



BLACKOUT

BENSON FIRST RESPONDERS

LISA PHILLIPS

USA TODAY AND PUBLISHERS WEEKLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLACKOUT

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BOOK 2

LISA PHILLIPS



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Expired Return](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Also by Lisa Phillips](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE

Morgan's abdomen cramped. She let out a loud scream, her entire body bearing downward. After the contraction dissipated, she sagged back on the bed. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

The midwife they'd brought in patted her knee. "It won't be long now. Just a couple more pushes and your little one will greet the world." The lines on her face had nothing to do with smiling. Dark skin, dark eyes. She was kind, but she'd seen too much to let that spark hope in her eyes. She knew exactly what was happening here. "It won't be long, hon."

Smoothing her hand over her abdomen, Morgan concentrated on taking deep breaths. She didn't want to think about where she was, or what would happen after she had this baby. Or the ace of spades tattoo at the base of her thumb. One day she would burn it off herself. Walk away. Live free. She hadn't given up like the midwife, who never even told Morgan her name. She *wanted* the hope. Some days it was all she had to cling to.

Like the fledgling hope that at least her baby would have a better life than she ever had.

She could walk away knowing that. Believing it. Even if it was all she believed in.

The next contraction swelled in her midsection. Morgan's body contorted toward the middle. Her fingers curled into fists and her knees came up almost to the T-shirt over her chest.

"Push, babygirl." The midwife held her knee.

Morgan screamed all the pain and frustration back at them. The closed door. Two men in the hall. She would get out, one way or another.

The pressure eased. Morgan stared at the rush of flesh and fluid between her legs, her breath caught in her throat, waiting for that first sign of life. Was her baby dead? That would be a kind of mercy, to give birth to a stillborn child. One who would never know the horror that life could be. But when had she deserved anything like that?

The child batted the air and let out a wet cry.

Morgan gasped.

The midwife did something, then carried the baby to a table in the corner they'd covered with a towel—her back to Morgan.

“Is she okay?”

The midwife glanced over her shoulder. “She’s healthy.” Then continued to wrap the child in a pink blanket.

Morgan pushed up to her elbows, aware of the mess between her legs. “Can I—”

The door opened.

She shifted one knee to meet the other and turned her hips to lay them down. The ache and burns of moments ago were still there. If he expected her to get up right now, that wasn't going to work.

He scanned her, a look of distaste on his face.

The midwife scooped up Morgan's baby and left the room.

Morgan's breath left in a whimper, and her hope went with it.

He moved to the side of the bed and reached out. Curled his fingers around her throat and squeezed.

TWO

E MT Trey Banning sipped from the paper cup. The black coffee tasted old, the last of the pot he'd made before five that morning. He tucked his collar closer to his neck and stomped his feet to pump some warmth back into his limbs.

Rain dripped off the edges of the awning they'd set up beside the Washington Wilderness Race finish line. The three-day event tested survival skills, stamina, and the will to rough it in Pacific Northwest December weather just to win.

As a rule, he preferred summer—T-shirts on top of whatever he was wearing—and the lack of need for a sweater, a jacket. Or the beanie, gloves, and scarf he had on now. But the four seasons of Washington State weren't worth trading for blue skies and high temps he'd wind up taking for granted.

He wanted the anticipation of summer through those cold months and short days.

The radio on the folding table beside the laptop crackled to life. "The first participant just passed checkpoint nine."

"Won't be long now." Beside Trey, Benson PD Captain McCauley had on a similar winter uniform. But he wasn't here in a professional capacity today.

Trey checked the trail cam for checkpoint nine. "Looks like Selena is in the lead."

"Huh."

"Not who you thought would win?"

McCauley sipped his coffee and didn't even grimace. Maybe the stuff they made at the PD tasted like this all the time. He should come over to the fire department and try coffee that was actually good. "My girls think she will. But they follow Selena's YouTube channel and they're convinced she can do anything."

"They didn't make this easy." The race organizers had McCauley here to coordinate security for the media who were live streaming the race. Trey had signed up to volunteer in the medical tent in case of injuries. His hope was to get McCauley to put in a good word with the EMT captain. To vouch that Trey had recovered enough from the attack a couple of months ago he could be back on the ambulance.

Where he should be.

Not sidelined.

"I figure the fact she weighs eighty pounds less than the other racers gives her a solid advantage." McCauley motioned to the computer screen. "She's small and agile."

Selena had millions of followers on her channel, where she performed tricks and stunts. Her participation in this race could get her sponsors, more media awareness, and the fact her boyfriend was a co-competitor might say more about her being here. Alex had a rival channel, and their enemies-to-lovers romance had helped build both their followers higher than they would've been able to solo.

Trey spotted Alex pass the checkpoint. "Here he comes. Pretty close."

"He might even catch up before they hit the river."

Trey flicked to the camera on the opposite bank, pointed across the surface at the trail. Selena sprinted along the trail though she was still too far away to make out other than a blur. Those signature pink sneakers were a giveaway it was her. As she got closer, the determination on her face became clear.

She splashed into what had to be a freezing-cold river, teeth gritted as she reached for the rope she could hang on to

as she crossed and headed the last two miles in a loop to the finish line.

Behind her, Alex tore down the trail, eyes on his girlfriend in first position. Anger twisted his features. The young daredevil reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He tossed it at Selena.

The young woman's leg gave out and she tumbled into the water, an audible cry clear in her expression on the screen.

Trey heard her from half a mile away, through the trees.

Alex splashed into the water and ran past her. She scrambled to get up, her face contorted as she fell back into the water.

Trey grabbed the medical duffel from the table and slung it over his shoulder. Keys for the ATV were in the ignition already. He ignored the fact the seat was wet and revved the gas. The final two miles of the race looped around, but the river was a half-mile straight shot between the trees, skirting around berry bushes.

He pulled up beside the river and left the duffel. First he'd have to get the injured racer out of the water. "Selena! Call out!"

She screamed, thrashing in deeper water twenty feet downriver. Thankfully on his side, but he'd still have to get wet to get her out.

Trey raced down the walking path beside the river and saw her drift several feet farther away. "Grab that tree!"

He had an EMT vest over his jacket, and a Benson FD beanie on, but wearing all this cold weather gear would only drag him down. Trey tugged at the Velcro of the vest, unzipped his jacket, and left it on the bank. Raindrops peppered the water and ran from the beanie into his eyes. He'd figured this would be easy, with a bunch of social media athletes participating. *Should've known better.*

No matter what he tried, things never turned out how he planned. Case in point, stepping in front of his partner and getting stabbed by a Malaysian cartel assassin. *Good times.*

He waded into the water. “Hold on. I’m coming.”

She cried out, both arms wrapped around the branch. The water threatened to drag her under the surface, farther downstream.

“Hold on.” He got within arm’s reach.

She flung out her arm and grabbed his fleece sweater.

Trey stumbled on the riverbed rocks. “Whoa.”

“I can’t walk.”

“I’ve got you.” He slid her arm up behind his head. “Grab the back of my collar.” He got an arm behind her back and another under her knees and lifted her. She whimpered and stuck her head in his neck.

Two more racers reached the river, gave them a double take, and splashed in for the guide rope. “Selena, you good?”

“I’m okay, keep going!”

Trey waded to the edge of the river. Each footfall sent pain cutting through his abdomen. Even though he’d healed from the stabbing, and was absolutely ready to go back to work, holding a 110-pound soaking wet young woman tugged at what remained of the injury.

He gritted his teeth and trudged to the ATV. “I need to check you over and then we can go back to the tent. Get you taken care of, okay?” He used his reassuring tone and lowered the woman to the back of the four-wheeler.

She nodded, sniffed. “My knee gave out. And I think I twisted my ankle.”

Nothing rested at the wrong angle. He had her rotate both feet, then bend her legs one at a time. Removing her shoe would only mean her foot swelled before he could get her back to the tent. Trey climbed on. “Arms around me, okay?” He told her where to put her feet and ended up with her injured leg over his knee—though not because that’s where he’d told her to put it.

She slid close to his back.

Trey realized he'd forgotten his coat but figured he could come back for the soaked item that wasn't going to keep him warm right now. "Hold on."

He hit the gas and got her back to the finish line, where the organizer's tent and his medical tent had been erected.

Alex raced across the finish line, a wide smile on his face. Cameras flashed. He raised both fists in the air and pumped. "A personal best time!"

Selena clung to Trey's middle. Trey remembered he'd seen the guy toss something at her. They'd have to look at the trail camera footage and see what that showed. Sabotaging another racer could cost him the title of winner if that was what'd happened.

McCauley got Selena up. Trey slung the duffel over his shoulder and ducked under her other arm. They walked her to the medical tent.

They laid her on the cot, and she clung to Trey.

"Let me know where it hurts." He grabbed fabric scissors and started at the hem of her pants, cutting up to above her knee, which was already red. He unlaced her running shoes.

She hissed when he removed her left shoe. The woman was soaking wet. Makeup ran down her cheeks. Hair damp and frizzy around her face. Selena whispered, "Don't let anyone see me like this."

The tent flaps opened. "Babe, I won! Did you see!"

McCauley said, "Hold up. None of you are coming in. This is a medical tent."

Trey glanced over and spotted McCauley's back, his arms out barring the door. He doubted the police captain would've imagined he'd be doing crowd control in here today.

Trey looked at Alex. "You can leave, too. Come back later." He tossed aside the shoe and grabbed a bandage.

The guy's thousand-watt smile faltered. He was about to talk when Selena grabbed Trey's shoulders.

He turned to her.

“You saved my life!” She tugged him to her and smashed a kiss on his lips before he could object.

Cameras flashed.

THREE

Ember Hendryx checked her phone screen, then looked back at the keypad. Three seconds later the keypad entry clicked, and the light turned green. She disconnected the cord that linked her phone—and the security bypass app to the keypad.

She'd already taken down their cameras and the heat sensors they probably didn't know she found. A few more seconds and she'd gain access to their main office. If the staff who worked here didn't see her coming, someone would wind up getting fired today.

Ember chuckled. The door clicked shut behind her, and she checked her phone before she continued on, her tight black clothing making no sound as she headed down the hallway. Last night she'd stolen a security badge from an employee at a pool hall. Then she'd slept for fourteen hours, barely able to drag her eyes open this morning.

Life seemed determined to kick her butt into the afterlife. If Ember was going to go out, it would be kicking and screaming—and not before she found her missing sister.

She slipped the backpack off her shoulders and unzipped the main compartment. The shoes she had on worked, but she tugged out the skirt and secured it over her hips. Then she tucked in and straightened her black button-down shirt. She pulled out the Vanguard Investigations employee badge on a lanyard and slipped it over her head before exiting the hallway swiftly. Moving with purpose.

As though she was supposed to be here.

The building blueprints she'd found on file with the city indicated the CEO's office should be to her left. Ember quickly realized it was backward and turned.

A young man stood up from his cubicle across the room and looked around.

She ducked her head to the side, glancing in an empty conference room, and headed down the hall. Corner office. Past the breakroom.

Ember couldn't walk too fast, or it would be obvious she wasn't supposed to be here. Too slow and the same problem would arise.

Her day job—though she'd quit recently—had given her plenty of experience sneaking into places. Hobnobbing with people at every level of society. Stealing information. Toppling a regime—though the details of that were classified.

Her watch began to buzz.

Ember slowed her pace and took a long inhale. She held it at the top and counted to four, then blew the breath out. *Easy*. She couldn't get worked up or she'd end up in bed resting again. Annalise needed her healthy enough to find her before it was too late.

She slowed before the end of the hall and sent a text.

The CEO's assistant snatched up her phone, got up, and scurried away.

Ember nearly smiled to herself. It was almost too easy to—

“Hold up a second.” The voice was young, and male. “Ma'am?”

So close. Ember passed the assistant's empty desk and twisted the door handle. Before she could push inside, the young man closed in behind her. In a wise move, he didn't touch her.

“Ma'am? Can I see your badge ID?”

Ember turned to him and grinned. She pushed the CEO's door open but didn't step inside.

"You're late."

Ember laughed. "You gave me a day to plan." Her watch continued to buzz. She needed to sit before her heart rate increased to problematic levels.

Clare Juarez, the CEO of Vanguard Investigations, rounded her desk and came over. "You're lucky I gave you more than an hour." She kissed Ember's cheek, one of the few people who knew Ember's occupation since college. The same way Ember was one of the few people who knew Clare's true role in the army.

"I'm sorry." The young man held up his hands. "What's going on?"

Ember grinned, motioning over her shoulder at him. "This one is good. He almost had me."

Clare grinned. "I'm thinking he *did* have you."

Ember shifted to lean against the doorframe in lieu of finding a chair. "I could've planted a virus and he'd never have known. Only because you requested I make it all the way to your office for this meeting did he have the chance to spot me coming."

The young man said, "This was a test."

Ember turned far enough to get a good look at him. Early twenties. He had what had to be a twin brother, standing four feet behind him. The closer brother was thinner, lean like a runner. The one farther back had more muscle on his upper body.

"Simon Olson, this is an old friend of mine." Clare motioned at Ember but didn't give her name.

"And by the way," Ember said, patting him on the shoulder. "The test? You passed."

He frowned. The brother said, "What's going on?"

“If you’ll excuse us...” Clare stepped back so Ember could enter. “We have a meeting scheduled.”

Ember said, “You should let your assistant know her car’s fine.”

Clare chuckled. “Simon, text Kellie for me please?” She closed the door while Ember crossed to the closest chair and sank into it.

Ember would’ve reached into her purse for a pill, but Clare turned and the woman always saw too much. A product of her training. “That was fun.”

Clare grinned. “We don’t want your skills to get rusty now that you’re retired.”

It hadn’t even been a month, but she knew what Clare meant.

“Of course.” They would come in handy looking for her sister. “Have you found anything out about the man Annalise was dating?”

Clare settled into her chair. There was a file on her desk Ember hoped contained the information she sought. Instead of opening it, the CEO studied her. “She’s been missing six months.”

“And the cops gave up after three days. So no one is looking for her.” Ember’s time was limited, but if she could find her sister, then she would.

“I saw that Marcus got the division chief position.”

Ember nodded. She’d been up for that job. “It’s for the best.”

“You two went on that last mission together. All of a sudden, you’re retiring—when you told me you’d be a CIA officer for life—and he’s promoted instead of you?”

“I need to find Annalise. That’s all that’s important right now. Not some bureaucratic promotion I cared about then, but absolutely do not now.” Ember had to stick to the truth, as close as possible. Clare would spot a lie.

Even though that was precisely what she did, Clare still studied her before speaking again. Ember's old friend would know things weren't right.

Ember looked at her watch. The reading on her heart rate indicated it had dipped. Not enough she was out of the danger zone, but far enough sitting was serving more than one purpose.

"If you're looking into what happened to your sister, I'd like to help." Clare didn't move, though anyone untrained would've shifted out of nervousness. "The way I'd like to find out what happened to you on that last mission."

Ember wasn't going to tell her. She also didn't need the delay of Clare working two cases at once. "Your people don't need to be involved."

"But you'll allow them to help find your sister?"

Ember nodded.

"Good. Because I already have everyone on this." Clare nodded in return. They had an understanding. "We will find her."

