

It's a swing and a kiss...

A SWEET SPOT FOR

Love



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALIYAH BURKE

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*To Jean,
I miss you. Run free!*

Prologue

The noise from Rock in the Green echoed louder than normal in his head. Linc blew out a breath. He had other things on his mind right now, but Tully needed him. Hell, he needed Tully and Mitchell as well. His best friends.

Demons nipped at the recesses of his mind, clamoring like a pack of wolves to be free. He shoved them down. This was about helping Tully get out of the mood that had swamped him since the blowup between him and Dawson Shay, the woman Tully had fallen in love with.

Linc strode over the hardwood floor, lips twitching as he watched the blue and green flashing lights ricochet around the room.

The crowd was raucous and he smiled as he dodged dancers and people yelling to hold conversations. Spotting his friends, he strolled over to them, clapping each on the shoulder.

“Not hard to find two of the ugliest mugs in here.”

Mitchell shook his head and tipped up his mug of beer. “You fucking adore me, so shut up.”

Tully grunted. Over his head, Linc shared a look with Mitchell. Their friend wasn't in a good place.

Perhaps a bar isn't the best place for him to be. It wouldn't be for Linc, but he wasn't paying attention to *his* issues.

As one, the three of them moved to a table in the rear. He nodded at people he recognized. Without speaking, he and Mitchell sat on either side of Tully. They waited. There wasn't any conversation between the three of them. Linc didn't push. Tully would speak when he was ready. Not more than five minutes had passed before Tully heaved out a groan then launched into a frustrated and dejected tirade.

Listening to Tully gripe about the woman he was head over heels for, Linc drained the rest of his drink. Mitchell glanced at him and jerked his chin at the empty mugs on the table. Without a word, Linc rose and went to the bar.

As he waited for their drinks, he scanned this side of the bar, his breath sharpening when he spied Dawson Shay sitting with her group of friends. She was a beautiful woman and he could see the spark that Tully never shut up about. Her personality just pulled people to her.

The women were laughing and enjoying their time.

“Here you go, Linc.”

“Thanks, Thad. Put it on my tab, please.” He reached for the six mugs of beer.

“You got it, boss.” A two-fingered salute and Thad moved down to help the next person at the bar.

Making sure he had good grips on the handles, he lifted them, three in each hand. He took the longer way around and opted to pass closer to Dawson and her group. He knew all of them, except one—Emma Henricksen.

She sat perched on a tall bar chair, her hair drawn away from her heart-shaped face in a French braid. Compared to most of the other women, her makeup was light.

God, she’s stunning.

He struggled to ignore the pull to her. Hell, he longed to put the drinks down and sink his fingers in her hair, tug it free, and let those strands fall over his skin.

Keep it together, Linc.

“Can we talk about your love life for a while?” Flora pointed to Emma, voice pitched to carry over the din of the gathered crowd.

Emma smiled as she shook her head. “Single mom. I don’t have a love life. What I have is an overactive imagination and a large supply of batteries.”

Holy fuck.

The floor opened beneath his feet and he nearly hit his knees. Years of playing baseball was the only thing that saved him from falling on his face. He slowed, took deep breaths, and allowed his gaze to trace over Emma’s profile. Gently.

Tenderly.

Her features were soft and his fingers itched to trace them. Swallowing the huge lump in his throat, he continued on without stopping.

I'm going to spend all night thinking about her pleasuring herself with a vibrator. Emma, Jesus woman, you're killing me.

He and his friends stayed at the bar for a while until Tully had had enough. Linc tossed some money down to cover their tab and they headed to the door. His gaze skimmed those dancing and he groaned again when he spied Emma in the middle of her friends, arms up as she danced with Dawson and the others. Linc bit his cheek, keeping his moan contained.

“Not the time or place.” Mitchell’s low tone snapped Linc from his own personal fantasy.

Snapping his focus back to Tully, he caught his response. “It’s public.”

Stepping in front of his friend, he held his angry gaze. “And you’ve been drinking.”

Thoughts of Emma, carefree and stunning, followed him home. Thoughts of her kept him awake until he brought himself to release later that night.

Chapter One

“Your meeting is in ten minutes, Mr. Conner. Mr. Stevenson said he will call you then.” Franklin “Linc” Conner paused midstride and leaned to peer at the woman at her desk. She stared at him as she fiddled with the mug by her right hand. The air held a hint of the lemon cleaner that had been used on the floors at the midday cleaning.

“Linc is fine, Miss Yander.” He didn’t want the center to become a place of strict formality. Respect? Definitely. But in the end, this was a community center, not a corporate office.

Cynthia Yander, the tiny brunette, blushed and by some miracle he kept the exasperation from showing on his expression. He truly needed to get himself an assistant who didn’t care who he was or what his name meant to those in the sports world. Not a young girl from high school or some starry-eyed woman who thought that by being here she would garner additional “benefits” from working so closely with him. The last thing he needed right now was any complications. The center had to be his main focus.

Was. Was his main focus.

“I’ll try to remember.”

They’d been officially open for more than a month.

Hands in his pockets, he gave her a slight smile and continued down the hall. The meeting wasn’t as important to him as making sure the kids were safe, learning, and having fun. And yet, in another aspect, it was just as important. The center needed funds to keep running. Not that he was strapped for money, because he wasn’t. However, he wasn’t foolish enough to ignore that investors could provide more options and opportunities.

He peeked in the rooms with current activities and smiled at the hunger in the expressions of those gathered. He’d insisted on having a computer room that kids could utilize if they didn’t have access at home and tutors to assist with homework.

The center offered sports, of course, but he didn't leave the arts out—painting, music, and more. In his mind, these kids didn't have enough options for their futures and he was trying to do more.

Currently, he was recruiting high school students to help. They could use the money and the work would teach them to help others and mold them into better team players for whatever they wanted to do after high school.

He paused at the gym doors to glance inside and couldn't stop the grin at the sight of his best friend, Mitchell Anderson, taking on a team of middle schoolers in a rousing game of basketball. The man had played professionally and had no problem giving back as well. Neither of his friends did.

The kids were running Mitchell well, making him work. The gym had plenty of spectators cheering them on. Mitchell was going to be busy for a while. His friend glanced up in his direction and gave him a brief nod. Even not being on the court in a professional capacity any longer, there was no denying the man's skill.

With a quick check of the time, he headed out to the backfield. The blue sky above was dotted with a few white fluffy clouds and some soaring birds and the day was beautiful. The gentle breeze brought with it the clean mountain air. Beyond the batting cages there was a football field with a track, as well as a baseball field.

The track had some runners on it but what caught his attention was the young girl hanging out, practically spying on the kids in the batting cages.

He'd seen her a few times but wasn't sure who she was.

His phone rang and he touched his left ear to accept the call. "Mr. Stevenson, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me."

"My pleasure."

The man's booming Texas twang filled his ears. Linc could picture him with a large white Stetson on his head as the man rocked in his highbacked leather chair. Suit smooth and devoid

of any and all wrinkles. One of those bolo neckties on. Handlebar moustache? No, probably a full one.

The man continued, “I looked over your proposal and am impressed. Whoever wrote it outlined the key points with clarity.”

Linc bristled but didn’t respond. He was used to people assuming he had no brain because he played sports and because he wasn’t white. He swung his gaze to the girl again. She was mimicking the batters—their stances, how they held the bat. All of it.

Impressive.

Unfortunately, also concerning, ’cause he didn’t see any adult or older child with her. His protective instincts kicked in.

“My best man did it.”

“I am extremely interested in coming out for a visit to see your place.”

What the fuck? He stumbled over his feet and quickly straightened up, glancing around to see if anyone had seen. Nope. He was in the clear.

“You want to come here?” He’d not made any contingencies for that scenario.

“Yes. My wife and I are coming. I’ve made reservations at your town’s hotel. We can do business face-to-face, like I prefer. Never been a fan of doing it this way, you know, over the phone. I need to look a man in the eye and shake his hand.”

Well, shit. “I’ll make sure I have some time set aside if you can send me your itinerary when you’re in town.”

He laughed. “Wonderful. Can’t wait to watch you with the kids.”

“Yes, sir.”

Despite his worry and concern for the visit, he continued to watch the girl. She didn’t appear to be out of sorts, just shy, like a lot of the children who came to the center. That was one

of the reasons he'd started it. To help girls like her—and boys—find friends. Get a network of those they could trust around them.

“Like I mentioned, I’m bringing my wife. I do value commitment...hadn’t heard you were married, but you got a little lady? Might be good...meet, what do you think?”

“Absolutely. Sounds like a great idea,” Linc said, without thought, as the girl swung her imaginary bat and turned a complete circle. His lips twitched as he wholeheartedly approved of her enthusiasm. He’d not heard at all what the man had said. Normally focused during a call like this, today he was distracted.

She had spunk, that was certain. With a little bit of guidance, this girl would be well on her way to playing ball. Assuming she could handle the ball flying at her head. It wasn’t something everyone took to. Hell, boy or girl, you had to have a certain mettle to not flinch at a ball careening toward your face.

“Wonderful, I do value commitment. See you then.”

“Bye, Mr. Stevenson.” He ended the call as he headed in her direction.

He wanted the kids supervised so *nothing* could happen to them, knowing firsthand how it could, even in Smalltown, USA. The fact that no one seemed to know this girl was out here alone didn’t sit well with him.

“Hey,” he said to her, pausing a few feet away. Linc didn’t want to freak her out. He wasn’t a small man and she didn’t know him. At least he didn’t think she did.

She spun toward him, eyes wide, and he was struck by the uniqueness of her gaze. Green with flecks of a fiery hue that snagged him.

“I’m Linc.” He touched his hand to his chest.

She nodded but still didn’t speak. Her high pigtails moved in time with her nod.

“Did you want to go down to the cages—bat some balls?”

Her gaze moved over him a few times before landing ever so briefly on the practice, then returned to him. All she gave him was a shoulder shrug.

“You do know that you’re allowed to participate, if you want to, right?” He hoped that no one was being made to feel excluded, because that was *not* what he wanted to create here.

I won’t fucking stand for it.

Another shoulder shrug.

“I’d prefer you be where someone can see you and keep an eye on you. How about you sit with me over there and we can watch it together, if you don’t want to take any swings?”

She rubbed her shoe into the ground and he hid his smile. Her checkered jeans and black shirt just added to the adorable vibe. He also admired her caution.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing to the larger gathering of children.

The quiet child didn’t say a single thing to him but she headed in the direction he’d pointed at, keeping some distance between them. As they strode into view, a few kids called out greetings to him, but only one said anything to the girl.

“Hey, Greer.” A young boy waved at her, showing off his missing tooth.

Her responding wave wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic but it was something, and now he had a name.

“She would like to bat as well.” Holding the gaze of one of the older boys, Linc arched an eyebrow at him.

“Of course. She can bat after Howard finishes his turn. Karly can get you outfitted with a bat and helmet, Greer.” Brandon was the captain of the high school baseball team, and in exchange for some additional time on the field and Linc’s advice, he was working with Linc and the kids. It was paying off. The young man had grown and improved his team-handling skills as well as his attitude.

With a nod of thanks, Linc stepped back and watched as Brandon got everyone working as a smooth unit—issuing

orders like it was second nature to him.

After high-fiving some of the kids hanging around, Linc waited to watch Greer.

Karly helped her with the stance and how to choke up on the bat. His heart swelled with pride. This entire place was his baby and he'd poured a lot into it but needed more to implement the other things he wanted to do. But baseball, well, that was his sport.

He perked up at the second swing from Greer. He hadn't been wrong and she had no problem with the ball coming toward her head. This wasn't T-ball. They were getting low slow balls lobbed in their direction. She had raw talent and he thought about the baseball team they would be starting soon. Perhaps she would like to be part of that.

His phone rang and he touched his ear once more to answer. "Linc."

"Mr. Conner, there is someone here asking for you. A Mr. Harper."

"I'll be right in." Mr. Harper was one of the men he'd approached about being an investor, but the man hadn't wanted to be involved. Despite the fact his son was here almost every day, utilizing the facility.

Do not punish the son for the sins of the father.

His own father's words rang in his mind and he took a deep breath as he thanked Miss Yander and ended the call. With a final glance in Greer's direction, he caught Brandon's gaze and gave a pointed look at the little girl so he would know to keep an eye on her. Then he returned to the main building.

Mr. Harper was a dour-faced man who loved to use his family's money to get what he wanted in town. When Linc had been growing up, the man had never failed to try and make him feel like less because of who he was. For no other reason than because his father hadn't had tons of money and Linc had worn a lot of secondhand clothes.

Amazing what I will overlook to make sure my center has what it needs.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Harper. You wished to see me? How can I be of assistance?”

“I want to talk to you about the baseball team.”

“The high school team?” He shook his head. “I can’t help you because I have nothing to do with that.” He had made sure he wouldn’t have anything to do with the school team. He had complete faith in the coach, the same man who had gotten him well on his way to the majors.

The man crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. “I heard you were starting some teams for the center.”

“We are. By age grouping.” The center was growing fast and getting in people from other towns. He had to do what he could to make it fair to those playing.

“I want Matt as the captain of his age group.”

Linc paused and tried to control the anger that surged through him like a living flame. Tried. It didn’t spill free but he sure as hell wasn’t in a good headspace now.

“Are you walking into *my* center and demanding what *I* do?” He crossed his arms and looked down at the man in front of him. When he’d been small, Mr. Harper had come off as an imposing man. Not so anymore. Linc towered over him by more than a few inches and what used to be muscle on Mr. Harper was now pudge. “That’s not how things work here. The boy or girl who is honored enough to wear the title Captain is picked by their teammates, not me.”

“He deserves this.” The man glared up at him.

“I don’t care what *you* think he deserves, Mr. Harper, that’s not how I run things. *Everyone* has a fair shot.”

A scoff. “Is this because I wouldn’t invest in your business? Or because of things when you were growing up?”

Across the room, he spied Mitchell step into view, toweling off his face. His best friend gave him a raised eyebrow and he responded with a minute head shake. He was okay, didn’t need the man to come back him up. Even if Mitchell would be right there, if necessary.

“Neither of those things have anything to do with this, Mr. Harper. Unlike you, I don’t hold grudges. I asked you about an investment opportunity and you declined. It’s your money and your right to do what you want with it. I didn’t want your reasons then and I don’t care about them now. My reason for doing what I am doing is because that’s how things are done here. This place is about *equality* for all the children who step through the door. Not just for those whose parents think they can *buy* them a position. Good day.”

Walking off before he punched the fucker, he went across the floor to Mitchell.

“How’s it going?” Mitchell draped the towel around his neck before tunneling his fingers through unruly blond hair.

“Coming along. How was the game?”

The former pro player groaned. “I think I’m getting old.”

Linc laughed and smacked him on the back. “You are.”

That earned him a glare. “Just as old as you are.”

“Yeah, but my bones aren’t creaking like yours.”

He grunted. “Don’t remind me. You sure you’re okay? Mr. Harper doesn’t seem happy.”

Linc rolled his eyes. “He’s not. He wants me to just *give* his son the captain position on the baseball team we’re putting together.”

Mitchell snorted then smirked. “Does he *not* know how you operate?”

A slow grin filled Linc’s face. “He does now.”

Greer came in with the other children and he watched her smile and run over to the wall where he saw Dawson Shay—fiancée to his other best friend Tully Faulkner—talking to another parent. Dawson and Tully, who used to play professional hockey, got engaged recently after a rough start to their relationship.

“Emma.” The name escaped him on a breath. It had been six months since he’d seen Emma at the bar and heard about her

overactive imagination.

“What’s that now?” Mitchell canted his head to the side, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Greer,” Linc said, clearing his throat, grateful for his darker skin. “I couldn’t remember where I’d seen her before but when she went to Dawson, I remembered she was Emma’s daughter.”

“Right,” Mitch drawled out, more than simple disbelief in that single word. “That’s why you said Emma’s name on that low, drawn-out breath.” He clapped him on the back. “Can’t wait until Tully finds out about this.” He wagged a finger. “Almost as good as Tully with the throaty sigh. I think I just heard yours.”

Shit. Mitchell loved to gossip and no amount of bribery could stop him. Because he was grinning like the fucking Cheshire cat.

He was fucked.

...

Emma rubbed the stiffness out of her lower back, biting her lip to stop the moan of pain from escaping. She needed a new job.

Greer bounced into the room, fresh from her shower, grinning from ear to ear. Like a little mountain goat, her daughter clambered up into the chair that was really too high for her.

“I batted today, Mommy.”

“You batted? At the community center?”

Greer nodded with such enthusiasm Emma wondered if she would slide off the chair.

“Even when it was pitched to me.” A wider grin. “I love baseball.”

Three words that made all of her own pain vanish as she moved to slip into the chair nearest her daughter. Greer didn’t *love* anything. Her daughter was one of the most withdrawn

and quiet kids she'd ever met. She liked things but never had she heard her daughter say she *loved* anything. And the fact she loved having something tossed in the direction of her head, well, that was proof that a child didn't solely take after the one who raised them. Because for her, *that* would not be a fun pastime. She loved watching baseball, okay, one player in particular. Had since high school. However, she had no desire to play the game.

"You do?"

Greer nodded before blowing some of her wet hair out of her face. Emma took the hint and rose for the brush. Moments later they'd moved, and her daughter sat cross-legged on the couch in front of her as Emma combed out her hair.

"What do you love about baseball, Greer?"

"The numbers of it. And it's fun."

Emma swallowed as she tried to figure out who this person was and what had happened to her quiet daughter. Not that she wasn't thrilled to know that she'd found something that called to her. Emma wanted her out and living. Making friends. Having a wonderful time in school. And after school.

Everything Emma herself hadn't had.

She hadn't even graduated high school. She pushed her own maudlin thoughts away. This wasn't about her. It was about Greer.

"The numbers of it?"

Greer nodded, her hair bouncing. "When I look, I see angles and stuff."

Oh God, her daughter was a freaking genius and she was woefully unprepared. Angles? She could see a ninety degree one sometimes but that was about it. She couldn't tell you the difference between an acute and an obtuse angle. If those were the correct names for them.

High school hadn't been easy or fun for her. Her lone bright spot had been Paul Lummin. He was a couple of years ahead of her in school, and she'd been thrilled when he'd begun to

pay attention to her—the frumpy overweight unpopular girl. A short-lived joy when she'd ended up pregnant and he had then wanted nothing to do with her, saying a child would ruin his future and he—or rather his parents—had offered to pay for the abortion.

Emma had refused to abort *her* baby. She alone faced the wrath of her father. Refused him when he too wanted her to get rid of her unborn child. She alone struggled to work odd jobs after dropping out of school to bring in more money.

A tremor wracked Emma and she took several deep breaths. Now wasn't the time to get lost in painful memories.

“Hold still, baby,” she murmured as she began braiding Greer's hair for her bedtime.

Over her daughter's slim shoulder, Emma watched as the little girl wrung her hands together, doing her best not to move from her spot. The tell was a big one. She was nervous about something.

“What's going on, Greer?”

She'd tried to make sure that her daughter knew she could come to her about anything.

“I was asked today if I wanted to join the baseball team that's going to be put together. They'll have a few, grouped by ages.”

The longest sentence she'd heard from her daughter in, well, ever. Tears burned her eyes as she realized how beneficial the center had been for her child, even after one day. No way would Greer have even stopped to talk with someone. She would have been in a corner reading, keeping to herself. Alone.

Emma never wanted her daughter to feel such a way. Whatever it took, she was willing to do.

Mind already calculating how much more this was going to cost her, she waited.

“Can I play?”

She worked hard to blink away her tears. Once Emma was

sure she had no lingering traces of them, she tipped her daughter's head with a gentle tug so she could look at her.

“That’s what you want to do this summer? Play baseball?”

“More than anything, Mama. I did batting practice and I’m really good. Mr. Conner said I was. And he asked me if I wanted to play on the team.”

Greer repositioned her head so Emma could finish her hair. The scent of her strawberry conditioner filled the air.

Heat slicked through her at the simple mention of the man’s name.

Franklin Conner.

Linc.

Former professional player who finished up his career playing third base for the Pennsylvania Dutchmen when he’d been sidelined by an arm injury. He’d come home, got better, but never returned to the pros. She had her assumptions as to why and she figured he wasn’t physically able or willing to put his body through the rigors of playing professionally again.

I think he could do it, though. Cripes, that man doesn’t have anything soft on him. Obviously, he keeps himself in shape.

Not that she’d followed his career or anything.

Same as not like she’d had a hell of a crush on him in school and after. Man was the star player in every single one of her fantasies.

Lying to myself as I braid my daughter’s hair.

And hell, he probably didn’t even know her name.

Though, because Dawson, her tenant and friend, dated Linc’s best friend, Tully, he might know who she was. Now. She’d definitely not registered on his radar in school.

Pushing any and all sexual thoughts away of a man who was so far out of her league it wasn’t even funny, she finished her daughter’s hair and kissed her cheek. “Let me talk to him and see what it would mean. I’ll do my best, Greer, but I have to work as well, so I need to make sure I can get you there and

home, okay?"

Greer bounded up, faced her, and flashed a brilliant smile before it faded. Those amazing eyes of hers dimmed as she reached out and cupped Emma's cheeks, her slender face tipped to the left.

"I don't have to play, Mama. I can spend the summer at home so it's easier on you."

God, she was the worst mother ever. Emma swore she would find a way to make this work. The rare smiles like she'd gotten from her daughter tonight were worth whatever hell her boss was going to put her through when he found out she wasn't going to be at his beck and call twenty-four seven anymore.

If he lets me keep the job.

"Let me talk to Mr. Conner and we'll see."

She had to give Greer credit. She tried to smile again but Emma knew her daughter had resigned herself to not playing.

"Night, Mama." She walked off, head down, feet scuffing the worn, dingy carpet and shredding the last bit of hope Emma had that she was doing good raising her daughter alone. Not like she had a choice. But the little girl was her world.

Next morning, she had Greer up, dressed, and fed early. They were going to the center today and she had a few other things to do before then.

The community center was already busy by the time they walked through the doors. Kids streamed in and out, talking and laughing with one another as their feet slapped on the tile floor.

Greer's hand firmly in hers as they walked inside, she paused at the front counter where three young adults were working. One young man gave her a smile as he walked toward them.

"Good morning." His gaze dipped down to Greer. "Hey, Greer. You gonna play baseball with us today?"

"Yes." Her daughter bounced on her toes. Her excitement

pulsed in the air around her.

If I wasn't seeing this for myself, I wouldn't believe this was my own daughter. Pride pushed through her and she tried to hide the joyful tears threatening to fall.

His smile was kind as he dipped his head. "Tell me you remember my name."

A slight pause and Greer wrinkled her nose. "Sammy." She punctuated that one word with a nod.

He tapped his nose. "Spot on. And what position do I play?"

"Third base. Batting average two-ten." This time there was no hesitation.

Sammy flushed and shook his head. "That's going to change."

Her daughter nodded, eyes wide and actually locked on the stare of the male she spoke with. Heck, she didn't keep a lot of eye contact with her own mother. This was incredible. Shocking. Emma was more than impressed.

Have I said I wouldn't believe this if I wasn't standing here? I am standing here and I'm not sure I do.

Emma watched Greer, astonished by the change that had come over her. So long to the quiet, reserved child. This one bubbled with effervescence.

Greer was the size of someone a few years younger—smaller than most in her age group and quieter than all. Emma had wondered for a while if a lack of decent food and sleep had resulted in her child being developmentally slow. But seeing this side of her cracked her heart wide open.

"Great. I can't wait to see you bat. I heard you took all of Brandon's pitches after I left." He pointed over her shoulder toward a set of doors at the end of the hallway. "They're out at the field now, doing some warmups. You should get going so you can get stretched out as well."

"Mama?"

Emma bent and brushed a kiss along her daughter's cheek,

fighting the urge to draw her close and burrow her face against her, just holding on to that smell of innocence. “Go.”

Greer bolted.

“Greer?” Emma called out.

Her daughter skidded to a stop and looked over her shoulder.

“Have fun.”

“Bye, Mama.” She was out the doors in a flash.

No way could she deny her this chance to play. Attention returned to the young man in front of her, she smoothed her hands down her shirt.

“Does Mr. Conner have a moment? If he’s here?”

“He’s out at the baseball field.”

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Same direction my daughter bolted?”

Sammy smiled and nodded, his braids moving with the motion. “You got it.”

“Thank you.”

Her shoes squeaked on the floor as she walked to the far doors and she paused for a moment before heading out. Despite this center having been open for months now, she’d not really done much exploring. But, damn, it was impressive.

The facilities were better than those at the school. She knew that because she was at the school fairly often. It was sad how often she was in the building trying to get the teachers to realize that Greer wasn’t dumb because she didn’t speak up a lot, if ever. And having heard her talking about angles and numbers, she was thinking they were right and she needed to be tested. She scanned the football field and the guys running on the track around it. Slicing her gaze to the left, she found the baseball field and walked in that direction. Laughter filled the air, combined with the sound of the birds in the surrounding trees.

Several groups of kids moved around the field. She found

Greer running in the last group.

The protective mother in her wanted to scream they shouldn't make the smaller kids feel bad about not being able to keep up, but as she stood watching, *he* moved between the groups with an ease she envied, talking and encouraging each group to keep going.

Emma realized she'd misunderstood what was going on. It wasn't a free-for-all where kids were trying to race one another, making the smallest ones last. They were far better organized—grouped together by age or maybe size.

These must be the teams he'll be making. So he's keeping them together. Bonding.

A walk around the field caused her to be out of breath and sweaty. She wasn't in good shape. Then again, maybe it was the man who was putting her out of breath.

Franklin “Linc” Conner was nothing less than a work of art. He ran shirtless, as did a bunch of the guys, but she couldn't tear her gaze from *him*. His dark skin shone with sweat and his muscles rippled as he moved. His longer hair continually fell in his eyes but he didn't seem to mind.

Her fingers itched to touch him, push the hair back and...
Oh yeah, my batteries will be getting a workout tonight.

Gut clenching when his gaze locked on her, she gripped the chain-link barrier that had been put up to protect people behind the plate. Emma didn't move.

Linc lengthened his stride, slowing by the lead group and speaking to them. As he headed across the field to her, picking up speed, she noticed one of the older children, a tall redheaded young woman, drop back to run with the smallest group.

The mother in her approved of how everyone was watched over.

She licked her lips the closer he came and whimpered, grateful that she was alone and he couldn't hear it. As he approached, he planted large hands on his waist, bringing even more attention to both the power in his arms as well as the

eight pack he had. *Seriously? Eight?* Weren't those reserved for the swoony heroes in romance novels and photoshopped athletes on the covers of magazines? Those indentations above his pants—what was it called, an Adonis belt?

Holy hell. Were men really made like that?

And since when had forearms become sexy? She was officially into arm porn now.

Touching. Yes, yes, yes. She longed to do that.

Unfortunately, it also reminded her how out of his league she was.

His gaze lingered on her face before it dropped and roved over her body before returning to her eyes.

“Emma.”

Good God, he knows my name. Her legs quivered and for a brief moment she wished everything was different.

“Mr. Conner.”

One side of his mouth quirked up, showing her a dimple, and her ovaries imploded, just on principle.

“Linc, please. Mr. Conner is my father.” He wiped the back of his hand over his forehead, dragging her eyes to one of the tattoos on his biceps. The woven band of feathers was unique and she really wanted to take a closer look. “I don't often have parents out here watching us warm up.”

“Really? I would think there would be a lot of moms watching you run shirtless.”

He grinned at her as he came closer.

Holy shit. I said that out loud.

Heat swamped her face, and she was pretty sure she was as red as a tomato.

“I'm so sorry,” she babbled. “That was unprofessional and inappropriate.” She held out her hand. “I'm Emma Henricksen and I could use a few moments of your time, Mr. Conner, if you don't mind?”

He took her hand and she locked her knees at the shock that rocked through her with the simple contact. She should have used her left hand, propriety be damned, because that way she could have held onto the chain link with her right and not risked falling down, because her gelatin knees suddenly decided they no longer wished to support her.

“Emma. And we’ve been over this.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “Linc.”

She gulped and he still held her gaze.

“Try it,” he encouraged.

What the heck was he telling her to try, because she was thinking something that only happened in dreams.

“Open up and say it.”

I want you? Wait, no, that wasn't right. Take me? No, pretty sure that shouldn't come out of my mouth.

“Linc.”

There. Got it.

Who knew sweat on a man could smell this good?

His lips twitched. “Emma.”

Goose bumps popped along her skin as she tugged on her hand. He released her, then walked to where a pile of towels and shirts were strewn about.

He drew on his shirt after wiping off the sweat, then moved to her side.

Lucky shirt.

“What is it that I can do for you, Emma?”

“Take that shirt back off.”

His black eyes gleamed and sparked with trouble.

“Pretty sure we would be starting rumors if I did that.” A wink. “Ask me later when we have no children around and I’ll be happy to.”

Yes, it was official. She couldn’t control her mouth. *Shoot*

me now.

“What do you want to talk about?” Linc changed the subject.

She prayed she could do this without further embarrassing herself.

Chapter Two

Linc stared at the woman in front of him. Tully had said she'd gone to school with them but had been a few years behind them. He didn't remember her. Emma currently rented an apartment to Dawson, Tully's woman, so he knew *of* her, but didn't *know* her.

More of a pity. He was completely intrigued by her and had been ever since he'd walked behind her and her friends that night at the bar. There was something about Emma that called to his protective side. A *lot* of things about this woman that called to his sexual side. It was a fucking shame she had to rely on a fake device to get off. He would love to help.

She was built like a woman should be—all curves and softness.

Linc realized she was talking and he'd lost track of the conversation because he'd been thinking about her and what treasures she was hiding beneath her clothing.

“One moment, please.”

He walked toward the field and the older kids, taking deep centering breaths, needing a moment. He got them set up for practice and watched as another adult walked out. With a nod to Marv, he returned to Emma, who was doing a bang-up job of staring directly at her daughter.

“Let's go to my office and talk about this.” A shrug. “Sorry, I tend to get distracted out here.”

“That's okay. I'm sure you have a thousand other things to do.”

He gripped her arm, halting her, completely serious for a moment. “The parents of the children who come to the center are important to me, Emma. And I need to know how I can best help, but I have to make sure I'm able to give you my full attention.” Sparks shot through his palm and careened up his arm before spreading out through the rest of his body.

That wasn't part of the plan.

Linc noticed that as soon as they began walking, she sidled away from his touch. He bit back a low growl of irritation. Was he sweaty? Sure, but she'd not minded before. Maybe she just wanted to lust after him without anyone knowing she was. He wasn't like Tully or Mitchell—All-American athletes with their looks. He had the athlete part down, for sure. But that's where the similarity ended.

He walked her around to the front, waiting to see if she would comment on not going through the door she'd probably taken to get out to the field. But she didn't say a word and kept her head down.

At his office, he pushed the door almost closed but didn't latch it. Then he walked to his chair. Making her more uncomfortable wasn't at all on his list. "Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you." Spectacularly prim and proper.

Unbidden, a thought flashed through his mind of her being anything but that. Hair down around her face that was flushed with desire and sweat because of what...

Door. Slammed.

Not the time or place.

"Have a seat."

Her smile was fleeting. He was confused. *Where's the woman who was so bold outside?*

"I was asking about baseball for Greer."

He sat once she did. A large smile filled his face. "She's incredible. I hope she'll be able to play with us this year."

"That's what I'd like to talk to you about."

Linc leaned forward. "I'm listening."

"I don't have a lot of money." Her face flushed and he realized she was risking her own pride for her daughter. Admiration grew for her. He knew how his father had struggled as a single father. "I need to know up front how much this will cost and how much participation will be

required from me. I don't get a lot of time off."

She was almost a statue. Almost. He could see the minute twitches of her shoulder which led him to believe she was wringing her fingers. However, unless he looked over the edge of the desk, he couldn't be positive.

And truth be told, if he pushed up to look over the desk, it wouldn't be to see her fingers. It would be to see if her lips were as soft as they appeared.

"First, this is a community center. We don't require payment. This is a place for children to be part of something that is fun and keeps them safe." God, he wanted to reach over the desk and shake her. Did she really think so little of him that if she wasn't at his beck and call she wouldn't be allowed to do something that meant so much to her daughter?

Emma blinked and stared over the table at him. And she waited.

Linc looked at this woman and, not for the first time, felt stirrings of desire. Her long brown ponytail begged his fingers to grip it, then bend her head while he plundered her mouth. He longed to shove up that pale pink shirt which only highlighted her freckle-dotted peach-hued skin. Did she have freckles all over? She had curves and he was a large man, not to mention one who appreciated a woman with the dips and swells this female had. His cock stiffened and he shifted in his chair. This was *not* the time for that.

"Secondly," he said, desperate to get his mind on track and off the X-rated freefall, "you're not *required* to participate in anything. Do we like for parents to be there for the games? Is it helpful when they volunteer their time? Of course, but it's not a prerequisite or anything of that nature."

Still, she didn't say a word, just watched him with blue eyes he didn't mind so much being on him.

God, something is wrong with me.

"I know we don't know each other very well, Emma. Can I call you Emma?" He wanted to call her Emma. Sure, he'd done so outside, but he hadn't asked if it bothered her.

“Of course you may.”

“Good.” He flashed a grin, pleased when a flush scampered up her fair skin. “I didn’t want to have to be formal with you. So, *Emma*.” Yep, there went more heat in her cheeks. “Surely you know that I wouldn’t do anything to make this more difficult for you. You’re friends with Dawson, who just happens to be the light of my man Tully’s life. You realize that you have babysitters for Greer if you need them. You’re practically family.”

He had to say *practically* because the thoughts he was having of this woman no way belonged in the same stratosphere as someone referred to as family—unless he could call her his wife.

“I don’t want to be a burden and I know this place’s attendance is growing. I see so many happy children coming in and out of the doors while you’re open, I can’t take advantage.”

Linc respected the hell out of her for that statement. “How about this. You let Greer play with us and you give us what time you can. I know she’d love to have you in the stands watching her play.”

Concern flickered over Emma’s face before she could mask it. “Will she get hurt?”

He wasn’t going to lie to her. “With anything, including sports, there is *always* a chance of an injury. I would love to tell you that no, she won’t, but that would be a lie, Emma, and I’m not going to do that to you. I will do my best to keep her and everyone else safe, but there is a chance.”

“And a waiver to sign?”

He nodded, reaching down to his left and pulling open a drawer. Frowning, he slid his chair back and dug through the drawer. Still not locating what he searched for, he muttered under his breath and yanked open a few other drawers.

When he sat up, Linc found Emma watching him with banked amusement in her gaze.

He playfully narrowed his eyes at her. “My receptionist is

learning.” He held up a finger and picked up the phone that connected him to Miss Yander. “Miss Yander, I’m looking for a copy of the waiver we have parents sign. I used to have one in my desk, but it’s gone now. Do you happen to know where it is?”

“I’ll be right there.”

She hung up and so did he. The girl popped in a moment later, her gaze flickering between the two of them, like she was shocked to see Emma. Had she been at her desk when he got here, she would have seen them.

“I didn’t know you had company, Linc.”

Oh no, that wouldn’t do at all. He recognized that tone all too well. A woman angling for something he wasn’t ever going to give.

“Emma is here about her daughter playing baseball with us this year, but I can’t find my hard copy of the waiver.”

She flushed. “I...erm...it accidentally got shredded. I do have it on the computer, though. I hadn’t yet gotten a fresh copy.”

After getting the location of it on his computer, he sent her on her way. The silence in the room was deafening. Linc stole another glance at Emma. Her lips twitched like she was trying not to smile.

“Swallow that laugh, Emma, and come over here. We’re going to share the computer and look it over.”

She rose and moved with ease around his desk. Linc dragged another chair over and placed her in his before taking the hard uncomfortable one.

“I don’t need to be at your desk, Mr—”

He bent so his lips were by her ear. “Linc. Pretty sure we discussed this. Linc. Remember, the man whose shirt you wanted to take off.”

God, this woman was freaking adorable. Her ears were tipped with pink. How the hell did she smell so damn delicious? Like crisp apples and warm caramel. Not the salted

kind, but the old-fashioned kind that was fucking incredible.

He tapped a few keys on the keyboard and waited for the new document to pop up.

“Oh,” she said, her hand covering her mouth, unsuccessfully stopping the snort of laughter that burst free.

“Ah, hell.”

His overenthusiastic receptionist-in-training had taken it upon herself to add pretty fonts and designs to the form. Bubblegum pink and teal were the colors of the day and there were more swirls and curls than he knew what to do with.

“I can’t print this off and give it to a parent. They’d never trust me with their children.” Hell, *he* wouldn’t trust himself with them, either.

She shook her head. “Nope.” Emma reached her hands out only to pause. “Do you mind?”

“No, please. Do whatever.”

As he watched, Emma took out all of the nonessential things on the form. It was down to two pages instead of five in mere minutes.

“You’re an angel,” he praised.

“Hardly, but I’ve worked in an office before. Gotten to know this program well.” She turned to him with a smile and his breath caught in his chest.

Damn, she wasn’t just pretty, she was stunning when she smiled. Lost as he was in her blue eyes, he missed the door opening once more to admit his father.

“Didn’t know I was interrupting. Guess I should be knocking before I come in.”

She blushed again, which he found so cute.

“Not interrupting, Pops. This is Emma and she just saved my butt. Emma, my father, Mr. Conner.” He cocked a brow when he said that.

She rose and offered a hand to his father. “Nice to meet you,

sir.”

For his part, Linc was fixated on her ass in her jeans. God, the curves on this woman. His hands itched to try and learn them.

“And you,” his father replied, shooting him a glare that let him know he’d been caught staring.

Linc stood and settled his hand on the small of her back. “While you were fixing that, did you get a chance to read it? And if so, what do you think?”

She glanced between him and his father. Both of them large men. And she was the only woman in a smaller room with them, but she didn’t appear to be concerned.

“I think if my daughter wants to play baseball, I’ll find a way to make it work.”

As he stood, his father maneuvered his way around and got between him and Emma, nudging her to the door even as he talked to her about how lucky she was that her daughter would be playing baseball and learning from Linc. Then she was out the door and he was left with his father.

“Miss Yander,” Linc said, walking to the door. “We need to have a talk.”

“When you’re done, Linc. You and I need to talk.”

Turning to glance at his father, he frowned, not a fan of the tone. “About what? Is something wrong?”

No answer came. Linc sighed and pushed the door closed.

“What do you need to talk to me about, Pops?”

Uncharacteristically somber, his father cleared his throat and rocked on the heels of his dress shoes. “Hear me out.”

Arms crossed over his chest, he reclined against the door, unhappy with the flipflopping emotions racing through him like a roller coaster.

“About?” he encouraged.

“Adam.”

Ice poured through his veins. “No.”

“Son, listen.” The senior Mr. Conner stepped toward him.

He sliced a hand through the air. “Enough, Pops. I love you and I am doing my best to respect you but you’re trying to mend something that’s not going to be fixed. Those bridges are burned. I’m out. *Out!* My professional career is over and I don’t relish the idea of sitting around with people who still have the option to play, listening to them bitch about stats.”

“If you gave them—”

“This conversation is over.” He turned his back and exited his office. It wasn’t until he’d made it partway down the hall and out to the baseball field when he realized that children were avoiding him.

He was scowling and stomping like a T-Rex who’d had his meal taken away.

Being raised by a single father, he didn’t often end a conversation like he’d just done, but right now he wasn’t able to be polite.

Thinking about his ex-teammate and how things had gone down after his injury didn’t exactly put him in a mood to be charming and PG-rated.

Linc took deep breaths as he stood behind the protective screen looking over the empty field. Fingers curved into the cool metal as he struggled to calm his heart rate. He tipped his head and closed his eyes as the sun warmed his skin.

Why can’t these fucking memories leave me alone?

At his side, his phone rang and he groaned, pressing his forehead against the metal. One hand tugged it free and he looked at the screen.

“I’m on my way,” he said as soon as he swept accept. He had a center to focus on.

...

Several weeks later, Emma quickly finished up the last tasks

she had to do at her job, determined not to miss Greer's first game. Her little girl had blossomed at the community center and she couldn't even begin to describe how that made her feel. Her shy girl had taken a back seat to the much more outgoing one who made an appearance during baseball.

Making sure all her things were put away, she punched out, picked up her purse, and headed out the door. Her boss, Mr. Perry, was still inside but she didn't want to talk to him.

It took her a minute to remember she'd not taken her car today because it was on its last legs and wouldn't start for her, but Dawson had lent her the Acadia she'd purchased when she'd first arrived in Rock Falls.

Emma fished the keys out of her purse and unlocked the door.

"Emma!"

Her boss's voice turned everything inside her to sludge.

"Yes, sir?" She turned around and hid her revulsion as he approached. How this man managed to run a food establishment, she didn't know. But it was a job and it managed to keep the roof over her and Greer's head. She didn't have a lot of options. The one job—an office job—that she'd liked had ended when her boss had passed away.

It didn't help that her father had been the town drunk and a bastard, but she'd never graduated high school either. Most people looked past her.

"I need you to cover another shift."

"No, my daughter has her first baseball game today. I told you that weeks ago and I'm on my way now."

"I don't give a damn about what your little spawn is doing. Millie wants to leave early, so you need to finish out her shift."

Was he kidding? Millie hadn't even been there for one hour, and Emma had been on her feet for ten already.

"No. I can't. You'll have to find someone else to do it."

He scowled at her. She got it. She got more tips than the

other women because she was nice and made sure customers got what they asked for while it was still warm. Since he took a portion of the tips, he wanted her working. Plus, because she wouldn't fuck him, he gave her the shit hours.

“How about this?” He glared at her. “You either get your fat ass inside and back to work or don't bother coming back.”

Her chin wobbled. She couldn't afford to lose this job. Tears of frustration burned her eyes and she prayed that one day Greer would understand the sacrifices she'd had to make.

He smirked. “Thought so.”

“She quits.”

Linc's voice wound around her, providing her a blanket of support she didn't know how much she'd craved until just then.

He was on her left side and Tully appeared on her right. Both men leveled glares of death at her boss.

She knew Mr. Perry wasn't happy, but he was nervous by both large men standing there. “You sure? Think about this, Emma. No one is going to hire a girl who couldn't even finish high school. You're lucky you got *this* job. Unless you're planning on something a bit more horizontal with them.”

Cheeks flushing with equal parts embarrassment and anger, she clenched her fists. “I—”

“Quit.” Linc didn't lower his voice even though his touch on the small of her back was gentle. “And I'll come with you when you get your final paycheck.”

Mr. Perry swore at her but stomped off inside.

“What did you just do?” Heart pounding within her chest, she began to get lightheaded.

“Stopped you from missing your daughter's first game.” He shook his head.

“I need that job. I can't keep a roof over our heads without that job.”

“You'll get another one.”

“You heard him. I didn’t fucking graduate high school, and I don’t have my GED. Who will hire me?” She couldn’t even comprehend becoming a hooker, but her daughter’s care took top priority.

Linc shrugged those wide shoulders. “I will.”

Tully stood observing, amusement dancing in his gaze as it bounced between the two of them.

“You?” She put her hands on her hips for all of three seconds, then poked him in that rock-hard chest of his. “And what do I have to do for you?”

The expression on his face would have made the ice age seem like a trip to the Bahamas. Everything on Linc grew cold. Even Tully had lost his enjoyment of the interaction between the two of them.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Emma? Did that man make you do things to keep this fucking job?”

Linc’s voice was so low she nearly couldn’t understand him. But she understood the fury vibrating from him.

She filed that reaction away and stayed focused on the important part. “This isn’t about him, it’s about you coming here and telling him I quit my job. I have a daughter, Linc. I can’t just up and quit, hoping I will land something else.”

“I told you, I’ll hire you, and if you fucking ask me what you have to do to keep the job, I’m going to go in that building and beat that asshole into pulp.” He grasped her upper arms, bringing her closer to him. “What did he make you do?”

“Nothing. He forced additional shifts on me all the time, threatening my job if I didn’t take them. Although he said I would have an easier time of it if I fucked him. Or blew him.”

What was wrong with her? Why was she telling him this?

“Stop, Linc.”

Tully’s voice got her attention and she realized that Linc had released her and was stalking across the parking lot to the diner. Tully had a hold of his arm.

“You have a game today. The children are depending on you.”

His expression was tortured and angry when he faced Emma again. Three strides and he was right in her face. “You’re coming with me. I’ll take you home so you can get changed and we’ll get to the game.” He thumbed toward Tully. “He’ll drive the SUV. Give him the keys.”

Something in his voice advised her not to argue with him.

Emma didn’t say anything as she handed the keys to Tully and allowed Linc to help her up into his large truck. *Holy Christ this thing is high up off the ground.* She wasn’t much over five feet and this was a gigantic step.

Luckily, he damn near lifted her and placed her in the seat, giving her another chance to feel his hard body behind her. God, it had been so long since she’d been touched by a man, brief though it was. That, combined with her infatuation with him, and her body responded instantly. Wet. Needy.

Distracting.

She stared at him as he strode around the hood of the dual rear-wheeled behemoth he drove. Hell, she wasn’t sure she should even be sitting in this. Probably cost more than all of her possessions combined.

He climbed up with an ease she envied. Interlacing her fingers, she focused on her feet and how small they looked on the dark mat on the floorboard.

“Emma.”

She snapped her head up and looked at him, feeling not much older than a schoolgirl with a massive crush on the popular boy. Okay, that’s how it had been, but damn it, she was a single mother. She shouldn’t still be feeling like this.

“Mr. Conner.”

He lifted one jet-black eyebrow, even as he pressed the ignition button. Fuck, *her* car still had crank windows.

“I’m about to get all in your business, Emma.” He shifted into gear, *still* looking at her, determination all over his face.

“No need,” she said, wishing her voice sounded more like a confident woman and not a woman who wanted to lie back and hand her panties over to him.

His left eyebrow joined his right and for a brief moment she wondered if her last thought had been spoken out loud.

“There’s a big need. I have nothing but respect for single parents and I know you’re doing all you can for Greer. Everything you do is for her and you constantly put yourself last to make sure she doesn’t want for anything.”

“That’s right, you lost your mom.”

His lips twitched and she was positive it wasn’t a smile.

