

At **First** *Sight*



New York Times Best Selling Author
MELODY
ANNE

At First Sight

Book Three

By:

Melody Anne

Dedication

This is dedicated to Emmy, my friend, my motivator, my hero.
You're so much stronger than any other person I know.

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Romance

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Prelude

I'm doing a prelude in my books now instead of an author note because our devices skip straight to the book, and this is important for the story. This book is incredibly special for me as it's how this entire series came about. My very good friend, who works with me, is the basis for this story. Of course it's fiction, but several of the events in this book are true. We've talked about the journey she's gone through, and her husband's journey.

Again, I've fictionalized it, and I've changed the ages, but Derek did have this upbringing in his life, did lose his fiancée in a tragic accident, and did find Emmy when he was a very broken man. She stood by his side as he struggled with the guilt and heartbreak of losing someone far too young to such a tragic accident.

Emmy has a core group of friends who have unique stories of their own. I included one of those friends in this book and it makes me want to tell her story as well. I might do that someday. I changed names to protect people, of course.

There's a chapter in this book about a school shooting, and Emmy was at that school, utterly heartbroken at the loss from that shooting. Her life was shaped a lot from that event. I didn't want that event in any form glorified. Ravish is a fictional town, but it's in Oregon, and it's close to Thurston. I lived thirty minutes away from that school myself, and was utterly horrified at what had happened, but this story is about showing the heartache that these two exceptional people went through in their own journey.

The Epilogue of this book is also true. Emmy trained me for years, that's how I met her, and I remember this time well. I remember how excited and nervous her husband was at this amazing opportunity that was coming his way. I don't want to give it away here. But this chapter is almost word for word what happened. I didn't need to fictionalize it since it was great all on its own.

Most books are based on some sort of reality. This is the closest book I've ever written that's as true to reality as it gets. It's been incredibly hard for me to write because I love these two people so much and I hurt for what they've gone through. The fiction of the book is the town they live in, the friends they have in the book, and several of the experiences they go through. There's a lot of events in this book they did go through as well. The trauma and events are very much true, though maybe out of order. And the true Derek and Emmy never thought of leaving one another, no matter how much trauma they went through. A few other things have been changed, because this is fiction, of course. I hope I did them justice, and I hope they live happily ever after for the rest of their lives, because they've both suffered enough in real life,

and they are incredible people. I had full permission to write this story, though at times I kicked myself for deciding to do it because it's been incredibly tough to write. When you're writing about real people, you constantly second guess yourself. I hope I've done it right.

Prologue

Derek McConnell

It's Labor Day weekend and hot enough to fry eggs on a sidewalk. I don't mind the heat so much, but it's not quite as pleasant with all of my officer gear in place. I'm grateful for my bulletproof vest, but right now I feel like I have ten pounds of sweat on me along with my uniform and gear.

Labor Day weekend always keeps us busy. The news channels have already warned the community about all of the safety issues of a big holiday weekend, particularly this one with all of the parties going on ... and the boating activities, which of course go hand-in-hand.

I'm nowhere near the water right now. I'm in Oregon, working undercover, fighting drugs and other crime in our area. I love my job, but there are times I lose faith in all of mankind. This highway is a drug trafficker's dream, and I see the worst of humanity while doing my job. I've been hit, spit on, screamed at, called every name in the book, held people as they've died, and given up more than a few times on thinking I can make any sort of positive change. There aren't a lot of people happy to see the police coming. The profession comes with a lot of lows.

In saying this, I've also witnessed miracles, and that's what keeps me coming back to work each and every day. I might

lose a lot of people, but the ones I save make all of the bad times worth it.

My day is relatively normal, considering the holiday. I've been at work for several hours, responding to calls, counting down until I can come home to the love of my life, who's most likely at the gym or hanging with friends. Life is good. I have a great career and an even better woman to come home to.

My phone rings and I smile when I see my pal John calling. I answer on the second ring.

"Derek, it's Kelly. She's been in an accident at the river. I'm on my way to pick you up."

"What? What do you mean?" I ask, telling myself not to panic. I'm an officer. I'm very aware that accidents happen, and I know not to let emotions get in the way of providing help. This situation is surely nothing. The chill flowing through me at the fact that John is coming to get me won't go away though.

He arrives without enough information.

"Where is she?" I ask as he flips on the lights and sirens while traffic moves out of our way.

"Up the highway on the river," John says.

I didn't know she had plans to go to the river today. It isn't like we need to inform each other of all we do because we have a relationship built on trust, but still, she's over an hour out of town. This drive seems to be taking us forever.

"They're wrong. It isn't Kelly," I tell him as I lift my phone for the fourth time to call my fiancée.

“It’s her, Derek,” John says, stress marking his brow.

“No, it isn’t her,” I repeat, frustrated she won’t pick up her phone. This is all a mistake. Kelly hasn’t been in an accident. She’s home. I’m going to meet her there later and we’re going to laugh about this. She’s going to tell me I worry too much. It will all be okay. My heart’s thundering as I give myself this speech, but it’s all I can do to keep from panicking.

We pull up, and John shuts off the sirens. I feel a buzzing in my ears. I don’t think I’ve realized how loud the sirens are before today. A large blue tent is set up in the parking lot, and my heart lodges in my throat when I see Kelly’s cousin outside the ominous looking structure. She’s sobbing. I’m unable to step forward. She looks up and spots me, and her sobs grow even louder.

I feel like a zombie as I begin moving toward her. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she wails, her cries filled with apology, utter despair ... and disbelief. I look inside the tent and see a body on a gurney and my blood runs cold.

“Derek, can you step inside and identify the body?” a stranger asks. I shake my head, but I still step forward. This isn’t something I can pretend isn’t happening, as much as I want to.

I move forward, for only a brief moment looking at the woman on the gurney ... and then I give a slight smile. They’re wrong. It’s not her. This has all been a mistake. I reach out and run my hand through the woman’s wet hair. It feels different. It’s not her. A sound escapes me that I can’t process. No matter how much I tell myself it’s not her, deep

down I know it is. I shake my head. This doesn't look like her. It's then I realize why ...

Kelly's gone, her soul is *gone*. Even if my beautiful fiancée isn't here, the body lying on the table is my beloved Kelly.

I drop to my knees as my hand stays on the table while I sob. How can I live without her? Where will I go? I can't return to the home we share and walk inside only to find her gone. I can't do this. I can't live if she's gone.

Devastation flows through me, and I want to lie down next to her. My soul mate has died ... and she's taken my heart with her. I don't want to be here without her, don't want to move from this spot I'm in right here and now. I'm done.

"Derek, let's go," John says, his hand finding my shoulder. I'm numb ... so very numb. I barely shake my head.

I'm not sure how long I kneel before the empty shell of the woman I vowed to love forever, but at some point John manages to pull me away. I don't look at her again, not needing her death mask etched into my brain as my final image of her.

I walk away ... without a clue as to what I'm going to do next.

Chapter One

Emmy

Fourteen Months Later

Driving my white Land Rover with a cigarette between my fingers, the window down, the breeze blowing through my hair, and freedom in front of me makes me smile. I move along the winding McKenzie Highway, getting close to my Oregon hometown; I can't believe I'm finally back. The lush green trees lining the roads aren't only beautiful to look at, they're a reminder of the countless memories I made over the years when living in this area. It was mostly good, but I was ready to leave.

When I left this place I never thought I'd come back ... yet here I am ... and not because life's great. My sanity is being held onto by a thread, but nothing will keep me down for long. I'm here ... for now.

I pull into the parking lot of the gym, toss my cigarette on the ground, and lose my grin as nostalgia flows through me, remembering all of those early mornings when I'd drive this route with my friends before school started. The gym wasn't here then. This is new and beautiful ... and completely out of place in this small town.

It seems like only yesterday that I was a carefree teenager, but now here I am, an adult with responsibilities, burdens, and

so much weighing on my mind. I step from my vehicle and take a deep breath of the fresh river-scented air of a place I know very well.

It's been so long since I last experienced this smell, this feeling of comfort. My absence has lasted too long. I always ran when I didn't know what else to do. I'm trying to fix this about myself, but nobody's perfect.

As I step forward I have to remind myself to be thankful for every experience in my life — both big and small — that's molded me into who I am today. Despite my years away from home, none of those experiences could ever prepare me for how I feel in this moment.

When I look up I see my dad on the steps of the gym talking to ... holy hell ... is this the trainer he's been telling me about? The man is gorgeous and built like a brick house. He has muscles on top of muscles and instant lust flows through me ... something I haven't felt in a very long time. I think Dad's found a trainer ... and a playmate ... just what the doctor's ordered. This man is so my type even if I tell myself I'm not interested in men at all right now.

“Hey, Dad,” I call out and both Dad and the Greek god turn and look at me. I've missed my dad, but right now my eyes are only on the man towering over him at this moment.

“Emmy,” Dad says, holding out his arms for a hug.

I tear my gaze away from the gorgeous bodybuilder and focus on my father, who I haven't seen in a while. I give him a hug. Dad laughs.

“I hope you’re prepared to be tortured,” Dad says with a chuckle.

I was an athlete throughout my youth, and I’m doing hot yoga as an adult, but I haven’t been running in years and I haven’t lifted weights in a very long time. What in the world have I gotten myself into?

“I need to do something different in my life,” I say with a laugh I don’t feel. “Sitting on my ass doesn’t seem to be doing my abused body any good.”

“You came here, and that’s the first step,” the man next to Dad says, his lips turned up in a friendly smile. “I’m Derek. It’s great to meet you, Emmy.” I take his hand and electricity flows through me, leaving me speechless. I close my lips so I don’t drool down my chin and embarrass myself more than I’m surely doing.

“We’ll see how long I last,” I say, trying to sound confident as I mentally strip this man down and wonder how good he is in bed. With his body, I’m sure it’s otherworldly.

“There’s no time like the present. Let’s get started,” my dad says with a little too much glee. I’m wondering if Dad is a bit of a sadist. He seems entirely too pleased at this situation. I’m sure they both smell the smoke from my cigarette, which I’m quite ashamed about. Who in the heck smokes a cigarette on the way to a gym? Apparently me, even if I tell myself I’m quitting any day now.

We go inside and the sound of weights clanking, and grunts of exertion echo across the gym, providing a rhythm for us as we walk through the surprisingly crowded area to the corner in the back where no one’s working out.

Derek's strong and so tall that my head barely reaches his shoulder. He tells me what we're about to do and I try to focus, but I'm in my own head mentally stripping this man's clothes away. I bet he's phenomenal when he's horizontal.

"Let's get started," he says, and I sit down at a machine and force myself to focus, not easy to do when he's wearing shorts and a tight tank that shows off his bulging biceps and powerful pecs. I'm wearing yoga pants and a curve-hugging, long-sleeved shirt ... that I'm sort of regretting right now with the extra thirty pounds I'm currently carrying.

We continue working out and he counts down, then has the nerve to tell me to hold on for endless moments. I stop picturing him naked, and start envisioning pushing him off of a bridge. The man doesn't lose his breath as he moves with grace, his body responding to every gesture he makes with ease and smoothness. He's an explosion of energy, lifting weights three times heavier than mine, all while wearing a smile. I want to punch him, though that would most likely break my hand.

We move from one machine to the next and I'm beginning to wonder if I'm going to make it through this damn workout. Derek encourages me as he pushes, probably punishing me a little bit extra for smelling like cigarette smoke. He also seems to like cracking jokes while I'm struggling to finish my sets. I'm sort of amused ... when I can catch my breath enough to laugh.

"Why do hamburgers go to the gym?" he asks.

"Why?" I reply, my voice breathy ... and this time not from lust.

“To get better buns,” he tells me before bending over in a fit of laughter.

I roll my eyes but still smile. “Why does the fisherman go to the gym?” I spit out, knowing quite a few fishing jokes thanks to my dad.

“I don’t know,” he says, seeming shocked to not have an answer. Good. I have at least one he doesn’t know.

“Because he pulled a mussel,” I tell him, my laughter turning to a cough because I don’t have enough air to spare on laughter. Our eyes connect and I feel the attraction between us. I can also clearly see he’s not interested in pursuing it ... just as I shouldn’t be. What am I thinking? I’m not. The man’s simply frying my brain.

I get through a particularly hard set and Derek smiles, telling me I’m strong. He gently corrects my form, his glorious hands on my sweating body. Okay, maybe I won’t push him off a bridge after all. I glance up and our eyes meet for an endless moment, the connection between us growing the longer we’re together ... getting hot and sweaty.

In between sets, our eyes meet over and over again, and a connection grows between us to the point that something has to be done. Something zips between the two of us, but I don’t know what it means. I do know it terrifies me.

The workout finally ends and I sit on a bench, trying to look like I’m not dying.

“That’s not a bad first day,” Derek tells me as he hands me an ice-cold water bottle. I take it from him and guzzle the refreshing liquid.

“It’s been a while,” I say, hating how weak my voice is.

“It doesn’t matter how long it’s been, we can always start afresh on improving our lives,” he assures me.

I’m about to respond when one of his employees approaches with a phone, telling him he needs to take the call. He gives me a quick goodbye and I sit and watch him walk away. He’s equally as beautiful from behind as he is from the front.

I manage to limp my way out of the gym after telling my father goodbye, then crawl into my vehicle. I lean against the steering wheel and desperately try not to cry. I can’t move for a very long time. When my hands quit shaking, I do a very stupid thing and light another cigarette, then pull out of the gym lot. I get to my dad’s place, nearly fall out of my vehicle, and barely make it inside before I find the bathroom and manage to slide into the tub.

What’s coming next? I have no clue what I’m going to do with my life. I do know I want to see that man again ... even after all of the torture. *Should* I see him, though? That’s the question of a lifetime.

Chapter Two

Derek

It takes me over a year to go back to the river. A place that had once given me so much peace is now a reminder of everything I've lost. My friends finally talked me into hanging with them by the water. I'm not quite ready to jump into the river, which once was a daily occurrence for me, but I can sit on the shore and cast a line while enjoying a barbeque with friends. Baby steps.

The sun's brightly shining on the sparkling water, and I'm considerably more relaxed than I have been in weeks. Maybe I needed this more than I realized. If I'm here with friends, it might take away the nightmares that haunt me nearly every night.

When I lost Kelly I was a cop, which wasn't good for those I vowed to protect. I became reckless, making foolish decisions that could've cost not only my life, but even worse, the lives of innocent people. Luckily, that never happened. I got out before it was too late.

What was the purpose of living my life if I'd lost my soulmate? I do believe in fairy tales ... or at least I did before Kelly was killed. She died and took my heart with her. I thought about ending it all, jumping into the depths of the river and letting the current drag me under where she'd lost her life

... or jumping off the side of a mountain and becoming a mountain lion's dinner ... or possibly driving a hundred miles per hour on a winding road and crashing, leaving no trace of my body to be found. I'm ashamed to admit I had many of these thoughts for a long time. I refused counseling. I never went back to the house I shared with the woman I loved. I utterly lost my mind for many months. It's crazy how one person can become so essential to your very existence.

When Kelly died, I couldn't go back to the house, couldn't step through those doors knowing she'd never join me. I didn't collect my clothes, our personal items, or a single thing from there. I moved to a friend's property and stayed in his trailer, not really alive, but not dead either. I fell apart a little more each day. On rare days now, I wonder why I didn't give up then. Some days are harder than others. I'm having a difficult time finding a purpose to live.

When Kelly died, I'd been a part of the police force for thirteen years, but I walked away from that as well. I left it all. I sank into a deeper pit of despair ... then the idea of the gym came to mind.

I always took fitness seriously, loved working out, and loved training others even more. I might not have been able to fix myself, but I could put all of my focus into helping others fix their lives. Friends and family relied on me, which is the only thing that kept me going. When I came out of my initial wave of depression I cashed out my 401K and used that and my savings to build the gym I now run. I built a clientele and slowly started living again.

I'm still not close to the person I used to be, but I'm getting there. Each day that passes the struggle of climbing from my bed gets a little easier. Not many people know how much darkness surrounds me because I cover the internal pain with a smile I've perfected. At one time it had been genuine. There are days when my smile is real ... but not every day. This town has taken me in, though ... has given me a purpose, and has brought a new faith in myself and in humanity back to me.

And then, like a light out of the dark, a woman showed up on the steps of my gym ... a light shining through my nightmares. As I worked out with Emmy a few weeks earlier some of my pain ebbed. When she left, guilt ate me up.

How could I be attracted to another woman when Kelly has only been dead for fourteen months? How can I associate Emmy with light? Isn't feeling this way a betrayal to the woman I planned to spend the rest of my life with? Am I letting Kelly go by looking at another woman? Guilt ate at me for the attraction and fascination, but Emmy hasn't come back since that first and only workout. I'm both relieved and miserable at this fact.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when I hear yelling all around me.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"There's a woman on a tube who's having trouble," Micah says. Micah owns the local fishing and tackle shop and is the main culprit of getting me down to the river today. The man always wears a smile, and that has helped me find my own again.

My heart lodges in my throat as I look at the strong current and see a woman clinging to a tube as she tries to fight being taken farther away. Not again. I can't see another dead woman pulled from the water.

I don't even realize what I'm doing as instinct takes over. I throw down my fishing pole and spring into action, ripping off my shirt as I step into the cool water and jump in, swimming toward the struggling woman.

The current is strong, and it takes several minutes to reach her. She's scared as she yells, dipping below the surface before coming back up again. All of my training over the years makes my response second nature. I quickly reach her and wrap an arm around shivering body.

"Hold on to me," I tell her in a firm, confident voice. She stops yelling and wraps her arms around my waist. I have to fight the current harder as I swim back to shore. We get close and several of my friends spring into action, reaching for the woman and helping us both onto the shore.

The woman and I collapse, both of us breathing heavily as we gaze up at the sky.

"Damn, Derek, that was amazing," Booker says. Booker owns the local garage, and the man can fix anything from a fifty-year-old vehicle to one of these space cars they make today. He's been a real blessing to our small town and to me as a great friend.

"You saved her life," Micah says as he pats my shoulder.

"It was instinct," I say. I haven't wanted to go near the water in well over a year, but the second I was needed I dove

in. That shows me more than anything else that I am healing even if the process is too damn slow.

“Thank you,” the woman gasps in a scratchy voice. Something about it sounds familiar. Now that adrenaline isn’t pounding through me, I turn and look at her ... and realize it’s Emmy. Her hair’s plastered to her pale face, but there’s no doubt it’s the same woman I’ve thought too much about these past few weeks.

“Emmy?” I’m not fully believing what my eyes are showing me.

“Yes,” she replies, not quite looking at me.

“I wasn’t aware you were still in town,” I tell her.

“I just returned. It appears I like to make an entrance,” she says as she slowly sits up. I join her, my heart thundering, and I don’t think it’s about the rescue anymore.

“Are you coming back to the gym?” I ask. Of all of the things I can say, why this? Do I really *want* her in the gym? She makes me feel things I don’t want to feel. I’m not so sure it’s a good idea to keep putting her in front of me.

She shrugs. “I’m sort of a hot mess right now. I haven’t decided what I’m doing,” she tells me.

I feel an instant bond with this woman at these words. There’s pain in her eyes, pain I can certainly relate to ... pain that has nothing to do with what just happened in the river. I don’t want to relate to her trauma though. I don’t want to hurt any more than I already hurt. I don’t want to take on the pain of another person when I can’t face my own.

“I think we’re all hot messes,” I tell her with a shrug. She gives me a long, measured look.

“Well, I’m here where I didn’t think I’d ever come again ... and to make matters worse, my tail is tucked between my legs. I’m going to find work, and try to find myself again. Maybe then I can focus on my health,” she says.

I nod. “It sounds like you’re miles ahead of where the rest of us are on a daily basis,” I tell her. The connection between the two of us is so damn strong it scares the living hell out of me. I felt it every second while we were working out. I feel it even stronger now. Everything inside is telling me to run.

I’m just getting back on my feet. I have plans to survive, and none of these plans include a female ... especially a woman like Emmy ... especially *Emmy*. She’s too complicated, too messy ... and I’m too attracted. She’s a free spirit who’s floated into this town and straight into my thoughts. She’s scarred and carrying her own secrets, and I don’t think it will help either of us to crash against each other.

Then again, I’m not sure either of us has much of a choice in the matter. I have no clue what all of this means, but for now the best thing I can do is run. We chat for a few more minutes then I make an excuse and rise.

I walk away from Emmy and my friends. My head’s spinning and my heart’s still thundering. She might think she’s the hot mess, but I’m the one who’s screwed up. I’m the one who can’t handle this. It’s best if I do what I’ve been doing for over a year now ... hide away and pretend nothing affects me.

Chapter Three

Emmy

Two Years Later

Lexa, who eloped with my boss, Dillan and is an incredible woman I call one of my best friends now, is standing behind the bar laughing at me as I sit on the stool with a dramatic sigh, my head in my hands, frustration rolling off of me in waves. The bell dings, and she moves to the window then comes back and places my salad and side order of fries in front of me. She steals a fry and sits on the stool so we can chat. It's never busy in the bar at eleven in the morning.

"I can't believe you want to hang out here when you're off work," Lexa says. The bell dings again and she jumps up and grabs another plate, this one loaded with fried food. She sits down, popping a cheese curd in her mouth, panting because it's too hot.

"I like the company," I tell her, pushing my salad around on my plate.

When I arrived in town two years ago, I was carrying an extra thirty pounds and I was a mess. I've taken my health a lot more seriously this past year, and I do eat some junk food now and then, but I try to consume healthier options more than crap food. It doesn't seem to matter what Lexa consumes, she's always perfect ... jerk.

“I love working here,” Lexa says.

“That’s because you and the boss sneak off to his office every chance you can get to rattle the walls,” I tell her, feeling only a bit of jealousy ... not over her and Dillan who are absolutely made for each other, but because I want to rattle some walls of my own ... with Derek.

“How is mission Derek going?” she asks. It’s not a secret to many about my crush on the very sexy gym owner.

“I don’t know what in the heck to do. I’m so damn attracted to Derek, but I can’t read him. Some days it seems like he feels the same for me, and other days it seems like he doesn’t realize I even exist. I’ve never had a problem making the first move, but it’s different with him. I can’t read the man,” I say.

“This sucks, Emmy. I personally think he likes you, but he’s tough to read. What have you noticed when the two of you are around each other? Is he making eye contact with you? Does he start conversations? Does he seem interested? I’d say yes; I’ve seen him give you some looks in here, but how about when you’re at the gym together?” she asks.

“I totally chickened out on signing up with him again. Maybe I need to take the bull by the horns and sign up. He has openings online. I wouldn’t have to do it in person. I don’t know why I’m such a chicken around him. He does make eye contact. Our gazes have connected across a room, and I swear there’s actual electricity zipping between us. However, in saying that, each time we’ve spoken, it’s been nondescript and friendly.”

Lexa chuckles. “Friendly isn’t bad.”

“Yes it is,” I counter. “I want passionate, not friendly. Friendly is what I have with you and Micah and every other member of this town. I want him to rip my damn clothes off, not ask how my day’s going. He touches me sometimes, just a light grazing of his fingers on my arm or back, but that can be considered nothing more than a friendly gesture as well.”

My salad is the least interesting thing I’ve ever seen. I reach over and take one of Lexa’s cheese curds and my mouth waters as I pop it in. Eating healthy sucks, especially working in a place like this bar that has absolutely delicious food.

“I think you need to step it up and flirt a lot more. Get up into his face and see how he responds. If he seems interested, that can definitely help you know what to do as the two of you move forward. If he doesn’t react to it, then maybe it’s time to move on,” Lexa suggests.

“I don’t know how to move on in a town this small, especially when I haven’t been interested in anyone but him since I came back. Do you really think I should ramp it up?”

Lexa thinks on this for a minute as she chews on an onion ring. “Well, I think it all depends on how much effort you’re willing to put into this. You’ve made subtle hints to him for years now, but you also haven’t spent a lot of time with him. You could go straight out and invite him on a date, nothing big, but maybe a lunch date or coffee outing at the bookstore. Maybe it’s better to get both of you out of your comfort zones.”

I laugh. “His comfort zone is the gym, and mine’s a cowboy bar. Maybe we aren’t a match at all,” I tell her.

“Meet in mutual territory then. If you don’t want to ask him out, you could be a little more subtle, though that doesn’t seem to be getting you anywhere. You can keep smiling, keep giving him longing glances and keep the conversation boring, or you can go out on a limb and let him know you’re interested. Maybe he’s scared like you are.”

“I used to be so damn confident until my ex-husband ruined that. Now I’m afraid to come on too strong, but at the same time I want to make sure he knows I’m interested in something with him. I’m not sure what that means, I just know he’s been on my mind for two years straight and maybe we should do something about it.”

“You can also show up at activities he does without being a stalker,” she says with a laugh. “There isn’t a lot going on in this town so that won’t look suspicious. Plus, you can ask your friends for some help and have us all drop hints to him. It can be a town matchmaking game that I’m sure everyone will want to be a part of. You could flirt with Micah or Booker and see if he’s jealous. Or you can be bold like the woman I know so well. You’re gorgeous, Emmy, and you’re fun and incredible. He’d be lucky to have you.”

I give her a grateful smile. “We all have skeletons. I’m just good at hiding mine and portraying an unafraid woman.”

“We’re all scared. Heck, you know my ex came to town and tried to beat the crap out of me. We can overcome our pasts though and have beautiful futures. I’m happier now than I’ve ever been.”

“I love that you and Dillan are such a perfect fit.”

“Me too. I can’t imagine my life without him,” Lexa says.

“That’s good, because it will never happen,” Dillan says, making her jump when he comes up behind her and leans in, kissing her cheek as he rests one hand on her shoulder, then reaches down and grabs a chicken strip with the other.

“Hey, get your own,” she says with a laugh when he reaches for more food.

“I ordered, but it’s taking forever,” he says, snatching a cheese curd and eating it quickly.

“You think ten seconds is too long,” she tells him.

“You two disgust me with how cute you are,” I tell them as I spear my boring lettuce and chew.

“We hear that a lot and we don’t care,” Dillan says, making me laugh.

“So, are you going to sit here all day or are you going to do something about this?” Lexa pushes.

I grab my phone and pull up Derek’s website. “I’m doing something about it.” My eyes light up when I see he has an opening in forty-five minutes. I click it before I can change my mind. Once it’s booked, I turn my phone and show Lexa who immediately claps.

“Thatta girl,” she says.

“Nice. Going to work out?” Dillan asks.

“Hopefully in more ways than one,” I tell my boss, giving him a wink. He looks confused as Lexa and I laugh. “I better get changed.”

I leave the bar and rush home. Everything is within walking distance in this town, which I really love. I have a car, but I

rarely use it. It doesn't take long to put on yoga pants so I pace for a bit before I leave the house again.

I walk with determination to the gym. Hiring Derek might not be the most subtle thing I've ever done, but he *is* a trainer and I *do* want to get in shape. Plus, I'm done hiding. I've kicked myself for too long, and I've never been a woman who doesn't go after what she wants.

There's a serious attraction between Derek and me. It's been clear from the first time we met. We've both been seriously screwed up for so long that I'm not sure either one of us know how to live in the real world anymore. I'm about to change that. I'm doing what I want and I'm rediscovering the confidence I've been blessed with my entire life. I can do this.

I was in a horrible place when I first came back to town. I went through a terrible, messy divorce and I didn't have room in my heart for anyone as a friend ... and certainly not as a lover. That's all behind me now, or at least I hope it's behind me. I'm a new woman, and today is the first day of the rest of my life.

Excitement fills me as I walk through the gym doors. I love this place. I've watched Derek from afar for years, having boring, short conversations. I see the façade he puts on for all of Ravish to see. I also see past it. I see the deep, dark corners of his heart. I've managed to do some healing, so I'm strong enough now for him to lean on me. I want to know what hurt him, and I want to know what he's hiding from. I want ... I don't know *exactly* what I want. I do know I'm not running, though.

I came armed to this training session. My outfit is cute and even though I'm coming after this man, I'm going to play it cool ... or at least give a try at acting unaffected. I vow though that if he doesn't make the first move, then I'm going to do it. If he rejects me then I have my answer and I can get on with my life. Good luck being attracted to any other man after having my eyes set on this one for so long.

Chapter Four

Derek

I watch as Emmy arrives inside the gym, immediately captivated by her presence in the room. She's wearing a tight tank and yoga pants that leaves nothing to the imagination, perfectly accentuating her figure and highlighting her dark wavy hair as she moves toward me. Her face is glowing, her skin radiant and smooth, and her eyes are sparkling.

I can't help but make comparisons to the first time I met her when she was a bit of a mess. I was attracted to her then, and now the pull is so great I'm not sure I can resist. Back when we first met, she was anxious, sad, and could barely look me in the eyes. She has no problem gazing at me now. I'm beyond impressed with the transformation she's undergone in such a short period of time.

"Hi, Derek, I guess two years later for session number two isn't bad," Emmy says as she stops a few feet from me.

I lean a little closer. "I don't smell smoke this time," I tell her.

"That was a bad time for me. I've given up the cancer sticks," she says, pleasing me. I'm a bodybuilder so of course I don't like cigarettes. However, I try not to judge what other people do in their lives. What someone wants to do with their body is their business, but when I'm their trainer I like to make

sure they get the full benefit of what I can give them ... which I can't do if they're destroying themselves the second they leave the gym.

“Good. Training should be enjoyable *and* productive. It hurts in the beginning, but our bodies are made for this. Today we'll start out with a nice warm-up and some light aerobics, then we'll build up the intensity.”

We need to get moving before I scratch all of this and simply grab her hand and pull her into my back office. I've desired this woman for so long I can't remember a time I didn't want her. It's increasingly more difficult to squash this urge when it comes to her. It's been a long time since I was with a woman, and even longer since I was attracted to one on this cosmic level. Will I do something about it? I have a feeling it's quickly growing out of my control.

“I want you to whip me into shape. I used to be an active athlete. It's been a long time, and I'm tired of being tired,” she says.

“I've been there. Training is what I do best. I'm also here to help you reach any and all goals you have. What's your main objective?”

The look she gives me makes my blood heat. I have a feeling the desire she feels for me might be as strong as what I feel for her. Should I say something? No. Not now. This gym is sacred to me, and I don't mix professional and personal in these walls. I've never considered it ... until now.

After a long pause, Emmy answers. “I want to tone up, strengthen my core, and build my muscles again. I don't want

to enter competitions, but I want to see differences in my body.”

“These are great goals, and we can certainly reach them.” We move over to my stretching area and the two of us loosen our bodies with a series of stretches. Then we move to the treadmills and set a light pace for ten minutes.

“I can breathe this time,” she says with a laugh. Her voice is naturally husky, making me think of a whole other workout I’d like to do with her.

“Let’s do some burpees and see if we can lose some of that breath,” I tell her. I realize my words as soon as I say them and I have to turn away from her as a bit of color highlights her high cheekbones. Damn, this woman is exceptionally hot.

“Yea, my favorite,” she says with a chuckle and a bit of sarcasm.

“Don’t worry, no one loves burpees. Let’s do this. On three, jump down on the floor and get into a pushup position.” She does it, her form perfect. “One ... two ... three. Now, explode up to your feet and raise your hands high.” She executes it perfectly. “Again.” This time I join her. We do a dozen of these and we’re both losing our breaths. Maybe I’ll exhaust us so much we won’t think about sex anymore ... but I highly doubt it.

“I’m feeling the burn now,” she huskily says as she grabs her water bottle and guzzles. I take a moment and cool myself off as well. I regularly train with my clients, but my heart’s beating far more out of control with Emmy than it’s ever done before. It has nothing to do with the burpees we’ve just finished.

“I’m not in as bad of shape as I was last time, but it’s still hard,” Emmy admits.

“It’s always harder in the beginning. If you’re a natural athlete, you know how quickly you’ll see progress though. The secret is consistency. It’s very much worth it.”

“With you as my trainer, I have all of the motivation I need,” she says, staring into my eyes for a solid few seconds. I suddenly want to dump the water bottle straight over my head because I’m on fire.

I laugh as I break eye contact. “Don’t think you can throw me off so I won’t push you,” I tell her. “I am good though, so yes, you’ll be motivated. Let’s do another round of burpees.”

She groans, but she’s right at my side as we do another dozen burpees, both of us sweating and breathing heavy when we finish.

“Whoo, you aren’t going to make this easy on me, are you?” she asks, wiping her brow.

“I want to make sure you’re getting your money’s worth.” I frown, not liking the sound of this. I don’t want her to pay me, which is crazy since this is my job. I rarely have an open slot anymore as I’m good at what I do and a lot of people want personal training.

“Well, if you’re going to work me this hard, I’m going to need a lot of ... motivation,” she says, giving me a sultry look that has me shifting on my feet. She’s flirting. If I was doubting it before, there’s no question now.

After only a brief hesitation I give her a smile. “Don’t worry, I’m here to help. Think of me as your very own

personal motivator.”

“How about my own cheerleader?” she says with a chuckle.

I do something I don’t ever do, and place my hands on her hips and lift her from the floor before either of us think about it. She easily goes above my head, laughing after the initial shock.

“Rah, rah, go team, go,” she says as she throws her arms high, making several heads turn our way and laughter to ring out in the gym.

I set her down, shaking my head. What is this woman doing to me? “Okay, enough playtime, let’s do one more round of burpees, then move to the weights.”

“Got it, but be prepared to do some serious cheering when we’re finished,” she warns.

“I’ll bring the pompoms next time. Now quit hesitating,” I tell her. Luckily this last set takes both of our breaths away so we aren’t able to flirt for a few minutes.

We move on to free weights and lift for about twenty minutes as she concentrates on her form and pushes harder than she most likely has done in a long time. It doesn’t matter how much I watch her, the longer it goes on, the more impressed I am with her.

“You have great muscle memory,” I tell her. “Remember to keep your core tight. Your form is perfect. We don’t want any injuries today or it will set you back.”

“Got it,” she says, giving me a playful salute. “Are you this involved with all of your clients ... worrying so much about their ... form?”

I can't help it, I laugh again. She makes the very air around us feel lighter. "I care about all of my clients' forms," I assure her. "I've never done a cheer with a client before, though."

"Well, I suggest you keep it up because I'm going to be sore, but I feel better than I have in a very long time."

"That's what I like to hear. Don't get too comfortable yet, though, because we have a lot more work to do before we call it a day."

"I'm ready for it all. Don't hold back," she says.

"Thatta girl. Come on, let's finish this last set of weights, then we'll take a small break, do a cool down, and finish with more stretches."

"Last set. I've got this," she says.

"You sure do." I remind her to keep her form tight and to breathe through it all. I've pushed her hard today, and I'm not sure if it's more for her or for me. I'm trying to burn myself out as well so I don't grab her again. Why is it so hard to keep my hands off of this woman?

We finish the weights and she beams at me. "I can already feel myself getting stronger," she says as she guzzles more water. She's refilled her bottle twice.

"This attitude will get you to your goals in no time at all. Keep on pushing yourself and there's nothing you won't be able to do," I assure her.

"What's that saying you're always putting on your social media feed?" she asks, before grinning. "Oh yeah, *keep hammering.*" She laughs.

“I’d rather be a hammer than a nail,” I tell her.

“There’s nothing wrong with nails. They cut through some hard wood,” she tells me with a look at my body. I have to scold my body so no *wood* responds to her flirtatious look. This is ridiculous. She’s flirting, but nowhere near over the top. I’m responding like a horny fifteen-year-old boy.

We start our cool down and she grins at me. “I really do appreciate your attitude and all of the encouragement.”

“Of course. You’re a natural athlete, Emmy, so this will get better and better with each workout.”

We cool down for fifteen minutes, making our workout thirty minutes longer than our session is supposed to be. This is all on me, but I’m not ready to let her leave yet. We spend another fifteen minutes stretching our bodies. I might help her stretch her legs a little too much. Some of these stretches are quite sexual, something I’ve never noticed before doing them with Emmy.

To tell the truth, I’m noticing a lot of things about her I haven’t noticed about any others. She’s gotten beneath my skin, and I’m not sure I have the power to push her out. To be honest, I don’t want to push her away.

I have no idea why I’m drawn to her, but she feels like home. The thing is, home is a very scary place. I once heard someone say that when you meet someone that feels like home, it’s actually your inner child recognizing trauma and finding familiarity in knowing how to connect with another person. My own personal childhood was survived ... not nurtured. I have to be careful about who I can trust. Is Emmy dangerous? Or is the connection I feel toward her the danger?

I'm unsure what's going on, but I've connected with this woman in a way I haven't experienced before ... not even with Kelly. What does this mean? Guilt ... I have incredible guilt for feeling this way.

"Let's go get a drink. You worked hard today and you need to put in some serious protein and carbs," I tell her. This is certainly a service I don't offer to any of my other clients. I tell them to refuel, but I don't offer to do it with them. We're stepping into overfamiliarity real quick ... but I can't stop.

Even though I have an overwhelming urge to keep spending time with Emmy, it scares the living hell out of me. It still doesn't stop me from walking by her side to the nutrition bar though. I like her at my side too much to pull away. Even though I'm scared, being with her comforts me. Maybe I need healing but won't admit it. I might even need closure from my rocky past and the trauma of what I went through.

I hate having these thoughts, I hate how weak it makes me feel. I'm not a fragile man; I'm strong. Anyone who looks at me can see my physical strength. I wonder how many people out there look strong ... but have been killing themselves on the inside while trying to perfect the outside.

"I hate to admit this, but I think I'll be beyond sore tomorrow," Emmy says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I smile at her. "We might've pushed a bit too much today," I admit.

She laughs. "I want to be pushed. I can't seem to do it on my own. I could've told you at any time it was too much. I want this."

Her look tells me she wants more than fitness. She's reaching out and all I have to do is accept the offer. Why is it so hard to do that? Neither of us are in a relationship, so what's wrong with being together? It doesn't have to be more than friendship and sex.

We don't sit too long at the nutrition bar before we separate. I'm both relieved and filled with longing as I watch her walk away from me. I'm in trouble. That's the only thing I know for sure right now.

Chapter Five

Emmy

My body aches. It's been two days since my intense workout with Derek. I wanted to be pushed, and I'm certainly feeling it now. I've taken long walks to try to ease the soreness, but I'm still grateful that I don't have another appointment with him for a week. The man is busy and his schedule's full. It was simply a fluke that I got right in the first time. I made a first move on this man I've had a crush on for what feels like forever ... but I don't want to push it, so now I'm pouting at home, wishing I was with him.

This is absolutely ridiculous. I'm a confident, strong woman, and I turn weak and pathetic when it comes to him. I wish I could be stronger. Give it time. If it's meant to be between the two of us, then it will all work out. If it's not, then we'll both go our separate ways and be just fine.

Derek: *How are you feeling?*

My heart thuds as the text message comes in. I wait a full minute before responding, not to play games, but because this man has incredible power over me, and I need to be careful. I'm in too deep already. Keep it casual. Keep it casual. Keep it casual. I take a meditative breath before typing my response.

