits, hauling me upwards. I slumped forward against him, unable to hold myself upright. I moaned, the fog taking over and my mind went black.

Chapter Forty Two

WESLEY

I stared at the page I'd opened to in my book, trying to comprehend the words but none of them making sense. My mind kept straying to Emerson and why she hadn't walked through the front door yet. I'd been sitting at the island in the kitchen for what felt like forever, my foot tapping nervously against the metal leg of the chair.

I checked my watch for what had to be the hundredth time. Slamming my book shut, I stood up, walking to the living room. Pacing back and forth, my hand ran through my hair, pulling at the ends. I checked out the front window. Nothing. No sign of her.

She'd have gotten off work almost two and a half hours ago now. I checked my phone to see if she'd texted. No notifications. I wouldn't typically be worried but for as long as I'd known her, she'd never been this late. And even if she was running late, she would have texted or called. She always updated me.

Something had to be wrong.

Pulling up my contacts, I dialed Stella.

“Wesley?”

“Hey, Stella. Emerson happen to be with you?”

“No. Why?”

My lips pressed in a thin line as I stared out the window, the rain pelting the glass. “She was supposed to be off work over two hours ago but she hasn’t come home yet.” My heart skipped a beat, my heart recognizing the way my mind spoke about this home. It felt like *our* home. No longer a temporary rental, but a place that felt permanent. A small house that quickly became a home because I got to share it with her.

I hadn’t lived under this roof for very long before Emerson started staying here, and thinking about it now, I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. I honestly wasn’t sure how long I was going to stay in Oldport when I first arrived here, but having Emerson in my life made me want to stay forever, if that’s what she wanted.

“I have her phone’s location, let me check where she is.” I heard her tapping her phone screen as I waited, anticipation building inside me, making my stomach twist. “She planning any vacations I don’t know about?”

“Where is she?” My hand was gripping the phone so hard I swore I heard something crack.

“She’s on some road at the base of Merritt Peak.”

I turned away from the window, quickly making my way into the kitchen to open the laptop sitting on the counter.

“The mountain?” I asked, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear as I googled how far that was.

“Yeah, but I thought they closed the pass in the winter?”

I cursed under my breath. “Stella, let me call you back.” Hanging up, I pulled the phone away from my ear and dialed Easton. Pressing the speaker

button, I set my phone on the counter as I grabbed a piece of paper to write the directions down. More than likely, there would be no service up the pass if I had to drive that way and I didn't want to get lost up there in this weather.

Easton answered. "Hey, what's up?"

"Are you with Emerson?" My words were rushed, too many possible scenarios swimming around in my head.

"I'm on duty."

"Where at?"

"Right now, I'm blocking off main street from the flood of rain the gutters can't keep up with."

"Can you check the Tavern, see if her car is there?"

"The restaurant? Yeah." I heard him set the phone down to put his patrol car in drive. I tapped my pen against the side of the laptop, needing to move in some capacity to attempt to keep my patience in check.

It felt like forever until he spoke again. "Her car is sitting in the parking lot at the side of the place." I heard his door open, then close, the sound of rain filling the silence of the call. A few beats later, he spoke again. "She's not in there and it looks like the place is empty. Everyone went home for the night."

I dropped the pen, grabbing the paper and folding it in half to slip it into my pocket. "She's not home, Easton."

His car door opened and closed again, the sound of pouring rain silencing. "Take a deep breath, Wes. I know you're nervous because of everything that's happened, but we'll find her."

"Stella has her phone's location; she said the phone was heading up Merritt Peak."

"That wouldn't make any sense in a storm like this."

“I know. That’s why I’m fucking worried.” I ran my hands through my hair again, my eyes roaming the kitchen countertops to double check I hadn’t missed a note from her or something.

I heard him tapping something into the computer in his car. “I’ll send some deputies that way, see if they spot her. You stay at home, Wesley. I mean it. It’s not safe to go out there with the roads like this.”

“You know I can’t just sit here. If Jett did anything..” I trailed off.

“Then we’ll find her, Wesley. I’ll call you if I hear anything.”

I hung up the phone, fighting the urge to throw it across the room. My hands were shaking, the fear of the unknown taking over my thoughts. I had no idea where she was, why she wasn’t answering her phone, or who was with her.

My mind jumped back to how Jett was acting this afternoon, almost like he was hiding something. I should have trusted my gut instincts and known something was going on.

My phone ringing pulled me out of my thoughts. I picked it up, hoping it was Emerson. Instead, it was an unknown number.

I answered, holding the phone up to my ear. “Hello?”