Tears burned in Ember's eyes. She glanced at the wall of windows that let in the sun but were likely thick bullet-resistant glass. Clare couldn't afford to leave her safety to chance.

"You aren't going to explain what's going on, are you?"

Ember shook her head, waiting for the tears to quit. "It doesn't matter. What—"

"I know," Clare said. "Annalise is what matters."

"It's just...I have to focus." She had no other option. As it was, she could be too late to save her wayward sister. "Whatever she got into, it doesn't matter. She might want out, and if she does, then I'll offer her a way to get out."

Clare said, "And if she's gone?"

Ember swallowed against the lump in her throat. "I have to believe there's a chance she's still alive."

Clare flipped open the file. “There weren’t many leads when she went missing.”

Ember knew that much. She’d made some calls, but no one had answers for her in the hours after Annalise’s disappearance. Then she’d been sent on a couple of back-to-back missions, one of which went wrong. The next time she had access to a secure phone line, a month had gone by.

Her sister’s case was cold.

“What about her boyfriend?” Ember asked. “I didn’t get a good feeling about him.”

Clare nodded. “He’s got a rap sheet. I think we should head out for girls’ night. There’s a nightclub across town. Not the same one that blew up over the summer.”

Ember blinked. “Girls’ night?”

“I hear there are some interesting men at that club. The kind we might want to get to know.” Clare’s expression brightened into the grin of a predator getting the scent of prey.

Finally, a lead.

Ember stood. Dizziness washed over her. She grabbed the chair back and managed to stay upright. *No*.

She was doing this. Whether her frail body agreed or not, she would find her sister.

Before her heart gave out for the last time.

FOUR

Trey gripped the phone, backpack over his shoulder, as he walked from his truck on the drive to the front door of his townhome. “You can’t be serious.”

“Hasn’t your phone been blowing up with notifications since it happened? Bro, you’ve gone viral.” Freya laughed.

Trey’s partner on the ambulance—until he was stabbed weeks ago—might think it was funny. He did not. “I don’t have notifications on for those apps. That way they don’t *bother me while I’m supposed to be working.*”

Freya’s laughter grew louder. “It’s been a slow night.”

“Seems like it.”

“The photos went viral. Everyone thinks you’re trying to break up Alex and Selena.”

“That’s insane.”

Freya let out a noise that sounded like disagreement. “They’re digging up your social media history, reposting photos of you with women in Benson. The club. The gym. That music festival last year. Painting a picture of you being some kind of flagrant womanizer.”

He stuffed the key in the lock of his townhome and paused. “Are you kidding me?”

Trey winced. Given what he usually posted—pre-stabbing, of course—that probably wasn’t a stretch as far as conclusions went. He liked to date. He enjoyed meeting new people, and spending time with women. Freya didn’t like it, but he wanted

to live his life no matter what her or his mother thought of his choices.

Since his stint in the hospital, two surgeries to repair the damage, and physical therapy, he'd been sidelined to a desk at work and his social life had taken a nosedive. When Selena kissed him, that'd been the closest he was to a woman in the last few months.

"Not everyone thinks that you're a predator and Selena is your latest victim. But..."

"This is insane. She kissed *me*." He let himself in and dropped his backpack by the door.

"Did you get a chance to talk to McCauley?"

Trey gritted his teeth as he straightened. There was a suitcase in the hall. "Not with everything that happened with the photographers." Not to mention Alex had threatened to punch him, Selena had laughed like the whole thing was a big joke—except no one else took it that way.

Apparently it was now worse than he thought.

"You want me to ask Lucas to mention you? Maybe he can get McCauley to email the EMT chief."

He knew that suitcase. "I don't need your boyfriend to help me."

Freya was silent.

"Sorry. It's just..." Trey ran a hand down his face. "I'll figure it out."

"I know you will." A shuffle rattled on her end of the phone line. "Gotta go."

Trey hung up since she'd already be focused on whatever call had just come in. The fact Freya was on the ambo without him, responding to calls and saving lives, should be the point right now—but with the suitcase in his hall, it might not be. "Ma, you here?"

"Yeah, honey."

He followed the sound of her voice and found her stood in his pantry. She glanced over her shoulder. “Why do you have no flour?”

“I’m a grown man. Why would I have flour?”

She frowned. “I’m going to make Grandma Jean’s cookies.”

Trey folded his arms across his chest. The scar on his abdomen ached from carrying Selena out of that river, but he ignored it. “You came all the way here from Last Chance County to make me cookies?”

“Of course I did.” A shadow crossed her expression. “It’s December. You need cookies for the holidays.”

Trey rounded the island and tugged her to him. He wrapped his arms around her and laid his cheek on the top of her head. “Hi, Ma. It’s good to see you.”

Her breath hitched on an inhale, and she squeezed his middle.

He’d learned better than to start with, *What happened?* So he said, “How’s Allen?”

She grinned. “He’s going to come and stay as well. We can all be together for the holidays.”

“That’s great.” It didn’t sound too fake.

Truth was, he’d love to spend the holidays with his mother and his stepbrother. But he also wanted her to tell him what was going on.

“We need cookies.” She grinned a watery smile.

“Absolutely. So just go ahead and write down all the ingredients, and I’ll head to the store for you.”

Her expression shifted, taking on a suspicious eyebrow raise. “Nice try.”

“One day I’m going to get you to tell me what’s in them.”

“I’ll tell you on my deathbed like Grandma Jean did.”

Trey chuckled.

“Now let’s discuss this social media business all my friends are talking about.” She raised her chin, wearing the same look she did when she’d caught him sneaking back into his room at four in the morning junior year of high school. “You’re entangled with some influencer woman?”

“It’s not like that.”

Before he could explain more, she said, “Seems like your...uh *choices* might have backfired and gotten you in hot water.”

“I’ll be fine.” He started making a pot of coffee.

This conversation would probably take a while, and the awards dinner wasn’t until tomorrow night. He could shake Alex’s hand, bury the hatchet, and prove to everyone there was nothing to what happened between him and Selena. One kiss wasn’t going to bury him in an onslaught of bad publicity.

He didn’t need that when he went to the EMT chief to convince the guy he could get back on his ambo. “I’ll put your suitcase in my room. I’ll take the couch in the den.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience—”

He turned back. “Ma, how long are you planning on staying?”

“I don’t know.” She wrung her hands together. “I just... didn’t want to spend the holidays alone.”

She could’ve stayed with any number of her church friends. She had a tight-knit group there. But he knew why she’d come to Benson from Last Chance County, where she had an apartment that she’d moved into after her marriage fell apart. Through no fault of her own.

Allen’s father, Trey’s stepdad, had residual issues from his military service. He couldn’t help how it affected him, and no one blamed the guy for having a hard time dealing. But Trey had moved back to his own father’s hometown to live his own life.

She’d come here to get away and not have to explain what was going on.

Trey said, “I’ll take the den. You can stay as long as you want, because you’re going to give me that cookie recipe for Christmas, right? Just write it down.”

She scoffed. “That’s not how it works. The recipe is memorized. It’s *never* written down.”

Trey grinned to himself and hauled her suitcase to his room.

“Maybe if you straighten up your life, I’ll hand it down to you.”

He looked at his room—neat and tidy—and frowned.

“I mean your behavior, Trey Michael Banning, and you know it.”

Uh-oh. “I can see the holidays are going to be fun.”

“I won’t stay here if you’re going to bring women home.”

It had been months. “I’m not going to—”

“I know. Because if you don’t, then I’ll tell you Grandma Jean’s cookie recipe.”

He shrugged. “Just make them for me.”

His mom lifted her chin. *Double uh-oh*. “Let’s make a deal, you and me. You’re single for the next month and I’ll tell you the recipe. You see a woman *romantically*, and no cookies for the rest of your life.”

“That’s extortion.” She was playing him, making him promise to change his ways just for cookies?

“You have one minute to agree, or no cookies for the rest of your life.”

Trey gaped. She was distracting herself from her own problems by deciding to fix his, but *dang*. She put the cookies on the line? That was serious.

“Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.”

“Fine!”

She grinned. “Deal. No women, or you get no cookies.”

“For a month.” It couldn’t be that hard. After all, it’d already *been* a month and he wasn’t going too stir-crazy.

“And you go to church with me.”

“You can’t make me—”

“You don’t have to like it, but you do have to go.”

She’d said the same to him when he’d been in high school. Trey had believed when he was a kid, but he grew up. Things changed, and he got busy. Too busy to worry about rules of behavior when it seemed like no one else in the world lived that way.

Freya’s relationship with Lucas was the only exception to the way it seemed like the whole world worked. Though, he figured they weren’t likely to go long before they got married so they could live together permanently.

Trey made his own choices. He didn’t love that everyone in his life looked down on him for just enjoying himself. He hadn’t even done anything to warrant Selena’s lip lock—or the fallout. Life was just life, and no one could control what happened.

It wasn’t like he was going to find religion.

FIVE

“**Y**ou look about ten years younger holding that.” Ember tapped her glass against Clare’s, leaning close so her friend could hear her over the chest-thumping volume of the music in this club.

“That’s the idea.” Clare took a sip.

“Why is it blue?”

Her friend tipped her head back and laughed, something the head of Vanguard didn’t do much. Clare had been deadly in her special ops role with the army. They’d worked clubs like this in joint operations when Ember had been attached to Clare’s military unit.

“You’re different now.” Clare lifted her chin, leaving the rest unspoken. *Now you’re not in the CIA.*

“That’s the idea.” Ember smiled, but her friend didn’t buy it.

“You are going to tell me what happened on that op.”

“Why not just have those twins hack the file?” Surely they could bypass a firewall, even if it belonged to the Pentagon. Or the Agency. Wherever they’d hidden that file marked Top Secret, it would be protected. But considering they’d nearly prevented Ember from breaching their office, she figured they could do it.

“Two things,” Clare said. “One, it’s a condition of their employment that illegal activity ceases. Two...you want them to know where you are?”

“I didn’t make a secret of the fact I was coming home to find Annalise.”

“And they just let you go?”

Ember shrugged her shoulder and sipped her drink. Her watch registered an irregular jump in her heartbeat. There hadn’t been any point in making her stick around. Not just because Marcus got the promotion over her. He’d made sure that was the outcome of their last mission.

Clare started to ask, even though she knew Ember didn’t want to talk about it. “What happened that meant you didn’t —”

Across the club, an employee door opened and a broad dark-haired man stepped out. If her relationship with God hadn’t been strained nearly to the breaking point, she might’ve been inclined to thank Him for the distraction.

Ember motioned with her drink. “There he is.”

As it was, a CIA career where she swam around in the evil she fought as part of every mission didn’t mix with a God of kindness and love. Not the one she’d been raised to believe in—and had until He’d remained silent, and Ember lost her mother.

Given the end of her life resounded loudly like a ticking clock, or the timebomb in her chest, she probably had to make peace with Him.

Just not tonight.

“That’s not a guy who’s small-time.”

Ember glanced again, for just a split second. “You’re right about that.”

“What do we know of him?”

“Brad—”

Clare made a face. “I already know he’s evil.”

Ember frowned.

“There was this guy in high school...never mind.” Clare took a sip of her drink.

“Brad Cummings.” She’d done a full workup on the guy this afternoon.

“Not the same guy, but same principal.” Clare hadn’t grown up in Benson like Ember did, so she didn’t expect her sister’s boyfriend to be the same guy Clare knew from high school.

Ember thought through what she’d come up with. “Did five years for possession. They tried to get him to roll on his supplier. They knew he was part of a network. He never caved. Pled guilty and did the time.”

“We should find out who his parole officer is.”

Ember nodded. “He got out over ten years ago and kept his nose clean ever since, at least as far as the cops are concerned.”

“We can check that.”

“He’s thirty-seven. One son he never sees. The kid is nineteen now.” Someone passed them, close enough to hear her. Ember took a sip of her drink. When they were out of earshot, she continued, “Started dating my sister a year ago, even though he’s a good fifteen years older than her. It got hot and heavy fast. Then she went missing.”

After six months of Ember asking if this was the guy Annalise was going to choose. Of course, that had been a rhetorical question because Brad had *bad decision* written all over him and Ember had never met the guy. She and Annalise always talked over video call, and she’d seen Brad in the background on the phone. Beer in his free hand. Ignoring her existence.

Brad walked to another man, currently lording it over a couch in the far corner where he could see every inch of the club. Two women in tiny dresses, heels, and jewelry sat with him.

He leaned down and spoke in the man’s ear.

Clare said, “Not the top of the food chain.”

Ember turned and set her glass on the bar. “I think I see someone I’d like to meet.” She bent forward and fluffed her blonde hair to give it a little more volume, then flicked it back as she stood.

“Hold up.” Clare touched her forearm.

A fissure of nerves roiled through her, but she realized Clare wouldn’t be able to feel her pulse. Thankfully it wasn’t out of control right now. The night was still young.

Ember found what Clare had seen—a middle-income couple in church clothes made their way through the club. She watched them approach the man in the corner. The couple were hesitant, unsure of what was happening. At a wave of his hand, rings flashing, the two women scurried off.

She motioned to Clare, not even having to ask before her friend set an earbud in her hand. Then she strode across the room, weaving and dancing between people on the dance floor so she didn’t stick out as if making a beeline. A guy with multiple shots in each hand headed her way. She twirled and put him behind her, leaving the crowd to head over by the couches.

The adrenaline wasn’t bad. She needed to keep her heart going. Too bad. Just gently dancing across a club floor was enough to make her need a nap.

She pushed away the draining fatigue and sashayed up three steps. The church clothes couple were almost at the coffee table. She came close enough to jostle the couple, slipping the earbud into the man’s suit jacket pocket.

Brad had disappeared, but another guy came up to block her path. “Private party.”

She pouted, even though she was a grown woman. “And if I see a party I’d like to join?”

The couch lord lifted his hand, palm out.

Ember put her hand on her hip. “If you’re busy...” She dismissed the couple with a look.

Couch lord lifted his chin. “Come back later.”

She touched her fingers to her lips and blew him a kiss, waved at the bodyguard, and sauntered away again.

Clare had a few sips of her drink remaining, sat on the bar behind her, when Ember reached her again. Ember stood beside her, and they watched the screen of the phone as it translated the audio feed through the earbud into text.

Ember read the next line as it appeared. “The price is twenty thousand now.”

Clare read the following line probably the husband, or the wife. “We can get the money. We will.”

“Payment is due Friday, or you don’t get what you want. No money. No deal.”

The wife shifted, the husband tugged her back, and they made their way to the door.

Ember said, “Let’s catch them out front.”

Clare nodded. “Go.”

Accustomed to giving commands, Clare’s single spoken word sounded like an order. As though Ember worked for her, which she never would. But if Clare needed to control the variables, that was fine. Ember of all people understood what it felt like to have no control.

She pushed out the front doors of the club and jogged to the couple as they approached a mid-2000s Toyota. “Excuse me.”

The husband stiffened. Across the car on the passenger side, the wife blinked and said, “You were inside the club.”

“Not because I wanted to be.” Ember unlocked her phone and showed the husband her screen. “I’m looking for my sister. She’s missing.”

The husband frowned. Clare moved up behind him and recovered the earbud.

Ember waved the picture in his face. “Have you seen her?”

He shook his head, barely looking at the screen. “Can’t help you.”