Emmy: *I'm hurting like hell. There's no point in lying.*

Derek: *Have you been walking?*

Emmy: *Yes, but I could probably push it a little more.*

I don't add that there's a certain workout I wouldn't mind doing with him no matter how sore I am. I'm sure I'd forget all about aches and pains if he was making me think of other more erotic things. There's a longer pause from him this time and my nail is between my teeth as I wait.

Derek: *I have some time open right now. Do you want to take a hike?*

I smile as this message comes in, filled with joy. No amount of pep talking helps with dampening the hope this message gives me. I could play it cool and tell him I'm busy, but that's the last thing I want to do.

Emmy: *Where are you thinking?*

Derek: *I have a favorite place about an hour away. It's not an easy hike, but the view from the top is well worth it.*

My heart thuds out of control. He not only wants to go on a hike, but he wants to ride together to get there. I think that's what he's saying, but I'm no longer guessing so I lay it out for him.

Emmy: *If you're driving, then I'm up for it. I'm too sore to drive that far.* I add an emoji to the end to let him know I'm keeping this lighthearted.

Derek: *Can you be ready in fifteen minutes?*

My grin is so big it hurts my cheeks. This is progress. I don't know what will happen, but it's certainly growth. Maybe it's nothing more than going on a hike ... but maybe he wants me as much as I do him.

Emmy: *Give me thirty please. I'm going to shower and try to loosen my muscles.*

Derek: *Done. See you soon.*

I drop my phone and slowly climb off the couch. Dang, I'm stiff. I move to the bathroom and stand under the shower for a solid ten minutes before getting back out. It does loosen my muscles, but not nearly enough. Getting outside and walking will help a lot. Of course we're going to be in the vehicle for an hour, so I'll be stiff all over again before we begin. Adrenaline will keep me moving though. I'm excited to be out with the man who's on my mind too much.

He arrives in exactly thirty minutes. I open my door with a smile and step out, only limping slightly.

"I guess I did make you sore," he says with a chuckle as he moves to my side and opens the passenger door of his truck. I cringe as I pull myself inside. I'm not sure I'll be able to walk at all after this hike that he says isn't easy.

Our conversation is light on the drive to the mountain. The closer we come to the place, the quieter he gets. I'm not sure what this means. There seems to be something about this town

he doesn't like. Then again, maybe I'm overanalyzing everything right now because of my own securities.

"Mount Pisgah?" I ask as we find a space in the full parking lot.

"It's great," he assures me. I gingerly climb from his truck and we move to the head of the trail. Several people are coming and going, all looking sweaty, but wearing smiles. Maybe this won't be so bad.

We start the steep hike up a gravel road, and in about three minutes I realize the hell I've signed up for. He chats a little, but I'm giving one word responses as I try not to look like I'm about to die. Within ten minutes I'm not sure I'll make it. We're going straight up. There's no break at all. How long is this damn hike? Is this worth it? My attraction to him certainly isn't at the forefront of my mind as he pushes me on the hike I'm sure is leading straight to hell.

We get through the initial steepness and see a bench I desperately need to take advantage of. I haven't complained once so far, but I stop, pretending to take in the gorgeous scenery surrounding us. In all reality I don't give a crap about the view. I'm simply trying to take one full breath. I'm in much better shape than I was a couple of years ago, but I'm not even close to running up this damn mountain like I'm seeing others doing. Derek isn't even breathing hard ... bastard.

"What do you think?" he asks with a smile that makes me want to punch him in the face.

"It's great," I lie.

He laughs. "It's tough, but good for the soul."

I barely manage to hold my words back. Two minutes later we're off the gravel and on a trail, still just as steep. We go up and up and up until I'm sure we'll reach the clouds at any moment. Why do people do this for fun? Probably because they're gluttons for punishment.

The only good thing about this hike is being at his side. I like being with Derek, like being pushed. Maybe he's lost in his own thoughts, thinking about life and whatever issues he's currently dealing with.

We finally make it to the top of the mountain where a sculpture stands. Everyone who comes up here moves past it and hits their hand on the top. I feel wind against me as a man comes seemingly out of nowhere, running by us, jumps high in the air, lands on top, then jumps back down again ... all while wearing a smile.

"Hey, Cam," Derek says.

"Hey, Derek, good to see you. It's been a while," Cam says.

"I've been busy with the gym," Derek replies. He turns to me. "Emmy, this is my friend, Cam. Cam, Emmy."

"Nice to meet you."

"Great to meet you. This is the best mountain," Cam says. "I can't stay, gotta get back to work." With that, he turns and begins running away.

"He didn't even look out of breath," I say.

Derek laughs. "He runs this mountain at least once a day," Derek replies.

“Runs?”

He laughs again. “Yep, runs. He’s a beast. I used to train him regularly, but only his arms. I got into a hole, but I’m climbing back out and will start training him again. Cam runs several marathons a month, sometimes multiple ones in a week, so he doesn’t do leg workouts.”

“That’s crazy,” I say.

“He’s a world-class bowhunter so all of his training is to be in shape for hunting.”

“Nice,” I say, then focus on the sculpture. “What’s the story with this?”

“This doubles as a memorial and geological history lesson. During the solstice, light shines through the holes in the base. The sculptor calls it the Mt. Pisgah Sighting Pedestal. It was commissioned by the Kesey family of Pleasant Hill as a memorial to their son, Jed Kesey, who was killed in 1984 along with another University of Oregon wrestler while traveling to a meet in Washington. The sculpture was installed and dedicated in October, 1990.”

“That’s tragic.”

“The sculptor is Pete Helzer who has many of his works featured in this area. Pete was honored to do this sculpture for Ken Kesey, who wrote the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. The orientation of the table shows the area surrounding Mt. Pisgah including the valley where the Kesey home is located in the east.”

“Beautiful,” I tell him as I run my hand along the mountains on the top of the pedestal. I then move and take in

the beautiful views of the Willamette Valley. This is certainly a difficult hike, but Derek's right, it's well worth it. How lucky are we that we live in such a stunning area?

"What makes this mountain so special?" I ask.

He glances at the beauty surrounding us. "There's something great for the soul in being outdoors. We're not meant to hide in darkness ... but to flourish in light. Oregon might have a lot of cloudy days, but I see past the haze to the blue skies beyond."

I think over his words for long moments and nod. "I agree with you."

We look around for a while before we make our way back to the trail and down the mountain, which is much easier than our hike up. We talk more, and I can feel Derek's anxiety. I have no idea what's going on with him, but I *feel* his struggle.

Is this the usual pain he deals with, the trauma he holds so tightly to? Is there anything I can do about it? Can he trust me enough to lean on me? I'd like to be his person, but I'm not sure how to assure him I'm trustworthy.

He surprises me when he grabs my hand, stopping us as we're moving. He looks in my eyes and I see a mixture of pain and frustration behind the stunning depths of his gaze.

"Stick with me — this will get better, I promise," he says.

I'm not sure what he's saying, what he's thinking. It seems he can feel my frustration and doubt about whether I'm strong enough to take this journey with him. But it also seems that he sees something more between us. He's not giving a definition of what that might be, but I don't need labels ... I just need

hope that at the end of the hell we'll rise to heaven. I give him a smile and don't say anything as he holds my hand on the way back down.

The weather shifts, growing windy and cold, but before we make it to the bottom, the sun peeks through. It's cold, but this ray of sunlight seems to tell me we can make it through this; there's always sunshine right behind the storm ... there are always blue skies just beyond our reach.

Emotion is rolling through him as he looks at me again, a deep desperation in his eyes. "I can't stand being held down by grief. I don't want to keep feeling this," he says. I'm shocked that this strong man is showing me such vulnerability. I know his story, but he hasn't shared it with me yet. I want him to share. I want to be strong enough to take on some of the burdens he carries.

I turn him around so he can see the sunshine. "Breathe, Derek. Feel the wind, feel the sharpness of the cold in the air, feel the warmth of the sun. You're alive and you're here. Make a choice to start feeling life again. I'm here with you ... and I'm not going anywhere." I hope I can keep this promise. I hope I'm strong enough to face the storm trying to pull us apart before we ever have a chance to begin.

He nods and we hold hands the rest of the way down the mountain, our conversation light and free. Back at his truck, he lowers the tailgate and helps me climb up. He pulls me to his side, and we stay right here, laughing, talking, ripping down more barriers between us. We don't leave until the sun sinks in the sky.

It might not be a perfect moment for everyone, but it's ideal for me. It's a beginning; it's what we've needed to break through this initial hesitation in what we are to each other. I'm sad to leave, sad to go back to the real world. I like this place in nature with him. Maybe if we can push the real world out for long enough, then we'll have a chance for something great.

Chapter six

Emmy

I'm nervous as I walk to Safe Haven Bookstore. I got a call from Ebony, who I haven't heard from in years. She wants to see me. She used to be one of my best friends, but we lost contact over the years. There are many reasons for this, but no matter how much time passes, I still love her. No matter what happened in her life, I still care. We took different paths, but we're both beautiful and unique in our own ways.

"Emmy!" I turn and my eyes fill with tears as I see Ebony walking toward me with her arms out. I walk straight to her, and we embrace; I don't want to let go. We finally pull apart and I take a good look at her. She's aged from a rough life. We both have our own personal demons. I have a feeling hers are worse than mine.

"Let's grab some coffee and sit down," Ebony says.

"I have a favorite table in the back of the store that will give us privacy."

"Perfect."

We get our drinks, Mattie talking a mile a minute as she makes them, and then we move to the back of the busy shop to get away from the other patrons.

"It's been too long," I tell her.

She sighs. “I know. You wouldn’t believe my life if I told you.”

“I’m the least judgy person you’ve ever known. You can tell me anything.” I reach out and grasp her hand. Tears fill her eyes before she looks down.

“Do you remember how we met?” she asks.

“How could I forget?” I say with a laugh. “I remember you from ten years old when we were in Sunday school together. You had this beautiful dark auburn hair and adorable freckles that I was so envious of. Even with all of that, though, and this perception of innocence, there was something about you that made me keep looking.”

“That’s because you were incredibly intuitive as a child. You always picked up on unspoken energy and vibes. I was in awe of you as a child. I knew you could see into my very soul. You would watch all of us, never getting too close to those you knew were ... dangerous.”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t afraid of you,” I assure her.

She laughs. “I was dangerous. I didn’t know it then, but I was.” She sighs. “We went to different elementary schools, and often found each other competing from different teams. We weren’t exactly rivals, but we instinctively hated each other on the field.”

I wince. “Well, maybe a little, but that all changed our junior year of high school when we became teammates on the varsity softball team. We made a real connection,” I say. “I loved your champagne 380Z. You were fast, just like your car.” I give her a genuine smile.

“I was known as the girl next door. My parents loved me, my coaches loved me, and the guys all thought I was untouchable. I was even a 4.0 student.” She says this like it was all a lie.

“How couldn’t everyone love you? You were glamour personified with perfect white teeth, stylish outfits, complete with an elegantly tied scarf around your slender neck or wrapped in your hair. Your image was always flawless.”

“All of that was a disguise. What was happening on the inside was pure darkness,” she admits.

I’m shocked.

“What do you mean?” I ask. The child in me, who backed away from her then, makes me want to step back now. I’ve known this woman for too long and there’s nothing in her that would want to hurt me ... I’m *almost* sure of this.

“While everyone thought I was a perfect angel in a perfect family, I was seriously abused by a person when I was a child. It lasted for years. I never spoke about it, not even to my parents. I thought it was my fault. I buried this pain inside of me for years, thinking I’d beaten it. It was slowly burning though. I tried to deny it, tried telling myself I was fine, but I was secretly sabotaging my life.”

“Oh, Ebony,” I gasp. How did I not know about this from someone I considered one of my best friends for most of my life?

She doesn’t look me in the eyes. “While everyone thought I was a sweet, perfect teen, I was seeking out boys even then, having sex in the back of vehicles, giving head to strangers

like it was a pastime event, and letting college age boys do whatever they wanted with me, sometimes hurting me, always humiliating me, which I thought I deserved because I was so broken. I didn't look at my body as my own, but as a tool to get what I wanted."

I'm shocked speechless by this. No one knew, especially not me. Did her parents know? I don't want to ask. It's like I never knew this woman at all. How many people out there have secret lives none of us truly know about? Maybe more than I realize.

"When I left for college to attend engineering school I quickly found myself in another abusive relationship. I hid that from the world as well."

"I remember visiting you," I tell her, filled with so much sadness that I didn't do more to help my friend when there was a chance to do so.

She shakes her head. "None of this is on you, Emmy. I'm simply telling you my story. I need to tell someone who won't share it, someone who will remember I wasn't always a monster."

"You aren't a monster," I assure her.

"That's debatable. You called me and said there was something in my voice you weren't sure about so you drove the four hours it took to get to me. I couldn't hide my living conditions when you showed up at the door."

I'm sad as I remember that visit. "I walked in and could tell abuse was happening. There were holes in the walls that were obviously from someone fisting through them over and over

again. I tried to talk you into coming with me, into leaving. You wouldn't go. I felt horrible driving away the next day, wondering if I'd ever see you again."

"I wasn't ready to leave then. I'm not sure I was ever going to be ready. I felt I deserved the abuse, deserved to be treated as less than human. There's some place deep inside of me that knows what happened to me was wrong, but when you live with the pain for as long as I have you don't know how to pull yourself out of it."

"We went two years without seeing each other after that," I tell her. I can't admit I moved on, I couldn't focus on what was happening to her because I was a mess myself. There wasn't room for me to try to help solve anyone else's problems.

"What I knew about you, though, was that no matter how much time passed, you were there the minute I called. I finally came back to town and called because I needed a place to live. I lied to you and told you I graduated. I was actually one math class short of getting my degree. One freaking class short and I never took it. I lied and still managed to get jobs as a civil engineer. I learned quickly that no one ever checks. I worked a long time with no one following up on that."

She's once again shocked me with this news. "It's never too late. You could take that class and have the diploma on your wall," I tell her.

She shakes her head. "I don't care enough to do that. I haven't cared in a very long time."

This makes me so dang sad. "Well, you did move in with me and worked as a waitress at the airport restaurant. You enjoyed that," I remind her.

“I loved it there ... until I met Mari. He was tall, dark, and handsome and the man had game. I fell for him hard! What I didn’t know at the time was that he was in town recruiting young women.”

“For what?” I ask. I remember Mari well. I didn’t like him from the start. I didn’t know why, but he gave me the creeps and I stayed far from him.

“He went to various college towns to find naïve, broken young women to take to Vegas ... and hand over to a pimp.”

“Wait! What?”

She finally looks me in the eyes. “I wasn’t working for an engineering firm. Each time I called you talking about my work, I was lying. I didn’t want you to know the truth of what I was doing.”

“I’m not sure I want the truth now,” I tell her. My heart’s breaking more and more the longer this conversation continues. I don’t know why she’s telling me. I want to run away ... but I won’t. I refuse to run again.

“The real truth is I was being inducted into the underground world of prostitution. I started as a stripper. I paid the strip club a percentage of my earnings. I started turning small tricks with guys from the club. I was a working girl. The next step was becoming a call girl. The pimp would send me out to turn tricks at a certain location. Some of the guys wanted to do nothing but have a beautiful woman on their arm. Some men wanted to do horrible and unimaginable things to me, or have me do those things to them. Month after month I lost more and more of myself, sinking into a pit that grew wider and wider.

The walls were too smooth for me to ever have a chance to climb back out.”

I go white as I remember a call that had come in years ago. She nods as if realizing what I’m thinking about.

“Some guy called me.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t know how he got my number, didn’t understand who he was,” I say.

“I know.” She’s so defeated.

I’d answered the call from an unlisted number to hear a man screaming at me asking me, where the fuck my friend was. I demanded to know who he was. He then screamed, saying she’d stolen his car and had been gone for days. I told him I didn’t know and demanded to know who he was talking about. He hung up on me.

“You called that night, crying, telling me everything would be okay. I heard that same voice in the background screaming at you. Before I could say anything you hung up ... you were gone.”

“We were twenty-two at that time and this was too big for you to take on, and I was so far gone at that point there was nothing that could be done to steer me in another direction.”

“I went to your parents and told them all I knew, crying that I couldn’t seem to help. They called you and demanded you come home.”

Ebony gives a mirthless laugh. “Greedy, my pimp, wasn’t going to allow me to fly home to see my parents. He owned

me. Once you're a part of that world it isn't easy to get out. He knew there would be hell to pay though, so he finally agreed to drive me home to see my parents so they didn't send in the cops. He warned me he'd be back on Monday to pick me up. He also told me if I said anything to them about what was happening he knew where they lived, he knew where *you* lived. I had no doubt if I tried to run he'd kill you all."

"You acted so normal on that visit," I tell her. "I could see changes in you, but you didn't seem afraid."

"I put on one hell of a façade for my parents and you. I wanted everyone to know how happy and healthy I was. Then Greedy came back on Monday and took me back to Vegas."

"Where were you for the three days?" I ask.

"It was a trick gone bad. I was drugged, taken hostage by another pimp and prostitute. They wanted me all to themselves to do with what they wanted. When Greedy found out, he was furious. This is a major breach in the prostitution world." She gives a humorous laugh. "Yeah, pretty disgusting what rules there are in this world. Men can beat us nearly to death and that's okay, but another pimp better not try to steal your girl."

"Did it get any better when you got back from your visit home?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"No, Greedy beat me so bad with a belt I couldn't walk for days. He put me in the tub and held me under for so long I passed out. I woke up in bed and when I was strong enough I drugged the bastard, then sat on his chest holding a knife over his heart. I realized I could kill him right then and there with no remorse. I toyed with the idea for a while, but finally moved off of him. We eventually came to an agreement that

I'd make him a certain amount of money and he'd let me visit my parents whenever I wanted to. It took me years, but I eventually earned my way out of Vegas. I might have left the city, but my soul didn't come with me."

"Why are you finally telling me all of this?" I ask.

She smiles. "I'm going to prison in a week," she says. "I needed to confess my sins and say goodbye. You were the only one I could come to. My parents are gone and there's no one else left."

Tears fill my eyes and spill over. "Why?"

She shakes her head. "I stopped prostituting, but I became involved in drug trafficking. The man I was working for got busted. I called the DA and made a deal. I knew it was a matter of time before they came after me. They have all of the evidence. I told him I'd voluntarily surrender after I said my goodbyes."

"Oh, Ebony, I'm so sorry," I tell her, not knowing what else to say.

She shakes her head. "I've done this to myself. Maybe I was screwed from the beginning, but I could've changed course a million times. Even after all of this though, I got a sweetheart deal. I won't be in for more than five years. Maybe when I get out, I'll do it right this time."

"You can do anything. Finish that degree while you're in there," I tell her. "And I'll visit you. I promise."

She chuckles, this time almost sounding like the beautiful woman I knew so long ago. We both stand and she hugs me.

“Maybe I will,” she tells me. She then turns and walks away, disappearing like she’s done so many times before. I sit back down and cry for a long while.

The air shifts and I look up to see Derek moving toward me. He takes a seat where Ebony sat a few minutes ago. He reaches out and cups my cheek, understanding in his eyes. He doesn’t know why I’m hurting, he just knows I’m in pain. That’s all it takes for this giant of a man to want to help me. We sit silently for several minutes before he gives me a smile.

“Let’s take a walk,” he suggests.

I nod. We both stand and he takes my hand, leading me from the store. The pain over the lost life of my friend begins to fade, as Derek’s presence eases the hurt inside me. This is what draws me to him. The light I so desperately seek. Maybe the two of us can conquer mountains together. Maybe we’re supposed to be in each other’s lives. Maybe this is where I was always meant to be ... maybe ...

Chapter Seven

Emmy

It's a lovely day for a walk in the small town of Ravish. Derek and I have begun a routine after that first walk we took after Ebony broke my heart. I very much enjoy our time together. We didn't really agree to it, it just sort of happened. If it's not raining, we walk the town, and sometimes walk a trail. So far, most of what we've discussed has been superficial, but I think the walls are coming down for both of us the more time we spend together. I'm growing attached, which scares me. Before it was simply attraction, now it's more.

"When is the last time you had a relationship?" Derek asks.

We've lived in the same small town for a couple of years now where gossip spreads faster than the rain falls from the sky, so it's clear I haven't dated anyone here, just as I know he hasn't dated anyone. That doesn't mean either of us couldn't go to the bigger city, which isn't all that far away, but it does mean no one here knows anything about our private lives.

"It's been a long time," I admit.

"Is there a reason?"

I sigh. "I had a very messy divorce that scared me off relationships for quite a while," I say. "Besides that, my own parents didn't have a healthy marriage, so sometimes I wonder

what the point is in being with another person when it's just going to end.”

He gives me a smile as we continue walking through town. Several of our neighbors are out and wave, giving a quick greeting before they move on their way.

“I understand that. I had a few hard knocks with my own relationships,” he tells me. This is more than he's given me before, and my heart skips a beat. Are we friends? Are we more? I don't want to rock the boat by asking. I also don't know what I want, and if I ask, he might direct questions back at me. That's a place I'm not ready to go yet.

“Tell me more about you,” he says.

He gives his trademark smile that has me holding my breath. I'm so damn attracted to this man it's sometimes difficult to breathe when I'm in his presence. What does this mean? We do need to have sex. I'm certain of this. If there's any chance of this happening, I have to open up to him. He's the kind of man who knows if a person is lying. I've never been good at telling untruths anyway. I am who I am, and I'm proud of how far I've come ... bumps, bruises, scars, and all.

“I grew up not far from here. My mother was a teacher, my dad worked in the timber industry. My parents tried to conceive a baby for ten years before they finally had me. I was a miracle gift for them. I'm not bragging, it is what they always told me. I was named Emmy of course, the E was for my grandma Eva, the M was for my grandma Marge. The MY stands for my sweet angel child.”

Derek beams at me. “That's beautiful and creative.”

“I love it even if I didn’t know my grandmas.” I laugh. “Of course my dad wanted a boy ... badly, so I became his little tomboy. Even as an infant he took me hunting with him, placing me in a hiking backpack. He also hung whiffle balls from the ceiling in the garage by the time I was three and taught me all about the strike zone for baseball. By the time I was five, I was miles ahead of the other kids in school, confused about a ball being placed on a device. I could hit a ball lobbed at me just fine and didn’t want to hit it off a tee.”

“Should I be scared you can swing a bat so well?” he asks with a laugh.

“It’s helped me out more than once in life,” I tell him. “I also helped my dad brew beer in his garage, a big thing back in the nineties when I was young. We also processed bear meat in the shop, did high-adrenaline adventures together, and I had dirt on my face more than I was clean. I wasn’t a *dresses and Barbie doll* type of girl.”

“You still aren’t, and I think it’s sexy as hell,” he tells me with a wink that has my heart thundering harder.

“I’ve never been one to pretend I’m someone I’m not. I love to dress up at times, but I’m far more comfortable in yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt than frilly dresses.”

“Me too,” he says with another chuckle.

“Good to know,” I say. “My dad is a great man, and I love him very much. He’s also an alcoholic. He was drunk more than sober for most of my life. He wasn’t the kind of drunk who drank too many beers on a Friday night, he was the alcoholic who chugged a fifth of vodka down his throat over the kitchen sink. Even saying all of that ... he was good to me

... just drunk far too often. Back then he was considered a functional alcoholic.”

“I know a lot of people like this,” Derek says with sympathy.

“He held the same job for over thirty years and always provided for our family. He was sick ... in fact, he was more than sick ... he was incredibly ill. The disease consumed our family for many generations from past to present. My grandfather committed suicide by jumping off a bridge while drunk.”

“Oh, Emmy,” he says. He gives me a sympathetic look as he reaches over and takes my hand. I love his large fingers holding me. It gives me the courage to continue.

“It is what it is. My grandfather suffered from depression and PTSD from the war. Pair that with the shame from years of abusing his wife and children, my father and uncle, and he couldn’t take it anymore. He ended it in the blink of an eye. My father and uncle carried his disease, drinking just as much, if not more, than he did.”

“But you have a decent relationship with your dad. It’s how we first met,” Derek points out.

“Yes, I love him. I can only be around him so much before he triggers me, though. We can love our families from a distance. We can choose to break the cycle. It’s what I’ve been doing since I was young. I love both of my parents, but I also know distance makes the heart grow fonder,” I say unapologetically.

“Tell me what shaped you into who you are,” he says.

I smile. “I think everything about our lives shape us into who we are. Sports were most likely my biggest strength. As I said, my dad had me swinging a bat from the time I was walking. I was a great athlete. I always knew my place on the court or the field. I played shortstop, point guard, and was the captain of the varsity soccer team. I excelled at any sport I joined. School was good for me and gave me confidence. I was a homecoming princess and took leadership seriously. I was a natural at it. My dad always told me I’d make a great lawyer because I knew how to make a compelling case in an argument regardless of where I personally stood on an issue. However, I didn’t excel in academics, never making the honor roll. It wasn’t because I wasn’t smart, it was simply because I wasn’t passionate about the book work like I was about sports and leadership.”

“I think there’s a lot of pressure on kids to be everything. Sometimes that’s so overwhelming they fizz out,” Derek says.

“I didn’t have burn out, I only focused on what I wanted, what made me feel good.” I give a shrug. “That led into some questionable sexual choices.” I’m not a blusher, but I feel a bit of embarrassment as I say this. But if I’m valuing honesty and I want him to open up to me, I need to do the same. There’s something about Derek that makes me want to confess all of my sins to him.

“Oh, now we’re talking,” he says, giving me a sexy grin.

“Of course you want to hear *this*,” I tell him, unable to look him in the eyes. We keep walking.

“I lost my virginity too young. It wasn’t because I was interested in sex ... but because no one had ever taught me the

value of my own sexuality. Uncomfortable conversations were avoided in my family ... and still are to this day. Mom never talked about sex with me, and Dad certainly wasn't going to. That would've sent him into a drunken oblivion to even consider the subject with his daughter. So, I had to figure it out on my own. I started having sex before I knew what it was. I guess it was peer pressure and annoyance at life, along with a lack of understanding, that led to my first encounter. After that, it was easier to say yes than no. It took many years to learn the sacredness of love, self-worth, and satisfaction."

"Yes, I bet a kid not knowing anything about sex wouldn't easily find pleasure," he says, his fingers squeezing mine.

I laugh. "Well, I certainly found more satisfaction from a hot tub jet than I did with my high school boyfriend," I tell him, making him burst out laughing.

"Damn, I hope there aren't women out there saying that about me," he says in horror.

"Oh, Derek, I'm sure they are," I tell him.

He stops and looks at me, raising his brows. "Now, you're making me want to prove something," he says in such a sexy tone I shiver all the way down to my toes.

"Maybe you should," I challenge.

We haven't even kissed yet, and I want this more than I've wanted anything before. He turns me on ... and I'm no longer a naïve teenager. I know what to demand from a lover, and I know what makes me scream. There's no doubt in my mind that this man can make me scream with orgasm after orgasm.

He leans down as if he's finally going to give me what I've been wanting since the first time I saw him ... and then we're interrupted.

"Hey, you two, what's up?" Booker asks, a smirk on his lips that tells me he knows exactly what he just interrupted. I want to kick the man.

"Just out taking a stroll," Derek says, recovering far more quickly than I do.

"It's a beautiful day for it. I've been looking for you, though. Your truck's ready and purring like the beauty she is," he says.

Derek's eyes light up with delight. "I hated turning it over to you to fix, but I've been slammed lately, and I guess you are the best," Derek says.

"Damn right I am," Booker replies.

"Want to walk over and get it?" Derek asks.

I realize our alone time is over and I have a shift at the bar coming up. Maybe I'll get the kiss next time. It's not happening right now. I need to pick a far more private place for the two of us to walk.

"No, I need to get ready for work. I'll see you tomorrow at the gym," I tell him.

"Great to see you, Emmy," Booker says with an even wider smile.

"Always a pleasure seeing you," I tell him, normally meaning this, but not at all right now. He laughs as if he can read my mind.

He and Derek walk off in one direction as I turn and head home. We were so close, so damn close to our first kiss. Patience, I tell myself. We made progress today, and it won't be long until we're naked in each other's arms. I have no doubt about it.

Chapter eight

Emmy

I'm sweaty and exhausted as Derek and I sit at a small table in the perfect café inside his gym. A person never has to leave this place if they don't want to. It's gorgeous from the second you walk inside. Not only does it have two incredible workout areas, but it also has a huge pool, spa area, chiropractor on site, mouthwatering bathrooms with all of the amenities, a juice bar, and a small café. And it has an outdoor area for sports and relaxing. I'm sure Derek even has an apartment here ... maybe with a bed. The gym is huge, the biggest I've ever seen. It's crazy in this small town.

People come from miles away to use it though, so it's working for him. I'm sure glad he's here. The more time I spend with him, the more I like the man. It's gone past dangerous to obsession. I need to know more about him. I need to get into his bed.

"You're good at getting information out of me, Derek, but I don't know a heck of a lot about you. Is that on purpose?" I ask as I devour my delicious strawberry banana protein smoothie.

He gives me a slight smile. "Yes, I'm very good at avoiding talking about myself," he admits.

“I won’t force you to, but it feels like we’re becoming real friends, so I’d like to know more.”

“We’re certainly becoming something,” he says as if this confuses him.

“Then help me understand you more,” I practically beg. I want him to talk about the dead fiancée that I had to learn about from others, but he hasn’t been willing to do this yet. I won’t push him.

He lets out a sigh. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything. I want to know everything from your childhood to what brought you to this town. I want to know what you think about, what your desires are, why you’re so passionate about fitness. I want to know what makes you the person you are.”

“Oh, that’s all?” he asks with a chuckle.

“I’m one of those people who can sit for hours hearing a person’s story. I believe all of us have a unique human experience, and I love learning what makes each person who they are. I always wonder how an innocent, perfect little newborn can grow up and turn into a serial killer, or have a desire to harm others. I wonder how someone makes the choice to become a nun or a priest. We all start exactly the same no matter who we are, what color we are, what country we’re from, or where we live. As we grow into adults, life shapes us. Yes, there’s something to be said about nature versus nurture, but I’ve seen good people emerge from rotten circumstances, and horrid people emerge from ideal homes. So, I like to ask questions and find out where someone is in life as I try to figure it all out.”

He laughs. “Well, you aren’t asking too much at all,” he says with delight.

“Nope, just the basics.”

“Well, I started out like a lot of other kids. I was born in Roseburg in southern Oregon. My mother, Diana, was a cheerleader. My father, Larry, was the varsity quarterback. My mom got pregnant her senior year in high school with my oldest brother. She was forced to drop out. Things were a little different back then and girls didn’t tend to stay in school if they were pregnant. My dad continued school and graduated, then got a job at the local mill. They stayed together.”

“Oh, that must’ve been tough,” I tell him.

He shrugs. He’s trying to keep emotion out of his voice as he talks. “My brother Keith came years later. Then in four more years I was born. By the time I arrived my oldest brother, Richard, was already in middle school.”

“That’s pretty cool that they stayed together. Not many high school romances last,” I tell him.

He shrugs again. “It didn’t last. The two of them divorced when I was eight years old and our lives were never the same again. My mom actually married seven more times after she divorced my father.”

“Seven?” I question unable to hide my shock. “I mean, I guess people have lots of relationships in their lives, or some people do, but eight marriages seems like a lot. Most people don’t tend to marry every boyfriend.” Maybe there are some thoughts I shouldn’t just spit out. It’s too late to take it back now.

“Yes, it’s a lot,” he says. “Everything changed so much. The holidays were never the same again. I was the youngest and my mom tried to be a survivor. It was her and me against the world. We moved in and out of one boyfriend’s house after another. Unfortunately, it was often in the middle of the night, and I only had time to pack my shoes and anything else that I could stuff into a backpack.”

“Oh, Derek,” I say, reaching out and taking his hand. He doesn’t pull away from me. I’ve been expecting there’s a lot to his past, but this is so much worse than I imagined. No wonder there’s so much pain in his eyes. How he can smile, I’m not sure. Most people wouldn’t survive the childhood he experienced.

“I don’t have many memories of my childhood. There’s trauma my body remembers, but I’ve managed to bury what actually happened down deep.”

“Did you see your father after the divorce?” I ask.

He nods. “I reconnected and lived with him when I was in high school. He wasn’t doing any better than my mother. We didn’t talk long. I came home one day from school my junior year and found crime tape circling our house. Apparently Dad was growing weed in the garage and the police busted him. Back then, they were harsh. He was sent to prison for five years as a result. I couldn’t go back to my mom’s because of the person she was with at the time, so I couch-crashed for the remainder of high school, moving from one friend’s place to another, not having a stable home.”

I squeeze his fingers. “You don’t have to go on, Derek. I’m sorry I pushed you,” I tell him. I desperately want to hear his

story, but I feel guilty for pushing him. Who has so much tragedy and ends up where he is? It's incredible he's even standing, let alone running a successful business and helping his neighbors as much as he does. I see why he's hesitant on romance.

"I can do this," he assures me.

"I'm more impressed with who you are now," I tell him. "You lift so many people up. I don't know how or where you learned how to do it."

He again shrugs. "We can live in the past or we can be who we want to be."

"You're saying this like it's no big deal, but it is, Derek. People either sink into the pits of depression and sit there, or they pull themselves out inch by inch. You've not only pulled yourself out, you've become an incredible person who gives so much to this community."

"I'm no one special, Emmy. Please don't think I am," he says, desperation in his eyes as if he's trying to warn me away from him.

"I disagree with that." I shake my head, sad that he doesn't see the man I see. "What did you do when you finished high school?" I told him he doesn't need to go on, but I think it's helping him to continue. Maybe we can help him let go of his tragic past together.

He only pauses a moment before he continues. "After graduation I worked at Williams bakery on the night shift and attempted to go to college during the day. I couldn't swing both so I dropped out of school and focused on working and

saving money. I didn't want to end up like my mother or father."

"A lot of people have to make tough choices on whether to go to school or work. Heck, a lot of people go to school, get into debt, and still don't know what they want to do. You probably made the best choice."

"I don't regret it. I did continue to make mistakes though. I met a woman while working and we dated for several years. She was ready to get married, and I wasn't. I loved her family though. It was so stable and perfect. I didn't want to let *them* go ... so I proposed to her. By the time the wedding date was set, my dad was out of prison. We were talking again. He asked me just days before the wedding if I was sure I wanted to go through with it. We both knew I was making a mistake ... but it was too late."

I've been in this same place. I don't say this though. Right now it's time for his story, not mine.

"We got married ... then we stopped talking. We didn't fight, we just grew distant, living two separate lives. During this time my mother also suffered several brain aneurysms. She was put into assisted living, and it killed me a little each time I visited her. She didn't know who I was, didn't even know who she was. It's been incredibly heartbreaking watching as she continues to get sicker and sicker."

"I can't imagine having my parent not knowing me."

"It is what it is, but it will be a relief when she can let go. At least I'll know she's whole, even if I can't see her. It's hard visiting her now and I don't do it as much as I should because she doesn't know me anymore ... and it hurts"

“It’s hard to be happy for someone to be gone. Everything in us wants to hold them tight and keep them with us. If you want me to come for a visit, I’m more than happy to do that with you.”

He gives me a grateful smile. “I’d like that,” he says. I squeeze his fingers and have just a little more hope that we’re going to make it through all of this to a happier side of life.

“It’s hard letting go, and I’ve had to do it more than most people should” he tells me.

“Yes, it’s hard to have faith in an afterlife when we can’t see it. I’m a very visual person, and I can’t see heaven so it’s impossible to imagine we’ll be with our loved ones again someday. I do have faith though. I’d rather believe I’ll see the people I lose than think I’ll never be with them again. I figure if I’m wrong, I’ll never know so I’d rather have faith,” I tell him.

“That’s a great way to look at it,” Derek says.

“What happened with your wife?”

“Well, I continued working at the bakery at night while I did bodybuilding and training clients during the day,” he says. “Two of my clients were police officers who were the ones who recruited me for the force.”

“Ah, that’s how you became a police officer,” I say, wondering how this phase of his life came about ... and how it ended.

“Yep, they said I’d be perfect for the force, and it paid a heck of a lot more than the bakery. I could still do bodybuilding and training as well, so it was a win-win.” He

sighs. “But my ex and I lost each other more every day. She eventually asked for a divorce and moved back to her parents, triggering every abandonment issue I ever had. It sent me into a funk for a while.”

I know what it’s like to lose a spouse. It hurts even if we know that relationship was no good for us in the first place. I squeeze his fingers again, encouraging him to go on.

“I didn’t do well on my own. I hadn’t grown up yet apparently. I met a new woman ... Kelly. It was crazy. I fell hard for her. She was a bodybuilder, beautiful, funny, smart, motivated ... and in love with me. We were small-town famous, both of us working out on a daily basis, having perfect bodies, hot sex, and wild, crazy love.”

I flinch as he says this, a bit jealous. I’m certainly not in love with him, but I realize I could be. I’m not sure if he can fall in love again, though, after all he’s gone through. What does this mean for either of us? Is this a fatal mission I’m on?

“I was happy, maybe for the first time in my life. I loved my work, loved Kelly, and felt like I was going somewhere for the first time ever.”

“What happened?” I ask, afraid of what he’ll say. I know the basics of the story, but what’s his version?

His eyes sparkle as he fights tears. He quickly blinks them away. “She died,” he whispers, and my heart aches for him. It seems he’s never gotten a break, not once in his life. How can so much trauma come to one person? It isn’t right.

“Do you need to stop?” I ask.

He's in a zone though. He shakes his head. "I was at work and got a call that Kelly had been hurt. I was rushed to the scene and found she'd drowned. I went a little crazy for a while. I was desperate, depressed, and wanted to give up. Somehow I didn't, though. That's when I came up with this gym. I quit the force, put all of my money into building this business, and this is where I've been ever since."

We're both silent for a long while. He doesn't let go of my hand.

"I'm sorry, Derek," I say, knowing the words aren't enough.

He comes out of the fog he was in as he looks at me. He then gives me the beginning of a smile. He squeezes my fingers.

"My story isn't finished yet," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I've been in a funk for a very long time. But then this woman walked into my life like a small light in the dark ... and that light keeps growing. She's made me feel something again ... something I've never felt before. She's made me think, and she scares the hell out of me."

My heart's thundering. I don't know what this means. I can't seem to take a full breath. I look at him and he doesn't break our gaze.

"So, what comes next?" I huskily ask.

"I'm not sure. I only know that I have hope," he admits.

I smile at him. "How are you this man?" I ask again.

He shrugs. “Maybe it’s because angels keep appearing in my life,” he says.

We grin at each other. I may not know what it means ... but it’s a start.

Chapter Nine

Emmy

For the past couple of years I've been trying to discover myself again. What are *my* needs? What are *my* desires? What are *my* hobbies? What do I do for me instead of doing things for others to make them happy? What's most important to me, and what can I toss out? I haven't even cracked the surface of these questions, but the most important part is that I'm still searching and not giving up.