“You could call it that. But my dad did for me like you do for Greer.”

His attention moved from her to the window and when he waved a hand, she figured it was to Tully. An assumption that proved to be true when the Acadia moved in front of the truck and left the lot.

Linc started driving and she thought he would let it go at that. Foolishly.

“You need a job that isn’t dependent on whether you’re willing to give it up for the boss or not. You have enough stress to deal with and shouldn’t have to worry if your boss is going to fire you because he’s having a bad day and you said no.”

If anyone could understand, it was a man who’d not been born into the wealth he enjoyed but had worked hard for it. Even so, her face flushed as she thought about how dire her situation actually was.

“You heard him,” she said, lifting her chin. “No one will hire a high school dropout single mom.”

His long fingers, ones she’d thought about in more ways than was probably acceptable, flexed on the wheel. He gripped it so tight his darker skin paled.

“That’s bullshit.”

She angled toward him, leaning forward until the seat belt dug into her shoulder, stopping her. “No, it’s not. Do you really think I would’ve stayed at that job if I had offers to be somewhere else? Somewhere steady with better pay?”

Her chest heaved as she tried to control her anger. Apparently, she’d been wrong about him understanding. How dare he judge her choices? She’d just go and tell Mr. Perry that Linc had spoken out of turn. Surely he would give her the job back. After all, she was pretty much the only one who did anything at that diner.

“Because I know the world you live in is lined with nothing but roses and willing women waiting to pull their clothes off for you,” Emma continued, “let me tell you *my* reality. I have a roof over my head because my father left it to me in his will. Not because he loved me, no, but because it was a hassle to change anything. I’m sure if he’d been able to pry his head out of a bottle long enough, he would have changed that. I *look* for jobs. I’m trying to improve my daughter’s life. To make sure she doesn’t have to go through what I did at school. So don’t you dare fucking sit there and tell me that I’m *not trying* to do something better.”

Chapter Three

Linc took several deep breaths before he opened his mouth and shoved his foot in it *again*. Emma had every reason to be pissed and insulted by his phrasing and his father would beat his ass with a switch for saying them.

But, Christ, he was still livid from the thought of that fucker holding her job over her head in such a manner.

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking at her when they were paused at a light.

Her jaw was set, and her pale skin was flushed with the fire of her anger, yet he witnessed a hint of vulnerability. He wanted to comfort her.

She crossed her arms as she stared out the window.

“You’re right, Emma.” God, he loved how her name fell from his lips. “I’m not in a position to judge and make assumptions about what you’re doing. However,” he said as she relaxed a fraction, “I am in a position to do something about it.”

“I don’t take charity and I’m not fucking you for money.”

Wow.

When she went there, she *really* went there.

“Wasn’t offering charity and I’m glad we got that out of the way. I’m not fucking you for money either. And now I’ve said that, *if* I were to fuck you,” he reached across the interior and turned her toward him so he could see her eyes, “it would be for nothing but *both* of our mutual pleasure.”

That pulse of hers kicked up and invited him to nip it before he laved away the sting.

“I’m sure you don’t need to lower yourself to sleeping with a frumpy single mother.”

Her self-confidence was in the crapper. Without releasing her chin, he gave her a grin as he moved his thumb along her

lower lip.

“I can think of a lot of words to describe you, Emma, and frumpy doesn’t even make the cut.” He let her go and gripped the wheel once more. Linc had to or he would be pulling them off the street to make her stop talking about herself in such a manner. “Do you want to discuss future fucking or the job I’m trying to offer you?”

“Job?”

He took a deep breath, allowing her scent to move over him even as he nodded. “Yes. Job. Secretary.”

“I don’t have the necessary skills.”

“I disagree. I saw how fast you fixed that form on the computer. And you said you’d worked in an office before.”

“I don’t have a degree.”

He slowed and turned into her driveway. Tully leaned against the Acadia, arms crossed, expression unreadable as his gaze tracked them.

“Don’t need one. You said you’ve worked a lot of jobs. I’m assuming you can answer the phone and work a schedule. I already know you can do more on the computer than I can.”

“Is this because you feel sorry for me?” She undid her belt as soon as he pulled up to park. “Because I already said I don’t need charity.” She swung the door open and hopped out, nearly stumbling as she fell from the height of his truck.

He opened his door and hollered after the woman who was stomping away from him. “Offering you a valid and legitimate job isn’t charity, Emma.”

“Says you!”

Linc clenched his hand on the doorframe to his truck. “Ten minutes, Emma. Or I’m coming in after you.”

She paused but didn’t turn toward him. When she stepped inside the small bungalow house and slammed the door, Tully slowly turned his head to look at him.

“Not a fucking word, Tully.”

The man shrugged and grinned. That's when he saw the cell phone in his hand.

The fuck?

"Tell me you didn't," he growled at his friend, flicking his gaze back and forth between Tully and Emma's front door. God, he wanted to go kick it in and make her understand that he was legit offering her a job.

"Still am." Another Tully shrug. "Mitchell is *not* going to believe this."

Linc flipped his friend off and hopped to the ground before stalking around the truck bed. Tully pushed his phone into his front pocket and crossed his arms, that same shit-eating grin on his face.

"I hate you."

His best friend slung an arm around his shoulder and tutted. "Just the other day, you were declaring your undying love for me. How times are changing."

Linc narrowed his eyes. "I'm keeping Dawson when she's smart enough to get rid of your ass. I like her better."

"Not happening, man. I'm following that woman wherever she goes."

Linc nodded, pleased his friend had found love. Dawson Shay was perfect for him. They shared a love of motorcycles and she had a head for business that was impressive to witness. Tully had the drive and was always encouraging her. He was happy working on newer rides in her shop while Dawson seemed to love restoring the older models.

"So, you and Emma."

"I offered her a job and she thought I was angling for sex."

"You know her life hasn't been easy, Linc. Go easy on her."

He looked at his friend. "Go easy on her? Did you see her stomp away from my truck? What about that woman says I need to go easy?"

"Tully!" He was interrupted by Dawson calling for her

fiancé.

“We’ll see you at the game,” Tully said. “I’m about to get some Dawson time before we’re around children.” Tully gave him a hard smack to his back before he ran up the steps leading to Dawson’s apartment.

“Hi, Linc!” Dawson waved as Tully met her on the stairs and kissed her.

He responded with a wave of his own, even as he walked toward Emma’s house. Debating on if he should just walk in or not, he kept himself outside. He would give her the ten minutes, though it wouldn’t do for him to be late to the first game.

Nine minutes and forty-five seconds later, her front door yanked open, leaving him to face a scrubbed-clean Emma Henricksen. Her blue eyes widened and he almost took a step back. Instead, he held his ground and simply arched an eyebrow.

“I thought I was going to have to come in after you.”

“No need, Mr. Conner. Do you mind stepping out of the way so I can get to my car? I have no desire to miss my daughter’s first game.”

Yeah, he liked the spark and suddenly he understood why Tully loved to poke at Dawson all the time.

“You’re riding with me. Let’s go. Wouldn’t do for my new employee to keep me from the game.” Pivoting to the side, he swung his hand wide, gesturing for her to lead the way.

“I have a car.”

“And it’s already blocked in by my truck.”

“So move your truck and I can get out.”

“You’re coming with me and the longer we argue about this, the greater the chance of being late. And we’re not going to broach the subject as to why you were driving Dawson’s Acadia if you had an actual working vehicle.”

She stepped close and he fisted his hands to keep them to

himself.

“You’re just used to running roughshod over people. I’m not one of them.”

“I consider it looking after my employees, *Emma*. Now will you get your ass in the truck? Or do you want me to put you there?”

Her gaze heated even while she blushed. Didn’t stop her from moving by him, the jeans she wore cupping that full ass in a delightful way. He had an image of her wearing those jeans combined with his jersey, his number emblazoned on her back. Branding her. Marking her.

His.

Linc followed, making sure she was in his truck before getting behind the wheel. As the door closed behind him, he touched the ignition button and glanced at the spitfire in the cab with him.

“Let’s talk schedule.”

He smiled even as his ears rang from her screech of frustration.

Linc had to admit, Emma was shrewd. The woman was far more than how she viewed herself and he longed to help her realize that.

He stood off to the side and watched the parents congratulate their children on a well-played game. More than one game was being played today and right now the older children were on the field.

Even as he scanned the group, noting all the happy faces taking in the ongoing game, he couldn’t deny how often his gaze drifted to Emma and Greer. Dressed far more modestly than the majority of mothers in attendance, married and single alike, she was the only one who interested him. It was obvious how much she doted on her daughter, even more so than when she’d first come to him about Greer playing baseball.

His phone rang and he touched his ear, wishing he’d sent it to voicemail the second he did.

“This is Linc.”

“Hey, son!”

It took a moment before he realized who he spoke with—it wasn’t his father. No, of course not. This was a potential investor, Mr. Stevenson.

“Mr. Stevenson. Did we have a meeting I wasn’t aware of?” He frowned over the loud sounds. “I remember you said you were coming to town. I’m sorry, I’m at a ballgame so I’m having difficulty hearing you.”

“I’m at one, too.”

This time, the voice wasn’t just in his ear but behind him. Linc spun and found himself face-to-face with Mr. Huxton Stevenson.

And what did you know, he *did* have a Stetson and a bolo. Guess that photo of him was real and not just a gimmick for being from Texas. The hat was black, not white, but still.

The man grinned and rocked back in a pair of black—snakeskin, maybe—boots that gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

“Surprise, son.” Stevenson held out his hand. “Great to finally meet you. The wife wanted to do some shopping, so we hit the east coast early and figured we’d come to your inaugural game.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity fuck.

Shaking the man’s hand, Linc plastered on a smile. “Glad you could make it. Sorry I didn’t know ahead of time.”

Stevenson’s shrug said it all. The man had wanted to surprise him. “I like seeing people on their own turf without them knowing I’m watching. Now, where is your little woman? I’m guessing that’s the pretty little filly who was with you in your truck when you drove in.” He wagged bushy eyebrows. “Later than some.”

There was a special place in hell for him given what he was about to do. Linc nodded. “Yes, that’s her. My Emma.”

How the hell did I forget that this man thinks I'm with someone?

“Great! I can’t wait to meet her.” Mr. Stevenson scoured the area and grinned. “She’s by that set of bleachers,” he said as he struck off in a fast gait.

Just tie a cement block around my feet. I'm sunk.

...

Emma waved as her daughter ran off with some of the other children on her baseball team. They wanted to watch the older children play their game. She brushed some of her hair behind her ear as she took a deep breath.

Tears burned the backs of her eyes as she watched Greer with her friends.

Friends. Her daughter had friends.

She’d watched her daughter bloom over the past few weeks and it had been worth every ache in her exhausted body. And it didn’t matter that she had been awake at three this morning to head off to work. What *did* matter was the joy in her little girl’s face.

Although, according to one hot Linc, she no longer worked for that horrible repulsive man but for *him* at the center. It brought out fears that had no place here. Right now, she wanted to celebrate the small things, the things that meant the world to her. Greer and her first game.

“Miss Emma? Miss Emma?”

Glancing over her shoulder at the sound of her name, Emma didn’t recognize the man striding in her direction. She knew she was wrong for stereotyping a person but this one, to her, screamed Texas. From the accent to the dress. The man behind him? Him, she knew. Linc. Mr. Conner. The one who had given her daughter all of this. She owed him big-time for helping her daughter smile and bloom.

The man who could make her want to kiss him and punch him all at the same time. The one who didn’t look all that

happy about this man coming toward her.

The Texan stopped before her, his black Stetson plunked down on his head, a bit out of place for the region, but that was not her business. His thick moustache had some gray in it, but his eyes, they were an incredible shade of blue.

He smiled at her and some of her discomfort eased. She wasn't going to acknowledge how much more comfortable she became when Linc strode up to stand beside her. He had a message in his black eyes but she couldn't decipher it.

"Miss Emma. You're beautiful. It's a pleasure to meet Linc's fiancée."

I'm sorry. Say what now?

Shifting her eyes to the sexy man in front of her *not* wearing the Stetson, just a nondescript baseball cap, she swallowed. Although, nothing on Linc was "just" anything.

"Mr. Conner?"

The man's barrel chest moved as he boomed with laughter. "Oh, she doesn't call you Linc? That's interesting."

Linc slipped to her side, his arm around her waist. "She just started working for me and we were trying to keep it professional." He held up a hand. "Do you mind if I steal her for just a moment?"

"No, no. I can wait to speak with her."

"Perfect." Linc moved her out of the man's hearing range and stared down at her.

Emma waited, not sure what would come out of her mouth if she opened it at this particular juncture. Perhaps it should have helped that he looked all out of sorts but right now she didn't give a damn.

"Go with me on this."

She arched her eyebrows, not one like he could do, because she didn't have that particular skill, but both. "Go with you on this. Sounds like you're telling, not asking."

He gulped. Hard.

What kind of person did it make her if she wanted to settle her fingers against his throat, purely to feel that motion?

God, she truly was hard up.

“Emma, he’s an investor for the center. Hopefully. But he showed up unexpectedly and his wife is here somewhere.”

“And you just blurted out that you were engaged?” She closed her eyes to stave off the panic that was creeping in.

He shrugged. “I mean, I don’t actually remember telling him that—only that I was with someone...” His full, kissable lips flattened. “If I had realized, I would have had time to figure it out and ask you properly.”

Linc’s answer took all the wind out of her sails. “Me?” Was this possible? She’d been more than half in love with this man the majority of her life, watching from the outside, wishing to be there with him. The dreams, the fantasies.

She blinked and sucked in a breath as he lifted her hand to place it against his chest. Oh dear Lord in heaven, this man was sculpted chocolate and she was desperate for a taste.

He shrugged. “Or someone.”

And that killed her high, deflated her like a balloon with a hole in it. “Right...someone.”

They didn’t have the chance to say anything more as Mr. Stevenson walked up to them.

“Everything okay over here?”

His gaze begged her and while she was hurt, like gutted hurt by his callous “or someone” comment, she did truly appreciate the community center and what it meant to the kids, her own child especially.

Unclenching her fist and flattening her hand across his chest, Emma stepped closer to him as she turned on the charm for Mr. Stevenson. She may not have a model body but she knew how to charm. It was how she drew in good tips at the diner.

“You have to understand, I’m very private and wasn’t

expecting this to be out as an announcement as it just happened a short time ago. I haven't even told my daughter. If you don't mind keeping it quiet, so I can tell her, I would appreciate it."

"You have a daughter? Where is she?"

Taking the opportunity to move away from Linc so she could breathe a bit better, she pointed out Greer sitting with her teammates as they watched the latest game unfold.

"This was their first game and she was so excited." She had no doubt her pride and love poured from her statement.

"She is adorable. I'm looking forward to meeting her." The man stepped back and she continued facing the same direction, not fully sure how Linc wanted her to act around him. "I didn't think you would be engaged to a single mother, Mr. Conner. I am impressed."

Emma bristled and nearly whirled to face him. Why did this man feel he had the right to say such a thing? And really, what did it matter what this man thought?

Linc tugged her by her shirt until she was against his torso, then he wrapped an arm around her. His thick forearm brushed along the underside of her breast and she did her best not to think about how damn good it felt, or how her nipples were tightening.

Didn't work, but she gave it a try. The phrase may have been "the old college try" and she still attempted, even though the closest she'd gotten to college was walking by a campus.

"Emma is all I could ever want, and Greer, well, when you meet her, you'll see how amazing and incredible she is."

Protective mama bear was soothed a tiny bit by his words. Scam or not, there wasn't any way she was going to let her girl be part of this to get hurt. Seeing Dawson and Tully walking toward them, she tried to get out of Linc's embrace without looking as if that was exactly what she was trying to do. He flexed his arm, effectively keeping her glued to him. Like he knew what she was trying to do and wasn't letting it happen.

Dawson smiled at her even as her gaze darted down to

where Linc held her. “Greer played a great game,” she said.

Emma’s responding smile wasn’t strained or forced. She truly liked her tenant and had lucked out when Dawson had moved in over the garage.

Tully was speaking with Linc and she took advantage to step closer to Dawson, who looked smashing in her outfit. As always. She had on a shirt with an eagle on the front. Red tips of the wings, blue then white on the head. Emma hid her smile. It was one of Tully’s old shirts, for it was the professional team he’d played for.

Eyebrows wagging, Dawson grinned. “Something going on I should know about?”

“Apparently, Linc and I are engaged.”

Dawson bit her lower lip even as her eyes sparkled. “It was the vibrator comment at the bar, wasn’t it? I saw him almost stumble when you mentioned how many batteries you go through.”

Emma flushed and scrubbed her neck, wishing she wasn’t so pale and didn’t showcase the red of her embarrassment as much. “This is serious, Dawson. He even told my boss today that I quit.”

She sobered. “I heard about that part. But good, your old boss is a fucking asshole. You need to be gone from that place. Work for your fiancé. I hear working for the boss can have perks.”

“He doesn’t actually want me as his fiancée. He only chose me because I was convenient at the time.”

Dawson pursed her lips. “Not buying that for a second. Especially with the way he’s looking at you right now. *We* will talk about this later tonight. I’ll bring the wine. You bring the story. Right now, I’m going to have Tully move Greer’s booster seat into Linc’s truck so you can take her home safely.”

Holy shit. I completely forgot about that. What kind of mother am I?

Dawson stepped closer and hugged her, mouth by her ear. “I know he’s been the unattainable fantasy of yours since school. Here’s your chance. Learn more about the man than everyone sees. Touch. Hold. Kiss. Fuck. Enjoy him. Who knows what this can turn into?” She ended the hug and stepped back. “Tully, get Linc’s keys so we can get that booster seat to the truck without them having to leave the game.”

Dawson and Tully left them talking with Mr. Stevenson. Linc reached for her hand and she took it, trying not to read too much into something as simplistic as a hand hold.

Another fail.

Mr. Stevenson smiled. “I know you have another game to watch. I’ll be by the center tomorrow to see how it operates. Looking forward to seeing you both again. I’ll have my wife with me and we’ll do lunch. Or supper. Perhaps both.” He held out his hand to Linc. “Good to meet you.”

“Thank you, sir. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow and meeting your wife.”

The man grinned. “Well, I’m much more comfortable having you meet her now, especially knowing you have a fiancée. She is such a huge fan of yours.” He looked at Emma. “You’re a delight, my dear. See you tomorrow.”

Mr. Stevenson strode off through the crowd.

She thought Linc would let go of her hand but he didn’t. In fact, neither did he stop stroking the side of her hand with his thumb as he held on.

“You can let go now.”

“He’s still watching. Try to act like you are madly in love with me.” Amusement tinged his tone.

Looking up at him, she narrowed her eyes. “Why don’t *you* act like it? You know, pretend until you get someone you actually want to be with. Not a single mother who looks like me.”

His gaze snapped to her face and her breath caught in her throat. The intensity. Even protected by the rim of his cap, she

couldn't escape how powerful his gaze was.

"What?" she growled.

"I really want you to elaborate on that asinine statement but I have the distinct feeling you're going to piss me off. So then I was thinking how to *show* you how pretend madly in love with you I am by kissing you. But...I'm not going to want to stop, a fact that's not fake, and the kids sure as hell don't need *that* kind of education. Therefore, I'm opting to just stare at you."

"Well stop," she huffed. "You're making me nervous and you should be cheering on the kids."

"*I'm* making you nervous?" He drew out the sentence like it was foreign to him that she could actually believe the words she'd said.

He let her go and removed the hat from his head. Emma watched all that silky black hair spill down and her fingertips burned to touch it.

When he placed the cap on her head, her insides did a few flips. Linc leaned down and brushed their lips together. It wasn't long, nor anything more than a quick skim against her own, but her chest thundered like a bass drum from the way her heart pumped and her lungs fought for air.

"Until I get to claim you like I want, this will have to do. See you in a bit."

He walked off and she could only stare at him. Coming or going, the man was a work of art, but damn, the knowledge that even for a little while he was hers... Cue her nights of more battery usage...

Touching the brim of his cap, she smiled and walked toward her daughter, even though her thoughts were on one Franklin Conner.

Dawson sucked the liquid off her thumb as she walked into the living room. "Okay, girl, you've given me wine, the young'un is asleep. Sit down and fill me in on what's going on."

Emma watched as this woman, who not so long ago had

been just a potential tenant and who was now a fantastic friend, sank gracefully onto the edge of the worn couch. Dawson was dressed incredibly as always, even when she was in a pair of dark blue leggings with a red stripe down the side and a blue and white shirt of Tully's. Her hair was piled up on her head in some haphazard knot that had her looking sexy and adorable all at the same time.

Quite aware of how dumpy she appeared, Emma took a deep breath and perched on the recliner her father had pretty much lived in. The threadbare material on the chair was now covered by an old comforter she'd picked up at the secondhand store. It covered up the shoddy state of the furniture and hid the cigarette burns.

After pouring a glass of wine for herself, she tried for a smile. Failed.

"What's going on, Emma?"

"He quit my job for me." Even now, it still worked her up. "Like he had the right to do such a thing."

Dawson didn't speak, just nodded and sipped her wine.

"He doesn't have a child to look after. I can't just assume he's actually going to keep his word and give me a job." A humorless bark escaped. "I'm going to have to reach out and make sure I still have that damn job at the diner."

"Breathe, honey." Dawson placed the glass on the old coffee table and reached over to pat her knee. "I've not known Linc very long but he hasn't ever come across as a man who says something he doesn't mean. All three of those guys are close, disgustingly wealthy, and yet beneath all of the shit that comes with a Y chromosome, I see good."

"I can't risk my daughter's wellbeing."

"Of course not." Dawson's tone was indignant. She tipped her head to the left, a few curls falling free to cascade down the side of her face. "None of us would ever think you could. Tully told me what happened, and I'm pretty certain if he'd not stopped him, Linc would have beat that man for threatening you. He's not doing it because he wants to control

your life. He's doing it because he cares."

"He can't understand what I'm going through. Maybe at one time he could've, but not now he has all that money and fame."

Dawson lifted her drink again. "What's really scaring you about this? The lack of a job or that you'll be working so closely with a man who just announced to Rock Falls you're engaged?"

Emma flushed and drank half of her wine. Dawson chuckled and sipped her own with a smug expression.

"Thought so," her friend commented.

"It's complicated."

Not a single judgmental look crossed Dawson's face. "I said that when I first came here."

"But you don't have a daughter depending on you to keep her fed and clothed. A daughter from a man who I'd foolishly believed liked me when all he wanted was to see if he could get me to lower my pants—newsflash, I did—and all the while he was fucking someone else and wanted *nothing* to do with the baby he created. Just like her grandfather. I'm not like you, Dawson—incredible and amazing."

"Excuse me?" Dawson's eyebrows flew up to her hairline. She closed her eyes for a moment then shook her head. "Oh, hell no. That's not going to fly with me, Emma Henricksen. You sit and listen."

Following the snapped directive, Emma turned the glass in her hand. Hell, she didn't even have actual wineglasses. They were drinking out of juice tumblers.

"You are a fucking incredible woman, Emma. You're a single mother who is raising your daughter without any help from the deadbeat who donated his sperm."

Dawson took Emma's hand and squeezed. Emma stared at the difference in their hands—hers pale with freckles and Dawson's dark with a few scars she'd acquired at her job. There was even a small flex bandage along her thumb with a

unicorn with a rainbow mane and tail on it.

Even that looks good on her.

“Listen to me.”

Again, Dawson didn’t allow her to ignore the demand in her words.

“I’ve spent a good portion of my own life not feeling like I was *enough* for people. Too big, too black, too, well, *everything*. It is hell on your self-esteem, so I’m going to tell you what a friend told me. You are incredible. You are amazing. You’re a goddamn fucking rock star. You’re not *less*, Emma. You’re an inspiration and you have a man who is trying to help you.”

“Because he needed a fiancée.”

The fierceness didn’t vanish but it did fade slightly. “Pretty sure that came *after* the job.”

“What are people going to say?”

“After they finish talking about how lucky you are? I mean, seriously? Linc is hot.”

Even though this was her friend and she understood how in love she was with Tully, a small spike of jealousy shot through her.

“I’m doubling down on what I said before. Take advantage of what is before you.” She twirled her arm around her head. “Ride him like a cowboy, or cowgirl.”

Quite positive her face was redder than a hot burner on her stove, Emma shook her head. “Stop.”

Dawson didn’t and soon they were both laughing and enjoying the evening. Later, as she waved to her friend as she walked out the door, Emma realized she could do this. She would take her insecurities as they came, but to turn something down because of pride didn’t make sense. She could swallow that and go to work for a man she’d desired since high school.

What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Four

Linc swore as he pushed himself harder during his workout. He'd slept like shit. And all of it had to do with one tiny slip of a woman named Emma. He got it. She didn't feel tiny. She thought she was larger than she should be, but to him she was tiny. Hell, he could lift her with one arm and not feel any strain.

And he'd like to lift her. Right back up to his mouth to kiss her properly. Then push her up against the wall and take the time to learn her body. All of it.

Working out with a boner. Not wise. With another round of curses, he dropped from the pullup bar and walked to where he'd left his water. Taking a long drink, he turned to the door when his father walked in.

His father gave him a nod as he moved across the floor. No longer as quick as he once was, he still had a presence that made people take notice of him.

“Good morning.”

Linc swallowed. “Morning, Pops.”

“What's this I hear about you being engaged?”

Holy shit. Already? What is it, seven in the morning?
“Mitchell?”

His father grinned. “Boy does love his gossip.”

Ain't that the truth.

He made a mental note to punch his gossip-loving friend in the face.

“Did he call you? Text you? Or is he upstairs eating my food?”

“I live here, too, son. I invited him in and he had breakfast with me.”

When he'd come back from the pros because of his injury—and subsequent downward spiral—which had healed but not

enough to play professionally anymore, Linc had forgone getting an apartment of his own and moved in with his dad. He hadn't wanted his father to have to take care of his own place and figured if he was in the same house, he could handle any maintenance issues. Or call Mitchell.

“And he didn't come down to say hello?”

“He's cleaning up. He'll be down later.” A shrug. “Maybe.”

Linc smiled. So many people thought that Mitchell couldn't do a damn thing for himself because of how much money he made, but he loved that the man would come in and just wash dishes after eating, because he was considered family in this house. And that's what family did. They pitched in and helped out.

Linc knew his father looked at Tully and Mitchell as two more sons and he himself was viewed as a son by Tully's mom. The only parent who didn't approve of him in their group was Mitchell's mom. She tolerated him because he was rich and had played professional ball but the woman didn't like him. Hell, the woman barely tolerated Tully but that was more than Linc got from her.

She was very good at putting on a show for the public eye but when they had been younger and at her place, it hadn't been welcoming. His dad and Tully's mom never said anything to her about it as far as he knew. They just encouraged the boys to meet at one of their places instead. Which they had done...willingly.

“Stop thinking about how to lie your way out of this and tell me why you are pretending to be engaged.”

So he told his father about Huxton Stevenson and what had led him to that point. His father frowned and shook his head at him.

“You know this is going to blow up in your face. You cannot be entering into a business deal based on a lie. And this Miss Emma, that woman has had to put up with enough in her life. Her old man made her life hell. That shit for brains who knocked her up and left her to handle it on her own did her a

favor by leaving, even if she doesn't think so now. She has her daughter to think about. What's going to happen when you decide you're ready to settle down with someone and you break off the engagement? Do you really think your new woman is going to be okay with you working so closely with your *ex-fiancée*?"

How did his father know so much about Emma's situation, yet *he* knew next to nothing? The man cleared his throat, reminding him not to dally in his response.

"I'll figure it out, Pops. I know you're not a fan, but I am willing to do whatever it takes to secure more funding for the center. If Stevenson invests, we can have that hockey rink built."

He already had the location for it. Linc had bought a lot of surrounding land. He wanted this venture to be a success and had every intention of making it beneficial for the area as well. If he could bring in business for the local economy, why wouldn't he? He loved Rock Falls and wanted to help out. It wasn't strictly so he could make more money. That would be selfish and something his father would swiftly nip in the bud.

His father smiled. "Tully coaching."

"Yep." He shoved a hand through his hair, pushing the sweaty strands away from his face. "I mean, he doesn't know it yet, but he will. I know he misses being on the ice."

"I know you have Mitchell coaching some of the basketball." His father crossed his arms.

Linc spread out his hands and gave an "aw shucks" smile. "Hey, I am utilizing the assets I have at my disposal, precisely like you taught me."

"True. I did teach you that. What I *didn't* teach you was to lie."

The point was taken. He sobered and took a deep breath.

"I know, Pops. And I said I'm working on it. I'll figure it out."

"Make sure you take care of Miss Emma." His father

walked to the door only to stop and turn around. “Of course, if you continue to stare at her like you were in the office, no one is going to doubt it.” Then he was gone.

Even Mitchell had left by the time he made it out of his gym. Fixing himself a small breakfast, he thought about Emma. She was probably going to try and get out of showing up at the center for her new job. He wasn’t going to hurt her in this. He would protect her. This woman obviously put herself last to give her daughter everything she wanted. A fact which made Linc all the more impressed with her.

Chewing the last bite of toast as he headed out to his truck, he was on his way to her place before he could decide if it was the right decision or not. Pulling into the driveway, he frowned as he watched Tully and Dawson talking by Emma’s car as Dawson gestured to the garage.

Once he parked and hopped out, they looked at him. He waited for some comment but they didn’t say anything other than wave him over with a “morning” from each of them.

“What’s up?”

“We’ll push. Legs, you steer, and we’ll get it in the garage so you can work on it.”

Without another word, he positioned himself by the passenger bumper. Tully took the driver’s side and they waited for Dawson to get behind the wheel. The men shared a look then began pushing while Dawson steered, moving the car backward into the side of the garage that was empty. Once inside, they waited until Dawson put blocks by the wheels so it wouldn’t move.

“Thanks, man.”

“No problem. What’s wrong with it?”

Dawson gave him a hug as she walked by. “Not sure. It’s not running. I’m going to check and Flora is coming by later to take a look. We’ll get it up as soon as we can. Until then, she has access to my Acadia and I’ll take my bike.”

He nodded. Flora was one of Dawson’s best friends as well as a mechanic at Laroche’s dealership. “Nonsense. I’ll drive

her where she needs to go.”

“Right. Your fiancée.” Tully smacked him on the shoulder.

“Not now, Tully.” He glanced over his shoulder and stared at the door to the small home that housed the woman who’d been a major player in his dreams all night. Not giving himself a chance to think about it more, he headed that way.

Linc experienced a highly unpleasant flutter in his gut as he approached her door. No reason for him to be nervous. Right?

He knocked and waited, pushing his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. Linc held his breath as he waited for her to answer. When the knob began to turn, his breathing picked up.

Then she was there.

Emma.

Standing before him. As her eyes widened at the sight of him, he hid his smirk.

“What are you doing here?”

He forced himself to remain where he was instead of moving closer to her. “What kind of man would I be if I didn’t make sure my fiancée got to her first day at the new job safely?”

When she leaned around him, Linc didn’t doubt that Tully and Dawson were watching. Emma’s lips flattened into a thin line before she stepped back. “Get in here.”

“No good morning kiss?”

She flushed and he almost felt bad for teasing her. Almost. But damn it, she was so adorable.

“You can’t show up at my house whenever you like.” Her words escaped on a low growl.

Closing the door behind him, he leaned against it. “Why not? We’re engaged.” A shoulder shrug. “I’m here to make sure you get to your job this morning...with me, not that fuck who I still want to beat into nothing.”

“And what am I supposed to do when you decide you don’t like my secretarial skills? How then do you propose I feed and clothe my daughter as well as keep up with the bills on this piece of shit house?” She shook her head and pushed her hands through her brown hair.

Her stress about this was palpable. The need to protect her, reassure her, ran over him with the force of a semi-truck convoy. And he reacted on instinct, reaching out to tug her closer to him. He settled her between his legs and skimmed his hands up her arms before cupping her face.

“I’m not going to put you in a bad position, Emma. I’ll fucking deposit two years’ salary into your account this morning if that will make you feel better about it. Yours free and clear just for coming to work today. I’ll give you a salary on top of that.”

God, her skin is soft.

“That’s a flat-out bad business practice.”

He smiled, despite the seriousness of the situation. “Look at you, protecting me already, even though it’s at the expense of your bank account. You’re not the kind of person to take advantage, Emma. And I’m not a man who lies.”

She lifted her eyebrows.

“Okay, *generally*. I don’t like it and I’m working on a way to tell Stevenson the truth.”

“It’s simple, you open your mouth and tell him.”

Linc liked that she wasn’t pulling away from his touch and allowing him to play with her hair. That same evocative scent floated around her.

“You know, he said that he was impressed with the proposal and wanted me to congratulate the man who had put it together.”

Her blue gaze hardened. “Why would he assume you didn’t do it?”

“Look at me.”

She blinked, not saying a word.

Linc gave her an odd look. “I’m a sports player and the wrong color.”

Anger sparked in her gorgeous gaze, burning hot and pushing over his skin like living flame. For a taste, he was willing to risk the burn.

“Then why do you want his money?”

He gave a small shrug. “Because we can build a hockey rink with it. And my pride shouldn’t get in the way of what I’m trying to do for the children in the area.”

Her mouth made a small moue before she placed a hand on his chest.

“Why is this place so important to you?”

“The center?”

She nodded.

“Mama? Why are you so close to Mr. Conner?”

Emma jumped and her skin flushed. Linc smiled at Greer before dragging his fingers along Emma’s arm before letting her step away, the moment between them broken.

“Talking, Greer. We’re just talking.”

There were questions to be answered. Later. Right now, he had a schedule to keep and two ladies to deliver to the community center.

...

“This entire place is impressive.” Mr. Stevenson smiled as he looked around the room they were in.

Emma had been excited to take the tour as well since she’d not seen the entire facility. Did it hurt that Linc continually found time to touch her and send her tender looks? Nope, not at all.

After Greer interrupted them this morning, she’d been embarrassed, but Linc had driven them both and right now

Greer was out playing baseball while she was learning the ropes as his assistant.

And fiancée.

The young girl who'd been doing the job was still in reception but she wasn't Linc's anymore. She handled other things, leaving Emma to manage his schedule.

It didn't escape her notice how young Mr. Stevenson's wife was. Hell, the woman was damn near her age, perhaps younger. And she was all about being near Linc.

Possessiveness was an ugly bitch and Emma kept hers on a short leash. Even though she wanted to snap at the other woman and remind her that she was married, so leave Linc alone.

"It is, I'm so proud of him. Well, the entire town is proud of him for opening up this place." She looked around at all the art supplies that were in this room.

"Do you know who wrote his proposal? Or was that you?"

Cutting her gaze over to where Linc stood across the room, Mrs. Stevenson hovering close, too close, she exhaled and faced the man before her.

Anger that she'd felt this morning when he'd mentioned being the wrong color and just a sports person churned inside her. She didn't like the implication. Not at all. "I'm not sure why you think Linc didn't write that, Mr. Stevenson. This center, it's *his* baby. The passion you read in the proposal, even though it was just a proposal, was because it came from *him*. It had his heart and his desire for this place pulsing through it. Linc doesn't need others to construct a proposal for him because it's his desire you read in those words and a third party would have made it far more clinical. My fiancé is more than a retired professional baseball player, he's extremely intelligent and very capable."

The man stared at her and she winced inwardly, not sure if she'd suddenly overstepped and cost the center the money.

He stroked a hand over his moustache. "You are extremely protective of him."

“I’m protective of everyone I care about, Mr. Stevenson.”

A slow nod came, the waxed moustache and large hat barely moving. “I can see that. And I apologize. I shouldn’t have assumed he wasn’t able to do that himself. I hope he didn’t feel that’s what I meant.”

“I won’t speak for him but perhaps *you* should tell him.”

The doors opened and a group of kids thundered in, slowing to say hi to Linc and the rest of the coaches before vanishing.

“There’s a basketball game about to start if you would like to look at the gym,” Linc said. “I have to check on one thing and I’ll be right in. Emma, could you show them the way?”

“Of course.” This she could do. “If you both will follow me.” She headed off down the hall, not liking how out of place Mrs. Stevenson made her feel. Like high school all over again where she wasn’t part of the popular crowd.

She took a deep breath before opening the door to the court.

Thankfully, Mitchell was in the gym and came over. The man was smooth and had a way of charming people, so she didn’t have to come up with witty conversation. It wasn’t just Linc Mrs. Stevenson flirted with—she was doing the same thing to Mitchell. The man barely blinked in her direction.

“Miss Emma!”

She looked over at the group. “Yes?”

The kids beckoned her and she walked onto the court, grateful at least to have tennis shoes on instead of pumps.

“We need another. Mitchell said we should ask you.”

“He did?” It took so much for her not to look over her shoulder and glare at the ex-pro player.

The boys nodded. “Said you could fill in for him for a bit.”

She pursed her lips. “And you boys didn’t think this was a bad idea? I mean, I’m like half his height, he played professionally, and what is the other thing?” She tapped her fingers along her lips. “Oh, right, I’ve *never* played basketball.”

They all smiled. “Time to learn,” the one with the ball said, spinning it on his index finger, the lone digit not even wavering as the ball continued to move smoothly on it. *How the hell is he doing that?*

Time to learn.

Glancing over her shoulder, she wanted nothing more than to flip off the man who smirked at her, his shaggy blond hair not hiding his amusement in the slightest. Mitchell Anderson was someone she couldn’t quite figure out. Again, she knew him from what she’d heard around town and from watching him grow up, but there were more secrets in that man than met the eye. And now he was pushing her out of her comfort zone. Then again, everything about this situation was out of her comfort zone.

She could do this.

Emma patted her pockets and pulled out a hair band, quickly putting her hair up into a haphazard ponytail.

Please don’t let me embarrass my little girl by doing this.

She pointed at the backboard. “The ball goes in the hoop thingy, right?”

A tall kid holding the ball grinned at her, his numerous freckles dark against his pale skin. “We’ll get you set right, Miss Emma.” He tossed her the ball and she caught it, heart beating hard as he too pulled his hair away from his face, using a band to turn it into a manbun.

They gave her a quick rundown of the rules and it was game on. Out of shape and not the best athlete anyway, she was exhausted after a few moments on the court but she wasn’t giving up.

When she actually made a basket, she squealed and laughed with the guys as they cheered her on. All gave her high fives or hugs.

With a bit of encouragement, they got her to do a dance on the court with them. Laughing, sweating, and exhausted, she looked up and saw Linc standing beside Mitchell. An amused grin tipped up Mitchell’s lips but that didn’t hold her focus for

long. Linc did.

Great googily moogily. How did one man manage to look like her favorite dessert topped with ice cream, whipped cream, and a cherry on top? Even the artificial light didn't detract from his dark skin, or the tattoos, or his chiseled expression.

I have to stop this.

His intense stare sent a different kind of pulse through her. *Did I do something wrong? Did I fuck it up?*

She smiled, even as her insides rebelled and tried to crawl up and out of her throat. Linc moved toward her, his steps purposeful and fucking hot. It wasn't right how good he looked. Around her, the gym fell quiet as he neared. She flushed, for once in her life grateful that her skin was already tinted red from being active, so no one would think she was flushed because Linc approached.

The man didn't stop, just moved right up into her space. The guys beside her shifted out of his way.

The second his hands cupped her jaw, her breathing hitched, only to flee as his mouth landed on hers. His touch was gentle, and she moaned as he dragged his tongue along the seam of her lips. Opening, she whimpered and gripped his wrists as he slipped his tongue in.

Sweet Jesus, no one had *ever* told her kisses could be like this. Not even the man who'd given her Greer had managed to pull a reaction from her like this man was doing. He slid one hand around to the nape of her neck, gripping it in a purely possessive move—one she wholeheartedly approved of.

He tasted of coffee and mint. Beneath that, though, was something she had a feeling was distinctly Linc.

The whistles and cheers finally sank in, for both of them, and he drew back, not far, just enough to rest his forehead on hers. She still held onto his wrists, fairly certain if she were to let go, her body would be on the floor. Her face heated again and he shook his head.

“No.”

She blinked. “No?”

“You don’t get to be embarrassed by that kiss.” His words were low but she wasn’t sure how private they were, given how close the boys were. “You’re my fiancée and I don’t want to hide it from everyone.”

Right. The show for Mr. Stevenson.

As the announcement spread, the whispered comments from everyone were nothing more than a hum to her and she nodded, not sure she could speak at the moment. His large hand flexed on her neck, reminding her how different they were.

“We’re having dinner with the Stevensons tonight.”

Words. She needed to make the words.

“What about my daughter?” The daughter she should have told this morning about the engagement.

“She’s welcome to come. I don’t know how excited she’s going to be about sitting with us, though.”

Fury surged. “I’m not sure I can make it. I have to see if someone can watch her.” She stepped away from his touch, hating how she missed it the moment she no longer had it. “I should get cleaned up and back to work. You don’t need me for the rest of the tour.” Forcing a smile, she looked at the boys who’d made her enjoy getting sweaty and thanked them.

“Come back and play anytime, Miss Emma. You’ll be giving Mitchell a run for his money soon enough.”

She waved over her shoulder. With farewells to the Stevensons, she went to the office after stopping off at the bathroom to clean herself up. The moment she stared at her reflection in the mirror, she realized Linc’s announcement meant Greer would hear about the engagement from someone else if Emma didn’t get her ass out to the baseball field.

“I’ll be right back, Miss Yander. I have to check on my daughter.”

Emma hurried out to the field and slowed as she watched her daughter play. Such happiness. When the team came in

from the outfield, she waved her over. Greer was playing third base, though that might not be permanent. They tended to move the kids around to find out who played well where. But it was the same position Linc played, if she wasn't mistaken.

She snorted. Who was she kidding? There wasn't any speculation as to what position that man played. She knew.

"Do we have to leave, Mama?"

"No. I just wanted to tell you that you're going to hear people talk about me being engaged to—"

"Mr. Conner. I know. Does this mean I can call him Linc like everyone else does?"

"Are you upset by this?"

"No, he's the coolest. I'll like calling him Linc." A kiss and a smile and her daughter was off again.

Emma thought about it as she walked inside. Greer had always been different, not caring about a lot of things that some kids would obsess and worry over. She yanked open the door and froze. Cold liquid ran down her front.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Emma."

Glancing down, she bit back her moan of frustration as bright red liquid soaked the entire front of her shirt. Her light cream shirt.

Wet T-shirt contest, here I come.

Chapter Five

Linc scrubbed his hand down the nape of his neck. Holy shit. His entire body still trembled with the aftershocks of the kiss he'd shared with Emma. Five minutes at least had passed since the moment he would refer to as The First Kiss for the rest of his life. But his head hadn't been in the game since.

Nodding at the appropriate times, Linc finished up the tour with Mr. Stevenson and his wife. He'd been around enough WAGs to recognize her type. And he didn't approve.

Was he saying there weren't faithful women who were WAGs? Of course not. There were, but damn, he'd seen more of the unfaithful.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Emma."

Fuck. Her name and he was right back to the moment he'd been pressed up against her. Sampling her unique flavor. Getting her against him, all of her curves and softness.

Linc turned and worked to keep his laughter contained. Emma appeared to have had a Gatorade bath.

"Excuse me," he said, heading immediately toward her. "You okay, babe?"

Her gaze narrowed on him. *Okay, babe is not an option.*

"Fine. I just need to dry off."

"We'll be back," Linc commented to whoever was listening before escorting her to his office. The moment the door closed behind them, she stepped away from him.

Trying to ignore how the wet cotton clung to her breasts, he went to his bag and opened it. Drawing out one of his old shirts from his professional days, he turned and lost his breath. Emma was bent over the trash can so the liquid dripped into it. Her top gaped enough to entice him even more.

"Take it off."

Emma jerked her head up. "What?"

He moved toward her, the shirt balled up in his fist. “Your shirt. Take it off.”

She stood tall, the wet fabric adhering to her full breasts, making his mouth dry. Drier.

“Here? In front of you?”

“The shades are drawn and I can turn around. But it’s gonna be a bit odd for your fiancé to leave the room for you to change.”

“Right. My fiancé.”

“I hear tone.” He never would have pegged this woman who he’d watched from afar to be so snarky and have such an attitude. She hid it well, but she was a firecracker.

“What would you have me do? Stroll out in my overly worn bra to your truck? Wait for you to finish up your day like a doting fiancée? Sure you want everyone to see my less than thin body?”

So that’s how it was going to be.

He paused before her, grinding his jaw. “Shirt off.” He held up the one in his hand. “A dry one for you. A clean, dry one.”

Tears shimmered in her gaze and he inched back, shirt still proffered. When she took it, he turned, giving her a speck of privacy.

The sound of her peeling off the sodden shirt made him want to do it for her. He went over baseball stats in his head, just to keep his mind focused on something else. Trying to convince himself he was in control of his hormones and not the other way around. Difficult though it may be.

Something *other* than how much he wanted permission to touch her. To learn her body’s secrets.

“Okay.”

There was a definite quiver in that single word. He licked his lips and turned. “Damn.” Linc smiled. “You make my shirt look fucking incredible.”

It wasn’t a lie. She’d released her hair so it tumbled around

her face. Her lips were rosy, like her cheeks. The dark gray of his shirt made her freckles pop along with her peaches-and-cream complexion.

For the life of him, he couldn't remember the words on the shirt. All he saw was Emma.

"Come here." The two-word command fell from his mouth in a low rasped tone.

Linc led her to his desk, noting she had draped her wet shirt over the garbage can. He sat her on the desk before claiming his chair and wedging between her legs.

"Emma."

Her gaze glittered around the room before finally meeting his waiting stare.

"This is a mistake."

Linc bit back his immediate denial and took a breath. "Why? More specifically, *what* is a mistake?"

"All of this. I..." She picked up the neck of his shirt, putting it over her nose. "This smells like you."

He hid his smile. Hands on the outside of her thighs, he spread his fingers, wanting to touch.

"Is that a good thing?"

"Definitely. You smell yummy." She flushed and moved. Or rather tried to but Linc kept her against him. "See, I can't hold a decent conversation. I keep saying things like that."

"Emma. We are engaged. You should like how I smell and you're not giving yourself enough credit."

"No one will believe this."

"That I was lucky enough to get you to agree to marry me?"