The wife blinked again, glancing between the three of them. “What’s going on? Who is that woman in the picture?”

The husband said, “Get in the car, Kara.”

She slid in.

“Excuse me.” He shoved the door open, nearly hitting Ember in the process.

She stumbled back. “Can you look again, please? Maybe you’ve seen her?”

The watch on her wrist buzzed.

White spots pricked at the edge of her vision. Clare’s arm snaked around her waist, and she said, “We’re only asking for your help.”

“Can’t help you.” He closed the door in their faces and pulled out faster than necessary.

Ember’s breaths came in quick pants. She barely managed to lift one hand and press it to her chest.

“What do you need?” Clare asked.

“Purse. Pills.”

Clare helped her to the car. Ember set the tablet on her tongue, barely aware of the world around her. She slumped sideways on the seat.

“You’re going to get yourself killed.” Clare folded her arms.

“Then help me.”

Clare’s lips flexed. “I’ve got a better idea.”

SIX

Trey flashed his Wilderness Race ID badge. The check-in desk for the end-of-race banquet was manned by three people. The older woman he showed his badge to glanced at the man beside her. “It’s him. The medic.”

The guy looked at her, then Trey. He handed the person in the line next to him a business-card-sized ticket. “This should be good.”

“I’m not here to cause a scene. I just need to talk to someone.” He wasn’t going to tell them he wanted to confront Alex. And not for the reason everyone would presume it was about. He had no interest in Selena.

But Trey had seen Alex toss something at her, and she’d gone down because of it. That meant sabotage. He’d won because Selena fell.

Trey also needed to talk to McCauley, who’d have the trail camera footage so they could prove his accusation wasn’t a personal attack ultimately about Trey and Selena—who he’d never even met until she fell the day before.

He took the card ticket and headed in. A woman walked alongside him. Blonde, wearing a form-fitting knee-length blue dress. His eyes met hers, and he smiled. More a reflex of politeness than anything else. After Selena’s ambush kiss—and now Ma’s ultimatum about his romantic life—he was stuck there, where any other time he’d have introduced himself. She was gorgeous, in a completely understated way.

As though she'd purposely toned everything about herself down and had no intention of standing out.

She also had an edge of exhaustion about her, but he'd never have commented on it. Who wasn't tired these days?

He nodded, focused on the hotel ballroom, and headed in. The place was packed with people. Racers. Friends and family. Sponsors. In front of the bar was packed. Servers wound through the room, between circular tables, delivering pre-dinner drinks.

It took a minute to scan for McCauley, but he found the guy to one side with the fire chief and a guy that worked for the mayor.

"There he is!"

Cameras flashed. A couple of reporters rushed over. One held out her phone. "Are you here to see Selena? Are you trying to steal her from Alex?"

He could accuse Alex of that sabotage to ensure his own victory, but they'd only see that as a desperate attempt to save face after whatever plan they thought he was enacting fell flat. He could also tell them he had absolutely no romantic interest in her. Instead, he figured there was one option to make sure he didn't put his foot in his mouth. "No comment."

A security guy approached them.

The reporter's eyes narrowed, but it was the smirk on her lips that drew him. "Have a good evening, *sir*."

The security guy nodded.

Trey headed for McCauley but spotted Alex in the corner. He had no idea if Selena was even here yet, but a crowd in the middle parted and he realized she was sitting. Behind her, Selena's personal assistant held the crutches and stared at her phone while the boss held court.

A waiter passed by, and Trey grabbed a water to quench the dryness.

Two of the guys with Alex broke off for the bar. Trey caught his gaze and lifted his chin.

The guy walked away from the friend talking, right in the middle of his sentence, and made a beeline for Trey. When he got close, Alex said, “You really wanna do this here?”

“You mean, discuss how you sabotaged Selena so you could win the race yesterday?” Trey assessed the guy differently now. All flash, expensive clothes, and a gold watch. A man who’d made millions through subscribers and likes. Underneath was there any substance?

Alex had muscle. Physically he could do the tricks he performed on social media. But what about the character everyone seemed to think Trey was lacking?

Taking this man’s measure only made him see the lack in himself. The reason his ma had wagered to get Trey to contemplate his life choices. Stop seeing every woman who attracted him. Go to church.

He’d rather be accepted for who he was, but it seemed more like he didn’t measure up. Not a feeling he liked.

And it distracted enough he missed the fist that came out of nowhere. Alex’s knuckles slammed into his face.

The surprise punch had him stumbling back a step so he had to catch himself on a chair, or he’d have ended up on the floor. The room erupted around him.

Alex snorted and leaned close. “That’s what you’re gonna tell everyone? Good luck proving it.” He tipped his head back and laughed.

“I saw you do it on the trail camera.” Trey massaged his jaw. “How do you think I knew your girl was hurt?”

“At least you admit she’s mine.”

“Of course I am, babe. Always will be.” Selena came over on her crutches, a tiny glance between them. The mask slipped, revealing wariness in her gaze. “What was that about?”

Alex tucked her to his side, not even looking at her. He kept all his attention on Trey. “Just getting some things straight. Don’t worry about it.” Alex was all but issuing a

challenge for Trey to fight him for the woman. Or whatever antiquated battle this was. He missed the way Selena winced as he jostled her close to him.

Trey took another sip of his drink, even though he wanted to touch the cold glass to his face where Alex punched him. “How’s the ankle?”

Alex’s expression darkened. “She’s fine. Right, babe?”

Selena smiled, bright but completely flat. Cameras flashed. “A few weeks of PT, and I’ll be back to my tricks. The fans are rallying, and everyone’s been so supportive.”

“It’s a shame, though.” Trey gave her an encouraging smile. “Since you were set to win before you took that tumble.”

“I’ve had trouble with that knee before. Surgery. It probably just gave out.” Hurt edged into her expression—physical or emotional, or both. “Like I said, I’ll be back in shape in no time. I’m just bummed I missed entrance into the Desert Dwellers Race in Arizona.”

“Oh?”

“But Alex gets to go.” She squeezed her boyfriend’s waist. “So at least one of us can compete.”

“Only the winner of the Wilderness Race gets invited to Arizona.” Alex lifted his chin.

“And you couldn’t let that be Selena, so you tossed something at her when she reached the river ahead of you. Ensuring she’d fall and you could take the title and race the Desert Dwellers.”

Cameras flashed.

“Is that true, Alex?” the reporter asked. “Did you purposely hurt her so she’d fall?”

Selena’s eyes flashed. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no way that’s what happened.” She had no idea how close behind her he’d been.

Trey was about to tell her about the trail camera when Alex said, “Sounds like someone doesn’t like being the loser. Making accusations, trying to drag me down. No doubt you’re already on socials smearing my race integrity.”

“Why would I need to do that?” Trey said.

“Because Selena chose you over me for one second?” Alex looked down at the woman plastered to his side. “But my girl will *always* choose me in the end. She knows who the best for her is.”

Trey shook his head. “I amazed you think I care about any of your relationship drama.”

Cameras flashed.

Selena wrapped both arms around Alex’s neck and hopped up to wrap her legs around his waist. They started to kiss.

Trey turned away from the ridiculous publicity stunt, wondering if Selena was in on the whole thing. Aware Alex would topple her if she got out in front. All so he could make another race.

Who knew? Trey didn’t care about their drama—except they’d made him an unwitting pawn. As if he’d asked for her to kiss him. Whether real or a stunt, it put his own actions into perspective.

He tried to move, but the reporter blocked his way. “Excuse me.”

She grinned, no humor in her eyes. “How does it feel to have your heart broken by social media star Selena?”

“I’ll cherish for the rest of my life this chance to volunteer as a medic for the Benson Wilderness Race. I’m glad I could put my EMT skills to good use and ensure something worse didn’t happen. But thankfully I reached Ms. Wright in time, after her boyfriend ran past her and didn’t bother to stop, even though she was floating away downstream in an ice-cold river with an injured ankle.” He smiled. “I’m so glad he gets to race in the Desert Dwellers.”

“Banning.” McCauley motioned with a tip of his head.

“Excuse me.” Trey stepped away from the reporter and headed off to the side with the police captain.

“If you think I’m going to put in a good word for you after that, you’ve got to be joking.” Trey started to talk, but McCauley held up a hand. “Yeah, I know why you took the position. You should go home, okay?”

Trey blew out a breath, then scanned the room and spotted the blonde with the blue dress. Why his gaze snagged on her, he didn’t know.

Until he saw her stumble and put her hand out for the wall. She walked away from the ballroom down a side hall.

There was nothing for him in here.

He turned to McCauley. “You’re right.”

The captain blinked.

“I should go.” Trey headed for that hall, and the side exit it led to.

He could leave. And the chance to potentially help a woman on the way out? He’d take that over this mess any day.

SEVEN

As Ember pulled a paper towel from the dispenser to dry her hands, she noticed her irregular heartbeat. Not caused by exertion, but by a scent. One man's overpowering cologne had sent her lungs into overdrive, panic filled her mind, and her heart rate raced after both.

She blew out a long breath, settling herself before she pulled her phone from her dress pocket. She sent Clare a text.

NO THANKS

SHE'D TAKEN THE MEASURE OF THAT MAN IN TWO SECONDS, and for a while actually contemplated Clare's offer of the medic accompanying her on this mission to find her sister. Not a bad idea. Except minutes after she almost texted Clare to accept the offer he got into a fist fight with a social media star.

She'd searched him up online and found Trey Banning all over the internet.

Most of the posts happened in the last twenty-four hours, but his life online before that didn't paint a great picture. She didn't need the guy to be anything except a competent EMT. His personal life was exactly that—his business.

But Ember wasn't going to waste time learning what she already knew. He was no different than any other man, and she had a sister to find.

Clare's reply pinged on her phone.

HE'S SOLID

CLARE WOULDN'T SAY THAT IF HE WASN'T, BUT EMBER couldn't afford to be exposed, and this guy seemed entirely too concerned with the limelight. Like another guy she'd known—and cared about at one time—but who had condemned her to a slow death just so he could get a promotion instead of her.

If she got into this with Trey Banning, they would both get made.

Better to do it alone.

Ember sent a text back.

STILL

IT WAS HER DECISION.

So when she pushed out of the bathroom door and spotted him in the hall accepting a Ziploc bag of ice from a waiter, she kept walking. He pressed it to his jaw and spotted her.

His eyes lit with concern. "Good to see you're all right."

That was the first thing he said? "I don't know what you mean." She didn't stop or slow but kept walking to the EXIT sign at the end of the empty hallway.

"I saw you sway and nearly go down. You took so long in there I was about to ask a female server if they could check you were okay."

"We don't know each other, right?"

"I'm an EMT."

She reached the door.

“Hazard of the job, I’m afraid. Worrying about people.” He stuck his hand out. “Trey Banning.”

She frowned. This had to be a setup. Why else would he approach her of all people? She wasn’t why he was here tonight—at least not according to social media. “Did Clare already tell you?”

“Clare Juarez?” He dropped the hand she hadn’t shaken.

Good-looking. Dark hair that curled at the ends because it needed cutting. Eyes with a ring of gold in them, and late-day stubble on his chin. She had to hand it to him, God hadn’t been unkind dishing out his looks. The guy had some handsome genes.

“You know Clare?”

Ember blinked. *Staring at him.* “She and I are old friends.”

“And she was supposed to tell me...what?”

“It’s nothing.” Ember shook her head. “She thinks I need help.”

“Not for nothin’, but if Clare thinks something, it’s usually true.”

Okay, so he did know Clare. And well, it seemed. “We’ve known each other a while, but we haven’t seen each other much lately.”

One brow flicked up for a second, as if he was intrigued by her—by the banter. “So she’s wrong? You aren’t who she thinks you are?”

“Do you always boil things down to simple conclusions?”

He chuckled. Intrigue morphed into surprise.

“This has been fascinating,” Ember said, “but I have something to do.” And she’d gained all the knowledge she needed coming here, taking his measure. Maybe there was more to this guy than most. But eventually he’d do what all men did.

Act in their own best interests, regardless of how it hurt the people around them.

Ember pushed on the exit door bar. It clicked, but her strength failed to get the door open.

He laid his hand between hers, his body facing her. Not touching. Just close—not too close it would've been weird. But she could feel the warmth coming off him. The bruise on his cheekbone from the punch didn't look like it would be too bad.

“Here. I'll help you.”

She bit the inside of her lip. *So embarrassing.* She could tell Clare all day long she didn't need help. But what if her sister was behind a door she didn't have the strength to open?

Cold air rushed in.

Indecision warred in her. Should she...

Ember looked at him.

Trey Banning frowned. “You really know Clare?”

She didn't want to get into that. She'd already said too much. “Your jaw looks like it'll be okay, but a tea bag will take down any swelling.”

He blinked.

“If you steep a tea bag for five minutes, you can let it cool a bit and then put it on your jaw. Or put it in the fridge for twenty minutes, and it'll be a cold compress.”

His lips twitched. Not laughter, just amusement. “Thanks...I think?”

Ember left that alone and headed for her car. He was still at the back door watching when she drove by him.

At least he wasn't in his car trying to follow.

She could do this—hang on long enough to find her sister. Preferably without landing in medical hot water before then. Her heart would just have to cooperate and quit trying to slam her into the afterlife through no fault of her own.

But Ember didn't want to get into all that, *Why, God? Why me?* stuff. Not when she had to find her sister. This was the

first chance she'd had, and she was already staring down a clock running out of time. Pity had no place in her heart. Neither did vengeance.

All of that would be solved after she was dead in the ground.

Ember drove to her sister's apartment. End of a complex, upper floor. The place looked rundown, even though Annalise had a good job at a medical clinic in the billing department. She'd been saving for a condo.

Ember had shown up the day before and talked to the super before she moved her duffel bag in. Her sister's rent was paid in cash before her disappearance, and Ember had continued with wire transfers after she went missing. Otherwise he was going to have tossed out all Annalise's things and sign a new renter. Ember never would've been able to look around for evidence of where she'd gone.

The police hadn't continued looking for her after she received a text supposedly from her sister. *I'm going away. Don't worry. Will call soon.*

The phone had been shut off, or destroyed, right after that text.

Someone had gone to the trouble of making sure it looked like she'd simply left. Not that she suddenly went missing from her life and then never called.

Ember had looked around a couple of times already, and after staying one night in a motel, she'd brought her things here. When she didn't know what else to do, she could keep looking around.

Trying to find Annalise.

She let herself in with the new key since she'd changed the locks. The apartment remained unchanged, just like the last time she'd been here.

Her eyes filled with tears. *Where are you, Lise?*

Ember didn't have anyone else in the world, just Annalise. Their mother had suffered through a drawn-out fight with

breast cancer Ember's junior year of high school. A fight she'd lost, no matter that Ember had done everything she could. She'd fasted and prayed the way the pastor told her to, until she had nothing left to give.

And God had done nothing.

He'd abandoned her when she needed Him most, and she'd returned the favor with zero qualms about leaving behind everything she'd trusted in. Her sister had been in fifth grade, and when Ember went to college, Annalise moved in with foster family after foster family, never settling anywhere.

Ember tugged off her overcoat and laid it on the back of the chair. Too antsy to sleep, she wandered through the house in bare feet. Changed into sweats and a T-shirt, which she overlaid with one of her sister's sweaters. It still smelled like Annalise, in a way that brought more tears to her eyes.