As I try to discover who I am, I'm doing a lot more on my own. I want to know I can succeed without the help of others. I don't ever want to be so lost again that I can't find myself. Tomorrow is another first for me. I haven't told anyone what I'm up to.

I'm getting ready to go to bed when my phone rings. I look down and smile.

"Hey, Dad," I say, my voice sleepy.

"Hi, kiddo, what have you been up to?" he asks cheerfully.

I smile at the sound of his voice. It reminds me that I don't talk to him enough. I love my dad, but life gets busy, and I assume he's always going to be around. Every time I see him, or talk to him, though, I feel better, and it also makes me realize that time is ticking, that one day he won't be here when I want him most.

"I've been working a ton." I don't add anything about Derek. I'm not sure what's going on with him, and Dad will ask a million questions, so it's better to not say anything on that front. "Have you done anything fun lately?"

"Nope, my life's pretty boring," he replies. "What about you?"

I lie back on my bed. "I'm running a race in the morning."

He's quiet for a few seconds. "That's great, Em; what race?"

"The shotgun trail blast. I'm terrified I won't make it all of the way through. It's only a 5k, but I'm not nearly as athletic as I used to be."

Dad chuckles. "You're an athlete through and through. Even if you took some time off, your muscles remember what they're supposed to do."

"*You* made me an athlete. You gave me a love of sports, of anything to do with the outdoors, and of always pushing myself. You made me believe in myself and strive to be the best of the best. I love all of the active things we've done together for my entire life."

"I'm so glad to have these memories with you," he says, his voice sounding a little choked ... not that he'd ever admit

he's getting emotional.

We chat for a few more minutes before getting off the phone. I'm smiling as I turn off my lights and lie down. Surprisingly, I fall asleep fast.

When I wake in the morning I'm wired. It usually takes me a little longer to wipe the sleep away, but I'm excited for today. I get ready and then head out of the house for the long ahead. I'm close to the race when my phone rings ... and again it's my dad.

"Where are you?" he asks.

"I'm parking my car. I told you I'm running a race today." It's just before seven in the morning and I rarely talk to anyone this early. The greatest part of racing is no one expects conversation. We all do our thing then limp away at the end.

"I know you're running. I'm at the starting line. I came down this morning and registered so I can run with my beautiful daughter and she won't be doing it alone."

My eyes instantly grow misty as I gape at my phone.

"You're at the race?" I ask, wondering if I heard him right.

"Yep, this sixty-seven-year-old man is going to show up all you youngins," he tells me with a laugh. I'm having to fight tears.

"Have you gone running lately?"

He laughs. "Nope, but once an athlete always an athlete," he says, just what he told me the night before.

"Dad, you have heart issues," I remind him. I'm walking toward the front of the race now, wanting to see him.

“Then it’s good I’m running with my daughter. It will get my blood pumping and keep my heart healthy. I didn’t want you to do this alone.”

I have to fight tears again as he says this. I’ve been trying to find myself for a while now, but it means so much that Dad knows I’m struggling, and that he wants to be here for me ... without me having to ask him. Someone doing something for us when we need it the most is the best gift that can be given.

I spot my dad up ahead and rush through the crowd, giving him the biggest hug ever. A tear slips out and I pull back to wipe it away.

“I’m glad you’re here, Dad,” I say, hating that I’m being such a baby right now.

“I missed you when you were gone. I’m grateful you came back home,” he tells me.

My childhood wasn’t perfect, but it was beautiful, and as each day passes, I appreciate more and more who I am. Everyday perfection is highly overrated. These moments, these beautiful, wonderful, perfect *moments* is what life’s all about.

Dad and I line up, and then we’re off. We’re both out of breath as we race, so there isn’t much talking. But we’re beaming as we cross the finish line; neither of us stopped the entire time. We move off to the side to catch our breaths and cheer on the racers behind us. It’s amazing that we aren’t the last ones to crawl across the finish point.

“You’re a stud,” I tell my dad when I can talk normally again.

“This old man still has it,” he says with a chuckle, then winces.

I laugh with him. “Let me treat you to lunch.”

“That’s why I had kids, so you’d take care of me in my old age,” he says, wrapping an arm around my back as we move away.

“Oh, I still have a lot of growing up to do, Dad, so you still gotta take care of me,” I tell him, which has him laughing some more.

I now have one more item checked off of my bucket list, and this is the best day I’ve had in a long while. Working on myself is a true gift. Maybe at the end of all of this I’m going to look in the mirror and love who I see.

Chapter Ten

Emmy

It's time for the town's annual street fair. Everyone shows up, and it's one of my favorite times of the year. I walk from booth to booth, helping everywhere someone needs me. I'm not running an event this year, which is sort of nice. It means I can simply enjoy the day by eating too much and experiencing all of the fun events the business owners put on.

"Emmy," Martha and Patsy, who work at the school, call out.

"Martha, Patsy, what are you two up to?" I ask as I quickly approach their booth and give them each a hug.

"We need help," Martha says.

"Of course. What can I do?" I ask. I'm not even bummed. There's plenty of time to go around the fair after I help them.

"Oh, it's nothing too demanding. We just need a beautiful, charming woman to draw in the attention of a nice young man," Patsy says with a chuckle.

I'm confused as I gaze from one woman to the other. I open my mouth then shut it, not knowing what to say. They both laugh more.

"Yes, we hear there's a handsome young bachelor attending the fair this year. We also hear the two of you have been

spending a lot of time together,” Martha says with a wink.

“Now you two aren’t trying to meddle in my love life, are you?” I ask with a laugh. I know they mean no harm.

“We would never do such a thing. We’re just very observant,” Patsy says. “But you have to make sure and not hold back. Let him know the real you; your wit and intelligence are sure to capture his attention more than anything else. We need to get this booth all set up with sparkles, balloons, and you ... and draw him in.”

“And we have the costume for you to wear so you can really wow him,” Martha says. I laugh harder.

“Yes, yes, it’s very cute and stylish and he won’t be able to take his eyes off of you,” Patsy tells me.

The crazy thing is I like this idea. Derek and I are certainly moving forward ... but it’s at a snail’s pace. Would it really be so bad to take some help from some of the locals? It isn’t like I’ve tried too hard to hide how I feel about him. Am I crazy to consider this?

“Well, I have to admit this sounds like an interesting challenge,” I tell them, and they both clap with glee.

“You know what they say: beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We can make sure the most handsome Derek sees all of your splendor and then our mission is complete,” Patsy says.

I laugh again. “Are you saying I’m ugly and need fixed up?”

They look at me in horror. “Of course not,” Martha says with a gasp. “Now, you quit stalling. You have to use that

captivating smile of yours, and those eyes are a killer. Just bat them and he'll come running. You're a natural beauty so it won't take much to have him kneeling at your feet."

"Hopefully with a ring in his hand," Patsy says.

"Whoa, you guys are moving a little fast here," I say as I laugh. "I'd at least like a first kiss before thinking about rings."

"You know they won't buy the cow when the milk is given for free," Martha says, and I find myself blushing. I don't love being called a cow, but there's no way I'm waiting for a ring to get some action from the incredible Derek.

"Just remember, darling, you have to be open to Derek, give him all of your thoughts and feelings, and open up to him, but don't be too easy. Men like to chase their girls. It's okay to set the hook though," Patsy tells me.

I laugh again. "So I'm fishing now?"

"We're *always* fishing, dear. You have to reel him in, then give him something to think about. Make him remember you when he walks away," Martha says.

"And don't forget about body language. It's important to maintain eye contact and give him a smile all through your conversation. Show him your confidence and beauty. He won't be able to resist," Patsy says.

"I'll do my best," I assure the ladies.

"Of course you will, darling. We know how charming you are. Lastly, just remember to have fun. We'll seek him out and send him this way."

With that they leave me in the booth. It's clear that they're matchmaking, but I've also been tricked into manning this booth for them, which is a bit of a bummer. It appears I'm not going to get to enjoy the fair after all. I laugh as I start setting things up.

It doesn't take long before a group of high school kids come in, bringing food, and setting up all of the products at the booth. Now that it's decorated, it's ready to go just as the crowds descend.

"I've been called to serve," Derek says as he moves up to me in the booth, looking absolutely adorable with a chef hat on his head and a huge apron that says, *Kiss the Cook*, on it.

"Oh, really. Did Martha and Patsy trick you into this as well?" I ask.

He laughs. "Yep, they guilted me, telling me that all of the funds from this booth go to the after-school program for kids."

"Oh, that will get you for sure," I say, feeling pretty dang great. I might be stuck in this booth, but at least I'm with Derek. I can't be unhappy about this.

"I can't resist helping with programs that give back to the kids. I needed programs like this when I was young to enjoy life."

My heart thumps at his words. Now that I know his story, I realize this matters so much to him. It pleases me even more that I'm here helping.

"I like your outfit," he tells me as he moves to stand beside me. We see people moving toward us so we're about to get busy.

“I don’t know, I like yours more,” I say. The ladies have me in a fairy dress with a sparkly crown on my head. It’s cute, and I feel silly, but everyone’s silly today so it’s okay.

“What else are you wearing that’s sparkling?” he asks in the flirtiest tone he’s ever used with me. It shoots my blood pressure to the sky and I’m not hating it at all. I just wish we were alone. We still haven’t had our first kiss. By the time we get to it, I think we both might explode. Maybe today’s the day.

We quickly get busy and have a line for the next hour, making it hard to talk. There’s a lot of laughter though, and we’re having fun, handing out hot dogs, cotton candy, popcorn, drinks, and more to children eagerly waiting in line.

My heart melts as Derek smiles down at a young girl while he hands her a hot dog. “How old are you?”

The small child looks up at him with big eyes and replies. “I’m eight.”

Derek laughs. “Eight is a perfect age. You’ll be older than me soon.” He gives her a wink that has her giggling.

“No way. You’re *super* old,” she says, her eyes wide.

“You’re breaking my heart here,” Derek says before he gives the little girl a big grin. She giggles as she moves away.

He turns and winks at me, making me blush as I help a little boy who asks for some cotton candy. I throw in a sucker for him for free just because he has the cutest little dimples I’ve ever seen in my life. This day is turning out to be one of my favorite days ever.

We're busy for several hours before we have a break. I grab a hot dog and scarf it down before we get busy again.

"I don't know what it is about carnival hot dogs, but they're the best," Derek says as he loads his own and then inhales it in four bites. I'm eating fast, but he's consuming the food without seeming to breathe as he steps over and makes a second dog.

"It's fair food. I think they add some extras to it to make sure we have to come back year after year. No matter how many times I try to recreate fair food at home, it never comes out the same. It just doesn't have the same flavor, not even the cheap nachos which are to die for."

"It's not just the food, but the atmosphere as well. Fairs takes us back to our childhood and being at them is like a bright spot in a slew of adult responsibilities," he says.

"You had to grow up fast as a kid. Did you get to go to fairs?"

He doesn't lose his smile. "Yep, I did. I had to be careful with what I bought, but I'd save year-round for the fair to at least get some food and go on a ride or two."

"What's your favorite ride?"

"Hmm, I guess that spinning one that you lift off the floor."

"I love that ride. They have it here. Maybe we can sneak out of the booth at some point and see if it's just as fun now as when we were young," I suggest.

"I think that's a brilliant idea."

We get busy again for a while and then we're finally able to sneak off to Zero Gravity. We ride it three times before we walk outside, both of us laughing and stumbling. Derek wraps his arm around me so we can balance each other, and the spark that keeps me drawn to him is stronger than ever before. I want to keep on walking right out of town and straight into my house where we can be alone.

It's dark now and he leads me to a table where we both sit.

"I can't remember the last time I've laughed this much," Derek says, his voice filled with awe.

"With all you've gone through in your life I guess there wasn't a lot of room for laughter," I tell him, wondering if this crush on him is a futile mission.

"I'm not someone to be pitied," he says, almost defensively.

"I don't pity you; I desire you," I boldly say.

He stops whatever it was he was about to say, and our gazes are locked together. He lifts his hand and cups my cheek, and I don't so much as breathe, worried the moment will be broken ... again.

Finally, in slow motion, he leans down. His lips touch mine. It's not a long, passionate kiss, but almost a question as he brushes his lips across mine, once, twice, a third time. He then rests his mouth against mine as he lets out a sigh.

Tingles rush through my body at the feel of him so close to me. This is barely a kiss but it's the best one I've ever had ... I'm sure it's because of how I feel about him. Can a person fall so hard for someone they haven't even dated? Apparently so.

Derek doesn't deepen our kiss, but pulls away, leaving his arm wrapped around me. We sit together for several silent minutes, the moment comfortable. I don't know what he's thinking ... I'm not even sure what I'm thinking or feeling.

"We better get back," he tells me. Disappointment rushes through me, but I still nod.

I take in a deep breath. "Yes, we can't keep the kiddies waiting."

We stand and go back to the booth. Even though I'm unsure of what's happening with this man, we're moving forward. It's enough that I'm not giving up ... not yet at least. As long as we continue to take steps forward, then I'm not falling backward.

Chapter Eleven

Derek

Emmy and I are sitting on the grass looking down at the river as we toss rocks into the water, watching the ripples get quickly swallowed by the slow moving current. We haven't spoken in several moments but it's not uncomfortable. As a matter of fact, it's easy being with Emmy ... which then fills me with guilt. Shouldn't I still be grieving the loss of my fiancée? Many tell me I don't need to be in a constant state of mourning, but I've done it for so long I don't know how to switch the flip off.

I now have this amazing woman at my side and I'm going to watch her walk away if I don't make some real changes in my life. I can't stand the thought of her giving up on me. That means I'm the one who needs to make changes.

“What are you thinking about so intensely?” Emmy asks.

I turn and give her a smile. “Is it that obvious?”

“You get this look on your face when you're struggling with whatever is going on in your head,” she tells me.

This woman I'm getting to know more and more with each passing day seems to know me so much better than anyone else. Is it because she's interested in me or because it's simply who she is?

I let out a sigh. “I was thinking about Kelly,” I admit.

She flinches, but it’s barely perceptible. I see the understanding on her face, and the hurt. I’m with her now and to be thinking of another woman is wrong on so many levels I don’t know where to begin. I either let Kelly go or I lose Emmy, it’s truly that simple.

“I’ve felt guilty for a long time that I’m living when she’s dead. I know we all glorify the people we lose too soon. I understand our relationship wasn’t perfect, but I elevated it because she’s gone. I did love her though. She helped me through some incredibly rough times in my life, and I wasn’t ready to let her go. I was planning on spending the rest of my life with her. Now I’m trying to find the balance I haven’t yet managed to find,” I tell her. This conversation will either make or break us. I guess it’s long past time we have it. We can’t start something if I’m in love with another woman.

“I get that. We don’t fall in love with someone with the hope that it will end. We don’t give our hearts to another thinking we’ll get it back. You didn’t have a choice because Kelly was taken from you. It was neither of your choice. I guess you have to decide if you’re going to hold onto a ghost or if you’re going to set yourself free. No one else can make this choice for you,” Emmy says.

Now I’m the one flinching. She isn’t saying this with any malice in her words. She’s simply stating a fact. I can be in love with a ghost or I can embrace the flesh and blood of a woman offering to take a chance with me.

“To be honest, I feel guilty that I’m letting her go. I used to be able to clearly picture her in my mind, but that image has

been fading for quite a while now. When I lie down at night she's not the one on my mind." I don't tell her it's her I'm thinking about now. Once I say this, I truly am letting go of the past. Am I ready? I might be.

"I think we impose guilt on ourselves because we think that's what we're supposed to do." She pauses for a long moment as if she's really thinking about what she wants to say next. This might be one of the things I love the most about her.

"Why don't we throw out the rule book, Derek? Why don't we decide to be in charge of our own destinies instead of doing what we think society expects us to do? Why don't we choose our own happiness without allowing others to judge us? I've lived a certain way for a very long time because it's what was expected of me. I don't want to live that way any longer. I'm sure you feel the same. Grief comes in waves, and it doesn't make us bad people for refusing to live in misery. We're entitled to happiness, but it's not just given to us ... we have to earn it, live it, and hold onto it."

I nod at her, emotion pouring through me. "I don't want to hurt anymore. I'm so damn tired of hurting. People look at me, this giant of a man who's supposed to have the world in the palm of his hand. I've spoken to many people who have gone through similar situations, and I've seen them recover much quicker than I am. I learned we all have to live our own lives, and it's not up to anyone else how we do it. Yet, even with this knowledge, I've kept myself shackled. I don't want to do that anymore."

She reaches over and takes my hand, and I curl my fingers around hers, feeling the deep connection between us. What a

fool I've been to avoid Emmy, to think it's wrong to be with her. She's light in a world of darkness and I don't want to run from her anymore.

I shock us both when I easily lift her and set her on my lap, facing me. I reach up and cup her beautiful face and then we simply gaze into each other's eyes. She smiles at me, and my lips turn up as happiness flows through me, replacing the melancholy that's filled me for too long.

"How am I so lucky to have found you?"

She chuckles. "I'm the one who found you. I'd say we're *both* lucky. We're both broken souls, but I think that's what makes our connection so strong. I believe we come into other people's lives when it's meant to be. I don't know what it is about you, but I've been drawn to you from that first moment I stepped into town. No matter how many obstacles have been thrown our way, I haven't wanted to run."

"I'm glad you haven't. You've had every right to walk away from me. You're special, Emmy, and if you have patience with me, the two of us might be able to crawl through these muddied waters together."

"I don't want easy, I want real," she assures me.

She leans forward and our lips connect. This time it isn't a tentative kiss. This time it's full of hunger and yearning that we've both been holding back ... me more than her. My fingers tangle in her hair as she pushes forward on my lap, rubbing against my arousal.

We kiss for long moments as the connection between us grows and sparks, consuming us. I want to lay her on the

ground, strip her clothes away, and get lost in her arms. I've been slow to come to this realization of how much I need her, but now that I'm allowing myself to accept it, I don't want to move slow any longer; I want her to be mine.

I start to do just this when I hear laughter. It's like coming out of a fog as I break away from her lips to look over her shoulder where I see a group of teens sitting about fifty yards away from us, clearly looking in our direction and laughing.

I wave at them, and they wave back ... still laughing.

"We have awful timing," Emmy says as she buries her head against my shoulder.

"That should be our theme song," I say, filled with hunger and frustration.

"Well, maybe it's good. I want more than a quick round of sex," she tells me.

She leans back and we're once again looking in each other's eyes. "I want more than that too." I mean the words. This is so much more than sex. This might be more than I realized. I can't delve too far into that right now though or it will scare the hell out of me.

We untangle ourselves, and I climb to my feet and hold out my hand to help her up. We walk away from the river hand in hand, just the way we're going to be from here on out. I don't want to hide our relationship ... and that's what this is. I want to only step forward from now on. I have no doubt that's exactly what Emmy wants too ... and it's good, it's very, *very* good.

Chapter twelve

Emmy

Derek and I want to take things at mach speed now that we're in an official relationship, but we're adults and trying to be smart. It's not easy to do. None of this is easy. In romance books, an author gets to have a couple meet, put them through their paces, and then give them a happily ever after.

In the real world, this isn't how it works. We read because we want the fantasy, not the reality, but I'm more aware that reality sometimes sucks. We can find our other half, find the person who makes us whole, but still have real world problems. Derek and I won't get to have an easy journey. We've both been through too much. But that makes our story so much better because it's real and raw and will take us to both hell and heaven. It's up to us where we stay.

We've discovered the river is our favorite place to sit and talk and get to know each other. This place was once traumatic for Derek, but now it's soothing, meditative. This is a place of trauma, but it's also a place of healing ... because we're together and we're helping each other rise. It's where he saved me from the water instead of pulling out another dead body. No, he didn't pull Kelly from the water when she was found, but I'm sure that image of her lying on the table will haunt him for the rest of his life. I need to show him the good of the water, the good of our relationship. I need us to heal together.

There's a loud bang from some kids setting off early fireworks and I can't help but flinch as I automatically duck. Derek looks at me with shock as he wraps an arm around me. I'm shaking, something I haven't been able to control for many years ... not since that fateful day that changed the course of my life forever. It's amazing how trauma shapes us. We can rise above it, but it takes strength ... and we can't always be strong. The sound of bangs will forever haunt me.

"It's just fireworks," Derek tells me as he rubs my shoulder. A shudder passes through me.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"What is it?" he asks, and I can't stop tears from filling my eyes and spilling over as I think back to that tragic time in my life. How in the world are either of us going to be okay when we've already been through so much? It seems impossible to climb the mountain and get to the other side.

"I jump whenever I hear shots," I tell him.

"I know fireworks can sound like a gun, but we're fine," he assures me. A shudder runs through my body.

"I was at Thurston," I quietly tell him.

He goes silent as he stares at me. This isn't something I talk about ... never. It was a long time ago and it's a part of my life I don't like reflecting on; it's a part of a lot of people's lives in our area. It was tragic and horrific, and we all want nothing more than to forget about it. The thing is though, if we forget, it's bound to happen again, so we have to remember even if it's painful to do so.

“Talk to me about it. You’ve listened to me more than anyone ever should. Let me be a shoulder for you now,” he says.

I realize he needs this more than I do. If I can open up to him, he can see I’m flawed as well, and he can be my hero. Maybe that’s what he needs more than anything else I can give him. Maybe he needs to quit being a victim and be the one to save another. He can save me like he couldn’t with his fiancée. He pulled me from the river once. Maybe he can pull me from this memory, from this pain that always rests in me. Derek’s a hero, and though being a victim is hard for me, I can hand him my burdens. This knowledge gives me the strength to pull this painful memory out of my past.

“I did a lot of research on school shootings after what happened at my school. It seemed like such a rare thing, but it’s been happening for far longer than any of us could ever imagine. The earliest known event happened in 1764 and was known as the Pontiac Rebellion School Massacre. Four Lenape American Indian entered the schoolhouse near present-day Greencastle, Pennsylvania, shot and killed the schoolmaster and either nine or ten children. The reports vary. Only two students survived the brutal attack.”

“That’s horrible,” Derek says. I nod.

“There were thirteen known shootings in the eighteen hundreds. This is also when the first known mass shooting occurred in the U.S where students were shot. It was 1891, and a seventy-year-old, James Foster, fired a shotgun at a group of students in a playground in New York. There aren’t any known deaths though.”

I take a breath. “Most of the attacks had to do with adults. Students were rarely targeted. Most didn’t involve guns but were arson or other devices. That all changed in the late 1900’s. In 1998, the year Thurston was hit, there were a total of six school shootings. At my school, twenty-five were wounded and two died. That’s not counting the shooter’s parents who were later found.”

Derek squeezes my hand but doesn’t say anything.

“I won’t go into a lot of detail about the actual shooting. I wasn’t in the cafeteria. We were running late that day because we stopped to pick someone up. It was actually senior skip day so we were all meeting at the cafeteria and then heading to the river. I was a senior with less than a month of high school left when it all went to hell.”

“Oh, Emmy,” Derek whispers. I shake my head. I’m never going to get through this if he tries to comfort me while I tell it.

“My friends and I were in the parking lot. We were walking to the cafeteria when the doors opened and people began flooding out, scrambling over one another in a panic to get away. We had no clue what was happening ... didn’t recognize the sound of the gun firing. It was such a foreign noise that had never been heard there before. There was a lot of chaos, people screaming and crying. We were in the dark, frozen where we stood, not knowing if we should rush forward or run away. Was it a prank? Was it real? It looked too raw to be a prank.”

I take a breath, close my eyes, and think about that moment so long ago, yet it feels like only yesterday. I don’t think any

of us who were there will ever be the same again, no matter what lens we saw it through.

“I’m not sure how much time passed, but the SWAT team showed up fast, all of these cars rushing into the lot, lights flashing. We didn’t move, just stood in shock, having no idea what was happening. We knew it was real, but we didn’t know what was going on. The SWAT officers gathered all of us students in the parking lot together and moved us single-file two-by-two down the breezeway into the dark classrooms where they had us lie on the floor.”

“What?” Derek gasps.

I again shake my head. “There was a radio on in the dark classroom, and finally we knew there’d been a shooting. We didn’t know who the shooter was. We just knew that friends of ours had been shot, some dead, some injured. We weren’t allowed to move, and we were freaking out. There were lots of whispered rumors and tears and so much fear. All we could hear was what was being reported.”

I go quiet as I relive that horrific moment in my life. Derek simply holds my hand as I take calming breaths so I can continue.

“After two hours the officers came back and led us out of the classrooms, again two by two. We were taken to the cordoned-off junior parking lot, where we were left standing, over a thousand of us, not knowing who had done the shooting. We were searching for our friends, not knowing who was dead, who was hurt. There were so many cop cars, then the media showed up. They were everywhere.”

“I can’t believe they let them in,” Derek says with anger.

“I don’t think there was any stopping it. This was before cell phones, so none of us had spoken to our parents. The phone lines were all jammed, and people were going crazy trying to make sure their children were safe. It was a nightmare. I don’t remember it all because it was a long time ago, I just remember being scared and lost.”

“Of course you were.”

“The media dubbed the shooting the Memorial Day Massacre because it was right before Memorial Day weekend. I remember being so angry. How dare they label the event? How dare they give any glory to this? We weren’t a small town, but the students were spread out up and down the river. We were a close group of students. The school had about fifteen hundred students in it, and everybody knew everybody. No matter who was gone, it was a loss.”

Derek wraps me in his arms and I take another break. I can’t remember the last time I’ve spoken about this. I hope I never have to again.

“We were all in the parking lot, and gathered together, trying to figure out who it was. The media people were shoving their mics in our faces, trying to interview anyone willing to talk to them. The whole nation seemed to have descended on our relatively small town. We got out of the classrooms around noon, but they didn’t let us get to our vehicles until about four so we were just standing there wanting answers. It was awful.”

We sit in silence for a few more minutes. He’s taking this all in. Heck, I was there, and I still have a hard time comprehending it.

“The next week was terrible. We didn’t go back to school. We’d meet at the fence outside of the school and place flowers, pictures, special items, and talk about and remember those we’d lost. We took a day and went to the beach and got very drunk as we cried and screamed. It was so unreal. It wasn’t something that happened to us, it was something that happened in other places. It’s something that never should’ve occurred. It made us feel better to gather together, to remember the lost, and to be thankful for those who were still with us.”

“Did you lose people close to you?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I knew those who were gone, but wasn’t personally close to those who died. I can still see their faces though, and I grieve for the lives they didn’t get to live. The awful part is that I didn’t believe it when I found out it was him who had taken the lives. He had friends and a good family. Yes, he had problems, but I couldn’t imagine him shooting anyone. Most people say they saw it though. He’d brought a gun to the school two days before the actual shooting, had been in trouble multiple times, and was on meds. He had problems. I just can’t imagine anyone capable of such a horrific act ... including him.”

“Sometimes people snap. There’s no rhyme nor reason behind it, and there are no excuses for it. What they do when they snap can never be taken back, and they should be punished. I was a cop for years and saw good people go bad. They have to be punished. The lives they took, and the lives they affected, will never be the same again. I don’t hate them, I hate what they did.”

I'm crying as he says this to me. He doesn't know any of the people affected by that day, but he knows pain and trauma. He knows life and loss. There are lives that will never be the same again because of this horrific day, and Derek, more than anyone, can understand this because he's seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in society. I'm glad I've shared this with him. It's one more brick in the wall coming down between us.

"We went back to school a week before graduation, and it was surreal walking across that stage. I accepted my diploma and was then pushed out into the world to go forth and act like it had never happened. I was told to move forward with my life. I didn't know what that meant. I failed. I couldn't stomach the thought of attending college, jumping at every sound and wondering when the next tragic event would occur. I dropped out my first year. There was too much trauma, too much pain associated with being at school."

"What did you do then?" he gently asks, not judging me.

"I wanted away from Oregon so I went as far as I could, to New York. I became a nanny and did that for sixteen months. I got myself together and decided I needed to come back home. I applied to the University of Oregon, somehow getting the administration to read my letter of explanation as to why I thought I deserved a four-year college education. They accepted me. I graduated in three years. While going to school I worked three jobs, coached a high-school softball team ... and then met my future ex-husband. I was living, but it wasn't easy."

"Damn Emmy, I'm not sure if either of us are healthy enough to attempt a real relationship," Derek says after a

minute.

I give a mirthless laugh. “I think I’ve let go of my past the majority of the time, but it does shape us, Derek. I am who I am because of what I’ve gone through. I’m no better and no worse than anyone else. I’ve lived a life and each event has shaped me. Now, I’m here, and most of the time I’m happy.”

He holds me close as we both think about our lives. Are we healthy enough to try something? I do know I don’t want to let him go, and I know I deserve a future. I’ve lived through tough times, but the point is: I’ve lived. I’ve never given up. That has to mean something ... there has to be a reason for this.

Chapter thirteen

Derek

Emmy and I walk toward her house. After what she's shared with me, I'm more impressed with her than ever before. She's been through much more than most people would survive, and yet here she is so strong, so beautiful, and so compassionate. How is she the person she is? How does she smile every day and give so much back to others?

Tonight I saw more of her, and I opened more of my heart. I'm still holding something back, but it's getting more difficult to do. She's touched me in places I never thought could be reached again. I don't want to pull away.

We reach her front door, and she turns, giving me a sweet smile.

"Thank you for another great day," she says before pausing. I don't want to leave. I haven't stepped foot in her house yet, but that's exactly what I want to do now. I stand before her, not wanting to ask, but not wanting to go. She solves this problem for both of us.

"Would you like to come in for a drink?"

My heart thuds at the suggestion, and I can't find words. I simply nod at her. We move inside and she goes to the kitchen. She pulls a bottle of wine from the fridge, and I see her fingers trembling as she opens the bottle, then pours us each a glass.

We move to her couch and I take a seat with her right beside me. I hold her with one arm while I sip from my glass with the other. I don't want to get drunk. I want to be here in this moment with her ... with no excuses.

We're not doing much talking as our glasses empty. Simply being with Emmy comforts me ... and sends my heart thudding nearly out of my chest. I can't make a move on her after what she just told me. That would be wrong. It doesn't mean I don't want her though, doesn't mean I'm not burning with need. I've been burning for a long time ... I'm finally just admitting this to myself.

Emmy reaches over and takes my glass, then sets both of them aside before she turns, hunger ... and something more burning in her gaze.

“Kiss me, Derek,” she demands.

I don't hesitate. I pull her into my arms and kiss her with so much hunger, we're both consumed. Our lust has been brewing for a long time, and it won't be a slow burn. We're both ignited and will certainly go up in flames ... and it will be worth it. No sadness or anger can survive the heat.

My lips caress hers as I slide my fingers up the hem of her shirt and glide them across her bare skin, reaching her ribs, letting them slide across the edges of her breasts, making my need for her grow. She presses her hips against me, urging me on, making us both moan against each other's mouths as we hunger for more.

I continue caressing her skin as I trail my lips across her smooth jaw and down her neck, teasing her skin with my lips, teeth, and tongue, enjoying the whimpers of pleasure escaping

her as I cup her butt and pull her over me so she's pressing against my arousal. We've sat like this before ... but this time there will be no interruptions. This time I can make her mine.

I suck on her neck as I run my hands over her thighs, circling them higher, wanting to feel if she's wet for me, ready for me to take her. She leans her head back, exposing her neck for me to continue licking and sucking as she presses her hips forward, feeling my hardness, feeling how much I need her.

"More," she begs, her voice breathless.

I rip off her shirt and bra and nearly lose it at the sight of her perfect breasts. She grips the back of my head and tugs, leading me to where she wants me. I don't make her wait. I bend and swipe my tongue across her taut nipple before closing my lips around it and sucking. She groans again, and I pulse in my pants, wanting us free from all of our clothes.

There's no sorrow in this moment, no pain. There are no other people between us. Just Emmy and me, nothing else matters. She's in my arms and this is what counts. I never want to be anywhere else.

"Bedroom," I growl before sucking her nipple again.

"Down the hall," she gasps, a smile in her voice.

I pull away from her with great reluctance as I stand, keeping her in my arms. I carry her to the bedroom and set her down on her bed. Perfection, she's utter perfection. I want to worship her body all night. Words don't need to be spoken.

I pull a condom from my pocket, set it on the nightstand, then shed the rest of her clothes before quickly scrambling out

of mine, and lay the two of us down on her bed. I'm partially covering her as I once again kiss her, more hungry than before.

She holds me and kisses me back with just as much passion. We need each other. That's all either of us need to know.

I again slide my mouth down her throat before moving to her glorious breasts, circling first one nipple then the other, wetting them, hardening them, and making her scream out my name as I please both of us. I drive her to the point of madness, then move away from her breasts and slide my tongue down her quivering stomach.

She's shaking in my arms as I push her thighs apart. Emmy arches off the bed as I lower my mouth. She screams as I run my tongue against her swollen folds before closing my lips around her and sucking. She squirms beneath me as I lick and suck before pushing my fingers inside her and pumping.

She screams again as she clenches around me, exploding in a whirlwind of pleasure. I slow my sucking as I draw out her orgasm, letting it run through her for an endless moment, my name on her lips as she feels every ounce of pleasure I've pulled from her.

I slowly climb back up her body and let my hips line up with hers. I take a moment to look into her eyes, letting her know I'm exactly where I want to be. She gives me a satisfied smile as she looks at me and opens her legs wider. This is right and perfect.

I slowly sink inside of her, and it feels so good. There's no more thinking as our bodies become one. I grip her ass and press deep. She moans. Then I slam my mouth against hers

and we're a tangle of bodies as I pump in and out, faster and hotter as our tongues dance.

We're both panting as I build us higher. I see lights as I explode buried deep within her. It takes a long time to come down from the high we're on. I hold her tight, not ready to let go. After a while I shift, knowing I'm crushing her. I don't want her far though, so I pull her against me.

We lie there not speaking as our hearts continue to thunder. It's a long time before my eyes grow heavy and I close them, keeping her wrapped close. I have no regrets. I'm where I should be with the woman I should be with. There's no room for guilt or remorse. There's no room for anything other than Emmy and me.

Chapter fourteen

Emmy

“I’m walking on sunshine, oohhh, walking on sunshine,” I sing as I move down the road. I haven’t felt this good in a very long time. I honestly don’t know the last time I have ... maybe never. I woke up with Derek fast asleep next to me, my body aching, slightly bruised ... and very well loved.

I quietly climbed from bed, not wanting to disturb him, then showered, dressed, and slipped from my house. I’m starving. The man worked me out the night before, and a refuel is desperately needed. So I’m walking down the street singing to myself, unable to wipe the smile from my lips. I did leave him a note so he doesn’t think I freaked out and ran. Running is the last thing I want to do.

It doesn’t take long to get to Safe Haven Bookstore. I move inside and find several people milling about. This is my favorite place to grab coffee and breakfast. Cassie has a nice selection of fresh products, and, seriously, the best coffee in town.

“Someone looks incredibly cheerful this morning,” Cassie says as I move straight to the coffee counter.

“I’m splendid,” I tell her, my cheeks slightly flushed. I feel great as long as I don’t dig too deep into whatever is happening between Derek and me. If I dig deep, I get scared.

Cassie's eyes widen as she gazes at me. "You had sex," she says in a hushed whisper.

My cheeks heat up even more. "Shhh," I say, looking over my shoulder. Luckily nobody is paying the least bit of attention to us. "I don't need rumors to spread before I have an idea of what's happening."

"Oh, you need to spill right this second," Cassie demands.

I chuckle. "Okay, I'll spill, but I need a mocha and a double order of biscuits and gravy and all of the good stuff before I perish," I say.

She laughs. "Fine, but sit down and start talking while I prepare the order," she says as she moves to the food counter. She places two biscuits on a plate along with hashbrowns, scrambled eggs, bacon, and ham, then doses it all with hot, steaming gravy. She places this and a glass of water in front of me and I dive in while she moves to the coffee machine and starts on my drink.

"Delicious," I say after swallowing.

"Of course it is," she says.

"Seriously, Cassie, this place gets better and better each time I come in. I love that you constantly make improvements. It's my favorite place in town."

She laughs again as she finishes my coffee and sets it in front of me. She takes a stool across from me and sips on her own coffee as she picks at a muffin.

"Thank you. I do appreciate it. Quit stalling and spill the tea."

I pile more food in, chew, swallow, then take a sip of coffee and let out a sigh. It's hard to concentrate when I'm this hungry and the food and drink is so good.

"Derek came over ... and was still in my bed when I snuck out this morning for fuel," I finally tell her.

"Well, it's about time. The two of you have been dancing around each other for a long time now. We've all been betting on when you'd become a couple," Cassie tells me.

I chuckle, but there's not a lot of humor in the sound this time. I'm not sure how to process all of this, but it's harder than I care to admit. I'm going from extreme highs, to despairing lows in seconds. I need to pull myself together.

"Hey, talk to me. That smile you've been wearing since you walked inside is falling now and I know it has nothing to do with my food," Cassie says.

"I really, really, *really* like him, Cass, like ridiculously like him. Making love to him has made it that much more. He's perfect and man can he make a woman scream."

"I'm hearing a *but* in this, but I don't understand why. It sounds like it's a match made in heaven," Cass says.

"*But*," I say, drawing out the word. "It's serious for me. I've been a bit in love with him from the moment I first met him. *However*, I'm facing every insecurity I've ever faced before. How am I supposed to live in the shadow of his fiancée who passed away far too young and so unexpectedly?" I voice what I'm not supposed to voice. I'm supposed to accept Derek's love for another woman and take whatever is left of him. I've

been trying to do just this, but I'm not sure I can continue being the magnanimous one. It hurts ... it hurts like hell.

Cassie frowns as she gazes at me. "Kelly died a long time ago. None of us know much about it because he won't talk about it, but of course we're aware they were a couple, engaged, and in love. You aren't replacing her though. She's his past, you are his present, and can certainly be his future."

I give her a grateful smile. "I like the thought of that, but I'm not sure he'll ever be over her. That was a trauma he's not fully dealt with and it sends him into low places even now."

"He has you, Emmy, and you aren't second best, you're incredible. He's lucky to have you and should show his appreciation of that every single day of his life."

"Everyone loved Kelly though. A part of me feels like I'll always live in her shadow, not only in his eyes, but in the eyes of everyone who knew them as a couple."

She reaches over and takes my hand. "Emmy, that's why he's here. He doesn't want that shadow cast on him. He wants to move on. Have faith in him, but more importantly, have faith in yourself. *You're* worthy, *you're* beautiful, *you're* worth having. Don't live in a shadow, but be a bright light and push those shadows away. If you feel you can't do that, then walk away, but do it on *your* terms, not his. Don't ever allow anyone to make you feel less than what you are ... not him and certainly not yourself. Don't go into this if you feel you're not enough. No one should make you feel that way."

I can't help but fight tears as she says this to me. "What if everyone is judging us?"

“I don’t think that’s going to happen. People will be jealous of how perfect you two are together.”

“What if their love was the greater love and nothing will ever compare?”