There was a long pause, then a deep, raspy voice spoke. “Meet us at the cabin off the highway pass up Merritt Peak.” I pulled the paper out of my pocket, writing down the address he gave me. I didn’t have to ask to know whoever it was had Emerson with them.

“Let me talk to her.”

He laughed, the sound grating my bones. “She’s not in a position to talk right now.”

I tensed, gripping the pen so hard that it snapped. “If you lay one finger on her-”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to make threats right now, boy. Come alone. I’ll know if you bring anyone.”

The call ended.

Without hesitating, I called Easton back.

“Don’t send the deputies,” I said as soon as he answered.

“What? Why?” I could hear his blinker through the phone, his windshield wipers swiping back and forth in a fast rhythm.

I explained the anonymous phone call, making sure not to leave out any details. “He gave me an address that he wants me to meet them at.”

“It could be a trap, Wesley.”

“I can’t let them hurt her. Fuck, they already could have. I’m wasting time.” I shoved the paper into my pocket, grabbing my coat and keys, and headed for the front door.

“I’m still sending the deputies, but I’ll make sure they’re discreet. They’ll stay on the highway. If they hear any gunshots or anything at all, I can’t stop them from going in there. I wouldn’t want to. You stay alive, Wesley.”

“Planning on it.” I hung up the phone, pulling open the truck door and tossing my phone on the seat. Shoving the key into the ignition and throwing it in drive, I peeled out of the driveway, heading in the direction of the girl I’d burn this whole world down for to make sure she was safe.

The moment I laid eyes on her all those weeks ago, I was a goner. I wanted her to be my equal, the person I woke up to every morning, the girl whose body and mind I got to admire day in and day out. Once this was over and she was back in my arms, I’d tell her how much she meant to me. I’d show her every damn day for the rest of my life.

Life was too damn short to leave things unsaid.

Chapter Forty Three

EMERSON

My head pounded and my stomach felt like it was turning over on itself, but I was awake. I kept my eyes closed in case there was anyone around me. I knew I wasn't still at the restaurant.

I was laying on what felt like a couch, the fabric itchy under my cheek. The musty air in the room was freezing, biting through the fabric of my still damp work clothes. I clamped my teeth together to keep from shivering.

I heard a shuffle and then a sigh. Someone was in here with me, wherever I was.

“Can't we light a fire in here, man?”

I swallowed deeply as I realized the person in here with me was Elijah. Why would my asshole boss be here?

“Can't risk the smoke drawing anyone in. No one's supposed to be up here this time of year.” My eyes flew open at the sound of Felix's voice.

“Ah, look who's finally awake.” Elijah stood from his chair in the corner, something metal glinting in his hand.

I went to sit upright but found that my hands were bound at the wrists, a zip

tie holding them together. Using both my hands, I pushed up against the couch, my head spinning. I tried to ward it off, fighting myself to keep focus. Now was not the time to pass out again.

I pulled my legs up on the couch, my wet jeans rubbing against my thighs uncomfortably. My hands between my knees and my chest, I took in my surroundings.

“Don’t be scared, smokeshow. The fun hasn’t even begun.” Felix came around the side of the couch, standing closer than Elijah was. There wasn’t much furniture in what looked to be a cabin. The structure was built out of logs of wood, the floor concrete. The door was less than ten feet from where I sat on the couch.

“Don’t call me that,” I seethed.

Felix cocked his head in an animal-like way. “Isn’t that what you’re famous for around here? Flaunting that little body of yours?”

Nausea rolled through me, bile rising in my throat just thinking of him looking at me like so many others did.

“She served Jett well,” Elijah said.

“I didn’t serve anyone!” I yelled, pressing my back against the couch as Elijah closed the distance between us. His hand shot out, light catching on whatever was in his hand. Cold metal slammed into the side of my cheek, my head snapping to the side.

Stars filled my vision as I pressed my cheek against the couch, pain erupting throughout my face. My head felt so heavy, but I had to stay awake. I couldn’t let them see me as weak if I wanted to get out of here.

Wesley would come looking. I hadn’t come home from work; he’d know something was wrong. He had to. Right now, he was my only hope. He’d been my beacon of light the past few weeks, pulling me out of the darkness

that had consumed me. I was convinced there was no way I was getting out of this alive without him.

Tasting blood in my mouth, I swiveled my neck to look up at Elijah, who's breath was coming out of his nostrils in little white bursts. The adrenaline kept the cold at bay, but it proved there was no heat source in here.