She left the closet door open, stumbled back a couple of steps, and sank onto the edge of the bed. Her watch vibrated. Draining fatigue weighed on her like a bomb suit.

Where are you, Lise?

As soon as she had the energy to stand, she would get up and search the closet again. Look through her sister's things. Try to find her.

Ember slumped back on the bed. She managed to get her feet off the floor, curled up so her knees nearly touched her chest. She'd lain like this after her mom died.

Spent. Out of options.

You know where she is, don't You?

Her heart whispered the prayer, but all she heard back was silence.

EIGHT

Instead of spending all day teaching the EMT certification class at the local community college, Trey had woken up to a change in his schedule. He'd been at HQ all day, filing paperwork. Chasing half the EMTs in the county about missing reports—and filling out one of his own, since his name had been on the list.

His shoulder blades itched as he walked to the employee door at Vanguard, a local private security firm. He should be at the gym working out some of this frustrated energy—his body was entirely too antsy. After all, his chief had been out all day. Unavailable.

Trey felt like he was in a holding pattern, benched until the powers that be let him back on his ambulance so he could be doing what he was supposed to be doing.

Not dealing with sudden social media fame.

Or filing other people's paperwork.

He entered the employee code they'd given him, even if his position was more freelance than someone on the payroll. When an operative needed medical assistance that didn't warrant a hospital and he could legally provide them care, he received a call. Or they came to him.

Peter and Simon, twin brothers of his—now former—EMT partner, Freya, were at work in the office at their cubicles.

He lifted a hand and waved. Peter raised his chin—he'd been working out more. Simon glanced over, still as skinny as always.

Maybe they knew about the blonde from last night. He could bypass asking for information—and permission—and get the twins to tell him who she was, and why she'd shown up last night. There was something about her he couldn't let go of.

All his hero sensibilities were firing.

If he couldn't get what he wanted at work, maybe he could do well with his side gig. It was worth a try at least.

Clare came out of her office and waved him over. Though she had no idea why he'd texted asking to see her. She probably thought it was about the social media hurricane he was in right now.

After last night the current trend—along with a three second image of him getting punched by Alex—was that he'd run off with his tail between his legs after Selena slighted him for her boyfriend.

“McCauley didn't answer his phone all day.” Trey strode into her office, more agitated about that than he realized as he turned to watch her ease the door almost closed but not shut it. “Alex should be arrested for what he did to Selena, but we need that footage.”

“McCauley is taking care of it. Someone swiped the camera, but he's on the case looking for it.”

“Good.”

“He was watching as well.” Clare eyed him as she switched on a tall lamp in the corner.

Out the windows, the skyline of Benson glowed. Life being lived. People having good and bad days that had nothing to do with social media stars.

His life had been invaded. He wouldn't say it felt like being violated, even if Selena had ambushed him with that kiss. Because he had no comprehension of the pain that accompanied something like a vicious house break-in, or a personal attack.

“We should get this done.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“I’m supposed to meet my mom for dinner.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Do you know a blonde? I met her last night at the award banquet for the race.” He didn’t even know how to describe her, let alone her name. Clare knew a lot of people.

She lifted her hand and held it horizontally. “This tall?” When he nodded, she said, “I’d describe her, but I don’t know what she’d have looked like to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just that she’s hard to describe.”

Which of course didn’t answer the question. “I’d like to find her, if you can give me her information.”

The woman had seemed injured, or ill, flaring his instinct to step in and save the people he came across every day. She’d also seemed a little lost.

“Ember isn’t the kind of woman you get to know, Trey.” She winced. “That’s not a personal slight on you. You’re a great guy. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have asked you to work with Vanguard. But Ember isn’t... She’s not the kind of woman you play around with. I’m sorry.”

He blinked.

A hundred thoughts went through his head faster than he could think them through. “You think I came here to ask you about a woman I’m attracted to?”

She stood behind her desk, hand on the back of her leather chair. “You didn’t?”

Trey blew out a breath. Apparently his mother had cause to get him to accept that bet, considering it seemed it was more than just her who had an opinion about his life.

“What you choose to do isn’t my business, Trey.” She pushed the chair back and sat. “But not Ember.”

He figured she didn’t want to break her friend’s confidence. “She seemed like...maybe she needed help.”

“She’s on a mission. She needs a wingman. And given her situation, I thought having that person be you might be a good idea.” She frowned. “But you’ve already met?”

“At the banquet last night.” He didn’t sit, too antsy to take a load off. “Kind of seemed like she wasn’t there for the race stuff, though.”

“She was checking you out.”

“She—what?”

“Assessing you.”

He frowned. “It did seem like I’d been weighed, measured, and found wanting.”

Clare’s expression softened. “It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“But she needs help?”

Clare nodded. “She’s stubborn. She doesn’t want anyone with her, but that makes it dangerous.”

“And having an EMT there makes it less so?”

“For her? It could mean life or death.”

Trey figured that meant she was ill—or injured. “I can’t be an operative. What is she up to?”

“I’m aware of your training. It’s why I recommended her to you.” She didn’t tap her finger or move or shift. The woman sat perfectly still. It was a little eerie to watch. “She’s looking for her sister.”

“And I can help?”

“I think it’s highly likely you can keep her alive while she does it,” Clare said. “I’ve got to go to DC to look into something myself, and I’d like to know she’s got someone watching out for her while I’m out of pocket.”

“If she doesn’t want my help, I’m not going to railroad her.” Trey didn’t like the sound of that. He slumped into the chair and sighed. “Maybe I’m just unhappy where I’m at. Seems like an easy sell to help someone who needs it.”

“That’s not a bad thing. You’re a good guy.”

“Even though I have a reputation?” He hadn’t had a girlfriend in months, and now he’d made that bet with his ma, he wouldn’t for another month. Maybe that time would give him the chance to figure some things out.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t disparage the way you live your life. Not when it’s because I have my own issues and a nasty history with that stuff.” She shook her head. “McCauley told me about Selena. She ambushed you.”

“Her adrenaline was high. Who knows what it was about?” He had some theories, but he didn’t even want to think about it, and he certainly wasn’t going to play the victim. There was no time for causing drama when he had to work his way back on the ambo. “I’m really sick of doing paperwork.”

Clare chuckled. “Why do you think I have so many staff members?”

“So you have people to write your reports for you?”

She grinned. “Peter and Simon will get you Ember’s information. If she allows you to assist, I think you’ll be an asset. She needs someone to watch her back, not in an operative way. In a hero way.”

He stared at her. She thought he was that kind of guy? “My dad was the hero.”

Clare nodded, a tiny movement. “She needs a medic.”

Terrence Banning had died serving his country in some faraway hot place. His plane had gone down, his body never recovered.

Trey would never be like him. As much as he might want to be.

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

He tipped his head to the side. “If she lets me.”

Ember.

The name suited her. Like fire, but understated in a way some might not even notice her presence. Burning. Capable of

starting a blaze that could destroy a forest. For now, she just flickered away. Alone.

He stood. "I'll convince her."

Clare smiled. "Keep me posted on how it's going. I want daily updates in my email."

"Copy that."

NINE

Ember made her way from the living room to the kitchen in her sister's apartment and delivered her mug to the sink. Not just because clearing up after herself had been instilled in her by her mother. Also because she needed to know she was improving since she woke up.

Curling up on the bed and falling asleep had wound up lasting all night and half the day. She could hardly believe she slept that long, but what was the point being surprised?

She should be realistic.

The sleep had been deep, full of dreams where she chased her sister—completely able to run as long and as fast as she wanted. Images of *him*. From the night before. Trey Banning, the man Clare wanted her to allow to help her. Of course she'd dreamed of him. Being held, and then that moment where he leaned in close. She woke up before their lips met. Something she should probably be frustrated by, but it was for the best. Even in her dreams, she didn't need to be distracted.

Ember leaned against the counter, her back to the low cupboard. She sighed into the quiet kitchen she'd cleaned up earlier. Wiping away the dust, and any trace of her sister being here other than the things she kept in her home.

The closet hadn't had much past winter clothes and old shoes. A couple of old photo albums belonging to their mother that Ember hadn't been able to bring herself to open.

She needed to do something, but even if she had the strength, she had no idea where to go to look for Annalise

except back to that club. Or stalking Brad, which would lead to capturing and interrogating him. The last thing she needed was to end up in jail, where she'd never be able to find her sister.

Simon had texted an hour ago that they were working on something for her and getting close. She should hang tight until they got it to where it was solid enough for her to move on.

After a life of being physically active and trained, she was more than capable of doing whatever was needed to get the job done. So being sidelined by her own body was like being trapped with no way out. She had the will but not the means.

The doorbell rang.

Ember stiffened. No one except Vanguard knew where she was. Had someone come by to visit her sister, not knowing she hadn't been here in six months?

She swiped up the gun from the TV unit on the way to the door and peered through the peephole. All her energy seemed to sink into the floor.

This was Simon's lead?

She unlocked the deadbolt and then the handle, and opened it far enough to say, "I don't like overpriced fundraising cookies, and I don't need Jesus."

"My mom thinks *I* need Jesus." He eyed her and shrugged. "Maybe we all do."

She frowned.

"Can I come in? It's important."

She didn't know how a grown man managed to look adorable, but he did. Enough her grip on the door slipped and she stepped back.

"Whoa." He lifted both hands, his attention on the gun.

"I can put it away."

"You always answer the door with a loaded weapon in your hand?"

She thought for half a second. “Yes. Why would I take the risk?”

His brows drew together. “So long as you don’t use it on me. I don’t need any more setbacks.” He stepped into the entryway, filling the space with the breadth of his shoulders and his height. She was five six and should weigh more than she did, but that was the least of her worries.

She closed the door, then unloaded the gun and set it on the TV unit. Neither of them would be able to use it without a head start.

He knew Clare, but that didn’t mean he was trustworthy. But he’d also come inside with her armed. This was about mutual trust. “How did you know where to find me?”

He blew out a breath and ended up patting his stomach. “Oof. Bad idea, too much pasta.”

“Did ambushing me interrupt your dinner plans?”

He shook his head. “My mom went to a movie she knows I don’t want to see. I think she’s trying not to ‘bother’ me.” His expression indicated that might not be what was happening.

“Back to my first question.” She perched on the arm of the couch so she didn’t have to stand. “How did you find me?”

“Vanguard. Clare told me you needed help, so here I am.” He shrugged.

“Help with what?”

“You’re looking for someone, and for some reason that means you need a medic?” He frowned. “I’m not super clear on the details, but I figure you’ll read me in, or whatever you guys say that means you get me up to speed.”

Ember pulled out her phone. She texted Simon and Peter in the group thread she had going with the twins. They’d turned out to be a fantastic resource in digging up all the info on her sister’s boyfriend and the club owner. She asked if they would consider Trey to be trustworthy.

The answer she got back was clear.

BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER ALL THE SOCIAL MEDIA STUFF. A HUNDRED PERCENT.

SHE FIGURED THAT WAS DEFINITIVE ENOUGH SHE'D TAKE IT.

Ember tossed the phone on the chair. "I'm looking for my sister who went missing six months ago. This is her apartment. I need to find her."

He moved to the armchair and sat on the edge. "Okay."

"Normally I'd be able to do that just fine, but..." She didn't even know where to start. "At my *previous occupation* I was involved in an incident that left me with some...health challenges. That's likely why Clare believes I need a medic."

"But you don't...believe it?"

She frowned.

"Why don't you just spell it out plainly, for those of us in the room who don't speak Vanguard Operative."

Did security clearance even matter? "I suppose this isn't that far from a deathbed confession." Ember shifted from the arm to sit in the chair. She tucked her feet up on the seat and circled her shins with her arms.

He sat quietly, staring at her. So different than the guy from the night before.

Different enough she heard herself say, "I was a CIA officer for the last six years. The last mission I went on, we were supposed to facilitate the exchange of a new chemical. No one thought it actually did what they said it should. We needed it off the streets. We'd already taken down the scientist and the people who paid him to create it. It was a matter of rounding up the canisters he'd made so far. There were four."

She had to take a breath, her heart rate rising as she got closer to those memories. The moment she thought she'd died.

Her watch buzzed.

Trey slid out his phone and checked the screen. He turned it over in his hand to focus on her.

“My partner and I were making the exchange for the fourth one. We got separated and I realized I was trapped by two of the target’s men. My partner went ahead with the deal, but somehow the canister was opened. I was in a room alone, and the gas was released with me. It had to have been on some kind of timer.”

Her watch buzzed.

He glanced at his phone screen for a second.

“I thought I was dead. Instead, I was left with a permanently damaged heart that won’t heal. I have to manage the symptoms.”

He nodded. “Inhale and hold it for me.” She did, and he looked at his phone. “Let it out.”

Ember exhaled.

“I’ll help you while you find your sister, but there are ground rules.” He turned the phone so she could see the screen, and the same readout her watch sent to her phone. Her heart rate. “This is the first one.”

Her inhale got stuck and she coughed.

Trey got up and crossed to sit on the coffee table in front of her. “Keep breathing.”

“That’s the plan.” But she had to be honest if he was going to hang around. “Just until I find out what happened to Annalise. After that...”

TEN

The bell over the front door of the coffee shop rang. Luciana had a hot chocolate in front of her, but she couldn't bring herself to drink it, or she would be sick.

They must have recognized her—or she was the only pregnant woman in the coffee shop. The wife gasped and they came right over, nearly knocking over a wooden chair on the way. Thankfully there were only a couple of other patrons. And Marco, in the back corner. Keeping an eye out with that look he always got when he looked at her—or any of the other girls.

Luciana started to get up.

The wife waved her off. “No, no. You sit, girl.” She came all the way into Luciana's space and gave her a hug that smelled like vanilla and some kind of shampoo she'd never used before.

The husband motioned to her drink. “Need a refill?”

She shook her head.

He headed for the counter to order. The wife stared overlong. Even if she was smiling, Luciana still found herself squirming in her seat. “I'm Kara, that's my husband, Steven.” She smiled in his direction.

“Nice to meet you.” She tried like Marco taught her to smooth out her accent, but Luciana didn't know if it worked. “I'm Lucy.”

Kara held her hands out, and she placed hers in them.

Luciana had been warm the last few weeks, with the extra forty pounds and a kicking baby inside her.

“Sorry,” Kara said. “My hands are always cold this time of year.”

“It feels nice. I’m always warm.” They shared a smile.

“How else does it feel...with the kicking and everything?” Kara glanced at her husband. “I’ve always wondered.”

The baby had been moving around since she sat. “Do you want to feel?”

Kara’s eyes lit.

Luciana lifted the bottom hem of the oversized sweater and showed Kara where to put her hand. “Sometimes he does what he wants.”

“We’re going to call him George.”

Thankfully *George* kicked then, so she didn’t have to answer what she thought about that name. Not that her opinion mattered.

Steven came over with two ceramic mugs of foamy coffee.

“He’s so strong!” Kara gasped, then sat back in her chair, a look of wonder in her eyes.

Steven gave his wife an indulgent smile and sat. “No matter what, we will love him.” He sipped from the mug and said, “Everyone we know just wants their baby to be healthy. But we’re committed to this, no matter what. We’ll take what comes.” He laid his hand over his wife’s.