She sighs. “Even if they had an epic love story, it’s ended. It’s time for a new chapter to start. You aren’t competing with her, you’re writing a new story. Believe in yourself and your own story,” she insists.

“I’m really trying.”

“That’s all you can ask of yourself. You can also talk to me anytime you’re feeling insecure. You know my story and what I went through. It took a very long time for me to believe in myself but now I do. I know I’m worthy. So are you. We all are.” She squeezes my hand again and it feels good. I really like this woman. Maybe I’ll start liking myself more because of my friendships and the unending support I get from the relationships.

“Thanks, Cass, I’m glad I came here,” I tell her. My food and coffee are gone. “Can I get another one to go?”

“Of course you can. Do you want one for that hunk of a man in your bed?” she asks as she stands.

“Yes please,” I tell her.

She makes the coffee and I feel better as I walk away. I was singing as I moved down the street on the way here, then I had a bit of a freak-out, but I’m now good again. I’m not sure what’s coming next in the story of Derek and me, but I’m not willing to run away. If he’s not pushing me out, I can be

strong. I've been through a lot, and I don't easily give up on anything.

I get home and find an empty house. I see my note to Derek, and he's added something below my words. He said he's headed to the gym and he left me a heart by his name. This is good, right? I do have coffee and breakfast for him so I should take it to him, shouldn't I?

Yes, I should definitely take it to him. It doesn't have to be anything serious. We can keep this nice and casual with no expectations, can't we? Ugh. I don't know. I know I want to be with him. I'm well aware it's not going to be easy. We can do this, though. I can be strong. I've been through a lot in life, and I can go through more. At the end of the day, it will all work out ... it will all be fine ... no matter what the final outcome ends up being.

Chapter fifteen

Derek

I'm confused about what I'm feeling today. Emmy came by and dropped off a coffee and breakfast, gave me a sweet smile, and told me to enjoy the day. She didn't put any expectations on me, didn't make plans to see me later, and pretty much left it in my hands.

I put more weight on the press bench, then lie down and push myself until my arms are shaking. Whenever I can't figure out how I'm feeling I push harder in the gym. I'm grateful my first client of the day isn't coming until three. On the other hand, Booker will be in soon to work out with me. The man may constantly be cracking jokes, but he's also hella observant. He's going to read my face in two seconds if I don't pull it together soon.

I push harder. But by the time Booker arrives, I'm still a mess. I look up as he approaches, his trademark smile on his lips. The smile falls fast.

"What's going on?" he asks as he sits on the floor and begins stretching.

I sigh as I sit on the bench, placing my head in my hands. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about this.

"Don't make me pound you, Derek. What in the hell is happening?" Booker asks. I look at him and smile as I shake

my head.

“You’re a pushy bastard.”

“You know it,” he says, not in the least offended. I sigh again.

“I don’t want to sound like a damn girl, crying over my love life.” He stares at me for a second, then laughs.

“Really? Grow the hell up and talk to me. I have issues and I like to talk them out and that doesn’t make me a crybaby ... or a girl,” he says, shrugging before he flexes, showing off his massive bicep.

“I’m not used to sharing my problems,” I admit.

“Well, that’s a healthy attitude,” he says with a heck of a lot of sarcasm.

I laugh. “I’m all about health.”

“Quit stalling.” He rises and goes over to the free weights, picking up thirty-five pounders and starting curls. His muscles flex, making a few of the ladies in the gym glance our way. Of course they do.

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Most people start at the beginning,” he says, a little less sarcasm this time.

I look around, making sure no one is within hearing distance. “Emmy and I spent the night together.”

He gapes at me for a second. Then he laughs. “Well, that took forever,” he tells me.

I roll my eyes. “I like Emmy, more than I thought possible, but both of us are pretty screwed up. I don’t see how we can do this without somebody getting hurt. I’m afraid I’m going to crush her; I’m afraid if we get too involved this is going to end in disaster,” I admit.

“Why does it have to be a disaster?” he asks.

“Well, you know I lost Kelly and that screwed me up for a while. It made it difficult for me to enter a new relationship. Plus, Emmy’s been through some extremely tough times too. What if being together causes more problems we aren’t ready to face? What if we’re too broken to have a relationship?”

Booker thinks about what I’m saying as we both continue working out. I like that he’s not throwing things out there without considering the best answer. That’s why we’re great friends. I don’t know his story and I haven’t pushed him for it. I figure we all tell our stories when we’re ready. Apparently I’m ready now. Maybe I am moving forward. I also have a tendency to spit crap out at the oddest times. A lot of this is that I’m brutally honest. Sometimes this gets me into trouble.

“This is tough. I’m not going to tell you it isn’t, but what you have to ask yourself is if you think you can work through it,” he finally says.

Now I take a minute to think. “Anything’s possible, but I’m scared. People look at me and only see the outside, not realizing there’s so much more on the inside. I was always a risk taker until the day Kelly was ripped from me. After all of the crap I went through over the years, I still stood back up. When I lost her, it was the first time I wasn’t sure if I’d get off my knees again. The other point is I’m afraid of hurting her.

She's incredible; I don't think I'm good enough for her. She deserves someone far less broken than I am."

"You can't let fear dictate your life, Derek. You have to take chances even when there are risks involved. You can always talk to her about your fears," Booker says.

"I've talked more to her than anyone. I don't want to make her feel bad, though, by explaining what a mess I am. I certainly don't want to tell her I'm not sure if I'm still in love with a woman who's gone. Emmy's amazing, and I don't want her to feel less than what she is."

"I think she's strong enough. I also know for a fact that if you don't talk about all of this together, your relationship won't stand a chance. You can't bottle things up. You have to be honest, even when the truth hurts."

I slam my weights down and sit. I'm burned out. My muscles are shaking, so I've effectively tired out every single one of them. I'm still not feeling better though. I'll have to do a crapload of cardio soon. That will empty my head.

"It's been years since Kelly died. I need to let it go. I'm well aware of this, dammit."

"I know this is hard on you, Derek. I'm here anytime you need to vent. You *are* letting go, but you feel bad about doing just that. You need to give yourself permission not to feel bad about moving on with your life," he wisely says.

"You might be right. I don't feel guilty when I'm with Emmy. It's when she's gone that I start having doubts."

"Well, that tells me that you should always be together then," Booker says with a wink.

I laugh, feeling it this time. I'm glad he's here. Sometimes we really do need to talk something out. We can get more lost in our own heads than we realize, even those of us who think we're so much stronger than we actually are.

"Do you know the craziest thing of all?" We both move to the floor and stretch. The reason we don't often get sore is we know that stretching before and after a workout is the best medicine of all.

"What's that?" Booker asks.

"Kelly wouldn't want me to grieve her death for this long. She'd certainly want me to grieve her for a while. What person wouldn't? But she loved me. I have no doubt at all that she loved me just as I loved her. She'd want me to find happiness again just as I'd have wanted her to find the same. She'd be pissed at me for being a baby for so long."

"I didn't meet her, but if you loved her, I agree with you. You wouldn't love a person who wouldn't want what's best for you. I do, however, know Emmy, and I know how special she is. Everyone in this town loves her. If this turns out to be love, you're one hell of a lucky man to have more than one great love in your life. This is a gift many people don't get a single time. For you to have it twice is a true blessing."

"And I'm being ungrateful," I say, feeling like an ass.

"Well, *you* said it, not me," Booker says with another laugh.

"With friends as encouraging as you, I don't need enemies," I say as I shake my head.

"Just keeping you humble, brother," Booker says. "Look, all joking aside, there's a real joy in knowing you have

someone in your life who's perfect for you. Perfection truly is in the eye of the beholder, but let me tell you, if you screw this up with Emmy, I'm going after her. That woman is hot, sweet, and charismatic. There's a line of men behind you, waiting to catch her eye. In all reality I shouldn't be giving you advice, I should be sabotaging you. If she wasn't looking at you like you're a damn hero I might just do that."

I realize he's deadly serious. Jealousy instantly fills me. I don't like the idea of Emmy with another man at all. I *really* don't like the idea of having to see her with another man. We're in a small town and if she isn't with me, she *will* be with someone else. I'd have to kill him. She's mine even if I can't admit this to myself. I can't stand the thought of her with anyone else. That should tell me more than anything that I want to be with her for more than a fling.

"She's taken," I say with a low growl before I can stop the words.

Booker laughs hard at this. "Okay, okay," he says holding up his hands. "She's taken."

We move to the cardio machines and all talking stops as we both push too hard to have a conversation. After another hour I'm finally tired enough to turn my brain off. I haven't really solved anything yet, but I do know for sure I'm not willing to let this woman leave my life. It might make me the better man to release her, but I've never claimed to be a saint. I want her, and I pray she wants me, problems and all.

Chapter Sixteen

Emmy

I've gone with Derek twice to see his mom. It's an emotional roller coaster to visit a woman so similar to her son, but not in the present with us. She gazes blankly at the wall while we're in the room, causing a lot of pain for Derek. I want to help him through the pain, but I'm not sure how I can. I honestly don't know how I'd deal with this same situation if it was my mother or father.

I've come to town on my own today since Derek has a full schedule. I pull into his mother's care facility. He doesn't have an issue with me coming here ... but I wonder if this is wrong. Is this too intimate when Derek and I haven't even defined what we are to each other? Should I visit a person who doesn't know who I am, and won't even know that I'm here?

Whether I should or not, I'm sitting in the parking lot and not leaving. I've been talking to my mother a lot lately, feeling a need to hold her tight as I watch the life drain from Derek's

mother. My mom's a great listener. We never used to talk much about my problems, but lately that's changed. Well ... I talk and she listens. She's been worried about me since I went through so many changes in a few short years ... and I haven't quite bounced back the way I used to so easily.

I don't love my ex-husband, but a divorce isn't easy on anyone, and things went *so* badly at the end. Mom was there for me during all of that, and she's been here for me ever since. She isn't much of a talker and lets me do my thing while she quietly observes and listens. It's sort of nice since I'm usually the one who has to fix things in everyone's life. I'm not looking for advice though, I'm looking for exactly what she's giving me: love and an ear. I think this growing bond with my own mother is helping me reach out more to Derek's mom.

It doesn't matter if a mother is perfect or not, it matters that they gave us our lives, and we owe them our love and respect ... and the dignity of having us at their side when they're in their last days. To leave them at this point in life would take some of our own humanity away. It also doesn't do us any good to cast blame and accusations at them. Our parents are human, just as we are. We're all going to screw up ... and we deserve forgiveness and love.

I finally step from my vehicle and walk to the doors where the front desk person smiles at me. I give a smile back, still feeling like I'm not supposed to be here.

“Hi, Emmy, are you here to see Diana?”

“Yes, if that's okay,” I say, holding a vase with colorful flowers in it, my fingers slightly trembling.

“That’s more than okay,” she says. I sign in then move down the hall to see Diana. My heart’s thundering. I’m not sure why I’m so nervous about this.

I step into the room to find her sitting up in bed, her eyes vacant like they’ve been the last couple of times I came here with Derek.

“I brought some pretty flowers to brighten it up in here,” I tell her before I set them down where she can see them ... if she’s seeing anything at all. I sit next to her on the bed and place my hand over hers, curling my fingers around her frail ones. She doesn’t move, doesn’t turn her head, and doesn’t give any indication of knowing I’m here.

“You look beautiful today. I love your pretty pink nails.” I feel her fingers twitch just a bit in the palm of my hand. I believe she can hear me.

“I came today to thank you for doing the best job you could in raising Derek to be the incredible man he is. He’s so strong even with all of the pain he’s suffered. He’s a beautiful soul inside and out. I’m very grateful I met him. I love his tenderness, sensitivity, and the true emotion he’s willing to show the world. That’s *all* because of you.”

I continue to sit and talk to her without any response for well over an hour. I want to believe she can hear me, that she’ll know I’m here for her son. My eyes fill with tears as I look at our connected hands. It’s too hard to gaze into her blank stare. Brain aneurysms have made her shrink within herself and it’s heartbreaking.

“I want you to know if you’re ready to let go ... I’ve got Derek. I promise to be all I can be for him. I promise to stay

by his side for just as long as he lets me. I'll hold him when he's breaking, listen to him when he's hurting, and be a true partner. I know I haven't been in his life for a long time, but I love him. I haven't told him this, I don't think I've even admitted it to myself, but I do love him. I want him to reach the stars. No one will ever take care of him better than you, but I'll do my best. I'll stand at his side always through thick and thin and beyond."

Tears fall as I tell Derek's mother this, as I pour out my heart, feeling safe to do this with her in this room without feeling judged. Her fingers twitch a little more and it feels like she can hear me, like she's thanking me.

"I'll come back in a few days," I say, before I lean down and kiss the top of her hand. I don't really know this woman; I only know how much Derek loves her. I love him, so I want to be here for Diana. It's really that simple.

I drive home. It's not too much longer before Derek calls, asking me to come over, which I immediately do. From the tone of his voice, there's something seriously wrong. I show up and find him sitting in the living room, tears falling down his cheeks. I immediately come to him and curl up in his lap.

"What's wrong?" I whisper, kissing his cheek as he shakes in my arms.

"Mom passed," he tells me. He takes a deep breath and I sit in his arms and hold him.

"It was time for her to let go, but it still breaks my heart. I can't imagine this world without her in it."

"I know."

“She’s not in pain anymore,” he says. “She hasn’t been here for a long time so I don’t know why this is hitting so hard.”

“Because she’s your mom and you love her. We want to keep our loved ones with us because *we* need *them*. It’s also okay to let them go when it’s their time. It’s never easy, but it’s good to celebrate their life and appreciate all of the time we have with them.” I don’t know what else I can say.

He holds me, and I stay with him. I love being the shoulder for him to lean on. I made a promise to his mother, and I intend to keep my promise as long as he allows me to.

Derek speaks with his brothers, and they quickly plan their mother’s funeral, wanting to close the door as quickly as possible. I stay strong for him, then cry to my mother as I share my grief and what happened on my last visit with Diana. Mom doesn’t say too much, just offers her condolences.

When I get to the funeral with Derek, there are many strangers I don’t know until I look across the room ... and spot my mom. I nearly fall apart. This isn’t about me, it’s about him, but sometimes it’s difficult to stay strong for so long. My mother isn’t a person who offers motherly comfort or long conversations, but she is a woman who’s all about action and showing up when it counts. I move to her and give her a hug, thanking her for being here for me, for renewing my strength so I can offer it to Derek.

Mom walks with me to Derek and gives him a hug. “I’m sorry, Derek.”

“Thank you,” he says, fighting back the emotion that’s been pulling him down for over a week. Mom gives him a pat on his arm, then takes mine.

Nothing else is said ... nothing else *has* to be said. We all move forward and sit, and many people speak, telling of Diana's life, the good and the unruly. She went through many hard times, but she survived, she lived, and she leaves this world being loved and appreciated. We can't ask for more than that.

When Derek and I get back home, all alone, I hold him and vow again that I won't give up. I pray for the strength to keep this promise. I pray I'm who he needs. I pray he can let go of a ghost ... not add another one.

Chapter seventeen

Emmy

It was tough losing Derek's mother, but he's bounced back quickly, appreciating that she isn't hurting anymore, that she's finally free of the pain of being so broken on this planet. She's one more person he's lost, but this loss is more of a blessing, not because he wanted her gone, but because she's now free.

It's been a few days since I've seen Derek. We've been texting back and forth a lot, but it's not the same as being together. He's woken a hunger in me and now I want more. I've never been a greedy person, but I can see that happening when it comes to this particular man. I've never been loved the way he loves me, and I could easily become a sex addict as long as he's my drug. He won't emotionally let me in, but there's nothing wrong with showing me love physically.

It's fun texting though. There's freedom in a message on a phone, freedom to open up without the fear of judgmental eyes on you. Of course, Derek isn't the type to judge. He's honest and open almost to a fault. The only negative in this, is I don't know if I'm just one more friend with benefits, or if I'm the person he wants more with.

I'm in my living room when a girlfriend messages me. I read what she says several times. I'm not sure how I feel about

it. I'm not upset. If I have to describe what I'm feeling, it would be bittersweet. My ex-husband is engaged.

I go to the kitchen and pull out a bottle of wine. I don't normally sit at home and drink alone, but on this occasion I can do that without throwing any judgment my way. I don't hold any feeling toward my ex, but he was a big part of my life for a very long time. It's odd to realize we're both moving on.

I finish my first glass of wine a bit too fast, but it's good wine. I pour a second and am nearly finished when there's a knock on my door. I'm not expecting anyone, but hope still blooms in my chest as I move to the door, my wine glass still in hand. I open it and Derek is standing on my front porch, flowers in his hand.

"Hey," he says, a crooked smile on his lips that has my heart thudding.

"Hi," I reply, not moving.

His smile falls away as he takes a good look at me. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head, oddly feeling tears in my eyes. "Nothing's wrong. I swear. I know it looks like something's wrong, but I'm fine." I finally step aside so he can enter. He does, but he's looking at me like he's walking on eggshells. Do I really look this affected from a text message? If I do then I have more problems than I've realized. I feel nothing toward my ex so it's odd this is bothering me. Maybe it's because my life is so uncertain right now where my ex seems to have it all together.

I down the rest of my wine then move to the kitchen to refill. Derek raises his brows, but doesn't say anything. I'm

not drunk, but a slight buzz runs through me. It feels good.

“Do you want wine?”

He looks at the bottle. “It appears this one is almost empty,” he tells me with a slight chuckle.

“It’s okay, I keep plenty of extras just in case,” I say as I pour the rest of this bottle in his glass then move over and pull out another bottle.

Derek stops me as he places his large hands on my shoulders and spins me to face him.

“Talk to me, Emmy.” He’s still kind, but there’s also a command in his voice that makes me want to listen. My shoulders slump.

“I don’t know why this is affecting me. I don’t care about him. Maybe it’s just strange. Maybe it’s just making me face the mess my own life is in.” I’m not meaning to say this as a negative about him, but my life is messy right now ... just like so many other people’s lives are a mess at so many points in time.

He smiles. “Talk to me,” he says again, this time more gently. He doesn’t know what I’m talking about with my muttering, but he wants to know.

I sigh. “Okay, but I’m opening another bottle of wine and taking it into the living room with us. I have a feeling I’ll need it.”

It doesn’t feel right to talk about my ex-husband, but Derek’s spoken to me about his dead fiancée so I guess it’ll be okay for me to share more about my ex. We can’t hide these things from each other, not if we want to make this work. It’s

better to spit it out and get everything on the table. It's better for us both to know we've been shattered.

I open the bottle, pour myself a glass, and then we move to the couch and sit. We're not touching this time. He's a smart man and can feel that I need a bit of space. He waits, knowing I'm organizing my thoughts.

"I found out a little while ago that my ex is engaged. I don't really care about that, but it's made me dive back into the past. I'm trying to figure out how I've made so many mistakes in my life. I don't want to keep screwing up."

His expression doesn't change. He's looking at me with nothing but support. This is a huge reason I like him so much. He's good with people, always willing to listen, and never judging with his eyes. I'm not so sure he's the right one to talk to about this, but he's the one here, and I want to talk.

"After I graduated from college, I packed up all of my possessions and moved to Portland with only five hundred dollars to my name. I found a one-bedroom apartment ... and very quickly found a job. I loved the hustle and bustle of the city. At that time I wasn't made for small town living. I appreciate it now, but back then I needed action and movement, needed lights and music, and twenty-four-seven stores. I wanted people all around me. I didn't want to be left to my own thoughts."

He chuckles. "The city definitely moves at a fast pace," he says. "I've never been a fan of large cities. I like nature too much."

"I love nature too, but when I was younger, I wanted activity that had nothing to do with nature. I wanted adventure.

While living there, I grew over the next few years both professionally and personally. My career was invigorating. I climbed the corporate ladder, and I made a name for myself. I was feeling powerful for the first time in my life. I was doing it all on my own without help from my parents and without anyone knowing the trauma of my school years.”

“That’s great,” he says. “Sometimes the best thing for any of us is a fresh start.”

“That part was perfect, but against my better judgment I was still with my boyfriend from college who was also living in Portland and pursuing a career in finance,” I say with a sigh.

“Did you know the relationship wasn’t working between you or were you in denial?”

I nod. “Yes, I knew it wasn’t working because I wasn’t in love with him. He proposed and I told him yes, even though I was screaming at myself, my internal angel sending every warning signal there was, screaming mayday, screaming at me to stop, telling me I had to move on, and get away from him.”

“Apparently you didn’t listen,” he says. Our glasses are both empty and I refill them. I’m feeling better, but still speaking, needing to spit this all out. The wine helps.

“No, I didn’t listen. He wanted a quick wedding, so I planned it. His family was religious so I organized an elaborate Irish Catholic wedding with a huge poofy wedding dress and all of the stuff I hated. I wanted to get it over with. The less time I had to fester and freak out, the better. I knew it was wrong because I simply wanted to get it over with. Who in the world goes into their marriage wanting to get the wedding done and over?”

“We make less than smart decisions when we’re young,” he tells me. I remember how he got married knowing it was wrong. We’re so much more alike than either of us realize. We made many mistakes when we were young. Is that why we’re scared now? Are we worried that we’re still making mistakes? I sure as heck hope not, but I can’t deny I don’t have this thought sometimes.

“We got married then moved to Kirkland, Washington for his new job. I was scared. I knew moving away from established friendships and a great job would not only make me have to face my marriage but also make me face myself every time I looked in the mirror. I wasn’t ready to do that, but I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“What happened?”

“Well, he cheated ... a lot.”

Derek looks horrified. “And you knew?”

I’m embarrassed as I nod. “He wanted a polyamorous relationship ... I didn’t. I know how stupid this sounds now that I’ve had time to think about it. It’s awful. I overlooked his cheating because we were married, and I was simply trying to get along. I didn’t want a divorce, didn’t want to face the embarrassment of failing, and I didn’t want my family and friends to know what was happening.”

Derek takes my hand. “I’m sorry, Emmy,” he says, his eyes filled with sadness.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore. I don’t know if it hurt all that much then,” I assure him. “I don’t think I ever really loved

him. That's how I put up with it. You have to love someone for them to hurt you."

"How did it end?" he asks.

"My breaking point was when he told me that it was time for me to get off of birth control. He wanted us to start a family."

"And he wanted to keep cheating?" Derek asks with horror.

"That was a given. I'd be the nice little wife at home while he did whatever he wanted. I told him it wasn't that I didn't want to have children, I just didn't want to have *his* children. That was the beginning of the end."

Derek chuckles. "Yeah, that might do it."

I smile at Derek. "I left him and moved back here. I was completely broken. I left our house, let him have the profits, the furniture, left it all. I only took what fit in my vehicle. I failed at my marriage. I needed to be where I was comfortable and familiar. My dad was here, my mom was here, my friends were here. Dad had been sober for several years at that point and had gotten remarried. Mom remarried as well. That first time we worked out together was right after the separation. I was a hot mess."

"I think you looked pretty great," he says, and I chuckle. "I'm not guzzling my wine anymore. I do feel better getting this all out ... a lot better."

"As I told you, Dad and I had a special connection through athletics. It's where we've always bonded the most. Dad was a collegiate athlete and one of the best at the time he was in school before he was drafted into the military. While I was

miserable in my marriage, Dad kept telling me about this trainer he'd worked out with several times. He said the man was the best of the best and he'd never met anyone like him before. He also told me he used to be a police officer, but he quit the force."

Derek looks at me a little shocked. "So you knew about me?"

"I didn't know it was *you*, but I knew all about his trainer."

"Then what happened?"

"Dad asked me to come train with him. He said it would be healing to my soul."

"So you did," Derek says.

"So I did."

He smiles. "And as they say, the rest is history."

I chuckle, not thinking I'd be able to do that a few hours ago. "Well, the rest is still to be written."

We grin at each other ... and then we stop talking as he pulls me into his arms. I forget all about my ex as he kisses me. There's no chance of thinking about anyone other than Derek when I'm in his arms. I hope he feels the same way about me ...

I can't make another mistake. I've made promises I'm going to stick with this man no matter what, but if I can't break through his walls, I can't stay. Where will we end up? I guess that's to be determined.

Chapter Eighteen

Emmy

I wake up warm and content. Derek is next to me, and I love it even more. As much as I fight to not fall too quickly, it's already too late. There's something drawing me in to him, and there's no use in fighting it. The only sad spot in my heart is not knowing if he's going to be able to give me as much as I'm willing to give him.

You'd think after my failed marriage I'd be more skittish. I guess my ex didn't break me. Then again, is it truly possible to break someone when you aren't that invested in the relationship? Probably not. I had more challenges in my life that were tough on me, the dissolution of my marriage wasn't one of those. That hurt my pride far more than it hurt my heart. In fact, losing my dog after seventeen years was far more painful than losing my ex-husband.

Derek stirs, and I cuddle closer. I don't want to face the day yet. I have an early shift at the bar, but I can lie like this for at least another thirty minutes before I have to get moving.

"Good morning," Derek says in a deep, sexy growl that has my hormones going all over the place.

"Morning," I reply. I'm still a bit sleepy, even if my body doesn't realize it.

“I could get used to this,” Derek says. I’m not looking at his face as my head is resting on his solid chest. Sure, it hurts my ear a bit because he’s so damn hard, but the comfort of lying against him makes up for any discomfort.

“I know what you mean. I’m nice and warm and cozy,” I reply.

His hand rubs up and down my back, his fingers glazing the curve of my butt. Heaven, I’m in pure heaven. It makes me wonder how a moment like this can be perfect and in the next moment it all gets shattered by one argument or difference. How do relationships start off wonderfully and then erode so quickly? Maybe because we choose people for the wrong reasons.

Am I choosing correctly now? I feel like Derek’s my person, like we’re supposed to be together. Even with all of the odds stacked against us, I still feel this way. What’s meant to be will happen. I won’t force it, but I won’t run from it either ... even if that might be easier.

“I have a full day at the gym today, but I don’t want to leave this bed,” he tells me.

I smile. This is such a difference from even a few weeks ago. I love it.

“I work the early shift today,” I tell him. “We could both call in sick.” I’m only partially kidding. I snuggle up a bit tighter against him.

He chuckles. “Don’t tempt me,” he says as he grips me a little tighter and pulls me in. My leg goes over his, and I feel his arousal, taking me from turned on to molten in a heartbeat.

“Temptation is the sweetest sin,” I say. Then I make the decision for us as I sit up and climb over him. I don’t hesitate as I slide my body over his, sighing in pure delight as he fills me. I don’t want foreplay, I just want us connected where I feel the very closest to this giant of a man.

We stop talking as he grips my hips and thrusts up inside of me again and again until we both cry out in pleasure. I fall against him, his heart thundering in my ear. This is perfect. This is right. This is where we both belong.

With reluctance we climb from bed. My shower is too small to share so I quickly clean, then dress as he showers. We only have time to grab toast and coffee before we both rush out the door of my house ... but not before making plans for him to come back later tonight.

I float through my day at the bar. It’s Tuesday so we aren’t super busy, and I keep myself occupied with customers and co-workers as I count down the hours until I can be with Derek again. Will this need ever dim? I sure hope not. Life goes on, and the infatuation of a new relationship eventually ebbs into something more comfortable, but hopefully we can keep the magic alive if we put real effort into it.

As I leave work I make plans to always keep it alive as long as he allows me to do this. I think we sometimes get lazy in our relationships. I have to take at least some accountability in the failure of my past marriage. I wasn’t in love with him, so I stopped trying. That doesn’t make what he did right, but I can at least acknowledge I didn’t care enough to stop it. I certainly don’t feel that way when it comes to Derek.

I make plans, then sit and wait for him to show up, my heart thundering. I've never done something like this before. I've never anticipated being with a man so much it makes my entire body ache. I've never put in this much effort. It scares me, but I'm secure in how much he desires me, giving me the courage to do what I'm about to do.

He knocks on my door, and I click the music on as I tell him to come in. As he opens the door, his eyes widen and he smiles, stopping in his tracks as soon as he shuts the door behind him. I'm standing in the living room, the curtains shut, my body barely covered in black lingerie.

"I've missed you today," I huskily tell him.

"I've thought about you every minute of the day," he replies, his sexy voice deep and turned on.

"Take a seat," I suggest. He walks toward me, and I shake my head. "Nope. You have to sit," I insist.

He looks as if he's going to argue, and he can certainly overpower me, but he seems well aware I want to be in charge. He decides to play along, which I'm grateful for. It's not about who's stronger, it's about being equal in this relationship. We've both had heartache and failures, and now we're starting this relationship on neutral ground.

I begin dancing, swinging my hips and running my hands over my curves and through my hair. I've never done this for another man. The most dancing I've done is in my bedroom while music blasts as I prepare for my day, but I want this to be the best performance of my life. I don't want even a chance of another woman on his mind while he's with me. I want to be his everything.

He watches as I slowly strip away my lace and silk, turning my hips, bending, touching, and licking my lips. The desire is clear in his gaze, and he clenches his fists together, forcing himself to stay seated while I seduce him without laying a finger on him, his eyes on me only.

Never breaking eye contact, I sway my hips to the music, then turn to show him my back as I unclasp my bra and let it slide down my arms before tossing it behind me toward him. I run my fingers down my naked hips and thighs, taking the sheer straps of my panties with the movement, lifting my ass in the air for him to gaze at.

I linger for several long seconds, my ass in the air, the position screaming *take me*. I hear him panting behind me, his breathing unsteady as he lets me finish my performance. I move my feet apart, widening my stance, giving him a view of everything, letting him see how wet and hot I am for him.

“Emmy,” he growls, just about out of patience. He wants me, and this makes me feel like a superstar.

I turn around unashamed at my nakedness. I like my body and I love that he wants to worship it as I want to touch and taste every piece of him. I slowly walk to the couch and drop to my knees, slipping my fingers into the waistband of his pants. I tug and he lifts his hips, allowing me to pull off his sweats. His erection pops out and my mouth waters at how swollen he is. I reach down and cup him, lightly squeezing. His eyes don't leave mine as he groans at the touch.

I bend and run my tongue around his swollen package before lightly moving up along his shaft, then circling his head and gently scraping my teeth against his steel. He gasps as he

cups my head, his fingers tugging my hair as his body tenses. I close my lips over him and suck before moving down, using my tongue and lips to drive him wild.

I love having this strong man as putty in my hands, making him lose control. I love his taste and feel. I suck him harder as I slowly move up and down his pulsing shaft. I go deeper, taking him into my throat and sucking harder, making him moan in pleasure.

He's shaking as I take him deeper and deeper, sucking, licking, coming all of the way to the tip and gently nibbling. His fingers are tight in my hair as he guides me, guttural sounds of pleasure escaping. I'll never have enough of this man.

"Enough," he growls as his fingers tighten in my hair and he rips me off of his shaft. My time for control is over as he rises, rips his shirt off, then grabs me and marches to the bedroom. The hunger in his eyes nearly makes me come without a single touch from him. I'm shaking, so turned on I could pass out, and ready for him to take over.

He tosses me on the bed with a growl before climbing over my body. He slams his mouth against mine and kisses me breathless, his tongue tracing every inch of my mouth before he rips it away and moves down my neck. Now I'm under his control, wiggling beneath him as he sucks on my neck before biting me, making me cry out in pleasure.

"I need you," I demand, wanting us to be one.

He moves up and kisses me again as his hard chest flattens my breasts, my nipples rubbing against him, aching in the most delicious way. He pushes my legs apart, lining himself

up against my heat. He rests there, teasing me, making me wait. I push up at him, needing him more than I need my next breath.

“Please,” I beg. This began with me teasing him, but now I don’t want to play. Now I want to *feel*. He slams inside of me, no gentleness to be found, and I scream as the first tremors of an orgasm rocks through me.

He doesn’t go slow and gentle. He pulls back and slams home again and again as I cry out. One orgasm morphs into the next and tears stream from my eyes at how good it feels. He cries out as he releases his own pleasure, both of us shaking as I grip him while he empties inside of me.

It takes a long while before we both float back to reality. We’re sweaty and breathing heavily ... and I still want more. I’ll never have enough of him, never. I’m completely his. I’ll have him forever if he’ll accept. I pray he does because I’ll never find this again. He’s it for me, through the good and the bad. I’m in love with him. I think I have been for a very long time, maybe since the first time I saw him. Each new day I simply accept it a little bit more even if it terrifies me.

He turns us and I cuddle up against him. I don’t need to talk, I simply need the security of his arms around me. This is it. This is us ... and I’ll do all I can to stay right as we are right now.

Chapter Nineteen

Emmy

It's Valentine's Day, the ultimate day for romance, the day all couples should be together, showing their love and appreciation for one another. It's the day of chocolates, flowers, jewelry ... and lots and lots and even more lovemaking ... and I'm alone. I'm not sure if I'm alone because he's truly busy working ... or if he just doesn't want to be with *me* on this romantic day.

I'm trying not to care. I've never cared about this stupid Hallmark card day before, but I'm also not confident in where I stand with Derek. This makes it so much harder. I want him to *want* to be with me today ... and it isn't going to happen. I can't sit at home any longer or I'm going to drive myself absolutely mad.

I climb into my car and call my dad, just to hear his voice. He answers on the second ring. Dad has been great, especially in the past few years. We've worked together, gone skeet

shooting, hiked, and he's even taken me bow hunting a few times. He's been here for me when I need someone so badly. Whatever I ask him to do, he rises to the occasion. Right now I just need to hear his voice.

"Hello, kiddo," he says, his voice cheery.

"Hey, Dad, what are you up to?"

"I just finished a good dinner and now your step-mom is reading and I'm sitting back watching the news," he says with a chuckle. I don't bring up the fact that it's Valentine's Day. If they are both doing their own thing then they probably don't care. Many couples don't celebrate it not because they don't desperately love each other, but because they show their love year round and don't need one particular day to spoil their partner.

"That sounds very boring, Dad," I say, giving a forced laugh.

He pauses for a few seconds, telling me I'm not acting as well as I thought I was. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, I'm just going for a hike," I tell him.

He again pauses. "You and Derek aren't spending Valentine's Day together?"

I feel my throat tighten a little which makes me mad at myself. "No, he's working." I don't add that he's mourning the loss of Kelly today. I *really* don't voice my fears of him being with another woman, having meaningless sex. He won't cheat on me. I know he won't, but I can't understand us not spending the day together. Maybe I should've said something to him. It's too late now and it won't do either of us any good

if I bring it up after the fact. Maybe he doesn't even realize it's Valentine's Day. I shake my head at this thought. That's just plain stupid. There's no chance the day can pass without him being aware.

"It's pretty late to be hiking the mountain," Dad says.

"No, it's perfect. There shouldn't be a lot of people out, and I've gotten faster since that first time I went with Derek," I tell him, putting false cheer in my tone.

"So, you want to run the mountain in the dark and cold?" he asks.

I laugh. "I'm going to lose reception, Dad. I love you. Have a great night," I tell him. I don't give him a chance to say anything more before I disconnect the phone. I don't want him to know my heart's broken, don't want him to know this day does matter to me. I don't want others to be angry with Derek because I feel that I'm not getting enough. This is between us and only us, and we either work it out or we don't. We certainly don't need to add more people into our relationship ... we have enough between us now as it is.

I arrive at the mountain at dusk, then run my heart out to the top, pushing myself harder than I have before. If I push hard, there's no room for tears or sadness. I can do this, I can make it. This is just a stupid day that doesn't mean anything. Derek and I are close. I know he's letting down more walls. I just need to have patience and not let my own insecurities break us apart.

I'm at the top of the mountain, my hand on the monument when my phone rings. My heart lodges in my throat as I pull it out. I feel a moment of heartbreak that it isn't Derek, but that

quickly evaporates as Dad's name flashes in front of me. I almost don't answer, but if he's calling me back it might be important.

"Where are you?" he asks as soon as I click the green button.

"What do you mean? I'm at the top of the mountain taking life in," I say, my voice still a little breathless.

"Okay, I'm almost there," he says, making my heart skip a beat.

"What do you mean you're almost here?" I question as I look around. No one is out tonight. I haven't passed another single person. That's because they're most likely together doing what lovers are supposed to do on this day. I cringe as I have this thought. It's petty and stupid and I need to pull myself together.

"As soon as we ended our call, I grabbed my shoes and walked out the door. I didn't want you to be alone tonight," he says.

That's it, the tears I've been holding inside come back with a vengeance and spill over.

"You're here on the mountain?" I say to confirm.

He chuckles. "Almost to the top," he tells me, his breath coming out in pants. This really is a steep mountain and my dad's hiking it just for me.

I hang up the phone, then quickly make my way to the trail and move down, darkness surrounding me. I quickly see the light from his headlamp and run the final distance to him, rushing forward and giving him a hug.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” he tells me as he pulls out a flower he must’ve plucked from the vase he most likely got my step-mother. It’s silly and yet it warms my heart beyond measure.

I laugh, feeling joy that I have such an incredible father.

We turn around and go back to the top of the mountain, and what a world of difference it makes to have my father at my side now. He loves me and doesn’t want me alone on this day of all days.

By the time we turn around, it’s pitch black. Dad has his headlamp and I have my cell phone flashlight. We have to take it easy so we don’t trip, and we hear night creatures stirring about. It’s absolutely perfect. Dad showed up for me without me having to ask. He could tell by my voice that I needed him.

We come down the mountain, then have a snack before Dad goes back home while I make the long drive back to my empty house. This too shall pass, and I’ll be fine because no matter what happens I’ll always be surrounded by love. I’ll never be broken again ... not by a man ... not even a man I love with all of my heart.

Chapter Twenty

Derek

It's odd how one day can be so drastically different from the next. A person can be sitting at home crying while gorging on Oreos and milk on a Monday, then laughing while fishing with friends on a Tuesday.

I've lived in utter misery for years, simply existing in life while pasting a smile on my lips so the world won't see that I've forgotten how to live. That all changed when Emmy came into my life. It's impossible to feel misery when this woman makes me want to fly. Even with how she makes me feel, I still screw up all of the time.

With her, I've been laughing, burning, and living again. The guilt I felt for moving on has ebbed. I know Kelly would've wanted me to be happy, but the oddest part of all of this is I'm not so worried about what she'd want anymore. That's the guilt I'm feeling now. Kelly was a chapter of my life I don't want to take away, but that story has ended ... and I'm feeling guilty for doing what I should've done a lot sooner.

I'm in a new story now. How can I think of another woman when Emmy is in my life? I can't. That would make me a monster, and I don't want to be that person. It's been a month

since I had this realization and began letting go of my past. But even while I let it go, I won't fully sever the ties.

Emmy and I have gotten into a routine. We spend more nights together than we do apart, and on those rare nights we aren't either at my place or hers, I miss her, my bed feels cold, and my arms are empty. We haven't talked about moving in together and we haven't said the three little words that solidify a relationship, but we're certainly a couple. We don't hide from our neighbors. We've gotten nothing but good vibes from the people in our small town.