She frowned at him. "Don't try to butter me up with false platitudes. I don't need it and it pisses me off."

"Not trying to butter you up and why do you assume that what I'm saying is false? Emma, you're a hell of a woman. I'm not making this up."

“I’m an overweight single mother who never finished high school. Not exactly the catch of the year, especially for someone like you.”

“Somme-onne likkke meee.” He drew out the words, enunciating each syllable with exaggerated care. He hated those words on her lips.

She flushed. “I mean, a professional ball player. Not your skin color.”

“So your issue with me is that I played a professional sport, not the color of my skin.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t have a problem with either.”

Linc lifted an eyebrow. “Then why are you making it about them?”

“I’m not. You’re the one pushing this.”

“The pushing will come later, Emma. Promise. Right now, you need to listen to me. You may not see yourself as a catch, but I fucking do. You put yourself last, giving your all for your daughter. To others that may not be hot, but to *me* it is. To me, *you* are sexy as fuck because of how you care for your daughter and how you look. You’re the fucking complete package and I have to tell you, I’m looking forward to late nights in the office.”

He sat up straighter and inched closer to her, maintaining eye contact.

“You and me. A copy machine.”

She blinked a few times, a small smile popping into view. “Don’t they have a function where you can enlarge the size of something?”

The door opened behind them and he looked at Mr. Stevenson peering in. “Forgive the intrusion but I had a few more questions.”

“Be right with you, Mr. Stevenson.” He looked at the woman in front of him. “Tell you what. We’ll do some hands-on research—see if *anything* needs to be enlarged.” Skimming his hands down her sides, he knotted his shirt along her left hip

so it didn't engulf her as much.

She flushed. "I don't want to let you down." Her soft admission was heartfelt.

He placed two fingers in the collar of his shirt that she wore and pulled her closer until their lips brushed. "You're perfect for this, Emma. Perfect for me. One day at a time. You won't let me down."

Linc kissed her then rolled his chair before offering her a hand to assist her off the desk. Mr. Stevenson waited and Linc didn't appreciate how the man had just strolled into his office.

While Emma picked up her ruined shirt, he went to nudge the Texan out of the room. "Meet you in the art room, Emma?"

"I'll be right there, just want to wash this out."

"Okay." He focused on Mr. Stevenson. "I'm not sure how much more you would like to see today. I know we have the dinner planned for tonight."

"I'd like to sit down with you and go over what you want to do with the money, should I invest in this center?"

Once again, he bristled. All of that had been outlined in the proposal.

"Sure thing. But we can't do that today. I have another class to teach."

"Computers? I saw a room with a bunch."

"I have a friend who teaches that but right now kids are using it for homework."

"I will get my wife and we'll head back to the hotel. Where is your place? Perhaps we can discuss what you're planning over dinner."

He gave his address, reluctantly, and as Mr. Stevenson walked off, Linc withdrew his phone and alerted his father. Then he walked into the art room fifteen minutes before the class started. When the door opened, he wasn't ready to deal with anyone and turned. His complaint became praise as he

watched Emma walk in, still wrapped in his shirt.

“You’re teaching this class?”

He shrugged, not taking his gaze from her as she moved across the floor to his side. “Monitoring it. Making sure it doesn’t turn into a paint-by-number on a child.”

Her lips twitched.

“Although,” he continued, “I’d be happy to paint you.” And that was no lie. “Naked. Lying on a couch.”

Her lips quirked. “What color is the sky in your world, Mr. Conner?”

“Same as it is in yours.” He nudged her with his shoulder.

“I doubt that. I called Dawson and she said she was happy to watch Greer tonight. I just... I need more notice than that.” She walked away.

“I’m sorry. I know that was sprung on you. Thank you.” He wanted to tug her against him and bury his nose in her hair. Instead, he held still and watched her as she wandered around the room, looking but not touching. “Dinner is at my place.”

She froze. “Am I cooking?”

“Not unless you want to. My dad will make something and have it ready in time.”

She turned to face him. “Your dad cooks?”

He smiled. “Pops does a bit of everything. Not a gourmet chef but he can make a mean meal.”

“He’s amazing.”

“Can’t argue with that, but we need to lose the appreciation in your tone when you talk about him. It’s sounding like you’re fonder of him than me and I just realized I’m a very jealous fiancé.”

She propped her hip against the wall. “Just realized?”

He nodded and headed toward her. “Like, seconds ago.”

The door opened and the kids came in. Emma shrugged.

“Interesting,” she muttered. “I’ll be in your office. I’m going to see what I can do to get you organized.”

“Don’t do any copying without me,” he teased.

She ran her gaze over him, lips twitching. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” Then she walked away and yep, he stared. Again.

...

Emma glanced around Linc’s office. There wasn’t much in the way of his days as a major league baseball player. And she knew he’d won awards. He was a private man. And a seriously disorganized one.

She didn’t want to ruin his setup, if he had one, but she needed to bring some order to this chaotic mess if it was the last thing she did. Picking a corner, she got started.

A bunch of rolled-up papers sat in a box on the floor. She reached in to pull one out. Emma had a moment of hesitation before she unrolled it.

Holy crap. This is a piece of art.

Immediately recognizing the location as Palisade Glen, the local covered bridge, she took in the incredible detail. Questions, she had so many questions.

Putting it down, she opened up another. Catamount Lake.

The next five were more scenes from around Rock Falls. But the paintings weren’t new. The one of Palisade Glen was before the bridge had been fixed. All of it begged the question: who had done them and why did Linc have them rolled up in a box in his office? His father perhaps? His mother?

She shook her head even as she continued perusing through the paintings. Emma knew about his family from growing up in the same town as him and her maybe-not-so-mild obsession with him. She knew his mother, a Native American from down south, was not part of their lives. Originally, she’d been from the local tribe, but she’d headed south and had returned here with Linc’s father only to go back after Linc was born—with no contact with anyone. And she hadn’t been back since he

was a little boy. These paintings were more recent, as far as she could tell.

Emma wanted them up on the walls. Even lining the halls of the center. While the sports angle was impressive and she appreciated the attention the kids would get from three professional players, she also knew that not every child wanted to do sports, or even could at a level that would give them star status.

“I wonder if he has frames for these?”

She got nosy and began digging. Time passed, though she wasn't focused on it, and when she turned around and found Linc leaning in the doorway, she jumped, a girlish squeal escaping.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, hating how she sounded out of breath.

How the hell did that man look so good? He'd had a long day schmoozing with a potential investor and dealing with children. Yet, there he was—deliciously rumped in a way that made her think of bedrooms, walls, couches and more orgasms than she could dream of. His hiking boots were crossed at the ankles and his baggy jeans tugged taut in just the right spots. His shirt hung partially untucked over his waist and his corded arms were crossed as he stared at her staring at him.

More of that incredible arm porn for her to add to her visual bank.

“You mean in my office?”

Minor detail. She lifted her chin and sniffed. “I mean shouldn't you still be out schmoozing the big money man?”

“Actually,” he drawled as he walked toward her, “I came to find my elusive fiancée and see if she was ready to head home.”

“I'm going home with you?”

She winced over the pitch she hit with that question.

He didn't stop until he was in her space. Damn it, now she was thinking about him all over her. Tipping her head, she

focused on his eyes. Not the dimple he had when he gave her that grin. One that made her think more about orgasms and less about being proper in a community center.

Nope, not focusing on that at *all*.

“That’s where dinner is. Thought you may want to change first. If not, I’m fine with it. I love you in my clothing.”

She clenched her thighs together at the heat in his gaze when he ran it over her body.

“Where’s Greer?”

“Out at the front desk talking to Tully and Dawson. They wanted to know if it was okay if she came with them now.” He cupped her cheek. “I’m perfectly fine having her at the house for dinner, Emma, if you want her with us.”

“It’s a business dinner.”

“For a community center that focuses on children. She’s part of our life and she is always welcome where we are.”

A twinge punched her heart. What if her baby’s father had felt that way? Where would her life be now? Not in Rock Falls, that much she knew.

Now isn’t the time to think about that loser. Or how we still live in the same state and he hasn’t once reached out about his daughter. Honestly, she didn’t know what she would do if he did, given his response when she’d told him of her pregnancy.

“When is the dinner?” She winced over the edge to her tone.

“Two hours.”

“Wait here.” She went to the door. “Greer.”

Her daughter bounded over to her, smile stretching from ear to ear. “Is it okay if I spend more time with Dawson, Mama? We’re going to let Tully come too.”

Meeting Dawson’s gaze, she mouthed her thanks. “I think you and Dawson will have a great time. Don’t forget to include Tully.”

She hugged her. “We won’t. Bye, Mama.” She stepped back.

“Bye, Linc!”

“Bye, Greer. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay!” Greer tucked her hand in Dawson’s and didn’t flinch from Tully when he reached for her other hand.

Emma blinked back tears as she watched her daughter go off with her friends. Greer was emerging from her cocoon and would be ready to fly on her own before she knew it. Turning to the room where Linc remained—right where she’d told him to—she walked in and kicked the door closed before marching up to him. Hands on her hips, she looked up.

“Yes?”

God, he was so tall.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed onto his shoulders and yanked him toward her as she pushed up on her toes. She slammed her mouth against his and kissed him. No tongue, nothing like that, just lips to lips.

His eyes were wide when she stepped away.

“Thank you,” she blurted. God, had she fucked up the kiss, too? He’d done it so well to her earlier, but this was different.

Linc opened his mouth and she tutted, waving a hand in front of him.

“Nope, not talking about it.”

“Emma.”

“Lalalala. I said not talking about it. Now, help me put up some of these paintings. I have an hour before you need to take me home to get changed.”

“We’re not putting up these paintings.”

“Why not?” She glared at him. “Have you looked at them? They’re incredible.”

“I’ve seen them.”

Emma narrowed her eyes and picked up the one closest to her. Opening it, she noticed the way his gaze slid away.

“Look at me.”

He didn't.

"Linc," she insisted. "Look at me."

"Why do you want these to go up?"

"Because they're incredible and they're of Rock Falls. People will recognize them. And art makes people feel good."

"There's more than just art to make people feel good." He tugged on the knot of the shirt she wore, bringing her nearer to him. "Like kisses."

Her body flushed hot.

"Not talking about it."

"If we're putting up these paintings, we're talking about the kiss."

"That's blackmail."

He smiled. "Business negotiation."

"Shit still stinks if you call it a bouquet of flowers."

Linc snorted and took the painting from her. "Do we have a deal?"

"Deal, but we talk while we hang the art."

He nodded. "Get some pins, I'll bring the box."

Surely he didn't want to discuss the kiss that bad? She got the pins and together they exited his office.

"The one of the bridge here." She indicated the wall where it would be seen by those coming in the building.

He clenched his jaw. "Fine." Picking it from the box, he unrolled it and held it up until she nodded. "Pin."

She placed one in his hand and watched him reach up to push it into the wall. Truly, it wasn't fair. He moved and it was just a fluid motion, whereas with her, it was a lot of jerking and panting. Not the good kind.

"Why?"

His question pulled her attention from his arm. What was that, his triceps? Either way it was hot and muscular, plus

tattooed. This one was a tribal design. A lot of guys, and women, had them. However, in her opinion, none looked as good as the one on Linc. It hugged his muscles, weaving around his arm like a lover. She clenched her hand, like she could actually reach up and touch the design.

“Emma.”

“Huh?”

He captured her chin and forced eye contact. “While I love you ogling me, we’re in front of children. Focus. Why did you kiss me?”

She pushed two more pins in his hand. “I told you, as a thank you.”

“Actually,” he corrected, “you didn’t. You kissed me then said thank you. Not that you kissed me as a thank you.”

She blinked while he put in the next two pins and held out his hand. Emma dropped a pin on his palm and bent to get the next image.

“Fine. I did it as a thank you.” Very deliberately she unrolled the next image and stared at it. The one of Catamount Lake.

His face took the place of the canvas and she swallowed hard as his gaze bore into her.

How did he get such great curved lashes? It wasn’t freaking fair. Women paid good money to have fake ones put on and here he was throwing around his incredibly thick, long lashes like he deserved them.

“Okay, Ms. Stubborn. Why were you thanking me?”

“Why? Want to make sure you don’t do it again to avoid more bad kisses?”

“Or perhaps so I can do it more to get more kisses which were not bad.”

She huffed. “You didn’t even try to kiss me back.”

His eyes narrowed the tiniest bit. “So, you’re mad at me now because I didn’t kiss you back in that surprise kiss that

didn't last more than a second? I just want to make sure I have it all right. You did it as a thank you, but you're mad at me because I didn't respond."

Well, when he puts it like that.

She pushed the painting toward him. "Enough questions for one picture. The next one should go by the door to the art room."

His lips twitched. "Yes ma'am."

Chapter Six

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Linc sighed as he paused before the door to his house. He could smell her. Always he could smell her, that damn evocative scent she wore—designed to drive him insane.

“I can go home if you think my being here will make it worse.”

“That’s not it at all, Emma.” Linc turned to face her. “Please don’t think that. I’m just... I’m protective of my personal space.”

“I understand. I’ll keep the snooping to the second night I’m here.” She offered up a tiny, shy smile.

He appreciated her trying to cheer him up and get his thoughts off the train they were on. With a smile, he brushed a kiss over her hand.

“There isn’t a room you can’t go in. My fiancée has complete access.”

“Not a real fiancée. Just a fake one.” She blinked and he pushed a section of her hair back from her blue eyes so he could see them without any obstruction. “I’ll take my cues from you, and again I’m going to apologize for anything I do wrong.”

“You’ll be fine.”

It was himself he was concerned about. He should have insisted on meeting in a public place. The last thing he wanted was Mrs. Stevenson snooping in his home.

The door opened and he found his father, his sharp gaze moving between him and Emma.

She smiled and held out her hand. “Lovely to see you again, Mr. Conner.”

Linc’s father snorted and pulled her in for a hug. “You’ll call me Pops and we hug.” With a glare for him over Emma’s shoulder, his father brought her inside, still keeping her close

to his side. "I'll give you a quick tour while he goes and showers before changing into something appropriate to wear. I'll give you all the details about how he used to pee in the bathtub, calling it a homemade water fountain."

"Pops!"

Emma burst into laughter. His father waved him away and Linc listened, glad Emma seemed more relaxed, even if it was at his expense.

I have to tell that man not to share all those stories.

Fifteen minutes before the Stevensons were due to arrive, he strolled from his bedroom out to the main part of the house. Emma and his father were in the kitchen, heads together as they stood over the stove.

"That's the secret?" Emma said, her voice full of wonder. "I've never been able to get them to do that."

"Practice, my dear. I had to learn to make more than boxed macaroni and toast to keep my growing boy healthy."

"You did that well enough. He certainly grew."

Linc smiled and leaned against the wall, listening to them.

"You remember in school how skinny he was. I swear he had a hollow leg. Never seemed to get full. Thankfully, I also had Mrs. Faulkner feeding him. Between the both of us, we kept those three fed."

Emma lifted her head and met his gaze in the window. A ghost of a smile lifted her lips. "You did a great job."

"I like to think so. Even if that leg is still hollow."

The doorbell pealed and he gave her a look before going to open the door. Game on.

Three hours later he closed that same door behind them. Mr. Stevenson and his wife wanted the full experience. They were going to have another dinner, out this time, where they would do more talking, and tomorrow he had to meet Mr. Stevenson at the office to show him another copy of the proposal.

He'd had everything set up for the original time they were

supposed to have arrived and it had just gotten shifted forward. He rubbed his forehead and took a moment.

His skin prickled and he glanced over his shoulder to find Emma, hands clasped loosely in front of her.

“Are you okay?” She blinked insanely long lashes as her soft question moved around him.

“If I say no?”

She shrugged. “I was going to hug you but I’m not sure if you want me to.”

His answer was to open his arms. Holding his breath until she walked into his embrace, he wrapped both arms around her and buried his nose in the top of her hair.

Part of him waited for the questions to come pouring out of her. Emma was naturally inquisitive. He’d learned that from watching her with his father. She’d peppered him with questions when it had been just the three of them until the Stevensons had arrived. However, with Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson in his home, she had been mostly silent, letting him lead and only speaking when a question was directly put toward her.

Except for the one time when Mrs. Stevenson had wondered why there was nothing of hers in the house.

“Not that our living situation is any of your business,” Emma had said, an edge to her tone. “But I have a young impressionable daughter and we are making sure that she is comfortable. I have nothing here and he has nothing at my house. It works for us. And I’m pretty sure you had no reason to be snooping in *my* fiancé’s bedroom.”

God, a protective-mama-bear-slash-jealous-fiancée was sexy as fuck. Yeah, he’d wanted to kiss her right then. No denying the pride in his father’s eyes when he’d given his own nod of approval. But after that, she’d retreated and only shown the Emma who was quiet and demure.

Linc held her tighter and loved that she didn’t move back or ask him to loosen his grip. A man could get used to this. Correction, *he* could get used to this. No reason for another

man to touch her. At all. Beyond her, he watched as his father turned off the kitchen light and left the room.

“I know I’m not one of your boys, but I’m a pretty good listener.” She remained relaxed in his embrace.

“I’m glad you’re not, Freckles. Because if you were one of them, I would have to tell you that you’ve gotten much better smelling and that could be awkward.”

Her chuckle warmed him. Drawing back so he could see her face, he tugged her to the couch and sank on the large cushions, pulling her down next to him.

“I hate feeling like a puppet.” Linc’s admission shocked him but he didn’t retract the words.

Emma toed off her shoes and faced him as she crossed her legs. Her skirt was long enough that it covered everything, stopping above her ankles. A light frothy material that seemed to float around her, the sea-green hue made her eyes and freckles pop. What a pity—he wanted to see more of her. He wanted to inch up the material, exposing skin he knew would be softer than silk. His brain, always one of his weaker organs, started trying to figure out if she was bare, close cropped, and damn it, how she smelled and what she was going to taste like on his tongue. Because *that* was definitely going to happen—someday.

“Why do you want him as an investor?” She flattened her lips and shrugged. “I mean, I get the desire for investors, but why this one?”

“His pockets.” He rested his head against the back of the couch but reached out a hand to stream some of her brown hair through his fingers, unable to resist the pull. Not a simple brown, but variegated samples of shades. Pecan, maple, caramel, chocolate, cinnamon and more. “They’re deep.”

She scooted closer and he wanted to wrap her up in his arms, bury his face into her skin, and hold her until the new day began. The questions were there, he could sense them, and he waited for her to voice them.

Emma tipped her head to the side and he knew she was

weighing her words. She did the same with her daughter before she gave a response. “But you don’t *need* him.”

“No, I don’t.” Appeasing the monster inside him, he took another section of her hair and played with it, feeding the need for touch he had when it came to this woman.

“Then what is making you go through this farce about having a fiancée?”

Linc held her gaze as he debated whether he should tell her his truth. She didn’t rush him, just watched him in return.

“Do you remember a young girl named Howie from when we were in school? She was in your grade, I think.”

He watched her expression as she thought about it. Eventually she nodded.

“I think so. Didn’t have a lot of friends. Much like myself.”

Note to file away and focus on later. “She went missing.”

“What?” Emma sat up straighter, brow furrowed. The move pulled most of her hair from his fingers. “She went missing? Why did no one say anything? What happened?”

Acid churned, rising up in his throat. Linc swallowed. “She was taken. And no one said anything about it, because she was just another child in a long line of troubled kids who the adults didn’t have time to care about.”

Linc watched her as she digested that piece of news, nibbling her lower lip in the left corner before giving him a nod that he should continue.

“When my father told me, the guys and I tried to see if we could find her. But we came up with nothing. We were stonewalled at every turn. No one would tell us anything.” His throat was dry and he cleared it. “She was almost like a sister to me. She’d been staying in our house, my dad feeding her. And then she was just *gone*.” That last word ripped from his chest, violently and painfully.

Damn it, tears blurred his vision. He pressed on.

“I realized then, had she a place to go—a safe place, a spot

where adults would listen to kids when they came with a problem, maybe, *maybe*, she'd still be here. Still alive and with us in Rock Falls."

"Linc," Emma whispered, her voice as tortured as he felt.

"That," he forced the word out, fingers flexing as if he tried to reach something so close but slightly out of reach, "that's why this center is so important to me. So kids from all over the county can feel safe. Where they can get the help they need, even if they don't realize they do. Also a place to teach them how to look out for their fellow humans. To not turn a blind eye, but ask questions. Raise their voices when someone isn't around any longer. Maybe I can keep one person safe *now* when I couldn't *then*. And I need more money to do it right."

There it was. His heart, ripped out and spilled for her to see all of it.

"Linc, look at me."

He lifted his gaze to find her much closer. As he watched her, she bunched up her skirt over her knees and straddled his lap, settling against his groin, reminding him how very attracted he was to her.

Not that he'd forgotten.

"You can't blame yourself for Howie. You looked for her."

"I didn't find her."

Emma held his face in her hands, her skin soft with a few callouses. She gave a shake of her head. "No, but you did everything you could at your age. You tried, which was more than many did. Cut yourself some slack, Linc. You were a child."

Same thing his father had told him. It didn't feel any better now than it had then. "It doesn't seem like enough."

"Maybe you should go easier on yourself. Look at what you have done. What you've gotten started." She canted her head to the side, swiped her tongue along her lower lip, and took a sharp breath. "You want this to go national, don't you?"

How the hell had she figured that out? He'd not even told

his best friends that part yet.

“I wouldn’t say no.” He shrugged.

“*There you are,*” she murmured, her thumbs skimming along his jaw.

“What?”

Her gaze became molten and it wasn’t just with desire. It had something else in it, he couldn’t pinpoint it at the moment, but he wanted to see it more often. To figure out what exactly it was. Then keep it solely for himself to enjoy.

“The man you were when you were playing ball. That spark in your eyes. It’s been missing. Until now. I’m in.”

He had been focused on her mouth. “You’re in?” *What does she mean by the man I’d been when playing ball?*

The smile she gave blinded him. “Yep. Consider me the fake fiancée at your service. For as long as you need me.”

“Working for me, too?”

Her lips twitched. “Well, you quit my other job for me, so I don’t have a lot of options.” She rocked on him and he bit back a groan. “One thing, though.”

God, it was like she didn’t know how much she affected him. He’d promise the world at this rate. “What’s that?”

“Teach one of the art classes.”

He frowned. “No.”

She inched closer, dragging herself along him and making him lose track of the conversation. “Yes, it will be good.” She touched his cheek, her head tilting slightly to the right as she stared at him. “You have Mitchell doing basketball and computers. Tully is doing mechanics, football, and field hockey, ice when the rink is in. You are doing baseball.”

“And running the center.”

She flattened her lips and shrugged. “Yeah, that’s more *my* job now, so you have time to do your other passion and don’t tell me it’s not.”

God, he wanted to tell her that.

“If I teach, you take a class.”

She rested her forehead on his. “Deal. But I’m taking your class.”

“First one is painting nudes.”

Emma tipped her head as laughter burst from her. God, he loved hearing her laugh.

Linc sank his hand into her hair and kissed her.

...

“Where’s the form, Miss Emma?”

She hefted the stack of papers she needed to file by the end of the day as she pivoted on her toes toward the table at her left. Resting her chin on the top of the ones she held, she reached out her temporarily free hand to swipe one up for the boy asking.

“Right here, Richard. We told you this morning, when you should have been listening to the presentation.”

He grinned at her, showing off the missing front tooth. “I was distracted by your beauty?”

Behind her, Miss Yander snickered and muttered, “Oh boy.”

Emma lifted her brows at him. “Why is that a question coming from you, Richard? I think it shouldn’t be a question.”

He flushed. “Not a question, Miss Emma. Statement of fact, but don’t tell Linc.”

She shifted the stack of papers to her other arm and tucked some hair behind her ear. “Why am I not telling him this?”

The boy blanched and ran off with a “Thank you” before vanishing around the corner.

“Because,” a deep voice whispered in her ear, “your fiancé is a jealous man.”

It didn’t matter that the entire thing was a farce. Every single time she heard him mention it, her insides went to

mush. It was pure dumb luck she hadn't dropped everything she held onto the floor because this man, he was really good at turning her into a klutz.

She knew her face was red but she didn't care. Honestly, it was nice, really freaking nice, to be known as his woman. Whenever he referred to himself as her fiancé, part of her melted.

At this rate, she wasn't going to have anything left when this ended. She would be a pile of liquid on the floor. Her infatuation as a young girl had grown so much stronger. Following him from school, through the minors, and into the pros it'd only deepened. This Linc was no boy, he was all man and she wanted him with a fire that rivaled the sun's heat.

“Really? Of a ten-year-old?”

“Male, so yes.” He nodded, then brushed a kiss over her cheek seconds before he plucked the stack from her with ease. “Where are we taking these?”

“Your office, please. I have to file all of them before the end of the day. Permission forms for the newest additions to the center from their parents and all the emergency contact information.”

She smiled at Miss Cynthia Yander. At first the young woman had been moody that she wasn't working so closely with Linc anymore, but Emma believed she'd won her over, for she was helpful now. It had only taken a few days. And for all the things she could imagine about men who had professional sports money, she didn't think Linc was the kind of man who would be interested in a high school girl. No, correction. She was positive he wouldn't be.

Stepping into the office behind Linc, she closed the door as he bent to place the stack on his desk.

“Keep staring at me like that, Emma, and I promise these children are going to get an eyeful.”

She flushed as she pushed her hands into her pockets. “Don't know what you're talking about. I wasn't staring.”

Slow, like he owned the rights to the universe's time, Linc

turned so he faced her. She swallowed hard and struggled to make it look like she wasn't about to erupt into a ball of flame simply because he glanced at her.

“That a fact?”

Lifting her chin, she nodded. “Yes.”

He didn't speak for a few moments, just stared at her. Unnerved, Emma didn't move.

What is he thinking about and can he hear how hard my heart is beating?

He could probably see the pulse running hell-bent in her throat.

Linc perched on the edge of his desk, resting on those powerful arms she dreamed about every single night, his strong legs stretched out in front of him. “You know, I'd love to believe you, but I'm afraid that I can't do that.”

“You could, you just don't *want* to.”

Half of his mouth quirked up. “Like you *could* admit you were staring at my ass just now?”

She sniffed primly. “This isn't about me, lucky for both of us.” More her, but hey, no reason to be specific.

“Come here.”

She shook her head, not sure how much longer she'd be able to keep from touching him. “I have work to do, as do you.”

He crooked a finger at her. “Come here.”

Damn it, she wanted to run to him, jump into his arms, and let the rest of the world fall away. Tall, sexy, broody. Funny.

Making a point to look down at her watch and tapping the cracked face, she clucked her tongue. “You, Mr. Conner, have things to do and I'm not going to be late getting home and getting dinner ready because you're up to something.”

“Up to something?” He shrugged those broad shoulders. “I'm simply asking you to come here.”

I can do this. Right? Here's hoping.

Walking up to him, she crossed her arms as she stood. Slowly, again, because he just didn't move like anyone in the world could rush him along, he reached for her. Strange in a way, because she knew how fast he could be on the baseball field. Linc tugged her to stand between his legs.

It wasn't fair that he smelled so delicious. If he wanted to make more money for the center, all he'd have to do was bottle his scent and sell it. Deep and masculine, woodsy yet fresh, with a hint of musk and all-around addictive. The women, and probably some men, would go insane for it.

“What?”

“Sure you don't want to be a teacher, Emma? You've got that whole sexy, stern bit going on.”

“A job.”

He cocked one eyebrow and she cleared her throat.

“I have a job to do.”

“Right, that *job*.”

Why did he sound disappointed at that? Okay, it was official. She really needed to stop reading romances in bed before she fell asleep at night. They were obviously messing with her mind.

“I have a lot of forms to get filed on the computer. And we both know that Mr. Stevenson will be back to take another look at your proposal.” For the past few days, the Stevensons had been out and about in the area, popping into the center and talking with people. She was glad she didn't have to see a lot of them and dreaded their dinner out as two couples.

“Kiss me.”

She leaned back, trying to ignore the way his thumbs made small circles on her exposed skin.

“You heard me fine, Emma. Convince me that you aren't attracted to me and weren't staring at my ass.”

“How is a kiss going to do that?”

He smirked. “Figured it was a good thing to try.”

“I don’t have time for games, Linc.”

“No game. I want a kiss. You control it. I’ll keep my hands right here.” He lifted them and slapped them down on the desk, gripping the edge. “You’re not going to make your fiancé beg, are you?”

Would he, though? Beg to kiss her? She wasn’t above begging, not for him to touch, kiss, or hold her or anything else those damn books had been taunting her with.

“Emma.”

That’s all it was from him. One word. Something as simple as her name and she was a goner.

Giving another sniff, trying to go for cool and unaffected—which, for the record, she was *not*—she moved closer and settled her hands on his shoulders, even as she pushed up on her toes.

His gaze was locked onto her but he didn’t move. Emma brushed her lips along his mouth, hating how much that small contact between them affected her in such a deep manner. She moved back until there was space between them. Linc still held onto the desk and she skimmed her eyes over his body.

Arms tense, pushing those muscles into locked position. Damn he was strong.

“See, done and done.”

“The fuck that was a kiss, Emma.” His voice rolled around her, deep and seductive.

“You said a kiss. That was a kiss. May not have been the one you wanted, but it was what you got.”

“Noted. Be more specific when telling my fiancée what I would like from her.” He raked his gaze over her as he pushed away from the desk and walked toward her and the door. “Like, very fucking specific.” Linc opened the door and stepped through, only to pop his head in. “Oh, and you were so checking out my ass and we both know the attraction is there.”

Chapter Seven

“Where is Emma?” Linc questioned two of the boys as they set up in the classroom.

“Not sure, Linc. I can go to the office and see if that’s where she is.” Darby Smoot, the younger of the two, made the offer.

“Please do. Remind her that she is signed up for this class and we need to get started.”

The boy nodded and dashed out the door.

Linc sighed as he looked around the room. She’d gotten him to agree to teach this class but he wanted her with him. There was something very calming about that woman. She calmed the loud cacophony that seemed to echo in his head when he had to do painting things with others. That had always been his private getaway and the only reason he agreed to teach the class was because of Emma.

It was a full room and he expected as much. Not that they would all stay for the entire thing, but as with Mitchell and Tully, when they did something, the kids lined up to be a part of it.

The class wasn’t going to be very structured. He wanted them to figure out what they liked to paint. He would be around to help, if needed.

“Let’s get started then.”

“No bowl of fruit at the front to paint, Linc?”

He glanced at the door and shook his head as Mitchell walked in the room, two more kids following him.

“I have faith in my kids, Mitchell. But if you’d like something simple, I can get a basketball for you. You may know what they look like.”

“I’ve seen one or two.” He smacked the kids with him on the shoulder and they hurried in to claim a spot. With a jut of his chin, Mitchell had him moving in his direction.

“Everything okay?” Linc asked in a low tone when he reached his friend.

“Yes. Just seeing how you’re doing. Haven’t talked to you in a few days. If you need anything with Mr. Stevenson, just let me or Tully know. We’ve been giving you space since we know that’s taking up your time, making sure everything is smooth for his sporadic drop-ins.”

He knew and he missed them. He, Mitchell, and Tully were close. Even when they’d each been involved in their professional careers, they’d spoken at least once a week.

“I’m good. I have a lot to tell you both.”

His friend grinned, eyebrows waggling. “About your fiancée?”

A rare spike of jealousy toward Mitchell spiked through him. Emma and Mitchell would make an attractive couple.

“You need to stay away from her.”

Mitchell rolled his eyes. “You’re just like Tully about Dawson. Just because I talk to her doesn’t mean I want her up against the wall.”

“Keep it that way.”

Mitchell waved off the threat and Linc let it go. The man was his best friend. He didn’t have to worry about him trying anything with Emma.

“Tomorrow, dinner at my place. I’m not taking no for an answer. Bring something good.” Mitchell backed out of the door.

“How does dinner at your place turn into *me* bringing the food?”

“Shouldn’t neglect me.” With a two-fingered salute, Mitchell jogged off.

Rolling his eyes, Linc went in the room and gave the kids his attention. Not much later, Darby came back and approached him at the front of the classroom. When the kid handed him a folded note, he took it and gestured for him to

head to his spot and join in the painting.

Slicing through the tape, he unfolded the sheet.

On a phone call with a parent. Will be there as soon as I can.

Emma.

That was it.

Damn it, he missed her.

Placing the note in his pocket, he walked around and helped when asked, answering questions as he moved from kid to kid.

This was the last class of the night and it wasn't even going to be an hour. He thought it went well and was cleaning off the last of the brushes when a tingle of awareness moved over him.

"How'd the phone call go?" He didn't turn from the sink, just continued to clean.

"Fine. How did the class go?"

There is something wrong with me if just hearing her voice makes me smile like a fool.

"Not bad. They're finding out what they like. I do believe I have an attendance problem, though."

"And you?" Emma asked, the sound of her footsteps growing nearer. "Did you enjoy it? And what do you mean you have an attendance problem? Were there too many in the room? Next time we could take it to the room with the removable divider if you need more space."

He didn't respond until she was beside him at the sink. Then he cut his gaze to her and stared down at the top of her head, noting how her hair was up in a haphazard bun at the base of her neck.

"I did. I meant I have a certain woman who said she would be attending this class if I taught it, and she wasn't here." Emma sank her teeth into her lower lip again and he wanted to press his thumb to it instead. He cleared his throat.

“I sent a note.”

She was so freaking adorable. “Where’s Greer?”

“Reading in the office.” Her voice took on the pride it reserved for her daughter. Any fool could see how much she loved her child and Linc knew her dedication to Greer only heightened his attraction to her. Piled on and made her even more sexy. Emma took the brushes he rinsed and laid them on a stack of paper towels to dry.

After he wiped his hands, he angled himself to face her. She looked up at him and his heart skipped a few beats.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Emma.”

Her entire open expression closed down faster than he could take his next breath. So fast his head spun.

“No one is here, so no need to toss out things like that. I should get going and get Greer home.” She stepped back.

Hell no. Linc followed and gripped her upper arms.

“Toss things out like that? What? The compliment I just gave you? I’m not lying, Emma, you *are* a beautiful woman.”

“I know I’m not a troll but I’m also not like the women you’re used to being with, so let’s not pretend otherwise. I can have Dawson come get us.”

Anger spiked. “I’ll take you home. And this *conversation* isn’t finished.”

She lifted her chin, defying him, and stepped out of his touch. “This *isn’t* a conversation and it is finished.” Spinning on her heel, she walked to the door, leaving him to be the one staring at her ass.

And he did. Without a single shred of shame. But he was hot on her heels and caught up to her as she breezed into his office like she owned the place.

“Come along, Greer, time to get you home and fed.”

The girl slid a book into the backpack at her side and climbed off the chair she’d been occupying. By the time she’d put the backpack on her shoulder, Emma was at her side, purse

on her own. Cold, distant eyes met his.

He strode into the office to swipe his keys. Standing before Emma, he lifted her hand in his, thumb stroking the soft skin, then placed his keys in her palm. “Get her settled, I’ll be right out, just going to lock up.”

Jaw tight, she nodded and walked off with Greer beside her.

Christ, how the fuck had he screwed this up so bad? All he’d done was tell the truth, but this woman treated him like he was the devil. And he didn’t like it one bit.

Scanning the room, he realized that Emma had done wonders in the short time she’d been working with him. He could see hints of him in the formerly generic office. He clicked the light off and locked the door as he exited.

With the night lighting system up and running, he walked through the empty hall to the door, pride at what he was accomplishing filling him. He was going to make this work. No matter how many obstacles he had to climb over.

After the alarm was activated and the front doors were locked, he strode across the parking lot to his large truck. It was running and he smiled at the silhouette of Emma in the passenger seat. He couldn’t see Greer but his back windows were tinted.

Linc walked around the front, so she wasn’t surprised when the door opened, then got up in the cab.

“Are you coming to dinner, Linc?” Greer’s question busted through the tension like a truck through a gate.

He so nearly said yes because, damn it, he *wanted* to spend more time with this woman and her daughter, but given he’d already fucked up, he wasn’t going to push his luck. Shifting into gear, he pulled out of the parking lot and waited for Emma to make the decision.

She didn’t say a word. Hell, she wasn’t even looking at him. Her entire body vibrated, which he assumed was with lingering anger. At him. For calling her beautiful.

“That’s up to your mama. I know she’s put in a long day and

may not want another mouth to feed.”

He watched her in his peripheral vision as he got them on the road leading to her place. She tensed further. How it was possible, he couldn't begin to say.

“What Mr. Conner is trying to say, Greer, is that he's too busy to stay.” Her gaze was arctic as she turned in the seat to look at her daughter.

“That's not what he said.” Greer blinked and met his gaze in the rearview mirror.

“Your mom's right, kid. There are a lot of things I have to do. This is why your mom is so invaluable to me. She keeps track of my schedule and makes sure I'm not forgetting *anything*.”

The silence as he finished the drive wasn't horrible but it definitely wasn't as relaxed as it could have been. He parked by her house and shot her a look before jumping out and going to her door.

Her expression was still set in a mutinous line but she didn't pull away as he helped her down. Flexing his fingers on her waist, he lowered his head to whisper in her ear. “We need to talk about this.”

God, rebar had more flexibility than she did. “Nothing to say.” She ducked under his arm and opened the back door to take Greer's bag as her daughter unbuckled her belt to climb down.

He nudged Emma to the side and reached his arms out for Greer. His heart melted when she jumped at him, trusting he would catch her. And he would. Always. Like he would for her mother, if she gave him a chance.

“Call me later when you have a moment, Emma.”

“Sure.”

That was a not-going-to-happen response if he'd ever heard one. He bent and put Greer down, watching as she slipped her hand in her mother's. “Night, Linc.”

“Night, kid.” He brushed the back of his hand along her

cheek and nodded to the door.

No way was he leaving until they were safe inside. He didn't give a damn how safe Rock Falls was. Linc protected his women.

Greer waved at him over her shoulder seconds before she vanished inside. At least one of the Henricksen women was on his side. Muttering to himself, he got in the truck and headed home.

He went to his gym and worked out, phone beside him as he waited for her call that never came.

...

Emma stared at her reflection, wishing she could find that rock star Dawson had spoken of. Even part of one. She snorted as she walked away from her mirror. Why stand and look at the bags under her eyes, the exhaustion in her expression?

Liar. You don't want to see the hunger for Linc.

And her brain needed to shut up.

But, on the other hand, maybe she did need to do something for herself. Hell, she'd nearly had a stroke when she saw what Linc was paying her. One check was more than a month's pay from the diner. Far more.

She could be saving and paying off things. Perhaps then she could update the house. After she updated Greer's clothing. Her own work attire was older and a bit dated but still in decent condition because she'd worn a uniform at the diner.

Her stomach dropped. She had to take those uniforms back before her old boss took the cost from her final paycheck. Unease grew. She didn't want to face him. He was nothing more than a sleaze but she wasn't going to let him take her final paycheck from her. She'd busted her ass to get that.

Making sure the dresses were clean and without grease stains, she took them from the hangers and folded them before stacking them on the foot of her full-size bed. She would put them in a bag and bring them back later today.

She looked over at her phone. Hmm, maybe she could get herself a new one, without a cracked screen that tended to draw blood more than it placed a decent call or took a viable photo.

Eyes drifting to the closet, she saw, folded on a hanger, the shirt of Linc's he'd given her. One of his workout ones from when he'd played professionally for the Pennsylvania Dutchmen. It was a simple men's T-shirt, but to her it was so much more. Cursing herself, she yanked it off the hanger and refolded it before placing it on the bed as well. She would return this to him when she was out doing her errands.

She hadn't called him last night, but honestly, she hadn't known what to say. Explaining her past and all of her insecurities seemed like overstepping between boss and employee.

Or a fake fiancée relationship.

"Mama?"

Greer popped her head into the bedroom.

"Yes, baby?"

"Dawson is working on her motorcycle. Can I go help?"

"Let me talk to her, okay?"

Greer gave her a small smile. "Kay, she's in the kitchen." Then she was gone.

It wasn't the first time Emma marveled over how much more outgoing Greer had become. For a lot of kids it may not seem like a lot, but for her daughter it was fucking amazing. Lifting the folded uniforms and Linc's shirt, she walked out of her bedroom and found Dawson in the kitchen, whispering with Greer.

Her friend looked at her and winked. "Okay if I steal this amazing helper today?"

Emma placed the clothes on the counter and pulled out two plastic bags from a drawer. Dawson watched her set them in each without saying a word.

“You should take Linc’s to him first. I think he had some things to do with Mitchell later this afternoon.”

“Thanks, I’ll go right away. And thank you for fixing my car.”

Dawson gave her a one-armed hug. “Flora did most of it, but you’re welcome. And all it’s going to cost you is dinner. You pick the night and we’ll all descend like a flock of birds and have a potluck.”

Emma crossed her arms. “How is that me supplying the meal?”

“Have to take it up with Flora—her rules.”

She hated feeling like a charity case, but even though she’d not been friends with these women in school, they were her friends now and she treasured that more than she could say.

Take a chance. Let them in. Have friends. “Okay. It’s a deal. Let me deliver this and I’ll give her a call to set up a date.”

“Perfect.” Dawson held out a hand toward her daughter. “Let’s get going, Greer. We have a lot of work to do.”

The girl bounced over to her, waved, and called out, “Bye, Mama,” before heading out the door with Dawson.

After tossing her hair up in a ponytail, she swiped the bags and went to her car. When it turned over with ease, she nearly cried with relief. She owed those women so much more than just dinner. With a wave at Greer, she backed out and drove through Rock Falls to Linc’s house.

Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed his large truck parked in the drive. Pulling in behind it, she took a deep breath before shutting off the engine. After retrieving the shirt from the bag, she climbed out of her car and walked up to the door.

She licked her lips and took a deep breath before pushing the doorbell. Mr. Conner answered.

“Hello, my dear.” He waved her in and she stepped inside before realizing she should have just handed the shirt to him.

“I was just dropping this off for Linc.”

Mr. Conner smiled at her and walked off, making a gesture to follow him. So she did. The man stopped at the door leading down to the basement where the gym was. “He’s working out.” A pat on her shoulder and she was alone in front of the door.

Not at all how she thought this would go. With a groan of frustration—or was that anticipation—she opened the door and walked down the stairs. Music she couldn’t even begin to name the artist of pounded in the space and she almost just tossed the shirt onto a bench and bolted.

That plan went to shit the second she saw him. Working out. Why she was stunned motionless she didn’t understand. It wasn’t like she didn’t know he was down here. But knowing it and actually seeing him, stripped bare to the waist, sweat dripping down the hardened planes of his body, was something else entirely for sure.

Holy manna from heaven.

And she thought she’d lost her thoughts seeing him running the baseball field. This was so much more. His burgundy shorts stopped above his knees but didn’t hide *anything* from her perusal. And there was a lot.

His muscles had muscles but even so, he wasn’t huge, like he took steroids or anything like that. He was just fucking gorgeous.

And she felt even more frumpy and out of his league than normal.

This wasn’t a good idea. She was about to step back and just leave the shirt on the stairs when he looked up from where he stood by the bench, one knee on it as he bent and lifted a weight. God, his hair fell forward and she didn’t even mind it was sweaty. That *he* was sweaty.

His leg didn’t move and she was mesmerized by the ripple of his muscles and the intricate tribal tattoos which snaked around his biceps and triceps—the more colorful ones on his forearms.

Whatever he was doing worked.

His dark gaze skimmed over her as he grinned and set the dumbbell on the bench.

“Emma.”

One word and it wasn't fair. Low and deep, it rumbled through her. Making her not only *think* about but *want* things she didn't need to consider. Chewing on her lower lip for a moment, she thrust the shirt toward him.

“This is yours. You know, from the other day, when you gave it to me.”

He stood and walked toward her, using a towel to run over his face. A whimper escaped her before she could clamp down on the needy cry.

“You didn't call me last night.”

“Dreamed about you.” The words slipped free before she could stop them. She squeezed her eyes shut and thrust the shirt toward him again. “Take it.”

He curled his hand, that large strong hand, around her wrist and tugged. Eyes open now, she noticed him looking down at her with a smug grin on his face.

Damn it! She hated how he made her flush. How he made her long for things she needed to relegate to reading about in romance novels.

“If it's any consolation, Emma, I dreamed about you too, but why are you giving me this?”

Was it a consolation? Nope. Not even a teensy bit.

“I'm out running errands. Dawson said you had a thing with Mitchell tonight and I didn't want to leave it out on the steps. So I came here first. Now I've given it to you, I'm going to leave. I have to take my uniforms to the diner. So, there you are, and I'll see you on Monday.” She slid to the left but he mimicked her move, keeping himself directly in front of her. “Excuse me,” she murmured.

Sweaty men shouldn't smell good. It was insane that this man did.

“Oh no, Emma. You’re not running off like that after saying what you did.”

She snapped her gaze to his. “What did I say?” Emma ran the conversation through her mind but she couldn’t pinpoint anything. The prickling along the back of her neck was most likely the result of his nearness.

“You mentioned you were returning your work uniforms. I’m not letting you go to the diner alone. I know you have to face him yourself but I will be with you.”

“I don’t need you to fight my battles for me. I’m not pathetic.”

Emma spun on her heel and made a move toward the stairs, only to pause when she realized he held her shirt, keeping her in place.

“Keep talking like that,” he warned, inching closer to her.

She gave a quick shake of her head.

His lips flattened and his tone got challenging. “No man worth their salt would let a woman face another man who’s threatened her. I understand you want to do this on your own. *Need* to do this, but I know men like him and I’m not going to let him bully you or, for fuck’s sake, even consider putting a hand on you.”

Warmth spread through her chest, pushing away all the fear and insecurity.

He dipped his head, his breath skating along her neck. “And we’re gonna finish that conversation because there are a few things we need to get straight between us.”

“Nothing to talk about. Like I told you, I don’t need platitudes or false compliments. Save it for when we have to act for your investors.”

He licked his lips and she hated that she followed the action in the mirror across from them. There was no way he didn’t notice but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he leaned closer, their gazes locked in the mirror.

“It’s like you want me to prove you wrong. Kiss you until

you forget either of our names.” He inched closer, his larger, stronger body dwarfing her.