She nodded. “We will love him no matter what. Through anything.”

Luciana said, “Thank you.”

She forgot it all in that moment. Between her baby and this couple, all she could think was that he would be safe. Loved. Given what he needed—things Luciana would never have to give. Tears gathered in her eyes. It was for the best, even if it was the last thing she wanted to do.

At least her baby would be free.

ELEVEN

Trey had gone home to change out of his EMT uniform right after work. He'd blended a smoothie and drank it now as he drove to Ember's. The tension at work had left him exhausted already, and the chief had been out of the office in meetings all day, so they hadn't even had a chance to talk about the social media storm surrounding Trey.

He sighed. Tonight he had to refocus. This was about helping Ember.

She'd reacted better than he would have to the knowledge that he had access to her health stats through an app Vanguard hooked him up with. Her watch kept track of her heart rate, and he could see if he needed to intervene with his EMT skills.

He was going to help her as much as he could in the evenings and on his days off to find her sister. Trey didn't like at all how she'd talked about what happened after that, but he could put two and two together.

She thought she was going to die.

In fact, it seemed like her intention was to find her sister so she could die knowing she'd done everything she could. Trey planned on doing everything *he* could. Keeping her alive while she found her sister—and making sure she'd exhausted every avenue to get her health back. *Heart failure*. She seemed to think it was a death sentence. He wasn't going to accept that there was nothing she could do. Sure, sometimes the patient didn't make it. But Trey didn't admit defeat without fighting with everything he had.

He was going to do everything he could to keep her alive.

Trey pulled into the apartment complex and found a spot by the curb in front of her sister's place. He got one foot out the door when she came into view. Indigo jeans and a dark turtleneck sweater over which she'd pulled a brown leather jacket. Black boots. Hair tied back in a ponytail. She looked... strong.

"Hey—" The breath escaped his mouth. "Uh...hey. Ember."

"I'm ready to go." She headed for the front of the car, and the passenger side. "The twins told you what they found?"

He slid in behind the wheel and turned up the heat. "They gave me an address."

She put both hands in front of the fan and turned to grin at him. "Oh, that feels good."

"Cold?" He swallowed to clear his throat.

This was about helping her do what she had to do, and it didn't hurt that Clare paid him seriously well for his time, and his skills. His mom and everyone else in his life seemed to think he was a shameless womanizer, but he could keep it professional. Not just because his mother had bet him Grandma's cookies. Or he would lose them forever. He snorted. She drove a hard bargain.

"What was that?" she asked.

Trey paused at the stop sign that led out of the complex. "Oh, uh...well, my ma made a bet with me. And the stakes if I lose?" He shook his head. "No more of Grandma's cookies for the rest of my life. Or if I win, she gives me the recipe."

"Wow. That's good?"

"No more of Grandma's cookies would be a *tragedy*. Especially at Christmas." He followed his phone directions to the address. Before she could ask what was on the line, and he'd have to admit his relationship history to her, he said, "So what's this place we're going to and what does it have to do with Annalise?"

She nodded. “My sister worked at a medical center. Before that she was a temp. All kinds of receptionist and admin jobs, she never settled anywhere particular until the medical center. But she received a payment for ten thousand dollars two weeks before she went missing. It originated from an online bank account that’s based in the Caribbean, so they don’t report to the feds, like a bonus for work because it’s the hiring company. Only she got paid by a shell corporation, and the address for the company is local. Street view is a storefront that looks like a medical center.”

“Okay. So we’re taking a look around.” He glanced at her. “Glad I didn’t wear a neon shirt.”

“Was that a possibility?”

Trey grinned. “Maybe not, but still.”

When he turned onto the street, she said, “Drive past it and park at the end.”

“Okay.” He glanced at the storefront on their way by. “Says it’s closed.”

“Good.” She patted his arm. “Up there.”

He parked in the spot she led him to. “You seem good today. Energized.” Her color was certainly better than the night before, and her heartbeat had been stronger all day. They’d exchanged numbers last night and she’d texted when she woke up late morning. “Rest must have done you good.”

“I still have to not exert myself, but I do feel stronger.” She unbuckled her seatbelt. “Do you have a gun?”

He frowned. “You think I’m going to need one?”

“Who knows?” She shrugged and shoved the car door open. Ember didn’t exit like most would. She used the door handlebar as leverage to stand. Not quite as strong as any healthy person her age, but it would take a careful look to notice anything amiss if he didn’t already know.

They met at the rear of the car. He locked it but didn’t engage the alarm so it didn’t beep on the dark, quiet street. It

was eight in the evening, but there weren't pedestrians around. The storefronts were closed, closed down, or empty.

This wasn't a part of town that had fared well during economic downturn, sadly.

"So how do you want to play this?" he asked.

She slid her arm into his, and they set off. "The first rule of spy work is to act like you're supposed to be here. If you're nervous, it'll be real obvious you might be up to something."

"Okay. So we're a couple out walking?"

"We're unlikely to get stopped and asked for a backstory, but sure."

"Sounds good." He winced. "I just hope no one recognizes me, because my face has been on social media a lot the past few days. It could cause problems if you're trying to blend in." He did get the feeling this wasn't normal inquiries into someone missing. Seemed more like the spy work she mentioned.

"Good call on the hat." She lifted her chin in the direction of his ball cap.

Trey pulled it lower. "Thanks. Seemed right to keep a low profile."

"The kind of people my sister and her boyfriend hung around with aren't the kind to be up on the latest social media trend. So even if you're recognizable now, it's unlikely to be a factor."

"If it causes a problem, I'm sure Clare has someone who can cover for me."

"When I've almost got you trained up?"

Trey barked a laugh. "You sound like my mom." He chuckled. "Why would I get a housekeeper? I have you and Allen."

"Slave driver?"

"Didn't matter how clean she wanted it. She paid well, and that's what mattered to two teenage boys. The woman ran a

tight ship, and it kept me out of trouble. As much as that was possible.”

“Sounds like you’re close.”

They approached the storefront.

“Definitely a medical center.” He looked in the window and saw a low-budget waiting area, a desk and computer. “But is it the place where Annalise worked?”

Ember shrugged. “You’re not going to respond to my comment about your mom?”

He didn’t move from peering in the window. “She’s at my house right now. Thinks I need company while I mope because I can’t be on ambo.”

“Full disclosure,” she said, “Clare told me you were stabbed but you’re healed now. I don’t see cameras.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s my mom that needs the company.” He didn’t want to get into Allen’s father and what was going on there. Not tonight—but maybe another time if they got that far. “And my house will be really, really clean by the time she leaves.”

Ember chuckled. It sounded a little rusty, but it was nice. “Let’s go in.”

Trey frowned. She slipped from his side and pulled something from her pocket. A lock pick kit. Trey glanced at the street. Sure, no one was watching them. She’d said no cameras. Did she really intend on...

He heard a click and glanced back.

“Come on.” Ember stepped inside. “Let’s look around.”

Trey crossed the threshold. Not the first time he’d broken the law, given he hadn’t been kidding about Ma keeping him in line as a teen. He also hadn’t mentioned how necessary it had been for her to do that. He and Allen got in plenty of trouble in high school, and Allen’s cousin Natalie had joined in a few times. Creating mayhem in Last Chance County.

But doing this with Ember felt a whole lot different. Not just because technically it was breaking the law.

Something about being with her felt like there would be no turning back.

TWELVE

Ember crossed the waiting area and ignored the front desk computer. She wanted a manager's office, and this wasn't it. Keeping Trey in the dark didn't sit right, but she also had no time to worry about pangs of her conscience—something she'd been trained to sear until she had nothing left. No qualms. Nothing she'd get squeamish about.

Getting sick threw all that for a loop, but she was determined to operate as a CIA officer would until she found Annalise.

“What are we looking for?” He followed her down the hall, where she found a closed door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

The doctor's office wasn't more than two working MDs. That meant four nurses, and a couple of front desk attendants depending on if they were full or part time. The place looked established—like it had been here operating for a few years, if not longer. She saw no signs of this being some kind of cover just meant to *look* like what it appeared to be on the surface. With no substance underneath.

Kind of like her. Without the CIA, what even was she? Before she got injured, she couldn't have said much. Now she was a woman trying to find her sister under a ticking clock. Without the mission she was nothing—same way she'd been trained.

Ember didn't like that train of thought, so she answered Trey's question to distract herself. “We're looking for anything

with Annalise's name on it.”

“So not only are we breaking and entering, but now we're violating health privacy rules as well. Great.”

She jimmied the lock to the employee door and stepped inside. Two desks, divided by cubicles. At the far-right corner was another door. Even if they were breaking the law, he'd seemed impressed by her. That would last the same length of time any other relationship did—up until the guy in question realized she had nothing in her life but the mission.

“This is about my sister.”

He knew that.

Ember blew out a breath. “I'm not invading anyone's privacy. And this company? It's a shell corporation. No matter if they're a legit medical center with completely clean hands, serving the community with quality healthcare, they're still a front for something. No one is completely clean. Not in my experience.”

“Now I know why you're friends with Clare.” He stood by the door while she moved through the interior office, where the file cabinets were. A door at the far end probably led to the doctor's private bathroom. If they needed a way out quickly they were going to have a problem unless they could break a window.

She wiggled the computer mouse, but the tower didn't hum to life. She bent and hit the button to power it on. Her watch buzzed.

She glanced at Trey, but he didn't react at all to the racing heart in her chest.

When he realized he was little more than window dressing, or someone to call the police while she hightailed it out of any given situation, he wasn't going to be pleased. But she couldn't worry about that when the name of the game was, *You're running out of time, so focus.*

He sighed and headed for the closest file cabinet. “What's your sister's last name? Same as yours?”

“Hendryx, with an R-Y-X at the end.”

“On it.” He slid the first drawer open and leafed through names.

Ember bypassed the laughably weak security password for the computer and took a look at the file directory, which turned out to be a complete mess. Still, she sent a tracer notification back to Vanguard and the email address Peter had given her—a completely secure way to get him backdoor access into this office network.

Trey sighed. “There’s nothing in here under Annalise’s real name.”

She pulled back the chair and heard voices in the hall.

Trey didn’t react.

“Psst.”

He looked over and started to slide the drawer closed.

She held her hand up and mouthed, *Quiet*.

The voices in the hall grew louder.

Ember could hide under the desk. Taking down any number of assailants would be difficult without the stun gun in her pocket, which she pulled out now.

Trey flinched, then settled. He probably figured she pulled the gun first, but she didn’t need to draw that much attention to herself.

She heard whoever was out there breach the outer office.

Ember waved Trey toward what she hoped was a place to hide—or a way out. Adrenaline rushed through her body until she could hear the beat of her heart in her ears. Much too fast. She twisted the handle and got it open. She was right—it was a tiny restroom.

Trey stepped in right behind her, and she eased the door shut without a click.

Ember’s watch buzzed again. She stood completely still and tried to take a long, slow breath. In her mind she saw him

crouch in front of her the night before, telling her to breathe. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Two men entered the office they'd been in seconds ago. *Don't come in here.*

Trey's warm hand covered hers. She opened her eyes, thankful for his presence...and spotted the frown on his face. He tapped the button on the side of her watch. The watch face flashed with her heart rate.

He slid his cell phone from his jeans pocket. His eyes lifted from the screen, a flash of fire there.

Did he really think she was going to let him that far into her life? Ember lifted her chin so he'd know exactly how she felt about that.

His lips pressed into a thin line. He tapped the screen, then swiped. Looked at her watch again.

The voices in the office got louder. "...find it."

She needed to crack the door but couldn't or they'd know she and Trey were in here. Cold waves rolled off his body along with all the questions she imagined were in his mind. Her career had been predicated on her ability to read what people weren't saying. It had kept her alive.

But they couldn't argue right now, no matter how much he wanted to debate her cutting him out of her heart rate tracker.

They'd discuss her need for personal space, and her refusal to get sidelined by health issues later.

"Keep looking. We need that one, or the boss isn't going to be happy." The voice moved, a man walking around the room and past the door. "This one is a rush order. He needs a redhead with freckles."

The other man made some kind of noise. Ember couldn't make out the tone, or what was said after that. She sent a text to Peter and Simon, in their group thread, and asked for surveillance around the doctor's office—in case they could get a shot of these guys when they left.

If this was what she thought it was, she needed to find these men later. Neither she nor Trey could take them down right now, ill-equipped as they were. Especially not if they were the kind of people to carry guns.

The rustle died. She waited a little longer, then eased the handle down and the door open.

Clear.

She stepped out.

“Care to tell me what that was?”

Ember ignored the question and headed for a window in the little room beside the back door. She pulled the curtain back, but the rear parking lot was empty. She called Peter.

“Yeah.”

She put the call on speaker. “Anything on surveillance? Who were those guys?”

Peter said, “You sure they’re gone?”

“I’m sure.”

Trey headed for the front door. “Maybe they came through the back, because if they’d come through the unlocked front door, they’d have realized there was someone in here. And they didn’t call the police.”

Ember sighed. “I already thought of all that.” To Peter she said, “Any idea who they were? We need to find them.”

“It sounded like they’re looking for someone.”

She turned to look at Trey.

“We need to get out of here, too.” He lifted his chin, the way she had in that tiny bathroom. “And we need to get to them before they find whoever they’re looking for.”

“Right.” She shoved off the ridiculous feelings interfering with her heart rate. “Let’s go. Peter, get into that computer I just hacked and find out who they were.”

She hung up on the young Vanguard employee and swept past Trey to the front door.

“Are you going to relock the entrance?”

Ember flipped the lock, then pulled the door shut behind them. “You realize we got nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” He took her arm this time, walking them the same way she had but back to the car. “We established you don’t trust me.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, *Did you really think I would?* But Ember held the words back.

Some tiny part of her flickered, ashes coming back to life with the barest flame.

One that felt tragically like hope.

THIRTEEN

Trey gripped the steering wheel, headed for Ember's house. She sat quietly beside him. "So you were just going to pretend everything's fine and neglect to tell me you cut off my access to your health data?"

Given they both worked with Vanguard, she had to know he'd be fully aware of their technological capabilities. He'd told her it was a non-negotiable part of their working together that he could see her heart rate at all times. But now he couldn't.

It wouldn't take someone like Simon long to figure out how to spoof her health data. But the guy hadn't even given Trey a heads-up? They were going to have words.

When he was back on the ambulance, he fully intended on telling Freya all about what her twin brothers were up to at Vanguard. He knew she tried to keep Simon and Peter in line, but they were making their own way in the world and building their careers. He was weirdly proud of them. But probably only because he didn't have any younger siblings of his own.

"What do you expect me to say?" Ember sighed.

"Hey, Trey. Just to let you know I'm only keeping you around because it's easier to avoid the confrontation of saying, 'I don't need your help.'"

"If I didn't need you, then you wouldn't be here."

He turned a corner. "Good to know how things really are."

“It was your idea in the first place to tag along with me. What do you want me to say?”

There were plenty of things he wanted her to say. This wasn't the time or the place to get into them. Especially not with cookies on the line. Not to mention with her health the way it was—and she'd all but inferred she didn't have that much more life to live. She only wanted to spend the time she had left finding her sister.