We get up each morning and take a run, come back inside, and have breakfast and coffee. We sometimes go to the bookstore, Emmy's favorite place, and have a delicious breakfast and coffee while we visit with Cassie. Everyone in our town has accepted that we're a couple. I'm still holding a piece of myself back, and I know this could make me lose her, but I'm not sure how to release this final puzzle piece. I'm sure I'll figure it out with a little more time.

We both work our jobs, then we meet at my place or hers, cook dinner together, watch a movie or play a game before falling into each other's arms. The sex is phenomenal. It's never boring. I discover a new place on her body each time I touch her, and the way she touches me takes me to another world. I don't want to admit I've never felt such desire for another person because that thought fills me with more unnecessary guilt.

I make it to the bookstore and open the doors to the smell of cinnamon, making my stomach rumble. I like this place. I

like it even more since Emmy is such a fan. I move to the coffee counter where Cassie is.

“Good morning, Derek,” she says as she looks behind me. “Where’s Emmy?”

I laugh. “Am I not allowed in here on my own?”

She chuckles. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you come in on your own.”

“Emmy had an early shift today and I was craving your cinnamon macchiato,” I tell her.

“Ah, you’re drinking sugar today,” she says with a wink as she moves to the machine to begin my drink.

“Yeah, Emmy got me hooked on them. I’m not too worried as I had a great workout already and there’s more to come.”

“Then you better try my cranberry scone because it’s to die for,” she suggests.

“Better make it two because I’m starving.”

She laughs as she finishes my coffee, hands it over, then warms the scones. “You look happier than I’ve ever seen you,” she says.

I pick up the scone, take a bite, sigh with pleasure, then look at this woman who came to town looking pretty broken herself only a few years ago.

“I could say the same about you,” I tell her.

She gets a serious look on her face. “This town is magic. Somehow broken souls find this place and we’re never the same again. I had such a miserable childhood, but I don’t think

about that anymore. I have everything I need and so much more here.”

“I know what you mean,” I tell her. “I wasn’t even sure I wanted to live when I arrived. I still have days that are harder than others to get out of bed, but it seems they are less and less as time passes.”

“That’s because you’re allowing yourself to live again. There’s nothing wrong with that. We only have so many years on this planet before it’s over, and each and every day should be beautiful and fulfilled. We *choose* to be miserable when that’s what we want to be. There are factors involved in this, but if we’re living a life that brings us down, it’s up to us to make changes. I’ve done this and I’m much better off because of it,” she tells me.

“Happiness *can* be a choice,” I admit.

“No, happiness *is* a choice. If we’re depressed, it’s up to us to change our lives. I understand that’s not always easy to do, and sometimes we need to make changes in stages, but I truly believe we’re the makers of our own destiny. Sure, people hurt us, and there are circumstances out of our control, but we have to take accountability for ourselves. If we’re so dependent on someone else to make us feel a certain way, we’re failing. I love my husband and children more than anything else in this world, but I’ve also learned I have to find my own identity separate from them. This makes all of us happier.”

I think about her words as I finish my scones and sip my coffee. “It’s not always easy to do.”

“No, it’s never easy to do, but it’s worth it. We have to love ourselves first, then we can love others.”

I don't know if I even love myself. I don't think I've given myself permission to do that in a very long time, if ever. Maybe it's something I need to consider. I decide to take Emmy a coffee so I have Cassie make two more, then I walk away from the bookstore with more on my mind than when I walked in. She's a wise person, and I'm glad she came to this town. I'm glad I came as well.

The bar isn't far from the bookstore, so the coffee is still hot when I arrive. About a dozen people are inside eating lunch when I walk through the doors. Emmy looks up from the other side of the place and her face lights up when she sees me, filling my heart with warmth. Whenever I come into a room she looks at me like I'm the sun rising on a cold day. Do I look at her the same? I'm a fool if I don't.

"What are you doing here?" she asks as she rises on her toes to give me a quick kiss.

"I wanted to bring you coffee," I tell her.

Her eyes fill with tears before she blinks them away.

"That's so sweet."

Am I such a terrible boyfriend that she's getting all misty-eyed over me doing something so simple as bringing her a coffee? I don't like the thought of this. It tells me I need to be doing a lot more for her because she sure as heck does a lot for me.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you, so I decided another minute wasn't passing without a kiss," I say, and she beams at me.

She looks over to the bar. “Dillan, I’m taking a break,” she calls out and he nods.

Emmy takes the coffee from me and the two of us walk outside. It’s a warm day with a light breeze blowing and it makes me want to take a hike. We both have to work, so that isn’t happening now. She has the day off tomorrow, so I’m going to take her out for sure.

We move to one of the outside tables and sit. She moves on the bench with her legs up as she leans against me and I wrap an arm around her. This is my favorite way to sit, my favorite place to be.

“I don’t want to go back inside,” she says with a chuckle.

I rub her stomach, feeling comforted with her in my arms. “I know what you mean. We could run off,” I suggest.

She laughs. “I like Dillan too much to do that to him,” she says.

“He’ll be fine. It’s not busy in there.”

She looks like she’s thinking about it. “I never call in,” she says with a smile in her voice.

“Let’s play hooky,” I say, meaning it. I have one appointment this afternoon, but I can change it. I want to take Emmy into the woods and get lost together. I want to spend time with her. There’s something pulling me to her more than usual.

“Let me see if Dillan will mind,” she says. She jumps out of my arms and rushes back inside. I immediately feel empty without her with me. I think about what Cassie said. I don’t want to be dependent on Emmy for my happiness, but I want

to find a balance where I appreciate and value her as well as myself.

She comes out a few minutes later, her purse wrapped around her shoulder. “He told me to have fun,” she says as she laughs.

This wasn’t what I was planning when I came here, but I’m glad we’re doing it. I call the gym and let them know to make some calls because I’m taking the rest of the day off, then I grab Emmy’s hand and we walk away from the bar toward my house.

We talk as we move down the street, then go inside, change, and head out to the trails. Our day is perfect. Emmy is perfect. My walls come down a little bit more. It’s not going to be long until there isn’t a single brick left keeping my heart from becoming fully hers. I just have to make sure this happens before she gives up on me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Emmy

Derek pulls up to my house, a huge grin on his face. I stand on my porch and can't help but laugh. Seeing him filled with this much joy, makes me smile. I'm so damn in love with this guy it's terrifying. I've told myself a million times not to get obsessed, but there's simply no stopping it.

"Like my new toy?" he asks.

"How can't I like it? It's beautiful." He's referring to his brand-new truck. "Little boys and their toys," I add with another laugh.

"Hey, baby, I'm a man. There's nothing boy about me," he says before leaping up onto the porch and pulling me into his arms. He no longer hesitates to hold me. I love this more than anything else.

"Where are we going?"

"We're meeting Dillan and Lexa at the winery."

“Oh, now this sounds like a good time,” I say, excited.

“And best of all, Dillan and I have agreed to be designated drivers so you girls can let go.”

“Well this is even better now.”

The two of us head into a beautiful day with the sun shining in through the windows. I love feeling like we’re in a real relationship, that we’re doing adulting things, having a double date with Dillan and Lexa. If we can hold on to this, then we’ll be great and nothing will come between us.

We arrive at King Estates and move to the tasting room where Dillan and Lexa are waiting.

“You made it fast,” Lexa says as she rushes over and gives me a hug.

“Of course we did. As soon as Derek told me what we were doing, I practically leapt into his truck.”

“I know, we don’t get out enough,” Lexa says.

Only a few other people are milling about inside since you have to schedule a time now instead of just walking in. The boys really planned this out for us, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

“Welcome,” the man behind the counter says.

He then pulls out several bottles of wine and we begin our tasting while he tells us about King Estates. I’ve lived in this area for a long time and have never been here before so it’s a real treat. The boys aren’t skimping either; they’ve chosen several pricier bottles of wine including a 2016 Domaine Pinot Noir, 2019 King James Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, 2015

25th Anniversary Pinot Gris, and more. Each one tastes better than the last.

“The concept of biodynamic farming was introduced in 1924 when German scientist Dr. Rudolf Steiner was called to help address a decline in the agricultural health of farms. The doctor traveled from farm to farm, teaching how to integrate the local ecosystem into farming techniques. He urged everyone to think of their farm as a living organism instead of a factory, making those who chose to do so more self-contained, self-sustaining, and regenerative,” the man tells us. It’s interesting, but I’m more into drinking and visiting than a history lesson at the moment.

We taste all of the wines, then choose a bottle and move to the outside dining area where the sun shines down on us as we order an early dinner. This place is one of the nicest in the valley, but it still feels homey, and being here with these three people makes the experience even better.

We order rustic estate sourdough bread with house-churned butter, an artisan cheese and meat charcuterie board, salads, venison tartare, grilled oysters, and more. We’re going to be drunk and very full by the time we leave.

“When is your next competition, Derek?” Lexa asks.

He shrugs. “I haven’t done one for a while. I’ve been focused on building up my gym and helping others, so I haven’t competed for a while,” he easily replies.

“You should do it if you love competing,” I tell him, reaching over and running my hand down his thigh. The

burning look he gives me says I'm most certainly doing something right.

"It was important to me at one point, and it might be again, but there are other priorities right now," he says with a shrug.

"We can live our lives and be responsible, but we shouldn't give up our passions while we do it. I don't ride as much as I used to, but sometimes there's nothing else that makes me feel better than jumping on my Harley and eating up some miles," Dillan says.

"I love rides," Lexa says, giving her man a flirty smile.

"I love having your arms around me when we ride." Dillan leans over and gives her a kiss hot enough to make us both blush. He releases her and she picks up her glass, her fingers trembling a little.

"I love that too," Lexa says.

I rub Derek's thigh, very happy being here in this moment, but also more than ready to leave and get this man all to myself. I shake my head as I sip from my glass. However, we have to do other things than have amazing sex.

"Do you know what I want to do?" Everyone looks at me. The knowing sparkle in Derek's eyes assure me he knows my mind has been in the gutter.

"Yes, that too," I say with a laugh, making him blush a bit, which I truly enjoy. I turn and look at Lexa. "I want to take one of those pottery classes where we paint, drink wine, and laugh a heck of a lot."

"Oh, I've never done that, but it sounds amazing," she quickly agrees.

“If the guys come, it will be *really* entertaining.”

Derek and Dillan look a bit horrified. “Or, you girls could go and we can play Top Golf,” Derek suggests.

“That’s no fun,” Lexa says with a pout.

“It sounds good to me,” Dillan says as he winks at his wife. It’s impossible to even pretend to be upset that they don’t want to paint pottery. I’m feeling too dang great just by being here with the love of my life and good friends.

We continue eating and sip our wine as the sun begins to set over the horizon, all of us feeling an indescribable contentment at being with one another. I’m so glad I came back home, so glad to have wonderful people surrounding me.

By the time we leave it’s late, and I’m certainly more than a bit tipsy. Derek gives me a heart-pounding kiss before helping me into his truck. I love this new vehicle, because the middle console lifts up, allowing me to slide over next to him as he makes his way down the mountain. I’m not only tipsy, I’m incredibly frisky.

I look at him as he controls the truck, then I pull off my shirt, making him swerve the slightest bit. I’ve never done this before, and I’m not quite sure how I’m so brave right now. I reach down and rub up his thigh, my fingers grazing his hard package straining against his pants.

“You’re going to get us killed, woman,” he growls.

I smile as I lean over and run my tongue along his neck. He makes it around a corner and sees a driveway to whip into. I look out and laugh when I realize it’s an elementary school

parking lot. It's a dang good thing it's late and no one's around.

As soon as he turns off the truck and scoots his seat back, I climb onto his lap and bring my lips to his as I push against him. His hands glide along my body as he explores my curves with his strong, confident touch. Our mouths collide hungrily, unleashing a current of desire that nothing can stop.

We're growing more and more lost in this moment, oblivious to anything around us. The heat of our bodies pressed together is intense, consuming us in a lick of flames I want us to burn ... just as long as we do it together. Derek rips his lips from mine, then holds my cheeks as he gazes at me in the dim light from the dashboard. I look back, memorizing every single detail about this man I love so deeply. I can't take it for long before I move forward, taking his lips once more as I reach between us, tugging on his jeans ... and very thankful for the skirt I'm wearing.

I pull him from his pants, his arousal pulsing in my hand as I squeeze his hard flesh and he moans against my lips. He reaches down and rips my panties from me, the delicate material shredding without a fight. I lift up, then guide him inside me as I slide down his length as a moan rips from me at how good it feels for us to be connected.

He holds my hips as he begins moving. We quickly find our rhythm as I push down hard before he lifts me back up again ... and again ... and again, our climaxes drawing closer. I don't want this to end, but nothing's going to stop the explosion we're both about to feel.

The orgasm rips through me as I lean back, a cry echoing in the truck. Another push deep inside of me, and Derek cries out, our voices mingling, our breaths fogging up the windows. Nothing else matters except for being together. I'll never have enough of him.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him how I feel ... until I see red and blue lights flashing behind us. My heart thunders all over again ... and this time it has nothing to do with pleasure. The windows are foggy, but I'm very aware I only have seconds to straighten myself out.

Derek swears as I leap back to my seat while lifting my shirt and ripping it as I force my arms inside. There's a knock on the window as I look over to see Derek zipping his pants. I realize my shirt's on backward and inside out. There's not a dang thing I can do about it now.

I'm sweating as Derek rolls down his window. We look like we've been doing *exactly* what this officer knows we were doing.

"Do you both realize this is private property?" a stern voice says, making me wince. I'm shocked when I see Derek laugh, giving the man a sheepish grin.

"Hi, Bill," he says, and I gape at Derek and the officer who's looking at Derek with shock.

"Derek?" he asks as if he can't believe it.

"Yep, it's me," Derek says.

"What are you doing here?" Bill asks, glancing over at me while I try to act casual, though there's no way in hell I'm pulling it off.

Derek's smile grows even wider. He's not embarrassed about this at all. "Just stopped to check the oil," he says.

Bill gazes at him for a moment before he bursts out laughing. My cheeks heat to molten and I know I'm as red as a ripe strawberry at harvest. I look down at my hands, unwilling to meet the gaze of this officer Derek's clearly friends with.

"Checking the oil? Good one. You need to come up and have lunch with the gang. But for now, you need to get the heck out of here. You might want to wipe the steam off the windows first," Bill says with another chuckle.

"I'll come see you all soon," Derek says.

Then as quickly as the officer showed up, he turns and leaves again. Derek leans back in his seat and chuckles.

"Well, that hasn't happened since I was sixteen up on lover's point," he says.

"Checking the oil?" I say, mortified.

He grins at me. "The oil was very ... wet ... and slick," he tells me as he grabs his sweatshirt and begins wiping down all of the windows while also blasting the defroster.

This day has been both one of the best and the most mortifying of my life. As he pulls me close to his side for our long drive home, I realize I'll take the embarrassment over and over again if I get to feel this close to the man I love. I'm in so much trouble when it comes to Derek, more trouble than I care to admit. I'm in so much trouble I don't care anymore ... just as long as I get to stay with him forever.

Chapter twenty-two

Emmy

I'm excited as I load up my backpack and then pace the house, waiting for Derek to pick me up. We're getting out of town. I had no idea how much I needed this until he suggested we take off for the weekend on a camping adventure. He said all I need to do is pack clothes; he has the rest covered.

Derek shows up early. I open my door and grin when I see two kayaks sitting in the back of his truck. I grin in excitement. I've never used one before and I've always wanted to.

“Are you ready for an adventure?”

“I'm more than ready. Can't wait.”

We load my two bags, then climb in the truck. He has country music blaring and I dance in my seat as we begin the two-hour drive to Crane Prairie Reservoir. I've camped many times with friends and I love every moment of it. I've never camped here before, though and never with a man, and the thought of being all snuggled up with Derek in a tent is quite appealing.

We chat on the way to Bend, Oregon, and I can't quit smiling as we arrive at Crane Prairie Campground on the northeastern shore of the reservoir in the Deschutes National Forest.

“What are we going to do here?” I ask.

“We’re going to hike, fish for trophy rainbow trout, and enjoy nice hot fires,” he replies.

“Trophy trout?” I ask.

“Yep, that’s why I wanted to come here. The kayaks are made for fishing. The current record at this lake is nineteen pounds, which is huge for a trout. This place is beautiful. We might also spot some cool birds while we’re out like osprey, blue heron, kingfishers, and of course bald eagles.”

“I’ve never been much of a birdwatcher, but I was once on a jet boat and saw an eagle swoop down into the water, spear a fish, then take it up into a tree. It began eating it right then and there. I was equal parts horrified and fascinated.”

“Nature isn’t kind,” he tells me. “But it’s all the circle of life. I’d rather be out in the woods than indoors any day of the week. I’m glad you like doing this,” he tells me as he pulls up to the office. “Give me a minute and I’ll get us checked in.”

He hops from the truck and goes inside. I undo my seatbelt and step out so I can stretch. We live in a beautiful place along the river, but something is different about being in a campground. I like being out in the middle of nowhere too, but there’s something nice about an actual campground with showers and a bathroom. I don’t need an RV, but I like to have some conveniences nearby. I can do either, but for Derek and my first trip, this is ideal.

Derek comes back. “We’re close to the shore of the lake,” he says with his usual grin. Even though this man has dealt with so much pain, he still gives a first-class smile. He’s

trying. I assure myself we're going to be okay, because even though he's dealing with loss in his life, I believe he cares about me. He wouldn't bring me here away from everyone else if he didn't.

We get to our site and Derek pulls a bunch of items from his truck. I help set up the biggest tent I've ever seen. This man is over six feet tall and he can stand in it. I didn't know they made tents this big. He pulls out a woodstove and I laugh as he takes it into the tent and sets it up, the stack going out a precut hole.

"I didn't know you could have a fireplace in a tent," I tell him.

"It's my hunting tent. We often go places that are well below freezing and need more warmth than a sleeping bag provides. I love camping, but I also love to be comfortable," he says.

He gets the stove set up, then we blow up a huge air mattress that I immediately have to lie on. It's as comfortable as my bed at home. I wasn't sure what to expect on this trip, but so far, it's perfect in every way.

We spend nearly two hours setting up camp, then he pulls me into his arms and kisses me. "Thanks for coming. I feel so much peace when I'm out here."

"Thanks for the best date I've ever had."

"It's just beginning," he tells me.

"If we did nothing else but hang at this camp, it would be perfect because I'm here with you," I say, meaning this.

He kisses me again. “Okay, we better get out of here before I drag you into the tent and we don’t see anything other than each other’s naked bodies,” he tells me as he pulls back.

“That’s my favorite view,” I say with a laugh.

“Mine too ... other than a nice fish on the end of my line.” I laugh as I shake my head. We move to the truck and he drives to the boat ramp. We place the kayaks in the water, and he gives me a quick lesson, then we’re off.

We spend an hour close along the shore in our kayaks, which are more fun than I thought. They aren’t tippy at all, and I never want to stop. He arrives at a place, looking at a device hooked to his kayak.

“What is that?” I ask.

He grins. “Fish finder. We have a bunch beneath us.”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“Nope, they can choose to bite or not, there’s nothing wrong with knowing where they are,” he assures me.

I’ve fished before and don’t need help as I get my pole ready. We both cast into the water about the same time. It doesn’t take long before I have a bite. I set my hook, then laugh as I begin reeling. It’s a little harder in the kayak, and in my excitement, I rock the boat but don’t spill over. In a less sturdy model I’d probably be in the water, losing all of my equipment.

Derek is reeling too, and we both pull up about the same time. I shout with joy when I see my fish is bigger than his. I pull it into my boat and do a little butt dance as I take out my hook, then place the fish in my small cooler.

“Looks like we’re having fish for dinner,” I tell him.

“We need a lot more. I’m always starving after a day outdoors and can eat about three or four of these all by myself,” he says.

“I have no problem with that. I love fishing and will be happy to spend the entire day on the water,” I tell him.

He gives me the most open smile he’s ever given me, making me fall more in love with the man than I already am. Every day I’m with him, I fall more and more and more and more.

By the time we finish fishing, we have fourteen trout ranging between about four and ten pounds each. I also catch a largemouth bass and two crappies. I totally out-fish Derek and love every second of it. He fishes often and I don’t, so I’m throwing a lot of good-natured taunts his way, making him laugh.

“Want to take a longer ride before we head back to camp?”

“Definitely,” I tell him.

We get a nice steady paddling pace going, giving us a workout as we move along the lake. We can see boaters out in the water, kids having fun skiing, and other people fishing. There are other kayaks as well. It’s a gorgeous day and this place seems to be a great destination.

As we move along the water we see Osprey Point where artificial nesting platforms have been erected after natural snags toppled from age. There are a lot of huge birds flying around, most likely eyeing us, sensing we have fish on our

boats. There's no doubt they'd dive down if our coolers were open.

We pull up to Crane Prairie Resort and dock our kayaks as we get out on wobbly legs. "I guess I have sea legs," I say as he holds me so I don't tip over.

"We've been on the water for about five hours so that's expected," he says as he wraps an arm around me and we move up the dock to the resort. I see a sign, and stop to read it, then burst out laughing. Derek turns to see it, then joins me in laughter.

If you come across a bear, never push a slower friend down even if you feel the friendship has run its course.

"That's hilarious," I say.

"We are in bear territory. They don't want to hang with the tourists though, so I think we're fine here."

"I've never worried about animals. I know there are attacks, but they're rare," I tell him. "However if we're running, I might have to trip you."

"I can fight a bear," he assures me as he flexes his massive bicep.

"You might be able to." The man is huge. I'm sure a bear will run in the other direction if it spots him. I love how safe I feel with Derek ... physically at least. Sometimes I don't feel as safe emotionally. He has the power to rip my heart out.

We move to the resort and I have fun looking around. They have a store and I purchase a few snacks, even though he brought a lot of food. I don't know why, but I have to buy food from these stores because it always seems to taste better. I'm

also always hungry when I camp, but all I seem to want is junk food. They have a bait and tackle shop that Derek purchases some items from, boat rentals, showers, and laundry facilities. A person could stay here year-round if they wanted to. There are times I wouldn't mind living on the road, traveling from campground to campground, to get away from the conformity of a city.

We sit on a picnic bench and eat a light lunch, not wanting to ruin our appetites for our delicious dinner tonight, then we finally head back to the docks and climb into our kayaks again.

The way back to our campground is easy. We chat and laugh and spot all sorts of animals. Maybe we can extend this trip beyond the weekend. Heck with our work responsibilities. This is heaven and I don't want to give it up. He's all mine here, I feel it in my very soul. This is away from any other memories. This is just ours.

We arrive back at camp as evening sets in. We spent eight hours on the lake and at the resort, about the most perfect day ever.

"I know I said it was a perfect date when we arrived, but it's more perfect now."

"I agree. This is the best date I've ever had." Sometimes the way he looks at me makes me feel like the only person in the world. I need to let go of all of my insecurities and embrace the moment, be fully here with Derek, and show him it's safe to love me even if I don't always feel safe loving him.

"It's going to take a bit to get dinner set up," he says.

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. I take pride in being the camp cook,” he says with a wink.

“Well I’m not going to complain about that. If you don’t mind, I’m going to take a shower. I smell like a fish,” I say with a laugh.

“Good idea. I’ll clean the fish, then take a quick shower myself. Take your time on yours.”

As much as I’d love to shower with him, the showers aren’t co-ed, so we go our separate ways. I take my time, inserting extra quarters to draw it out. Not all campgrounds have showers, which is a shame. I can go a couple of days without a shower if I need to while camping, but I always feel icky. This is much better.

By the time I get back Derek has a nice fire roaring, and a lot of food set up on a table. I spot chips and dip, and immediately go over and scoop up a salsa concoction with a tortilla chip, and pop it in my mouth. Delicious!

“You’re the perfect man, Derek. You love what I love, you’re gorgeous, you cook, and you give the best orgasms of my life. I might have to tie you up and keep you,” I tell him with a wink before I scoop more dip and eat.

He laughs. “I could say the same about you, Emmy. You’re the light in a very dark world. I like pleasing you,” he says.

“Well I like being pleased, so we’re definitely a match,” I tell him, and he laughs.

I take a seat in the comfortable double camping chair he set out with a blanket on it. I snuggle beneath the blanket as the

sun lowers in the sky, creating pinks, purples, greens, and oranges above us. Absolutely stunning.

There's nothing greater than the smell of a fire mixed with the seasonings he's using as he fries our freshly caught fish. My stomach rumbles as I watch him work three different pans over the fire.

It doesn't take long before he hands me a plate with perfectly cooked trout, grilled potatoes, and broccoli. It's all charred to perfection, and my first bite makes me groan with pleasure.

"There's something about cooking over a campfire that makes food go from good to orgasmic," I tell him.

"I agree, and you're going to get a lot of orgasmic moments on this trip," he says with a wink as he dives into his own plate. We each finish our meal, then get up for seconds. When we finish there isn't a single morsel of food left. We've cleared it all, which is saying a lot because he made enough for four people. I sit back, my stomach full along with my heart.

As our meal finishes we hear music from the site next to us and I smile. They'll have to turn it off in the next hour, but it's sort of nice to hear it now. I'm shocked when Derek stands and holds out his hand.

"Dance with me," he says.

I have to fight tears as I take his hand and he pulls me into his arms then starts swaying to the music, the fire burning behind our backs, the stars twinkling above us, and the lake lapping against the nearby shore. This is why I believe in

magic, because this right here is magical and there's nowhere else I want to be.

He holds me close as we sway to the song, then he leans down and kisses me. His lips are enchanting, and being in his arms takes me out of this world and into my happy place.

It doesn't take long before he pulls me into the tent, strips away our clothes, then gives me the promised orgasms. I fall asleep happier than I've been in a long time.

Chapter twenty-three

Derek

The rest of the world falls away as Emmy and I camp together. It's our final night and I'm not ready to go home. Three days isn't enough. We've laughed, fished, hiked, and shared more of our lives. We have so much in common it makes us a perfect match, but we also have enough differences that it makes us unique.

The more time I spend with Emmy the more I realize I can't lose her. I never thought I'd feel this way about another woman, but she matters to me. I wasn't looking for a relationship when she walked into my life, but now that she's here, I'd be a fool to let her go. If I don't pull my act together, I might have no choice.

The fire is crackling as we cuddle together beneath a blanket, looking up at the stars and sharing adventures we've had in life. She's delicate, but not frail. She has muscles and more strength than most people. She shows her strength with love though, not needing to prove herself to anyone.

She snuggles a bit closer as if she can read my thoughts. It makes me smile. "Tell me your best scary camping story."

She laughs. "I guess it's not a true camping trip without scary stories."

"Nope, it's certainly not," I tell her. "Now quit stalling."

She laughs again. “I’ve camped a lot through the years, let me think about it for a minute.” We both go quiet as Emmy comes up with her story. I already have mine to tell, but I want her to go first.

“Okay, got it,” she says.

I pull her a little closer as we enjoy the warmth from the fire. It’s quiet in the campground. We hear light conversations but not the words being spoken. We know others are around us, but it still feels like our own cocoon that no one else can come inside.

“I had a friend in school who went to a church camp every year, and I decided to go with her one year. I was thirteen years old, and we went to this place in the absolute middle of nowhere, about two hours away from civilization. It was a great camp, though, and I was more than excited with so many people in what I was assuming was a safe place owned by her church.”

“I always wanted to camp when I was young.”

She nods. “It was our third day of camp, and they had this huge pasta-bar dinner in the big lodge. Some of the parents would come to camp to visit before leaving again so none of us were shocked to see an unfamiliar man pacing around the otherwise all female camp. Dads came in and gave talks and then left again. It didn’t seem like a big deal at all.”

I feel myself tense a bit. This might not be a great story. I was looking for something spooky not traumatic. I don’t interrupt her though.

“So we had a process for eating, oldest to youngest since there were so many of us and we had to have some sort of order. We sat at tables in our own age groups. While we were waiting, that large, sort of dirty maybe fiftyish-year-old man kept walking around. He sat down at the head of our table. None of us said anything, assuming he was a father sitting with his daughter. The only red flag was how unkempt he was. The dads usually wore suits or at least polos. It was a church camp and the leaders dressed nicely even if the kids were in sweats and yoga gear.”

“I can honestly say I’ve never worn a suit camping,” I say with a bit of a chuckle. She doesn’t seem stressed as she tells the story so I’m a little less worried.

“It didn’t take long for the man to make small talk with us, asking all of us our names, what we liked, what was our favorite part of camp. We were a little uncomfortable, but we were taught to be polite, so we humored him since we seemed to be stuck with the man. He had this long gray beard and kept running his fingers through it, making kernels of food or who knows what drop onto the table, totally ruining my appetite, which I was bummed about since pasta bars are my favorite. I’d still do them now if I had enough people to feed,” she says.

“You can do one for me, I’ll eat it all,” I tell her, and she chuckles.

“He finally got up to get some food and we all began chatting, trying to figure out who in the heck the man was. No one knew him. We were starting to get a little panicked. There was so much chaos with the large dinner crowd, though, that we couldn’t get the attention of any of the leaders. The man

came back to our table and sat with this giant plate of meatballs in front of him. He didn't have pasta or sauce or cheese or anything, just a huge mound of meat that was nearly breaking his paper plate."

"Nothing wrong with balls," I tell her. She rolls her eyes. I don't even have to see it to know she's done just that.

"We were totally grossed out when he started picking them up with his dirty fingers, shoving them into his face like he was in a race to suck as many down as humanly possible. I'm not even sure he tasted or chewed them. It got more disturbing though." She pauses as a shudder runs through her.

"He looked at one of the girls and started saying some creepy things to her between bites. He told her she had beautiful, soft hair. He asked if it smelled just as good as it looked. The girl looked at him in horror as she tried to figure out what in the world to say to him. She was gaping at the man when he asked if he could massage her shoulders while she was eating. We all glared at him, wanting to get up and run. Who in the hell was this man? We were at a church camp and knew this wasn't at all okay."

I squeeze her tighter, wishing I could find this man and punch him in the face.

"The girl told him no and the man seemed mad as he kept eating his meatballs. He turned to another of the girls, and let me remind you, that we're all *thirteen* years old. He said to her, *do you see that? She has great looks, but refusing a man like that means she isn't wife material.* We were seriously scared now. Who in the heck says something like that to young

girls who aren't even close to marriage age? Let alone the fact that the man was old enough to be our grandfather.”

“Not a real man,” I growl.

“He asked her to come and sit on his lap. That was it. We now knew for sure this man wasn't supposed to be in our camp. One of the girls jumped up from the table and went to find the bishop to come and help us. The bishop came over and asked the gross man's name and which church he attended. He was trying to keep things civil, but it was clear the bishop was worried.” Another shudder runs through Emmy.

“The man then told the bishop that he lived near the campsite with his mother. He said he regularly visited the girls' camp. The bishop asked why he was visiting. The man said that he was looking for young, innocent wives to take back home. He'd failed so far since all of the girls he'd spoken with were too stubborn and selfish for a man like him.” I can't help but gasp at this.

“The bishop rounded all of us up and took us upstairs while other leaders kept an eye on the man and called the police. There were about a hundred of us crammed into the lodge's attic space for over an hour before the cops arrived. We really were in the middle of nowhere. All the police did was escort him off the property. There was nothing else that could be done since technically he hadn't done anything to us.”

I shake my head. I was a cop a long time and the laws that bind our hands sometimes really suck.

“We were all scared but eventually headed back to our campsite and were told to stay in our tents, to not come out at

all and to go nowhere alone. Many of the dads and a couple of the policemen stayed at the camp and patrolled to make sure the man didn't come back ... but he did anyway, however not before the leaders thought we were safe and people started going to bed.”

I clench my arms around her a little tighter.

“Sometime between the police leaving and the morning, the gross man returned. He knocked on the lodge door and asked the person inside if he could use the bathroom. He then pushed himself inside. The person said they were calling the cops again and the man turned around and disappeared back into the forest.”

“Did he get caught?”

“We didn't see him again, but the next few days were scary. A bunch of dads stayed at the camp and patrolled, but other than that activities went on as normal. They did a good job of calming us down, downplaying what had happened. They were on active alert and they did keep us safe, but it tainted what otherwise would've been a great camp with only happy memories. I never went back again. It really freaked me out. It didn't kill my love of camping, but it did make me more aware each time I went out after that.”

Emmy goes quiet and I hold her close, grateful nothing happened to her back then. “That could've ended a whole different way. I'm sorry.”

“I guess that's not exactly a *scary* camping story, but it was the scariest thing that ever happened to me when I was camping.”

“Now, you’d probably beat the crap out of the man.”

She laughs. “There’s no maybe about it, I’d kick his butt,” she says with confidence.

“I love how strong you are.”

“I like feeling capable. Now, it’s your turn. Tell me a scary story.”

“I’m not sure I can beat that,” I admit.

“Try anyway.”

I move away from her for a minute to add another log to the fire, then come back and pull her into my arms.

“You know my childhood so you’re well aware we weren’t a typical family that went out camping and doing family-friendly activities. I remember though as a young kid I found a Boy Scout handbook in a free book box and took it home, doing my best to learn everything I could about the great outdoors. We lived in poverty and my mom thought it was ridiculous to stay in a tent in the woods; she said we pretty much camped all of the time in the conditions we lived in. She thought the whole idea of camping like pioneers was foolish.”

“I know a lot of people who think that way. To each their own,” Emmy says.

I nod in agreement. “Needless to say, it wasn’t until I was an adult that I got to go camping for the first time. I collected all of the items I needed, then decided to make my first camping trip a real adventure. I was alone, doing an overnigher in the middle of nowhere. It went well, so I continued to do it more and more. It became a regular event

for me. It was all great ... except for one time.” I pause as Emmy shifts.

“Because of my work schedule I could normally only camp one night and one day, so I had to make the most of it. I’d have my vehicle packed the night before, then get off of work the next day and head straight up into the mountains where I’d set up camp and enjoy my evening in nature with a great fire, cooking delicious food that always tasted better in the mountains.”

“I agree,” Emmy says.

“I had one place I was the most in love with. There was a lake nearby and it felt like I was in the middle of nowhere. I rarely ever encountered another person, which I loved since I was living in the city and had to be around people all of the time except for when I camped. If I did see someone, we’d wave, say hello, and then both be off in different directions. I’d always fish, and usually have some for lunch that day. I brought other food just in case, but was always disappointed when I had to use it.” We’ve had fish two of our nights this trip and steak one night because camping isn’t camping without a night of steak, but there’s something special about a freshly cooked fish.

“This trip I was on had no cell service and the nearest town was about an hour away. The roads were bumpy and it wasn’t easy to get to. I set up my tent and was getting my fire ready. It was already dark, so I was using my headlamp to prep my food. I was just beginning to cook and it was close to midnight. The next day I’d get to fish and cook lunch before I

had to head home since I worked late.” I pause for only a minute as I remember this night.

“I’m cooking and walking around when suddenly this light shone right at me. It’s midnight and I should be all alone. I wasn’t as big back then, and I was well aware this shouldn’t be happening. It made my heart skip a beat. Who in the hell was there and were their intentions good or bad? I quickly moved behind the fire to put some space between me and this person who hadn’t spoken yet. I had a lot of thoughts going through my head, in fight or flight mode.”

Emmy squeezes my thigh.

“The person shifted his light, and I realized it was a young guy. He was wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a backpack that was hanging open. He had no shoes on. What in the heck was happening? His appearance made me worry even more. Was he homeless? Crazy? Did he have a weapon? Neither of us had spoken at that point.”

It’s funny how time changes what we think about situations. This one happened so long ago it doesn’t scare me anymore, but it does make a good campfire story.

“The man finally spoke, apologizing for scaring me. That’s when I knew he was either drunk or high because his voice was slurring. He began speaking a mile a minute, telling me he was out there with a couple of friends, and that his friend began acting crazy and pulled out a knife and started getting aggressive. He ran away from the friends because he was scared. He then began going off on weird tangents, telling me all about his favorite camping places in the area.”

“Okay, I’d be freaked,” Emmy says.

I laugh. “Yeah, I was freaked. The whole time he was speaking I was wondering if his so-called friends were his other personalities and if he was going to pull a knife out on me. I kept my distance from him, wondering how I was going to defend myself. I had cooking knives, but no other weapons. It got crazier still as he started telling me about how to hide a body, and the best places to do this.”

“Yep, I’d be gone,” Emmy says.

“The guy’s clothes were tight so I could tell he didn’t have any weapons on his person; the backpack was hanging open and I didn’t see anything in it, so I was gaining more confidence. I finally told him after a while that I wanted to get some sleep, so I’d like it if he left.”

“How did he react?”

“He handled it well. He told me to have a good night, we said goodbye, and he disappeared into the darkness.”

“Did you immediately leave?”

“I didn’t want to be chased out of my favorite place, but the longer I sat there with my dinner officially burned, I realized I was in the middle of nowhere with no way to call anyone. I thought this camping trip might have to be over. I was trying to decide when I started hearing people screaming. It sounded like a man and woman fighting. Then there was the sound of a car screeching away. There was one more ear-piercing scream from a female ... and then silence.”

A shudder runs through Emmy at these words, and she cuddles a bit closer to me.

“I decided I wasn’t in a safe situation. There was no way I could sleep there now. What if the man who’d just been in my camp had gone back and killed the female I heard? A car had driven off before the final scream, so that meant someone was still out there and he might be heading my way next, whether it was the man who’d already come to my camp, or possibly his friend he said had been waving a knife around. It wasn’t worth sticking around. I quickly packed all of my items in my car and drove away. I ended up sleeping in my car when I reached the small town nearby.”

“Did you ever find out if a murder happened?” This time I’m the one who shudders.

“I called the police and told them where I was that night and they went out there and found a woman who’d been stabbed. That’s all I ever found out because it was in the papers. I never went back there again. I didn’t camp at all for nearly a year, and then I went to the state campgrounds for a while after that. I eventually went back out into the woods, but not without being armed from then on. In all of the years of camping though, that was the only time I ever had a problem.”

“I’m glad it didn’t ruin your love of camping,” she tells me.

“Me too. I don’t know what would’ve happened had I stayed. I’m glad I don’t know. I do know I won’t let fear rule me. I’m not letting the predators of this world stop me from living. I am more cautious though.”

“I think we all grow more cautious as time passes,” she says.

“Then there are times we should let it all go and be free.”

“That’s my kind of heaven.”

We tell a few more stories as we sit by the fire making s’mores, then we climb into the tent and make love. It’s a perfect ending to a great weekend. I think we’re going to be okay. I think I’ll be okay with Emmy in my life. If I let go of the past, I see a shining future ahead of me. I’m my own worst enemy, and I hope I don’t sabotage myself in the process.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Emmy

As the sun begins to set, the city lights sparkle against the evening sky, the perfect backdrop for a romantic date I'm a bit too excited about. Yes, we've done the outdoor stuff, but we haven't been out on the town yet. Derek planned this and told me to dress to the nines, something I don't often get to do.

We've been driving for a while when we arrive at Sunriver Resort, my heart fluttering with nervous excitement. We don't have anything fancy in Ravish, so the drive makes the date even better, spending time in his truck, talking, laughing, and building a relationship I hope will last forever.