She gasped at the thought of his hands moving over her and shook her head. “I have to go.”

“You’ll give me a few minutes to get cleaned up and if you say no, I’m going like this and we can let him come to his own conclusions as to why I’m all sweaty.” He arched an eyebrow.

She wanted to laugh at the pure absurdity of this conversation. Emma truly enjoyed how he continued to make her smile.

“That you were all sweaty and yet I’m put together like I wasn’t affected at all?”

Holy hell, what is wrong with my mouth that it isn’t keeping anything in?

Damn his lips, she was fast becoming addicted to watching them. Dreaming about them. Wishing for another taste of them.

He reached around to cover her neck and press her into his chest. She didn’t fight him on it. Lord, even if she wanted to, her body wasn’t listening to any commands *she* gave, it was in tune to the man touching her.

“Sounds like a challenge, Emma.” She could feel his torso press deeper against her. “I’m looking forward to the day when you’re ready to let me make you this sweaty with me.”

She gulped and gripped his wrist. His lips brushed her cheek as he whispered, “Let’s just tell him we were doing what was in our dreams.”

Her eyes didn’t want to stay open and yet she didn’t want to miss a second of the way he watched her, with a hunger in his eyes that scared and excited her with its intensity.

“If you’re coming, get changed.”

Damn him for being so hot. He smiled, slipped his hand up from her neck to her chin and placed a swift kiss on her lips. “Be right back.”

Legs wobbly, she didn't move until he vanished up the stairs. Only then did she move to the bench he'd been using and sat down. The shirt she'd brought him stayed on the floor and after a few seconds of staring at it, she rose to set it beside her. Even the music couldn't pull her mind from the trip it took imagining taking that man up on his offer.

Chapter Eight

Linc hurried down the stairs to the basement, worried Emma might have slipped out while he showered. Yes, he had a shower down there but as he only had so much self-control, he thought it better to be away from her tempting body.

On the last step, he looked in the room and found her immediately. He couldn't stop the smile from turning up his lips. Not that he wanted to, but she looked so perfect in his house, in his life. *How the hell did I not notice her in school?*

Her hair was in a ponytail and he was ready to see it spread out on his pillowcases. She stiffened then glanced over her shoulder. He pushed away from the wall and walked to stop in front of her. Holding out his hand, he waited as she looked at the shirt he'd brought her.

Without a sound, she took it, a small furrow in her brow. She unfolded it and held it before her, still not saying a word. At least not verbally. Her eyes and face were so freaking expressive he was able to read her like a book. One that was quickly becoming a favorite.

Dark gray with DUTCHMEN written across the chest in blue and framed in burgundy. Below that the roaring lion. Buttons sliced down the middle. Turning it around, it had CONNER and the number 10 below it.

“Very nice. I’m guessing this was your number?”

He tugged her up and dragged his hand down her cheek. “This is *my* jersey. One of them.”

She blinked at him and he smiled with a low chuckle. Instantly she frowned at him.

“Why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m laughing because you think you’re taking advantage of me and my good nature. It never occurred to you that I’m trying to give this to you. This is for *you*. I want *you* to wear *my* jersey.”

Her lips pursed and he wanted to lick along that plump lower one before slipping between them. “Why?”

He put them nose to nose. “It appeals to the chest-beating primitive male I really am. To see *his* woman wearing *his* clothing.” He stole a quick kiss. “Plus, I thought you might want to change out of the shirt you’re wearing since I pressed my sweaty body against it.”

Heat surged in her gaze but she didn’t back down. “Fine.”

He smiled even as he turned her in the direction of the bathroom. She walked in, only tossing him one curious glance. It didn’t take her long to swap out the pink top she’d had on and put on his jersey.

Holy shit. She looked perfect. It didn’t matter how big it was on her. He had a closet full of his clothes she could simply take, as long as he was allowed the pleasure of seeing her wear his shirts draped over her curves—and the honor of removing them.

Without a word, they headed up and outside.

He hadn’t done enough dumbbell rows. Hadn’t worked out enough, because all he wanted to do was toss this woman over his shoulder and take her inside his house and close out the rest of the world. Keep them holed up until she understood how he viewed her. What he saw when he looked at her and how fucking impressive it was, all the way around.

He helped Emma up into his truck and took the long way around to the driver’s side, needing to take a breather and get his emotions in check. This woman eroded his control with something as simple as a breath.

Linc loved seeing her in his clothing. After an argument about him driving her, she’d gotten her uniforms from her car and had them on her lap. In his truck. Wearing his jersey.

He hopped up into the cab and buckled his belt once the door latched.

“I could have taken my car.”

“And I could have put him in the hospital for how he spoke

to you. Both of us have done some things we weren't happy about."

Her leg bounced as he maneuvered his truck around her car.

"Thank you."

His heart thumped hard. "For?"

She angled toward him in the seat, her fingers with their pale pink shimmery nails tapping against the robin's egg blue of her old uniforms. He gripped the wheel tighter as he struggled to remember that she wasn't going back to work for that slimy bastard.

"Being you."

He allowed her soft voice to tamp down the anger that had been building.

"Humph."

She canted her head to the side. "What?"

"I must be slipping. Last time you thanked me, I got a kiss. Now, you're all the way across the truck from me, pressed into the door like you think I'm going to eat you."

She captured the corner of her lower lip in her teeth. "You do look like you want to."

It took an act of God to keep his eyes on the road and not look at Emma. "I do." A deep breath. "But that's a discussion for later."

Linc slowed and turned into the lot for the diner. Parking his truck, he killed the engine and took another deep breath before hopping out. He strode around the front of the truck and opened the door for Emma.

Turning her on the seat, he reached up with his right hand and pressed his thumb against her lower lip, rolling it free from her teeth. Heat flared in her eyes but she didn't turn her gaze from his.

Progress.

"I'm with you, Emma. He won't hurt you. I promise."

She took a shuddering breath and he grasped her around the waist, lifting her down. Taking advantage of the small space between them, he let her curves slide against him. Such a simple act which made his body hard. This woman had no clue how much she affected him.

“Ready?”

“Probably not, but we’re here.”

He kissed her. Linc didn’t want to think too much, he simply dipped his head and captured her mouth. An easy brush of their lips. Didn’t mean she didn’t rock him to the core from such a simple act.

“Let’s go then.”

Sliding his arm around her waist, he escorted her up the steps to the diner and held the door for her to walk in first.

“Emma!” A couple of the customers called out her name.

She responded to each of them. Mr. Perry walked out, his expression turning gleeful until he spied Linc near the door. God help him, he wanted nothing more than to be beside her, but he knew she wanted to do this herself. So, he forced himself to hang back.

“Come to beg for your job?”

She lifted her chin and held out the uniforms. “No. I came for my final paycheck and to return these.”

Perry folded his arms over his pudgy belly and unimpressive torso. His smile was obviously forced.

He glared at Emma, his thin upper lip curling in obvious disgust. “I gave you a job when no one else would. When he tires of you, you’ll have to beg for your old position.”

Now Linc moved up to stand behind her. Settling his left hand along the curve of Emma’s hip, he gave her a soft squeeze but held his tongue.

Something I deserve sainthood for. Not reaching over and decking this pompous asshole.

“My paycheck, please.”

Cold heartless eyes swung to him and Linc merely cocked an eyebrow. The man's skin flushed and he knew he longed to challenge him. While wishing he would, the fact was, this wasn't about him but Emma. For that reason, he held onto his temper.

After a short stare down, the man stomped to the rear of the establishment, only to return with an envelope that he tossed on the counter, partially landing in a pool of spilled coffee which hadn't been cleaned up.

"Take it." His sneer was lecherous. "You know where to find me when he gets tired of you."

Linc bared his teeth and the man slunk away. "Ready?" he murmured to Emma.

"Yes." She shuffled her feet and released a small huff.

He felt the slight tremble that moved through her and he pushed his lips to her temple as he reached over the counter with his right hand. Shaking off the excess liquid from the envelope, he carried it as he led her to the door.

Unlocking his truck, he handed her the envelope before he reached for the handle. He lifted her up and this time she stopped him before he could walk away. Linc held her gaze, waiting.

Her expression was soft as she cupped his cheek. Every synapse fired at the simple caress. A simple brush of her thumb along his skin.

"Thank you."

"Always." And he meant it. He would be there for her *always*, and the kicker was she didn't even have to ask.

His heart tripled in speed when she gave him a small, tender smile.

Linc opened the door to Mitchell's house and walked in. No need to knock or anything. They all had keys to one another's places. After the diner, Emma had gone on her way to run some errands, even though he'd wanted her to stay with him.

"Honey, I'm home," he called out as he strode through the

front room. He needed his friends because he was becoming all too focused on that one slip of a woman.

“Out back!” Mitchell hollered.

He made his way through the kitchen, the one room other than Mitchell’s bedroom, including the ensuite, that had been fully renovated. The living and front rooms were partially finished. He dropped the bags he had carried in and made his way out through the sliding glass door to where his friends were.

Tully leaned against the railing of the porch, his Bobby Hull jersey and jeans typical attire, his brown hair longer and in its usual rakish disarray. At the grill, keeping an eye on the steaks, Mitchell had on board shorts and an unbuttoned white shirt.

“I thought I told you to bring food,” Mitchell said with a grin as he lifted the bottle to his lips, taking a swig of beer.

“Check the counter, bitch. I brought you food, even though you should simply be fucking happy I’m here.” He gave a chin jut to Tully who responded in kind.

“And I told you, that’s what happens when you ignore me. I’m fucking sexy and I deserve to be petted and adored.” Mitchell sniffed and tipped his nose up in the air. “All the time. Adored and petted.”

Linc and Tully laughed and soon enough Mitchell joined in. They talked about Mitchell’s computer company, Inicio—inspire in Latin—that he’d started but put in Linc and Tully’s name to keep it from The Viper, his ex who struggled to get her claws and fangs into every cent of Mitchell’s money.

While Mitchell plated the steaks, Linc whipped up the salad and Tully got the baked potatoes out of the oven. The three friends sat in the kitchen at the handcrafted dining table—an Amish double pedestal bench with clipped corners. The top was about one and a half inches thick with a beveled edge.

Mitchell sat at the end in one of the matching chairs and Linc sat across from Tully.

“How’s life with a fiancée?”

He chewed his bite of steak like just the thought of the woman didn't kick his heart into overdrive.

Mitchell glanced at him and frowned. "Stop pretending that piece of steak in your mouth keeps you from speaking. We all know you've had larger things in your mouth."

He sucked steak sauce off his thumb even as he flipped him off. "Thought you were talking to Tully."

Both his friends laughed.

"I don't need an intervention," he insisted. "I'm fine. She's fine. We're working together—"

"Fine," Mitchell and Tully said as one.

"Fuck you both."

Tully grinned and leaned back. "Only if you're lucky."

The stress of everything faded as he hung out with his friends. That's what he needed. Them. When his world got crazy, they were the two who anchored him. He told them how much Emma meant to him, regardless of the short time they'd been together.

...

"I'm sorry, you want me to do what?"

Emma swallowed a few times and tried to pop her ears. That had to be it. She was hearing things. Or merely losing her mind. Either was an option since after leaving Linc yesterday she'd been all out of sorts. Craving things she wasn't destined to have. Running out to get more batteries...

The man who took up far too much of the oxygen in her office kept his onyx gaze on her, his full lips turned up in a smirk.

"Pretty sure this is my office, beautiful, but I'm glad you're thinking of it as your own." He wagged his eyebrows.

Why can't I keep my damn embarrassing thoughts to myself?

She flushed but couldn't afford to think about that slipup right now. Emma had more important things to focus on. Like

making sure she didn't collapse on the floor in front of him.

Like his insane idea that she go bowling with him.

“Bowling.” He blinked. “Pins to be knocked down. Big balls. Holes for you to put your fingers in.”

He was goading her. Had to be.

“I thought we had a dinner with Mr. Stevenson and his wife.”

She swore he hadn't moved and yet how was it possible she was even more aware of him than she had been?

“We do. That's tomorrow. I'm talking tonight.” His eyelids lowered, almost like he was bored with the conversation and was thinking about something else. She wasn't believing that for a moment. The man was a predator, through and through. He wasn't doing anything but watching her every move. Searching for a weakness.

Shows him. He's my weakness. If he truly wants to know what it is, it's not like he has to look very far to find it.

“Why would I want to spend the night sticking my fingers in the holes of big balls?”

Holy shit. Did that really pop out of my mouth?

Linc gave a slow smile as he pushed away from the wall. She exhaled as she curled her toes inside of her shoes. The grin he gave didn't calm her any. Quite the opposite. Body temperature ramped up, she took several deep breaths, trying to control her heart, pulse, the wetness between her legs that was increasing with every second that he stared at her.

It didn't matter if a desk was between them. She was hunted. With a prim sniff—one that merely brought more of his heady scent into her nose—she settled her fingertips against the desk and watched him.

“We have work to do. The dinner is tomorrow night and I have to make sure everything is ready for you.”

He sauntered around the desk as if he had all the time in the world. At least the man wore pants today instead of shorts. Not

that it mattered. It wasn't easy for her to concentrate with him around, regardless of what he wore. He wore jeans like a god, making her want to touch, stroke, pet, *bite*.

"I want to spend the night with you, eating greasy food and watching you play with big balls."

She turned her head to look at him as he propped a lean hip against the desk. "Balls that aren't yours," she said.

His gaze glittered. He dragged his thumb along his lower lip as he watched her, slowly. Almost like he pictured doing the same to her lips. She shuddered like he'd touched her himself.

"If that's an option, I'll take it."

Cue the panties evaporating. *I would like that option as well. Because I'm tired of my own touch.* "I have to think of Greer."

He reached out and tugged on the end of her braid. "Already have a babysitter lined up for her. Mrs. Faulkner. They're doing some quilting thing that Greer did with Dawson."

Fear spiked and he rubbed two fingers along her jaw.

"You have the final say, Emma. Always. But the babysitter is there and I haven't mentioned anything to Greer."

She really didn't have any excuse to say no, even though she searched for one. Desperately. This man, he made her feel things she had no right to feel. Especially since she knew this was just temporary.

"Come on, Emma. You. Me. Big balls. Pins. Horrible music and loud noise. Bowling is a sport for people with talent to spare."

His gaze fixated on her face and she took a breath, even as she shook her head over the terrible quip.

"It's right up my alley." He slid closer. "Come with me to leave no pin standing."

A snort-laugh escaped and she slapped her hand over his mouth. "Stop with the horrible puns."

"That ship has sailed." His lips moved against her palm and he wagged his eyebrows at her.

“We have work to do.”

“Bowlers always have time to spare.” Linc captured her wrist and moved her hand so he could nip her fingers.

Holy crap that feels delicious. Her insides trembled as he continued to feast on her.

“Let the pins fall where they may.” His grin grew. “We’ll be the life and bowl of the party. In the morning, we’ll have aches and lanes.”

“Okay, okay. Just stop. I’ll go.”

He kissed the pads of her fingers before bringing her even closer to him.

“Let the good times bowl.”

“I can still change my mind,” she teased.

“So what you’re saying is, I’m on pin ice?”

“Linc.”

He pulled and she fell against his chest. When his hand slipped around the nape of her neck, she didn’t think past how she loved him touching her. Eyes locked on his, she tried to control the rapid beating of her heart.

“Knock, knock.”

Emma went to move but the large hand on her neck held her in place. Linc didn’t look away from her.

“Go away,” he rumbled.

“Be nice.”

“It’s only Tully and he’s cockblocking.”

Heat surged. “Is that what he’s doing? I thought we were discussing tonight. At work. Where there are a lot of impressionable children around.”

The slow shrug from Linc was sexy. Lord help her, the man made breathing sexy.

“Kiss me, Emma.”

“Now?” Maybe she needed a breath mint. Perhaps she

sucked at kissing. Maybe she would spontaneously combust if she did. Or didn't.

"I'm feeling needy. Or was that punny?"

Emma narrowed her gaze at him despite wanting to laugh. "I suspect this is blackmail."

"You can call it whatever you want, so long as I get a kiss."

She wanted to give him one. "One."

"For starters." A throat cleared. "Keep your knickers on, Tully. I'm getting a kiss from my fiancée. You can wait your turn."

"Should I be jealous you're kissing him after I kiss you?" She gave a saucy grin. "Is this a common thing with you and your boys?"

His fingers flexed against her skin. "They're both so ridiculously needy, so sometimes I have to give them what they want." His gaze burned hotter. "Emma?"

"Yes?"

"Kiss. Me."

She shouldn't be doing this. Especially here. But she wanted the kiss. She slid her left hand along his smooth jaw and into his hair, which wasn't currently confined but falling free over his broad shoulders. The strands were smooth and silken.

A low moan slid free. From her? From him? She couldn't say. Perhaps both. She raked her nails along the back of his head as their lips brushed together. His low moan of pleasure allowed her to slip her tongue in his mouth, bold for an unknown reason.

Nothing mattered. Not that Tully was behind her. Not that they were in the center, his office, yes, but still *in* the center.

Linc tasted of mint and she got a hint of melon. Most likely from the flavored water he'd been drinking. He gripped her tighter and his body locked up. Tully cleared his throat again and she ended the kiss. She didn't get very far before Linc was pulling her to his mouth again.

“You taste fucking divine.”

She thought the same about him. When he pulled back, she licked her lips, loving how he followed the motion with his gaze, his jaw clenching and his nostrils flaring.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Bowling.”

“Perfect.” His thumb skimmed along her chin. “I have to take care of Thing One here and I’ll be back.”

She lowered her gaze and rubbed her palms on her thighs. “No, you have a class and the phone meeting with the contractor for the rink.” He stepped back and she gripped his shirt, keeping him close. “Also, you had a call from a man named Adam Savaglio and he’d—”

“No.” One single word with no wiggle room.

His eyes had lost all the previous heat they’d contained. His jaw was set.

Forcing a smile to her lips, she nodded as she slipped to the side and walked away from him. “I have some things to get done.”

“Emma.” Her name was a beg.

“I’ll see you later.” She ensured her smile didn’t slip as she walked by Tully who watched her with understanding in his gaze.

“Bye, Emma,” he said.

“Tully.”

Out of his office, she got busy behind the counter, figuring when they left, she would head in and take care of what she needed to. There was something she wasn’t sure she wanted to pop the top on. But if it was for the betterment of this place, she would risk his wrath. Or disappointment.

Chapter Nine

“Oh, come on!” Emma’s wail had him lifting the beer bottle to his lips in order to hide his laugh. She stomped her foot, her rented shoes making her look all the more adorable in his eyes. “There’s something wrong with my balls.”

He snorted. Emma whipped around, her hair flying out to settle once more about her heart-shaped face. The pale pink gloss she had on her lips sparkled in the horrible lighting but only added to the pull she had on him.

Linc put the beer down and held out his hands. “Sorry, that was rude of me.”

She tapped her foot and narrowed her eyes at him.

“Ohh, Linc’s gonna get it. His girlfriend is mad at him.” The taunt came from two lanes over. A group of high schoolers were at a nearby lane, paying more attention to him and Emma than to their own game. Spare, the bowling alley, was a popular place.

She snapped her gaze to them and the boys who’d teased blanched and took several steps back.

Hell yeah, sexy teacher she could nail.

He bit the inside of his cheek, knowing better than to let her see how much this amused him.

“Come on, baby. Let me help you. You’re just releasing at the wrong point, and that makes it a gutter ball.”

“Every time?”

Opting on the side of caution, he neglected to answer that and just stepped down to where she was and captured her hand, tugging her toward him.

“Let me help.”

He drew her close, put his head down by hers, and began swaying with her as above them “Vuelve” by Ricky Martin played over the speakers. Splaying his hand along her lower

back, he left no space between them. It wasn't easy to hear the music over the sounds of children screaming, pins crashing, and the *thunk* of the ball return. But he could. Hell, even if he couldn't, he had the opportunity to hold her near and he wasn't losing out on that chance.

"You do realize you're dancing with me in the middle of a bowling alley?"

He lifted his head at her question. "I'm aware." Putting his forehead against hers, he closed his eyes once more. "Is that a problem?"

"Only if you're going to help me with the balls."

"I can't wait."

She smacked him in the chest and he stumbled, smiling at her. Linc was grateful she wasn't upset by the way he'd snapped at her earlier. Tully reamed him for that but he'd not apologized for it yet. However, Emma hadn't mentioned it.

"Fine, I was talking about those balls."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure you were."

When she walked away, he snagged the back of her shirt and tugged her until she was against his chest. She fit him perfectly.

"Four steps," he murmured in her ear, dragging his hand down her arm, up, and then down once more, this last time only using his index finger. She shivered but didn't pull away. "Most people use a four-step delivery method. As in you take four on your approach."

He covered her much smaller hand in his. Linc walked them to where he thought would be the most helpful with the length of her legs and her stride—let's face it, he had been paying a lot of attention to her ass, erm, stride—and positioned them before the foul line.

"You're going to want your motion to be free swinging."

This time she snorted before holding up her free hand. "Sorry."

Linc wouldn't follow that line of thought or he was going to be written up for public indecency. He was falling for this woman fast and it wasn't like they'd spent a ton of time together, but it was natural. She was the flower and he was the bee, drawn to her on all levels. Again, how she was with Greer and making sure she wanted for nothing, only heightened his attraction.

"Not a discussion we will be having around high school children and parents who are paying a lot of attention to what we're doing." And he wasn't lying, almost everyone inside the bowling alley watched them, and they weren't being subtle about any of it.

Her head brushed against his chest as she turned to peer at him, amusement sparkling in her large eyes. "All I'm doing is sending those things into the gutter. I haven't even knocked down a single pin."

All facts. But she'd not given up and he admired the hell out of her for that.

"The ball is going to continue through the swing, naturally. Like you're walking."

"Doubt that," she snipped before heaving a frustrated sigh.

"Brief rundown, then I'll walk you through one."

"And you didn't do this for me during the first, um, frame, why?"

He settled his lips against her cheek. "I remember someone mouthing something sassily about how hard could it be to throw a ball down a lane."

"Good thing someone learned her lesson about being so cocky."

"I for one am happy to be of some assistance. I mean, the fact I get to stand with my arms around you, I don't give a damn about the game." She stiffened and he shook his head, *refusing* to let her get into her head about this. Not tonight. "Pay attention. Move with me."

"Bet you say that to all the women."

“First time.” Making sure his thighs were at the backs of her legs, he got ready to move her for the four steps, using their laced right hands to mimic the motion of the ball. “Here we go.”

“Before you start this, when the ball careens out of my hand because I throw it at you, I want to apologize.”

He burst out laughing, pulling the attention of those around them. “You’re apologizing for something you’re going to claim is an accident? It wouldn’t be one if you *throw* it at me.”

“First time.” She wriggled her shoulders. “Show me.”

Lips to her shoulder, he pressed a quick kiss to her skin. “One.” He moved her forward, pushing her right arm into the swing at the same time.

“One,” she echoed.

Other leg forward and the ball arm went into the down swing. He pushed her left arm out to the side to help her balance. “Two.”

“Two.” Her voice was becoming breathy.

At the end of that step the ball was by her right leg.

“Three,” he whispered in her ear, continuing the ball into the backswing so it was at the top of that motion when the third step was completed.

“Right.”

“Fourth step.” He encouraged her to move her arm forward. He lowered his hand from hers and placed it on her thigh. “We slide this leg now and make this adjustment. And when the ball passes your ankle, you’re going to release it. *Not* where it would come flying at me.”

“You’re used to balls flying at your face.”

He almost stumbled but just held her thigh tighter. “I think you’re trying to kill me.”

“Not even close. There are a lot of things I think about doing to you. Killing you isn’t one of them.”

Heat pushed through him. “Care to share?”

“No,” she said with an adamant shake of her head. “Definitely not. In fact, we’re going to forget I even said that. Walk me through it once more? Then I’m going to do this.”

He had a hard time pulling his attention from her lips as she spoke. “Right.” Linc didn’t doubt she would do it. Hell, this woman didn’t need his help but he wasn’t about to deny himself the raw pleasure of being tucked so close to her.

And he did. They even did one trial with her holding the ball. Then he went to his beer and put it to his lips for a much-needed drink. While watching Emma set herself up to try this on her own, he worked on calming his own pulse.

Fuck, the woman had no clue how sexy she truly was. He got it. She thought she was overweight and frumpy. She viewed herself as an uneducated single mother who no one would want.

Not at *all* what he saw when he looked at her. Emma Henricksen had one of the sharpest minds he’d ever known. Maybe she didn’t have a piece of paper saying she’d completed a certain set of courses, but the woman was incredible. And her curves made him hard all the time.

Her jeans cupped her ass in a way that made him jealous. The light green shirt she wore pulled out the teasing reddish strands in her hair.

Yet it was far more than that. Her heart was pure.

Her form needed more work but the ball flew from her hand and rolled down the lane. He smiled as he watched her hands at her sides with their crossed fingers. Knees bent, she watched the ball creep closer to the ten pins waiting at the end.

One pin.

That’s what got knocked down but from her screech of joy it was as if it had been a strike.

“Linc! I did it. I hit one and it fell over!” She whipped around and lunged toward him.

His daddy didn’t raise a fool. And he held out his arms to

grab her and pull her close. She wrapped around him and he pushed his nose into her neck, inhaling. Around them, he could hear the younger kids making comments and he refused to respond.

“Did you see?”

“I did.” God, he wanted to kiss her. “I knew you could do it.”

Emma drew back, her smile blinding. “Thank you.”

Leaving his left arm around her, hand sprawled against her back, he moved his right hand to tuck some escaped hair behind her ear. “For?”

“Not letting me give up.” She pushed up on her toes and gave him a light peck on the lips. Then she wriggled free and bounded over to the ball return and waited for her ball to pop back up.

“Anytime,” he muttered, brushing his hand over his mouth, trying to feel her touch a bit longer.

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Emma stared at the man who held the door for her as they stepped out into the cool Vermont night.

“Thank you.”

She watched him in her peripheral vision as he moved up beside her while they walked across the parking lot to his truck. His dark indigo jeans had been giving her heart palpitations all night with the delicious way they cupped him. The white long-sleeved crew neck T-shirt, which for most of the night he had worn with the sleeves pushed up, had an interesting 3D vertigo print on it in black and gray, making it look vibrant and lifelike. Similar to MC Escher’s style of work.

He’d tugged his sleeves down but it still didn’t matter, the hem hung untucked over his jeans, hiding part of his ass from her searching eyes. The sleeves hugged his powerful biceps and had her continually reliving how nice it had been when

he'd held her.

“Did you have fun?”

His words slugged through her thoughts like him when he'd been at bat. She had to focus and not think about what wasn't to be. “Never thought I would—with my feet in shoes other people have used and shoving my fingers into heavy balls—but yes, I had a lot of fun. You're good at it. Did you bowl a lot? Or rather, do you?”

“Not so much anymore but I used to work at Spare.”

She looked over at him. Shock had her eyebrows arching up. How had she not known that? “You did?”

“It was my first job. Perks were all the drinks I could down in a night and I got to bowl as often as I liked for free. So I learned.”

“Guessing so did Tully and Michael?”

He nodded as he reached for her hand. She wasn't even going to think about how much she enjoyed having him do something so simple.

“Yes, we all had jobs at Spare. Old Man Northey wasn't hard to work for.” He pursed his lips. “I don't remember ever seeing you come in.”

Her snort wasn't the slightest bit amused this time. “The first time I went in was tonight.” A bounce of her shoulders. “I'm sure I wouldn't have been noticed even if I had gone in.”

Memories rose of hiding in her room so her drunken father couldn't take out his anger on her. Never getting to do anything after school. Instead of a job to earn money, she scrubbed the floor to clean up his vomit. She cleared her throat, determined not to let those memories cloud the night.

“I can't speak for the idiot boy I was then, but I am damn sure I would notice you in *any* room. Hell, anywhere.”

She opened her mouth to dispute him but he waggled a finger at her.

“What?”

“Any disparaging remarks and I’m going to kiss you.” A wicked smile. “Although, to be fair, I’m going to do that anyway.”

It wasn’t right that his words made such a mess of her gut.

Deciding the best course would be to ignore that, she asked a different question. “How did you get your nickname?”

He took a deep breath and shrugged. “Jarvis Yardley.”

“The janitor?”

He unlocked his truck and chuckled. “That’s the one. I wasn’t always the best student and had a tendency to run through the halls.”

Her breath caught as he lifted her up and placed her in the seat before closing the door and walking around to the driver’s side. The moment he was in, he started the powerful engine.

“One day,” he said, securing his seat belt, “he told me he was only going to call me Lin because I was moving too fast for him to get my full name out. The boys added on the ‘c’ and it became Linc.”

She didn’t even have to ask who the boys were. That was a given. They weren’t moving and she lifted her gaze to find him focused on her.

“What?”

It was too dark for her to make out all the intricacies of his expression but there was no denying the scrutiny from him.

He gave a tiny headshake and pulled his truck from the parking lot. When they turned in the direction *away* from her house, she worried her lower lip with her teeth. Was he expecting something for this? That was how it had been with the *one* other man she’d been with. He’d do something nice for her and expect sex of sorts.

“You okay? You’ve gotten quiet.”

Rubbing her palm over her thigh, she exhaled. “Where are we going?”

“Movie.”

She'd just mouthed the word when his large hand settled over hers, lacing their fingers. His thumb rubbed her skin and she tried not to fall apart. All his touch did was make her want to beg for more.

“Unless you want me to take you home.”

Emma couldn't get words to work and it wasn't until she realized he'd pulled his truck off the road and put them in park that she was quite possibly panicking.

“Emma.” His tone was low, soothing but commanding. “Look at me.”

She complied.

“Good girl,” he praised, squeezing the hand still intertwined with his. “Are you okay? If you don't want to go to the movie, I can take you home.”

Heat pounded into her cheeks, making her grateful it was dark inside the truck.

“I'm...okay.”

She figured he would make a joke and that would be it. He didn't. Line didn't move. Not closer, not farther away. He just looked at her, studying and assessing.

“Deep breaths. Take your time, we have all night.”

“What about the movie?” God, she'd had such a fantastic time until she ruined it by freaking out.

“Freckles, I don't give a damn about that. I'm worried about you. And we're not moving until you convince me you're doing okay. After you do that, if you still want to go to the movie, we will. You want me to take you home, I'll do that too.”

She couldn't taste anything but honesty in his words.

“Freckles?” He'd called her this before and she'd not asked him why then.

He leaned closer and lifted their joined hands so he could brush his lips over the back of hers.

“As in, I can’t wait to figure out how many you have all over.”

The moan escaped and she didn’t even try to pretend it didn’t happen.

“Movie.” Her voice was higher than normal as she squeaked out that one word.

Another graze of his lips over her skin. “As my lady wants.”

Straight No Chaser played as he drove and when she realized he’d taken her to the old drive-in theater, she gasped.

“You brought me to Benny’s Drive-In.” She slid to the edge of her seat, teeth sinking into her lower lip.

Taking a row in the rear, he did some quick maneuvering and backed the truck up. “Come on.”

She’d just climbed down from the cab when he was pulling her to the back of the truck. Linc lifted her up and in the dimming lights of the drive-in, she saw he had a nice spot set up—blankets and pillows along with a basket.

I hadn’t even noticed this when we were at the bowling alley. Emma crawled up until she was on the soft pile of blankets and looked at him. The man was staring at her ass like he longed to take a bite.

“Linc?”

“Coming.” He made jumping up in the bed look so easy.

They got settled and he opened the basket, letting her see the snacks inside. When the movie started, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and tucked her close to his side.

“Field of Dreams?”

He held some popcorn in front of her mouth. “Shh, it’s a classic.”

Emma didn’t care what played. She was cuddling in the back of a truck on a bed of blankets and pillows with the one man she’d had a crush on since she was a little girl. Allowing him to feed her some popcorn, she stifled the yawn that snuck up on her and did her best to enjoy the movie.

Chapter Ten

He had a wet spot on his shirt, right over his heart from where Emma had drooled on him. Linc didn't care. She'd lasted about thirty minutes into the movie when he realized she'd crashed.

Could he have woken her and gotten her home? Sure. Did he? Fuck no.

What he did do was rearrange her so she was settled between his legs, head on his chest, with one of the blankets pulled over her to keep her warm. Slight snores escaped her as she slumbered against him. He knew she didn't get the best sleep, single parents rarely did and he was fine sitting here holding her while she dozed.

Was it how he'd expected the night to go? Not at all. But she was in his arms, so he would take it and count it as a fucking win. When the wind picked up, she shivered and burrowed deeper into his embrace. He made sure she was well covered by the thick blanket. As he stared at Kevin Costner on the screen and held his fiancée—real or fake it didn't matter, she was his—Linc thought about everything.

In his periphery, a tall figure cut through the few cars, making his way to where he'd parked. Mitchell.

The ex-basketball player gave a chin jut in welcome as he rested his arms on the bedrail.

“What are you doing here, Mitchell?”

The man's brown eyes flicked between him with his arms outside the blanket to the woman tucked under it and then back up to him.

“She must be more of a basketball fan.” A teasing grin. “Can't say I blame her.”

“Fuck you, man.” A beat of silence. “You good?”

The smile told him that no matter what came out of Mitchell's mouth, it wasn't good.

“Been better,” his best friend said before reaching behind him. In his hand was a thick envelope and he handed it over. “Didn’t mean to ruin your date but wanted to make sure I handed this to you.”

Only one person in the world could make his friend this morose. “The Viper at it again?”

“I’m heading out, but there’s a meeting about Inicio. I know you know that, as you’re part owner, but I had some ideas I’m putting together that I wanted to make sure got mentioned to the board.”

“I got you.” And he meant it. He would *always* have Mitchell’s back, just like he knew the man had his.

His lips thinned before he nodded and gave a partial smile. “Take good care of our girl. See you when I’m in town again.” He stepped back and turned around.

My girl. But he got it. Mitchell would protect her like he would Tully’s girl, Dawson, without hesitation, if it was ever needed. “Mitchell?”

His friend paused but didn’t face him again.

“Call us if you need *anything*.”

Linc hated how stiff his friend was. A perfunctory nod and he walked away.

“Should I be worried that I’ve been claimed by more than one guy?”

His own tension flowed off as he angled his head down to see the woman tucked against him, like she belonged nowhere else.

“Trust me, Freckles. You’ve not been claimed. *Yet*. When it happens, it will be by me. And *only* me.”

She trembled in his arms but didn’t pull away.

“I got you wet.” Her fingers brushed against the spot on his shirt.

He lowered his head to nip her ear. “I think that’s my line.”

A small mewl escaped. "I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"I'm fine with it. One of my favorite movies, my fiancée asleep in my arms. Perfect night for me." Another nip of her ear. "Are you warm enough?"

"Getting warmer by the second," she muttered.

Linc figured he wasn't supposed to have heard that. His body responded and he didn't say anything. Hell, he didn't have to. His cock pushed against her. No way she didn't feel that. Again, she didn't pull away and he swore he heard a small growl escaping from her throat. God, hunger for this woman was getting harder and harder to ignore.

"Is he okay?" She sniffed. "Mitchell? Do you need to take me home and make sure he's okay?"

He lowered his gaze to the thick packet by his leg that he'd been handed. "He will be."

"I'm guessing The Viper is the soon-to-be ex-Mrs. Anderson?"

Resting his cheek against her hair, he inhaled the soft scent of her shampoo. Perhaps soft wasn't the right word, it was sharp and crisp like biting into a cold Cortland. Or McIntosh. "That's the one."

"Bitch."

Unbidden, a chuckle rumbled from his chest. "She is that."

"You're so comfortable and warm," she mumbled, shifting closer.

Comfortable wasn't a word he would have chosen. *Hard. Aching.* Flexing his fingers around the blanket and her arm, he kissed her head.

"Wanna stay all night?"

"Tempting but I have a child to get back to."

"Camping out worked well for Tully and Dawson."

"After a fashion." She sat up, keeping the thick blanket around her. He could hardly see her anymore for the lights

were almost completely out at the drive-in.

Not willing to let her go just yet, he pulled her closer to him, encouraging her to settle over his lap, placing her knees on either side of his hips. God, he wanted to do this again. Without clothing between them.

“Well, we’re already engaged.”

She snorted and damn it, even that he found adorable.

He tugged on the blanket’s edges, bringing her closer still. The press of her breasts against his chest was hard to ignore and he didn’t want to, but he did. Mostly. She rocked against him, sliding against the stiffness in his jeans.

“Emma.” Her name fell from his lips in a breathless sigh.

A bright light illuminated them both, making him squint, and he was pretty sure she did the same thing.

“What the fuck? Turn that off or get it out of our faces.”

“Sorry.” After a few moments of fumbling it shone toward the large screen the movie had been playing on. “That you, Linc?”

“Parker?”

“Yeah man, it’s me.”

Parker Hewes was an officer on the Rock Falls police force. He would have rather it been his father.

“What the fuck are you doing out here?”

“It was movie night.” He moved closer to the truck and Linc tightened his hold on Emma to keep her in place. “What are *you* doing here? The movie’s been over.”

“Oh my God,” she whispered, moving away. “I’m like the town slut now.”

“You’re my *fiancée*,” he growled at her. “She fell asleep during the movie and when she woke, we were talking.”

Parker set the flashlight on the rail of the truck only to swear when it rolled off. “Fuck, my foot.”

“Christ, he’s just like Barney Fife.” His words were low in

Emma's ear. He got a chuckle for that and brought her closer once more.

"With who? I heard you were engaged now."

"I am, Parker. I'm with her tonight."

"Who?" The light shone on him and Emma. "I just see Emma Henricksen. You cheatin' out here?"

The woman in his arms stiffened and he knew this wasn't good.

It baffled the mind who thought it would be a good idea to give this man any authority. And a gun.

"My fiancée, Parker. Emma Henricksen *is* my fiancée." He pushed his lips against her temple. "So, no, I'm not out here cheating. Why, again, are *you* here?"

"Told you, it's movie night. I thought someone stole your truck."

Linc rolled his eyes. "You thought that someone stole *my* truck and parked here? My big, jacked-up truck that damn near everyone in town knows belongs to me?"

"That's the one." Parker sounded so damn chipper about it. "I know you take a lot of pride in your truck. And you're one of our hometown heroes, so we keep an eye out on your things for you."

Emma moved against his chest and he figured she was laughing at him and the situation. Flexing his hand, he kept it on top of the blanket and not where he wanted to put it. Under the blanket, on her body.

He huffed with impatience and more than mild irritation. Cockblocked by a cop who belonged in Mayberry. Seconds later, the light was right in his eyes and he squinted.

"Parker?"

"Yeah, Linc?"

He ground his jaw. "The light?"

"Pretty impressive, right? I saw it on one of those

infomercial things. You know where they run over it with a tank or something like that. So bright it will cut through the dark.” A pause. “I knew I had to get one, you know how dark it can get in winter. I bet it will make seeing through the snow easier.”

Linc tugged the blanket over Emma’s head, protecting her. The beam was too wide for him to just dodge it.

“Parker, I don’t give a fuck where you got it. I meant the light, as in, get it out of my face.”

“Right, right. Sorry.”

He breathed a bit easier when once again the light was directed toward the ground.

“Good night, Parker.”

“I can take a hint.”

“Can you though, really?” he whispered the question and from the jerking of the woman on his lap, she heard him.

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds out here. But Linc, you’re not supposed to linger after the movie is over.”

“We’ll head out soon.”

“See you do. I don’t want to have to write you up.”

“Good *night*, Parker.”

“Night.” The light swept an arc then began to retreat as Parker carried it, and himself, away.

Linc had just started tugging on the blanket over Emma when they heard a commotion. The light wobbled and most likely fell.

“Umm, Linc.”

He clenched his jaw. “Yes, Parker?”

“I seem to have gotten myself stuck. Could you help me out?” His voice was a bit higher than usual. “Don’t know how this happened.”

A bark of laughter escaped Emma and she slapped a hand over her mouth as she met his gaze. All he could do was nod

with understanding.

“Let me go help him, then I’ll get you home.” He rested his forehead on hers.

“I’ll help.”

They climbed out of his truck and walked over the ground where some early fog was rolling in, close but not touching. The light made it so they could see Parker. The man was on the ground tangled in the cords from the speakers that attached to vehicles.

“How did he do that?”

Emma’s question echoed his own.

Linc grunted. “I never know with him.”

Thankfully, the revolver Parker carried had fallen away from the man. Linc picked up the light and had Emma hold it as he got to work untangling the officer.

His boys weren’t ever going to let him live this down.

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“You just don’t seem like his type of woman.”

Emma may have agreed with Mrs. Stevenson but that didn’t mean she enjoyed hearing it from a woman who looked like most of the women she’d seen Linc with during his baseball days.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Emma took a deep breath and prayed for patience. “I think that’s why it’s called love. There’s not any rule for it. Besides, Linc and I are both from this town, so we’ve known each other for years.”

Emma had no reason to tell her the infatuation was one-sided and she was pretty certain she could be considered a cyber-stalker for how often she looked him up.

Cynthia Yander wasn’t far from the two of them, definitely eavesdropping. It was the only reason, well, perhaps not the *only* one but the main one, that she kept the snark inside.

“Interesting,” she said. Seconds later, her expression

changed from calculating to flirtatious.

Emma knew Linc was around. Not just because of Mrs. Stevenson's change of demeanor but because of her own body's reaction.

"Ladies," he said as he strode up.

The second he slid an arm around her and pressed his lips to her cheek, she wanted to preen.

"Hello, Freckles."

Unable to find words, she reached up and patted his cheek and hoped she didn't look like she was about to pass gas, like some babies did when people thought they were smiling.

Linc guided her into the office and blocked her view of the women outside the door. He shut them out without even glancing at them.

"What's wrong?" He crossed his arms as he held her gaze.

"Nothing." She wasn't going to make him suffer because of her own numerous insecurities.

"Did she say something to you?"

"Did who say something?" She backed up to the desk and edged around it to his chair, all without taking her eyes off him.

"Mrs. Stevenson."

"Nothing I've not heard before." Emma gave him a small smile. "I'm fine, Linc."

He strode closer, not even slowing as he went around the desk until he was right in front of her. When he dragged the backs of his fingertips down her cheek, her breath slipped away.

"I miss you." His dark gaze heated. "Did you sleep okay?"

Her belly flip-flopped. "You miss me? It's not even been eight hours since you saw me last."

"Keeping track of the hours we're apart. This is good." He moved closer, pushing one of his thighs between her legs. She

sank her teeth into her lower lip and he clucked his tongue. Thumb against that same lip, he rolled it free of her bite. “None of that, it makes me want to lick it and then kiss you.”

He really shouldn't say things like that to her. She was going to start believing him.

“You should believe me, Emma. I want to lick, bite, and *taste* you.”

“Kids,” she blurted out.

His eyes smoldered. “Yes, please. I would love some smaller siblings for Greer to play with.” He grinned. “Keep looking at me like that, and we'll get started on them right away.”

A wink and a kiss, then he was gone, leaving her lightheaded and grateful the chair was there to catch her.

Her morning flew by as she worked on finishing up the plans he'd done for the rink. Her final task before lunch was a packet he wanted put together for the dinner tonight with Mr. Stevenson. As she finished up the last bit of that, the door to the office opened.

“Mama?”

She looked up with a smile that dropped away the second she saw Greer's face. “What happened?” Panic surged as her hands grew sweaty and acid burned in her throat.

Her daughter had some butterfly stitches on her head.

Greer touched the injury and gave a half grin, which for her little girl was a fucking million-watt smile.

She rushed to Greer's side and gripped her chin, tipping her head. “Did someone hit you?” She was going to lose her shit if someone hurt her little girl.

“Baseball.” Her daughter's response was muffled given she currently had her face smooshed and pinched in her hand.

“Who did it?”

“I'm fine, Mama. They are already scared that if I get hurt, Linc will kick them out.” She took a deep breath. “I like playing, Mama.”

That's all it took to soothe the angry mama bear who longed to go find the kid who dared injure her baby. Taking in the bandage job, she made sure it was to her standards and brushed a kiss over her forehead.

"Linc won't make the other kid leave. It was an accident." A pause. "Right?"

Greer blinked her long pale gold lashes that stood out against the color of her eyes, their flecks of fire-opal red offsetting the crystalline emerald green. "Yes, I didn't get my glove up fast enough."

Making sure she was smiling when she looked at her daughter again, Emma nodded. She barely saw anything of Greer's father in her, which was odd because she didn't see herself either. But those eyes, they were all him.

"Will it happen again?"

Greer crumpled up her expression. "I hope not. It hurt."

"I'm about done. Want to wait while I finish up and we can grab something to eat?"

Her daughter's response was to scamper into the desk chair and climb up. After digging into her bag, Emma passed along a book she always carried for her daughter as a backup read in case she finished the ones she had in her own pack.

"Thank you." She took it from her mother and opened it, making sure not to crack the spine.

That was it, Greer was buried in the story in seconds. Not worried about the injury on her head or anything other than the story unfolding before her eyes.

Making sure to lock Linc's proposal in his filing cabinet, she smoothed her hands down her slacks before toying with the end of the braid hanging over her left shoulder. "Where would you like to go?"

"TC's?" Her face fell as she nibbled on the corner of her lip. "Or we could eat here."

It broke her heart to think her daughter was trying to make her feel better because she knew money was tight. Or it used

to be. She'd not changed her frugal lifestyle and wasn't going to but she did have more money available thanks to this new job.

"TC's it is." She held out her hand. "Let's go."

Greer slid to the end of the seat and looked up at her. "Thank you, Mama."

"For what, baby?"

"Letting me play ball." She hopped down and reached for Emma's hand with the one not holding the book *Percy Jackson & the Lightning Thief*.

"You're welcome." Emma nearly bent down to kiss her but refrained. Holding hands, they walked out of the center and she stole a glance toward the part of the lot where Linc parked his monstrous vehicle.

"When you and Linc get married, do I get a truck like his?"

"A truck? And what makes you think I'm getting married?"

She unlocked her car and helped Greer inside. Soon her daughter wouldn't need the booster if she kept growing the way she was. It was one thing to be playing at being engaged, another completely to have her daughter jumping in on actually getting married.

"They said you're marrying Linc."

"Who said?"

"Everyone. They talk about it all the time. People are deciding when."