He didn't need to make this more complicated for her. He needed to support Ember. Which was what he'd been trying to do by having access to her health data so he could monitor how she was doing while she focused on finding her sister.

Instead, she had cut him out of that part.

“I'm not a mind reader,” he said. “I also don't know you well enough to assess your symptoms and be able to discern for myself if you're fine or if you're lying.”

He figured at any given moment she was absolutely apt to lie about how she was doing. A woman like Ember would focus on getting the job done and push away the risk to her health. She knew Clare. Given what he understood of Clare's background, that didn't leave many options. Ember was either Special Forces, or a spy. Or something else with that level of training.

Ember shifted in her seat. Dissipating some of the built-up adrenaline in her system. She would crash soon, and she would crash hard. Not because she had exerted herself, but because hiding in the bathroom caused her heart rate to elevate from the first moment they'd stepped in. And yet his app never notified him.

“I'm fine.”

He sighed. “I'm not going to work on the assumption you're lying to me, but I'm also not going to believe you.”

“Ditto.”

He shot her a sharp glance. “What does that mean?” He wasn't the one who'd been lying.

She picked at a thread on her knee. “I guess I am doing what I hate when other people do. But you have to understand I have good reason to keep you in the dark about certain things.”

“Despite all the training they put you through?”

She looked out the window. “Some lessons are only learned the hard way.”

“Don’t I know it. Grandma’s cookies are on the line.”

She glanced at him, but he had no chance to look over and see her face.

Trey sighed. “So you’ll convince yourself that you’re fine when you’re not, because it serves your purpose of finding your sister.” He could understand that. He had spent most of his life fighting the urge to be in denial about the kind of person he should be. The man he’d been taught he should strive to be or want to be. Instead, he’d acted like who he was didn’t have any impact on anyone else. He could do what he wanted. Treat people how he wanted to treat them.

It wasn’t until a Malaysian cartel assassin shoved a knife in his stomach that Trey had started to wonder if it wasn’t a completely futile way of living.

He just hadn’t known how to change things.

Ember’s phone rang. “It’s Simon.” Before he could ask, she said, “I’ll put it on speaker.” She tapped the screen. “It’s Ember. I’m here with Trey.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “We took a look at the computer you got us access to. There was a whole lot of information stored on their hard drive.”

“We’re looking for a redheaded female, I’m guessing.” Ember paused. “That’s who they wanted to find.”

Trey guessed she was right about that. It was who those two men in the office had been looking for. But what conclusions had she drawn that he had no idea about?

“Two hundred patients. Give or take.” Simon tapped keys on his end. “Each one has a photo on their intake form. We

skimmed through and singled out redheads.”

“We found one,” Peter chimed in from the background. “She’s twenty-four, and pregnant.”

“You think it’s her, just because Clare and I ran into that couple at the club? That doesn’t mean it has anything to do with pregnancy. They could’ve been there paying off a gambling debt.”

“Clare has it on our radar that there’s a local organization buying and selling babies illegally as adoptions.” Simon muttered something under his breath. “This is the first inkling that it’s real and not just someone posturing.”

Ember said, “Is she married?”

“Not according to her patient records,” Simon said. “But you think those guys were looking for her?”

“Her information, at least,” Trey pulled off the street into a pharmacy parking lot. There was no point going to Ember’s house if they were just going to turn around and head somewhere else. He pulled into a space and threw the car in park.

He turned to Ember. “Do we believe this woman is in imminent danger?”

Before she answered, Simon said, “I’ll check this address is legit.”

“Cross-reference with...” Peter’s voice trailed off.

The two guys on the phone went quiet. Working hard as support for a woman on a mission. Whether that was personal, or a professional job, it didn’t matter to the twins. They put a hundred percent into what they were doing.

Trey studied her in the dim light. “Do you think she isn’t safe?”

“I think we need to find her and make sure she is.”

“Even if you don’t get closer to finding your sister?” Trey asked.

Ember's face shifted to a guarded expression. "Are you willing to risk a pregnant woman's health and safety?"

He wasn't. The question he had, was whether it was something Ember would do when she only had a limited time left. When the object of being out here was to find her sister.

How far would she go to save someone she loved, and what would it cost anyone between her and achieving that goal?

"I'm texting you the address now," Peter said. "Hang on."

Ember looked at the screen.

"Got it?" Trey tried to lean over and see.

She shook her head.

Peter said, "A call just came in from a neighbor. This woman's neighbor. Apparently, there was a disturbance in her house. The police are responding."

"Send the address now." Trey pulled out of the parking lot while she hung up with the twins.

Ember directed him to the house, and he made it in good time even though they had no lights and sirens.

One police patrol car was parked outside.

"It's better if the cops don't see me," Ember said. "It will just distract from what happened if they're stuck on figuring out who I am. Because I won't be telling them."

Trey hit the button to release his seatbelt. "You want to stay here? I can go talk to them."

He knew most of the cops in Benson. Worked with them often, though he spent more time with firefighters than police. Normally he would take the firefighter side of that rivalry. But now his ambulance partner had fallen in love with a police detective, Trey's loyalties had certainly shifted. And not just because McCauley had been his foot in the door back to the ambulance.

That was only proximity, not a solid plan. The whole wilderness race thing had gone down the toilet. The social

media firestorm was settling down now that everybody saw his apparent attempt to break up Selena and Alex hadn't worked. As if that had been his intention with any of it.

"Wait here." He climbed out of the car, wondering at how much his life had changed the last few days.

He'd been determined to get back to his job, finish up healing, and get his life where he wanted it to be again. Now he had no idea what was going on. Things seemed to be up in the air, and at the center of it all was Ember and the chance to be a hero for her. Someone who needed help the way people he met on call outs always did. In despair, in the middle of a time of crisis.

With Ember, he could do something.

The responding officers were Watson and Omara. Both stood in the entryway of the residence, a small square house in a row of small square houses.

"Hey." Trey lifted one hand in wave.

Watson shook his head and stepped out. "No going inside. There is no one to help, anyway." The officer frowned. "Are you on duty?"

He shook his head, not sure how to explain that the woman he was with was concerned about the resident—a person she'd never met. Someone they'd overheard enough to believe was in danger while breaking and entering into a shady business.

Omara glanced over at the car. "Is that your latest squeeze?"

"She's a friend of mine." Trey folded his arms, about to ask what happened inside.

"Right." Omara elbowed Watson. "Sure, that's all it is."

"What happened here? Is the woman that lives here all right?"

Watson grinned. "Because your new squeeze wants to know?"

“That’s not what this is.” Trey folded his arms. Maybe Ember should have told him how to get information out of someone. It turned out Trey was bad at subterfuge.

FOURTEEN

Ember watched Trey from the dark interior of the car. Reading body language of the cops who had responded proved easier than Trey's. Or maybe it was more that she didn't want to know.

He was upset with her. She never kidded herself at any point that he wouldn't be. He was a first responder, and a capable man. Not the kind of guy who wanted to be lied to. Even if it was simply withholding information.

He may not have asked the question in so many words, but she'd been able to tell he wanted to know why she'd agreed to him tagging along if he couldn't monitor her heart rate. All that lingering distrust wasn't something she could easily let go of. Trey would have to deal with what she was prepared to hand over, which considering she trusted almost no one right now wasn't much.

She knew why she wanted him here. The same reason she'd gone to check him out at the award ceremony at the hotel. Because even if it had nothing to do with his ability to save—or prolong for now—her life, and he could give her the extra time she needed to find Annalise, there was still another reason she hadn't objected to him being here.

Ember didn't want to die alone.

She hadn't admitted it to Clare, or anyone else, that she wanted or needed a partner. Maybe even a friend. After years of CIA work, being solo on operations with no safety net, maybe she wanted someone to talk to. Bounce ideas off.

Clare was...wherever she was. Ember didn't begrudge her doing what she thought was right. Her friend earned that respect from her many times over.

Their relationship meant Ember would have to answer a whole lot of questions. Ones Ember didn't want to answer because it meant getting vulnerable and left less time for that than these distracting feelings for Trey.

She had no time for attraction. Least of all for a good guy she would seriously consider at any other time than the last few weeks of her life. Although that would be a tough sell... involving more vulnerability.

No one wanted to be saddled with someone who had a bunch of baggage.

Trey shifted. Tension echoed from his body. If she were closer and it wasn't night, she might be able to read some lips. The cop facing her most likely. She could guess well enough, though. They'd responded to the neighbor's call of a disturbance. The girl wasn't here—or there would be an ambulance out front, and if not that then she'd be at the door. She had to be missing.

Trey wasn't happy with what they were saying. Maybe the pregnant resident hadn't survived the altercation. That wouldn't be good. These cops might be out here, waiting for the coroner.

Made sense why Trey might be agitated by their words.

She wanted a way to listen in without revealing her identity. The last thing she needed was to have to answer uncomfortable questions about who she was, and why she couldn't give them ID. She didn't even have an employee badge for Vanguard.

Peter's name flashed on her phone screen.

"Find something?" Ember held the phone to her ear, eager to focus on something other than what the cops might be saying to Trey—because whatever it was, he didn't like it.

"Surveillance footage from the medical center you were just at." Peter sounded distracted. "I've got their faces on

camera, and their license plate.”

“You can ID them?” She felt her eyebrows rise.

“The medical center computer got me access to their cloud storage, which included the storage folder of files for their exterior camera live feed.”

“Tell me how this ties back to Annalise.” She wanted to save this young woman if that was needed. Ember would never leave an innocent to suffer if it was within her power to save them. Especially right now when she had no idea where her sister was.

This was only a quick side trip, plus the chance to gain a lead.

Trey turned to her.

Ember waved her hand just in case he was free to come back over. If they could track these guys and find the girl, that would be a good use of their evening. Unless she was dead in the house.

He said something to the cops and started toward her. Not happy.

Please don't be dead.

A pregnant woman? That wasn't good, and murder was terrible under normal circumstances.

Peter said, “Your sister received a sizable payment from the company that owns the medical center.”

Trey opened the car door. He slid in and shot her a look.

“We knew that.” Ember turned to Trey. “Is the girl here?”

“She's missing, and there was an altercation inside.”

Ember wanted to ask what that tone was, but she didn't move the phone from her ear.

“Your sister's file is on the computer with the patient records.” Peter went quiet.

Ember looked at her knees. “Tell me.”

“She was receiving treatment consistent with someone trying to get pregnant. Like a surrogate, or for infertility.”

“But you don’t know, and it doesn’t say?” She shifted on the seat and looked out the front window. “And she received a payment from them? Like a payout.”

Peter spoke more softly than before. “Her file is missing key information. Test results, a number of other things present in other files. But only after eight months ago. Before that, I’ve got all the information for visits. Strep. A bout of bronchitis from two years ago. Stuff like that.”

She connected the dots between her sister and the missing girl. “And the woman who lives here is pregnant.”

It wasn’t a solid connection, just an association.

Could be nothing, but if this woman was in imminent danger they needed to help her. Even with the change it could have not one thing to do with Annalise’s disappearance. “The circumstances aren’t the same, but do you have any leads on where she might be?”

Trey nodded. “I want to know, too. Because the police don’t seem to have much to go on right now. They’re waiting for two detectives I know, Lucas and Eric.”

Ember didn’t want to meet them, even if they were friends of Trey’s. “We should head out.” To Peter she said, “Vanguard needs to find this girl.”

Peter said, “We’re going to find her.” It sounded like a promise to himself, voicing his determination aloud.

She heard Simon agree in the background. “Good. I’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

Ember hung up the phone so they could focus. Trey pulled out of the parking lot of the apartment complex and headed toward downtown Benson. “How’d it go with those cops? Friends of yours?”

Trey said nothing at first. “It’s nothing.”

She wanted to point out that saying that meant it definitely was *something*.

“I’m just realizing the perception I’ve been giving everyone of who I am.”

“A hero first responder who cares enough to get involved?”

His foot slipped off the gas and he glanced at her. “That’s what you think?”

“It got you caught up in a social media non-scandal that they totally milked for the ratings.”

“Alex tripped Selena so he could win.” Trey frowned and kept driving. “But I can’t tell anyone that because it just looks like I’m trying to break them up.”

“So now you’re focused on helping me instead?” Made sense to her. She knew he’d been injured a couple of months ago and wanted to get back on the ambulance. Right now he was in a holding pattern because the chief of paramedics hadn’t authorized the switch back yet. Trey still had to be cleared by his doctor for heavy lifting, where with another job he’d have been back to full duty weeks ago. He was probably just avoiding the drama of it and focusing on her instead.

Because he had no personal stake in her success.

FIFTEEN

Trey had checked on Ma, packed a bag, and headed to Annalise's apartment to spend the night on the couch. Not too dissimilar from sleeping at the firehouse. Though, to be honest her sister's couch turned out to be more comfortable than his bed at the firehouse.

The entire time he couldn't let go of what she had said about him being a hero. A first responder who cared enough about people to get involved.

She really thought that about him?

He didn't like the idea that she might end up in medical trouble with no one around to help her. So here he was. Why did it have to be more than that? He hadn't ever let his feelings get involved before, so why would it be happening now. Not just with the job but also with every relationship he'd ever had. Which led back to those two cops he would've said were friends, but apparently thought what everyone else did about him.

That he was nothing but a shallow guy who used his uniform to pick up women.

And Ember was just another one in a line of candidates.

In the dark of her apartment, he stared at the black of the ceiling. Not her apartment, her sister's.

The truth was he knew very little about Ember, though he had drawn a few of his own conclusions. She seemed resigned to what would happen to her soon enough, when her heart failed for the last time and she wasn't able to come back from

it, no matter what medicine was available to utilize to intervene. He didn't really want to think about that. After all, it meant acknowledging the fact he would grieve, even if they'd only known each other days.

His mom had asked him what was up with him. He needed to spend some time with her, but given everything going on, he wasn't sure when he'd be able to help find Annalise . His mom would still be there after everything with Ember concluded.

When she was laid to rest in the ground.

Trey grabbed his phone from the coffee table and searched the internet on what heart failure meant, though he knew enough to know if she wasn't on a transplant list, there might not be much anyone could do for her. And even if she was, there was no guarantee she'd be able to get a heart in time.

Maybe she refused to hope in the impossible.

Trey didn't like it. He wanted to help her, but all she needed right now was someone to watch her back while she found her sister.

The door handle rattled.

He couldn't see anything in the glow from his phone illuminating his face. He hit the lock button and laid it facedown on the table, then snatched up his gun just in case.

The bedroom door eased open. He could see that much in the light above the oven coming through the door to the kitchen.

"Should I call 911?" he whispered, hoping she would hear him.

Ember stayed where she was. "We need to see who it is."

Trey got up with his gun. Whoever was at the door had a key, but he wasn't sure it would be her sister. He moved to the side, out of view, and kept the gun loose.

The door eased open. A man stepped inside, the key in his hand. Ember's reaction was immediate. She knew who this was. Given the look of him, Trey made some stereotyped

conclusions even if often that wasn't advisable. Right now it might save their lives.

He waited until the guy took another step and then moved in, the gun raised. "Hands up. Shut the door behind you."

The man spun around to Trey, reaching to the back of his waistband as he moved.