We're both dressed in our best clothes, and if I'm being honest, I'll admit I feel slightly out of place. I'm so used to jeans and tees, or yoga gear, that I've been stumbling a bit on the heels I'm wearing.

Derek comes around and opens my door, something I love, then takes my hand as I step down from his tall truck.

“This place is beautiful,” I tell him.

“Not nearly as gorgeous as you,” he says before leaning in and gently kissing my lips, making me sigh with pleasure. He’s finally looking at me like he sees me. It’s both exhilarating and terrifying. When he looks at me this way I feel his love and I’m scared it will be taken away from me.

Derek leads me inside and we’re quickly seated at a candlelit table. My hands are shaking. What is wrong with me? We’ve been out again and again, gone camping, spent endless nights together, and walk side by side on a daily basis. I think the thing that’s freaking me out a little bit is that this date makes it all seem more real than our normal daily activities. This is what I want ... but am afraid to hope will last.

Our waiter quickly approaches and we choose a bottle of wine. The restaurant is quiet, beautiful, and elegant. We’re surrounded by other couples, quietly whispering as they lean toward one another, sharing intimate moments.

We place our orders, and enjoy the wine as we wait. Derek’s driving, so he takes it easy, while I don’t hold back, loving the delicious red that’s smooth and fruity. Our first course arrives, and the food is exquisite, making me savor every bite. The flavors dance on my tongue, and mix perfectly with the wine I’m having too much of.

“I’m impressed. This is the first time I’ve come here,” Derek says.

“It’s my first time too. I’ve always wanted to come to Sun River, but we usually head to the coast instead of going east

when we want to play,” I reply. “What are your normal summertime activities besides camping?”

“It’s tough to narrow it down. There isn’t much I don’t enjoy about summer. I used to love going to the beach and playing volleyball with friends. You also know I can’t pass up a great barbecue with cold drinks on a hot day,” he says with a chuckle.

“I haven’t had a good beach volleyball day in forever,” I tell him, instantly smelling the fresh ocean air as I briefly close my eyes. “My favorite thing has always been going on hikes and exploring new trails, and of course, camping. I don’t like being cold, and the Oregon beaches are often too windy for me, but on those rare hot days, I’ve always made a beeline for the coast.”

“Our last camping trip was my favorite of all time. Maybe we’ll combine the two loves — camp at the coast *and* play some volleyball,” he suggests, warming my heart.

“I love it. We can bring the kayaks too and if the ocean cooperates, take them out.”

He laughs. “There might be one or two days a year the ocean is calm enough in Oregon for that. Then again, riding the waves in a kayak sounds like an adventure I’m willing to try.”

I love Derek’s sense of adventure. There isn’t much I don’t love about this man. “I’m getting excited just thinking about it. I’ll have to put a plan into motion. It’s not only fun once we arrive, but the road trip there is part of the adventure.”

“Some people hate road trips, but I’ve always loved them. There’s so much to explore in our country and being in the car allows us to stop and see anything we want,” he tells me.

“It’s a great way to make new memories,” I agree.

I’m feeling a bit tipsy as more of our food arrives. It’s all delicious but the portions are tiny. It’s certainly fun to come to these fancy restaurants, but I’m often still hungry when I leave. I don’t care though. I’m still loving every second of this time with Derek.

“There’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately. It probably sounds stupid, but I’m contemplating starting my own business.” I might not have said this to him if it wasn’t for the wine, but it feels good to voice something I haven’t told anyone else about. My fear of failure is huge, but the thought of it won’t leave my brain.

Derek’s smile grows. “That’s incredible, Emmy. What are you thinking of doing?” His enthusiasm encourages me to go on.

“I’m not sure what I want to do yet. I’ve considered a few ideas. There are a couple of spaces in town open. We have a great coffee shop at the bookstore, a great bar I currently work at, and the best gym ever created.” I pause as I think of things. “I want to do something that brings people together, that makes our community stronger, and that I’m passionate about.”

“That’s what I love most about our town. We’re a tightknit community, and each business that comes adds something special. There isn’t much to entertain the kids, though,” he says, making the wheels in my brain spin faster.

“That gives me something to think about. I haven’t explored business options for the kids.”

“Whatever you decide to do will be wonderful. You’re smart, one of the hardest working people I’ve ever known, and passionate in all of your endeavors. I’ll help you with anything you want in this new journey.”

I beam at him as he reaches over and takes my hand. “Thank you, Derek.” I have to fight tears; I’m such a baby sometimes.

Our bill comes and Derek pays, then places his hand behind my back as we exit the restaurant. We make it to the truck and he pulls me close and kisses me until my knees grow weak. He pulls back and gives me a smile.

“I’m still hungry,” he says with a chuckle that makes me laugh.

“Me too, but I wasn’t going to say anything,” I tell him. “That was incredible food, but the portions are made for five-year-olds.”

“Want to head over to Taco Bell in our fancy clothes?” he suggests as he wiggles his eyebrows.

I laugh hard. “Taco Bell nachos sound like heaven right now.”

We’re like two kids as we climb into his truck and drive to the nearest Taco Bell in Bend. Neither of us are in the least bit self-conscious of our fancy clothes as we walk inside, getting a few strange glances from the teenagers all giggling as they consume mounds of food.

Derek and I order nachos, tacos, burritos, and sodas, then sit at a table, giggling like the teens surrounding us. We gorge on the food until our bellies beg for mercy. This food certainly isn't fancy, but it's ridiculously delicious and hits just the right spot. This date will be one I'll never forget. The thought of driving back home for two hours seems miserable with how full I am right now. Derek seems to have the same thought as he looks at me.

"We should walk some of this off before a long drive," he says. He takes my hand as we begin a beautiful evening stroll.

The more time I spend with Derek, the more I fall in love with him. There's no doubt in my mind we've found something special. It's up to us to explore it, build it, and never let it go.

Approaching a park, we hear a group of street musicians playing. Derek picks up the pace as we gravitate toward the crowd. Without hesitation Derek pulls me into his arms and we dance, our bodies fitting together perfectly. Swaying to the music, lost in this beautiful moment, makes me feel like we're adrift in the middle of a romcom.

After a few songs, we move along and find a quiet place in the park to sit on a bench, cuddled up close as we look above at the twinkling stars above. We're living in a dream, and I never want to wake up.

"You don't talk much about your brothers," I say.

I can't see his face as I lean against him. I want to know everything about him, though, and want him to trust me enough to share.

He lets out a sigh. “We’ve never been close. Both of my brothers were out of the house and in the military by the time I was in middle school. I do have some fond memories of them though. One of my brothers loved playing Dungeons and Dragons. He had a great imagination and came up with the most brilliant story lines. I was good at the game and young enough to tap into that side of my imagination. The only time I ever felt connected was when they’d let me play with them.”

“Do you reach out to them now?”

“Not really. I don’t dislike them, I just don’t really feel like they’re family. We live different lives. We all had a lot of trauma from when we were young and we just went our separate ways. I was told I have PTSD from my childhood, from my career as a police officer, and well ...” He stops for a moment, takes a breath, then continues. “I don’t know if I do or not, but I don’t have a lot of memories from my childhood. It’s more vague recollections that I’m not even sure are real,” he says.

“What do you remember?”

“I recall certain moments of holidays or of riding my bike at my grandmother’s ranch. The most I talk to my brothers is twice a year, and we rarely take time to see each other. My oldest brother just received his doctorate in theology. That’s impressive. I attended his virtual graduation. The door isn’t closed, it’s just that none of us make our relationship a priority in our lives.”

This makes me sad for him. “You have to remember something special,” I push. Maybe I shouldn’t, but I have so

many happy memories from my childhood, and I want to pull something out of him.

He thinks for a moment and then chuckles. “Well, there is something silly I remember with my brothers.”

I sit up. “Tell me more.”

He laughs. “When we were young, we’d play pranks on each other. One summer, we were all home from school and decided to build a giant fort in our backyard. We used old blankets, pillows, and cardboard boxes to create this massive structure that took up almost the entire yard,” he begins.

I laugh as I picture these young boys building a huge fort. “What did you do with it?”

“We had many adventures in that fort,” he says. “We pretended to be pirates, explorers, and even astronauts. One day, though, we decided to take it to a whole new level.”

“Oh, how so?”

“We decided to rig a trap in the fort. We wanted to catch our dad and scare him,” Derek says as he chuckles. “We set up a tripwire with a bucket of water above the entrance. We were sure he wouldn’t be able to resist coming in our fort to see what we were up to.”

“Did it work?”

He laughs a bit harder. “It worked better than we imagined. Our dad came in the fort, and as soon as he tripped the wire, he got soaked. We all jumped out, laughing and shouting ... and running, knowing payback would be swift.”

“What did he do?” I ask, laughing along with him, his happiness infectious.

“He laughed, one of the best memories I have of my father ... before he left.”

The despair in his tone turns the good into sorrow. I want to pull him from those bad thoughts. “It sounds like you and your brothers were quite the troublemakers.”

Derek shrugs. “We had good times. That fort was one of the best things we ever made together, one of the *only* things. I sometimes miss those days.”

“Maybe you and I should make a fort together,” I tell him. If I can bring that laughter back to his voice I’ll build a dang castle with this man I love.

He turns me, and pulls me onto his lap. “I’ll build anything with you,” he says.

He kisses me and we once again get lost in each other, my favorite place to be. We kiss beneath the starlight until we’re ready to rip each other’s clothes away. Then we decide we’d better get back home ... if we can make it that long.

This will certainly go down as my best date ... not just because I’m with Derek, but because it’s unique and wonderful, and every single day with him is better than the last.

Chapter twenty-Five

Emmy

I wonder if it's possible to be happy for this long without the bubble popping. I feel like Derek and I have slipped into the most perfect routine. We're always together and I'm happy, so very, *very* happy. I don't want to wake up from this perfect world I'm in. Since we returned from our camping adventure, we've been closer than ever before, and it feels like he's happy. For once I don't feel like I'm competing for his attention. It's making me comfortable. He still hasn't told me he loves me, but I'm okay with it. He *shows* me his love, and I'd rather have that than words any day of the week.

We both have a couple of days off and we've been at his place with a view of the river, sitting outside on his back deck naked, making love, eating, and repeating. I want to stay in our bubble forever.

The two of us watch the sun go down, painting the sky in beautiful colors as the air cools. Since I've been with Derek, I've changed. I'm happier, more confident, and feel more love than I knew was possible. I'm sore a lot too. I've always been into fitness, but having as much sex as we've had is a workout beyond anything that happens in a gym.

"I don't want to go back to work tomorrow," I tell him, always sad when our days off end.

“We can always quit and live naked in a tent in the woods,” he suggests as he pulls me closer to his hard body. We cuddle close together on the cushioned lounge, only a light blanket covering our naked bodies. A part of him means what he’s saying. If only it was sensible to do that.

“It’s incredibly tempting, but we might eventually miss other people.”

“Who needs people when we have each other,” he says with a laugh. He then leans down and runs his lips across my neck, sending a shiver through me and making my heart beat out of control.

“I see your point,” I say, wiggling against him as all of my senses wake up. They don’t ever fully go to sleep when I’m with this man. I’m in a constant state of arousal I pray will never end.

I shift on the seat and he clings a bit tighter to me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks with a chuckle. I love how much he enjoys holding me. This big strong man is quite the romantic. It’s only one of the reasons I’m in love with him.

I don’t move far as I grab a cushion and drop to my knees in front of him. I move the blanket down and whisper my fingers across his arousal.

“Ohhh,” he groans, immediately swelling. My mouth waters as I grip him, feeling the strength of him as I squeeze. He’s hot and throbbing and fills me with desire as I touch him.

His hand drops into my hair and he tugs while I lower my mouth and run my tongue along the length of him, causing this

big, strong man to shake beneath my touch. He groans again as I close my lips over him and suck.

I shift on my knees and moan, my lips vibrating, bringing him even more pleasure. I know exactly what makes Derek squirm, and it brings me as much pleasure to please him as he gets from it. I love his touch on me, but I love pleasing him more.

I nibble on his tip while I run my fingers up and down his length. He's shaking beneath my touch as I suck him harder before lowering my mouth and taking him deep, wetting his steel.

Derek groans louder as his fingers grip my hair and he begins thrusting up into my mouth while I suck and lick, taking him deeper each time I consume him. He's losing control and it makes me soar. The more he loses it, the more pleasure I feel. My core is burning and tingling as I suck and lick, my fingers squeezing him hard. He's trembling, telling me how close he is to letting go.

"Stop," he growls, his fingers tightening more. I don't release him as I tighten my lips around him and suck harder.

His fingers leave my hair, and he reaches down, cupping my breast in his hand and squeezing. I moan as my lips surround his thickness, and he throws back his head as he shudders, his hips thrusting up, taking him deeper in my mouth. I move faster on his shaft while his fingers circle my nipple and pinch, nearly sending me over the edge as I bring him close to exploding.

I suck harder and feel him stiffen. Almost there. He squeezes my nipple again and I gasp, my mouth loosening on

him. He shocks me when he rips me away from his shaft, his hands grabbing me and lifting me up.

He turns my body so my ass is in the air, close to his face. I move back down and circle his shaft again as he holds my bare ass and bends, gently biting me on the cheek. I moan and take him deeper as he pushes two fingers inside me, making me scream, my mouth vibrating against his shaft.

I suck him as he pumps his fingers into me, then bends, his tongue tracing the line of my ass until it reaches my core where he flicks my clit, nearly making me explode. It takes all I have to keep sucking him as we both come close to falling off the edge of bliss.

I suck him, but lose concentration as he licks, sucks, and plunges his fingers inside me. I groan and fight the orgasm building within me. This is supposed to be for him, but he's turned the cards, and now it's my pleasure I'm focusing on.

He flicks his tongue again and I release him as I scream out, a powerful orgasm rocketing through my body. My fingers tighten around his shaft as I shake in his arms, his tongue still circling my core, his fingers deep inside of me. My body turns to liquid beneath him, and I collapse against his hardness.

He pulls me up, my back against his hard chest, his hands circling me to play with my breasts as my butt rests against his thickness, which is pulsing beneath me. I feel moisture dripping from his tip, showing me how close to the edge he is.

I'm still trembling when he lifts me up, then pulls me back down, my body easily sliding over his, his thickness penetrating me in the most beautiful way. No matter how

many times and in how many ways we come together, it only gets better. When we're one, I feel whole. I stop thinking as he grips my hips, holding me in place as he lifts, slamming hard inside of me. I've pushed him over the top, and he's sweating as he draws nearer to that sweet explosion we desperately seek.

I reach behind me, hold his neck, and push against him as we move as one. I can't get enough of him inside me, can't get enough of his hands on me and mine on him. His hand grips my breast as his other holds my hip. He pumps harder ... faster, and with each thrust I draw nearer to the edge. I'm on fire, my body hot and tingling, my breath gone. He pushes faster, his breath on my neck, my name on his lips.

With one more thrust I shatter around him, squeezing him tight as he moans, pushing harder, drawing out my pleasure as he finds his own. With another thrust he lets go, his body trembling beneath me as heat fills my insides. We shatter as one, as it should always be.

We lie exactly as we are while the tremors rise and fall, his hands wrapped tightly around me, his thickness pulsing inside of me. "I love you," I gasp, unable to stop the words.

He leans forward and kisses my neck and I smile. He's showing me his love, and it's beautiful. Everything about us is nearly perfect. I'm not sure we need to reach total perfection. I like right where we are.

"I can't imagine my life without you, Emmy," he says after a moment. I wiggle against him, with him still pressed inside of me. He twitches and I love this power I wield, love his desire for me.

“You don’t have to. I’m not going anywhere,” I tell him. I need to assure him he has nothing to fear with me. He’s lost so much already I don’t want him to ever fear I’ll abandon him.

Derek lifts me off of him and I whimper, not wanting to lose our connection. I like him resting within me. But he turns me so we can look into each other’s eyes. I smile as he leans forward and kisses me soft and sweet. He cups my cheek.

“Things won’t always be perfect between us, but I do appreciate you. You’ve made me feel like living instead of simply existing. I can’t say the right words to tell you how much this matters,” he says.

“I’m so glad we’ve come into each other’s lives.”

“Me too, Emmy,” he replies.

He kisses me again and I feel him stir beneath me, which makes me chuckle. He grins before he stands, keeping me in his arms. He carries me inside, sets me down, and starts the bathtub. Once it’s full we climb inside and stay until the water cools. We dry off then climb into bed together and he holds me ... and I’m right where I belong.

Chapter twenty-six

Derek

It's a beautiful day, the sun's shining, a breeze blows gently, and critters scurrying around. Even with the beauty of the day, I'm restless. It doesn't matter that I'm sitting with Booker, looking at the river where I should be at peace ... my mind's restless.

I've been filled with despair for so long that I start worrying about how happy I've been lately. I was used to being alone, used to misery. I'm almost ashamed at the joy that's begun to take over the longer I'm with Emmy. I sip on my cup of coffee and try to pull myself out of my own head.

Not much takes my breath away as I'm used to pushing myself hard each and every day, but when I'm with Emmy it's almost like I can't breathe. She's gorgeous, talented, and has so much faith in me it's hard not to lose it around her.

When we first came together, I didn't think it would last long. I didn't think I'd be capable of ever loving another woman. I realize how stupid that was. If I didn't want to fall in love again I never should've dated a woman. I certainly shouldn't have fallen into a relationship with Emmy. She's not the kind of woman a person doesn't fall in love with. I'm well aware there's a line of men hoping I'll fail with her.

My inability to let go of the past still hurts her. She hides it well, and always has a smile for me, but it's absurd that I still haven't worked through my shit. I'm not quite sure when I'll fully pull it together but each new day I feel I'm doing better. If I was a better person I never would've put her in this position. I'm not a better person though. I need her more than I feel guilty about hurting her.

"Do you just show up at my place for the view or to sit here brooding while you drink my coffee?" Booker asks as he takes a seat next to me.

I laugh. "You do have a better view than I have, and I like that you're farther out of town," I tell him.

"What's running through your mind right now?" Booker asks.

I sigh. "I'm going to lose Emmy if I don't pull my crap together," I say, not sure if I'm shocking him or myself more with the words. Emmy has been wonderful, but I see the pain I cause when I don't tell her I love her, when I go off in my own head. I'm happy with her, but I'm still holding onto the past. This will break us apart if I don't figure it out.

He's quiet for a moment. "Well, then you better fix things because you'd be a real fool if you push that woman away. She's about as perfect as a person comes to being."

"I'm well aware of this," I tell him.

"You're hooked, Derek. You have to suck it up, stop acting like a child, and admit to yourself you can't live without her. She loves you. It's more than clear to everyone around."

“I’m afraid I’ll hurt her more by staying than by walking away,” I admit.

Booker scowls at me. “You can be such a damn fool. You’re right though, you will hurt her if you walk away, but she’ll survive because she’s strong. The question is will *you* survive seeing her with someone else?”

Even before he’s finished speaking, I’m shaking my head. “The thought of her with anyone else fills me with rage, sadness, and the need to destroy people.”

“That will happen,” Booker says. “She’s too amazing to be alone for long. I’m not sure how she stayed single in this town for so long. It’s simply because all of us could see how she’d been looking at you from the first time she spotted you. There was a connection, and it’s only grown stronger through the years.”

“We have something real. I also have my own damn issues that keep me from giving her everything she deserves.”

“It’s impossible to push things completely away, but you better do something about it. When you have gold in your hand you don’t trade it for copper,” he says.

I lean back and think about his words. It’s a few more minutes before I speak again. “Can you hold gold twice?”

Booker gives me a disappointed look. “You can keep comparing her to something that’s lost or you can appreciate her for who she is, not what she isn’t.” He shakes his head. “You don’t deserve her, Derek.”

His words sting, but he’s right. I don’t deserve her. She’s always been too good for me. That doesn’t mean I’m willing

to let her go. What do I do? I'm not really sure.

"I know she's not Kelly, and I know she's perfect for me. I'm just a fool," I say.

He nods. "You sure as hell are. Kelly is dead. Accept that, and let her go. Do whatever it is you have to do, but let her go. If you can't, then let Emmy go," he wisely advises.

We both sit back as I think about his words. He's right. We both know it. Am I going to listen or will I damn myself?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Emmy

Derek and I walk along the quiet street, our footsteps echoing against the pavement as I share my day with him. Derek's lost in his thoughts, but I'm used to this now. Sometimes if I just keep talking, it pulls him out of his melancholy. Today doesn't seem to be one of those times.

We move along, drawing closer to my house and I squeeze his fingers. "Is everything okay, Derek?"

He takes a long moment before answering and I feel my stomach tense.

"Not really," he finally tells me. I have to fight back tears.

I stop walking and turn to face him. "What's going on?"

Derek won't meet my gaze, which isn't good. "It's just ... the date of Kelly's death is coming up soon and I can't shake this feeling of despair," he admits. I feel the knife stabbing me ... again. "I know I need to be here for you, and you alone,

and I can normally pull out of this funk, but today isn't a good day."

I listen to him, my heart breaking, but once again, I push my own pain down. I love him, and I know he loved another woman before me, and he's grieving this loss. I need to have patience and be at his side. But when is enough, enough? When do my needs matter more than the needs of a ghost? I matter. I suck in a breath and tell myself he's hurting and it's more important for me to help him right now. When I'm broken he can be here for me ... right?

"I'm here, Derek," I tell him. "This is hard, but we'll get through it together."

Derek looks at me, his eyes shining. "I'm afraid I'm going to lose you."

I shake my head, a small smile playing at the corners of my lips. "You're not going to lose me," I assure him. I'm saying the words, but I'm not sure I can keep this promise. Each time he falls into this dark place, it kills me a little more. I want to be supportive, but how many times can I be stabbed before I die?

Derek retreats into his own world and leaves me on my own. The only reason I'm still holding on is because of how much I love him. I might not have all of this man, but I have a part of him. Is it enough? Maybe I have to be honest with him. It terrifies me, but we'll eventually drift apart if I don't share what I'm feeling.

We turn and walk the final distance to my place. A tear slips from my eye as we move into the living room. I've been keeping this in for months. Derek's been grieving his dead

fiancée for a very long time. I want nothing more than for him to move on with his life. This fills me with guilt.

“Derek, I need to be honest. I don’t know how long I can keep doing this,” I admit, my voice shaking with sadness. “I can’t always paste on a smile and pretend everything is perfect when it’s clear you’re in love with another woman.” The words aren’t harsh, but they are the truth.

He doesn’t say anything, but his eyes flick to mine for a brief moment before he looks to the window. I feel his withdrawal.

“You have to talk to me,” I practically beg. “Bottling this up isn’t helping us. It’s not healthy for you or me.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Em,” he finally says, his voice strained. “It’s not like I’m not trying ... it’s just hard.”

“I understand it’s difficult,” I tell him. “But I can’t keep living in the past with you. We have a life together, Derek. I need for you to let the past go and live in the present with me ... with *just* me.”

“That’s much easier said than done,” he tells me. “I loved her. We had a future planned together ... and then it was gone in the blink of an eye.”

“I understand,” I tell him. “But she’s gone and I’m here. I’m not a consolation prize. You have to start living in the here and now. It’s okay for you to be happy again ... for you to have a fulfilled life.” Derek is silent as his gaze stays fixed on the window. I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. I’ve begun this and I have to follow through on it.

“I love you, Derek. I also can’t keep doing this if you’re not willing to work alongside me. I can’t keep being second best to a memory.”

This makes his head snap back to me, his gaze meeting mine.

“You aren’t *ever* second best, Emmy. You’re *everything* to me. I just ... I don’t know how to let go of her.”

“Then we can figure it out together as long as you don’t shut me out or make me doubt myself. You can’t do this alone,” I tell him.

“How do I forget about her death?” he asks, his voice anguished. “I know it’s been years, but it still holds on.”

“You don’t forget about her death, you just accept it, let her go, and move forward. That’s not betraying what you had, it’s appreciating that time in your life ... then closing the door. You’ve shut yourself off from the world for long enough for something you had nothing to do with. Her death wasn’t your fault. I’m here, standing before you, willing to give you everything. It’s up to you if you want to accept this gift or not.” I hold out my arms to him, inviting him in, inviting him to be my partner.

Derek opens his mouth as if he’s going to say something, then closes it again. He gazes at the window once more, then sighs heavily as he runs his hand through his hair. He finally looks at me, pain etched in his features.

“I don’t know what to do.”

I move to him and reach out. He doesn’t pull away from me. We stand together as the minutes tick by. I’m close to

being broken. I have to remind myself of how strong I am.

“I’ll try harder,” he finally says, his voice barely above a whisper.

I give him a tentative smile. “Good. Because I don’t want to lose you, Derek. But I can’t continue watching you destroy yourself ... and destroying us.”

He squeezes my hand, but doesn’t pull me close.

“I won’t let you down,” he assures me.

“I know you won’t,” I say, but I’m not sure I believe this.

Derek looks at me, understanding in his eyes. He knows we’re on the brink of something that’s either great or tragic. It’s up to him to determine which way we’re going to go.

We head into the kitchen and make dinner together, the rest of the night subdued. He doesn’t leave, but we also don’t make love. I lie awake for hours with him asleep at my side. We’re at a turning point, and I’m not quite sure of which way it’s going to go.

Chapter twenty-eight

Emmy

Something has definitely shifted with Derek and me. He's pulled back even more since our last conversation about Kelly and I'm not sure what I can do about it. How in the world can we go from such highs to extreme lows? It's almost too much to bear.

We're out of town today, though. He had some shopping to do, so we're in the valley. We've been running around all morning and he's said all of the right things, and he's held my hand, but I feel a thick wall between us. I don't like it. I'm starting to realize I don't deserve it either.

Even knowing all of this, I can't walk away from him. We've come this far, and I don't want to take steps back. We've officially been together for over six months. That means this will last, doesn't it? I hate the doubts.

We're coming out of Costco, he's pushing the cart and I'm looking at my shopping list for the next store, when a voice calls out Derek's name. I look at him and see him stiffen before a fake smile appears on his lips. I glance over and see a beautiful woman walking to us.

"Derek, I haven't seen you in forever. How are you?" she asks as she stops in front of us and then gives him a hug.

“I’m great; how are you?” he asks. He’s tense, though. Maybe most people wouldn’t notice this, but I know him well enough now to know he’s uncomfortable.

The woman turns and smiles at me. “I’m Amy Smith,” she says.

“Emmy,” I tell her, holding out my hand. She shakes it. She seems friendly if not a little reserved.

The woman looks between Derek and me before focusing on Derek. “Are you two a couple?” she asks. It’s not in any way malicious, just curious. I feel Derek tense.

“We’re friends,” he says before I’m able to say anything. The woman’s eyes narrow the slightest bit as if she realizes he’s lying. The stinging in my chest almost drops me to my knees.

It’s not like I need this stranger to know Derek and I are a couple, but to have him deny our relationship hurts ... more than anything I could’ve ever imagined. I don’t know why he’s doing it, and don’t know who this woman is, but this is the first time with him that I feel dirty, like a secret he wants to keep locked away. It’s something I never want to feel again.

The woman chats with us for a few more minutes, turns, then leaves. Derek is silent as we move to his truck. We load the items into it and climb inside. I don’t say a word to him. I’m not sure what I want to say. I don’t know what any of this means. I only know that I’m hurting badly. Are we hiding our relationship now?

“I’m sorry,” Derek says after we start driving. We’re supposed to hit another store, but he turns, and I can tell he’s

taking us home. Our fun shopping day is over.

“Why?” I ask him. I’m not sure if I’m asking why he’s sorry or asking why he just told this woman we’re only friends.

He lets out a sigh and it’s a few more minutes before he speaks again. I don’t make it easier for him, which I almost always do. I wait to hear what he has to say. This is one of those moments that either make or break us.

“That was Kelly’s best friend,” he finally tells me, and coldness washes through me. Of course it has to do with his dead fiancée. What else could it be?

I nod my head. “I understand,” I say even if I don’t. I’ve been supportive through this, but how much longer am I supposed to be his girlfriend and still live in the shadow of another woman? I think not much longer at all.

We don’t talk much on the drive home. He turns on the music and I fight tears. When we get back to town he pulls up to his house. I don’t want to go inside. We climb from the truck, and I move up to him and wrap my arms around him because I can’t help but do it. He clings to me as if he knows he’s screwed up and wants to make up for it. He can’t right now, not when I’m hurting.

“I have some things to do at home. I’m going to stay there tonight,” I tell him, trying to keep my voice neutral and calm.

He looks down, our eyes meeting, and I see pain in his expression. I want to help him, want to make it all better, but right now, this is about me ... not him. He nods and doesn’t try to fight me. He leans down and gives me a kiss, then lets me

go. I leave immediately and make it home before I allow any tears to fall.

I pour myself a glass of wine and pull out my computer to do a search for Amy Smith. It takes a while to find her, but I finally do. It doesn't take long to find pictures of her and Kelly together, laughing, the posts showing a deep friendship.

She has a new post. She doesn't say Derek's name, but there's no doubt in my mind that it's about him. She's talking about not appreciating being lied to, that sometimes a person needs to rip off their bandage. I can't tell what she thinks about him dating me, but I clearly see she doesn't like that he lied to her.

I wonder if she'll call him, demand answers from him. I wonder what I'll do next. I drain my glass and shake my head. I know what I'm going to do next. I'm going to cry tonight, then tomorrow I'm going to get up and pretend it didn't happen. If I don't do this, I'm going to have to leave him ... and I can't ... not yet at least. Why? Because I love him. It's truly that simple ... for now.

He's not cheating on me, not lying to me, and not abusing me. He's hurting me, that's for sure, but it's because he's still in love with a ghost. I hope he'll let her go. If he doesn't, I'll somehow find the strength to leave him. I'm not there yet, though ... but someday soon, I might be.

Chapter twenty-nine

Derek

I shoot up in bed, my body covered in a sheen of sweat, my heart thundering, and tears in my eyes. I look over and shake as I see Emmy soundly sleeping, a smile resting on her lips. A tremor runs through me. I'm not being fair to her. Every single time I begin to think I'm healing, I have a setback like I just had.

I was dreaming. Kelly was still alive, and we were married. We had two children and were playing together at the park, her laughter ringing out while our little girl giggled as she demanded to be pushed higher in the swing. It was so damn real I still see it in my head. The thing is though, Kelly's face was blurred. I'm already losing the image of her in my mind.

As we were playing at the park, clouds came in and a bolt of lightning shot down from the sky, hitting Kelly right in the heart. She screamed out my name as she fell. I ran toward her, but no matter how fast I ran, I couldn't get to her. Then the kids began screaming as they were pulled up into the clouds. I couldn't save them ... I couldn't save any of them.

"It was a dream," I quietly tell myself. Emmy stirs but doesn't wake. I want to pull her into my arms, tell her about the nightmare, have her assure me everything's okay. But it's

not okay, is it? It's never going to be okay, not as long as I hold on to a ghost.

I have this incredible woman lying next to me and I'm losing her. No, that's not true, I'm not losing her, I'm pushing her away by letting a ghost come between us. These are dreams of my past. I'm not doing anyone any good by holding on to these dreams.

I climb from bed and move to the bathroom. I have to get out of the house. It's not that I'm running from Emmy, I just don't want her to see me like this. This day has always been a bad day for me, or at least it has been for the past four years. I throw on some clothes, make sure the door is locked, then leave her house and walk home.

It's four in the morning but I'm wide awake. There's no chance I'm getting back to sleep again. I take a long shower and decide it's best if I stay by myself today. The gym already knows I won't be there, but I have a great staff to run it.

I fight with myself for a while, but I don't know exactly why. There's only one place I'm going today. I get dressed then head to my truck and climb inside. It takes thirty minutes to reach my destination. I exit my truck and move down the hill, sitting on the rocks as a tear falls. I don't often cry, but I give myself a break today. Maybe this will be the last year, maybe this will be our final goodbye. If not, there's no doubt I'll be left with no choice but to say goodbye to Emmy ... who is alive and by my side. I have to choose ... and I have to choose now.

Chapter thirty

Emmy

Stretching my arms ... I come up with cold sheets. My eyes fling open as I turn and see the spot where Derek should be. We finally had a fantastic night, fell into each other's arms, made love, laughed, then crashed. He hasn't worn the torn look he's often worn. I think maybe our talk has helped him ... but where is he now?

"Derek," I call out, but only silence greets my words.

I swing out of bed and head to the kitchen. I flip on the coffee pot and look around for a note. Nothing.

Now I'm a little confused. He didn't tell me he had an early morning appointment, which he sometimes has. I shake my head as I chuckle. Okay, I'm being stupid now. We certainly don't have to give each other a play by play of every single thing we do while apart from one another. We don't have to always leave notes either.

It's just odd that he left without saying a word. Things have changed a lot over the past couple of months ... some great ... and some not so great. We're practically living together, though we haven't talked about actually doing that, of actually getting rid of one of our places. We each have our own homes, but we both have clothes at each other's houses. We don't

really plan on staying together, it just happens most of the time. He normally comes to my place, even though it's smaller. It seems that's how it's worked out.

I take a quick run then come home to shower and slam down a cup of coffee. For some reason I'm restless and stressed. I have no idea why. It scares me that I'm so dependent on what Derek is doing. I've lived a long time on my own and I love this man, but what he's doing shouldn't define my happiness. If he's gone, it shouldn't upset me.

I leave the house and head to the bookstore to get some breakfast and more coffee. Lately I've been doing this a lot. I have a lot of social interaction at the bar while at work, but the coffee shop is more mellow, and I enjoy my morning chats with Cassie.

It doesn't take long to arrive, and Cassie is here as usual with a smile on her face. "Your usual?" she asks.

"Of course. Throw in a plain bagel too," I tell her, making her laugh.

"I don't know how you stay as small as you are with the amount of food you consume," she says.

Now it's my turn to laugh. I already feel better, just getting away from my house and being here has helped ease my fears. There's something very soothing about the bookstore. I've spent hours in here reading while sipping coffee and snacking on too much food.

"It's because I work out all of the time. I'll gain weight for sure if I'm not careful, but then I feel crappy so I have a ten-

pound limit. If I hit that number, I cut back for a bit, lose it, then cheat again and gain some back.”

“I like that plan. That way you can always have greasy pizza and curly fries,” Cassie says.

“When are you going to start serving pizza?” I ask, thinking that sounds pretty great.

She laughs again. “I need to add another room if I want a wood-fired oven and that’s the only way to make pizza,” she says.

“Or we need to lure someone here who will open a wonderful pizza place. We make pizza at the bar, but it’s mediocre. I could try to talk Dillan into getting a wood-fired oven.”

“Oh, do it. I’d come in several times a week,” Cassie says.

“I’ll put it on my list.” She sets my overflowing plate of biscuits, gravy, and all of the fixings in front of me, and I dive in. I try to look casual as I look back up. “Have you seen Derek this morning?”

“No,” she says, drawing the word out a little. She knows something. I zero in on her.

“What’s going on, Cassie?” I demand, my appetite gone.

She sighs. “Do you know the date?” she asks.

“Yes, of course,” I say, confused.

“I haven’t seen Derek, but there’s no doubt he’s down at the river. I was hoping maybe he wouldn’t feel he needed to go down there this year, but if you can’t find him, that’s where he is,” she tells me.

I'm confused. "I don't understand."

"This is the anniversary of Kelly's death. He always goes to the river," she tells me like she doesn't want to say it.

My worries immediately appear. "He didn't say anything to me," I say, feeling like crying. Maybe our talk didn't help after all.

"Emmy, this doesn't reflect on you or your relationship," she assures me.

I wipe away a few fallen tears, angry at myself for letting the emotion come out.

"What if he can't let her go?" I ask, feeling more broken than I ever have.

"Then you let him go and you'll be fine," she assures me. "Today isn't the day to do that, though, today is the day you let him lean on you."

"I know that's the right thing to do. I need to be strong, but we've been together for a while and I'm so happy. I can't compete with a ghost, though," I tell her.

"You shouldn't have to compete with a ghost. I think this is more like him figuring out he's already let go, but he needs to give himself permission to be okay about doing just that," she says.

"Maybe," I tell her. "Why does it have to be him I've fallen in love with? Why can't I fall for someone who makes it easy?"

"Because the heart chooses who the heart chooses. If it was easy, we'd take advantage of the relationship. When we grow

together and stick with someone through the good and the bad, we know it's real. It's easy to love someone when it all seems perfect. But real love sticks through the hard times and comes out on the other side," Cassie says.

"Maybe," I tell her, unsure of how I'm feeling, unsure if I'm strong enough to do this.

"Find him and hold him and see what happens," Cassie suggests.

I leave the bookstore after Cassie tells me where I can find him. I'm scared to go to him, scared he won't want me there. He would've told me if he wanted me to go with him, wouldn't he? I guess I'll have my answer when I show up.

I'm scared as I walk back home, get into my car, and begin the drive. He might reject me today. If he does, I'll have my answer. We're in this together and today he's broken. That means I need to be at his side. If I was broken I'd want him to hold me. I need to remember not to take this personally. That's nearly impossible when he's shutting me out.

I almost turn around a dozen times before I arrive at the place where Kelly died. I drive into the park and find his truck. My heart thunders as I sit in my vehicle for a while, giving myself a pep talk to exit.

I finally do, then I take the trail to the river ... and my heart stops. Derek is here ... facedown in the water. I scream as I rush to him.

Chapter thirty-one

Derek

My head is tugged hard, startling me, making me inhale a bunch of water as I come up coughing. I'm ready to throw a punch, and barely hold back before I realize it's Emmy kneeling in the water next to me, tears streaming down her face as she grabs my face.

"Emmy?" I wonder if this is another dream.

"What are you doing?" she sobs, grabbing at me, feeling for a heartbeat. I'm speaking so it's clear I'm alive, but she's visibly panicked.

I realize what this must look like to her. How did she know how to find me? Someone had to have told her. Guilt flows through me at what this must look like, at what she must be thinking. I'm hurting her as I've done many times before. If I was a better man I'd walk away from her. I can't, though. Am I trying to push her so far that she'll leave me? I sure as hell hope not, but I can't say if I am or not.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. She's holding me tight so I stand in the shallow water and hold on to her as I bring us back to the rocky shore. We both sit down. She's sobbing, and I feel like an utter asshole.

"Derek, were you trying to kill yourself?" she asks, looking so destroyed it shatters my already broken heart.

“No, I promise that’s not what I was doing.” I have no strength in my voice.

“Then what were you doing?” she demands. I see the conflict in her eyes as if she doesn’t believe me. I let out a sigh. If I don’t tell her the truth she’ll surely walk away from me as I clearly deserve. It’s not what I want.

“This is something I’ve done for four years,” I admit.

“Why?” she asks.

“The first year after I lost Kelly, I came here, planning on drowning myself. I didn’t think I could make it in this world without her,” I admit.

She doesn’t flinch this time. She’s holding my hand as she listens, tears still in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Derek,” she tells me.