"Stop listening to rumors." She got behind the wheel and gripped it while she tried to find a way to get her off this topic. "Linc and I aren't in any rush."

Emma didn't hear a single peep from the back seat. Using the rearview mirror, she found Greer with her head buried in the book. With a smile, she started the engine and headed to TC's to spend some time with her daughter.

Lunch was great but when Greer dashed off to the restroom and Emma turned to find two women whose children were at

the center every day, she knew it was about to hit the shitter.

“Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Winter.” She pasted the smile she used to have on her face most days when she’d been at the diner, serving people who probably wouldn’t have spit on her if she’d been burning.

She’d gone to school with these two.

“If it isn’t the one who landed the big bad baseball player,” Jenna Carter sneered. She tucked a small clutch with one hand tipped with pointed bloodred nails under her arm. “Guess we know what you were practicing when you quit school.”

Katherine Winter snickered beside her, her lips flattening into a disapproving line. “Sad how the center could have been a great place but some people bring it down with their lack of morals and education.”

Skin heating, Emma made sure her smile didn’t slip. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard things like this, and she didn’t doubt it would happen again. However, having it bring a dark cloud over Linc and his center didn’t sit well with her at all.

“You could always leave, Katherine.” A new voice entered the conversation.

The woman speaking stepped up beside her. Emma recognized her from town. She used to work at the library—Mrs. Juliet Sprague. The woman was a firecracker of five feet nothing. Well into her eighties, she did what she wanted and said what she wished.

“Mrs. Sprague,” she greeted her.

Emma received a gentle smile before it fell away into a disapproving frown at Mrs. Winter and Mrs. Carter.

“Always lovely to see you, Emma.” She sniffed and thumped her cane on the floor of the shop. “What are you two still doing here? I don’t want to see or talk to you. Go away.”

They flinched and scurried off, leaving her with Mrs. Sprague.

“Such unpleasant women.” A sigh. “Now, where’s that child of yours? How are the wedding plans? We haven’t heard

anything about it yet. I did see an article in the paper about the center and it had a lovely photo of you, your daughter, and your fiancé to accompany it. Walk with me to a table. These old bones don't like standing as much anymore."

Obedying immediately, Emma went with her to a table. However, this one had people at it. Or rather it did until Mrs. Sprague glared at the two sitting there. They rushed off and the woman sank down with a huff. Emma was pretty sure it was one of smugness.

She hadn't seen any photo of herself in the paper. To be fair, she'd not looked at one in a long time.

Chelsea, the 'C' in TC, hurried over and placed a sandwich down with a glass of tea for Mrs. Sprague.

"Thank you, dearie." She waved her away. "Now, let's talk wedding."

It took three attempts before she could swallow the wad of cotton residing in the base of her throat. "Wedding?"

This time the flattened lips were directed her way. Emma scanned the room for her daughter and saw her standing beside the boy who'd spoken to her the first time she'd gone into the center to meet with Linc. Gary? Or was it Sam?

"Wedding." Knuckles rapped on the table, pulling her from whatever spiral her mind had gone down.

"We haven't talked about it. We're both putting our energy into the center right now."

Mrs. Sprague's drawn-on eyebrows rose. "Not the only place you are putting your energy, I hope. A man like that, I bet he can go for hours."

Emma had zero doubt she flushed, her face like the red pepper in Mrs. Sprague's sandwich. The woman cackled and took a big bite of her sandwich, giving Emma a few moments' reprieve. Barely.

"When Dawson came to quilting club, I asked her about Tully. I need to remember what it was like to be young, wild, and crazy. Making love in places that were an adventure. The

bridge, the park. In school.” She grinned. “If I thought my hip could take it, I’d be all over him, or his father. Even both before you could say ‘yes please.’”

Dear sweet Lord, did she really have to participate in this conversation? Emma bit the inside of her lip to keep any sound firmly inside.

“Ready, Mama. Hi, Mrs. Sprague.”

“Hello, dearie.” She pointed to the counter. “Could you go grab my chips from the counter for me?”

“Yes.” Greer looked to Emma and was off after she gave her daughter a small nod.

“Listen,” Mrs. Sprague continued. “I’ve watched you grow up, Emma. I know what a bastard your old man was and I know about that little girl’s deadbeat dad and his family. You’re an amazing woman and God willing, one day you will believe that for yourself. This Linc is a good man for you. Get those cobwebs out. Grease the wheels. Take him for a spin. Whatever you youngsters are calling it these days.”

Greer hurried over and passed along the bag of Kettle chips.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Emma stood. “Thank you, Mrs. Sprague.”

The older woman opened the bag and ate a chip, one eyebrow rising again. “We’ll talk again soon.”

Yeah, she had a feeling they would. Greer’s hand firmly in hers, they walked out into the afternoon. As she headed to the center, she couldn’t stop thinking about what Mrs. Sprague had said.

Chapter Eleven

Linc winced against the strain in his shoulder but remained where he was in the batting cage. This cage remained locked, as it was for him, personally. Pitching could reach up to one hundred miles per hour. Combined with the variety of pitching angles, he didn't want any child to be injured. Linc had come to blow off some steam before he picked up Emma for their dinner with the Stevensons. He needed to work off some of this excess energy.

Closing his eyes, he adjusted his stance slightly as he waited for the machine to lob a ball at him. Lips twitching as he thought about Emma saying he was used to balls flying at his face, he almost missed the first one.

Instinct took over and while he'd been out of the game for a while, his muscle memory knew what to do. The crack of the bat was satisfying as the reverberations moved up his arms.

Swing after swing, endorphins pumped through him. He'd been a switch hitter when he'd played and so he took an equal number of pitches on both sides.

Drenched in sweat when he finally called it quits, he took a deep breath and saw both Mitchell and Tully, fingers hooked in the wire, watching him.

"Are you ever going to forgive yourself?" Tully walked to the door and unlatched it for him.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Fuck you, Linc, if that's what you think." Mitchell handed the padlock to Tully after Linc walked out.

"I don't want to do this."

"That's the problem. You *never* want to do this. We're not letting it go and before you ask us a fucking stupid question like why, let me tell you." Tully turned his ballcap backward. "You have a great thing going with Emma but you're never going to completely open up to her so long as you're not letting go of the past and moving on."

“Just because you found *your* woman, Tully, doesn’t mean all of our lives are fucking roses.” They walked to the storage locker and he tossed his bat in before slamming the door.

“I’m with Tully on this, Linc. Don’t think I’m backing you this time.”

“Jesus, guys, what do you want from me?” He locked it and spun, glaring at them. “You want to know how many times I wake at night sweating because I still think there may be a chance I’m not going to walk again or be able to move my arm? You want to know how much of an ass I was when I knew I wasn’t playing again and instead of being happy for Carlos when they made him captain, I said things to him that my father would still whup my ass for today?”

Linc banged his head on the locker without wincing.

“I cut myself off from everyone.”

Mitchell propped his leg up on the bench. “You tried.”

“Not hard enough.” He ripped his shirt off and dumped it on the floor. Fingers on the waistband of his jeans, he arched an eyebrow at them. “Joining me in the shower?”

They laughed. “We’ve showered with you enough, but if you think threatening to get naked before us is going to stop this discussion, you’re wrong. So if you want to have it in the shower, fine, we’ll follow you in.”

“Thanks, Tully, you both do know I have the dinner with the Stevensons tonight, right? I need to shower and pick up Emma.”

Neither looked impressed.

“Fuck,” he growled. “I hate you both.”

“Yet here we are.” Mitchell held his gaze. “We know you entered a dark place with the painkillers and rehab. We know you pushed everyone away because in your mind it was just a reminder of what you no longer had and they had pity for that. Time to move on, Linc. You have a fantastic woman, like Tully said, who is at your side. Open yourself up to the opportunity and take a chance.”

“You don’t understand!”

“So fucking explain it to us,” Tully snapped back. “We’re not going anywhere so you may as well talk. And stop with the I-have-to-pick-up-Emma bit, we still have plenty of time.”

He raked both hands through his sweaty hair, only for it to flop over his eyes once more. “I shouldn’t have been playing when it happened. It was because of my arrogance that I no longer play.”

Tully’s mouth dropped open but Mitchell merely nodded.

“Your knee was already bad,” the ex-basketball player said.

“Yeah.” The admission hurt.

“How the fuck did you know?” Tully glared at Mitchell. “Why am I the last to know?”

“I recognized his gait from when I had hurt mine, Tully. I didn’t say anything because I thought our *best friend* would have told us, especially since We. Don’t. Keep. Secrets. From. Each. Other.”

Linc heard it in Mitchell’s tone. The pain. Anger. Frustration. Even a hint of fear.

He hung his head. “I’m sorry, guys. I couldn’t bring myself to see pity from either of you, so I tried to keep you away. In the dark. Wanted to handle it on my own.”

“We know.” Tully shrugged. “It’s not like we haven’t all been assholes before and will undoubtedly be again.” He sobered. “Are you okay?”

“I honestly don’t know. Part of me feels like Carlos threw the ball that way so I would have to do what I did to get it back to first in time for the triple play. I feel...” He pressed his lips together. “Betrayed. Or I did. I don’t know. We weren’t friends. Still aren’t.”

Hell, he didn’t have any friends left from those days.

“At least you’re admitting it,” Mitchell said. “First step and all.”

“Thank you, Dr. Phil,” he snarked.

“We’ll never pity you, Linc. You need to know that. We’ll laugh with you, cry with you, and hold your balls over the fire when you need it. Pity isn’t something we do. Got it?”

“Yeah, Tully, I do.”

“Thank God, because that was getting a little too touchy-feely for me.” Tully grinned and backed up.

Linc lunged after him and wrapped his arms around him, making sure to get as much sweat on the man as he could. “I need cuddling first.”

“You fucker,” Tully hollered. “Mitchell, start the water. I’m tossing this bastard in.”

Minutes later, Tully dragged him under the running shower and stepped away with a growl. Linc laughed. For the first time in a long time, Linc thought maybe he could move on. Right now, he had a shower to take and a fiancée to pick up for dinner.

Linc worked the screwdriver, tightening the hinge on the cupboard door at Emma’s. He hadn’t lingered in getting ready for his date with her. He just wanted to be with her and Greer. She’d let him in then had vanished to put on her finishing touches, so he’d walked around her home. When he’d come to the clean kitchen he’d noticed a cabinet door hanging at an angle. They’d all been loose and after going out to his truck for his toolbox, he’d set to fixing the easy things. He would have to come back to finish the rest.

He’d draped his suitcoat over one dining room chair and he’d loosened his tie. He felt her before he saw her and when he turned to look toward the living room, his breath caught. Nearly fumbling the screwdriver, he sucked in a sharp breath. A frosted sage green dress with lace covered her curves.

“Fuck me, Freckles. You’re gorgeous.”

She didn’t respond, didn’t flush, nothing. Emma stood there, eyes on him. Once the screwdriver had been placed on the countertop, he walked toward her, noticing her gaze never wavered from him. But still no words had passed her lips.

He raised his hands to cup her face before at the last moment settling them on the sides of her neck, allowing only his thumbs to touch her face.

She blinked a few times and it finally came, that adorable flush that owned her skin when she was thinking about him. Linc brushed his lips along hers and while it was hell pulling away, he did.

“You look good in that suit, Mr. Conner.”

“Linc.”

Her flush deepened.

“What are you doing?”

“Touching my fiancée.” Something he didn’t plan on stopping for a long while, if ever.

One side of her mouth twitched. “I meant in the kitchen.”

“Tightening the hinges on the cupboard doors.” Shame flooded her gaze and she tried to turn her head away. Linc refused. “No, Emma. This is something I can do and I’m a lot taller than you, so I don’t have to be on a stool or ladder to do it.”

“We should go.”

He growled. She wasn’t meeting his gaze. “We can miss the entire thing.”

That did it. She snapped those blue eyes to him and there was the spark that had vanished for a few moments.

“After all the work you did on this? Putting it together, kowtowing to that old man and his *wife* just to secure the money. You’re not missing this.” She smacked a hand on his chest. “Why would you even joke about something like that?”

“Maybe I just needed my woman to knock some sense into me.”

She coolly lifted her eyebrows. “Give me a bat.”

He clucked his tongue. “And you say you’re just a shy, quiet woman, Emma Henricksen. But you’re threatening me.”

She reached up and adjusted his tie, tightening it once more before smoothing her hands over his torso. His skin pebbled and his pants grew tight as her hands caressed him.

“We need to go.”

Heaving an exaggerated sigh, he released her and stepped into the kitchen to swipe his suitcoat off the chair. She watched him the entire time he slipped it on. And still when he returned to stand before her.

“Yours to command, Freckles.”

“If only,” she muttered as she turned around and walked to where a lacy shawl thing, which matched not only her dress but her fingers and toenails, waited.

Fuck, tonight was going to be hard. And so was he.

All.

Damn.

Night.

The dress stopped just below her knees and she had some strappy sandals with heels on her feet, giving her a few more inches but not a lot. All he knew was he approved of everything. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in curls, which added softness to her features. Linc dug his nails into his palms so he didn't grasp her hair and enjoy it falling over his skin.

He stared at her ass until she reached the front door and glanced over her shoulder at him. “Linc? You okay?”

With a jerky nod, he walked to her.

She gave him a smile that warmed him completely. Fiddling with the lapels on his suitcoat, she smiled up at him. “You know you're going to do fine. No one knows this proposal better than you. No one cares more than you about this center.”

“You think so?”

“I think,” she said, settling a hand along his cheek, “if Mr. Stevenson doesn't see what you are doing and can't understand your proposal, he's not as smart as everyone

believes.”

“You’re not impressed with his choice in women.”

She sniffed. “I’m not impressed with *his* wife flirting and trying to get *my fiancé* in some kind of compromising position. But he’s the one who has to live with what he brought into his life.”

“What I’m hearing is, you’re prepared to fight to the death for me against that woman.” He nipped her lower lip ever so briefly. “God, now I’m imagining naked Jell-O wrestling. Or mud wrestling.”

“I’m sure *she* would have no problem getting naked and doing that for you.”

Linc tsked and wrapped an arm around her midsection, drawing her flush to him. “I don’t want to see *her* that way. You, Freckles, all fucking day and twice on Sunday. What do you say? You and me? Mud wrestling? Jell-O? Sheets?”

She snorted and shook her head. “You’re incorrigible.”

He nodded. “Yes, yes, I am adorable.”

“Not at all what I said.”

He shrugged without shame. “Meh, it’s what I heard.”

“Thinking with the wrong head, Mr. Conner.” She turned around in his arm and opened the door.

He closed the distance between them again, pushing against her back. “You sure about that?”

Her entire body shivered and he wanted to experience that again.

“I’m sure that we’ll be late if we don’t leave now.”

Linc leaned closer to her ear. “If it helps, this one doesn’t run on batteries, so no need to worry about that. And you won’t have to run to the store to pick more up.”

God, he’d replayed the conversation he’d overheard from her with her friends a million times in his head. How she used vibrators. A thought which pushed him to envision her spread

out on his bed, using one with him. Him using one on her.

He swallowed down his animalistic grunt.

Her whimper thundered through him. “Dinner,” she gasped. “We have to get to dinner.”

He walked her to his truck and helped her up. “Just wanted you to know.” A wicked grin. “In case you were curious.”

Emma sat and didn’t say another word for about five minutes, fingering her clutch and the wrap which was on her lap as well.

“Is there anything I need to know before we get to the restaurant?”

Her nerves were obvious.

“Not a thing.” He patted the file on the seat between them. “You’ve done the hard part, Emma. It’s all been gathered, proofed, and organized. I’ve looked over this twice since you locked it in the cabinet and I can’t find a damn thing wrong with it.”

“You did the hard part,” she praised. She glanced at him, angling her body slightly. “Why didn’t you have someone write it for you? Is there a reason you want this done by your hand?” She flattened her lips. “I’m sorry, that was rude.”

He laughed. “No, I understand. For a lot of people, it’s easier to delegate this kind of thing.” Linc turned down the music. “I’m a bit of a control freak.”

“Nooo,” she drawled. She slapped her hand over her chest and watched him with exaggeratedly wide eyes.

He shot her a glare. “Watch it, Freckles.”

Her smile would have brought him to his knees had he been standing. As it was, all she did was kick his heart rate up triple and make his palms sweaty. Christ, he hadn’t been this nervous for his first pro game.

I really don’t want to share her with anyone tonight.

Okay, so it wasn’t only tonight. He wanted to keep her to himself for always. Her and the little girl he had become to

think of his own.

“My point,” he said, once again focusing on the road, “is that I like writing that kind of thing, being able to pour my heart into something I created. I did the one for Mitchell as well.”

“His gaming company?”

“Mine and Tully’s gaming company.”

A sage nod. “So *she* can’t get her claws into it.”

“Sounding mighty protective of Mitchell right now, Freckles.”

“If he gets to claim me, then I get to claim him right back.” An indulgent sniff. “Both of them.”

Emma was perfect.

He pulled into the restaurant parking lot and saw the Stevensons waiting by the door. Linc shoved down his insecurity. There were so many ways this could go wrong.

When he helped Emma down, she didn’t immediately step away from him but cupped his face in her hands, her thumbs moving gently against his skin.

“You’re going to do fine, Linc. Trust yourself.”

Closing his eyes at her words, he rested his forehead against hers. “Thank you.”

“Let’s go.” A brush of her fingers against his neck. “Do I call you Slugger?”

His lips twitched. “That’s a name for another part of my body.” He pulled back after brushing his lower half against her and sought her gaze. Amused but heated.

“Incorrigible.”

“Again, I’m hearing adorable.” He laced their fingers and led her toward the door as he locked his truck behind them.

“Perhaps a doctor is what you need. To check your hearing.”

“Nope, I’m perfectly fine with that, thank you very much.” He kissed the back of her hand and repositioned it on his arm.

Mr. Stevenson was in a dark suit, much like Linc, and his wife—unlike Emma, whose dress highlighted while not revealing everything—wore something more suited for a night of clubbing. Beside him, Emma tensed and he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“Good evening, Mr. Stevenson.” He barely glanced at the wife. “Mrs. Stevenson.”

The man grinned and held out his hand. “Thought you may have changed your mind.”

“Not at all.” He wrapped his arm around Emma, tucking her into his side. “I mean, I was tempted, how could I not be, but we’ve been looking forward to getting this deal done and signed.”

“Let’s grab a table and eat. We can discuss business later.”

Mrs. Stevenson gave him a look that nearly had him ducking behind Emma for protection. “I think, honey, you should escort the lovely Emma in while I walk with Mr. Conner.”

And he’d thought she’d been tense before. Emma didn’t say anything, however. She smiled when Mr. Stevenson held out his arm for her.

“I would be charmed to walk this woman to the table. I haven’t had enough time with her.”

Jealousy spiked but Emma looked at him over her shoulder and he read that command in her gaze like she’d shouted it from the rooftop: *Behave*.

Mrs. Stevenson’s thick perfume clouded around him and made him want to sneeze. She dug her nails into his arm as they followed Emma and Mr. Stevenson across the floor of the establishment. The chandeliers that hung above them shone brightly, their flickering candles highlighting the crystal.

A slight tug on his suitcoat brought his gaze to the woman on his arm. She just smiled and gestured around the place.

“This is a nice restaurant.”

“We like it.” He held her chair for her and made a point of

leaning down to kiss Emma on the cheek before claiming his own seat. Across from Mr. Stevenson, he gave the man a smile as their menus were handed to them. Under the table, a foot grazed his own and he nearly jerked it away. Stevenson's wife sent him a wicked smile and Linc knew this was going to be a long night.

But he had a goal in mind and he needed to focus on that. Sliding his chair closer to Emma, he made sure his feet were in the clear.

...

Emma made a slow perusal of the menu before her. Stomach in knots, she didn't really want to eat. The last thing she needed was to throw up or to drop something on her dress. She wasn't the slightest bit nervous for Linc. As for herself, however, and the ways she could fuck up tonight, well that number was high.

"See something you like?" Linc whispered in her ear as he settled one arm around the back of her chair.

"Probably a salad," Mrs. Stevenson said, looking at them over the top of her menu.

Linc tensed and Emma touched his thigh, hoping he didn't rise to the bait. "It all looks delicious."

"Haven't you been here before?" Mr. Stevenson set his menu down and placed his gaze on her.

Emma chuckled. "No, not really somewhere my daughter would enjoy."

"I like that you put your daughter first, Ms. Emma." He smiled at her.

"Emma is always putting people before herself. It's part of what drew me to her." He brushed his lips over the shell of her ear.

Their server appeared. "Are we ready to order?"

Linc tipped his head to Emma. "Freckles?"

“I’m ready.” His gaze heated. “To order.”

After ordering her chicken sauté with maple cream sauce, walnuts, grape tomatoes, dried cranberries, linguine and asiago cheese and pairing it with a white wine, Linc ordered the surf and turf but declined alcohol.

“Not drinking, son?”

“Precious cargo to get home.” His thumb skimmed her shoulder in an oddly relaxing caress.

Emma noticed how Mrs. Stevenson continued to send doe-eyed looks at Linc—who focused on Mr. Stevenson and her, not the wife.

She listened as Mr. Stevenson made small talk. He peppered Linc with a few other questions about the center. They seemed to be redundant ones that had been asked before but Linc never hesitated with his answers. Emma thanked the server when their food was delivered. She looked over at Linc’s filet mignon, lobster meat, with the house hollandaise, as well as the mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus. Damn, that looked delicious.

“Want a bite?” He cut her a small piece and held the fork to her.

She opened her mouth and couldn’t even stop the moan when the filet mignon hit her tastebuds. From the heat in his gaze, he’d heard. Emma chewed and swallowed all without looking away from him. Electricity sparked between them as he never dropped his gaze. He finally lowered it to track the trail she made with her tongue along her lips.

“Delicious,” she murmured, suddenly conscious of the other couple at the table.

“I would like to put something out there,” Mr. Stevenson said, interrupting the bubble which had surrounded them.

“What’s that?” Linc faced the man across the table from them as he began to eat again.

“Come to San Antonio.”

She shared a look with Linc. This had to be good, right?

“You want me to come to San Antonio?” Linc placed his utensils down on the plate, giving Mr. Stevenson his full attention.

“I think that would be a great idea, honey,” Mrs. Stevenson cooed, her gaze never leaving Linc.

Emma wanted to toss her water in the woman’s face...to help her cool down.

“I want both of you to come.” Mr. Stevenson took a bite and chewed.

Panic exploded in her chest. Go to San Antonio? With Linc? Alone? What about her daughter? What about her determination to not climb him like a spider monkey and beg for one night with him?

“I want you to give the same presentation to my board that you gave me. I think it will go a long way in gaining interest from more of them.” He leaned and steepled his fingers. “Unless you don’t feel comfortable doing that.”

Emma narrowed her eyes, knowing exactly what this was. They wanted to make Linc jump through a few more hoops. Anger flowed like lava through her veins.

“He’s perfectly comfortable doing that. I know his hesitation is merely out of respect for the fact I have a daughter who can’t be left alone.”

Linc’s hand cupped the back of her neck and his fingertips moved in small circles, soothing the beast that had been awakened.

“She’s right, honey. Perhaps Emma should stay home.” Mrs. Stevenson shot her a cold glare.

She growled low in her throat, fist clenching where it sat on Linc’s thigh. Wait, when had that happened?

“It would mean that this is something you’re serious about, son. How about it? Can I count on you both coming to visit my great state?”

Emma chanced a glance at Linc to find his gaze waiting. While his touch along the nape of her neck grounded her, it

was the tender brush from his hand against her cheek that did her in.

“Your decision. I won’t make you leave Greer.”

She believed him. Giving him a small smile, she looked first to Mr. Stevenson, then to his wife. Her expression told of her hope that Emma wouldn’t go. Mr. Stevenson’s held a challenge.

“We’d be happy to join you. I do have to set up care for my daughter, so it couldn’t be right away.”

“No problem. I have to tell my other guys about this. Let’s talk later about a good time for both sides. Right now, I want to know more about this lovely little town. It’s like a postcard. We will eat dessert and get to know one another.” He held up a hand and their server hurried over.

Emma sighed and leaned into Linc’s touch. He brushed his lips over her ear. Every synapse in her rose, not that they’d been sleeping as he’d touched her throughout the meal, but this was more.

Claiming her? Keeping her off kilter so she didn’t focus on what she’d agreed to? She didn’t know but she loved his touch.

Linc insisted on paying for dinner.

“Fine,” Mr. Stevenson relented. “But it’s on me when we go out in Texas. You’re going to love the steakhouse I’ll take you to.” He stood and glanced to his wife, who got up beside him, a bit wobbly on her feet.

Linc rose, then helped Emma from her chair, tucking her close to his side. A move she didn’t protest.

The four of them moved to the door. Mr. Stevenson held out his hand to her and gave her a limp handshake. She was pretty certain it wasn’t that way with Linc.

“Thank you for indulging this old man, son. I’ll have my people get in touch with you about coming down to San Antonio.” He gripped his wife around the waist when she moved toward Linc.

Hmm, perhaps the man did know his wife.

She and Linc watched the Texas couple get into their car once the valet brought it around. The moment they drove off, she sighed, a collective weight sliding off her shoulders.

“Let’s go,” Linc said, taking her hand in his, leading her to his truck.

“What are we doing here?”

Linc pulled his truck into the parking lot of the center.

“Come on,” he said, and he jumped down and was at her side of the truck in seconds to help her down.

She slid down his body, not at all complaining because the man smelled so damn good.

Emma couldn’t figure out if he was happy or upset by how things had played out tonight. Usually, she was fairly good at reading him, but for some reason, she got nothing when she looked at him. Well, not in regard to how he felt about the dinner.

She got a lot from him and it had been hell to have him so close all night, brushing his hand along the nape of her neck, playing with her hair. All the small intimate touches he gave her, like he couldn’t stand *not* to touch her.

She leaned toward upset but Linc had such control over his emotions, she couldn’t get a read on them. Or him.

I’m not a fan of not knowing what he’s thinking. While not as important to her as him, because let’s face it, the center was *his* baby, she wanted to see him succeed and shatter people’s expectations of him. Especially as he was no longer playing professional ball.

Other than when he’d nearly beat up her old boss for what had been implied, he didn’t lose his temper. Sure, he’d gone cold when she mentioned Adam, but nothing had come from it.

Her heels clicked on the asphalt as she followed him to the door. She stood beside him as he disabled the alarm. Then her hand was in his and he was taking her through the building, his

pace fast.

“Stop, Linc. I can’t walk that fast in these shoes.”

He jerked to a halt and gazed down at her. Emma’s heart lurched at the raw vulnerability in his eyes. He hadn’t had time to hide it from her. Without a word, he sank to his knees before her and skimmed a hand down her bare calf to the strap on her open-toed heels. He removed them for her and held them in one hand as he pushed to his feet. Then he grasped her hand once more and led her off down the hall.

After slipping out the rear door, they stuck to a path which curved around the back of the building. The moment she saw it, she realized where they were going.

The batting cages.

Her heart surged at the prospect of watching him swing a bat again. The man had been magic on the field.

Again, he shocked her. Rummaging through the gear, he brought out a hat for her and placed it on her head, the corners of his mouth twitching. Then he pushed a bat into her hands. Turning her, he nudged her into one of the cages.

“Seriously? You want me to bat at night, in a dress, and without shoes?”

“Want your shoes?”

She glared at him as the lights slowly came on around them. His long, dark fingers curved against the fencing and she couldn’t help but think of those same fingers stroking her pale skin, sending her to heights of pleasure she’d never known.

“Or help removing your dress?” Linc tipped his head and dragged his gaze over her before meeting her eyes once more.

Her core temperature rose and she squeezed her hand around the knob before she shifted down to hold the handle. “Not even in your dreams.”

“Freckles, in *my* dreams you’re not even allowed *any* clothing. So removing that dress wouldn’t be an issue. Personally, I think you’re going to be adorable naked with a batting helmet on your head.”

“Why am I here? Why aren’t you holding a bat?”

“I’ll be next door. I wanted to get you set up first.”

She faced away from him, digging her toes into the hard packed dirt. “I’m ready.”

“Sure you don’t want some hands-on instruction? I’ve done it once or twice and look how I helped with the bowling.”

“Helped me work through some batteries, more like...”

“Fuck, Freckles. You can’t say things like that to me. I’m trying to be a gentleman.”

His breath fanned along the back of her neck as his chest pressed into her.

Knowing this man was attracted to her blew her mind. “To be fair, it was supposed to be an internal thought.”

“Wasn’t.”

She flushed again, hating how hot this man could make her cheeks. “I got this. You go swing over there.”

He didn’t move. Not true—he didn’t move away. He came closer. Linc wrapped his arms around her, bending his form around hers. Emma had never felt more protected than she did at that moment.

“One day you’re going to take me up on my offer.” A small bite along her neck that made her want to shift shamelessly as she offered up more of her skin for him to enjoy. “And I cannot *wait* for you to be ready for that step.”

She felt the loss of his heat before she registered that he’d stepped away from her. Linc watched her through the fence separating them.

“Ready?”

Not really. She nodded.

“Set your knob and be prepared.”

She quirked her lips. “Bet you say that a lot.”

He choked up on the bat and clucked his tongue at her. “You have a dirty mind, Freckles. I love it. And only Tully and

Mitchell got me to say that to them. Until you.”

“Maybe it’s not just an ear doctor you need to visit but an ophthalmologist as well. I definitely don’t have the equipment they do.”

“Thank God for that.” He wagged his eyebrows. “I love what you have.”

She flushed and shook her head. “Pay attention to your own balls.”

His chuckle filled the air. “Back to the balls again, Freckles?”

Setting the machine for herself, she ignored Linc’s comment and braced herself for the first ball to come flying at her. The whirr let her know it was prepping to lob one at her. She licked her lips, lying to herself that she was ready.

She wasn’t a ball player. She hadn’t done any sports in school, but she’d watched enough games—yes, mostly Linc’s—to get the concept of the batting cage. And since working at the center, she knew each cage had two pitching machines: one for baseball and one for softball. They each offered a variety of speeds. She had hers set at forty miles per hour. Emma figured Linc would be doing the fastest for baseball: sixty miles per hour. Which was still far slower than he’d had careening at his head during his professional career.

There was another cage, way down by the end, but the children had been strictly forbidden to enter that one. She’d not even ventured down to it.

Two had already zipped by her when she heard the crack of the ball off the bat from the man beside her. Amazed, she watched him three more times, just as flawless and beautifully mesmerizing as he had been on the field.

“Swing the bat, Freckles.” He hadn’t even looked over at her. “Stop checking out my ass.”

“Ahh,” she said, getting into position again. “I understand now, this hearing thing. I heard you say you were an ass.” She swung and missed, frowned and adjusted her hold on the bat.

Linc laughed and that was the last that was said for a while. After what she was sure were more than a few homeruns, Linc abandoned his cage and entered hers. She still didn't talk but let him position her a bit better, making adjustments to her feet and her hold on the bat. She got a brief moment of touching when he assisted her with her hip action.

When the time ran out, she was sweating and felt incredible. "Thank you for this. I had a great time. It was the perfect way to end the night, plus it worked off part of what I ate. Who knew getting sweaty like this would be such fun?"

There went his damn eyebrow again.

And true to form, she flushed. This man got her so tongue-tied and fried her circuits. Linc raked his gaze over her. Slowly. Like treacle dripping off a spoon.

The air between them crackled with passion. She worked hard to swallow and it took a few tries before she could claim success at that particular feat.

He strode into her space, maneuvering her until the chain-link fence prevented her retreat. Hands on the fencing over her head, he surrounded her with his scent and heat. His skin held a sheen of sweat from batting and his suitcoat was off. He'd rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, allowing her hungry gaze to lap up his visible tattoos, and his hair fell forward over his eyes.

And just like that I'm back in the front row of the arm porn addicts.

She skimmed her lips with her tongue, noting how his gaze followed the motion. God, her temperature was increasing, fluttering sensations were alive and well in her chest and stomach. Perhaps he could hear her pounding heartbeat over their combined breathing.

"Tell me something, Freckles. You have an adorable little girl. Surely you experienced sweating involved in creating her." He bent his arms and got even closer.

She snorted. "Not even close. I mean, perhaps on his part, but for me it was more like a *oh, that was it* kind of response."

What the fuck is wrong with me that I would admit this to him?

Those damn bow-shaped lips of his curved up. “Perfect.”

Yeah, his voice kind of was.

“What is?” She shifted her weight, spreading her legs a bit more, wishing they were touching his.

For a moment, there wasn’t any sound between them other than their breathing. His gaze roved over her face, dipped down then up to her eyes. “I need to get you home.”

That was a dousing of cold water. Disappointment didn’t even begin to explain her emotions.

“Right.” She dropped her gaze to the ground. “I’ll put this away.”

He didn’t move. “No, Freckles. The first time we learn just how sweaty we can get isn’t going to be on the ground of a batting cage. And we need to talk about San Antonio.”

If his “no” had been a cold douse, the mention of San Antonio was a freaking iceberg. She shuddered.

And I’d done such a spectacular job forgetting that had come up during dinner. And I not only agreed but led the damn charge on going.

Linc didn’t speak, just guided her out of the cage and slipped his coat over her shoulders. Warmer wearing his clothing, she sighed. He grabbed the two bats, and her shoes, then led the way into the building. After they returned the items, including the helmet on her head, he took them to the office and sat at his desk before pulling her onto his lap.

“I’m too hea—”

He held up a finger to cut her off seconds before he pulled her tighter to his chest. “Not hearing it, Emma.”

She could hear his irritation. But his touch was infinitely gentle. Linc had her so her feet couldn’t even touch the floor. She was completely in his lap, tucked against him so close—just like she’d been in her dreams.

Chapter Twelve

“Do either of you know who knocked up Emma?” Linc blurted out the question as he was finishing his packing for the trip to San Antonio. It had taken a little over a week for everything to be set for him and Emma to travel. Mitchell and Tully were in his room, making nuisances of themselves as opposed to helping.

His question stopped his friends and they both looked at him. It was more of a mix of “has he lost his marbles” and “who the fuck was he” for even inquiring. He paused, a T-shirt in his hand as he looked up at them instead of the dark, distressed leather bag he was packing.

“What?”

His friends shared a look before they each leaned against the wall.

“What’s really going on with you and Emma?” Tully crossed his arms, showing off his tattoos as his massive arms flexed.

“Sounds like you’re getting serious.” Mitchell had a long-sleeved Henley on which hid his markings. He hooked his ankles as he reclined.

“Because I’m taking her with me to San Antonio? I told you why that was happening.”

“Don’t bullshit us, Linc.” Tully frowned at him.

Mitchell mimicked the motion. It was their thing, being truthful with each other. No matter how much they didn’t want to.

So, he came clean. “I like her. A lot.”

They shared a “no shit” look between them before they glanced to him.

“And Greer.”

Tully grinned wide. “She’s freaking adorable, no argument.

Even Legs has mentioned how much more outgoing the kid's become." He shook his head. "But this is more than a work thing."

Linc zipped the weekender bag closed after shoving the last shirt in and flopped on the bed next to it. "I'm falling in love with this woman. Hell, perhaps I have already. Christ, I'm..." He toyed with the metal keyring on the main zipper, the roaring lion which had been the symbol of his life for a long while. "I don't know."

"Far be it from me to tell you you're not in love with the woman. Both of you know how fast I fell for my Legs."

He glanced at Tully then Mitchell.

His friend pushed a hand through his locks while releasing a sigh. "We all know how my marriage went into the shitter. I'm not going to lie and say I am a true believer in love right about now, but I can say I see how happy this woman and her child make *you*, Linc. For what it's worth, to me she seems like one of the good ones. You know this, though, we talked about it. A WAG you wouldn't have to worry about." A shoulder bump. "Not like that's a thing that needs to concern you now, but still. You know how I was raised."

Mitchell held out his hands when Linc opened his mouth.

"This isn't about me and my screwed-up outlook on things because of how I was raised. This is us supporting you and the woman you're in love with."

Shit, he loved his friends.

"Thanks."

They both nodded and jumped on the bed beside him, making the bag bounce off. "So, we haven't caught up in a while," Tully said, lying on the bed like he had a right to. "Tell us about getting caught at the drive-in."

"And bowling at Spare." Mitchell nudged him in the arm. "You've been holding back on us."

"Fuck you both."

They snorted.

“Sounds like that’s what you were doing at the drive-in,” Tully said, stroking his beard. “On your lap, under a blanket.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Fuck off, it’s not like that with us. Don’t make me tell Dawson on you for being rude.”

Tully sobered up. “Low blow, man.”

“Keep being mean and you’ll be blowing yourself. I mean, if you could reach that tiny dick.”

Mitchell leaned against the headboard, a smile teasing the corners of his mouth.

Tully cupped his junk through his pants. “Suck this.”

Linc just punched him in the shoulder. Tully retaliated and it was like they were kicked to childhood where everything turned into a scuffle. They fought for headlocks and rolled around. Wrapped tight around one another, they both stiffened when the door opened and Mr. Conner poked his head in. Large feet planted on his shoulder and shoved. He and Tully slid off the bed and onto the floor, courtesy of Mitchell.

Mr. Conner watched them for a moment, lips twitching. “Good to see some things never change. Just remember, you’re bigger and stronger now. Don’t break anything.” Then he shut the door on them.

Linc looked at Tully and as one they rushed Mitchell, who sat there entirely too smug for just having pushed them off the bed.

After they finished behaving like the little boys they had been, they went downstairs where Mr. Conner had set out a large spread.

“Thanks, Pops.”

The man smiled at the three of them. They stood still, aware he was double checking for anything which may need to be patched up.

“Gotta feed my boys.” He hitched a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m off to take my walk. If I’m not back before you leave, Linc, take good care of that woman and knock ’em

dead.”

“Yes sir.”

After giving Linc a hug, his father got one from each of his friends and left with a wave over his shoulder. As they stood at the table and put together their sandwiches, Linc pointed the knife in his hand at Mitchell.

“You know, he’s going to start on you next.”

Mitchell glanced up from where he spread Miracle Whip on one side of the cut hoagie bread in his hand. “What are you talking about?” The panic in his gaze told Linc Mitchell knew exactly what he meant.

“Tully and Dawson. Me and Emma. You and—”

“No one.” Mitchell picked up some sliced tomato and set it on his bread. “I haven’t gotten rid of The Viper in my life yet.”

Linc picked up some sliced hickory-smoked turkey and layered it on his sandwich. “What can we do?”

Mitchell’s bark of laughter held no humor. “Nothing. Keep doing what you’re doing. We’re almost finished, but my money has hired her a large team of attorneys to fight on her behalf.”

“Why is she stalling?” Tully didn’t stop assembling his massive sandwich as he posed the question. Linc watched him and wondered how the hell he was going to get his mouth around that.

Mitchell grunted as he paused to shake his head at Tully. “Money. It’s all about the money. She found out about the company and feels it should be hers. Well, at least half.”

“If it hasn’t been said before,” Tully continued, “I really don’t like her.”

“Makes two of us,” Linc added.

“Three.” Mitchell placed some cheese on the growing stack of condiments he was adding. “Three of us.” He looked before picking up a serrated knife and cutting the sandwich in half then placing it on the plate and grabbing a bag of chips.

They all ate in the living room, the talk turning to sports.

“What about you, Linc?”

He swallowed his bite. “What about me?”

“You don’t mention the guys you played with. Have you mended those fences yet?”

He wanted to send his plate into the wall. These two were the only ones who knew about the bridges he’d burned when he got injured. About his spiral down to where he didn’t think he was ever going to get out.

“No.” He squeezed his fist so tight, he had half-moons embedded in his skin from his nails.

Both of them looked at him. No judgment on their faces. They merely waited for more of an explanation.

“Let it go.” Linc forced the three words from between clenched teeth.

As one, they snorted. “You know *that’s* not going to happen.”

Mitchell balanced the plate on his knee and gave him a look. One he didn’t want to see.

“They were your friends, Linc. You deserve it, and so do they. I thought our chat at the cage had pointed you in the right direction about this.”

“I have friends,” he snapped, irritated with this conversation. “Two less if they don’t drop this.”

He didn’t need to remember the nights of being blackout drunk, not that he could, anyway. Or the pain as he’d pushed himself too far too fast, trying to heal, and ended up doing more damage. And he definitely didn’t need to replay the one time he’d managed to hobble his injured body back to the clubhouse and had overheard them talking about how they were going to be fine without him—that they didn’t need him. Another person had already stepped up to his position at third base and they would be going further than they would have with him in the lineup. That had been it for him. He’d turned around and walked away. Okay, hobbled away, and after

checking himself out of the rehab facility, he'd headed home. If they didn't need him, he sure as fuck didn't need them.

"Threatening us isn't going to change a fucking thing. We all know you're not cutting us out of your life like you did them, because we're too goddamn stubborn to leave. Plus, we'll bring in Pops." Tully shoved three chips into his mouth and chewed.

"I hate you both."

They nodded. "We love you too, man." Mitchell gave a short smile before he returned to demolishing his sandwich.

"Bastards," he muttered with affection.

Thankfully, they dropped it for the rest of the lunch. However, it didn't stop his mind from whirling, which had been their end goal. Getting him to think about his old teammates. Again. And he wasn't any closer to solving who was the father of Emma's adorable daughter.

When the time came to go get Emma and head to the airport, his gut was a bundle of nerves. He didn't mind flying but he wasn't sure about this entire trip. Sharing a room with a woman he woke up thinking about as he fisted himself was going to be a test of something he wasn't sure he had. It didn't help that he couldn't get fantasy-her, dressed in an old worn shirt of his as she opened the door, looking like he'd interrupted her being pleased, out of his mind. Hair tousled, skin flushed, nipples pointing through her thin top.

He sat outside her house in his truck, trying to get his erection back under the pretense of control. Behind him on the seat was not only a booster seat for Greer—which he loved having in his truck—but also his bag.

"Get out of the fucking truck and go get her," he told himself.

He listened, strode to her house, and knocked. She must have been watching for him because the door opened right away.

Emma wouldn't meet his gaze for more than a brief second.

“Hi.” She stepped back, allowing him in. “I just have to get my bag.”

He followed her in and closed the door. “Where’s Greer?”

Her lips trembled. “Already with Dawson. Planning on having a blast while we’re gone these two days.”

He cupped her shoulder, keeping her from bolting. “Are you okay with leaving her?”

“No. But that doesn’t really matter, does it? You told a stranger I was your fiancée and now he’s expecting us both to be there.”

“Emma.”

She squeezed her eyes and opened them once more, holding his gaze. “I can’t put it all on you, I opened my big mouth as well and made it worse. It’ll be fine. I’ve never left her before.” Emma blew out a long breath and nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

He knew how much this woman loved her daughter and it killed him to see her this way. “You don’t have to come, I’ll make your excuses. You can stay here with Greer.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m going. I can handle it.”

“Okay.” He wanted to pull her in and kiss her but didn’t. They had a plane to catch.

...

Emma worried her lower lip as she gazed around the suite they were staying in for their two nights in San Antonio. It contained two rooms and one bed. One king-sized bed. It was incredible and never had she seen anything like it.

Setting her bag on the floor, she walked out onto the balcony and gripped the iron railing. She smiled as she looked at the people milling along the river that snaked below her.

Linc was beside her, not saying anything, surrounding her with his warmth and the comfort he provided. Even if she didn’t want to admit it.

“This is beautiful.”

“Yes, you are.”

She jerked her head up and his gaze, once again, was on her. Emma hated how nervous she was. *What if he is expecting sex from me for bringing me? What if he thinks I'm horrible at sex like my ex did? What if he makes me get home on my own? What if—*

“Stop it, Emma.”

She blinked and took a shuddering breath. “Stop what?”

“Whatever fucking train crash your thoughts have you on. I'm not expecting anything from you at night. Or day. Nothing other than doing your job, which I know *you* know how to do.”

Damn him for reading her so well.

“Isn't my job to play the adoring fiancée?”

He put them nose to nose. “You are one.” Linc cupped the back of her neck and dragged his fingers along her skin, reminding her how hypersensitive she was to this man's touch. Her nipples drew taut and she damn near rubbed against him.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” His voice never wavered.

“I don't want to let you down, Linc. I know how important this is to you.”

“You're not going to let me down, Freckles. You came across the country with me, left your daughter for the first time, all because I needed you.”

She tried to smile. “You needed *someone*.”

His fingers pushed up into her hair and tugged. “No, I need *you*.”

If only. “Needed,” she corrected.

Linc shrugged. “Your word, not mine.”

“Is this where the meeting is?” She had to focus on something other than how damn good his fingers felt running

through her hair. As well as how he used *need* in the present tense instead of past.

“No, we’ll be going to Mr. Stevenson’s building.” He tucked her against him as they stood out on the balcony. “Across town.”

“Why are we not staying closer? Wouldn’t it be more cost effective to not spend money on a taxi for a longer distance?”

She should pull from him and put space between them but Emma didn’t move. She couldn’t bring herself to do so. She loved being up against him. Having his strong arms around her.

“We’re staying in this area because I thought you might like exploring the River Walk and getting some things for Greer. I have a driver who will take us where we need to go.” He slid his hand to cup her cheek and make sure she was looking at him. “This is a business trip, Emma. However, we are allowed to have some fun while we’re on the trip. We meet Mr. Stevenson tomorrow, so tonight is ours. We can do whatever you want.”

Bed. No clothing. Off the wall sex.

Her phone rang and she moved away from him and hurried to answer it.

“Hello?” She knew it wasn’t Dawson about Greer as she’d given her friend a unique ringtone. She’d not recognized the number when she picked up the phone.

“Ms. Henricksen?”

“Yes?” In the doorway leading out to the balcony, she saw Linc watching her, eyebrow up in a silent question. She shrugged in return, not sure who this was.

“My name is Adam Savaglio.”

Her heart thundered in her chest. That name she knew. One of Linc’s old teammates. A man he wouldn’t talk about. Granted, he had never spoken to her about his ball days.

“You reached out to me about a proposition.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for getting back to me. Please give me a moment, I just need to get to my desk and pull out the information.”

“Of course.”

She remembered him from watching Linc play ball. Adam had been, well, still was, the pitcher for the Dutchmen. Tall like Mitchell, with blond hair and green eyes that many a woman swooned over. Personally, her own tastes ran to black hair and eyes.