Behind Elijah, I could see snow falling outside the tiny window. We weren't in Oldport, that much was certain. It wouldn't be snowing there this early in the winter. The closest place I knew of that could have snow right now would be Merritt Peak. How long had I been unconscious? It was at least an hour and a half from Oldport without extreme weather.

He bent down in front of me, using the gun in his hand to tilt my chin up. I tried to keep the trembling at bay, refusing to let fear take over. I never wanted to feel the cold press of the barrel of a gun again in my life. I kept my eyes locked on his, hoping I didn't look as scared as I felt. "Jett never loved you. You were his little toy he used to get more clients. How's that make you feel, huh?"

A gunshot sounded and I screamed, curling my body in on itself in an effort to protect myself. Elijah's body crumpled to the floor in front of me. He didn't shoot me. I was breathing uncontrollably, my breath coming out in clouds. I couldn't keep the trembling at bay anymore.

"He can't be running his mouth when I have an agenda," Felix said casually, making his way to the chair Elijah had been sitting in just moments ago. He held the gun in his hand with such cool indifference, as if he didn't just shoot someone.

I tried to keep my eyes from straying to Elijah's body at the base of the couch. We never got along, but I never would have thought for a second his

hatred towards me went that deep. I never would have wished him dead, either.

I shouldn't feel sad for him, but I couldn't help it. If Elijah was here, it meant he aided in whatever Felix had planned, and clearly Felix didn't care about my wellbeing. I felt sorry that he went out that way, that someone so deranged just took his life without a second thought.

"He was out of control anyway, bound to snap soon. You can't trust those idiots."

Felix crossed his ankle over his knee, his arms draped over the sides of the chair in a show of relaxation. I was anything but relaxed right now.

"Get comfortable, Emerson. We've got a bit to wait."

I glared at him, not moving an inch. "Wait for what?"

"Your little knight in shining armor to show up."

I tried to keep the shock off my face. Wesley was coming, but Felix knew about it?

"Why?"

He stroked the barrel of the gun along the arm of the chair, his gaze on me. "Once he's out of the picture, you can go back to Jett."

"What makes you think for a second that I'd go back to him after all of this?" The zip ties dug into my wrists when I tried to bring my arms down, forgetting they were bound together.

Felix leaned forward in the chair, dropping his ankle and holding the gun in between his spread legs, the gun pointed at the floor. "You're the reason half this town started buying from Jett." He must've seen the confusion on my face because he kept going. "His dick got in the way of our original plan. Once you two got together, everyone wanted to buy from him. They hang out with Jett, they get to eye fuck the smokeshow."

I shook my head, my body shivering from the cold and fear. “Jett wouldn’t have knowingly let that happen.” Even though he treated me with such disregard at the end of our relationship, I wouldn’t believe that he’d use me as some sort of spectacle to up his sales and be okay with it. As much as he loved to flaunt me, he was still a jealous kind of guy. He wouldn’t have sat by and let men ogle over me purposefully.

“That’s business, baby. We’re selling top dollar in this little town. Who would’ve thought?” He threw his arms up in the air, the gun waving around. I kept my eyes trained on it. He was trigger happy and the last thing I wanted was to end up like Elijah right now.

His words dawned on me then. “What do you mean by agenda?”

“Oh, you don’t know? Your idiot father is the reason I was in prison for so many years.”

My lips parted, my mind not comprehending what he was saying. What did my dad have to do with any of this?

Felix laughed, the deep sound causing goosebumps to rise on my arms. “Did you really think running into Jett at that bar all those years ago was a coincidence? I *sent* him to find you.”

I shook my head, unable to take my eyes off him as he spoke.

“I wanted payback. Revenge for the way he backstabbed me.”

“My dad wouldn’t-”

He cut me off. “You didn’t even know him! Your bitch of a mother kicked him out. She thought keeping him away from you and your brother would keep you both safe.” He spit the word at me, making me feel anything but safe right now. “Man, was she wrong. When he double crossed me, I wanted to hurt him where it mattered most. He was always talking about you.

Showing the guys little pictures of you.” He clicked his tongue, waving the gun back and forth like it was his finger. “Big mistake.”

“But Jett couldn’t follow through with the plan,” He went on. “He’s weak. He let you get to him, let you sink your claws into him. But it worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

Did he kill him? Was my father Felix’s first stop after getting out of prison?

My mind spun with questions. I was struggling to make sense of any of this. Their original plan was to hurt me to hurt my dad. If Jett had followed through with what Felix wanted him to do in the first place, would my dad still be alive?

I had to get out of here. If Wesley truly was on the way here, he’d be walking into a trap. Felix wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger on him, he proved that already by shooting Elijah without even blinking. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to Wesley because of me.