Ember was on him already. She reached for the man, and Trey realized what was going on when he heard crackle and saw a flash of light. She touched it to the man, who went rigid and collapsed. "Help me get him up."

Trey closed the door first instead. "You don't think we should call the police and tell them he broke in?"

"That might be a bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

Of course she was going to bring up the medical center.

He wasn't so sure if this guy intended them harm. They had no idea why he was here, though it seemed Ember intended to find out what it was.

"Let's get him on the chair." She set her hands on her hips.

Trey figured that meant he was supposed to haul the guy over to the seat. The man slumped over, but Ember found a scarf and tied his hands behind his back.

"How about you tell me what the plan is?" Trey folded his arms, unsure what Ember planned to do here. Especially considering his early thought about not knowing her all that well. If she worked in the same field as Clare, maybe she planned some kind of secret torture method. Did she need him to leave for that? He wasn't sure he wanted to listen from the next room, even if he could stick around to provide medical care.

"We're going to find out where Annalise is." She motioned to the man. "This is Brad, Annalise's boyfriend."

That made sense why he had a key. A lot of people had that kind of living arrangement these days, though even with his reputation, Trey hadn't ever taken that step. He knew what

people like his ma who followed religion thought about the way he'd lived the last few years.

Trey had never come face-to-face with a real need for God to step in.

Until he was stabbed.

All he was left with after were questions about why it needed to happen. Seemed like all that attack had done was cause problems for him.

The guy sucked in a breath and lifted his head. He blinked at Ember and Trey but didn't seem to recognize them. Trey had never met the guy. He didn't know if Ember had.

She said, "Hello, Brad."

The guy narrowed his gaze on her. He struggled against the scarf securing his hands behind his back. "Let me go."

A guy like this, Trey wasn't surprised it offended his sensibilities to be bound.

"Tell us where Annalise is, and we will let you go," Ember said.

"I was just coming over to get something. You guys broke in."

"You want me to call 911 for you?" Trey said. "Maybe you can explain to them what happened to Annalise."

The guy snorted. "As if the cops care about one woman. She doesn't mean anything to them."

Ember said, "Well, she means something to me."

Trey's phone buzzed on the table. He backed up, the gun still pointed at Brad, and looked at the screen. Ember's health app was showing an uptick in her heart rate. The stuttering beat had increased.

She had given him back access to her health app since she went to bed? Instead of getting information that she was fine all the time, it now showed the truth. He glanced at her, but she didn't react, and he said nothing.

“So tell me.” Ember folded her arms and leaned on the edge of the dining table. “What does your boss at the club have to do with Annalise? What did he have you involved in that meant she needed to disappear?”

Brad lifted his chin. “You think I’m a rat?”

“I don’t care what you are. I just want to find my sister.” Ember spoke slowly. “What do you think he’ll do to you when he hears that you sold him out?”

The guy blinked as if realization dawned. “You’re going to put a target on my back. Just to find Anna?”

She said, “You might be surprised to find out what I’d be willing to do.”

Trey looked down at her heart rate. If he wasn’t staring at it, and assuming it was reliable data, he’d probably be convinced she was fine just from looking at it. Instead, he could see a different story.

Trey said, “Pills?”

Brad flinched, because he had no idea they weren’t talking about him.

Ember straightened off the table and motioned toward a backpack in the corner. Between Brad and the door.

“I’ll get them.” Trey kept the gun loose in his grip so he could use it if he needed to and moved to the backpack.

“Where is my sister, Brad? That’s all I’m interested in.”

Trey found a pill bottle from the pharmacy. The name on the label was Rebecca Sanchez. “These?”

Ember said, “Yes,” and turned back to Brad.

“She said you were a bigshot.” Brad laughed. “That if anything happened to her, then this supersecret black ops whatever-you-are would hunt me down.” He sneered. “You ain’t all that.”

Trey took a step toward her, holding out the pills.

She took them at the same second Brad launched out of the chair, his hands free. The scarf fell to the floor. He barreled into Trey and they both went down. All Brad's weight slammed into him and pinned him against the carpet in one punishing blow.

Pills scattered across the floor.

Pain erupted in Trey's middle, and he roared out all the frustration of not being completely healed yet. All he could do was lie there and blink up at the ceiling. Listening to the door open and Brad racing off into the night.

His phone blared with an alarm.

Trey managed to roll over and look at her.

Not breathing. Under two fingers he felt her pulse, far too fast.

Trey dragged himself across the floor, levered up, and slammed his fist down on her sternum to perform a precordial thump. "Not like this."

SIXTEEN

Ember moved her legs, and the first thing she realized was that she was back in her bed. Like she'd been before she heard Brad trying to enter the apartment. Like he lived here and had use of a key. Something Annalise had neglected to mention. Which meant Ember hadn't had the chance to share with her sister how disappointed their mom would be at her choices.

Go figure.

Ember blinked at the ceiling. Daylight.

It all rushed back. Brad escaping. Trey, hurt.

And suddenly her heart had quit beating altogether, as if to remind her she had no control. That any second her life could end and there was nothing she could do about it.

Ember planted her elbows and levered her head up off her pillow. The room swam.

The door, already open, pushed wide, and a woman she was certain she'd never met before entered holding a mug. This was her sister's apartment. Who was this lady?

"Oh, you're awake." She stopped to smile wide. "That's great. I'll let Trey know." She set the mug on Annalise's dresser and tugged out her phone. "He's been worried, but thankfully he's already on his way home from work."

She tapped on her phone, then sat on the dining chair by the bed.

Where'd she been watching Ember sleep?

“Don’t worry,” the woman said. “I’ve read two books today on my phone.” She lifted her hands. “I resisted the urge to clean. But I did do the dishes and make a couple of meals that I put in the freezer. Just in case.”

“I’m Ember.”

“I know, honey. Trey told me. I’m his mom, Audrey.” Worry flashed in her eyes. “He told me how bad it was, and how he couldn’t take you to the hospital.”

“My heart stopped.”

Audrey’s eyes watered. “Does it do that a lot?”

“More than I’d like.”

Audrey cleared her throat. Trey’s mom.

“I see where he gets his care and empathy from.” Ember tried to smile.

Audrey laughed. “Don’t tell him that. He’ll think I did him wrong. But I like that he cares so much. People think he doesn’t, but I’m glad you see the truth.” She paused a beat. “I’m supposed to inform you that you’re not to get up until he gets here to check you out, unless you absolutely need to use the restroom, in which case I’m supposed to help you all the way.”

Ember was glad for the conversation switch. They had been venturing into risky territory here, but talking about needing the bathroom was much better. Ember didn’t want to end up in a heavy conversation. There had been enough of that already.

“I’ll let you know.” Ember sighed. “Thank you for staying here today and keeping an eye on me.”

Audrey nodded. “Of course. Your friend Clare called, Trey gave her my number, I guess, and she asked me lots of questions about how you were doing. Then she put her friend on, a Doctor Windermere. I had to take your temperature and check your heart rate on a readout.”

Audrey motioned to the bedside table, and an assortment of over-the-counter items. Like a point-and-shoot

thermometer, and a finger heart rate reader, even though Ember had a device stuck to her chest that told her app what was happening.

Had Trey been monitoring her at work all day?

She shouldn't be so pleased that might be the case. Not when there was little point entertaining thoughts about a good guy who cared about people. Who wanted to help when she'd turned him down. He'd gone to Clare and asked for the chance to assist her even back before he had any idea she was looking for her sister.

"Thanks again for being here." She could have survived by herself, and it might seem strange to have someone here she didn't know, but maybe not being alone wasn't so bad.

Audrey shrugged. "I wasn't doing anything but figuring out a new storage system for Trey's closet."

Ember blinked.

"He would've been mad about that anyway, so this is better. He asked, and I got to help." Audrey smiled.

"You were at his house?"

"It's a townhouse. And yes, I came for the holidays. And my other son, Trey's stepbrother, will be here for the holidays to stay as well." She smiled, but there was a note of sadness in her eyes. Maybe she would tell Ember, but it wasn't her place to pry if Audrey's life wasn't perfect.

Trey had told her that his mom might be here to figure out his issues. But he also believed she had things of her own he could help her work out.

Ember said, "I lost my mother years ago, and I'm actually here in town looking for my sister." She had no one.

Not the right thing to say to a woman with more empathy in her little finger than the people Ember worked with in the CIA had in their whole bodies.

Audrey gasped. Tears flooded her eyes, threatening to spill over. "I'm so sorry!"

“I’ve had a lot of time to come to terms with it.” Less for her own fate. “I’ve learned to do what I can with each day and make the most of each one that I’m given.”

Audrey reached over and touched Ember’s hand. “You’re a lovely young woman. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Ember smiled back at her, the yearning in her for a mother hadn’t gone anywhere no matter how much she’d tried to squash down her grief. It was the same not knowing where her sister was, even if their relationship had a strain.

A shadow darkened the doorway. “Everything okay in here?”

Trey, back from work. Looking handsome and capable in his uniform, standing in the doorway while she lay in bed like a terminally ill person. Which was precisely the situation. So why should she feel bad about that?

“I’ll let you two talk.” Audrey headed for the door. She lifted up on her toes and kissed Trey’s cheek. “Good day at work?”

“Paperwork and…” He grumbled something else on the end.

His mom patted his stomach. “You’ll get there soon enough.”

Trey came over and sat on the edge of the bed.

“I can’t lie here forever.” Ember had her pajamas on from when she’d gone to bed the night before, prior to the break-in. She liked being incapacitated even less than the fact of her impending demise—or coming up with alternative ways of thinking about it than, *Girl, you’re gonna die soon*. She needed a distraction so she didn’t just stare at him all evening. “What was that about your work?”

“I’m trying to get back on the ambulance. Although that will mean being gone twelve or twenty-four hours instead of just eight, which could prove a problem if you need a wingman.”

Ember wanted to know why he wasn't on the ambulance if he was an EMT. She should know, but she couldn't remember if he'd told her. Something about being injured. She was pretty sure.

Trey untucked his shirt and lifted it enough to reveal a ragged scar on his abdomen. Instead of admiring his middle, which was extremely tempting right now—and something she'd never have said was more attractive than a face or hands or strong arms—she focused on that injury.

She hissed. “He slammed into you when he left the apartment. Brad.”

He nodded.

“I thought you were dead.” The images filled her mind. “He slammed into you, and you both fell. I thought the gun might've gone off.” She didn't remember much, just impressions. Fear mostly. Then nothing. “You restarted my heart.”

“How are you feeling now?” Trey held her wrist with two fingers and looked at his watch. “Because if you're up to it, we need to head somewhere. Just a short trip and then back here for more rest. Or we could go to my house. I'm thinking about that since it's more secure and Mom can be there with you when I'm at work.” He'd worried about her today, at her sister's apartment. No police. No medical attention other than him and the unofficial help she was accustomed to in her line of work.

“Where do we need to go?” she asked.

“The morgue.”

Ember flinched.

“Sorry. There's a body. Clare would like you to see if it's your sister.”

SEVENTEEN

The elevator descended slowly to the basement level, where the morgue was located. Given the size of the town, the police department, and the tiny Benson satellite office of the FBI could be found in the same building—next door—Trey wasn't surprised things were close by. This was the biggest small town he'd ever lived in. Like it was trying to be a big city, for good or ill.

Trey huddled in the elevator with Ma and Ember.

She'd insisted his mother accompany them, and the two had sat in the back seat of his SUV chattering quietly while he drove.

Trey didn't mind. Though by the look of her expression right now, Ember knew he and his mother were both assessing her in the pause between entering the building and getting to the morgue to see if the Jane Doe was her sister.

"I'm okay, you guys. Don't worry." She didn't smile. Her face was entirely too pale to convince him she was fine.

They were going to make this quick. No matter if he had to carry her out, she needed to know. Then when they did know, one way or another, she would be back in bed resting as quick as he could get her there.

Trey was thinking his house, so he didn't have to worry about Brad coming back. So Ma could be there all the time while he was at work.

Ember managed a laugh. It was good at least one of them could find this amusing. "You have identical expressions." She

touched Ma's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you for caring about me. Both of you. That hasn't been something I had in my life. Not for a long time."

Trey frowned. "I thought you've been friends with Clare for a while now."

Ember shrugged one shoulder. "We haven't seen each other much for a few years because work had me on the East Coast—and farther afield. We mostly kept in contact via email."

The elevator doors opened before he could continue the conversation. She was an enigma. Trey had no idea if they'd even have time for him to puzzle it out before...

He was last out the elevator and took a moment to stop and squeeze his eyes shut.

He'd restarted her heart.

She'd been seconds from being dead. One hard thump of his fist on her sternum jogged the organ back into a rhythm from unstable ventricular tachycardia. It worked then. Whether it would work next time, he couldn't say. One day there would be nothing he could do to restart her heart. Weakness or overexertion. Stress and strain. All of it would culminate and the taxed and frail organ in her chest would give out entirely.

"Honey?"

Trey opened his eyes at Ma's call. Both women were looking at him, more worry in their eyes. They'd had enough of that between them. He wanted to take them out for ice cream or something. Shake them all out of this funk. But if it was Ember's sister dead on that cold slab in there, it would hardly be the time for dessert.

He put his arm around his ma's shoulders, then did the same with Ember, but slow enough she could object. When she walked close by his side, under the shelter of his arm, he said, "Let's go see what's what."

Ember nodded against his shoulder.

The ME strode out of her office, presumably aware they'd been on their way down. Dark hair, and younger than a lot of medical examiners. Especially considering she was the chief. She had been in the papers months ago now after a local camp was shut down and all the staff arrested. They'd reportedly been involved in drug operations.

"Evening." He slipped his arm from around his mother and held it out. "Trey Banning." He still wore his uniform, so she could figure out his association. But if he were honest, the woman did look familiar. "I think we've met."

She nodded. "Possibly, with your line of work and mine. Though I don't get out of the office as much as I used to." She shook his hand. "Sarah Carlton. It says, 'Chief' on the door, but don't worry about that." Her attention flicked between his ma and Ember. "Sarah is fine."

His mom introduced herself, then Sarah held out her hand to Ember. It helped that she gave them her first name, because it meant Ember was able to do the same—and not offer additional information. Trey figured she'd like that.

Sarah said, "You're here to see if you recognize the unidentified woman?"

Ember nodded.

"Let's go to my office." She strode ahead of them down the hall and opened the door to a generic space. Probably not the area she worked out of as the chief. More like a communal use computer and desk, and chairs for civilians. "Please have a seat."

Trey stuck by the door. His mom took a chair, but Ember seemed restless. Even with the weakness of her body, she walked to a wall of framed photos.

"Those are our families. All the staff." Sarah clasped her hands on the desk. "So this room isn't completely devoid of life. We like to celebrate those we love, and those we have lost."

Ember pointed to one. "Your... father?"

Sarah nodded. "Family is family, no matter what."

That was an interesting thing to say.

Trey glanced at Ma in time to see her flinch. He needed to talk to her about what was going on. Neither of them had been okay after Trey's dad passed away when he was eight. She'd married Allen's father the year he turned eleven. The guy had his issues—but all of them did.

True to the man everyone seemed to think he was, it turned out Trey hadn't asked her how things were in far too long. Because right now he had no idea what was going on.