Covering the phone, she gave Linc a small smile. “Work.”

“Do you need me to handle it?”

She smiled as she shook her head. “I have it. I’ll set up at the table.” Betrayal ate at her gut but she ignored it. He would understand why she was reaching out to this man. Yes, she had to tell him, but not before this meeting with Mr. Stevenson.

“You okay if I go to the gym?”

“Of course,” she said, walking to her bag and bending over to unzip it and pull out her portfolio that contained what she needed. Carrying it to the round black marble circular table in the corner, she settled in one of the gray chairs and put in her earbuds. “I’m almost ready, thank you for your patience.”

Adam murmured something she would suppose was appropriate but truth be told, she was sidetracked by Linc as he walked out of their shared bedroom, shirtless. The man met her gaze and winked before drawing his shirt on over his head.

Approaching her, he dragged his fingers along her shoulders before pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Be back later.” His whispered words robbed her of any response so all she could do was nod.

Then when the door closed behind him, she flipped open her portfolio and jumped to the section she was working on to help Linc acquire more funding.

“I appreciate you getting back to me, Mr. Savaglio.”

“Have to say I was shocked. Linc hasn’t exactly been friendly with any of us since he got out.” A bark of laughter,

which she wasn't positive held all that much humor in it. "Guess money will do strange things."

She ground her jaw and looked around, making sure she truly was alone. "I have to be honest with you, Mr. Savaglio, he doesn't know I'm in contact with you. I work with him and I'm reaching out to lots of potential investors." Her grin lifted her lips. "Linc has a grand vision and he wants to take this center national to give children safe places to gather, learn, play, and create bonds that will last a lifetime."

A low hum crossed the line. "And you're going against his wishes to speak with those he used to play with?"

She drummed her fingers on the paper before her. "He never explicitly told me to stay away from ballplayers."

This time his chuckle was humorous. "Oh, I like you already, Emma. Can I call you Emma?"

"Of course."

"We love that man, all of us do, but he pushed us away after his injury. He's rebuffed all attempts to reconnect with us. And we tried, numerous times. Sure, when his accident happened, we were assholes because he wasn't going to be able to help get us to the championship." A deep breath. "I just didn't know the depth of his injuries or how hard it was for him to climb out of that hole. When I got my own head out of my ass, it was too late. Bridges had been burned. On both sides."

That broke her heart. Linc had such a large heart and was so damn giving. Why would he shut off part of himself that was so important? *I want to know everything.*

"Nevertheless," Adam continued. "I want to contribute and I'll pull in some of the other players to do the same. Our clubhouse hasn't been the same since he left. I know that players move on, but we do tend to keep in touch with our friends. With him, he was there, then gone with no trace or chance to reconnect. If this is what it takes to get him back in our life, we'll take it."

She made some notes on her page. "I'll send over his proposal so you can look at it."

“Let me give you my personal email.”

Emma entered it in her phone along with his personal numbers. “Thank you, Mr. Savaglio.”

“No, no. We’re going to be friends and you are going to get me back to Linc. Call me Adam.”

“Adam,” she capitulated.

“Before I let you go,” he said, “do I have your permission to share this with the other guys I have in mind?”

She raked her mind over the players’ names and couldn’t pull anyone specifically that Linc had despised. She’d not asked about others, given how fast he’d shut her down when she merely said “Adam” to him. Sure, the guys had had some disagreements on the field and he’d had some dustups with a few but she didn’t recall anything so serious he wouldn’t be okay with this.

Aside from the fact I’m going against his wishes. Betraying the trust he put in me.

“Not at all, just please make sure they know to keep a lid on this. He’s not ready for everything to come out yet.”

“I’ll take care of it. I have a few more questions, do you have the time for that?”

“Of course I do. Ask away.”

She spent another hour on the phone with Adam, answering his questions and asking some of her own. After hanging up with him, she walked into the bedroom and took a deep breath as her gaze traveled over the king bed’s bright white sheets and the brown folded comforter.

Storing her portfolio, she dragged her fingers along the mattress top, trying to figure out how tonight was going to work. Lord knew she craved Linc but he’d refused to go further than kissing.

She pushed those thoughts away. This was nothing more than a means to an end for him. She was a fake fiancée. And, as a woman who was a high school dropout, single mom, and overweight, she wasn’t exactly a catch. Yet, there were times

when she caught him watching her that she swore he saw something else. Something he was attracted to.

“Get over it, Emma.”

She left the bedroom and paused in front of the open closet to hang her navy blue whimsy wrap dress. Thankfully, it was wrinkle free so it would be fine after hanging for a few hours. Next she hung up her A-line midi dress in black and pink. It was one of her favorite dresses, black on the top with a pink floral print on the bottom, reminding her of a field of flowers with some small sparkles rising from the petals.

Finding his garment bag, she made sure that had been hung up as well. Her heart twisted as she stared at their clothing side by side.

Waxing poetic.

The door opened and she turned, letting her hand drop away from his suit as he stepped in the room. Sweaty. Shirtless, *again*. And more than capable of rendering her breathless.

“Your call go okay?” He walked toward her, barely slowing by the door to toe off his tennis shoes.

With all those muscles and tattoos on full display, it took a moment for her to realize he’d spoken to her. She nodded. “Fine.” Wow, she sounded like she’d gulped down a grater and it was wreaking havoc on her throat.

He paused at her side and brushed a kiss along her cheek. “Perfect, you can tell me all about it while I get cleaned up.”

Trailing him, because *that* wasn’t a hardship, she drew up short at the sight of the bathroom. There was a large shower, with more than enough space for the both of them, plus a bench which was going to star in her fantasies. It was clear glass. She would be able to see *everything*.

Sucking in much needed air, she backed up. “I’ll wait for you to finish.”

He looked at her over his shoulder, wickedness in his gaze as he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts, shimmying his hips, teasing her gaze with flashes of the skin

below. “You sure? I can listen to you while I shower. In fact,” he said, his voice dropping, “I often imagine your voice when I shower.”

Good God, I’m going to spontaneously combust.

“I’m sure.” Backpedaling, she nearly fell over the bed as she rushed away.

His laughter followed her. As did his shorts. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

She caught her reflection as she passed the mirror. Skin flushed, lips parted, and hunger in her eyes.

This was going to kill her. Not even Dawson’s encouraging words helped. *Ride him like a cowboy, or cowgirl.*

On the balcony, she curled up on a chair and did her damndest to forget that Linc Conner, ex-professional baseball player for the Pennsylvania Dutchmen, was naked in the same room. Enjoying a shower. Sudsing up his body and letting the water sluice off him. Emma whimpered and squeezed her legs tighter.

Chapter Thirteen

Linc reached for Emma's hand once more. She had this uncanny way of slipping free. Like she didn't want to touch him in public. They'd decided on a lovely night out on the River Walk. The evening was warm, despite being later in the year, and people were out in force.

Brightly colored umbrellas surrounded by small lights added to the atmosphere. He got them both some ice cream while watching people move by on tours of the river.

"Here," he said, offering her both cones.

Emma pulled her gaze from the moving tour boat and lifted her eyebrows. "You want me to eat two ice creams?"

"Pick one, Freckles." He lifted one. "Mexican Raspberry." Then the other. "Almond Joy."

His cock jerked in his jeans when she licked her lips and her gaze flitted between the two choices. When she captured her lower lip in her teeth his groan slipped out.

"Both?" She grinned at him.

"We can share." Linc handed her the raspberry, fairly confident she wouldn't want all of that one. He'd noticed she loved chocolate in her ice cream. He'd noticed a *lot* about this woman.

Her pleased hum rushed through him like a live wire. God, he loved making Emma happy. When she would give him a small smile that was strictly for him, no one else. His possessiveness refused to think of her giving it to another.

She sat on a bench and her contented sigh soothed the neanderthal within who wanted nothing more than to haul her over his shoulder and carry her off to his cave. Claim her. Possess her.

Linc perched beside her, brushing her shoulder with his own. A few moments of quiet passed between them as they each ate their ice cream and watched San Antonio's nightlife

move around them. Even so, he never allowed himself to not be aware of the woman next to him, so when she shifted and moved the ice cream closer to him, he swapped their cones.

Holding her gaze, he turned the Mexican raspberry cone to where she'd been eating and deliberately dragged his tongue along the same place. The stunning blue of her eyes grew molten before she turned away and stared out over the river.

"Thoughts on where you want to go next?" He bumped her shoulder again.

"Nope. I've never been here before so I'm good with going anywhere."

Hotel? Bed? Shower?

It wasn't easy keeping those thoughts to himself.

"How about this." He ate a bit more ice cream. "We get a ride to The Alamo, take that tour, then head back and walk until we find a place for dinner."

Emma didn't answer him and he glanced at her, moaning and shifting on the bench when he saw her. Eyes closed, hands around the cone as she enjoyed the treat he'd given her.

"Emma?" His voice rasped.

"Linc."

Oh shit, he was going to embarrass himself if she continued to say his name in such a way.

He cleared his throat and she opened her eyes, blush tinging her cheeks. "This is really good," she muttered.

Finishing his ice cream, he wiped his hands as he waited for her to complete her porn-worthy soundtrack. Not so subtly, he adjusted the erection in his jeans, anything to get a bit of relief.

"I'm ready." She wiped the corners of her mouth and damn if his mind didn't detour down a different road at the motion.

Linc drew out his phone and figured out where they needed to go in order to catch a ride to the Alamo, he didn't want to use their personal driver as it would take away from the experience. As they rode the bus through the city, she kept her

face to the glass and he didn't mind too much that she wasn't speaking to him. He enjoyed watching her have fun.

Her eyes never stopped moving as they took a tour of the Alamo. She took photos and purchased two things for Greer. Linc took the bag from her to carry. He'd been to The Alamo plenty of times but this was the first time he'd had such a great time, seeing it through her eyes.

"We should bring Greer here sometime. I think she'd enjoy it."

Emma smiled up at him. "I know she would." The joy in her eyes filled him with warmth.

It hit him. This, right here, was a discussion of a future with her and her child. One he was fine with. He would have loved to have Greer with them, the young girl was always making him smile and hell, Emma wasn't the only one who missed her.

It had been nice to be in some shade from the strong sunlight. When his stomach growled, he walked up to her as she looked over what used to be the stock pen. Linc slid his arm around her and pressed a kiss to her temple.

"How are you doing?"

"Hungry," she admitted. "This is a lot of walking and it's a fair sight warmer than in Rock Falls."

"Let's get a drink and go wait for one of the buses to take us back to the River Walk. Then we can decide where to eat." He turned her into his chest so they were eye to eye. "Unless you'd like to go to the hotel for room service?"

She lowered her eyelids and hope thumped in his chest. Her laugh was sad.

"Come on."

They got lemonades and waited with other tourists for the next bus to leave. She sat beside him, her fingers clutching the paper cup holding her drink. The closer they got to the River Walk the more nervous she became.

Linc didn't mention it as they walked the Mercado in

Historic Market Square. Nor while they ate a nice dinner at Mad Dogs British Pub. She was quiet as they ambled along the river.

She paused a few times to look at things for Greer, only to pass on them. At first, he thought it was because of money but he'd come to understand her a bit more—this was about what Greer would like.

He really wasn't a fan of her not letting him hold her hand. As they walked up the stairs to cross over the water, he paused at the top and pressed her into the side of the bridge.

God, this woman was stunning. Even while she tried to underplay her beauty, it shone through. Bracing his hands on either side of her hips, he put his forehead to hers. He would be perfectly happy to lose himself in her blue gaze.

“Talk to me, Emma.”

She bit into her lower lip and he groaned.

“If you don't want me to kiss you, Emma, stop sinking your teeth into your lip. That's driving me crazy.”

It popped free so fast, he was almost insulted. Closing his eyes, he rubbed the side of his face against her neck then backed up enough to see her gaze once more.

“Are you embarrassed being seen with me?”

Her eyes widened so much it was *nearly* comical. “What? Oh, God no. Why would you think that?”

“You don't want to hold my hand. Always finding some way to drop it.”

Her expression pinched. “I'm trying to protect you.”

He switched them around so his ass was braced against the bridge and he tugged her between his legs. Hands on her waist, he skimmed his gaze over her. The dress, her shoes, even the simple jewelry she had around her neck and in her ears. All of it took his breath away.

She takes my breath away.

“Freckles. I don't need to be protected. I *need* to be able to

hold your hand while we walk. I want to be able to kiss you and dance with you when we come upon a street band playing a song that makes us unable to refrain.”

She flattened her lips and took a deep breath. “I don’t want to disappoint you, Linc. I know why I’m here.”

“Do you really think that these past few weeks have been nothing but a means to an end for me?”

She canted her head to the left, the lights hanging from the trees and nearby businesses reflecting off the different hues in her hair. “Have you told him the truth?”

Right now wasn’t the time for him to focus on that failure. “No. And I know how that looks but it doesn’t change that I have real feelings for you, Emma.” He shook his head. “Don’t give me that line of shit about not finishing high school, your weight, or being a woman you aren’t used to seeing on my arm. I don’t want anyone other than you.”

“Do you really think this is the place for this discussion?”

“I tried to talk earlier, but *someone* didn’t want to join me in the shower.”

The pulse at the side of her neck jumped. He tugged her tighter against him.

“Linc,” she whispered.

He gave her a half smile. “That’s how I want you to say my name. Breathless. *Needy*. I’m not going to push you into anything, Emma. I want you to come to me when you’re ready.” He leaned closer and nipped the top of her ear. “Of course, I’m always happy to provide any relief you may need in the meantime.”

“I don’t know what to do with you.”

“Dance with me.”

“Why?”

“You said we needed to talk. Dancing is just a conversation between two people.” He wrapped his arms around her and cast a look around. Others were watching them, most with soft

smiles on their faces as they observed.

She blinked up at him. “Did you seriously just quote *Hope Floats*?”

“You like Sandra Bullock?”

“I *like* Harry Connick Jr.”

He growled low in his throat, kissed her cheek, and pulled her away. They wove in and out of the crowd on the walk until he found what he wanted. Music to dance to. Slow romantic music. Without giving her a chance to voice a complaint or a reason they shouldn't be doing this, he pulled her into his arms and began slow dancing with her.

It didn't take too long before a group of people were doing the same thing.

They danced late into the night. Watching her, he knew when she had hit her limit. Emma stayed tucked against him on the stroll to their hotel along River Walk. They didn't speak as they got ready for bed and he just pointed at the bed when she cast a look to the sofa in the other room.

“Adults, Emma. We can share.” He clicked off the light and put his hands behind his head. “Although, full disclosure, if you want to venture on my side of the bed during the night, I won't say no.”

“Good night, Mr. Conner.”

He grinned like a fool. “Night, Freckles.”

Linc didn't have a grin on his face when he woke. More of a grimace. She'd come over to his side of the bed during the night, which made him happy, but his cock was hard, painfully so. She was burrowed into his side, pressing all her lush curves against him. Her silky hair teased his skin as he smelled her apple shampoo.

She had a hand settled against his abdomen, just barely above the waistband of the boxer briefs he'd worn to bed last night. Her nipples pushed against him and he prayed to whoever was listening that he wouldn't do something dumb.

“Freckles.”

Christ, even his voice sounded like a cry for help.

She moaned and shifted against him, her hand swiping over his erection before she flopped on her back. “Linc.”

He dug his short nails into his palm as he turned toward her. Plump lips parted, tousled hair all over, giving her the sultry vixen look without even trying. The shirt she’d worn to bed had inched up, letting him see the soft swell of her stomach.

God, if she would just let him show her how he saw her, she wouldn’t ever have doubts again about how beautiful he found her. Emma reached for the sheet at her thighs and he bit his lower lip as he watched her hand trail over her lower body and pull it up.

Jaw clenched tight, he slipped from bed and stumbled to the shower. Turning on the water, he let it heat up as he took shuddering breaths. Realizing he forgot his clothing, he stepped out only to freeze.

“Linc.” She moaned again and he walked to the doorway and peered into the bedroom.

“Fuck me.” The words were guttural and ripped from his throat.

Her hand was below the blanket and between her legs as she rode her fingers, her lips passing his name to the air. His cock jumped and he grabbed himself and squeezed. Turning his back on her was the hardest thing he’d ever done in his life.

She had to invite him to her. He wasn’t going to take advantage. No matter how much he wanted to replace her hand with his tongue and taste her. Linc shucked his boxers and stepped into the shower, hands braced on the wall as he let the water fall around him.

He made a decent amount of noise when he finished his shower. She was up and seated on the edge of the bed. He saw the flush on her cheeks but didn’t point it out.

“Morning, Freckles.”

Her gaze ran over him and she didn’t speak. He cleared his throat and lifted an eyebrow.

“Morning.”

“I’m going to order some breakfast while you get ready. Anything specific you want?”

“Waffles?”

“Okay.” He walked toward her and brushed a light kiss over her mouth, then went to the phone beside the bed, wearing nothing but the towel wrapped around his waist.

She kept her distance from him in the two-room suite until the food was delivered. Then she walked out. The hotel robe was huge on her.

Personally, he liked his clothing on her better.

When she sat at the table, he made sure to sit in a chair beside her, not across from her. Linc slid her order in front of her and she gave him a shy smile. He watched as she cut up her waffle.

“Just going to watch? Or do you need me to cut up your food?”

He held her gaze. “I don’t mind watching. In fact, I like that a lot.”

She gulped but didn’t look away. “I feel like you’re talking about something other than food, but I’m not sure what. Therefore, I’m going to ignore that.” She pointed at his plate. “Eat. We have to leave in less than two hours.”

He ate.

They got dressed after finishing up breakfast. Leaning in the doorway to the bathroom, he watched her fix her hair. She met his gaze in the mirror and gave him a smile. Shaky but he would take it.

“Is this okay?”

He ran his gaze over the navy dress that hugged every one of her curves.

“Perfect, Freckles.”

She set the brush down and exhaled at her reflection. He

moved up behind her, his tie loose around his neck.

“You’re missing one thing.”

“Is this where you give me a ruby and diamond necklace like in *Pretty Woman*?”

He held her gaze. “You’re not a hooker and I don’t think you’re a ruby woman. I see you in something pink, blue, or purple.” Linc moved closer until his chest brushed against her dress. “Diamonds are another option.”

The moment she spied the black box in his hand, her eyes widened, her gaze flicking up to his every now and then like she expected the box to vanish before her eyes.

“What is this?”

“Open it.”

...

Hands trembling, Emma complied. Her nails had been painted a shimmery wash of dusky cool blue. She and Dawson had treated themselves to a spa day before she’d come here—not in Rock Falls because she didn’t need everyone in town knowing she’d gotten a Brazilian. Instead, she and her friend had gone a few towns over and she’d endured plucking, waxing, and more.

The velvet box opened without a sound and when she spied the item lying on the black velvet, she nearly dropped it. Linc’s hand was beneath hers, keeping her steady.

“You got me a ring.”

His strong arm circled her waist as his face lowered to hers. “I got my fiancée an engagement ring.”

Silence stretched between them.

“If you don’t like it, we can find something else. I picked it because you wear your heart for everyone to see. Always thinking of others.”

Tears burned her eyes as she stared at the heart-shaped diamond ring. The pavé band had more diamonds going down

over half of it. It probably cost far too much money for him to have spent on a hoax.

“No one’s ever given me anything like this.”

“I’m glad no one’s given you an engagement ring before. That would make this a bit awkward.”

She appreciated him trying to make light of her admission. Emma pulled the ring from the box and bit her lower lip as he slid it onto her finger.

A perfect fit.

God, she wasn’t ever going to want to take it off. Hell, already she didn’t.

“Tell me this is fake.”

She watched his expression in the mirror. The man looked positively green that she’d suggested he’d gotten her anything fake.

“I can’t take this, Linc. If this isn’t fake, you spent far too much.” She looked at it once more. “Even if it’s cubic zirconia, it’s too much.”

“We have a meeting to get to and investors to impress.” His lips lingered against her neck.

Swallowing the nerves that had taken residence in her throat, she turned and straightened his tie. After she made sure it was how she wanted it, she smoothed her hands down the crisp white of his shirt, again, noting the blue of her nails and the sparkle of her ring. Then she buttoned up the vest, ensuring the tie was properly tucked behind it.

Like he could read her mind, he picked up her left hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles just above the ring.

“In case I forget to say so later, thank you, Emma. For having my back.”

A flash of guilt hit her but she pushed it away. “Of course. Anything for the center.”

She held her clutch in hand as she observed him sliding into his jacket. The dark gray color with a lighter gray tie speckled

with blue had been cut to fit this man perfectly.

He shrugged his shoulders and she picked up his briefcase with all the proposal information and waited. Linc opened the door and reached out to her.

“I can carry your briefcase.”

Linc shot her a frown and gave a hard shake of his head. “I’ll carry it and hold your hand.”

She didn’t argue with him and together they went to the elevator, across the pristine lobby floor, and out to a black town car with tinted windows. The driver held the door open and Linc gave him a nod before helping her in and sliding in after.

Emma held her counsel as they moved through the streets of San Antonio. Linc had his tablet out and was reading something. She let him do what he needed to. This was his show. She was his support, but it was up to him to sell this to the people they were meeting.

They pulled to a stop and she took a deep breath while waiting for the door to open. It didn’t take long and Linc slid over the leather seat to climb out before reaching in with a hand to assist her. She allowed him to help and as she stepped out, she lifted her head and took it all in. Buildings mashed together, mostly brown and drab. A few taller skyscrapers that if she blinked and squinted into the sun she still wouldn’t be able to see the top of them.

Linc slid an arm around her and whispered, “Not quite like home, is it?”

“Not even close.”

Even the noise was a lot. It was louder than on River Walk, which she’d attributed to it being a tourist destination. But here, horns honked, engines revved, sirens wailed, and the smell. Dear Lord. This wasn’t the place for her.

“Let’s get this done and enjoy our last evening.”

With his hand on the small of her back, they walked into the building and she spied Mr. Stevenson right away. He’d

swapped a white Stetson for the black one he'd been wearing in Vermont.

“Linc, my boy, I’m glad you could make it. And look,” he boomed. “You brought your lovely fiancée as well. My wife isn’t here for this. She’s just not interested in the business end.” They shook hands and Emma braced herself for the kiss the man put on the back of her hand. “Look at that. I’d wondered where the ring was when I was in Vermont.”

Linc tensed beside her and she rested her head against him. “Like I said, Mr. Stevenson, I hadn’t yet told my daughter so I wasn’t wearing it. Now that she knows, I was able to pull it from the box and put it on.”

He nodded approvingly. “Glad to hear it. These men we’re meeting are very family oriented. We’re on the top floor. Let’s head up.”

They chatted about nonessential things as they rode up the numerous floors in the glass elevator. Linc hadn’t stopped touching her, not that she minded, but she was a bit concerned about how stiff he was.

Outside the room, she paused. The entire thing was glass and she could see all eight of the men sitting at the table, watching them.

“Give me just a moment to say something to my fiancé, Mr. Stevenson, and we’ll be right in,” Emma said.

“Of course, my dear. I’ll have Gladys get us some drinks. Water, or would you prefer something stronger?”

“Water is fine,” Linc said.

The man walked in the room and Emma faced Linc, turning him so they weren’t looking at the waiting men.

“What’s going on?”

He looked at her but she didn’t feel he saw her. More like he was looking through her.

She placed her hand on his torso and dug her nails into him. “Linc.”

That did it. His gaze sharpened and that sexy trouble-maker smirk returned.

“You know I want to feel your nails.”

“Tell me that again, after you finish this. You okay? You’re a bit stiff.”

Yeah, she didn’t have to worry anymore. The smirk on his face let her know he was back.

“I’m good. Or I will be. I just need one thing.”

She ran her mind over everything. She’d not forgotten a single thing on his list.

“What did I forget?” Shit, had she screwed up already?

“I need my fiancée to kiss me and wish me luck.”

She pursed her lips and shook her head. “I’m not wishing you luck because you have this in the bag. You know this proposal like the back of your hand, Linc. They’d be foolish to refuse.”

His lips lifted. “And the kiss?”

She pushed up on her toes, settled her hand against his cheek, and kissed him. His mouth opened and she slipped her tongue in to parry with his, mixing their tastes and wishing they were somewhere she could get more.

God damn this man was dangerously potent. When they separated, both were breathing hard, and he gave her a smile and a wink before reaching for her hand once again.

They walked in to find all nine men watching them with undisguised interest. She didn’t say anything as Linc walked her to a chair and held it for her to sit. Then he put the briefcase on the table next to her. She pulled out his tablet and watched him as he introduced himself.

When he gave her a nod, she rose, smoothed her hand down her dress, and pulled out printed copies of the proposal. She walked them around to each of the men, giving them a small smile as she handed them their own copy. Every single one of them zeroed in on the ring she proudly wore on her finger.

Linc began his presentation and she settled in to watch the man work. Much like when he was on the field, there was nothing but pure poetry and smoothness in his actions. This time it was his words—the passion within them—as he relayed his vision to those gathered.

Even though he wasn't in his on-field uniform with pants that cupped his ass, or a jersey that showcased his powerful chest and arms, he still mesmerized her. A suit and fancy shoes had damn near the same effect as a baseball uniform or jeans and a shirt.

All she knew, right then, was how lucky she was to be part of this with him.

As Linc continued his presentation, she skimmed the room. There were a few men she thought wouldn't be signing on. They weren't paying Linc the barest bit of attention, focusing more on her than him. A couple of them made her skin crawl but she pretended not to notice, hell, she didn't fidget. She listened and couldn't help but smile at the passion flowing from Linc.

“How soon do you need our answers?” Charlie Toby posed the question.

She cut her gaze from the thin man with salt and pepper hair to the man beside her, immediately cataloging their differences. Linc checked all the boxes.

Always had and always will.

“Obviously, I would like one as soon as possible, but I know investing is a huge decision and most of you have boards to discuss this with as well.”

Linc shifted next to her and she moved her hand under the table to settle on his thigh. Just a brief touch, but he stilled.

She began pulling her hand away but he grasped it and gave her a squeeze first. Entire body tingling, she regretfully repositioned her hand on the table before her.

Another hour of questions passed and she realized this was not the life for her. Gods, this was boring.

“I think we should let this man and his fiancée get on their way. We’ll have dinner tonight, all of us. My treat,” Mr. Stevenson said. “I’ll send a car to pick you up at seven.”

Linc stood and she followed suit, gathering the papers and pushing them into the briefcase. “Thank you, gentlemen, for your time. We look forward to seeing you this evening.”

He escorted her from the room, his hand a solid presence on her back as well as a comforting one. She didn’t speak until they were in the town car.

“Is that it?” Her blurted question surprised her and she slapped a hand over her mouth even as Linc laughed.

“What were you expecting?”

“More.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t polite, but after all those boring hours of listening to different men ask you the same questions in a different way, like that meant it was something new, I don’t know. I guess I expected something.”

He tugged her closer to him. “You thought they would say yes right then?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I mean, your presentation was fucking brilliant. What more do they need to think about?”

“All part of the game, Freckles.” He threaded his fingers in her hair.

Wait. When had he taken it out of the updo it had been in? And why didn’t she care?

Right, because his fingers feel incredible in my hair.

“The game is stupid.” She inched closer. “They should just say yes and carry on.”

He nibbled along the shell of her ear. “But they can’t make me sweat if they don’t do it this way.”

She gave an indignant sniff. “Like you say, there are better ways to get sweaty.”

A low rumble escaped his chest and Emma bit the inside of her cheek to keep her answering moan contained. His large

palm curved around her neck and he held her close.

“Emma.”

One word. Her name. Yet she felt it directly on her clit.

All she had to do was say yes and he would touch her like she dreamed. She longed to have the courage to say it, but she couldn't push the word past her lips. And Linc didn't try to change her mind.

When the car got them to the hotel, she wouldn't meet his gaze as he helped her out. Linc wouldn't release her hand. The moment they were in the room, he caged her in his arms, her back to the door.

“I'm going to work out,” he murmured, lips feathering over her forehead.

“Shower.”

“Is that an offer?” Dark and decadent, his words slid over her skin, heating her further.

Her legs weakened like the tide removing a sandcastle, bit by bit. “I need a shower.”

He stepped back and immediately loosened his tie before tossing it on the bed. Emma didn't, or couldn't, move until Linc strode in view, wearing nothing but a pair of workout shorts.

“Keep looking at me like that, Emma, and I'm going to lift you and fuck you against that door.”

“Shower,” she gasped.

He stalked her. “Yes. God, yes. There too.”

God his cock was hard and his shorts did a shit job of hiding it. He paused mere inches from her, chest heaving with each breath.

“Move, Emma.”

She dragged her gaze from his tattoos and up to his face. “What?”

“You need to move. I have one fucking *tiny* thread of control

and it's gone if I touch you right now. I see your nipples pushing through your dress and I can smell your arousal. *Christ*, Emma. Step aside and let me go work this off."

She did as he asked and didn't turn to watch him leave. Instead, she went to shower, alone, and shore up her weak defenses to this man. All she'd wanted was to give him permission to touch her and get his to return the favor.

"But no, here I am, by myself. Talking to myself in a shower while the man I'm in love with goes somewhere else."

Dinner was going to suck. But then so was sleeping with him one more night in this hotel.

Chapter Fourteen

Linc frowned as his phone vibrated in his pocket. Lifting his hips off the couch, he dug it free and looked at the screen. Emma. His heart began to pound. Did she need him? Did Greer? She'd asked for the day off from the center after they'd gotten back from San Antonio and he'd not had a problem giving her the time. Sure, he'd missed her like hell, but she and Greer had been off doing something for the two of them.

He wasn't sure they were still good. After their *thing* by the hotel door, she'd been pulling away. He'd not wanted to scare her but damn it, he only had so much control. She'd even fallen asleep on the couch, but he'd refused to sleep away from her and had carried her to bed where he endured a night of hell when she curved into him, moaning his name on those damn soft sighs.

"Freckles? Everything okay?"

"Linc. It's Greer." She had a quiet voice but at this moment it was softer than usual.

Heart thundering, he swung his feet to the floor and was striding to the door. While he didn't know why she was calling, he needed to be there for her. For them. "What's going on, kid? Your mom okay?"

"Are you really not able to make it?"

Making sure he had his keys, he shoved his feet into his flip-flops. "Make what?"

"Mom's birthday."

He smacked himself with the door. "What?" Eyes watering, he rubbed the spot and tried again.

"I asked her if you were coming tonight but she said you were busy. I wanted you to be with us."

He looked at his watch. Six at night.

"I'm just on my way. Does anyone need anything?"

“It’s just Mama and me.”

His heart broke for the woman who had quickly come to hold the key for it. She gave so much and yet asked for nothing for herself. Emma wouldn’t do anything for herself even if it was offered for free. Her single-minded determination was all for her daughter.

“I’m on my way.”

“Okay.” She hung up and he ran for his truck. What kind of guy was he that he didn’t even know his fiancée was celebrating her birthday? After swinging up into the cab, he drove away, moving swiftly through Rock Falls.

At Emma’s he noticed the Acadia was gone, so most likely Dawson was off somewhere. Part of him thought he should have gotten some flowers before he arrived, but he hadn’t wanted to stop. He took a moment before knocking on the door to gather himself.

Once he’d knocked, he leaned against the door and waited. Then it opened and he promptly lost his breath. Emma’s thick brown locks were tossed up in a bun at the top of her head. Some wisps had escaped, framing her features like he longed to do with his hands.

“Linc? What are you doing here?”

He dragged his gaze over her. A black shirt dotted with stars hung off one shoulder, baring that smooth creamy skin he longed to taste. Spearmint-green shorts peeked out from beneath the bottom of the shirt. Her toes were painted a new color—a vibrant blend of pink and purple with a shimmery finish. The hand she had on the door glinted and he was thrilled she still wore his ring.

Cupping the nape of her neck, he drew her close to him and kissed her, slanting his mouth over hers and dragging his tongue along the seam of her lips. When she parted them on a gasp, he delved inside. She tasted like lime and mint, even though she still filled his nose with the perfect combination of crisp apples and warm caramel.

He stroked through her mouth, touching all he could even as

he brought her closer to him, craving her curves tight against his. When she curled her fingers into his shirt, he nearly backed her into the nearest wall to indulge.

“Mama? Linc?”

Cockblocked by a child.

He ended the kiss yet kept her close. “Happy birthday,” he murmured against her lips.

Something indescribable moved across her eyes. The smile she gave wasn’t the one he wanted to see from her. This was the practiced smile, the one the Stevensons got.

“Linc! You came!” Greer inserted herself between them. “See what I gave Mama.”

Her small hand settled in his and she pulled him into the living room. Going with her, he stole a glance over his shoulder at Emma who stood where he’d left her, fingers dancing along her lips like she still felt his kiss.

Good, because he sure as fuck still did.

Greer stopped by a quilted throw and tipped her head up to him, her grin blinding. “I made that for Mama.”

He reached for it only to stop and look at her. “May I touch it?”

She nodded and sat on the sofa by him as he took his time looking at the gift this little girl had made for her mother. The fabric was made up of blues, purples, silvers, and grays.

“This is incredible, Greer. I bet your mama loves it.”

“I do.” Emma stood by Greer. “I’m so proud of her for doing this. And I didn’t even know she was working on it.”

Greer grinned and tipped her head up to scrunch her nose at Emma. That move got the unreserved smile *he* coveted. Skimming his gaze over Greer, he noticed the scar on her head was almost fully healed.

“I kept it at Dawson’s.”

Emma cupped her daughter’s face. “I love it, Greer. Thank

you. Could you do me a favor and check on the timer for dinner?”

“Okay.” She vanished into the kitchen.

“What are you doing here, Linc? Did she call you? You didn’t have to come. You shouldn’t have come.”

“Why didn’t you tell me it’s your birthday? I would have taken you out for dinner.”

“Almost ready, Mama. I’m setting another place for Linc.”

She flattened her lips and he knew she was pissed. “Thank you, Greer.” Her sharp gaze never left his.

He swiped his thumb along her lower lip. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“How do you plan on doing that?”

Linc moved closer. “How would you like me to?” Another pass with his thumb. “On my knees? Back? We both know I wasn’t lying when I said I was yours to command.”

“So if I told you to go?”

“If that’s what you want, I’ll go. You can explain to Greer.”

“Paint something for me?”

“You naked? Absolutely?”

She wagged a finger at him. “I’m not part of the deal.”

“You’re all it’s about.” A deep breath. “What do you want painted?”

The timer went off and she slipped away. He trailed her into the kitchen and his stomach growled at the smells. Watching when she bent over to pull the dish from the oven, he waited for her to set it on the hot pad. Then she drew out a tray of something else which looked like breadsticks.

“Can I help?”

“Salad is in the fridge,” she said without looking at him.

The ravioli lasagna, fresh breadsticks, and salad were on the table shortly thereafter. He helped Greer into her chair first,

then Emma, brushing his lips over her exposed shoulder as he pushed her chair in.

“Looks delicious,” he said, taking his seat.

“Mama makes me this every year.” Greer held up her plate.

Interesting. It was Emma’s birthday but she’d made something her daughter would enjoy.

Linc served his girls. And yes, that was how he had come to view them. His.

“You said your mom makes this for you every year, Greer?”

She nodded, her pigtails with their sparkly blue ribbons bobbing. “She does. My mama is the best.”

“I agree,” Linc said, turning his gaze to Emma, who made sure not to look him in the eyes.

“What’s her favorite food?”

“Popovers,” Greer said immediately. “Soft pretzels with cheese dipping sauce. And clam chowder.” Greer shuddered.

“I take it you don’t like chowder?”

She shook her head so hard her pigtails smacked her in the face. “It’s gross. But the little crackers are yummy.”

“And what does your mom do for fun?”

“Linc,” Emma said, but he shook his head.

“You’re not forthcoming about what you like to do.” A sly grin. “Other than things with batteries.”

She flushed, flattening her lips at him. He winked and turned to Greer.

“Mama doesn’t have a lot of time to do things. She bakes with Dawson a lot.”

Emma groaned under her breath and he nudged her foot beneath the table.

“We read a lot. All kinds of books.”

“That’s good,” he praised. “My dad always reads when he can as well.” He stole another look at Emma, whose face was

beet red, and he took pity on her, turning the conversation more to Greer and how she was enjoying baseball.

They cleaned up as a family and when Greer curled up on the couch to read her latest book, Linc grasped Emma's wrist before she could escape the kitchen.

"Are you okay, Freckles?"

Her smile was sad. He brushed his thumb over the ring on her finger, trying not to notice how her expression twisted when she looked at it.

"What time does she go to bed?"

Tucking some hair behind her ear, she glanced at the clock hanging over the recliner against the wall. "Birthday night, she has until nine."

"Okay, come on. We're going to the center."

"Why?"

"Painting."

She shook her head. "You don't have to paint me anything. It was foolish of me to ask. Just forget it."

Not going to happen. "I want to." And it was true. He *wanted* to paint for her. And he wanted to paint *her*.

Once there, Greer opted out of painting and put her nose in the book she'd been reading. She lay on some blankets off to the side. He and Emma were beside his easel.

"Talk to me, Freckles." He placed a blank canvas on the wooden easel.

"I just don't celebrate my birthday."

"Why?" He picked up a brush and dipped it in the paint before making that first stroke marring the unblemished canvas.

"It isn't a day that means anything to me."

"Not even when you were younger?"

She huffed and he watched her gaze go to the corner where

her daughter read. Greer was not paying them any attention. He also noticed how she spun the ring as she stared at her child.

Emma sat in a chair but her expression showcased she was anything but comfortable with the discussion.

“I had no friends and even if I had, my father wouldn’t have allowed anyone into the house.”

God, he wanted to hold her close, but he stayed on the stool and continued with his painting.

“So we have a few birthdays to make up for.” He stared at the canvas in front of him, imagining what he was going to paint for her.

“How?”

He grinned and made a point of wiggling his eyebrows. “Spankings?”

She flushed and shifted on the chair.

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How did this man make her so hot? It wasn’t fair. And he’d not even tried to do anything other than kiss her. Even during their time in San Antonio. Sure, he’d teased her about joining him in the shower but hadn’t pushed. Maybe that’s all it was, teasing and flirting. She’d thought maybe it had changed after their time in the car and at the door on their last day. It hadn’t. However, she woke in the bed when she had been sure to sleep on the couch. He’d not tried to convince her to sleep with him, give him a blow job, or anything. He’d been a perfect gentleman. Damn it.

He put down his brush and moved another easel against his. “Come paint. We can share the paint.”

She moved her stool closer and bemoaned that she no longer had a direct line of sight to him. Linc reached around her and placed some brushes on the easel. Plunging his fingers into her hair, he tugged her head. On instinct, she parted her lips, desperate for his touch. His kiss.

“Make sure you do everything proportionally correct.” A wink.

“Like the big head.”

He kissed her, biting her lower lip when he pulled away. Her body responded in a flash, demanding he finish what he started.

“Exactly like that.” A moment’s pause. “Very big.”

Even the flush on her skin didn’t bother her like it probably should have. She walked her fingers up his chest and tugged on his shirt. “Linc?”

He bent closer. “Yes, Freckles?”

Lips nearly brushing his, she allowed her eyes to flutter at simply being so close to this man. “Paint me my picture.”

She felt his groan to her core. “Yes, ma’am.”

Her relief was short-lived. He rearranged the paints and his easel so she could see him and he her. His smile was pure sin.

“Better.”

She wasn’t sure who it was better for, because she didn’t want to take her eyes off him.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” He continued painting.

“Did you end on bad terms with the men you played with?”

His entire countenance stiffened but he never stopped the brush strokes. “No.”

Single word. Harsh inflection. Obvious that he didn’t want to go further with this discussion.

“Then why—”

His gaze was cold when he lifted it to hers. “I walked away from that life when I couldn’t play anymore. Things happened, words were said. That world isn’t one I am in any longer and I have no desire to be.”

“But—”

A muscle flexed in his jaw and she let it drop. She didn't push it. He may have his reasons, but so did she. And she had ways to find things out if he didn't want to discuss them. She already had. She merely needed a way to explain her actions to him.

She glanced over to where Greer was, then slid from her stool with a smile. Her daughter had fallen asleep and Emma made her way to her and covered her with another blanket.

They painted for an hour. Okay, Linc painted and she did little doodles. It wasn't going to be winning any prizes, but she had something on her paper. She stifled a yawn when he got off his stool.

"Let me get you both home."

"My painting?"

"Well, it's wet."

She huffed at him. "Can I see it?"

"No." He covered it and she pouted, making him laugh. "You can see it tomorrow when it's dry. This is quick and nothing like what's hanging in the hall."

"I don't care," she said, edging closer to the covering. "You painted it." She just wanted a glance. Emma reached for it.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her away. "No peeking."

"But it's my birthday," she whined.

"I'm taking you home." He turned her to the door then crouched by Greer and swept her up in his arms.

He carried her daughter from his truck into the house as well. She directed him to place her in bed and after covering her up, she brushed a kiss over her forehead and closed the door. She walked with Linc to the front of the house. Only one light was on and it cast a soft yellow glow over part of the room, leaving them mostly in shadows.

Linc stood before her, tall, the potential to be extremely imposing, but she only felt safe with him.

“I wish I had known it was your birthday, Freckles. I would have gotten you a gift.” His words were a low rumble that did crazy things to her insides.

“You did.” She pushed her hands into her pockets so she didn’t do anything foolish like grab for him.

He cocked his head to the side. “I did?”

“A painting.” She frowned. “Even if you’re not letting me see it.”

His smile was incredible and she loved seeing it on him. “Tomorrow.” He sobered and took a deep breath.

“The sun will come out?”

He grinned and drew her close to him, tugging her arms free to wrap them around his waist. “You and your random movie quotes. I’m leaving for the night, Freckles, before I drop to my knees and taste you as I’ve been wanting to do. I’ll be here in the morning to take you to work, and I’ll bring you your painting.”

Linc kissed her and she sagged into him with a whimper of need. His hands skimmed along her curves and she wanted to have his calloused hands on her skin. Her bared skin.

“Night, beautiful.”

He set her away from him and left her with the imprint of his mouth on hers. Need burned through her and she wished she had more confidence. Maybe if she had some, she could have convinced him to stay. To sleep with her. To do more than just kiss her and raise her body temperature.

After a cold shower, she crawled into bed, wearing one of his jerseys she’d purchased when he played.

She overslept and woke to a banging on her door. Scrambling from bed, she hurried to open it, hoping nothing was wrong with Dawson. It was Linc.

It took her barely a second to realize she had answered the door in her sleep clothes. All she had on was his shirt and not even a pair of panties, given how aroused she’d been from the dream she’d been having when the pounding had jarred her

from her sleep. Her nipples were taut and pressed against the thinning fabric as the shirt hung over her frame.

“Linc.” His name was rasped as it fell from her lips.

“Fuck, Freckles.” He reached for her, only to stop. “You’re killing me.”

She stepped back, letting him in, but didn’t want to turn so he could see her ass in the shirt so she pivoted and pressed against the door as it shut. He held a rolled-up sheet in his right hand and his left was a fist.

“You sleep in my shirt?”

“I have a daughter. I sleep in *a* shirt.”

His nostrils flared even as he gave her a look which she interpreted to mean he didn’t buy her statement for a second. “And this isn’t one I gave you. It’s older and has my number. How long have you had this?” He squeezed his eyes shut briefly.

“A few years.”

Linc pinned her to the door with his gaze, like she had the capability to walk anywhere as it was. He stepped closer and reached out to her with his left hand. When it settled along her hip, she sucked in a sharp breath and slammed her eyes shut. No dream could even begin to compare to something as simple as his real touch.

“Just a shirt? No panties?” He moved his hand up and down her hip like he was searching for a panty line.

His questions were whispered in her ear and she couldn’t bring herself to tip her head and look at him. Hell, the feelings racing through her far surpassed anything she’d felt the entire time she had been with Greer’s dad. Not like that had been a lot, but still.

“Freckles?”

She couldn’t formulate the words to ask him to finish her off, to kiss her and give her what she so desperately craved. Because he would break her when he refused. Instead, she curled her hands in his shirt, anchoring herself to this rock to

weather the storm rolling within her.

His grip on her hip flexed and she heard something fall to the floor. Perhaps the item he'd held. Then his right hand settled on her other hip.

Linc trailed kisses down the curve of her neck and she whimpered without shame. He wedged one thick thigh between her legs and hers widened to accommodate.

“Nothing but perfect goddamn curves.” He nibbled on her neck while his right hand slipped between them. “I don't have near enough time to pleasure you like you deserve and how I want, but I can take the edge off for you. Will you let me do that?” His fingertips hovered at her core but never advanced.

Damn him. She craved him and his caresses.

She rocked her hips against his leg and his groan filled her with power. Power she'd not had before. When the shirt she'd slept in lifted and his large hand settled over her belly, she tensed, all too aware of how much larger she was than the women he'd been photographed with in the past. But Linc took his time, stroking, making circles, all while he continued kissing and nibbling on her neck and shoulders. Words she didn't understand flowed from his mouth but she understood the feeling.

“Freckles, I need the words.”

She tightened her hold on his shirt. “Yes.” A thousand times yes.

The word hadn't even faded from the air before his hand slipped over her already damp skin. Hell, her favorite vibrator, large and with a suction cup for the shower—when necessary—still resided under her blankets. The moment Linc touched her, it faded from memory.

She arched for him, a wordless gasp sliding from her throat.

“So fucking wet.”

Her head rested against his chest, between where her hands had latched onto him. God help her, this was dangerous.

“Freckles,” he whispered as his fingers grazed up and down

the wet slit. “Look at me.”

“Nope. Not a good idea, definitely not.”

His answer was to wrap her loose hair in one large fist and tug her back so she didn’t have a choice but to follow his directive.

“Look. At. Me.” His dark eyes held hers. “Know who you’re with, Freckles. Know who’s touching you like this. Who’s going to get you off, then fix you breakfast while you shower.”

“Linc.”

The brushing of their mouths was nearly a ghosting but she felt him. Like she felt his thumb stroking her clit, pulling a low moan from her. One thick finger dragged down and pushed into her, making her gasp once more. He didn’t let her hide from him. Eyes locked on hers, he slowly pumped the long digit into her. Body already slick and needy, it didn’t take much for her to reach the pinnacle she’d been denied earlier when she’d been interrupted. She bit the inside of her cheek when he added a second finger.