To my right, I saw stacks of blocks wrapped in something like plastic wrap. “What is that?”

“Shipment we have to move. Doesn’t do us any good to have our stash in a spot we can’t get to in the winter.” If what he said before didn’t confirm that he was selling drugs with Jett, that definitely did.

Felix leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms behind his head, his eyes boring into me. From what I could tell, there wasn’t anything I could use as a weapon in this room. I only had my body to use.

Not allowing myself to think twice about it, I jumped up, bolting for the door.

“Fucking bitch!” Felix sprung up from his seat but I was faster, already at the door. I tried to grab the handle, my hands being bound making it difficult.

The door was already unlocked so once I got my grip, I ripped it open.

He grabbed me from the side, the gun still in his hand. It made it more difficult for him to get a proper grip on me so I twisted, slamming my knee in between his legs. It took him off guard, his hands reaching to grab his crotch on instinct.

I ran out the door, the snow already over five inches deep. The cold bit at my skin, the snow falling so thick I could barely see more than six feet in front of me. I didn't care which way I was going as I ran through the woods, trees popping up in front of me as I sprinted.

I tried to pull at the zip ties but they didn't give. The snow was over my shoes, the cold biting at my ankles. I forced myself to ignore the cold and keep running.

"You won't get far out there!" Felix yelled through the forest. His voice sounded like it was far off, but the noise could have been skewed by the snow and trees so I didn't trust it, keeping my pace.

I was sweating despite the cold, which would be dangerous at these temperatures. If I could make it to the road, I might be able to find Wesley before he headed to the cabin. The only problem was that I didn't know which way the road was.

A twig snapped behind me and a hand grabbed the back of my shirt, pulling me backwards. I yelped, my ankle catching on a root under the snow, causing me to fall backward. My head slammed into the ground, the snow not deep enough to cushion the impact.

My head swam as I saw Felix standing over me, my eyes staring into the barrel of the gun. "You won't kill me, Felix. You need me," I mumbled through the fog returning to my head from the impact.

"Just as stubborn as your father. All I have to do is hurt you to make you

quit playing games.” Before I could register what he said, he moved the barrel of the gun to point at what had to be my leg. He was going to shoot me.

I heard what I thought was shuffling, and then something knocked into Felix and the gun fired. I screamed, waiting for the pain to bloom.

Chapter Forty Four

WESLEY

I slammed into the ground on top of Felix, trying to wrestle the gun out of his hand. The snow caused the metal to slip, making it hard to get a good grip. Felix thrashed against me, landing a punch to my jaw.

I grabbed his wrist, slamming his hand into the ground, causing him to drop the gun as what had to be the bones in his hand snapped. Emerson's screamed echoed in my ears and I fucking hoped the bullet hadn't hit her.

All I wanted to do was check her, make sure she was safe, but I had to take care of Felix first.

He somehow managed to roll out from under me, the gun still buried in the snow. I jumped to my feet as he darted for Emerson, who had scrambled back, her back now pressed against the tree behind her. I could see the fear on her face as she tried to scoot away, her hands bound in front of her making it difficult. I was faster than Felix, grabbing the collar of his shirt and hauling him backwards. I slammed my fist into his face, holding him up against a tree with my other hand. Emerson's face flashing in my mind, the zip tie on her wrists, fueled me as I slammed Felix's head back against the tree.

“Wesley!” I heard Easton shout from behind me. He was crazy if he thought I was going to let Felix get away. He hurt Emerson. He laid his hands on her, possibly shot her, and all I saw was red. Rage filled my veins, my body running off the anger and adrenaline that made me want to keep beating the living hell out of Felix.

“Wesley!” he yelled again. I stopped throwing punches, keeping my other hand on Felix’s neck to hold him against the tree. I looked behind me, worried something was wrong with Emerson. “I’ve got it from here.” Easton was standing directly behind me, a gun in his hands, his uniform on. Scanning behind him, I saw four other officers, one crouched by Emerson.

I brought my eyes back to Easton, who nodded at me to let him go. I faced forward, seeing blood dripping down Felix’s face, his eyes already swelling. I hesitantly released him, taking a step back.

“Go check on her,” Easton said to me as he moved between Felix and me.

I turned around, racing to Emerson. The officer kneeling in front of her was taking off his gloves, holding her hands in one of his. I shoved between them, pulling my pocket knife out and immediately cut the zip tie. Closing the knife and shoving it back into my pocket, I held her frozen hands delicately, raking my eyes over her body to check if she was injured.

I yanked my jacket off, wrapping it around her. When I saw her eyes on me, the tears threatening to spill over, I slid my hand behind her head and gently pulled her to me. “Come here,” I whispered.