“I got here and stepped into the water, but something kept me from going through with it. I can’t say what it was. Maybe angels whispering, maybe sense, maybe time. I’m not sure, but each year I come back here and put my face in the water and hold my breath for as long as I can before needing to breathe. I’m trying to feel what she felt, and at the same time trying to let her go.”

She cries more, but she nods. “I understand,” she says, but I don’t think she does. How can I expect her to understand any of this? I’m breaking this woman more and more each day as I hold on to another person.

“You shouldn’t have to understand. It’s long past time I let her go, but I haven’t figured out how to do it.”

“I know you struggle with this, but I didn’t realize it was this bad,” she quietly admits. “We’ve seemed pretty happy lately.” More tears fall from her eyes, and I feel about two inches tall.

“I am happy, Emmy. I promise I’m happy with you. I had a nightmare this morning, and with it being the anniversary, it set me back. I need to let go, I need to move forward, but I’m not sure how to do it,” I tell her.

She holds onto my hand. “I’ll do whatever it is you need me to do, Derek.” She pauses. “I love you.”

My heart skips a beat at these words. I want to say them back to her, want her to know what she means to me, but I can’t get them out. What in the hell is wrong with me? She’s going to walk away from me right here and now if I don’t pull it together.

“Emmy ...” I’m not sure what I’m about to say but she smiles at me as a few more tears fall.

“Please don’t say it back ... not now. I love you, Derek, with my entire heart and soul. I’m still broken, still healing from my own garbage, but being with you makes me feel better, makes me see a future. I need you to know that. It also means I love you enough to walk this journey with you. I’ll do whatever it is you need me to do. I’ll be here for you when you’re ready. There’s no one else now. It’s just you.”

Tears fill my eyes as I look at this gracious woman, this person who sees all of my flaws and loves me anyway. I’m not worthy of her, don’t know if I ever will be, but she’s still with me, not running away.

I pull her into my arms and she hugs me, giving me her warmth and love. I desperately want to give her the words I should be saying, but this isn't the place, and this certainly isn't the time. I have a lot to work on to earn this love she's so freely giving me. I'm going to start right this minute. I might not know a lot right now, but I know for sure that I can't lose her. It would be the most foolish thing I've ever done. That's saying a lot since I've made more mistakes than the average person.

"I *will* fix myself," I promise her. It's the only thing I can promise right now.

"I'll be here through it all, Derek."

We sit at the river for the next hour with her in my arms and I feel better. I don't need to be here on my own, holding on to a ghost. I need to have this woman walking by my side through life. Without her I would float down the river to never be found again. Now I have to figure out how to fix what has so completely shattered.

Chapter thirty-two

Emmy

I'm in love with a man I don't think can love me back. It's odd, though, because I'm not crying, I'm not panicked, and I'm not broken. I love him. There's no doubt about this, but I'm realizing I love myself as well. I love who I've become, love that I'm stronger. I'm strong enough to be here for Derek, but I'm also strong enough to realize I deserve to be loved as much as I love.

I've been in a relationship with Derek for months, and we've been dancing around each other even longer. We have something beautiful together, but it's clearer than ever before that he's still in love with a woman who's gone. Where does this leave me? I know for sure if he can't let her go, if he can't let go of the past, I'm going to have to walk away ... for him and for myself.

I won't run this time, though. I won't hide. If I go or if I stay, I'm keeping my shoulders back and my head held high. I'll look him in the eyes and tell him I love him enough to set him free, even though it will hurt.

I love Derek deeply, irrevocably. It won't be fair to either of us to stay together though if he's in love with a ghost. Right now I'm alone, gazing out my window. Sure, a few tears have fallen, but that's expected. I've struggled for weeks, trying to

figure out how to make this relationship work. It's been a week since that incident at the river, and he's still grieving. I'm through with it now.

There's a knock on my door and I suck in a breath as I wipe my cheeks. I've asked Derek to give me a couple of days to think things over and he said he didn't like it but would respect my wishes. I'm not sure who else would be showing up unannounced.

I slowly walk to the door with trepidation. Since moving to Ravish, I never look out before opening the door. I'm shocked to see Cassie and Lexa standing here with bags in their hands and smiles on their faces.

"We didn't warn you we were coming over because we didn't want you to tell us no," Cassie says as she steps forward, making me move out of the way to let them inside.

"We aren't letting you turn us away. You need us right now, so it's a ladies' night," Lexa says.

"I'm fine you guys," I tell them, though clearly I'm not.

"Mm hmm, we don't believe that," Cassie says. "It's okay to have a friend or multiple friends to talk to. We're here for you."

"We've both been through hell and back, and now it's time for us to be shoulders for you to lean on. How many times did you help me when I was going crazy?" Lexa asks.

I give a watery chuckle as I wipe away more tears. "Well, I hope you brought wine. I'm almost out," I say as I look at my nearly empty glass.

“Of course we brought wine. We aren’t animals,” Cassie says with a chuckle. “And we brought Gardetto’s, Doritos, cookies, and cheese.”

“Women after my own heart.” I didn’t want visitors but now that they’re here, I really can use their advice. I have no doubt at all if I start this conversation, I’ll spit out a slew of emotions. They won’t know what’s hit them.

We move into the kitchen and make a tray with snacks while also opening a couple of bottles of wine. With three of us we’ll probably drink more than two. It really depends on how long we sit and lament on my pathetic love life. We make it to the living room where we sit and the girls insist I eat. I do for them even if I’m not in the mood.

“Okay, spit it out,” Lexa says.

“Just like that?” I ask with a raised brow.

“Yep, just like that,” she demands.

I take a sip of wine. “I love Derek, I love him so much I can’t picture my life without him.”

“And you’re scared he’ll never be able to love you back in the same way,” Cassie says. It’s not posed as a question. She knows the problems we’re facing, knows the insecurities I’m facing.

I sigh. “I’m competing with a ghost. How can I win?”

“Because you’re flesh and blood and wonderful, and even if Kelly was perfection personified, she’s no longer here,” Cassie says.

“Of course I’m amazing,” I tell them.

“You have to really believe that, Emmy, because you are. There’s a line of men hoping Derek screws up bad enough to lose you. You’re a catch and should never settle for less than you deserve.”

I shrug. “I’ve settled before.”

“Well, that was then, this is now. I love Derek, I really do, but I want to kick his ass right now. He needs to pull it together and realize what’s slipping through his fingers,” Lexa says.

I chuckle. “You have to say that because you’re my friend. We girls have to stick together.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I thought you were being an ass. I’m all about speaking the truth now. I don’t want to hold back anymore. That cost me way too much,” Lexa says.

I believe her. She was in a rotten relationship years before and it could’ve killed her. The man was physically abusive. He even came into town with the intention of doing some real damage. He managed to get in some hard hits before Dillan nearly killed the man. She’ll never be hit again because she has the love of her life, who looks at her how every woman dreams of being looked at.

“This is really all my fault. I knew he wasn’t ready, yet I pursued him anyway. The best thing I can do is walk away. He might realize he wants to be with me and come back, or I might move on. But I can’t seem to make myself do this.”

“Love isn’t that fragile. If you need to walk away for a while, that’s just what you need to do. It might wake him up. Sometimes a person has to see what they have to lose before

they wake up. I wasn't ready when Greyson was. He never gave up on me and now we're very happy. All three of us have gone through some deep things we can't let go of, but that doesn't mean we don't deserve happiness. Sometimes the best thing we can do is let a person go to determine if this is what's best for us."

"I'm so scared if I walk away, he'll be happy about it and we'll never be together," I admit.

"Oh, sweetie, that would mean you *shouldn't* be together. We've all had unhealthy relationships. Don't be in one that's not good for you."

I start crying again and both Cassie and Lexa reach out and hold my hands as they cry with me. They truly are wonderful friends. We've been by each other's sides for a while now and these friendships will endure no matter what else happens in our lives.

"I don't want to break up with him, but we can't keep going on like this."

Lexa gives me a smile. "It's okay to not have all of the answers right away. You can take your time figuring it out."

"If I'm questioning this so much right now, where does that leave us?"

"Well, you move forward at the pace you're most comfortable with. If that means going on dates and sleeping together, that's what you do. If it means you need some separation, that's what you do. No matter what decision you make, know that we're both here for you anytime, day or

night. You have true friends to help you through it all,” Lexa says.

“I tell myself I can be patient, that I don’t need him to love me as much as I love him, but I’m wrong about that. I want his love, but I want it because he needs me, not because I’m demanding it. It shouldn’t be this hard this soon into this.”

“For one, it’s not soon. The two of you have been dancing for two years. For two, no one gets to put a timeline on it. A person can fall in love in days. Some people take a lot longer than that. We need to be with those who lift us up though. We should never be with anyone who makes us question our own happiness, or makes us doubt ourselves. Is there more good than bad?” Cass asks.

I smile. “When we’re together, most of the time at least, it’s great. I feel cared about and the sex, oh, the sex is out of this world. I don’t think any other woman is on his mind when we’re intimately together. He makes me feel things I’ve never imagined feeling, and I see him content as he sleeps in my arms. It’s when we’re apart that I believe he starts having doubts, or guilt, or whatever it is he’s going through. I hate the yoyo of it all.”

“Good sex is important. So many believe it doesn’t matter, but it’s essential in a relationship. It’s something you can do with your partner that you can’t, or shouldn’t, do with anyone else. When the sex is bad, the relationship falters. In saying that, we need more than great sex, we need love and companionship and things in common. A relationship is about the whole circle, not just a piece of it,” Cassie says.

I sigh. “That’s the thing though. We *do* have fun. We love working out together, hiking, playing games, watching movies. I’m never bored with him, and I’m never in a hurry to leave. I miss him when he’s not around, and I sleep through the night tucked into his arms. How can it all be so perfect and yet still have this huge block between us?”

“Because life isn’t easy. We all have souls that crave something and you’re not getting all you need. That’s up to him. You have to be honest and demand it. Tell him to either love you the way you deserve to be loved or to let you go. I don’t think you can be the one to push him away, so the best thing you can do is leave it in his hands.”

I nod. “I’ve been telling myself the same thing. I know I’ll be okay either way. If we don’t work out I’ll certainly hurt, but I will survive, and I’ll move forward. I won’t ever let a ghost come between me and love.”

“You’re in a stronger place than he is, but I hear the way he talks about you, Emmy. I’ve also seen a change in him. He’s happy. He just has to let go of the past and the guilt so the two of you can ride off into the sunset together,” Cassie assures me.

We continue talking for a couple of hours and I do feel lighter after their visit. I’m more hopeful than I was before. It feels like the anchor I’ve been carrying for a very long time without any guidance has suddenly been lifted from around my neck. I’m certainly more fragile than I’ve been in a long time, but I’m already a little bit stronger.

It took the good advice of my two best friends to help me figure out who I am and how strong I am. Sometimes it really

is as simple as having caring friends to talk to in order to find your inner strength that's always been there, just sometimes hidden deep down.

I'm going to take a few more days and then I'll have a chat with Derek. We'll either move forward ... or we won't. It truly is that simple.

Chapter thirty-three

Derek

I haven't seen Emmy for three days. This is the longest it's been since we decided we're in a relationship. I don't like it. I don't like it one little bit. She asked for space, though, and she's been more than good to me, so it's something I need to do for her, even if it hurts. I don't want to be without this wonderful woman who has so much faith in me, who loves me in spite of everything that's broken.

I had a hell of a time at work and at home since the freeze out. I didn't realize how important Emmy's become to me until I didn't have her at my side. Maybe, it means I can't lose her, maybe that's what scares me more than anything else. What if I allow myself to fall in love with her and she's ripped away from me? Can a person survive that kind of a loss twice in his life? I'm not sure.

I do know I can't think this way. Losing Kelly nearly killed me. Am I truly so broken that my identity is fully wrapped up in another person? If that's the case, I have a lot more to fix about myself than I originally thought. It's time to get it fixed.

I'm pacing the floor when there's a knock on my door. My heart thuds. Please be Emmy. I hate how much I need it to be her. I should be healthier, should be in a place I don't need to

have someone around me to feel joy. I *will* get this fixed along with so many other things, I vow to myself.

I open the door and feel true joy seeing Emmy standing here, a slight smile on her lips. I stare at her, not finding words to say. She's beautiful and I don't want to ever be without her. I want to be whole for her.

"May I come in?" she asks.

"Sorry," I spit out as I move aside and open my door wider. She nods at me as she moves into my home.

She walks into the living room and takes a seat in the chair. It's clear she doesn't want to sit side by side with me on the couch, which fills me with disappointment and slight panic that she might be here to break up with me. I try not to show any emotion as I stand close to her.

"Would you like something to drink?" I'm on autopilot now.

She shakes her head. "I want to talk to you," she says. Her tone doesn't tell me what this is about.

"Always," I tell her, meaning it. I don't care if the conversation is deep and meaningful or shallow, I just want to speak with her at all times.

"We both feel strong emotions toward one another. You know I love you, and I believe you care about me," she begins.

"I do, Emmy," I rush to assure her. She again gives me that half smile I'm beginning not to like. I can tell she's holding herself back and I don't like it. This isn't the woman I'm obsessed with. I love the carefree, spirited, courageous woman who gives with all of her heart, not what I'm turning her into.

I've hurt her; it's more obvious now than ever before. I hate myself a little more for what I've done.

“We also have the ghost of your fiancée between us. I want to be supportive and love you through it, but I realize you have to be the one to let her go. I deserve more. I deserve to be loved and cherished. You can love more than one person at a time, but you can only be *in* love with one. I'm in love with you, Derek, and I don't want to share you with anyone else, living or dead.”

My heart's thundering in my chest as she says the words I deserve to hear. She's one hundred percent right. She deserves everything and so much more.

“I know, Emmy, I'm so sorry. I realize I've been letting her go for a very long time, but there's still a hold on me that isn't fair to you. I don't want to push you away, and I don't want to lose you, which means I need to pull myself together. I need you to give me a little more time to do this. We can take a break if that's what you need, though. That's up to you because I don't want you away from my side. I understand if this is too painful for you. I don't want to keep hurting you.”

Tears appear in her eyes as she gives me a smile. “It's hard for me to be away from you as well, Derek. I don't know how or why, but you've become very important to me. When you hurt, I want to fix it, when you're away I miss your arms around me. I love you, and that will never change. I realize I love myself as well. I want to give you everything, but I want you to give the same. We all have ghosts in our pasts. We have to let them go. It's not easy, and it doesn't make someone

wrong if they can't let go, but I know what I need, and I need you to give me all of you."

I drop to my knees in front of her and she lets me take her hands. Her fingers are trembling and I gently squeeze them, wanting to comfort her, wanting to let her know that I'm here for her. I want to assure her that I'll always be, but I have to fix myself before I can do that.

"Let me show you something," I say. I reluctantly let her go then grab my wallet from the counter. I pull out two items, then move over to Emmy and kneel before her. The first item is one of those booth photos. It's aged and blurry, but it's still clear what it is. Emmy flinches but keeps looking at the photos of Kelly and me, smiling, laughing, on top of the world. I open my hand and the other item is a wedding ring that I never got to wear. Emmy's smile fades away and I know I need to talk fast.

"I've held onto these items. At first it was because I was holding on to her. Then it was just because I'd had them so long I didn't know how to throw them away. I'm ready to let them go, but I need to do it in a way that forever releases her from me. I want to tell you how much I love you when my heart is fully yours. It will mean nothing before I can assure you that's the case."

She's crying as I stand and move over to the counter where I have a bottle waiting. I drop the ring and the pictures inside where a letter is already waiting. I seal the bottle with a loose cork. I don't want to forever seal those things inside. I want the bottle to float, to break, and for the items to fade away.

“I’ve been planning this for over a year, but I’m ready now. Please don’t give up on me. Just give me a little more time, not much, but a little more,” I beg her.

I move across the room and scoop her up in my arms. She stiffens for only a moment before she wraps her arms around my neck. I move to the couch and sit, cradling her close to me. She tucks her head against my chest and cries. I don’t say anything because there’s nothing more I can add. Soon, I’ll be able to give her the words she desperately needs to hear. Soon, I’ll be whole again, the man I’m supposed to be, the man who deserves to be with her.

We sit this way for an hour before she looks up, gently kisses my lips, then stands and leaves without saying another word. She knows I’m on my own right now. I have to complete this part of my journey by myself.

I sit in my house a while longer and leave as the sun is at its highest point in the sky. The bottle sits on the seat next to me as I drive to the river. I arrive, finding a few cars already parked. I make my way down to the place where I lost Kelly. The people in the vehicles must be tubing or something else because no one’s around, which I’m thankful for.

“I’ve held on to you for a very long time,” I say as I look out across the water. I can almost hear her respond. Her voice isn’t as clear to me anymore though. It’s been so long since I’ve heard it.

“I found a wonderful woman and I’m losing her. I’m hurting her. I have to let you go now, just as I would’ve wanted you to let me go if the roles were reversed. I’ll always love you, Kelly, always hold you close to my heart. But I can’t

be in love with you anymore. I have to appreciate the time we shared together, and look at it like a fond memory.”

No tears fall this time. I’m letting her go and it feels right. I strip down to my swim shorts and move into the river, gripping the bottle. I dive in and swim to the place that took my fiancée’s life. I submerge myself and feel the strong tug of the eddy that’s trying to keep me below the surface. My lungs burn as I stay in the strong current for the same amount of time it took for Kelly to drown. Just when I’m starting to see stars behind my eyes, I open my hand and let the bottle drift away. I push with all of my strength, pulling myself from the eddy wanting to keep me under.

I emerge from the water and take in a desperately needed breath of air. My muscles are trembling and I’m weak, but I manage to swim back to shore and crawl onto the rocks. I lay there and face the sky, feeling both sadness and joy.

I’m not sure how long I lie this way, but this isn’t quite over yet. I’ve released the items, these holds of the past, and I feel peace at letting Kelly go, but I need to return to Emmy with a full heart, not a broken one. I have to head off for a little while. It’s what’s best for both of us. I send Emmy a text, a simple message, then I move over to my clothes and get dressed.

I get in my truck and head out of town in the opposite direction of Ravish. When I come back I’ll be a new man. I promise myself. This is my promise to Emmy. She deserves the best, and that’s very much what I intend to be.

Chapter thirty-four

Emmy

I'm at work when Derek's message comes in and I'm not exactly sure how to react. I sit and read it several times.

Derek: *I need to leave for a little while. I promise when I return I will be whole. I hope you won't give up on me.*

A part of me wants to cry, but I'm also truly hopeful ... for the first time in a while. I don't reply. He needs this time. We don't need to talk back and forth. It's in his hands now. I can never give up on him, but I also realize that as much as it will hurt if I lose him, I *will* survive. I don't want to be without him, but knowing I can do it on my own and be fine makes me stronger.

"What's going on?" Lexa asks as she takes a seat next to me. I don't say anything, just show her my open phone. She's silent as she reads the message, then she reaches over and pats my arm.

"Is this good or bad?" she asks after a while.

I chuckle but there isn't humor in the sound. "I *think* it's good," I finally say. She smiles.

"It might be very good. He knows you, knows what he has to lose. If he's finally letting go of his past, he can then be all yours," she tells me.

“That’s what I’m hoping, but what if I let him go while he’s gone?”

She gives me a sympathetic look. “Then he’ll lose you, but he’ll be a better person and might have a good life. We don’t need to have another person in our lives to make us whole. We have to be true to ourselves first, and then we can be there for others.”

I nod at her. “I agree with you. I was broken for many years, but my pain hasn’t come close to what Derek has gone through,” I tell her.

“I disagree. Just because someone handles a situation differently from another person doesn’t put a rating on how badly we’re hurt. We all deal with trauma in different ways. Some of us scream and shout, and some of us suffer in silence. Some of us go into a great depression when our family pet dies, and some of us are at the humane society the next day to find a replacement. None of the different ways people react are right or wrong, they are unique and make us who we are. What’s important is to always surround ourselves with people who lift us up, to never take abuse from others, and to forgive ourselves when we aren’t perfect. You handle this in any way you need to, and you decide if you want to move forward with a man who has hurt you. He might not have done it intentionally, but he *has* hurt you. You’ve been denied, have had love withheld from you, have been compared to another woman, and have been left with more questions than answers. There have also been beautiful, powerful, bonding moments. You have to decide if the good outweighs the bad.”

Tears finally appear in my eyes. “What would I do without you?” I ask.

She beams at me. “You’ll never have to find out. We’re a team.” She goes quiet for a minute. “Do you need to take the day off?”

I quickly shake my head. “No, I want to be here with you, with the customers, with people. I think it will be harder if I’m alone. I’m happy he’s doing this and hoping he finds the answers he needs, but you’re right. I’ve been hurting too. I’ve suppressed it a lot, and maybe it’s time I let it out.”

“How do you want to let it out?” I gaze at her, not knowing what to say.

“I have no idea.”

“Do you want me to call Cassie and the three of us can steal some of Dillan’s finest alcohol and go to the river?” Lexa asks.

This sounds perfect. “We can’t do that,” I tell her.

She laughs. “Oh yes, we can.” She leans over and gives me a hug. “I’ll tell Dillan we’re stealing from him and then ditching the bar.”

“No, Lexa, don’t do that. We’re working the floor,” I tell her.

“Trust me, Dillan’s still smiling from his afternoon delight. He’s not going to complain at all. He’ll call someone else in,” she tells me with a wink before she skips away. Dillan’s going to hate me if we both leave the bar.

He comes out with Lexa a minute later, and she’s right, he is smiling.

“I hear I’m not only losing my two best employees, but my finest liquor too,” he says as he moves up next to me and puts an arm around me.

“We don’t have to go,” I tell him.

He gives me a long look. “Yes, I can see that you need to do just that. Give me ten minutes and I’ll have the cook put together a nice meal for you three, so you have more in your stomachs than just liquor.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to say a word before he jumps up and goes back to the kitchen. While he does this, Lexa moves behind the bar and grabs a large bottle of top shelf vodka. She sets it and two jugs of orange juice on the counter before she moves over and grabs a folding cooler. She opens it and dumps ice in it, along with three cups, straws, and the vodka and juice. She seals it just in time for Dillan to come back out with a very full bag. He moves over to Lexa and gives her a kiss that has her beaming.

“I won’t be home tonight. We’re going to have a slumber party at Emmy’s,” she tells him. His smile falls for a minute.

“Okay,” he says, a definite pout in his voice.

“You don’t have to do that,” I quickly say and she waves away my words. My eyes once again fill at how lucky I am to have such an amazing friend. The door opens and Cassie comes inside.

“I’m ready,” she says, a big smile on her lips and a bag hanging on her shoulder. “Tell me you grabbed the good stuff.”

“Of course I grabbed the good stuff,” Lexa says. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t get into too much trouble,” Dillan calls to us as we head toward the door.

“We can’t promise anything,” Lexa calls back right before we walk out the door.

“I’m really fine, you guys,” I tell them as we walk through town, heading to our favorite place on the river.

“We know you are, but sometimes emotion spits out of us at the oddest moments. I need a night off anyway. It’s good for Greyson to have the kiddo on his own.”

“You really don’t have to stay the night,” I say.

“That’s the funnest part. Just because we’re adults doesn’t mean sleepovers should be over,” Lexa says.

When we arrive at the river we find Booker in our spot, smiling. We stop to figure out what’s happening. There are chairs and blankets set up as well.

“Hello ladies, I was called in to make sure you stay warm. Don’t worry. I’m getting the fire started and then I’m out of here,” he says as we move forward.

“You’re the best, Booker. If I wasn’t already taken, I’d be chasing you,” Cassie says as she moves forward and gives him a hug.

“I’ve been planning Greyson’s death for a while so I can steal you away,” he tells her with a wink that has all of us laughing.

“Don’t you dare. I’m not raising our children alone,” she tells him.

He holds his hands up. “I forgot about the kids. You’re all his,” he says as he backs away.

“Oh, the woman who takes you down will be our new bestie,” Lexa says. “I think you’re going to have *lots* of babies.”

These words horrify the man, and he backs farther away. “It’s a good thing he already has our fire started because you’re scaring him off,” I tell the girls, which makes them laugh harder.

“I’m so out of here,” Booker says. He turns and runs away.

“Babies are coming,” Lexa shouts after him. He speeds up as if he can outrun the words.

“Well, that was a fine beginning to our night,” I say as I move to one of the chairs and take a seat.

“I agree. Maybe we should be matchmakers. There *are* a lot of single men in this town who would benefit from our expertise,” Cassie says.

“I’m not doing too well in my own relationship, so I’m not sure I’d do any good helping others find love,” I tell them.

“You’re doing just fine. No relationship happens without bumps in the road,” Lexa says. She’s opening the drink bag and doesn’t take long to mix us each a drink. Cassie opens the food bag and pulls out sandwiches, chips, cookies, crackers, cheese, and meats. Dillan hooked us up with stuff that will last all night without going bad.

“Here,” Cass says as she passes over a piece of a sandwich and a bag of chips. I automatically take it and bite into it. Of course it’s delicious.

“I didn’t know I needed this, so thank you for making me come out,” I tell them.

Cassie holds up her glass so Lexa and I do the same. “To friendship in good times and bad,” Cass says.

“To friendship,” Lexa and I say. We clink our solo cups then sit back and consume our drinks, eat our food, add more wood to the fire, and laugh and cry.

We stay for hours, and I really do feel better as we talk. Booker comes back and checks on us after a while, bringing more wood. He doesn’t speak this time and leaves as fast as he can, making us all laugh a lot more.

We eventually put out our fire, then drunkenly make our way back to my house where we put on a movie and fall asleep in the living room in a mound of blankets and empty glasses and chip bags. For a day that could’ve been horrible, it ends up being one of the best I’ve ever had.

Chapter thirty-five

Derek

My phone is in my hand as I gaze at the picture of Emmy and me together. What a fool I've been for a very long time. I held on to Kelly because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. It took me nearly losing Emmy to understand how important she's become to me. I don't want to live my life without her.

I also realize I can't wrap my happiness up in her. If I want to be worthy of being the right man for her, I need to be strong. I need to be the shoulder for her to lean on, like she's been a shoulder for me for a very long time ... for too long.

Relationships are about love, respect, and living a shared experience. To expect her to carry all of the burden is unfair. I don't deserve her, but I'm going to work every single day to be a better person so maybe in time I can earn the right to have her by my side.

I've been gone for a week, staying in a hunting cabin in the woods. A place that's always offered me comfort, but hasn't this time. Why would I want to be here alone when I have a beautiful woman waiting back home for me? Damn, I hope she's still waiting for me.

I guess I can find out now. I click on my message app and type in her name. My fingers hover over the letters on my

phone. What do I say after being away a week with no communication? I just need to be honest. I want to make her smile, want her to know she's been on my mind the entire time I've been gone. I want my message filled with love and longing.

The two of us have shared so much together in a relatively short amount of time. We've joked, given each other our secrets, made love, and built each other up. I didn't realize how strong our bond had grown during our time, but I finally get it.

I'm ready to talk about plans for the future, marrying her, having children with her. I want to make all of this a reality and if I need to grovel in order to do this, then I'm more than willing to give her whatever it is she needs ... she's earned it.

Derek: *It feels like forever since I've last seen you.* I hit send and then wait, my heart thudding. Will she respond? Will she want to chat? I could call her, but I have a feeling it will be easier for both of us through text.

Emmy: *How are you?*

I smile as if I've won the Super Bowl. She responded. This is a start.

Derek: *Miserable. I'm ready to come home. I'm sorry for what I've put you through.*

The dots show up on the phone, telling me she's reading my words, telling me she's either responding or thinking about responding. I feel like a teen waiting for my first date. I should just jump in my truck and head home. This is stupid.

Emmy: *I'm miserable too. It feels like forever since I last felt your touch.*

This warms my heart and heats my blood. Is she wanting to flirt? We have so many unsaid things between us, but shouldn't all of that be said in person? I haven't done the flirting thing over text before. I'm not sure I'd know how to start.

Derek: *I've come to realize that something is missing when you aren't by my side. I don't like being this far away from you.*

Emmy: *You needed to do this. Have you found what you've been looking for?*

Derek: *Yes and no. I now know who I am and who you are and that we belong together.*

There's no response for several moments, probably thirty seconds to a minute, but it feels like an eternity. Should I have waited to say this? I don't even know what is up or down right now.

Emmy: *I know how you feel. A part of me is missing as well with you gone.*

Derek: *I'm coming home ... to you ... if you'll still have me.*

I'm coming home to her no matter what she says. I'll beg and plead if I have to. I understand I can survive without her, but I don't want to. She's my other half. She's more my other half than any other soul alive. I can't believe what a fool I've been to not understand this for so long.

Emmy: *No matter how far apart we are, Derek, you have my heart. Even if for some reason this doesn't work out, I gave*

it to you and I don't want it back. I love you. I have from the beginning. We might both be broken, but together we're whole.

My heart thuds as she says even if it doesn't work out, but there's more positive than negative in the message. She's been hurt and it's understandable that she's being careful. It doesn't mean she's not willing to keep trying. I'll convince her this is exactly what we need to do.

Derek: *I want to hear your voice.*

Emmy: *I want to hear your voice in person. I'm lying in bed right now and it's easier to send messages. We haven't done much of this. It's kind of fun.*

I smile. I'm not having fun away from her, but I know what she means. This yearning inside of me won't go away. It's all because of her.

Derek: *I dream about you every night. I wake up reaching for you in the morning.*

Emmy: *I never stop thinking about you. When I close my eyes at night, it feels like you're lying next to me.*

Derek: *I close my eyes and picture the way you look at me like I'm the only person who matters in this world. No one has ever looked at me like this before.*

Emmy: *That's because you matter. That's because I love you.*

I'm not telling her how much I love her over a message. She doesn't want me to say it this way. She wants me to say the words in person, looking into her eyes. I want to jump in my truck and drive to her, but I've had too much to drink and it's an eight-hour drive. I need to wait. It's only one more day.

Derek: *I guess that saying that absence makes the heart grow fonder might be true.*

Emmy: *I don't need absence. I chose you, which means I'm always fond of you. Distance makes me miss you, but my love grows daily because it's you, because I don't want to live my life without you.*

My heart thuds. I have so much to prove to her and I feel unworthy of the love she's given me, but I won't question it, not when I love her this much, not when I refuse to live my life without her any longer.

Derek: *I'm humbled at how much you love me, humbled that even with all I've put you through, you're still you. What a fool I've been.*

Emmy: *Our connection is otherworldly. It's something that can't fade with time or distance. Without you, a part of me is missing.*

Derek: *I'm going to earn your love from this moment forward.*

Emmy: *You don't have to earn it, Derek, it's always yours. I can close my eyes right now and feel the warmth of your touch, the way you hold me close to you. I can feel you beside me. I can feel you sinking inside me. I can feel you in every way that matters.*

Derek: *No matter where this journey of life takes us, I'll never hurt you again. I make this vow to you here and now.*

Emmy: *We will hurt each other. It's impossible to promise not to, but we can build each other up as well. There's nothing we can't do if we do it together.*

Derek: *I feel stronger with you in my life. I'm not saying this to put it on your shoulders, just saying that you make me a better person. I hope to one day do the same for you. I'm coming home, Emmy, and I'm going to pull you close and love you the way you should always be loved.*

It's as close as I'll come to telling her how much I love her through a damn text message. The rest of what I'm burning to say will be done in person. The dots remain for a very long time, and there's no reply. After ten minutes I realize she must've fallen asleep.

There was a time I would've panicked at her lack of reply, but not this time, not with the knowledge that she wants me to come home. I pack my bag of things I picked up on the way to the cabin and set it at the door.

I lie down and gaze at an image of Emmy until my eyes grow heavy and I'm finally able to fall asleep. I need enough time to sober up, then I'm driving home. It's beyond past time. I want to be with the woman I love ... for the rest of my life.

Chapter thirty-six

Emmy

I wake up to Derek's last message and smile. He's coming home today. I could try to play it cool, I could even make him suffer for leaving, and for the tears I've cried, but I don't want to play games. We've both been through enough. He loves me. There's no doubt about this now. He didn't tell me in a text, which I'm grateful for, but I can hear it in the words he's written.

I want him to come home. I want him to pull me into his arms. I want to be with him for the rest of my life. I have a good feeling he's leaving the past behind him. Maybe he's finally let go of the ghost that's been between us. I'll know quickly if that is the case.

I'm strong enough to let him go if I have to do this, but it's the last thing I want to do. When you find a love this strong, you hold on with everything you have, and you pray it's never taken from you. I can let him go if I have to, but it's the last thing I want to do.

I've been cleaning the house all day. I know he's driving here. I'm sure he got up early. When Derek decides on something, it's set in stone for him. I'm so hopeful he gave up the past and he found himself again. I've loved him through all

the brokenness. I can't imagine how wonderful he'll be as a whole man. Maybe we'll get whole together.

I hear his truck pulling into my driveway and my heart lodges in my throat. It's only been a week since I've seen him but that feels like a lifetime. How do couples handle relationships where one of them often travels? It hurts to have him so far away from me. On the other hand, the joy I'm feeling at his return is beautiful.

He turns off his truck and seconds later I hear his door shut. I could wait for him to knock, but I've already assured myself I'm not going to play games anymore. I open it as he's making his way up the steps, a bouquet of flowers in his hand, a smile resting on his lips, and a light beard on his face.

I've never seen him with facial hair before. He's as sexy as hell with his messy hair and wrinkled clothes, the most beautiful man I've ever seen. He's mine, he's all mine. I can feel this sureness by the look in his eyes.

"You're beautiful," he says, his voice filled with awe.

This is so right. I smile at him as tears fill my eyes. "I was just thinking the same thing."

That's all it takes for him to step forward and pull me into his arms. I wrap my arms around him as he lifts me from the floor and moves inside, kicking the door shut behind him. He moves straight to the couch and sits, pulling me into his lap. I cling to him.

"I'm so sorry, Emmy," he whispers.

I nuzzle closer to him. "You don't have to apologize, Derek. I love you." I'm so happy to be in his arms again. It felt

like forever without him, but now that we're together again, it's as if we were never apart.

He pulls my face back and looks in my eyes. "I love you, Emmy. I should've said it long ago. I've felt it for a very long time, but for some reason the words were impossible to express. I was holding on to a ghost not because I was in love with that life or that person, but because I thought it was what I was supposed to do. I hope you can forgive me for this."

I'm crying as I gaze at him. "There's nothing to forgive. You were filled with grief for a very long time and you didn't know how to let it go. When a person loves another as I love you, you stay with that person through the good and bad. As long as I had hope, I was always going to stay at your side. The only way I'd walk away is if I knew you could never love me. You might not have said the words to me, but you've shown me love in many ways this past year. Love is about trust, and we both have a lot of reasons not to trust, but I believe we've broken down the walls and can move forward. I'll be with you through it all just as I know you'll be with me."

He smiles at me as his eyes fill. He blinks away the tears and then pulls my face forward and gives me a gentle kiss. This is absolutely perfect. He pulls back.

"I don't deserve you, but I'm so very grateful you're here. I won't leave again. I won't run again. I'll never need to do this. You're my world, Emmy, and I'll be yours. We'll have friends and family, and we'll do this together. We'll never be alone again."

“Never again,” I agree. I smile. “Now, take me to bed, Derek. I need to be as close to you as two people can possibly be. I need you in my sight for at least twenty-four hours straight before we face the rest of the world together.”

He chuckles. “That’s not long enough. I’m not letting you out of my sight for the rest of our lives.” He stands, cradling me in his arms as he walks down the hall to my bedroom.

There will be plenty more words to come, but for now, I want him to show me his love again and again and again ...

Chapter thirty-seven

Derek

I've been back home for a month, and I can honestly say I've never been this free or this happy. Not only did I let go of the ghost that haunted me for so long, but I let it all go. Emmy and I are on a mission today, something I've needed to do for a very long time, but didn't know I needed to.

We're in the vehicle driving, and she's sitting at my side, her hand in mine, giving me comfort as we face something I've needed to for quite a while. We pull into the cemetery and drive to the back. I haven't been here in years.

We park and walk around the gravestones. So many lives here and gone. There's nothing that makes us face our mortality more than walking among the dead. There have been times I've walked through different resting places and read the stones. The very young always hurt my heart. What would they have done with their lives had they lived longer? How many people would they have affected? How many of their unborn children would've impacted the world? We'll never know.

We reach the gravesite and I wince at the condition of the rock. It's dirty, and moss is covering it. Emmy pulls out her bag and kneels, immediately beginning to clean it up. It takes me a minute to take a breath and drop down next to her to

help. We're silent as we make the stone shine. Soon my mother's name is shining bright.

"It's as good as new," Emmy says, taking my hand as we stand and squeezing my fingers. "I'm going to take a walk and let you have some time."

I nod, unable to answer. I appreciate this woman so much for understanding what I need. I love her at my side, and I want her here with me. I also do want a few minutes alone with my mother. I have some things to say and I don't want to worry about the words. I know Emmy won't judge me, but this moment is for me alone. I'm learning I can take some journeys alone, I don't always need to have someone holding my hand.

"Hey Mom, I'm sorry I haven't been here for a long time," I begin.

This place really is beautiful. It's on the outskirts of the city where there isn't a lot of traffic driving by, where I can hear birds singing and feel peace as I stand before the grave. I know my mother is gone, and I'm speaking into the wind, but it still feels good.

"I'm sorry you had such a difficult life, that you struggled with depression, with addiction, with abuse. I'm sorry you lost yourself and dealt with so much pain. I forgive you for falling, for leaving me on my own. I mean this; now that I've dealt with my own depression and gone through too much sorrow of my own, I understand. I have to believe you're happy now, that you're whole. I'm glad you're home where no pain can touch you. All of us make mistakes, but I know you did the best job you could under the circumstances you were put in."

I pause as I fight emotion rolling through me. I've been letting go of a lot of trauma from my past, and this is one more thing to set me free. I already feel it's doing just that.

"I'm so thankful to you for giving me life, for enduring in this crazy world for as long as you did. It wasn't easy for you, but the memories I'm choosing to focus on are all good. I remember the comfort you gave me as a young child before the world weighed too heavily on your shoulders. I love you, Mom. I always did and I always will. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you, and while none of us are perfect, I'm the man I am today because of you."

I look across the cemetery grounds and see Emmy respectfully walking among the graves. She's reading them and smiling, appreciating the lives that rest here even if she didn't know them. That's because she's an incredible woman.

"I've met my other half, Mom. She makes me feel like I can soar. She lifts me up when I feel the world is pulling me down. She makes me laugh and makes me believe. I love her. She's stuck by my side when most wouldn't have been able to. I was a broken man for a very long time, but I no longer feel this way. I'm not whole yet, but I'm well on my way. Looking back at your journey helps me heal. I don't want to get so broken that there's no glue strong enough to make me right again. I'm healing because of the people I've chosen to surround myself with. I wish you would've had good people in your life to help guide you. None of that matters now, though, because you're in the light surrounded with only good. There are no more addictions, no more pain. That's what we all hope to find."