The pad of his thumb pushed against her clit, rotating it and making her legs shake more.

“Linc.” Her cry was loud and she bit her lip.

The whisper of her name in her ear catapulted her over that edge and her scream, which she wouldn’t have been able to contain, was absorbed by Linc who kissed her as she orgasmed. He never stopped pumping as she came, and his kiss went on until she stopped shuddering.

“Fucking beautiful.” He licked his fingers clean and pressed his mouth to hers, sharing her taste with her. “I hear your daughter. I’ll make some breakfast.”

Legs that weren’t solid took her through the small house to her bedroom. After stashing her vibrator, she hopped into the shower and got herself cleaned up. Dressing quickly, she headed to the kitchen and heard Linc and Greer talking and laughing about baseball. Her heart lurched and she realized it wasn’t simply her who was going to be hurt when this ended.

Chapter Fifteen

Linc watched Greer scamper out the door to the baseball field. He was fairly certain she would sleep on the grass if her mom allowed it. Knowing there were already plenty of children out at the field, he didn't follow, even if he did want to make sure she got to it okay. Damn it, the kid had gotten under his skin. He cared about all of the children who came to his center, but Greer Henricksen had reached a different level in his heart.

Walking through the center, he slowed as he moved by his office and glanced through the window to spy Emma on the phone. She loved the headset and he personally loved watching her.

"Hey, Linc."

He turned to find Carl Navo, a local reporter, on his way up the hall.

"Carl. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping to talk to you about a few things I'd heard."

"Rumors, Carl?"

"Not really, let's call it some clarification."

He rolled his eyes but gestured for the man to head to his office. Emma had ended her call by the time they got to her and she shot him a shy smile before greeting Carl.

"Mr. Navo."

"Emma." He didn't miss how they had no love lost between them. He could see that, but as long as the man treated his woman with respect, he'd be fine.

"He has some questions for me. Are you okay if we meet in here?"

"I thought this was your office, Linc. Why does it matter what this woman says? We both know she's not really your fiancée. She's a dropout who got herself knocked up by a man who's currently running for congress. Are you even going to

be in her life once his child is with him in DC?”

Seeing the color leach from Emma’s face spurred Linc into action. “Get out, Carl.”

“I have some—”

“Get the fuck out of my office or I’ll throw you out and don’t you ever talk about this woman in such a manner.” Two steps toward him and Carl scrambled like a scared rabbit. Whipping his head around to find Emma shaking in his chair, he rushed to her side and sank to his knees beside her.

Her skin, clammy, sent nausea through him. Turning her in the chair so he could see her, he placed both hands on her thighs. She flinched and he struggled not to take them away.

“Look at me, Emma.”

Her gaze, unfocused and fearful, skimmed the room before it latched onto him.

“Breathe with me.”

She listened and soon her chest rose and fell as she took deep breaths. She blinked a few times and looked at him, really looked at him.

“What happened?”

“I think you had a bit of a panic attack.”

“A mouthful of water will not harm you, but panic will.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know that quote. What movie?”

“*Life of Pi.*” A blink. “I hated that movie. The tiger shouldn’t have died.”

She sucked in her lower lip and he reached up, using his thumb to free it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

He nodded and stood. “Okay. Sit. I’ll get you some water. I’ll be right back.” Linc pulled his phone from his pocket as he walked out of the office. Miss Yander watched him with wide eyes. “No one goes in to bother her.”

“Understood.”

Dialing as he strode down the hall, he put the phone to his ear.

“There a reason you’re calling my woman, Linc?”

“Not the time, Tully. Where’s Dawson?” He pushed outside. The cold weather had arrived.

“Outside. What’s going on?”

“Carl just insinuated that Greer’s father is going to try and get her back. Emma is panicked. I need Dawson to come get Greer when she’s done at the center.”

“No problem. Do what you need to do.”

“Okay, I’m telling Greer.” He hung up and strode up to the ballfield. Glancing over the players, he found her waiting off to the side. “Greer,” he said, walking over to her.

She smiled at him and damn if he didn’t want to pick her up and hold her tight. “Your mother isn’t feeling the best so I’m taking her home.”

“I have to go, too?”

“No, kid. I have Dawson coming to get you when the day is done, okay?”

She nodded and approached him, reaching up to slide her hand into his. The squeeze wasn’t all that long or strong but it was powerful to his heart. Then she released him and walked away to the spot she’d just vacated.

With a gesture to the oldest out there, he gave a strict dictate. With no one but Dawson and Tully would Greer be going anywhere. Then he ran in, reiterated that with Marv, and entered the office. Emma sat where he’d left her, shivering.

Pushing a bottle of water into her hand, he broke a bit at the fear in her eyes. “I have to get to Greer.”

“Greer’s safe. Dawson and Tully are coming to get her. You and I are leaving now.”

Water untouched, she rose and followed him woodenly out the door. He put her in his truck and drove off. Keeping her against him on the bench seat, he wished he could hold her. At

his place, he helped her down and led her inside and to his room.

All the sparks from this morning between them had been doused. He opened his dresser and rooted for a pair of flannel pants. After that, he found another old shirt of his for her. Linc approached her and placed the replacement clothes on the bed. Then he reached for the hem of her shirt.

“Arms up.”

She complied and he pulled the pink and blue V-neck blouse over her head. Ignoring—not an easy job—her breasts, he swiftly replaced her shirt with his, a long-sleeved baseball jersey from his short stint in the minors. On his knees before her again, he slid his hands up her legs to the waistband of her slacks.

When he undid them and tugged them down, he figured he was down for sainthood. Steadying her to make sure she didn’t fall, he got her out of those and into the flannel ones. Once that was accomplished, he got her on his bed and curled up around her, holding her against his chest.

She sobbed and he just let her get it out. Linc had so many damn questions on his tongue but he knew she had to do this at her speed.

They stayed like that for two hours. When she drew back and looked up at him, he gave her a small smile, ignoring the raccoon look on her face, the puffy eyes, and the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“Where’s Greer?” Panic spiked her voice.

“With Dawson and Tully.”

She tried to bolt but he held her. Emma struggled. “I have to get to her. She needs me.”

More like Emma needed her daughter. He shook his head. “Freckles, I need you to listen to me. Your daughter is fine. Dawson is at the center. Tully, and I’m fairly certain Mitchell, is there as well.”

“She’s not your responsibility.” A shove. “She’s mine.”

“I love that little girl like she’s my own. She is safe. You need to get yourself together so you don’t scare her.” He pulled his phone out again and called Tully.

“She needs to talk to Greer,” he said when the call was answered.

“Video?” Tully asked.

“No.”

“I’ll get her.”

Putting his phone on speaker, he held it between them.

“Mama?” Greer said. “Are you feeling better? Linc said he was going to take care of you but I can finish my game.” A breath. “I can come home if you want.”

Her blue eyes flew to him. He left it up to her.

“No. Enjoy your afternoon, be good for Dawson. I’ll feel better soon.”

“Love you, Mama.”

“Love you too, Greer.”

He ended the call and dropped the phone on the bed beside them. “Talk to me, Emma.”

“What about?”

He thought about it, searching hard for the quote he could give her to let her know he was trustworthy. Linc cupped her cheek. “If you want to get someone’s trust you have to give a little trust first.”

She stared, blinked, and stared a bit more. “Didn’t peg you for a Disney guy.”

“Disney?” He scoffed and rolled his eyes. “I’ll have to ask Mitchell about that. I heard it from him.”

Emma smiled, pushing sun and hope into his heart. “Don’t have him take the blame for you watching *Raya*. Besides, I heard you do watch Disney.”

“Who’s been feeding you lies?” His lips twitched.

“So, you don’t quote *The Sandlot* and weren’t thrilled that Dawson could, too? Sounds to me like you’re just hiding your true personality.”

His heart soared at her small joke. He’d take all the blame if he could keep the fear and panic from her gaze.

“Talk to me, Emma, please. Let me help you.”

Her expression was tortured. He waited.

“Her father is Paul Lummin.”

That name rang a bell for him. Familiar. Searching his memory, he realized why. The man had been in his class. Unreasonable jealousy and anger filled him. Emotions he *knew* he had no right to, but it didn’t stop them. That man had knocked her up and left her to raise Greer alone. The man had squandered his chance with the woman he’d been blessed to be with.

Linc settled the hand from her cheek down to her hip. “Does he know?”

She closed her eyes like it was a barrier. Linc refused to let it be one. He squeezed her hip until she opened them once more.

“Does he?” Linc pressed, needing to know everything.

“I was shocked when he’d shown interest in me. I’d spent my life on the outside looking in, but he came around and was charming, handsome, and gentle with me. Like he knew I was scared of, well, everything. Turns out he was just after sex. He used me to show his family he wasn’t out screwing around with a girl they didn’t want him with. I was a place holder, a stand-in. Not the one he wanted and that was crystal clear when I got pregnant.” She shook her head. “To answer your question, yes. Always has. I told him when I found out. After my father,” she sniffed, body trembling and not in a good way, “shared his displeasure with me.”

Skimming his hand down over her thigh, he cupped the back of it and lifted it so he could slide his between them, anchoring her closer to him. This was a woman who deserved the world. Not that anyone deserved the hell it sounded like she went

through, but damn it, Emma had come to mean so much to him.

“That little girl is my world. If he is back and wanting her, then it’s merely to do something for the vote. Maybe it’s a family angle. I don’t know but I *won’t* lose her. She’s my *entire* world.”

...

The high pitch of her voice irritated her but she couldn’t help it. Emma was scared out of her mind. If Paul wanted to, she didn’t doubt he could take Greer. He had money, status, and friends in high places.

She lay like a board, trying to think about movies that had brought her happiness. She’d watched just about everything. Popular. Odd. And everything in between. The only time she and her old man hadn’t been fighting was if a baseball game had been on. He’d loved the sport.

What could Paul want?

She really didn’t want to find out.

“You know Carl is just trying to get a story. For all we know, he’s not trying anything.”

“I can’t fight him if he does. I can’t compete with his money.”

“You’re not alone, Freckles. I will be at your side. You just have to let me in.” His large hand slid around to her ass, bringing her even closer to him. Everything about this man was hard. And strong. And protective.

“I’m not worth the center.”

“Let me decide what the center is worth.” He brushed some hair away from her face before placing his hand on her hip.

She needed to change the subject. “Thank you for your clothing.”

“You can wear whatever you want of mine. They never looked as good on me as they do you.”

“I doubt that. Your clothing is...” She took a deep breath. “Let’s just say no one complains when you walk in a room.”

He lifted one eyebrow. “Because of my clothing?”

“Are you fishing for compliments, Mr. Conner?”

A flash of white as he showed his teeth. “From you? Always. I have a fragile ego.”

“Why? You have to know how good you look. In anything. And I doubt anything on you is fragile.”

He nuzzled her neck with his nose. “Regardless, compliments are always nice to hear. God, you smell good. How do you manage to smell so damn delicious?” His tongue flicked out and licked her skin.

She shivered. “Lotion?”

“Sounds like you’re asking me. Maybe I should find out how you smell everywhere. I already know from this morning that I love your taste.”

She couldn’t shut her legs even though she tried. His thick thigh was between hers. He nosed aside the collar of the shirt he’d put on her, moving down toward the top of her breast.

“Linc,” she panted, her grip digging into his shoulders. “What are we doing?”

“Talking.” His teeth closed around the strap of her bra before he licked down toward the cup.

“Talking?”

“Sure. Don’t you hear what I’m communicating? How beautiful you are? How much I’m addicted to your smell, your taste? How much I want to be inside you?”

“Is that what this is? Sex to get off?”

He grazed her nipple with his teeth as he lifted his head to look at her. “Freckles, I am happy to get you off. *Anytime* you want me to. I want to make you feel better. You’re hesitant to talk about this man who gave you the greatest gift you have, Greer. I don’t want to push because I feel you’ll resent me in the broad stroke of your anger. Not that it’s not deserved, but I

want to be on your good side. So if that means distracting you and letting you see how I feel about you without words, than that's what I'll do."

Linc growled in his throat as he closed his eyes and flicked his tongue around her pebbled nipple.

Emma whimpered as his words resonated through her. Wasn't all that did. Her entire body reverberated with every touch, stroke, and breath of this man. Linc made her feel beautiful and she pushed away the last vestiges of her fear before sinking her hands into the silken strands of his hair and pulling.

She hadn't a chance in hell of moving him if he didn't wish to but he did slice his gaze up to her, eyebrows up in silent question, even as he continued to make love to her breast.

"Make me feel better."

His gaze burned her like the flames from a solar flare. She sank her teeth into her lower lip and unlike the other times when he'd used his thumb to free it from the grip, this time he surged up her body and claimed her mouth. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and laved it with his tongue before planting his own small bite on it.

This one didn't hurt. At least not her lip. But deep inside her gut, it clenched, hard. And she shifted with a moan of need. Linc rose over her, his hair falling around his face as he stared at her.

Unease began to creep in and he gave a firm shake of his head. "Eyes on me, Freckles. No one else in here but you and me. And I swear to you, I love everything I am about to see."

"Words," she gasped as his fingers danced up her side, under her shirt. Well, his.

"Ones I'm about to prove." He settled between her legs and skimmed her with his stare. She shifted and he settled a large hand in the middle of her less than flat stomach. "Let me just look, Freckles."

Emma didn't want him to look. She wanted him to touch. Kiss. Deliver on the promises that had been flitting between

them for the past few weeks with their teasing, fleeting touches, and heated looks.

But she held still, staring at him as his eyes devoured her. The intensity with which he observed her made her wonder what he was thinking about. His thick eyebrows converged as he watched her.

“Christ, Freckles. The things I want to do to you.”

“Words,” she repeated.

His lips twitched as he met her gaze with a hungry one of his own. “Is this a case of show don’t tell?”

The familiar teasing set her more at ease. “Something like that. Or put your money where your mouth is?”

“I’m sure the places I’m about to put my mouth, money has no business being.” He bent closer and lifted her to a seated position, dragged her so her legs hung off the huge mattress on his bed, and knelt before her.

“Shirt off.”

She reached for the hem of his jersey, one she wanted to keep, but that wasn’t the focus right this moment. His hands covered hers, lifting them together along with the shirt. The material fell beside her but she wasn’t watching it, all her focus was on the man who stared at her like she was his last meal.

Never had such hunger pooled in someone’s gaze while they watched her. Linc skimmed his hands along her silhouette only to settle them along her full hips, fingers digging into the rolled waistband of the sweatpants he’d put her in. His eyes met hers as he tugged. She almost held her breath as he dragged them down her legs.

“Fucking spectacular,” he murmured as the pants fell to the floor.

She followed his large, strong hands as they slipped up her thighs, noting how dark his skin was next to hers. A beautiful blend.

Emma was seated on his bed in a bra and panties. Her bra

straps were already partway down her shoulders and the cups were wet from his mouth. Seconds later, his mouth covered her right breast and she gasped. The slide of satin along her skin was the only warning that the bra was being tossed away like the rest of her clothing.

She didn't care. Not a bit. His mouth was a fucking miracle. He flicked, sucked, and nipped on her breast and all she could do was whimper as her fingers speared deeper into his hair to hold him closer. He laved kisses between her breasts prior to paying the same attention to the left one.

"Linc," she moaned.

He didn't stop. As he skimmed the thumb of his hand over the nipple not in his mouth, she shuddered and bit down on her own lip to contain her cry. Of need or frustration, she wasn't sure.

"No, Freckles. No hiding what you want, what you like from me. I need to hear you."

He pinched one nipple while he grazed the other with his teeth. How the sensations were so damn different but so similar, she couldn't explain—both were fucking lightning bolts to her core.

She dug her fingers into his hair and yanked before sliding them down to pull on his shirt that was always molded to his body, highlighting everything he was. His muscles, the smooth skin, the power which remained coiled beneath his deep bronze hue. She gripped at his shoulders and dug in her nails.

Linc released her breast with a pop and sat on his heels. He didn't make her ask. Or beg. Not that she was above doing either. He lifted it off and dropped it beside him, much like her pants and shirt.

"Fuck," she muttered.

The man was gorgeous. Always had been. He may not have been actively playing professionally anymore but he was just as fit as he had been. Cuts and ridges, even his forearms were a fucking turn-on. Again, cue the arm porn. Then there were his tattoos. Not as visible as they were on some people's skin

but his tribal and other designs were incredible. One day she would trace them with her tongue and learn all the different patterns and images he carried with him.

“What do you see, Emma? What do you see when you look at me?”

“Perfection.”

“That’s what I see as well.” And he pushed up enough to capture her mouth once more.

She surrendered to him, following his lead, trusting him to lead the way to the top she wanted to find, desperately.

He kissed his way down her chin, neck, and over her breasts as he curled the fingers of his left hand in the waistband of the simple purple panties she was wearing. With a slow tug, he dragged them down, over her thick thighs and to her knees.

The second they were off she tried to close her legs but he was there, between her, keeping them open.

“No hiding from me, Freckles. I love everything I’m seeing. I want to take it slow and savor what you have but fuck it, I want you too bad. My cock aches to be inside you.”

She ached to have him inside her. Emma closed her eyes and breathed deep, only to jerk seconds later when his mouth landed between her legs.

“Linc!”

Wrapping her legs around him, digging her heels into his strong back, she wedged her head into the mattress beneath her, arching her back and her hands holding onto his head in a death grip.

Dear sweet God in heaven. Only in books had she even imagined anything like this happening. It had never happened to her before and she was surely going to combust.

Linc didn’t seem to mind the grip she had on him. He took his time and licked his way up her wet folds and sucked her clit into his mouth. She screamed his name to the room, uncaring if anyone could hear them.

That flipped a switch in him and he devoured her like a starving man. Linc licked, sucked, and indulged in every part of her as he tormented her. He dragged his teeth over her clit. She shuddered, shaking even as she rocked against his wicked tongue and mouth. Begging for something he held just out of her reach.

Incoherent words tumbled from her mouth. Was she cursing him? Praising him? Begging? Threatening? Most likely a bit of everything.

His large calloused hands settled on her thighs, spreading her wider than she thought her legs could go. As he continued to lap and suck, he opened her with one hand. Head thrashing on the mattress, she gulped and struggled for any air to help her breathe better. The second she thought she'd managed, he shoved two fingers deep inside her, his tongue twining around her hypersensitive bundle of nerves.

Back bowing, she disintegrated, his name yanked from her on a cry that might not have contained any sound, for he took all her air.

Chapter Sixteen

Sweet, heavy honey coated his tongue as the woman beneath him bucked and twitched, coming on his fingers. Linc lapped up all he could, watching her through slitted eyes as she rode out the aftershocks. Her grip on his hair was unrelenting.

Lust surged through him. On its heels was a possessiveness he'd never experienced before. This was his. *She* was his and no other fucking man would dare have the chance to experience this with her. It was his and his alone.

A growl escaped him and she shuddered again with the newest vibration moving through her. His dick was painfully hard and he couldn't bring himself to pull his fingers from her heat long enough to adjust.

But that need to sink between her legs rode harder than the desire to keep his fingers inside her. Kissing each thigh, he reached up and pulled her hands from his hair. Her gaze, unfocused and hazy with lust, found his. He pushed up and with one hand popped the button on his jeans.

She locked in on his groin and he stripped and watched her as she saw his cock bounce free from the prison it had been confined in. Emma moaned and licked her lips. His dick bobbed in response. Bending for a condom, he tore it open and had himself sheathed in seconds.

He crawled over her, settling between her spread legs and kissing her as he lined the head of his cock up to her pussy. His left hand sank into her hair and he held her gaze.

"You still with me, Freckles?"

"Yes." She placed her hand on his jaw. "Inside me."

Linc took her at her word. He burrowed his face in the soft spot between her neck and shoulder, nipped her lightly, and thrust deep, surging inside her with one full stroke.

Holy shit. She wrapped him tight as a gasp slipped from her. He held still, drawing back to make sure she was okay.

“Emma?”

“So full,” she muttered. “So damn full.”

This woman was liquid fire around his cock. Her body held him like a vise and her muscles worked him, tempting him to give in and release.

He clenched his jaw and found a way to hold on.

“All of you, Linc. I want it all. Once, I want it all.”

It was going to be more than once.

“Take what you need. You set the pace. You are in charge.”

He felt her hesitation and he leaned over her to press a firm kiss on her mouth. “Come on, Freckles. I told you, I’m much better than anything with batteries. Use *me*.”

“Bigger, too, than what I have.”

He smirked. It was seriously hard not to. Emma skimmed her hands over his shoulders and down his back. Every inch of his body demanded he power into her, taking what he needed until his release found him. Linc refused to listen. This was her choice. Her pace.

When she angled her hips a slight bit, adjusted her knees higher and sank her nails into his ass, encouraging him in deeper, a low curse escaped him.

“All,” she moaned. “Give me all of you.”

He pulled back, withdrawing his cock from her heat, those clenching muscles holding him like they didn’t ever want him to leave. She mewled as her body did its best to retain him inside. Holding a few seconds with simply the head of his shaft notched inside her, he snapped his hips, driving back inside.

Her groan paired perfectly with his own as she shuddered beneath him.

“Christ, Freckles. You’re goddamn perfect. Wet. So damn tight. How is this possible?” He pebbled kisses along her jawline, tossing them against her parted lips. Linc wrapped a hand in her hair, yanking it back to give himself even more

access. She responded by sinking her nails deeper into the flesh of his ass.

Unable to continue thinking like a rational human, he powered into her with short thrusts, ones he was fairly certain would be bruising her. Emma met each one, all the while asking for more. When her lids drifted down, hiding those beautiful blues from him, he found his words again.

“No, Freckles. Look at me.”

She listened.

“Good girl,” he praised. “You’ve done this to me, Freckles. Turned me into this man who can’t get enough of you.”

She licked her lips and he swore before claiming her mouth again. It was too much and yet not enough. Slowing down his strokes, he made them long and dragging.

Her nails raked up his back, sinking into his shoulder blades as she pulled him tighter against her. Tearing his lips from hers, he held her gaze, their bodies sweaty as they rocked against one another.

Linc moved her hands and laced their fingers together before he stretched her arms up over her head, the move lifting her full breasts so they pressed into him. Sweat stuck her hair to her flushed skin. God, she never looked so perfect as she did this moment.

She turned one wrist so her right hand was flush to the mattress but her left hand was palm down. The move allowed her more traction—he figured that out when her arms flexed and she used him to rock harder, nearly feral in her action. What wasn’t feral but just as shocking was the glint of her engagement ring as it sparkled in the late afternoon sun.

Emotions he’d been holding back surged over him like a tidal wave. He didn’t fight them, just took possession of her mouth again. He thrust hard, fast, and deep, needing to make it so she felt him even when he wasn’t buried to the hilt inside her perfect pussy. Molding it to his cock so it was his. So *she* was his.

He rode her. His sweat dripped onto her and all she did was

move with him, taking what he offered and wringing more out of him. She undulated in time with his thrusts, her legs wrapped high on his hips until she flattened them on the mattress and bucked into his forceful drives.

“Come for me, Freckles. Come on my cock.”

Her grip tightened, both on his hands and his dick, her full lips parting as she splintered beneath him, his name soaring from her mouth like it took flight. He followed her over, his shaft jerking and pulsing inside her. She trembled again and gasped.

Fucking nirvana. That’s how he would describe this experience with Emma.

He lowered himself over her, covering her smaller frame with his, wanting to keep her like this. Soft. Pliant. Beneath him.

“Stay here.” He brushed his lips along the curve of her jaw as he pulled free of her heat. Padding naked into the bathroom, he tied off and disposed of the condom before reaching for a washcloth and wetting it with warm water. Then he returned to the bed and crawled up to the woman who still lay where she belonged, though she’d pulled the sheet up over her body.

Clucking his tongue, he tugged it away, the dune-hued sheet sliding along her still flushed skin. She clutched at it the moment it began to move.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking care of my fiancée.” He pulled a little harder. “Let go.”

Her gaze darted left and she shook her head. “I think I should go.”

Fuck that.

With a frustrated huff, he released the sheet up by her hands and pushed to the bottom of the bed. Seconds later, he was moving up between her legs under the sheet. Her protest was cut short as he licked her before drawing her clit into his mouth once more.

Two hours later he woke to find Emma sleeping in his arms, their limbs intertwined as they slept. His cock stirred, ready for another few rounds in her curvaceous body, but he willed himself to have more control.

Finally, she appeared to be at peace. Propping his head up on his hand, he stared down at her and traced along her hairline, memorizing her features as she continued to slumber. Once he got to her bottom lip, her lashes slowly rose.

Pink skimmed up her cheeks as she pulled the sheet up over her body so it hid her mouth. “Hi,” she muttered.

Reaching between them, he yanked it down without letting go of her gaze. “Hi. Why are you hiding from me?”

“Pretty sure my breath is bad. I’ve been sleeping.”

He grinned. “Not all we’ve been doing.” Linc kissed her and when she pushed into him, he wrapped an arm around her, lining her core up with his cock. “We need to talk.”

Her entire body stiffened. And not in a good way.

“I know. It didn’t happen and we won’t mention it again.”

This woman. “You need to stop going to the extreme when I say we have to talk. I want to go with you when you meet her father.”

She gasped. “Meet him? I’m not going anywhere near him.”

“Hear me out?”

He stroked her back as he waited for her to respond.

“Seems like he wants to surprise you, get you when you’re vulnerable. When you’re alone with Greer.”

“I’m her mother, I’m always with her, and I’m always going to be vulnerable.”

“Hear me out,” Linc repeated. He hated the look of panic and fear in her expression. “We have people who are on your side. People who will protect her like their own.”

Her lower lip trembled and he pressed his thumb there before rubbing it lightly.

“Let her stay with Dawson for a day and we’ll go to where he is and speak with him.”

“What if they try to take her while we’re gone?”

“Is his name on the certificate?”

“No.” Her eyes got shiny.

God, this was ripping out his heart. Pressing her head into his chest, he massaged her scalp.

“Then no one is going anywhere with him, if he tries it. We both know Dawson will cut a bitch. And Tully would cross-check the fucker right through a window. Mitchell has a slew of attorneys on speed dial if it’s necessary. Of course, that might be to get him, Dawson, and Tully out of jail, but, you never know, because that man is brutal. My dad will protect her, as will Tully’s mom and the rest of the quilting group.”

“What’s the catch?”

Closing his eyes, he rested his lips on top of her head before making her look him in the eyes.

“The catch is you have to trust us to help you.”

...

The catch is you have to trust us to help you. A sentence she’d run over and over in her head, ever since Linc had said it to her. Granted, it had taken a back seat while he made love to her...again. The man had simply lain on his back, covered his cock, and grunted. She’d hesitated because she was larger but he’d picked her up and slid her down over his dick, telling her to set the pace.

He was huge. Thick and perfect inside her.

They’d moved from the bed to his massive shower and done things beneath the spray she’d wanted to do in San Antonio.

Currently she sat cross-legged on the end of his bed, draped in another of his long-sleeved jerseys as he brushed out her hair. Eyes closed in absolute bliss while he worked the comb through her locks, she was close to another orgasm.

“Hey,” he said with a nudge. “You’re supposed to be telling me more about the worst customer you had.”

“Hands down,” she said, letting her head drop forward because it was too much to hold it up. No wonder her daughter loved having this done. It was heavenly. “Mr. Tomlinson.”

“Doesn’t he own Critters & More?”

“That’s the one. It’s not that he’s rude, because he isn’t. Not really. But you never know what kind of creature he’s going to have in his pocket. And I have to tell you, I’m not a fan of critters or the numerous other things he’s brought in.”

“Like real things that should be in cages?”

“Yes, he wanted them to get some fresh air.” She shuddered. “Nothing like trying to pour coffee when some huge ass Madagascar Hissing Cockroach is looking at me like I would make its next meal.” A full body shudder. “Madagascarnian? I don’t know what it would be. Don’t care.”

“Isn’t that like a health code violation?”

“On so many levels.”

He kissed her neck. “Sorry.”

“It is not something I have to deal with this second, so I’ll be okay.” She leaned her head on his shoulder. “Thank you for brushing out my hair.”

“Want pigtails?”

“No, I’m not exactly a pigtail-wearing kind of girl.”

“You can rock anything, Freckles. Although I’d be lying if I didn’t say my favorite on you is either my shirt or nothing.”

She flushed.

He placed his chin on her shoulder. “I spoke to Dawson and Tully while you were sleeping. They’re fine with Greer staying and Mitchell and my Pops know what’s going on, too.”

“Is this your way of saying we’re heading to see him?”

“Yes. We’ll leave early and be there when he’s walking in.”

She didn’t feel good about this but he had a point. She

needed to know what Paul was up to.

“Not leaving tonight?” She finished putting her hair up in a ponytail.

Linc wound an arm around her middle. “No. I have plans for you tonight that don’t include me driving my truck.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Does it have to do with balls and a stick?”

His grin melted her insides. “Yes. And a very big head.” He lowered his face to hers. “Unless you disagree.”

Nipping her lower lip, she spread her hand over his chest as she twisted to face him. “I had a look but I think I should take a much better look.” Leaning nearer to him, she flicked her tongue along his lip. “All about the details, you know.”

Pushing him with one hand, she straddled his legs and stared at his hard length. “Lots and lots of details,” she mumbled as she reached for him.

At the ass-crack of dawn, Emma sat in the passenger seat of Linc’s truck, heading to confront Greer’s sperm donor. Emma’s nerves ratcheted up the closer they got to Montpelier. The moment she’d left the sanctuary of the mountains that allowed her to blend in and hide, her anxiety rose. Linc didn’t look like anything bothered him. He mouthed the words of the music playing as they drove.

Overhead, the sky was gray with rain-filled clouds. She felt the same way. Like one poke and she would explode all over everyone. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her hand down her slacks. The huge ring on her hand helped to calm her. But it wasn’t easy.

The man at her side looked like he’d just strolled off the set of a *GQ* photoshoot for sexy casual day. His dark indigo jeans were distressed in some places but she knew how well they fit him. How they hung low on his lean hips, making her want to give a brief tug and have them fall down over his strong thighs and that ass. Holy shit, his ass was incredible.

He had the sleeves pushed up of a heather gray Henley,

showing off those porn-worthy forearms and tattoos. He wore a pair of Oakley sunglasses like the ones he wore when he played ball. And a baseball cap. It wasn't one from his team but Mitchell's former professional basketball team, the Monterey Leviathans.

She moaned and shifted on the seat. He'd awakened something in her, Linc had. Something she'd been convincing herself she had well under control.

He didn't speak but he picked up her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it before settling it on his leg. With a deep breath, Emma calmed down.

Which was great until they parked near the capitol building. Her breathing became erratic once more. Linc helped her down, holding her against him before stepping back.

“Ready?”

“Not even remotely.”

He looked at her. “Want me to do this?”

Did she ever. “No. I have to face him.”

Linc offered her his arm and they headed to the entrance. It took a few moments for them to look over the board and find out where he was. They sank into some chairs in the hall while they waited. She brought her phone to life and found the first image of Greer.

The most recent one. Her girl in an outfit for the community center, face smudged, and her smile so big it was nearly ear to ear.

“Heads up.” Linc didn't move from his spot, just nudged her leg with his.

Emma looked up at the man walking down the hall. She noticed how beside him was a small blonde woman taking twice the steps Paul took merely to keep up. With a deep breath, Emma rose and stepped into his path.

“I need a moment of your time.”

“I'm sorry,” he said without looking at her. “You'll have to

make an appointment with my secretary. I'm always happy to make time for my constituents."

"How about the mother of your seven-year-old child? The one you never acknowledged until recently?"

He snapped his gaze to her and yes, Greer's eyes were looking at her. "Emma?" His gaze moved over her and she stiffened her spine against the pain his usual dismissal gave. "You haven't changed."

"Neither have you. I want to know why a reporter is asking me if *my* daughter is going to be coming to live with you."

The blonde with him watched avidly. "We can't discuss this right now."

More people were walking into the hall.

She didn't have to look over at Linc to know he had her back. "Fine. Your office then, because it's happening now."

He stepped toward her and she locked her legs. "I'm not leaving, Paul, until this is very clear to you. You don't mention my daughter's name. You—"

He dragged her into a room and tried closing the door behind them but Linc's hand stopped it from shutting completely and he was followed them in, along with the secretary. "You can't just show up at my work and do this, Emma. She is my daughter, too. She sure as hell wasn't an immaculate conception, although for all the participation you gave, it might as well have been. Christ, you really are dumb like people say."

"Watch how you talk to my fiancée." Danger drenched Linc's statement.

Warmth at her back gave her courage. Noticing how Paul stared at Linc, she hid her smirk.

"Let's get something straight. Your name isn't on her birth certificate. You weren't there for me while I was pregnant and you sure as hell weren't there after she was born. Not once. No support. In fact, you wanted to abort her. While you were here fucking your way to whatever position you're after, I was

busting my ass with more than one job. Greer is my daughter and you will forget you donated sperm. I'm guessing you saw the photo in the paper and now you want to be part of her life but if I get one more question about her and you, I'll let everyone know how you abandoned her and wanted me to abort her and didn't give her another thought, until it could further your career. Let's see how well your *constituents* take that."

She looked down her nose at the man who had given her the greatest treasure she had. He didn't make her heart skip a beat, not even in anger. She felt *nothing* for him. At all.

He glowered at her and took a step only to pull up. "I can bury you, Emma. Don't forget that. Hey, wait a minute. You're Franklin Conner. I remember you from school."

"I am." A sniff. "Can't say the same." He reached down and lifted Emma's left hand in a very deliberate move, turning it so the large heart-shaped diamond couldn't be missed. "And I'm hers. Which makes this woman, and *her* daughter, *mine*."

Looking up at Linc, she gave him a smile. One he returned seconds before he kissed her. Gentle. Tender. Loving.

"Seriously?" Paul shook his head.

A low growl escaped Linc. "Deadly. I want to make sure we're clear on something." Linc slid his hand around to cup Emma's neck. She loved him holding her like that. "You're not part of this woman or her child's life. All the friends you have that you think will be impressed by you showing up to play the savior father have nothing on the ones I will bring in. The ones who will make sure you are painted in such a light you can never run for office again."

Paul blanched as he glanced to the secretary, who was listening avidly. His gaze swung to Emma who was a statue beside him.

"I fully back this woman, my future wife, and her daughter. You don't want to know what I will do, what lengths I will go to, in order to protect them."

"Understood," Paul muttered, his skin a bit pale and the

pulse at his neck rapid.

“Good,” Emma said and walked out.

Linc kissed her again when they made it to the truck. “Feel better?”

“I do,” she admitted. “I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

“Sometimes you have to face your past.”

She hugged him. He was correct, sometimes you did, and she only hoped he would forgive her when his came knocking.

Chapter Seventeen

A week later

“Let me just get the folder off the desk and I’ll be right there.” Linc hurried into the office, which, honestly, he viewed as Emma’s, not his. Flicking on the light, he skimmed over the items on the desk for the folder he sought for this new investor.

Emma had a great system and he was learning it so when he found the yellow tab on the top, he pulled. It slid free of the stack but it wasn’t the only one. Another fell as well.

Savaglio.

What the fuck was his name doing on a folder? Lifting all the yellow ones, he flipped through them. His gut churned with betrayal at each new name he read. Fox. Jones. Freeman. Santino. Yun. And more. So many more.

It took him a moment to calm the rage in his blood. He put the folders back and left with only the one he needed. Charlie Toby. One of the men they’d met with in San Antonio.

The man had walked down the hall while waiting for him and was by the doors to the gym. Moving up beside him, Linc peered in the vertical pane of glass.

High schoolers were practicing and Mitchell was watching. Not playing but on the sidelines offering up advice as he coached.

“Would you like to watch?”

Charlie grinned. “My son plays in middle school. He’s not going to believe that I was in a room with Mitchell Anderson.”

“Let’s go over this and I’ll introduce you.”

They sat at the top section closest to the door so they could have a bit of a conversation. Once Charlie signed, Linc sighed with relief. Two of the eight they’d gone to meet, along with Mr. Stevenson, hadn’t wanted to sign. Mr. Stevenson was still up in the air but Charlie and three others had already agreed to

invest.

True to his word, after the game had finished, he walked Charlie down to speak with Mitchell. Leaving them together, he flexed a hand around the folder he held before realizing he had to talk to Emma about those names.

As he walked up the hall to the front, he passed the paintings she'd encouraged him to hang. Hell, the one he did the night of her birthday hung in her home. To him, it was a terrible rendition of the night sky, but she claimed she loved it and wouldn't dream of letting him do another.

He would anyway.

Her laughter found him in the hall and like a puppy on a leash, he was pulled in that direction. She was in the cafeteria cleaning up with some of the kids. They had music playing and were dancing. He recognized R. City and wondered how many of the children actually knew who he was.

Whatever style her hair was in today, he knew it had to be Dawson's doing. Emma said she'd never learned how to do cute and amazing things with her hair. She glanced over her shoulder and gave him a smile.

It wasn't easy to return it. She passed a towel to one of the children and walked to him.

"Everything okay? How did the meeting with Mr. Toby go?"

"Fine." Yep, even to him the word was clipped and short.

She opened her mouth like she had something to say, only to close it and nod. When she stepped nearer, he turned away and retreated to the office.

Sitting at the desk with a groan, he slapped the file down. He should be thrilled that more money was coming in. At the moment, he had more than enough to begin construction on the hockey rink. He and Tully had already gone over what he wanted and the blueprints had been confirmed. He merely had to tell them to start.

A buzzing in the drawer had him pulling it open. Emma's phone was lying face down and he picked it up. Unknown

number. Without thinking about anything other than making sure it wasn't Paul, he answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, beautiful. I spoke to a few of the guys and while they were a bit hesitant because of Linc's name being mentioned, they're willing to give it a shot. We'll meet you there."

Could his heart pound out of his chest?

"Emma? You there?"

"No, she's not," he bit off.

"Who is this?"

"I should be asking the same question. Who are you?"

Muffled talking. "Linc? Is that you?"

He ended the call and dropped her phone in the drawer. Slamming it shut, he picked up a Post-it and wrote *Signed*. Slapping it on the top of Toby's folder, he left it on the desk. She would scan it in the computer and get them both signed copies.

Linc stormed out of the office and away from the center. He saw Mitchell watching him, his expression one of concern, but he didn't have it in him to be polite in front of the children. So he went home and retreated to his basement.

Blaring Led Zeppelin, he began to work out, pushing his body to the limit. Time passed and it didn't mean a damn thing to him. He couldn't get the male voice on the phone out of his mind, nor the fact that she had folders with his old teammates' names on them.

The sun had set by the time he finished punishing his body, showered, and trudged upstairs. The house was silent and he rubbed the nape of his neck as he picked up his phone to see if he'd missed something.

Nothing. Flopping on his sofa, he groaned as he turned on the television. This wasn't what he wanted. He wanted Emma. He wanted to be with her and Greer, their family.

Clicking off the large HD screen he had on the wall, he

walked to the door. After locking up behind him, he went to his truck and drove. He didn't go to her place, because while he wanted to be with her, he had to work through his anger before he did something foolish like accuse her of something unfounded.

Passing by Cassidy's Roadway Motel, he frowned. The man had finally gotten the sign fixed so it no longer read *Ass Rot*. Shifting into reverse, he backed his truck up and bit off a low curse as he found himself staring at Emma's old vehicle.

What the fuck is she doing here?

A door opened down the line of rooms and his heart bottomed out when he spied her walking from the space. Behind her was a man that he recognized, regardless of the years that had passed. Carlos Ruiz.

His world went red.

She'd gone from his bed to a cheap-ass hotel with this man. A guy who on his best day wasn't the player Linc had been, even if he had been given the captaincy once Linc left. At one point they'd been friends. Then they were nothing. This moment in time, if the man touched Emma, they were enemies.

The past flashed before him.

"We don't need him. Linc Conner isn't going to help us get to the playoffs. We can't sit around and wait for him to come back. We're a better team without him. I'm your new captain and I know we can do this. We don't need a man who didn't let us know about his injury so we could give him some rest—a man who not only has had surgery on his shoulder but also his knee because that was fucked up as well. A man who is drinking alcohol like it's water and not trying to get better to help us. He's done. Washed up. Out of the game. We need to focus on here and now, this team, without him. The Dutchmen don't need Linc Conner anymore."

Shaking off the memory, Linc hopped out of his truck and strode toward them. "What the fuck is going on?"

More fucking betrayal is what's going on.

Both of them jumped, Emma emitting a small squeal of shock. Her hand clasped to her chest, the weak lot light glinting off the ring on her finger. One that seemed like a colossal joke. Mocking him. Mocking his decision to pick this woman.

“Linc,” Emma said, moving to his side. “I wanted to surprise you.”

He scoffed. “I can see that.” He flicked a glance to the man who was still there. Carlos hadn’t changed much—he was still fit and he still had that handsome Latin swarthy that so many women fell for. And some men. He had a jaw covered by full stubble.

Rage pulsed through Linc, thinking of this man laying a hand on Emma.

“Let me explain,” she said. When she put her hand on his arm, he jerked away from her touch.

“Oh, I’m good. Definitely don’t need the blow-by-blow details.”

Carlos stepped closer and Linc growled, yep, actually growled at the man. “If you want to keep that pretty mug you’ll stay away.”

“Linc, it’s not what—”

“Decided to move on from a has-been to an active player? Decided you do have what it takes to hang with the WAGs? Congratulations, I’m guessing you do. Always gunning for the next cash cow.”

She opened her mouth and he slashed a hand through the air, making her flinch. This time Carlos put himself in front of her.

“Taking to putting your hands on women, Conner?” Carlos sneered. “Is that the only way you get a touch? Once you were out of the game and the drinking didn’t solve your knee and shoulder issues, you turned to this type of behavior? This is why we didn’t need you.”

Motherfucker. He snapped. With a roar, he rushed the man and lifted him as they powered into the building behind

Carlos.

“Stop it!” Emma screamed. “Linc, let him go.”

He snapped his head toward her seconds before a punch had him seeing stars. “Want to protect your lover?”

“Despite his need to be an ass? Yes. Stop this, you’re behaving like a child.”

He spat on the ground and slugged Carlos, taking his fair share of pride when the man’s nose cracked under his fist. It didn’t stop the scrappy shortstop. A low rumble of his own and it was his turn to be lifted off his feet as they plowed into the ground. Rolling around on the parking lot of Cassidy’s, they yelled profanities and other things at each other. They didn’t stop until strong hands pried them apart.

Linc wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and spit out more blood. One eye was swelling shut and he had more aches and pains than he’d had after his workout. But the good thing was Carlos didn’t look like he fared any better.

He squinted into the light from the cops who’d split them up. Carl from the paper was present and beyond them, he saw Emma standing by his father—who had a disappointed scowl on his face. Very deliberately, his father put his arm around Emma and walked her away from the flashing cameras. He noticed it was Flora who climbed into Emma’s car and drove it from the hotel.

Linc didn’t fight them as they put him in the back of the car. He didn’t say a word until when he looked up from the holding cell he’d been put in, Tully and Mitchell were there.

For once, he wanted to stay behind bars, knowing what waited for him outside the cell was worse than anything that could happen inside.

His friends weren’t happy.

They went to Mitchell’s house and he stood on the man’s back patio, looking at the outdoor firepit with the large seating area. No flames flickered in the pit but he knew there were enough from his friends. Moving down the steps, he slumped against one of the cushions only to lurch forward and put his

head in his hands.

“Start talking.” Mitchell’s tone was low and edged with danger.

Linc didn’t even look up. No reason to do that and see the disappointment in his friends’ expressions.

“Carlos is an ass.”

“This have to do with his speech after he got named captain?” Tully posed the question.

He couldn’t force words past his lips. Not even to ask how the fuck he knew about it.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes. Why the fuck didn’t you call us when you overheard that? Instead of turning to a goddamn bottle?”

Linc snapped to his feet and glared at them both. “I was weak, okay? I wasn’t fucking made of stone like the two of you.” He raked a hand through his hair, wincing at the tacky feel of blood.

Guess he did get lucky when he slammed me into the wall.

They both fucking growled at him. “Why are you mad at me? I’m the one who lost everything. Emma betrayed me. With *him!*”

Anger pumped through him. the thought of that man touching Emma or hugging Greer like he did. They were *his* women. His to love and protect. Not Carlos’s.

“We’re pissed because this is exactly what our friendship is for. Times like that—when you’re at the bottom and when you think there’s only one way to go.” Mitchell stepped closer, anger evident in every inch of his body. “That’s when you pick up the motherfucking phone and call one of us or both of us and we are there for you.” Another step. “What you don’t do is shut us out and turn to *goddamn* alcohol!”

Tully touched Mitchell’s arm and the ex-basketball player backed up two steps.

“Maybe,” Linc yelled right back, “I didn’t want you to know

how far I'd fallen. How I'd fucked up my knee worse by pushing myself too hard and ignoring the pain. How my shoulder will never be good enough to play professionally again. Not that my knee is. Maybe I wanted to wallow in my fucking despair without you!"

Mitchell clenched his jaw. "You don't deserve Emma or Greer in your life. And if you don't want me in it, you know where the goddamn door is." He turned his back on Linc, the first time the man had done so since they'd met. "Let it hit you on the way out."

"Okay, enough!" Tully roared.

The ex-hockey player didn't yell a lot. He didn't have to, but damn it, he had some vocals when he did.

"Both of you, sit the fuck down." Linc hesitated until Tully glared at him. "Now!"

"Jesus Christ." Tully pointed his finger between the two of them. "This stops now. We are *best* friends. We never turn our back on each other and this shit stops now. We are mad because we love you, Linc. Losing you isn't something we will ever be okay with. And we would have been there for you. It's hard as hell for us to find out after the fact you were fighting the bottle and how bad your injuries were. Don't be mad at Carlos. I went to Adam and found out."

"Fucker," he muttered.

"Yes, you are." Mitchell leaned forward, arms resting on his thighs.

He hung his head. "Holding onto the anger was my way of coping. With what I perceived as a betrayal."