A sob broke loose the moment her body connected with mine. Her whole body trembled. She was frozen in my arms. I hooked my arm under her legs, picking her up as I stood. “I’ve got you, Em. You’re safe.”

“Stop!” I heard Easton yell. I turned Emerson away from the sound of his voice, shielding her body with mine. I looked over my shoulder to see Felix

darting for the gun in the snow. Easton drew his weapon and had it aimed at him for less than a second before the sound of the shot ricocheted through the woods. Emerson flinched in my arms and I tightened my hold on her as she curled into me, tucking her head into my chest.

Felix dropped to the ground, his head landing face first in the snow. I cradled Emerson's head to my chest as I watched blood stain the back of his shirt. It was better off this way. Anyone who put their hands on Emerson deserved nothing but the worst.

Chapter Forty Five

WESLEY

“Did he say word for word that he killed your father?” Easton asked Emerson, a notepad in his hand, pen poised above the yellow paper. He’d been standing beside her hospital bed asking questions for almost an hour.

I held her hand in mine, staring at the IV in her arm. The doctor said she had a mild case of hypothermia and a small concussion. He cleared her to leave, but Easton wanted to get the details of what happened written down before too much time passed.

I felt Emerson weakly squeeze my hand three times, our silent code for *get me the hell out of here*.

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” I interrupted, angling my head back slightly to meet Easton’s eyes from where I sat in the chair by her bed.

He nodded, slipping the paper and pen into the pocket of his coat. “Get some rest, Em. You’ve been through a lot today.”

She gave him a small smile as he walked out, his shoes echoing on the ceramic floor.

I brought my other hand up, cupping her frail fingers in both my hands. “How are you feeling?”

Her gaze moved to our hands, then up to my face. “I’m okay.”

I knew she was anything but okay right now. “I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner.” I tried to keep my eyes off her blue and purple cheek. It made me wish Felix died a slower, more excruciating death. Too many men had put their hands on her and I’d be damned if I ever let it happen again.

“Please don’t say sorry. None of this was your fault.” Her voice sounded small and weak and I fucking hated it.

They laced her drink, abducted her, and tried to use her as bait in their sick, twisted plan. I wish they would have come straight for me instead of involving Emerson. Now she was hurt, her safety put at risk, and I couldn’t help but feel like it was my fault.

I didn’t press further. We could have this conversation another time, once we were home.

In *our* home.

“We’re unpacking that duffel bag of yours when we get home.”

Her brow furrowed. “What?”

“I’ll move my stuff out of the closet so you have space. I want you to live with me, permanently.”

She was silent for a beat, her eyes roaming my face.

“Are you sure?”

A smile pulled at my lips, my thumb rubbing circles over her hand. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, darling.”

When we got home later that night, she laid in bed while I reorganized my dresser to fit the clothes from my closet, plus leaving two drawers available for her.

“I can unpack my clothes tomorrow,” she said from where she was lying on her side, watching me.

“It won’t take me long.” I picked up the bag and set it on top of the dresser. She reached her hand out, grabbing the waistband of my gray sweats and gave them a gentle tug.

I looked over my shoulder at her, her gaze full of lust and affection. *This* was the look I always wanted to see on her face. Not the fear I saw in those woods. “Come to bed, Wesley.”

I slipped my shirt off, tossing it at the hamper in the corner before crawling into bed beside her. I grabbed the comforter and pulled it over us, wrapping my arm around her. She buried her face in my chest, her breath warm on my skin.

I could stay right here forever, my girl wrapped in my arms, our bodies tangled in each other. This was enough. *She* was enough.

Her hands roamed my skin, her fingertips gliding along my chest, down my stomach, to the hem of my sweats. I cleared my throat, feeling my blood run south. “I don’t want to hurt you, Em.”

She looked up at me, her eyes pleading. “You won’t.”

“The doctor said to rest. That’s the complete opposite of resting.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want her. Trust me, I wanted to hear her breathy moans, watch her squirm as I made her unravel. But I was scared to make her injuries worse than they already were, then I’d never forgive myself.

“Then I guess you just have to do all the work.” She smirked, hooking her fingers in the waistband of my sweats.

“You’re damn hard to resist, you know that?” I sat up, positioning myself so I was situated between her legs.

She smiled, those blue eyes glistening. “I know.”

I hovered above her, my eyes glued to hers as I ran my hands under her shirt, my hands covering her stomach. Her skin was smooth against my calloused hands as I slowly slid them further up, cupping her breasts. Her lips parted when I rolled her puckered nipple between my fingers.