This is good, this needed to be done. I also don't need to stay here all day, don't need to express everything I've ever felt. There's a woman not far away from me that I want to be with. I told her I'll never leave her again, and I'm keeping this promise.

"I hope you follow my journey, Mom, I hope you're proud. I won't take so long to come back here again. I won't let your tombstone be defiled like this again. I love you."

I lean down, lay my hand on her stone, then turn and walk away, heading straight to the woman I love. Emmy turns, sensing me coming toward her. The sweet, understanding smile on her lips makes me love her even more. I quickly approach, then pull her into my arms.

"Thank you for coming here with me."

"You don't need to thank me for something we should always do together."

"I'm so scared to face death, I try to avoid it. I'm not going to do this anymore. From here on out, I'm going to appreciate the life I'm living and appreciate all of those who have come and gone in my life. I'm a better person because of the people who have touched me whether it was for a day or for years. Each moment I spent with them was beautiful, and now I want to focus on what's right in front of me."

"I like the sound of that." She draws up on her toes and gives me a gentle kiss while she cups my cheek. "I love you, Derek."

"I love you, Emmy." I wrap my arm around her and the two of us leave the cemetery together, both smiling, both secure in

who we are and our relationship. We really have turned a corner, and I'll never backtrack again.

Chapter thirty-eight

Emmy

I'm standing at the bow of the boat, the wind whipping through my hair, the lake water splashing my skin. The sun is high and it's an absolutely perfect day. My favorite date Derek and I have had so far is our weekend camping. We've been a few more times since that first time and they've all been good, but that first time was pure magic.

We live in a town that's like one giant campground, but it's still nice to get to new places, to explore this beautiful state of Oregon that we live in. I'm grateful for being born here. I've traveled around the United States and nowhere draws me home more than this state. Sure, I want to travel to many more places with Derek, but I'm also very happy right here.

I don't care where we go as long as we go together. I want to see the world with this man by my side. So much has changed these last few months. Derek's been open and happy, and I've never been more secure and peaceful. I found my person and it was well worth it to live through all of the bad. It's made us stronger.

Derek stops the boat and I move to my fishing pole. We're salmon fishing today, and they can get quite big in this lake. They aren't easy to catch, but I still plan on a perfect salmon dinner tonight. We haven't failed yet.

Derek comes over and gives me a kiss before he takes his own pole, gets it ready, then casts it in the water. Once my line is in the water I turn to him.

“Each time we find a new lake I’m determined to never go back to the real world again,” I tell him.

“I know what you mean. However, we don’t get the luxury of disappearing for too long now that you have your own business.” I beam at him.

“Don’t you dare jinx me. It’s not open yet.”

“It will be open soon and you’re going to rock it.”

I’m beyond excited. There was an old building that was closed for a long time. I got a loan to buy it and we’ve been working on it for two months. We have a few months to go before it’s ready. I’m working part-time at the bar until it’s finished because I’m having a hard time leaving. Dillan and Lexa have been incredibly supportive of my new business adventure and have been a part of my team helping get the place set up.

I’m terrified I will crash and burn, but I’ll work hard to make it thrive. The community is excited. It’s a game center with bowling, video games, pool tables, air hockey, and more. We’re also serving pizza baked in an incredibly beautiful, huge wood-fired pizza oven. I have a state-of-the-art salad bar on the way as well. I don’t want to compete with Dillan and Lexa; I want to add to our community. The kids are beyond excited for the place and a youth group have volunteered a lot of their time with painting, hanging sheet rock, and working on the floors and walls. They’ve all earned lots of tokens and gift cards for free pizza. What a great community I live in.

“I’ve never thought about owning my own business. I have a degree, but I’ve been lost for a very long time and unsure of what I’ve wanted to do. It’s been comfortable working for Dillan. I’ve saved a lot of money over the years though, and this seems like a smart move.”

“It’s good for my business too. People will come and gorge on your delicious pizza then need to come over and work it off,” Derek says, making me laugh.

“I’ll have to put up a sign that says, if you’re feeling fat after walking out the doors, you can scoot on over to the gym.” We both laugh at this.

“You’re making me hungry,” he says.

“The pizza oven will be installed by the end of next week. We’re going to have to test it out. The youth group is practically jumping up and down in excitement. We’re going to have many pizza parties as we finish the rest of the building.”

“It’s not just the kids excited over this,” he tells me.

He’s holding his pole and all of a sudden it dips low. “I think I have a big one,” he says, a huge grin on his face as he turns away and focuses on his rod. I’m not going to admit it, but I’m a tad jealous as he struggles to reel up what’s obviously a very big fish. I tell myself this is good. If we don’t catch anything, we eat chicken for dinner and that’s just wrong.

I’m watching him as he reels, his smile growing bigger and bigger. “It’s almost up,” he says, his happy voice washing over me, making me very happy.

I'm lightly grasping my own pole when it's almost yanked out of my hands. The rod nearly hits the water as I get hit hard.

"I have one," I shout, setting my hook, then reeling as fast as the fish will let me. It's certainly a fighter and I reel it closer, then it runs my line back out again and again. I bring it closer and finally see color, shouting at Derek to get the net ready. "It's a big one," I shout, laughter falling from me.

I feel Derek behind me and wonder if he's lost his fish. I can't turn to see. The huge salmon gets close to the boat, and I reel again, and then I'm filled with horror as it jumps out of the water in its final attempt to get away. I feel my pole jump as the fish rips the hook out of its mouth, then does a backflip back into the water as it swims away.

I'm not proud when a slew of curse words escape my mouth and I stomp my foot. "Noooooo," I cry out and hear Derek chuckle behind me.

I spin, my eyes narrowed, my lips pressed together. I'm about to yell some more when I see him holding his pole next to him, a black box dangling from his hook.

"What ... what is happening?" I ask, looking from his grinning face to that little black box dangling in the air between us.

My heart starts thumping out of control and I forget all about the fish I just lost as he takes the box off the hook, then drops down on one knee before me.

"It looks like I've caught the biggest fish in the lake," he says, his eyes shining, his lips turned up brightly.

“Derek?” I gasp. He’s proposing. I realize this is what’s happening but I’m in shock; I don’t know how to process this moment. We haven’t spoken about getting married. I didn’t think it was something he wanted to do, not after all he’s been through. I told myself I’m okay with that; I don’t need to be his wife. With him kneeling before me, I realize how wrong I was in that line of thinking.

“Emmy, you’ve stuck with me through the worst moments of my life. It took me too long, but I finally realized this world isn’t worth living in without you. Yes, I know we don’t need to have another person in our lives to be whole, but you truly are my other half. I love you for you, I love you for how much you love me, I love you for how kind you are, how smart you are, how motivated you are. I love you for making me want to be a better person.”

He opens the box and a beautiful diamond sparkles in the sunlight as he looks at me with love and admiration that makes me feel like I’m the woman he’s describing.

“Marry me, Emmy, be my wife, be the mother of my children. Walk through this journey with me, and I swear I’ll be the man I should’ve been from the beginning for you. I’ll never fail you again. I’ll walk at your side, and always lift you up. Let me prove I’m worthy of being your husband.”

Tears fall from my eyes as I look at this beautiful, broken-and-healed man. I reach down and cup his face in the palm of my hand, loving him more and more every single day.

“Derek, I’m so glad you’ve come into my life. I love you and nothing would make me happier than walking the rest of

our lives together. I want to be your wife, have your children, and live through the good and bad of life together.”

He pulls the ring from the box and slips it on my finger, then jumps to his feet and pulls me into his arms. He kisses me with a passion that’s still growing stronger every single day. He then lifts me off my feet and spins me around.

“I love you, Emmy,” he shouts.

We hear someone from another boat yell back and both of us laugh. “I love you, Derek,” I reply.

He kisses me again, and there’s a surety in me that this is how it’s going to be for the rest of our lives. It’s going to be me and this man from here on out and together we can make all of our dreams come true. It really doesn’t get better than this.

It takes a while for us to get back to fishing, and we do end up getting a salmon. This time it’s Derek who lands the fish. I don’t mind as I’m quite content to gaze upon my beautiful ring and make plans for our future. It’s funny because I didn’t think I cared about getting married, but now that I’m wearing this ring, I know it’s what I want more than anything else. I want Derek to be mine for all time and all eternity. I want to say the vows that seal us together.

We get our salmon dinner, and then we seal our promises to each other long into the night. Making love to him this time is different. We’re planning on becoming husband and wife, and that makes me soar higher than I’ve ever soared before.

Chapter thirty-nine

Derek

Gametime Pizzeria opening day is a zoo ... and I can't possibly be happier for my fiancée. It's so funny that a word that used to cause me pain now fills me with joy. Emmy is my fiancée, and I'm thrilled to soon make her my wife. I wanted to run off and elope the second I proposed, but I couldn't pull her away when she was about to open her new business. We are still sneaking off for the wedding. We're heading to Mexico with only a few friends. Later we'll have a fun reception right here in her own business.

"This place is great," Booker says, moving beside me as I lean on the back wall and watch everyone having fun.

"She did great," I tell him.

"She might run me out of business," Dillan says as he steps up, a big smile on his lips.

"I don't think that will happen, but while the adults are all at the bar, the kids will be here," I tell him.

"I'm very proud of her. I love this place. Who doesn't enjoy some twilight bowling?" Dillan asks.

"Thank you for being so supportive of her in this," I tell Dillan, who's become a great friend.

“There was never a question of being supportive. I hate losing her at the bar, but I love that she has her own place. We’re family in this town and we all lift each other up,” Dillan says.

“That’s why I love it here so much,” Booker says.

“Hey guys, this place is great,” Greyson says as he joins us, his two-year-old sitting on his hip.

“I did whatever Emmy told me, this is all her,” I say with a beaming smile.

“When is the wedding?” Booker asks.

“In two weeks. We only get to leave for a few days because Emmy doesn’t want to be away from her business too long. Her dad is going to run it for her while she’s gone and she’s afraid the place will burn down,” I say.

Everyone laughs. “It’s hard to trust your business to someone else,” Booker says.

“I know, but when you have a great staff, it’s easier to get away,” I tell him.

“I’ve been so slammed, I need to hire a couple of more people. I’m so damn picky though, that it’s hard to do,” Booker says.

“I know what you mean,” Dillan agrees. “However, I wouldn’t have met Lexa if I didn’t hire people, so I say bring in more employees.”

Booker holds up his hands. “I don’t want to marry an employee. I think I’ll stick with male hires.” He laughs.

“Haven’t you seen the way the ladies keep looking at you, Booker? I think they have something up their sleeve. The more of these women who get married, the more they want to marry off all of the bachelors,” I tell him.

Booker looks absolutely horrified. “I’m perfectly content being a bachelor. It’s worked out well for you guys, but I’ve seen a lot of bad marriages. I’m not interested,” he emphatically says.

“What does your mom think of this?” Dillan asks.

We all laugh. We’ve met his mother, Renita, and she isn’t afraid to speak her mind. Booker laughs.

“Yeah, Mom says it’s going to happen. That’s why I moved here. I have a feeling if I would’ve stayed in Texas with her, she’d have already married me off,” Booker replies.

“When is she coming for another visit? I love it when she comes to town. She shakes things up and is the life of the party at the bar,” Dillan says.

Booker laughs. “She was doing shots with Tim McGraw and nearly had him on the floor. Do you really want her here, scaring off your artists?”

“That was damn funny. Tim was impressed,” Dillan replies.

“Well, in her defense if the man can’t keep up ...” Greyson says.

“I was damn lucky to grow up with such a strong role model. I can’t imagine this world without my mother. I will say she scares the hell out of me at times though. She doesn’t deal with misbehavior even as an adult,” Booker says, making us laugh again.

“We all need someone to keep us in line. It starts with our mothers then the task is left to our wives. I think that’s why our moms want us to marry well,” Greyson says.

“My mom wasn’t strong, but she was very broken. I hope she’s smiling down at me now and how far I’ve come,” Dillan says.

“I’m with you, Dillan,” I tell him, patting his arm. “I’m grateful for all I went through. It’s made me stronger, it’s opened the door for a woman like Emmy to step through it. I’ll only become a better man with her in my life.”

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve ever said,” Greyson tells me.

“An old dog *can* be taught new tricks,” I tell him.

We’re interrupted when a group of teens come running past us, someone’s parents calling out to them to slow down. We laugh at the joy everyone in here is feeling.

“What are you boys doing over here in the corner?” Emmy asks as she sidles up to us.

“Admiring the amazing job you’ve done,” I tell her, pulling her close and giving her a quick kiss. It doesn’t matter how long we’re together, the second we touch I want to find the nearest room and strip her naked.

“Don’t you dare give me that look, Derek,” she says with laughter as she backs away from me. I shake my head, mesmerized by this woman, shocked that she’s all mine, and more in love than I ever thought possible.

“What?” I ask with innocence. She pats my arms.

“I have a table ready. Your wives are already there. You’re invited too, Booker,” she says with a wink his way.

“I’m not sure I want to hang with all you blissfully in love people,” Booker says. I’m unsure if he’s joking or not.

“You’re a part of the group. Come on,” she demands.

He laughs, unable to deny her. We follow her to the back corner where a large table is set up, brimming with pizza, beer, and soda. We sit and Emmy stands at the end, smiling at all of us.

“Thank you all so much for your support. I never thought I’d want to have a place like this, but now that I do, it feels right. I couldn’t have done it without each and every one of you pitching in and helping me. Pizza and beer aren’t nearly enough to thank you, but it’s a start,” she says.

“Pizza and beer are always enough,” Booker says as he’s the first to dive in and grab the house special that’s loaded with so much good stuff, he has to use both hands to hold it. He takes a bite, chews, then groans in pleasure. “You’re going to get me fat, Emmy; this is delicious.”

“That’s my favorite pizza. It’s taco, but not ordinary taco. I love the cheese stuffed crust.”

“Perfection,” he says, then stops talking as he consumes the piece before reaching for another. The rest of our group dives in before all of the pizza disappears, though I’m not sure how that will be possible with six pies sitting on the table.

“Don’t worry, I have more coming out,” she assures us. “I want to sit down and hang, but I have people to entertain.” She runs off and I sit with my friends and watch her go from table

to table, talking, laughing, and looking like she's on top of the world.

"I'm one hell of a lucky man," I say.

"Yes, you are," both Lexa and Cassie say before they start laughing.

"We're all lucky men," Dillan says as he winks at his very happy wife.

"Yes, we are," Greyson says, sending an air kiss to Cassie.

"I think we can agree we're all very lucky and in love," Cassie says.

"Mom, I got two hundred bowling and kicked everyone's butts," Mattie says as she skids to a stop in front of our table.

"That's amazing," Cassie says, beaming at Mattie who's now eighteen years old and heading off to college soon.

Cassie was fourteen and in juvie when Mattie was born. She was forced to give the baby up and never stopped looking for her daughter once she was out. Now Mattie is a very lucky child to have two incredible mothers. Their journey wasn't easy, but it worked out in the end and that's all anyone can ask for.

"I have to go or Lisha will cheat," Mattie says before she flits off again, her laughter trailing behind her.

"I love that girl," Cassie says.

"We all do."

"I don't cheat," Lisha calls over the crowd, making us all laugh again.

“How in the heck did she hear that?” Lexa asks.

“Because teenagers have bat ears,” Lexa says.

“Yes, we do,” Chance says, sneaking up on us, grabbing a slice of pizza then disappearing again, making Lexa laugh.

“That boy is a pain in my butt,” Lexa says.

“And we adore him,” Dillan says. Lexa looks at him with so much love it makes us all feel like we’re intruding.

“I’m so glad we came to Ravish, so glad Chance and I found you,” Lexa says.

“Not half as glad as I am,” Dillan says. He climbs out of his seat, moves to Lexa, and bends down and kisses her.

“Enough of that, we have children present,” Booker says.

“It’s good for the kids to see what real love looks like,” I tell him. “Had I seen more love in my lifetime, I could’ve saved myself a hell of a lot of trouble.”

“I agree with that,” Dillan says. “But no matter what we went through in our youth, we’re here now, and that’s what matters the most.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” I tell him.

We stay at the place a couple of more hours, and it doesn’t slow down. This might be opening night, but I have a feeling it’s going to continue to stay busy. Emmy really did think of everything. She has a fun, safe place for parents to bring their children to play and have fun while the parents sit and visit. There’s music, games, great food, and drinks. It’s going to be a weekly event for many families, and a daily event for the teens.

What's even better about it is that I get to go home every night with the woman I love. I've come a long way in the past few years, and I owe it to everyone with me in this room. I couldn't be more grateful. I'm very much looking forward to what the future holds for all of us.

Chapter Forty

Emmy

My stomach is tight as I gaze in the mirror, Lexa and Cassie standing beside me. They're grinning ... and I'm having a panic attack.

"Are you sure this is the right thing to do?" I ask.

They both laugh. "Oh, doll, this is *so* the right thing to do," Lexa says. "You're in love with Derek, there's nothing else you can do *but* marry him."

"I agree. There were a few times I wanted to bury the man, but you love him, and he loves you, and now it's time for a happily ever after," Cassie says. "And you're absolutely beautiful."

"However, if you want to run, we'll run with you. No one should ever marry another person because they're being pressured," Lexa adds.

Her words finally make me smile. "I don't feel pressured. I'm just scared. I felt forced to marry the first time. I wasn't expecting to marry Derek, but I do love him more than words can express. This is just last minute jitters."

"We know. We both felt the same," Cassie says.

Lexa laughs. "You didn't have time to think of last minute jitters since you were having a baby at the moment you finally

decided to marry Greyson.”

That takes the last of my nerves away. “That was certainly a wedding I’ll never forget,” Cassie says.

“Are you ready?” Lexa asks as she clips some flowers in my hair.

I’m emotional as I smile at her through the mirror. “I’m ready.”

The three of us go outside, climb into the golf cart, and head to the beach where Derek is waiting with Greyson and Dillan by his side. We’re keeping the ceremony simple with only the six of us. We’ll have an epic reception back home with all of our loved ones. I did the big wedding once, so this time I want simplistic, raw, and filled with nothing but our love for each other.

I tremble and step barefoot out of the golf cart, feeling the sand between my toes as I move to the head of the aisle, drawing closer to Derek, the love of my life. The setting sun casts a warm glow over the beach, and the sound of waves lapping against the shore creates a serene backdrop for this special moment.

My simple white island dress flutters in the ocean breeze, and delicate flowers in my hair flow down my back. My hands are free so he can take them in his and hold me as I cling to him, just the way it will be for the rest of our lives.

Derek is waiting, looking handsome in his linen suit. He smiles at me, a tear rolling down his cheek, making my heart skip a beat. I can’t believe the moment is here, that he’s about to officially become mine.

The music starts . . . *Angel of Mine* by Monica. The words choke me up.

When I first saw you, I already knew

There was something inside of you.

Something I thought that I would never find.

Angel of mine.

I begin walking toward Derek, my eyes for only him, a smile on my face at the raw emotion in his face, the love, the loyalty, the awe. We haven't had an easy journey, and there were many times I didn't think we'd make it, but we're here, and he and I are going to be *us* from this time forward. The music continues:

Nothing means more to me than what we share.

No one in this whole world can ever compare.

Last night the way you moved is still on my mind.

Angel of mine.

I reach Derek and he takes my hands in his. I don't hear the preacher's words as I gaze at Derek, who's looking back at me, love shining in his eyes. It took a long time for us to get here, but I know it's me he's seeing. There is no longer a ghost between us.

The preacher asks him to say his vows and he suddenly looks like a deer in the headlights, making me chuckle. "I was supposed to write vows?" he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Just speak from your heart," the preacher says.

He turns and looks at me. “I promise to love you and to always be faithful,” he says as he slips a ring on my finger, his hands trembling. The way he gazes at me with another tear slipping tells me more than words ever can how he feels about me. I know I’m loved.

“Emmy,” the preacher says.

Unlike Derek, I have a lot to say ... as usual. I have three pages I’ve written down. I don’t need to look at the words though as I gaze at this man.

I speak from the heart until I get to the last thing I wrote. “Our journey hasn’t been easy, and we’ve already climbed mountains together. That just means that we know we’re strong enough to make it through anything and come out whole on the other side. I love you, Derek, I love you with all of my heart and soul. I wasn’t looking for love, but when it hits a person, there’s nothing you can do about it. I promise to love you, to cherish you, to walk through this life with you. I promise to give you my body, my heart, and my soul. I promise to always be true to both you and myself. I promise this will be for an eternity.”

Our vows finish as the sun dips below the horizon, the sky turning a beautiful shade of orange and pink. We seal our vows with a kiss as the ocean laps at the shore. Our friends cheer as Derek dips me. It’s a magical moment I’ll never forget, and I’m forever grateful I’m sharing it with this man I’m so lucky to have found.

We’ve only exchanged vows, but walking away from the ceremony hand in hand with my husband makes life seem different. I take in the beauty of the scenery around us, the

ocean sparkling beneath the darkening sky, the palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze, and the sound of laughter and music from the bars on the beach, and I'm happier than I've ever been before.

The evening is filled with dancing, snacks, and drinks as we celebrate our union with our closest friends. The warm Caribbean air and the rhythm of the music makes us feel alive, and I laugh as we dance for a little while until it's time for dinner.

Somehow the six of us end up at an Italian place in Mexico which makes me laugh. We're all seated and my cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

"This is a beautiful place, but I can't believe we're eating Italian in Mexico," Cassie says with a chuckle.

"I'm not holding much hope that it's going to taste great. I wanted nachos," Dillan says.

"We've had nachos for the past three meals," Lexa says with a laugh. She then turns and looks at me. "We leave tomorrow, so where are the lovebirds off to next?"

"Cancun for a couple of days. We can't be gone for too long, but we want to have a mixture of adventures while we're there. Who knows when we'll get the chance to go back again," I tell her.

"That sounds great. What do you guys have planned?" Greyson asks.

"We're going snorkeling and paddleboarding and visiting the Mayan ruins," Derek says.

"And taking a fishing charter and going tubing," I add.

“Now I’m jealous,” Cassie says with a laugh.

“We aren’t invading their honeymoon,” Greyson says. “But we can sneak off somewhere else for a while.”

“Maybe in a couple of more years. I don’t want to leave the kids too long yet,” she says with only a slight pout.

“We can always bring them and hire the best nanny alive,” Greyson suggests.

Her eyes brighten. “I might be willing to do that.”

I love how much my friends love one another. It makes it easier for me to trust my own heart. Yes, my first marriage epically failed, but that doesn’t mean *all* marriages fail. Derek’s my soul mate and we’ll last forever. It won’t always be easy, but we can make it through anything as long as we’re together.

Lexa stands and we become quiet as she pulls out a piece of paper.

“Since you wanted to keep this small and intimate your mother passed me a note to read at dinner,” Lexa says. My eyes instantly start tearing up.

“Derek and Emmy, I’m so happy for both of you, and wanted to write this letter to show my support and love. Life hasn’t been an easy journey for the two of you, but it’s been an adventure, and as long as you keep holding on to one another, that adventure will continue to make you stronger. I love you both. I can’t wait for the reception. Lots of love, Mom.”

“Mom is the best letter writer ever,” I say as I wipe my eyes.

“I’m very glad to be a part of your family,” Derek tells me as he wraps an arm around my back, then leans down so we can kiss.

“Do you feel different now that you’re officially married?” Cassie asks.

“I feel amazing,” I say.

“I found my other half so I finally feel whole,” Derek says, making me melt next to him.

“I’ve been rooting for you guys for years so I’m thrilled it’s finally happened,” Cassie says.

Derek looks shocked. “Years?”

“Yep, Emmy spotted you and you were hers from the start even if you hadn’t figured it out yet,” Lexa says with a laugh.

“I was a fool to take so long to notice,” Derek says.

“Yes you were, but you figured it out, so you’re forgiven,” I tell him, and we all laugh.

“Men take a while,” Greyson says.

“You men have to stick up for each other,” Cassie says.

“We sure do. We know women are the ones who really rule the world,” Dillan says, holding up his glass. “To love, happiness, and the beautiful women who rule our worlds and take us to our knees. May it never change.”

We smile as we clink glasses. Then Derek pulls me close and kisses me breathless. We finish a perfect meal, then the two of us slip away from our friends and walk down the beach, watching the waves come in and out and talking about the beautiful day we’ve shared.

This is just the beginning of our journey through life, and I can't wait to see what the future holds. For now though, we're perfectly content to simply bask in the afterglow of a wonderful wedding and intimate reception with our best friends.

We snuggle up together on the sand and I'm safe in his arms as I watch others frolic in the water and run on the warm sand. We have forever together ... and that might just be enough time.

epilogue

Emmy

I watch as Derek paces the house. This past week, he's been a mess ... and it isn't because I'm nine months pregnant and past my due date. Our daughter seems quite happy right where she is in my belly. No, he's been a mess because the one and only David Goggins is coming to town to do a lift, run, shoot with Cam Hanes, and Derek is the trainer for the lift part.

I was a bit of a mess too, because they weren't sure what day David was arriving. Cam has asked me a few times to please not go into labor until the event is over. I laughed and told him I'd do my best.

Today is the day and Derek and I head out the door for the gym an hour before everyone else is to arrive. This is a big deal with camera crews and one of the toughest men on the planet. David Goggins is the only member of the U.S. Armed Forces to complete the SEAL training — including two Hell Weeks — the U.S. Army Ranger School where he graduated as Enlisted Honor Man, and Air Force Tactical Air Controller training.

On top of all of this, he's an accomplished endurance athlete, having completed over sixty ultra-marathons, triathlons, and ultra-triathlons, setting new course records and regularly placing in the top five. In other words, Derek is

nervous to be training a beast like this man. How in the heck do you bring something new to one of the greatest athletes of all time?

I understand this is a big deal, but my doctor has told me if I don't go into natural labor this weekend, he's going to induce me, and I absolutely don't want that. I want a natural experience. I'm tough and I can do this, so I've been getting massages, rubbing on oils, exercising, eating foods that are supposed to stimulate labor, and even went in for acupuncture. Today, while Derek's doing his thing, I'm going to be working out in another corner of the gym, encouraging this child to get the heck out of my body.

I'm on the treadmill when the camera crew come inside, David and Cam walking ahead of the pack, both looking confident, people stopping to look their way. I laugh. They aren't going to be thrilled if my water breaks and spills out all over the floor and their trainer has to rush out. I don't want this ... but I do need this baby on the outside of me.

I watch as Derek shines, putting David through a great workout while I move along the wall doing lunges and squats ... without the baby even thinking of coming out.

After about two hours I hear a cheer go up, then see David pat Derek telling him good job, that he'll feel this workout tomorrow. Derek looks both thrilled and as if he might puke. I see them all chatting before the camera crew heads out.

When David and Cam leave, Derek walks over and throws his arms around my wide body. "That was incredible, babe," he says, joy flowing through him.

"I'm so happy for you," I tell him, meaning it.

“How are you and our stubborn daughter feeling?” he asks as his hand rubs over my bulging stomach.

“Good. No pain at all. This little peanut is quite content right where she is.”

“That’s because she has a great mom and knows she’s safe in there.”

“Well, I’ve given her an eviction notice, so it’s time to go,” I tell him, making him laugh.

“Cam invited us over to watch the UFC game if you’re up for it,” he offers.

I shrug. “This child is never coming out, so let’s do it.”

We drive to Cam’s house, and everyone is laughing, eating, and having a great time while we watch the fights. Tonight’s main event is Holloway versus Horteia. David looks over at me and winks.

“I’ve delivered a few babies. I’m an EMT among other things,” he says.

The scary thing is that I have no doubt he could deliver this child. I don’t think there’s anything he can’t do.

“Well, she’s never coming out, so I think we’re all safe,” I say. We joke about it for a bit, and when the fights over I’m tired.

Derek and I head home. Derek can’t quit smiling he’s riding so high, so I leave him to burn off some excess energy as I go and take a bath. I’m not feeling so good now and can’t get comfortable. Of course I can’t ... my stomach is huge.

I get out of the tub and still feel miserable. I walk back out to the living room ... and my water breaks all over the floor. Ohhhh, I'm in labor. I've studied this, and thought I knew the signs of labor. I guess I didn't study enough. Derek stares at me, looking like a fish that's just been flung on a boat. He's gone from riding high ... to not knowing at all what to do.

My confident, sure husband is suddenly a total nutball, moving all over the place, not sticking with our plan of grabbing our go-bags and getting me to the hospital. I finally have to grab him and look in his eyes.

"I need you to get your crap together. I need you," I say, then moan as a contraction rips through me.

My words pull him out of his meltdown, something snapping together in his brain. He takes over, which I desperately need him to do. In about an hour we leave for the hospital, calling Lexa on the way. She assures me she and Cassie will be there. Derek also calls my mom who meets us there.

It's nearing midnight and our daughter isn't in a hurry to come out. Labor is miserable and there's no way I can get through it without my friends, Derek, and my mom at my side. Derek waits until morning to call my dad. He's had some setbacks on his drinking and, as much as I love him, I don't want him at the hospital unless he's sober, not during this special moment.

Derek stays by my side the entire time, treating me like a client as he tells me, I have this, I can do it, I'm doing great. It's enough to make me smile, a welcome expression in the midst of so much pain. Around nine, after ten miserable hours

of labor, the doctors finally talk me into getting an epidural. I don't want one, but they tell me my body needs to rest, and my swelling has to go down. The epidural does take away the blinding pain.

A doctor I trust immensely comes in and checks me, then gives me a look I don't want to see. "Emmy, this isn't happening. Her head is too big for your pelvis. You have to have a C-section."

Tears stream down my cheeks. I look at Derek, then at Lexa and Cassie, who all nod. I finally accept it and nod. Derek lets out a visible sigh of relief. Seeing me in this much pain for so long hasn't been easy on him.

Things move fast after this. I'm wheeled into another room while Derek scrubs down and gowns up. The doctor tells Derek to look over the curtain and he sees our daughter being pulled out of my midsection.

He starts yelling. "Here she comes. Babe, they're pulling her out. Emmy, she's here. She's beautiful. She's perfect." Several of the people in the room chuckle at the joy and excitement in his voice. I'm exhausted, but still smile.

He moves behind the curtain and cuts the cord, and then our daughter, Charlie, is laid in my arms. The look of love and awe on Derek's face tells me more than anything else that all of the pain we've gone through has been worth it.

Our journey hasn't been even close to perfect, but we're a family now. We had a ghost between us, and a lot of childhood trauma trying to keep our hearts hidden behind brick walls, but we've made it.

Derek leans down, tears in his eyes as he lays one hand on me and one on our daughter.

“I love you, Emmy,” he whispers.

“I love you, Derek,” I reply.

“I’m sorry for all I put you through.”

I give him a watery smile. “It was all worth it to be here now. We’ve climbed the mountain and we’ve come over the top into the sunshine. We’re a family, and nothing can ever come between us again.”

He gives me a gentle kiss and our daughter lets out a cry of disapproval, letting us know she’s here and wants to be the center of attention. We both chuckle and say a prayer as we thank God for the blessing of her and of each other as we form our imperfect union. Who wants perfection anyway? That’s boring. I’d rather have our unique lives any day of the week. We will live happily ever after even if there are more bumps in the road.

The End ... For Now

If you read the prelude, you know how difficult this story was for me to write since this is based on real people. I called

the real Emmy several times as I was writing this story, telling her how much I wanted to stop, that it was tough to write.

I always dive into my stories, and always fall in love with my characters as if they're real people, but this is my first book, that they really are real people. Not everything in here is real, a lot is fiction, but there's enough truth that it was tough for me. I've finally realized that real life is so much better than fiction most of the time.

The labor scene is pretty much accurate. Emmy does like to be a pain ... and I love it.

I've shifted in my writing. I want more depth, more emotion, and more reality. Maybe I'm finally growing up. Who knows, miracles do happen. When I go too dark, though, I have to come back to my roots and write something lighter and sweet. We can only dive into the darkness for so long before we have to come up for air and take a deep breath. That means the next story is back to the Andersons where I'm always happy.

I hope you love this story as much as I love the people in it. I will be doing Booker's story. There's one real character in that book as well. Renita, Booker's mom, is based on my real life friend, someone I met in the beginning of my career. Sign up for my newsletter to know when the pre-order for Booker's story is up. The last book in the series will be a little lighter, but there will be some drama as well because we all have a lot of it in our lives.

If you want to read something else, here are some ideas: I have series that are lighthearted, dramatic, and in between. I have brief comments about each of the series listed below.

For a lighthearted feel, this series will go on and on starting with three brothers and the infamous Joseph Anderson who decides to play matchmaker. It then goes into his twin brother's children, and then they find a lost triplet that makes it super fun. Each story has an happily ever after, but characters will appear in the other stories.

The Andersons

[Wins The Game](#)

[The Dance](#)

[The Fall](#)

[The Proposal](#)

[The Blackmail](#)

[The Runaway](#)

[The Final Stand](#)

[Unexpected Treasure](#)

[Hidden Treasure](#)

[Holiday Treasure](#)

[Priceless Treasure](#)

[The Ultimate Treasure](#)

The Anderson Heirs come about, because it's time those in the stories above grow up. So these are the stories of their children all grown up and falling in love. These are all lighthearted and fun stories.

The Anderson Heirs

[Book One: Sweet Noel](#)

[Book Two: Jacob's Challenge](#)

[Book Three: Jasmine's Homecoming](#)

This series is super fun and full of action. I co-wrote it with a buddy of mine. The men in this series are based on real people he worked with while he was in the military or doing contractor work. Smoke is by far my favorite character of this series. You also see Jasmine growing up and having quite the attitude which leads to her own series listed below.

ANDERSON SPECIAL OPS

[Shadows](#)

[Rising](#)

[Barriers](#)

[Shattered](#)

[Reborn](#)

This is a spin-off branch of Andersons that are again a fun group of men in a new town. It's lighthearted and fun, and I really loved writing the series.

THE ANDERSON BILLIONAIRES

[Finn](#)

[Noah](#)

[Brandon](#)

[Hudson](#)

[Crew](#)

Now, we're coming to more of my dramatic writing. I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE this series. This story came about while I was driving with my husband to a camping spot. We were talking about what would make someone get married multiple times and we came up with this series together. I completely lived vicariously through Charlie (different from Derek and Emmy's Charlie) and all of the adventures she takes in this series. I love how it all comes around, and I personally love how it ends. The adventures she goes on in the middle,

though, are so much fun. Please let me know what you think of this series because it's one of my favorites I've ever written.

TWELVE HORIZONS OF CHARLIE

[Diamond](#)

[Sapphire](#)

[Opal](#)

[Emerald](#)

This is certainly my most erotic series. But I'm well-known for my "clean" sex scenes. They are descriptive, they are sexy, and some of them are long, but I don't use crude language in my scenes. I use words like steel, core, heat. I personally get grossed out when crude words are used so I get creative in my writing. My hubby might have blushed a bit though when he read one of my books for the first time. He certainly was ready to try out some of the scenes he read. He doesn't mind helping with my research ... not at all. I love this series, though. It's sexy, but of course it has siblings because family means the world to me and I can't write anything without family. I love the bond between the siblings

and parents. I love how sexy it is, and I love the three storylines. I hope you do as well.

SURRENDER SERIES

[Surrender](#)

[Seduced](#)

[Scorched](#)

[Saved](#)

And we're back to contemporary romance. This is another Anderson-type series with brothers and is fun and lighthearted with alpha men and sexy, confident women. Each story finishes but you'll want to read the entire series because you'll love all of the brothers.

UNDERCOVER BILLIONAIRES

[Kian](#)

[Arden](#)

[Owen](#)

[Declan](#)

This is another series I love. It's different from my other works and again co-written with my friend. This isn't romance, though

there is romance in it. It's about Jasmine Anderson and the adventures she takes away from home. You'll see some of your favorite characters in it and meet some new people. This is more high adrenaline and crime fighting and it was super fun to write.

TRUTH IN LIES

[One too Many](#)

[Two Secrets Kept](#)

[Three Outs](#)

[Four Seconds Gone](#)

I love this series because I have a total thing for pilots. There's just something hot about a man who can control a plane. I worked for the airlines for about 10 years and it was one of my favorite jobs. These are 4 brothers that are fun, sexy, and each story is unique. Ace is my fav, because he's such an ass for so long ... but we all know how fun it is to take these kind of men down to their knees.

BILLIONAIRE AVIATORS

[Turbulent Intentions – Book One \(Cooper\)](#)

[Turbulent Desires – Book Two \(Maverick\)](#)

[Turbulent Waters – Book Three \(Nick\)](#)

[Turbulent Intrigue – Book Four \(Ace\)](#)

I love this series too. It's again contemporary romance with alpha men and the women they think they deserve. This time it's cousins. It's one of my early series and it's lighthearted fun reading. They are certainly alpha but none of my men cross the line into irredeemable.

The Titans

[The Tycoon's Revenge](#)

[The Tycoon's Vacation](#)

[The Tycoon's Proposal](#)

[The Tycoon's Secret](#)

[The Lost Tycoon](#)

[Rescue Me](#)

This was my first series that was sold in stores and I was like a child at Christmas when I walked into the bookstore to see a book on the shelf with MY NAME on it. What a thrill for a girl who was raised in low-income housing and a single-wide trailer. I will never forget the thrill of that

moment. I will never forget seeing it in People Magazine. I love this series. It's fun, lighthearted, and of course, Joseph Anderson comes and visits. If you want a great beach read, this is the series for you.

HEROES SERIES

[Safe in his arms – Novella](#)

[Baby it's Cold Outside](#)

[Her Unexpected Hero – Book One](#)

[Who I am with you – Book Two – Novella](#)

[Her Hometown Hero – Book Three](#)

[Following Her – Book Four – Novella](#)

[Her Forever Hero – Book Five](#)

[Her Found Hero – Book Six](#)

Okay, so this series came about at a romance conference where Jan, Ruth, and I were drinking WAY WAY WAY too much. We started chatting and decided billionaires were far too overdone. We were sitting there with a crew from Amazon and started talking about kings that had to kill the woman if she didn't fall in love. We thought it was hilarious. Alcohol might have fueled this. Then one of the reps said, "and then he kills her." We were drunk, but not stupid. We had to explain to the Amazon rep that

we can't *actually* kill a heroine in a romance book. He told us then people will know how the story will end. By the end of the night we'd come up with Taken by the Trillionaire. We each wrote a novella, and we loved it! So we had to do a second set of princes because why the heck not? Next, we're going to have to do a third set, maybe set in America. A fun, silly night turned into some super fun stories. I love these two authors who will be lifelong friends. Here are our brilliant minds (fueled by a lot of free alcohol) in a series that will make you laugh and sigh.

TAKEN BY THE TRILLIONAIRE

[#1 Xander – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#2 Bryan – J.S. Scott](#)

[#3 Chris – Melody Anne](#)

[#4 Virgin for the Trillionaire – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#5 Virgin for the Prince – J.S. Scott](#)

[#6 Virgin to Conquer – Melody Anne](#)