"If it helps," Tully said, "Adam called Carlos on it and said he was wrong. You were the heart and soul of that team, Linc. Still are, given how he came all this way to meet Emma."

I'm pretty sure I know why he came all this way. "Tully?"

"Yes, Linc? Do you need to cuddle?"

Despite his bodily pain and the ache in his heart, the words from his friend tugged a chuckle from him.

“Yes.”

“Good. Cuddle with Mitchell. I’m going to fix us some food.” He walked by them and back to the house.

Linc turned and watched him pause at the door.

He didn’t turn around. “I expect cuddling to be happening when I come back out.” Tully vanished inside after wagging his finger in the air.

Mitchell hadn’t moved and the scowl on his face hadn’t faded. Linc cocked an eyebrow at him. “Well, come on then. Get over here and cuddle me. You heard the man.”

Unfolding to his six-foot-five height, Mitchell stared down at him. “Don’t you ever fucking freeze us out again.”

Linc gave him a nod, not trusting himself to speak. Right now, he could do nothing because in the morning he had to deal with Emma’s betrayal and that fucking sucked.

...

Emma sat on her sofa, legs tucked beneath the quilt her daughter had made for her. She had no tears left in her. Everything around her made her think of how far she’d *not* come. Same crappy interior from when her old man had been alive. Same furniture. Same carpet. Even the same dishes in the kitchen.

Some days she swore the smell was still the same. The rank stench of cigarette smoke. The moldy scent due to the sweat stains on his chair and the moisture from the spilled drinks. It wasn’t true but she imagined it in her head.

Nothing about this place was hers. She didn’t have a voice in it. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. There was one thing which was hers. A painting of the night sky, full of stars and beauty.

The bedroom she slept in was bare because it felt odd putting up things in a room where her father had brought his whores...when he’d managed to leave the living room.

Greer’s room was the only one with any feeling. She’d

encouraged her daughter to decorate how she wanted.

“Mama? Are you ready?”

Was she? Definitely not. But hey, how did she tell her daughter that the man she’d fallen in love with had essentially called her a gold digger as he pounded the face of another man? Pretty sure there wasn’t a Hallmark card for that most specific occasion.

“Yes, baby.” She rose, folded up the quilt, and draped it over the ugly orange sofa.

Helping Greer into her coat, she stepped outside to the cold rain falling. She didn’t care about herself. However, a sick child wasn’t anything she wanted to deal with. Emma hurried her through the rain to the car. Her hands trembled as she started the engine.

Driving through to the center, she took a few deep breaths and looked in the rearview at her daughter. Greer had come out of her shell so much due to the center. Friendships had been formed.

“You’re sad, Mama.”

Automatically pasting a smile on her face, she glanced again into the mirror. “I’m just lost in thought, baby.”

“Lying is bad, Mama. You told me that.”

“And it is. But I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

As they got out at the center, she took several breaths, shored up her shoulders, and reached out for Greer’s hand. They entered and the place was oddly quiet given the time of day. She walked up to the counter and smiled at Sammy who was behind the counter.

“Hello, Greer,” he said with a large smile. “Ma’am.”

Okay, that was odd. He hadn’t called her that in a long time. Not since she’d told him to address her as Emma.

“Go play, Greer. I’ll be by later to pick you up.”

After her daughter signed in, she hurried off down the hall. Emma walked around behind the counter. Miss Yander slid in

her way as she tried to go to the office.

“What are you doing?”

She wouldn't meet her gaze.

“Just stop fidgeting and tell me.”

“Mr. Conner said you're not to go back there anymore.”

Shock sucked the air out of her lungs. “I'm sorry, what?” Miss Yander flinched. “Is he here? Or is he hiding somewhere else?”

“No need to scream to the world, Miss Henricksen. I'm here.”

Slicing her gaze over to him, she hardened her heart against the cuts above his eye and the split lip. Emma marched by the young woman and right up to Linc.

“Are you firing me?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

“Figures.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I don't keep on cheaters or people who go behind my back.”

She opened her mouth to plead her case but his words gutted her. “Is that what you think I was doing?”

“What else should I think was happening when you walked out of a roadside motel room at nearly ten at night?”

“I don't know, perhaps you could have let me explain instead of losing your cool and beating some guy as if you grew up on the streets.” Anger of her own pushed through her.

“What? Did you think your lover was going to make me believe that you weren't fucking him? That he had honorable intentions when he followed you out of that room?” He stepped closer to her but his voice didn't lower. If anything, it rose, carrying to any and all who wanted a front row seat to The Humiliation of Emma Henricksen Part II.

“You forget, Emma. I know him. I was with him when he would fuck multiple women in a night. I know *exactly* what

that man is capable of. I didn't know what *you* were capable of."

This moment, right here, was the singular one she had feared ever since she'd agreed to pose as his fiancée. It was inevitable in her mind, but she'd hoped it wouldn't be so public or humiliating.

She skimmed those watching with unabashed curiosity. Kids and parents. And Mr. Stevenson and his wife.

Figures this is how my life goes.

"Yeah," she muttered, too mentally exhausted to even be shamed any more. "What I was capable of." She pushed her hands in her pockets. "I have a few things in my desk. Am I allowed to get them?"

"Sure." He waved a hand.

She slid by him, trying to keep her whimper contained. Even now, her body betrayed her to this man. It still longed for his touch. At the desk, she opened the second drawer down and pulled out her small leather notebook that Dawson had given her. Taking a moment, she dragged her fingertips over the quote stamped in the cover. *There is no force equal to a woman determined to rise.*

Well, here's hoping.

Also on the cover was a picture of flowers rising to the sun. She'd nearly cried when Dawson had given it to her and almost did so now.

Glancing over the top of the desk, she found the pen that went with it and slid it in the holder. The pen had a quote on it as well. *Think like a Queen.*

With a careful move, she removed the ring and placed it on top of the folder he would need later tomorrow when the contractors came out to start on the rink. Standing tall, she looked into his eyes, which she couldn't read any longer.

"Would you like me to stop Greer from returning?"

"I would never punish the child for the sins of the parent."

She knew the next time she opened her mouth a sob would come out, so she kept her mouth clamped shut as she walked by him. Flora was at her side—why she didn't know, but she appreciated the support—and tucked an arm around her, leading her from the building and to the passenger seat of her car.

Wooden, she needed help to get from the car into her home. When she walked in, she noticed that she wasn't alone. Maria, Ruby, friends through Dawson, and a woman she'd only seen in passing, Mrs. Dani Wolcott of Wolcott Jams and Jellies, were all there.

Ruby gave her a warm smile as she tucked some fuchsia hair behind her ear. "Hi, hon. Dawson is at the center and she'll bring Greer home at the end of the day. We thought we'd see what we can do to help cheer you up."

Emma put the notebook down on the table by the couch and swallowed the bile trying to make an appearance.

"How about you three give us a moment. Fix up plates of that food I've been smelling." Dani gestured to Emma and beckoned her to the couch before she sat beside her. Patting her graying hair, which was twisted into a low bun, she took a deep breath.

Emma stared at her toes. But Dani grasped her hand and held tight.

"Chin up, love." When she obeyed, the woman squeezed once more. "Good. I want you to know this offer is not charity. It's purely in self-interest."

"Offer?"

"A job offer."

"You want to offer me a job? I *just* got fired from my last one. And to be honest, I quit the one before that because my boss was an asshole."

"I know." A small smile. "Rock Falls, hard to keep any secrets. I need you and I want you out at Wolcott Farms."

"Doing what?"

“My books. I have the organizational skills of a slug. I couldn’t pass it off before but now I’m older and, quite honestly, I want to spend my time making jam. Not remembering to send out invoices or pay this, that, and the other.”

“I didn’t graduate high school. I dropped out.”

The woman held her gaze and arched an eyebrow. “And? Are you saying that makes you less? That a woman who didn’t complete school isn’t worth a damn? Before you answer that, let me tell you, I didn’t even go to school. I was home taking care of my sick mother. When I married Joel, I learned how to run the farm but I ain’t never had any book learning in an official capacity. My name and face are all over this part of the country and if I have your help, perhaps we will spread them across the whole country. Are you going to tell me that I don’t deserve that because I didn’t graduate high school?”

“No.”

“Good answer. Let’s eat and talk salary.”

How is this my life?

Chapter Eighteen

“I’m sorry, son. Given that display in front of the motel and the one again with your fiancée, I am just not confident in your ability to keep this center safe.”

Linc swallowed his disappointment. This was on him. No one else but himself.

“And I read an article that said you weren’t even engaged. Is that true?” Mrs. Stevenson watched him like a hawk.

This woman had no right to question what he and Emma had.

“We were pretending.” He licked his lips. “At first.”

He wasn’t lying about that. He meant all of it and he’d spent a long-ass time finding that perfect ring for her. The one that she had left on the desktop before she’d walked out of his life.

“And then?” Mr. Stevenson watched him.

Frustration at the tipping point, Linc rose to his feet. “What are you looking for, Mr. Stevenson? Since I first approached you, you’ve been on a see-saw about this. Wanting me to jump through all these hoops. Even doubting that I was the one who drafted up the proposal, like I’m less capable because I played sports or because of my skin color—not sure which. I have a duty to the children I built this place for. Did I lie to you? Yes about my fiancée, because quite honestly, I don’t see what the fuck it matters if I’m married or not. Emma helped me out because that’s the kind of person she is. You don’t want in, fine. Leave. I owe you no more explanations and I have a contractor ready to start breaking ground for the hockey rink. Miss Yander will show you both out.” He got to the door and looked at the two watching him. “You should probably look at your own wife and the fact she tried multiple times to get me into bed before you start judging the relationship between myself and Emma.”

With two pats on the doorframe, he walked out and headed outside to where the contractor stood. He had a hard time

containing his shock. This was Nashua Brothers Construction. *Nashua* was Abenaki for *Two*. Steven and Martin Ogden ran the business. He'd known of the company but it wasn't one of the large names that would typically be pulled in for a job of this magnitude. The fact they were waiting for him was simply because Emma was insistent on giving more back to the community. With her support backing them, he'd given their proposal a second look and hadn't argued when she'd opted to choose them.

Steven was the one waiting, hat in hand, beside the truck pulling the trailer with the bulldozer. Behind him were other vehicles with more machinery just waiting to be unloaded and used.

“Hi, Linc.”

He held out his hand. “Steven.”

“Thank you,” he said with a nod. “For giving us a shot. When your Emma approached us about how much it would be to do the work, we didn't think we would be in the running. She's a shrewd businesswoman, that's for sure.”

His heart wrenched. She was something.

“And she was right,” Steven continued. “When it gets out that we did the hockey rink for Franklin Conner's community center, we will be sought after. So, again, thank you for not just writing us off when we gave that first amount. This is good for the tribe and the family.”

He didn't have as much to do with this side of his family as he would have liked but he loved Emma more for bringing in his heritage to this, even in this manner.

“Glad to have you on board. Get to work and let me know if there is anything you need from me.”

“I'd love a chance to say hi to Emma, if that's okay.”

Bitterness twisted his gut. “She's not in today. I can get a message to her.”

His smile never slipped. “No problem. I'll give her a call this evening. I spoke with her this morning to finalize a few

things and she said she wouldn't be in. I forgot until this moment.”

All he could do was smile in return and allow the acid in his gut to churn. He deserved it. God, he missed her and wanted to talk to her since he'd had a chance to calm down. Even given how much of an ass he'd been to her, she'd still taken this man's call. As they unloaded the equipment, he noticed that the children outside were watching avidly. In the mix, he saw Greer. The girl wouldn't hold his gaze. She turned away and walked inside.

She was gone from the center by the time he returned. Another kick to the gut. He'd disappointed the little girl he loved more than almost anything in this world. He went home to find Tully and Mitchell waiting for him. Pizza and beer were already on the table. They both jerked their thumbs to the food. He pried a paper plate off the stack.

“Why haven't you spoken to Emma yet?” Tully picked up a large slice and folded it in half before taking a bite.

“And say what?”

“Sorry is a good place to start.” Mitchell drank some beer, his blue eyes direct. “Of course, telling her you're a dick and a sorry excuse of a man isn't a bad idea, either.”

Linc rocked in his chair. “Doesn't change what she did.”

Tully reached over and knocked his chair so he had to scramble to keep from falling on the floor, nearly dropping his pizza in the meantime. “What did she do?”

“What else would she be doing in a motel room with a man?” He gestured to the table. “More importantly, why the fuck is there so much pizza and beer in my house? I know we can put it away but this is a bit much, even for us.”

“It's not for you, jackass. It's for us.”

Linc lunged up at the sound of that voice. Carlos Ruiz.

“Get the fuck out of my house, you bastard.” He struggled but Tully and Mitchell kept him restrained—Tully with one hand as he finished up his pizza with the other. Mitchell left

his beer on the table. At least he knew why the man hadn't eaten anything yet.

"Just as arrogant as you were when you played." Carlos shrugged easily and stepped to the table, picking up two of the slices for himself.

"And I can still outplay your mangy ass."

"Perhaps, but between the two of us, only one made Emma cry." A cocky grin. "And one of us had her smiling huge."

"You fucking prick!" He slammed forward, taking Tully and Mitchell with him a few steps.

"Christ, can we all just sit down for a moment?" Mitchell snapped. He wasn't generally a man who got visibly upset but he was snippy tonight. Two nights in a row for him, some kind of record. "Linc, get your ass in the chair, sit down, and shut up. Carlos, over there. The rest of you, get the fuck in here so we can get this going."

Linc flopped down, anger coiled and ready inside him. Anger which segued into shock as he looked up to see Jasper Fox, Adam Savaglio, Boone, Jones, and more of his old teammates stroll into his house like he'd not ghosted them when he got injured. Like he'd not told them all to fuck off and leave him alone for the rest of his life. But it fit Tully's vague remark about how *he* had come all this way to talk to Emma.

"What the fuck are you all doing here?"

"Your fiancée reached out about your community center. We've come to donate and help you take it national." Adam reached for a slice of pizza and ate half before he grabbed a plate.

"That's why you were on the phone with her?"

Adam grinned and claimed a spot against the counter as the others filed in and picked up some food and beer, all of them giving him a jut of the chin, a fist bump, or a pat on the shoulder. Damn the fucking tears for showing up.

"Tell me you're not thinking she went behind your back."

Adam stretched the slice's cheese from his mouth to the plate and picked it off with his fingers before shoving it in his mouth.

"That's exactly what he's thinking. And it didn't help when he saw her and Carlos at the motel." Tully swiped another two pieces. "Since my man Linc thought with his dick and not his head, he came to the worst conclusion ever about what could have been going on."

He couldn't even send his friend a look because Tully spoke the truth, no matter how he didn't want to admit it to himself. Or anyone else.

"Why would you guys do this?"

Carlos tipped his beer and Linc glared at him before skimming the room to glance at men he'd not seen, except on television, since he'd woken up in the hospital. And, to be honest, he had often switched channels so he wouldn't *have* to see them. They didn't all play for the Dutchmen anymore but here they were. In his house.

"You're our captain." Jones shrugged. "Your fiancée outlined all you're trying to do and it's fucking incredible. She told us that you're trying to make a safe place for children, to give them a start in life not everyone gets."

God, that woman deserved so much more than he could ever give her.

Jasper sat forward, resting his forearms on his thighs, his vibrant red hair a startling contrast to his nearly black gaze. "We give to charity all the time, Cap. It's a thing that we do. Did you really think we would pass up a chance to give to one that meant something special to a guy we *all* admire?"

"I told you all to fuck off and never contact me. I ghosted you, ignored all your calls and attempts to reach out."

"Yeah, you fucking prick." Carlos again. The man had zero malice in his tone, though.

"And you still came?"

"With checkbooks in hand. Or Venmo, or however you want

our money.”

He glanced at Tully and Mitchell who had proud papa expressions on their faces. “Did you two know about this?”

“No, you bastard,” Mitchell snapped. “But we’re pissed, too. We also have friends with pockets, as well you know. Why didn’t you come to us about this? Instead of going to Texas and putting on a show for a man who had people around him that couldn’t even respect that Emma was a taken woman?”

His body went rigid at that. “Excuse me?”

“Dumbass. You know she didn’t tell him, Mitchell. And you went and blurted it out.” Tully wiped his fingers on the paper towel at his side.

His notoriously gossipy friend merely shrugged. “She didn’t and she’s not going to. Jackass needs to know how much damage he did so he can fix it all.”

“Who said something to Emma?”

They all shot him a glare. “Besides you?” Mitchell bit off.

He ground his teeth. “Tell me what happened.”

...

The pounding on her door surprised her. Greer was at the center and Emma had gotten home from Wolcott’s ninety minutes prior. On the counter sat two freshly baked pies she’d made with some of the fruits she’d gotten.

A perk, Mrs. Dani had called them, as she’d loaded up the back of Emma’s car.

“Coming,” she called out, tossing the tea towel over her shoulder. Outside, the promise of snow hovered in the air and she was more than happy to be indoors with the oven adding more heat to the home.

Drawing the door open, she sucked in a breath. Linc stood on her stoop, his face a mask of unreadable emotion. Simply seeing him tore at her and ripped off the temporary scab

settled over her feelings for him.

“Nope.” She swung the door shut.

It didn’t close. He’d shoved his hand between the door and the jamb at the last moment.

“Hear me out, Freckles.”

No he didn’t.

Yanking on the doorknob, she ripped the door open and glared at him, determined *not* to take in how his jeans rode low on his hips, or the way his leather jacket draped on those broad shoulders and down, nearly covering up the jersey he wore, this time a Capitals one. Without a hat his hair moved in the wind, which had no problem whipping around, slamming into what it hit with the promise of what was coming.

Yeah, good job. Didn’t notice that at *all*.

“You lost the right to call me that when you humiliated me.” Her words were rough, grated. “Go away and don’t speak to me unless absolutely necessary.”

“Let me explain.”

“No. I’ve been viewed like a slut before. When I was pregnant in school. When I dropped out to have my daughter. Being the daughter of a man who had no qualms about sleeping around, whether it was with married or single women—he was an equal opportunity asshole. You accused me of something similar and while it hurts like hell, I’ll get over it, but what I will *never* do is let it hurt my daughter. Go back to your beanpole women who are blatant about wanting money from you because your insecurity about that isn’t anything I care to risk. Not when my daughter’s future is in the balance.”

Guilt flashed over his skin. “I deserved that.” He licked his lips. “Let me make it up to you.”

“Make it up to me? How are you going to do that? Offer me more money? Turn me into exactly what you accused me of being? A gold digger who is going after someone with more money? I’m after an *active* player, remember?”

He rocked on his heels and she took the time to slam the

door in his face. Did she nearly get her own fingers? Sure. But it was worth it because he was gone.

Swallowing a sob, she went to the kitchen and gripped the counter as she sucked in shallow, rapid breaths.

She took her anger out on the dough for the bread she intended to make. Even so, she made sure not to over knead it. After splitting it into five sections and covering the pans, allowing it to rise a bit more, she started cleaning.

Emma had finished the kitchen when pounding on the door blasted through the house again. Jaw set in a line, she stomped over and yanked it open. “I told you to leave me alone. Why don’t you—”

Maria and Dawson stood there, eyes wide and on her like she was a wild animal who might attack any moment.

“Can we come in?”

“Sorry,” she said, stepping back to allow them entrance.

“Thank you. The weather today sucks.” Maria shrugged out of her coat and hung it on the hook by the door.

“Care to explain what that was all about?” Dawson questioned as her jacket joined Maria’s.

“Nope. Sure don’t.”

Both women hugged her and they all migrated to the kitchen. One, it was warm, two, it smelled delicious, and three, it was where the food and drink waited.

They soon had coffee and were sitting around her small table.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We wanted to check on you and from how you answered the door, I’m guessing Linc’s been by?”

“I don’t want to talk about him.” She sipped her coffee, refusing to wince when the scalding liquid left its mark on her throat as it went down.

“Fine. Just listen then.” Dawson curled her hands around the

mug. Her fingernails were painted a sparkly purple with a streak of gray through each. “He knows he fucked up. He lost Stevenson as an investor.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t quite dredge up sorrow for that. “He doesn’t need someone like him.”

Maria smiled. “Yeah, he wasn’t happy when he found out one of those guys made advances on you.”

“How did he even know about that? I didn’t tell him.” She frowned at them. “I didn’t tell you either. How did *you* know?”

“Carlos.”

She shrugged. “Seems like even if he knew, Linc shouldn’t. They’re not exactly friends.”

“Sweetie,” Dawson said, patting her hand. “Men are odd creatures. Doesn’t seem all that logical to those of us looking in on the path they take. All I can say is they’re friends now. Or at least not killing each other, and Carlos has donated to the center.”

Her heart twisted. “Good to hear.” She rose from the chair when the timer went off. After pulling the towels off the bread, she slid the loaves into the oven and set another timer.

“None of this explains what the two of you are doing here. I mean, I love that you stopped by, but if this is to get me to give Linc a second chance, don’t waste your breath. I don’t have the patience or a give-a-damn left in my body.”

Maria took her hand when she sat down, giving it a squeeze. “Actually, we were going to take you out tonight. Thought you could use a change of scenery.”

“I can’t. Greer has a game tomorrow and I have to make sure I don’t look like a raccoon before I face the mothers who will take great delight in telling me I didn’t belong with Linc anyway.” She pasted a smile on her face. “But thank you for the offer.”

“Like you can get rid of us that fast. Greer is at the center for a few more hours. When the bread is done, we’re going out.” Dawson finished her drink and rose to refill her cup.

After she'd doctored it how she took her coffee, she rejoined them at the table, a large smile on her face.

An hour later, Emma found herself wearing a VR headset and playing the new Jurassic Park game at the arcade. Screaming when the raptor snapped at her, she dissolved into peals of laughter when her own cry was echoed by Maria and Dawson.

She pointed to the left. "Blue! Follow Blue."

"But there's a freaking T-Rex!" Dawson's voice didn't sound any better than hers.

"Where?" Whipping around, she didn't see anything.

"There!" Maria grabbed her arm. "Right there. What is that, noon, midnight, six? I don't fucking know but it's there. About to go up our ass."

"It's on our six," she said, heart thudding in her chest.

"Whatever," she wailed. "I said that number too. Move, move, move!"

They ran for a bit until she bent at the waist. "This is too fucking real for me. I'm exhausted. What the hell are we here to see?"

Her friends sucking air beside her took a moment. "Apatosaurus, or something like that."

Both she and Dawson looked at Maria. "What?"

"You can remember that mouthful but not a number? And do you even know what kind of dinosaur that is?"

"Not a clue, other than the name. More importantly, I'm good with mouthfuls. Just ask Brian."

"I'm not asking your husband about your blowing skills."

Maria popped her thumb in her mouth and pulled it out with a loud moan. "He'll never complain."

"Neither does Tully," Dawson chimed in. "You know, in case anyone was wondering."

"No one was," Emma griped, looking around the image on

the ocular. “I think we’re about to get eaten.”

“I don’t complain about that either,” Maria chortled.

Damn them. She thought back to the first time Linc had gone down on her and her entire body flushed with the recollection.

“Won’t hear one from me about that. What about you, Emma? Linc as good at that as I bet he is?”

“Yes.” The answer rolled from her mouth before she could even pretend to corral it and stuff it into the box it should be in.

“Yeah, doesn’t surprise me.” Dawson huffed. “We’re going to have to run again.”

“Wait, I thought we weren’t supposed to run from a T-Rex. I thought it was supposed to be standing still for that one.”

“Who said that?” Maria questioned.

“Jeff Goldblum.”

Both laughed. “So, you were staring at the man on the screen, not hearing what he was saying.” Dawson slugged her in the arm. “I’m about to die by dino teeth because you were thinking with your ovaries about Goldblum.”

Emma tossed her hands up. “It’s his walk—that damn swagger. Don’t judge!”

Those bitches were judging. Totally.

Chapter Nineteen

Linc hefted the bats and helmets from the bed of his truck and carried them to the dugout. This was the last game of the season for his kids and it was an away game. No doubt the stands would be filled. He dreaded seeing Emma cheering on their girl. And yes, despite his colossal fuckup, Greer was *their* girl. Much like Emma was *his* woman.

“Hi, Linc.”

Dropping the gear, he turned to find Melissa Towery, mother to Karly, one of the high schoolers who helped out at the center, standing there.

“Mrs. Towery. What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to stop by before others arrived and tell you how sorry I am that you and Emma broke up.” She settled a hand on his arm, her bloodred nails curling to dig into his skin. “I’m around if you need *anything*.”

He removed her hand and walked by her. “Thanks.”

At his truck, he began reaching in for the cooler when a pair of arms came over the side and pulled it out. Adam.

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s baseball. Where else would I be?” A grin. “Besides, I wasn’t about to turn down an opportunity to meet the woman who kicked your ass and turned your world upside down.”

His heart ached. “She’s probably not coming.”

Adam snorted. “Man, I’ve already met her and Greer. Tully and Mitchell were right. She’s far too good for you.”

Tell him something he didn’t know. Then it hit him. Adam said she was at the game. Immediately he scanned those gathered, searching for her. It had been nearly a week since he had gone to her house. She was polite if they saw each other at the center but she did a damn good job of not running into him.

There.

It wasn't just a visual that told him he'd found her. His entire body reacted to her. Heart pounding hard, breath coming faster and, of course, soul sighing in relief. She crouched by the bleachers, speaking to Greer, who wore her uniform and had her long hair braided down her back.

After a nod to her mother, the child scampered over to the dugout and vanished.

"Take that for me, will you?"

"Sure," Adam called out with a chuckle.

Linc was over by the bleachers before it sank in what he was doing. *What the fuck am I doing? Approaching her?*

Too late to move away, he was beside her and she looked up at him when he cleared his throat. It was fast how she masked her true emotion, but he saw it. This time. Before, he had missed it, but this time, it was as plain as the nose on his face. She missed him and still had feelings for him.

"Emma."

"Mr. Conner." A slow blink. "Something I can do for you?"

"Could I have a word with you?" He noticed how many gazes were on them. "In private."

Hard to ignore the people who snickered behind their hands. Emma took a deep breath and gave a small nod. Linc held out his hand to her and the depth of pain that lanced him when she ignored it almost brought him to his knees.

Dawson watched him, her expression cold and calculating. That woman would be the first one to Emma's side if he fucked up any more than he already had.

She walked with him until they were barely out of earshot of those doing a shitty job of pretending they weren't trying to eavesdrop on the conversation. Tipping his head, he scowled when he noticed she wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Say your piece, Mr. Conner. I have to get back and watch my daughter play her last game."

“I’m sorry.”

She glanced up at him, expression blank. “Is that all?”

“Freckles, please. I’m trying to fix this.”

She walked away and he cursed before turning to watch her climb the bleachers.

He couldn’t, *wouldn’t*, give up on her. He had to apologize and make this right. She was the one for him. That was obvious and it should have been sooner. Like before he opened his mouth and accused her of shit that, had he been thinking rationally, he knew she wouldn’t ever do.

But, right now, he had a game to coach.

The game was long but his kids rocked it. They won and as they took a team photo with everyone holding their trophies, he smiled. In the bleachers, he spied his best friends, his father, the guys he had missed far more than he’d ever admit, and Emma. His Freckles.

Heart lurching as he stared at her, he barely took his gaze from her. As the kids spilled from their position held for the photo, he noticed she was no longer in the bleachers. He didn’t worry. Greer was still around, which meant so was her beautiful mother.

In the dugout, he began stuffing gear into the bags. Normally, he would insist the children do this but they were enjoying a celebration. A small hand pushed a helmet into the bag by his left leg.

“Greer? Everything okay? Why aren’t you out with your friends?”

“Mama said I have to help clean up after every game.”

“I think your mama would be okay if you skipped this once.”

She dragged over two bats and placed them in the designated bag. “Do you not like her anymore? Is that why you’re not marrying her? Was it me?”

He winced as her words gutted him. He never wanted to

make her feel that way. Linc dropped the helmet and reached for Greer, tugging her closer to him. Once she sat on the bench he crouched before her.

“Kid, this has *nothing* to do with you. Or anything your mom did. It’s all about me and the fact I made a mistake.”

“So you still like her.”

He nudged up her chin. “I *love* both of you, Greer. I was so proud watching you play today and I want to be at your mom’s side when you win, to lift you on my shoulders and let everyone know how full of pride I am. I want to be there when you lose to offer comfort.”

She blinked and he waited, knowing that she moved at her own speed with words.

“Why don’t you apologize? Mama says when we do something wrong we have to apologize.”

“She’s right. And so are you. I’m working on it.”

“Work faster. Mama is talking about moving and I don’t want to go.” She flattened her lips, a move so much like her mother, Linc smiled.

“Greer,” Emma called out. “We have to get going.”

He lifted his gaze to find Emma at the edge of the dugout. “I got this, kid. Go on.”

A soft brush on his arm had him glancing down to Greer. “I was excited to get to call you my dad.”

His heart nearly exploded. She got off the bench and gave a small smile. “Bye, Mr. Conner. We’ll see you at the party.”

She skipped off to where her mom no longer faced him. Regardless, he didn’t take his eyes off her as Greer slipped her hand into Emma’s and the two of them walked away.

Tully walked in as he finished picking up the rest of the gear.

“Not making the kids do this?” His friend swung one of the bags over his shoulder with ease.

“Last game. You know we didn’t have to, either.” He hefted the bat bag and they walked to his truck. “Although Greer stopped by to help out for a bit.”

“Did she now?”

“Yes. What’s the look for?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.” Tully slammed the tailgate and Linc noticed that his cooler had been put in already.

He braced against the side panel and held Tully’s gaze. “She told me she’d been excited to call me Dad.”

“Shit,” he said.

“Until she said it, I never realized how much I want that. Christ, Tully. I’m a fucking idiot. I let the best thing in the world get away from me because I have trust issues and want to do it all myself.”

“What else did she say?”

“That I should apologize. That’s what Freckles tells her to do when she messes up.”

“From the mouths of babes.”

“Let’s go, man. I have a woman to win back.”

Tully pumped a hand in the air. “Finally!” He whistled and jumped into the truck, pounding on the roof. “Saddle up and let’s go get her.”

After making one last pass visually to ensure nothing had been left behind, he got behind the wheel and headed to Rock Falls and the community center where the end of season party was happening. He parked in the back, like always, and frowned when he didn’t see Emma’s car.

“She came with Dawson.” Tully hopped out and tossed him a hurry-up look over one shoulder.

“You always have my back.”

“Always will. And you can make it up to me by making me the first godfather. Not Mitchell.”

“How about I get the girl back, marry her, and have a child before you start demanding who is first.”

“I am.” Both his friends said that as one. He hadn’t even seen Mitchell come out. The three of them headed in together, laughing.

His old teammates had hung out and were taking photos and signing autographs. All had signed a waiver that photos could be posted. People drifted in and out of the cafeteria where the tables were full of chips, sandwiches—from TC’s—drinks, ice cream, and more.

Making his rounds, he congratulated the kids and spoke with parents. But no Emma. His father walked by him, giving him a look he understood all too well. He’d disappointed his old man. He’d disappointed himself far more. And if he could just track this woman down, he would make it up to her.

His father pointed at the painting of Palisade Glen, then continued on his way. For a second, he thought the man was telling him she was at the bridge. But no, Greer was still at the center, which meant her mother would be as well. Walking down the hallway, he paused outside the room he used to teach his painting class.

Sure enough, there she was. Off by herself, like normal. She didn’t push to be the center of attention and he admired that. She did what she did and didn’t ask for any recognition. At the moment, her shoulders were slumped and he hated that look on her. More so when he was the ass who had put it on her.

He rapped his knuckles on the door twice before opening it.

...

Emma hoped there weren’t any lingering traces of tears in her eyes as she turned to face whoever was coming through the door. Not that it mattered, her body tingled as it did around Linc and she had her answer before her pivot had her facing the entrance.

He looked so handsome it hurt. Linc stayed in the doorway.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine. I should get going.” She curled her fingers so they vanished inside her sweatshirt.

He didn’t get out of the way. In fact, he rested one shoulder against the frame, blocking her in.

“I was talking to Greer today after the game when she helped me pick up the gear.”

His dark gaze moved slowly over her body, taking in every inch, every curve. She didn’t doubt he saw the circles beneath her eyes as well.

“I would have explained to her why she can’t play again next year.”

He pulled away like she’d struck him. “What? No, Emma. It wasn’t anything like that. I told you she was welcome.”

An unamused snort escaped. “Right, because the magnanimous person you are doesn’t punish the child for the sins of the parents.”

His bow-shaped lips thinned and a muscle flexed in his jaw. She didn’t have the energy to do this again. Nerves were already strung taut from the underhanded comments she’d endured before Dawson arrived.

“She was telling me that I should apologize, that her mother told her that’s what someone did when they messed up.” He took a deep breath. “And I did. I fucked up in ways I never thought I would be able to accomplish.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

Music pulsed on the other side of the wall and seeped in from the doorway he *still* blocked.

“Everything, Freckles. It has *everything* to do with you.”

Damn her belly for clenching and flipping at his casual use of Freckles. “What else do you want from me, Mr. Conner? I’ve apologized, I’ve walked away, and I’ve tried to limit our interactions. If you never want me to come in, fine. I won’t.”

His face contorted as his brows furrowed. “Baby, that’s the last thing I want. I want to explain my stupidity.” A shrug. “I

can't really. I was angry and jealous and I took it out on you. I was wrong. And I apologize. God, I apologize for all of it." He yanked a hand through his hair. "Hurting you is the last thing I ever want to do."

Nope, still didn't have the energy to deal with this. "Fine. Do you mind getting out of the way?"

His small nod was jerky and hesitant. "I mind. Because if I do, you're going to run and while I don't blame you for wanting to, I need you to hear me out."

"You want me to give you the courtesy you didn't give me?"

"Yes. And I know you will because you're a far better person than I'll ever be, Freckles." He swallowed. "Greer also told me she wanted to be able to call me Dad."

Emma gasped. And he moved toward her, only to regather himself and stay put.

"I'm not going to lie and say that wasn't part of what prompted this today, but damn it, Freckles. Until I heard her say it, it didn't register how fucking much I wanted to have that honor. I *want* to be her dad. I want her to come to me for help, for scraped knees, to beat up some boy who makes her cry."

Her heart was splintering into shards. Ones that would shatter into pieces upon impact with the ground.

"But more than that, Emma Henricksen, I'm standing before you because I am truly madly, insanely, and forever in love with you. I picked that ring out thinking how perfect it was for my woman. You, Freckles. It wasn't a prop, I mean it was, but I took so long giving you one because I had to have the *right* one for you."

"You can't say that."

Her heart thundered in her chest. Her legs were like cooked noodles and tears burned her eyes, hoping for a chance to slide away down her cheeks.

"Freckles, I'm planning on saying things like that and more for the rest of our lives, if you'll give us a chance. Let me

make it up to you every damn day. Show you how much I love you and how I can't live without you."

He left the doorway to stride across the room and pull her into his arms. Face-to-face, his minty breath surrounded her.

"I love you, Emma." His lips brushed the side of her mouth. "I'm so sorry I hurt you." A touch on the other side. "Let me make it up to you, let me prove myself worthy."

"You hurt me, Linc."

He nodded. "And I'll keep apologizing for that until you believe me. I want my ring on your finger again, for real this time. For no other reason than because I love you and you love me."

God, she longed to say yes but self-preservation wouldn't let the word pass her lips. "This can't work."

"Freckles, this *did* work. I don't want to lose you. Your daughter said you were talking about moving. I'm following you."

His words punched the air from her chest. "You can't give up the center, Linc. Too many people depend on it, and on you."

"I'll hire someone to run it." He didn't let her drop her gaze. Linc cupped her face and smoothed his thumb along her lips. "You're my world, Freckles. You and that little girl."

"Can you hurry up and say yes so we can be a family, Mama?"

Linc's mouth twitched but he didn't say a word. She dug her nails into his torso as she glanced around his shoulder to find Greer with far too many adults behind her, being nosy.

"Fuck," she uttered.

"You have to stop cursing at the center." Linc's tease warmed her. His eyes drifted to her lips and stayed on them. "I want to kiss you, Freckles. Tell me I can."

"We'll discuss this later, Greer. I'll be right there."

"Not right away," he said in a not-so-subtle tone. "We have

some making up to do.”

She dug her nails in more and his purr went from his throat directly to her clit. “Behave.”

“Let me kiss you, Freckles.”

Her lips parted seconds before he closed the distance between them. The cheering behind her didn’t register. Not even when he swept her up in his arms and carried her through the gathered crowd toward his office. They didn’t make it, however. Everyone stopped them and pulled them apart.

Emma didn’t have time to be embarrassed before she was being passed around from friend to friend as they gave her congratulations. Then she was in front of Linc and he kissed her again, bending her backward until one of her legs lifted off the ground.

“Freckles?”

“Yes,” she murmured against his lips. “Of course I’ll give you another chance. I love you, Linc.”

His smile warmed her from her head to her toes. Without missing a beat, he dropped to one knee and took her hand in his. She gulped and shook her head. Linc didn’t let her pull away, instead he pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

“Emma,” he said as everyone fell silent. “I’ll never find another woman who makes me feel the way you do. A woman who always puts others before herself. A woman who loves with her entire being. I’m a jackass and no doubt an asshole.”

“Nope,” Tully supplied. “No doubt.”

Linc winked at Emma even as Dawson smacked Tully in the chest.

“There you have it, Emma. I am an asshole but more than that, I’m the man who loves you and your daughter Greer more than anything. I would move heaven and earth for you if it made you happy. I need you in my life, Emma. Both of you. Will you marry me?” He licked his lips. “Will you let *me* marry *you*?”

She dragged her tongue along her lower lip. Beyond Linc

she saw her daughter leaning against her Uncle Mitchell's leg, her small hand curved into his jeans, but her eyes were on Emma. Greer gave a smile and a tiny nod.

“Yes,” Emma said, giving Linc her full attention once more.

“Thank God,” he replied, digging into his pocket and pulling out the ring he'd presented her before.

Tears burned her eyes as she watched him slide it onto her finger. Linc pushed to his feet the second it rested where it was meant to be and kissed her once more.

“I love you, Freckles.”

Placing her hand against his cheek, her ring sparkling in the light, she smiled. “I love you, too, Linc.”

His lips on hers erased all the cheers around them as she focused on him alone.

Epilogue

Sixteen months later

“Dad!” Greer hollered over the noise of the gathered crowd milling around after the away game finished. “Did you see me?” She ran toward him, popcorn containers and dropped drink cups were kicked out of the way of her lightning-fast steps.

Linc smiled and caught the projectile of his daughter launching at him. She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and hugged hard. One he returned.

“I saw you, kid. You were amazing!”

She leaned back, grinned, then came in once more, pressing her face into his neck. “I caught it and made a double play.”

Lord, baseball was difficult to watch when it was *his* kid playing. She eased up her grip on his neck and settled into his arms as he held her with ease.

“Uncle Carlos really is a great shortstop.”

He clenched his jaw and made what he hoped was an agreeing grunt. He and Carlos Ruiz weren't best friends by any stretch but when his little girl made the move from outfield to shortstop, he bit the bullet and reached out to him, asking for pointers. The man had done more than that. He actually showed up with his wife, Ana, and his son, Mateo, who was a year older than Greer. Hell, he'd not even known the man had a child. Much less a wife.

“Meh,” he said with a grin as the man in question walked up, his arm around his slender wife. “He's okay. I think, kid, you're going to be far better than he ever will.”

Heads together, his daughter chuckled. “Of course I will. I have not only him teaching me but also you, Dad.”

“And you did well even with that challenge, Greer.” Carlos shot him a look only to grunt when his wife elbowed him in the gut. Ana was deaf but proficient at reading lips.

“Where’s Mateo?” Greer questioned.

“Over with some of his other friends,” Carlos said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

“Can I go say hi, Dad?”

“Of course, but don’t stay long. We have to get going.”

She wriggled and he set her on the ground. After taking two steps she came back and hugged Carlos. “Gracias, Tio.” A kiss on the cheek and she was gone.

Ana glanced between the two of them and shook her head before walking away, trailing in the direction Greer had bolted.

Silence stretched between them until Carlos cleared his throat.

“You’re welcome. You know, for me being the best uncle she’ll ever have.”

Linc fought a smile. “I liked you better when you avoided me. But I’ll be sure to tell Tully and Mitchell you said that.”

The man laughed and turned so they were shoulder to shoulder. A lot of people stopped to look at them and Linc got it. While getting to be a bit more common, it wasn’t every day that a current and a past professional baseball player were just hanging out at the park.

“I didn’t avoid you. I was avoiding a confrontation.”

Linc rubbed his thumb over his right eyebrow. “Whatever story you need to tell yourself.”

“You’re lucky my wife likes you.” Carlos crossed his arms.

Another snort. “You’re lucky she likes *you*.”

The man nodded sagely. “There is that. How’s Emma?”

It still grated to have his wife’s name on that man’s lips, but he swallowed his snappish response. Emma got it, he was going to be jealous until the day he died. It’s what it was going to be.

“Claiming she’s a whale and that my big-headed child has gotten too comfortable and is resting on his laurels—not

planning on coming for a while yet.”

Carlos laughed before clearing his throat and pushing his hands in his pockets. “Sorry. Date’s coming soon, though, yes?”

“Another month but she wants him evicted right away.”

“Ana was like that her last few weeks. Couldn’t get comfortable. Was cranky at everything I did and cried at the drop of a hat, making me wonder what I’d fucked up this time.”

Linc understood that. “Emma’s still working.”

He whistled. “Stubborn. I feel for her with this child. Your big head, her stubbornness. Here’s hoping he gets her looks.”

“I pray for that every day.” They watched as Greer, Mateo, and Ana began walking toward them. They signed about the game and his heart swelled for his daughter. She may not have come from his loins, but Greer was his daughter and he would beat anyone who suggested otherwise.

Mateo had begun teaching Greer how to sign so she could communicate better with his mother.

“Just a reminder, before your wife gets over here, and I have to pretend to like you again—your son better keep his hands to himself.”

Carlos laughed and when Ana walked up and signed “What’s so funny?” neither of them could stop laughing long enough to come up with a credible response.

After stopping for ice cream on the way home, Greer crashed in the back of his truck, which had a baby seat—just waiting for his newborn to arrive.

He woke Greer when they reached their house. She and Emma had moved in with him and his father weeks ago. When his father had had a heart attack. Emma said she would move in and everyone would keep an eye on him. Linc thought Greer was good for his father. She kept him active and didn’t let him wallow in his anger over being the burden he believed he was.

Emma's house had gone up for sale and he refused to take any money. They put it into a college fund for Greer and their future children.

Yes, children. He wanted a passel of them with this woman. After sending Greer to clean up, he tracked down his wife. She reclined on the porch, seated in a chaise lounge. He braced a shoulder against the wall and stared at her.

Her beauty took his breath away. Hair unbound, it settled over her shoulders. Her dress was a pink and blue floral print with three-quarter sleeves. He dragged his gaze along her bare legs as she lay resting.

Hell, he'd painted her toenails two nights ago when she'd burst into tears that she couldn't bend to get that done.

"Didn't lying on this lounge get you in the position you're in now?"

Her lips twitched but she didn't open her eyes, just moved her hand along the swell of her belly that housed their child.

"Minding my own business before being invaded by a big head?" She tipped her head and looked at him. "Yes, that sounds familiar."

He strolled toward her and bent to kiss her lips.

"Well, since you're already carrying a big head, want another?"

"Behave yourself."

He dodged her smack with ease before sitting by her head and letting her use his thigh as a pillow. "I'm trying, but I look at you, Freckles, and I'm horny. You're absolutely glowing."

"Sweat."

"Beautiful carrying my child."

"Fat and gassy."

He laughed again. "Our daughter did well today."

"And you? No cops coming by to take you down to jail?"

"One time, Freckles. That was *one* time." Linc tugged on

her hair. “Besides, he was a relatively well-behaved human today.”

She hummed. “Ana was there.”

“I kind of feel like I should defend all men at this juncture, since you’re implying that we’re unruly when our spouses aren’t with us.”

“But?”

“If I did that, you may think I actually like Carlos.”

“Heaven forbid you like Tio Carlos.”

He growled at her and tugged on her hair again. Her low moan kicked him square in the gut. Biting his lower lip, he reached out and rubbed her belly, lacing his darker hand with her pale one.

“How are you feeling, Freckles?”

“Like I’m carrying a soccer player. Or perhaps a basketball player.”

“Mitchell will be happy if it is.”

“I mean,” she sassed him, “I’m thrilled the men in my life are taking bets on what sport the children will play. Are you doing the same with their women?”

“Of course.”

“You sound positively offended I doubted that.”

He wrinkled up his nose. “Kind of am, Freckles. You should know us by now.”

She shrugged and nodded. “I know I must have been insane to think this was a good idea a second time.”

“A second time?”

“Pregnancy.”

“You, my love, are the most stunning pregnant woman I’ve ever seen. Don’t hate me for saying this but seeing you like this, carrying my child and glowing as you do, makes me feel all kinds of primitive and I want to keep you this way. I totally get the barefoot and pregnant statement.”

“Do you?” She sniffed, indignant. “Because to me, it sounds an awful lot like doghouse and couch sleeper.”

Point taken.

He pulled a necklace from between her breasts that had her wedding ring on it. The moment she'd started swelling, she'd told him she needed a chain for it. And he got her one. He kissed the back of her hand and nuzzled her chest. How could he not, it had grown spectacularly, and she nearly spilled out of the V-neck dress she was in.

“I love you, Freckles.” He kissed along the tops of her breasts.

“Linc.”

“Is that a reprimand, Freckles? Or a don't-stop-do-it-some-more? Because I'm not entirely sure. To me it was a don't-stop-do-it-some-more cry.”

Her response was to sink her hands in his hair.

Yeah, that's what he thought.

Soon enough their son would be joining them and he couldn't wait. Until then, he had a lovely wife, a fantastic daughter, and a life he didn't think he would ever have. Talk about hitting the sweet spot.



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About the Author

[Aliyah Burke](#) is a *USA Today* Bestselling author who's an avid reader and never far from pen and paper (or the computer). She is happily married to a career military man. They are owned by three Borzoi. She spends her days at the day-job, writing, and working with her dogs. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached [here](#).

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