I pulled her shirt off, tossing it to the floor behind me. Bending down, I kissed her neck gently before trailing down to her nipple, pulling it into my mouth. When my teeth grazed her, she let out a small whimper. Flicking my tongue, I soothed the spot, then pulled back to slide her shorts down. Lifting her legs, I pulled them all the way off, along with her panties.

She bit her bottom lip as she used her foot to trail down my abdomen, not stopping until her barefoot grazed the bulge in my sweats. She applied pressure, pushing up, then down. I groaned and pushed her leg to the side, pushing my sweats off and positioning myself back between her legs.

I brushed the hair from her face and kissed her cheek gently where a bruise had formed. She was so fragile yet so strong, so determined. Regardless of what she’d been through, she was still unapologetically herself, and that’s all I ever wanted for her. To feel safe enough to let go, to be herself.

She went to reach between us but I grabbed her hand, bringing it up to the pillow beside her face. “I’m doing all the work, remember?” I intertwined our fingers as I used my other hand to line myself up with her entrance.

I pushed inside of her slowly, her pussy already wet for me. I made sure to be gentle as I buried myself in her. I watched her as she moaned, her eyes glossing over as pleasure overtook her. I thrust in and out slowly, keeping my pace steady.

She arched her back as I took her deeper, her legs spreading to allow me a better angle. With her hand still in mine, I reached back with my other hand, grabbing behind her knee and hiking her leg up against my hip. Her moans filled the room as I made love to her, worshiping her body.

As we reached the edge, our climax's synced, she yelled out my name, her grip on my hand tightening. We rode the high together, cherishing each other.

I pulled out of her, getting up to grab a warm washcloth from the bathroom. After cleaning up, I laid back down next to her, pulling her close to me. She laid her head on my chest, her hand over my stomach.

"I knew you'd find me," she whispered.

"I'll always find you, Emerson. You're safe with me."

Chapter Forty Six

EMERSON

Wesley and I were out for our daily walk on the beach that we'd been doing since I got out of the hospital a few days ago. The fresh air helped clear my head and keep the panic attacks at bay.

Even though I knew I was safe now, I was still looking over my shoulder constantly, waiting for someone to strike. Any sudden loud noises would cause me to jump, but Wesley was always there to calm my racing heart.

He was the only thing anchoring me to the here and now when my mind drifted to that cabin. To Elijah's body crumpled on the floor. To Felix chasing me through the woods.

I didn't know what would have happened if Wesley hadn't have found me when he did. He truly saved my life.

We'd been walking for about fifteen minutes when I saw Jett about thirty feet down the beach from us, sitting in the sand.

I halted in my steps, Wesley instantly darting his gaze to me, then to my line of sight. His grip on my hand tightened as his body went stiff.

"We can head back," he said, trying to keep his tone soft.

I inhaled a deep breath in an attempt to slow the drum beating in my chest.
“No. I should talk to him.”

“Emerson...” He was protective of me and didn’t want me getting hurt more than I already was. But I couldn’t bring myself to think Jett was apart of what his dad did.

I faced Wesley, taking both of his hands in mine. “Please. I need to know.” I needed the closure in order to move on with my life.

He studied me, seeing the pleading look in my eyes. “Okay. But I’m coming with you.”

Reaching up on my toes, I kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

We walked through the sand over to Jett. As we approached, he looked up, his gaze locking on mine.

“Emerson,” he said, standing up and dusting the sand off his pants.

“Hey,” I replied softly.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Em. There’s no words I can say to make up for it. I had no idea. You have to believe me.”

There was a desperation in his eyes I’d never seen before. “I do.”

He blinked, as if that shocked him. “You do?”

“Jett, I know you’ve done some pretty shitty things to me, but I don’t think you’d want me, or even Wesley, dead.” Wesley gripped my hand harder with the mention of what could have happened had he not shown up to stop Felix.

Jett’s fingers were hooked on each other in front of him as he twiddled them. “I’d never want you dead, Emerson. I’m a shitty guy, but not shitty enough to wish you weren’t on this planet.”

A wave of relief washed over me with his admission. I hadn’t realized I needed to hear the words to truly believe them.

As usual, Wesley was silent beside me as he let me take control of the

situation. I'd lost my sense of having power of my life a long time ago, and it felt like I was finally getting a piece of it back lately.

"I'm thinking of moving," Jett said.

My brows furrowed. "What? Why?"

He shrugged. "No reason for me to stick around. I think a change of scenery might be nice. Disconnect from the memories here. Maybe give rehab a shot."

Getting out of Oldport didn't sound like a bad idea, but it would be a while before I was in any position to leave. I didn't have enough money saved up to buy a house, and I didn't want Wesley to be the only one contributing to a down payment.

"I hope that works out for you," I said.

"Me too." His gaze moved to Wesley beside me. "Thank you for taking care of her."

Wesley gave him a nod. "She deserves the world."

Jett's eyes landed on me, regret shining in them. "I know. I just couldn't open my eyes enough to give it to her."

I swallowed the emotion swelling in my throat as I thought back to all the memories, the good and the bad.

My hand squeezed Wesley's three times, giving him the sign we were okay to leave. I'd said what I had to say.

"I hope where ever you end up treats you well, Jett," Wesley said.

"Me, too," Jett replied as he gnawed on his cheek. "I hope you have a nice life, Emerson. You deserve it."

I nodded. And as he walked away and the sun set, I let myself believe it.

I did deserve a nice life. It was about damn time I started living it instead of just dreaming of it.

With Wesley by my side, that finally seemed possible.

Chapter Forty Seven

EMERSON

I stared out the window of Wesley's truck, the side of my forehead leaning against the chilled window, my breath fogging up the glass. I didn't know where we were going. Wesley said he had a surprise for me and before I knew it, we were in his truck heading east.

It'd been a week since the incident, my cheek an ugly shade of yellow as the bruise faded. I was having nightmares more nights than not, the sound of a gunshot echoing in my head before I'd wake up in a cold sweat. Wesley would draw me closer to him every time I awoke from one, his arms my safe space.

Easton said they hadn't found any traces of drugs in the small cabin when they searched it. Whoever was going to move them must have done so while everything was going on outside.

The police searched through Elijah's phone, confirming he had been conspiring with Felix the past couple weeks.

Luke was keeping his mouth shut to any and all law enforcement. The police decided to launch an investigation with the possibility of whatever

drugs that were in the cabin could be distributed on a large scale.

No one in town was giving the cops much information, giving no indication that Jett was involved. Brendt, Stella, Wesley, and I all knew he was, but for my sake, I asked them to drop it. It was clear Jett was not the only one in on the operation, and with moving away, I hoped he started clean with no involvement in any of that.

Despite no one mentioning Jett's name, the police already confirmed that they were moving a portion of the drugs through Jim's Auto Body and arrested Jim and Ray on the account of distributing illegal substances under their business name.

While they haven't confirmed, I knew as much as anyone that more than half this town was in on it. I wouldn't be able to rest until they resolved this, but it could take months, if not years, to break an operation at this large of a scale.

I hadn't wanted to speak to my mom to confirm whether what Felix said was true. If my dad was involved in whatever Felix claimed he was, it could make sense why my mom didn't want him around us, but I still wasn't happy that she didn't tell me and Ross any of it.

While a part of me wanted an explanation, the other part of me wanted to let it rest. I was tired. I wanted to let that part of my life go, to stop stressing over things I couldn't change and just be content with the way things were.

Unnecessary stress wouldn't change anything.

Wesley turned off the highway onto a gravel road. The terrain was flatter where we were, the silhouette of mountains peaking up in the distance.

He parked the truck, getting out to come around to my door, opening it for me. I got out, taking in the white house in front of me. The paint was coming off in some spots, the screen on the privacy door slightly torn at the corner. A

porch wrapped around the house and a swing that resembled a twin sized bed hung from the rafters.

“What is this place?” I swiveled on my heel to face Wesley, my eye catching on movement behind him. Looking around him, I saw two horses in a fenced field watching us from where they stood. I looked back at Wesley, confusion written all over my face.

He had the biggest smile pulling at his mouth. “This is where I grew up.”

Spinning around again, I stared up at the house. I pointed to it. “Here?”

He came up next to me, nodding. “My mom called the other day, said she was moving to the city if I wanted it. All my memories with my dad are here and I thought maybe we could make our own here, too.” He scratched the back of his head, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat as he waited for my answer.

“The horses?”

“A story for another time.”

I looked between Wesley and the house, not believing it. Nothing was stopping me from saying yes. I didn't have any desire to stay in Oldport. I could still see my friends whenever I wanted, the drive wasn't too far.

“So.. What do you say?” He was eyeing me nervously when I turned to step in front of him. I slid my hands around the back of his neck, bringing my lips close to his, staring into his deep green eyes.

A smile reached my lips and I nodded. “I'd love to make new memories with you here.”

I brought my lips to his as he smiled, melting into him.

My past was wasted memories, but I'd make sure my future with Wesley Barton was one for the books.

Epilogue

WESLEY

Four Months Later...

Emerson danced around in the gravel driveway with our black lab puppy. She brought him home a few weeks ago, claiming she found him. I knew better. The girl fell in love with those big puppy eyes at the animal shelter when she helped Stella with her mother's volunteer work.

The puppy splashed in the puddles, spraying mud on Emerson. Her laugh was a sweet melody I could listen to on repeat, the sound never failing to make me smile. She wore a short white dress with brown cowgirl boots, despite the bite of cold still lingering in the air.

She came home with those boots on last week, saying she wanted to match me. I couldn't help but strip her clothes off, leaving her wearing only the boots as I made love to her. She was so damn sexy no matter what she wore, but her in those boots would be the death of me.

Don't even get me started on that girl's mind. The way she threw ideas out the moment we stepped foot in the house, deciding what paint she'd use on the living room walls, the kind of countertops she wanted in the kitchen, what

photos she wanted framed and hung. I'd give it all to her. I'd steal the damn moon for her if that's what she wanted.

I sat on the porch, watching the girl I'd fallen in love with get all muddy without a care in the world. Rocking in the old chair, I turned my attention on the screen door that was slowly falling apart.

My smile softened as I remembered when Easton and I were younger. Our dad chased us through the house, Easton and I in a fit of giggles as we ran away from him. Easton ran head first into that screen door, the screen popping off in that corner.

My one request was to keep that door how it was.

If my dad was in that house, just a screen door away, I'd tell him I was happy.

Happy with the woman I loved, for the life we would create together.

The things we went through together all those months ago proved we could get through anything. When I first ended up in that small seaside town, I was perfectly content with having no one. And then she came into my life, proving me wrong.

I was running from the life I had, not wanting to see what my life here would be like without my dad in it. But the truth was, everyone was running from things deep inside them, we just had to choose to be brave and face them head on.

Standing up, I walked over to Emerson, who was holding the puppy in her arms now. She smiled at me, out of breath from her dancing. "Sparks is tired."

Yeah, she named the dog after a sparkler.

I took him out of her arms, his eyelids blinking slowly as he tried to fight the sleep that wanted to claim him. "You sure tired him out."

She brushed her hands on her dress, the skirt skimming her thighs. “Tired me out, too.”

I held Sparks with one hand close to my chest, reaching my other hand behind me. “Too tired for these?” I pulled the sparklers out of my back pocket. Her face lit up when she saw them.

“Never!” She grabbed one from my hand. Pulling out my lighter, I lit it for her, the glow illuminating her features, just like all those months ago on that shore.

She twirled, making shapes with the sparks, the smoke trailing after her. I smiled, shaking my head as she tried to write my name in the air.

Emerson was beautiful. Divine and downright breathtaking.

I never wanted to let her go.

Despite his protests, I set Sparks down on the gravel. He circled twice before curling up in a ball, resting his chin on his tiny paws. I reached my hand back behind me again, pulling out the small box.

I wanted this woman by my side for the rest of my days. I wanted her sitting on that porch with me when we were eighty years old, watching our grandchildren splash in puddles in this same driveway. I wanted it all with her.

Coming up behind her where she was drawing hearts in the air, I knelt on one knee. Once her sparkler died out, she twisted around. “Do you have-” Her eyes landed on me and the box outstretched toward her in my hand.

“Emerson Foley,” I began. She brought her hand to her mouth, covering her o-shaped lips. “I didn’t think when I walked into that bar all those months ago that you’d be the girl I woke up to every morning. I also didn’t think we’d go through everything we did, but here we are.” I paused, staring up into those sea blue eyes. “I’ll be by your side in this world, no matter what’s

thrown at us. We can't control what happens in this life, Emerson, but we can choose how we want to perceive the hand we're dealt. I choose to appreciate the moments that led up to now, because going through all of it brought me to you. I wouldn't trade a single moment of it. Please make me the happiest man and marry me."

Her eyes flicked from me, back to the ring, and then back to me again. She nodded over and over again, tears brimming her eyes.

"Words, darling."

"Yes, Wesley. Yes." My smile grew as she threw her arms around my neck, almost knocking me over.

"I gotta put it on you, honey."

"Shoot, you're right." She let go, pulling away and holding her left hand out.

I took the ring out of the box, closing it and putting it back in my pocket. I held her delicate fingers in mine, slipping the ring on her finger. She stared down at it, tears spilling over her cheeks as she smiled.

"I'm so head over heels in love with you, Emerson."

Bringing her eyes back to me, she grinned from ear to ear. "I love you too, Wesley Barton."

THE END

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