Ember continued looking at the photos. She made a low noise in her throat. "Is that...your..." Her voice squeaked. "Someone close to you?"

"My husband, Joseph." Sarah's face took on a guarded expression. "Should we get down to business?"

"You don't need to worry," Ember said. "I came here through Vanguard, and Clare Juarez."

"Ah."

"Your husband looks like someone I...might have heard of a long time ago."

Trey blinked. Was that supposed to make any sense? His mom glanced at him, but he just shook his head. Maybe it was some kind of CIA connection. But the medical examiner's husband? That had to make this a seriously small world if they knew each other. Or knew *of* each other.

Sarah nodded, apparently content with that answer, as if it explained anything. "Yesterday morning we were called to a scene by local police. A young woman with no ID on her, and who we've been unable to identify from either fingerprint or DMV records, had been found, deceased, in Benson State Park."

Ember crossed the space between her and Trey, then stood beside him. He didn't move or reach out to touch her. He just let her take what she needed from his proximity.

Sarah continued, "I have a photo, if you'd just like to see that."

“I’d like to take a look at the body. Thank you.” Ember held herself tight, all together. Considering her condition, she was doing a fantastic job.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Trey asked.

Ember shook her head. “Doctors have medical training. I’m sure Sarah has a defibrillator here.”

“I want to get a portable one. Start carrying it with me.” He realized he’d said that aloud.

Sarah frowned. “Is there something I should know?”

Ember glanced at him and made a motion with her hand.

“I know,” he said. “I’ll be alerted if there’s a change.”

Ember nodded, then followed Sarah through a side door into the morgue.

Trey let out a breath. He checked his phone.

“No call back yet?” Ma asked.

He shook his head. “Freya is working tonight. Lucas is probably out on a case, or at his desk, up to his nose in open investigations.”

“Your friends can have time for you. It is okay.”

“That’s not what I meant, Ma.” Besides, he was a grown man who didn’t need to have his friends call him instead of the other way around just to make him feel better. He didn’t need his ego stroked. “I don’t have hurt feelings.”

He went through his email, then a couple of social media sites. Bad idea since the Selena/Alex thing had gone down. Now he had hundreds of DMs he would probably never read at this rate.

His mom shifted, then her fingers covered his phone, and she gently moved it away from his face. “Maybe we could talk about what’s bothering you.” Her face had a soft expression he’d always loved. “Or that sweet woman, and how she doesn’t have long to live. But you’re still helping her, even though it gives you nothing. Just because it’s the right thing to

do. And no one sees that, but a few people—probably more than you realize.”

“I’d rather talk about what’s bothering *you*.”

“Touché.” She didn’t smile.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to push like that.” He sighed.

His mom rolled her eyes of all things. “I can’t believe no one sees what I see in you. But you know what? I think that woman in there just might.” She pointed at the closed door.

EIGHTEEN

Audrey took two steps away from her son and sank back into the chair. This office had no life, even with the family photos. Maybe it was just the place this was. Surrounded by death all the time. Infused with it.

She studied her son. “You’re not pushing. I know you care, but you don’t let it all hang out. Your father was the same way. Guarded, but for what he wanted people to see.”

Trey stood at the door. Strong. Capable. Such a deep heart he had to bury it down where no one could touch it. Break it.

Terrence had kept himself that way. He’d been a pilot in the US Navy, so no way would he have worn his heart on his sleeve. But they’d never needed to train him to have that boundary, to keep his feelings and the depth of his care for the people he loved to himself. He’d walked into the Naval Academy that way on day one and never looked back.

She’d met him in high school, married him before college, and given birth to Trey when Terrence had been back from his first deployment to the Gulf.

“I don’t want to talk about Dad.” Trey ran a hand down his face.

“So let’s talk about Ember.” Audrey paused. “You really only met her a few days ago?”

He nodded.

“You two seem to have clicked.”

He shrugged. "It's work. She's a good woman. Or she seems to be. I barely know her. We've been through some things. She needs help I can give." He seemed like he wanted to shrug again.

The sight of it shot a pang through her. "Your father did that. I called it the double shrug." She remembered and felt the tug of a smile on her lips. "Like bookends to whatever he was saying."

"You miss him."

"Of course I do," Audrey said. "I don't go a day without remembering him."

"What happened with Jim?" Her husband, Trey's stepbrother Allen's dad, was a former US Marine. She didn't wonder why he picked up on that first as the source of why she'd suddenly shown up at his house.

Shame settled like a cloud. "I tried to help him."

In the end, she couldn't make him stay. That was a year ago, not that Trey knew anything about it, and no one knew the truth of where Jim was now. Just Allen, because his father needed that connection.

And it was help she couldn't give him.

Tears gathered. Audrey swiped them across her cheeks.

"So you came here to fix me instead?" Trey crouched in front of her, the edge of a smile on his face. Terrence's smile.

She wanted to tell him that as far as she could see, there was nothing to fix. But Trey wouldn't accept that. Not right now. Maybe not soon, either.

She'd thought maybe Ember would be the catalyst to get him to admit he wasn't the man the world thought he was. Terrence had combated that in high school before they started dating. Dropping out of football after a sprained ankle. Fighting to find his place.

How had Trey reached his thirties and not figured this out?

Audrey realized then that she was the one who taught him to keep his feelings in a box.

“I’ve been meeting with an older woman at church and working through some things and all the heartbreak,” she replied. “Facing myself.”

“So why did you come?”

“To see my boy at Christmas.”

Trey smiled.

“Turns out it’s not just us that needs something we don’t have.” She motioned to the closed door Ember had gone through. “We need to help that girl.”

NINETEEN

Doctor Carlton held the door for Ember. She seemed like a nice woman, dressed professionally with a skirt suit and low heels. Hair secured at the back of her head. Enough makeup to brighten her face for long days and terrible lighting.

Ember had assumed so many roles over the years, blending into those places where she wasn't supposed to have gained access. Sarah seemed genuine in a way Ember wasn't sure she knew how to be. Nor did she have the time to figure it out.

She spotted the sheet-covered body. As soon as they knew for sure it was or wasn't her sister, there would be privacy restrictions on what Sarah could say. Until then it remained a gray area, as the Jane Doe still could be Annalise.

Ember wasn't sure she was ready to look. "Can you tell me about her?"

Sarah nodded, standing near Ember in the expansive room. A long table with equipment was positioned beside the double doors from the hall. The wall to the right had rows of doors, refrigerated compartments where bodies were stored. In between were three long tables. Low-hanging spotlights.

Ember didn't want to think if it was her sister under that sheet, or if she'd wish that fate on anyone else instead.

"She's young, maybe early twenties." Sarah's gaze lifted to Ember's blonde hair. "Brunette."

Ember swallowed. "How did she die?"

“Her injuries indicate she was strangled.”

Ember appreciated the fact Sarah wasn't going to treat her like any civilian.

“She recently gave birth. Within the last week.”

Ember blew out a long breath, the hot prick of tears in her eyes. Annalise and Brad had a baby? The medical center treatments would make more sense now if that were the case. If they'd been trying to get pregnant.

If she'd given birth, then who had custody of the baby?

Ember bent forward and sucked in a few long breaths. Did she have a niece or nephew out there? She couldn't provide that child a life. Even if her sister hadn't survived this ordeal, Ember had a rapidly approaching expiry date. She wouldn't be around for years to come so that she could care for a child, as much as she might want to.

“Would you like to see now if this young woman is your sister?”

Ember straightened and nodded. Sarah didn't want to be here all night.

The doctor strode to the opposite side of the long metal table with wheels. “All right.”

Ember lifted her gaze from those wheels to the white sheet.

Sarah lifted it from the woman's face.

Ember sucked in a breath and shook her head. “It's not Annalise. It's not my sister.” She then turned away and paced across the room. Toward the double doors that led to the hall. Back to face the metal compartment doors on the far side. Sloughing off the nervous energy.

Trey probably wondered why her heart rate was going up and down—or maybe he didn't wonder at all. Maybe he figured this was completely understandable.

Sarah noted something on a file, then straightened. “Thank you for coming. I appreciate you being here to see if this woman was your relative.”

Ember nodded. She paced some more. “I just need a second. Is that okay?”

“It’s more than okay. It’s perfectly understandable,” Sarah said. “We all react to death in our own way.”

“If Annalise isn’t here, then she’s not dead.”

Sarah said nothing, she simply waited. A professionally bland expression on her face—not adding emotion to an already charged situation.

Ember turned and paced back the other way. “She might not be dead.” She couldn’t be sure, but after believing Annalise was likely dead, it was nice to contemplate something laced with hope.

Sarah offered a faint smile. “I’m sure the police will find her soon.”

Maybe it would be better if they did. But Ember hadn’t asked them to look, and she wasn’t going to venture into the police station next door to ask. She didn’t need her face on their surveillance system, or her name—whatever fake one she gave them—in their records. Hazard of the job, even if she was retired there was reason to be cautious. Though, with her life expectancy maybe it wouldn’t be that big of a deal. She could go in as Annalise’s legal next of kin and ask questions. Get them to search.

But if her sister turned out to be into something dangerous—or illegal—Ember might not be able to save her from the consequences of her actions.

Ugh. She wasn’t sure which path to take. And she wanted to discuss it with Trey, which only made things worse. She was starting to rely on him for more than to be there to restart her heart.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Sarah said, “how is it that you recognize my husband?”

Ember’s mind latched onto the question, eager to think about anything but her health or worry over her missing sister. Sarah might be unaware of the threat her husband’s previous occupation posed, but Ember got the idea maybe she knew.

Enough to ensure she was cautious, anyway. “Only by reputation. Though, I’ve seen his picture a few times.” Joseph, as Sarah knew him now, had been “Casper” years ago. Not a spy, more like a freelance agent. A man who would do anything for the money. “I don’t believe we ever met.”

Ember had heard the story. Casper had met a woman, married her, and quit the arrangement he had with whoever paid him. His wife had been pregnant when an old enemy took revenge, and she was killed. Some people said Casper lost it. That he killed the man who murdered his family, then disappeared. Or he was in a secret off-book prison. Or he’d committed suicide after he had taken his revenge.

Depended on who in the business you asked.

If he’d landed here, found a woman he could love again after the pain of losing everything, then Ember posed absolutely no threat to him. Sarah needed to know that.

“As a result of the last mission I went on before I got out, I now have...heart failure, I guess.” Ember didn’t know how else to explain it. “I might have enough time left to find my sister. But that’s all I have the energy or life left to focus on. Nothing else is going to interfere with that, because it could mean I don’t find Annalise before my heart gives out for the last time.”

Sarah swiped a stethoscope from a drawer and came over.

“I don’t need an examination.”

“With the threat you represent? You can hold still, and I’ll verify, thank you very much.”

Ember nearly laughed. “Good for you.”

Sarah and her husband’s safety and security were at stake. If Ember were a civilian who’d married a man who’d lived Casper’s life, became Joseph, and only wanted to live the rest of that life in peace, she’d do the same thing.

Ember shifted the edge of her jacket so Sarah could hear her heartbeat.

Sarah’s expression flickered. “Oh.”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Ember said. “I don’t begrudge you checking, but I don’t mean you any harm.”

“I’ve learned the hard way I can’t take people’s word for it.” Sarah wrapped the stethoscope around the back of her neck. “Do you need any help? I can talk to Joseph for you. Maybe he could lend a hand and help you find your sister.”

Ember shook her head. “Thanks, but I’ll find her.” Not that she couldn’t use the help. Just that it would take time to read someone new in on all the particulars. And she’d have to admit she didn’t have that much to go on.

She headed for the double doors instead, needing to move her legs before she talked to Audrey and Trey again. Talking about Casper—Joseph—and bringing up memories of her time with the CIA always left her with itchy skin. As though she was still covered by a film, a residue of the things she’d done, what she’d seen, and the fact that legally she’d be an accessory to all of it whether she’d taken the action or simply observed. If any of it took place within the US, anyway. The fact it was on foreign soil wasn’t much better.

“Thanks, Lucas. That would be great.” Trey’s voice drifted down the hall.

Ember glanced left, but he didn’t see her. He stood with his shoulder to her and the phone to his ear. Reading a notice board of missing persons.

Trey chuckled. “You really think that’s what I was after with Selena?” He sounded disappointed. “I’ve got something more important going on.”

Ember figured by that he meant keeping her alive to find her sister. Still, Trey being such a good guy, giving his free time to help someone like her, gave her that same filmy feeling. He was a first responder. A hero. She’d come to Benson with the intention of doing this alone, even if Vanguard provided some resources.

Now she had Trey and Ma helping her. Giving their time to make sure she could do this, when it could wind up that she dragged them down.

The restless energy that had her pacing the morgue sent her in the direction of the stairs. Air would be good. A little time alone to think and get rid of this restless energy. It wasn't like she would go far, or that she couldn't take care of herself. Vanguard could find her. Trey had her health information.

Ember had every coverage a person could have. Whether she remained back there or headed up these concrete steps to the ground floor. Exertion was the biggest threat to her life right now, and yet she had more help right now than she ever had.

So different from those days in the CIA. As an officer for the Agency, she wasn't used to backup unless they went on the mission with her. Help was normally a phone call—or a safehouse away. She wasn't used to multiple team members.

Not after years of such a solo existence.

How did big rowdy, close families survive it? Things hadn't been like that before her mom died, and the truth was she and Annalise had never been close. Maybe people with tight-knit families didn't notice. They probably thought all the people and commotion was normal.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket as Ember hit the landing step and the exit door that led to the street. She pushed against the release bar and kept going, so the heavy door opened in front of her. Already gasping for clean, fresh air.

Instead, she slammed into a man's jacket, and heavy hands grabbed her.

Ember swallowed a scream.

TWENTY

Trey held the phone to his ear and followed past the door where he'd seen Ember go, up the stairs. He heard her exit the morgue and wanted to know if the body inside belonged to her sister, or not. Given her hasty exit, he wasn't sure which way it fell.

On the other end of the phone line, Detective Lucas Westbrook, a more recent friend of Trey's—since he had fallen in love with Trey's ambulance partner Freya—came back on. “Okay, I took a look at Brad's boss, Thomas Nellis. He's definitely connected to the shell corporation that owns the medical center.”

“So that's something you can move on, right?” Trey asked. “It's enough to look more into it?”

“I don't exactly make a habit of investigating missing persons cases that aren't even open,” Lucas replied. “There is no record of a report being made about Annalise Hendryx. So if Ember called one in, it might've never been entered into the system.”

“It's connected to the missing woman from the other night.”

“Not my case.”

Trey could bring Ember in to make a report, but that would take time. And she might not even want to. “I'll find out if her sister needs your help.”

“If you come across any crimes while you're helping look for this woman, you need to report them.”

He winced. Like breaking and entering? That had happened twice, but only one of those incidents was the work of a bad guy. And he'd had a key to the apartment. "Is there something else I need to know?"

"Organized Crime has an open case with Brad's boss listed as the person in charge," Lucas said. "But they have no way in with Thomas Nellis's organization to figure out exactly what they're up to."

"I'll ask Ember if she knows anything about what Brad is up to."

"I can direct Organized Crime to talk to Vanguard, but that might open a can of worms no one wants spilled."

Trey figured Lucas had a point there. "If I can give any information, I will."

"Sounds good." Lucas nodded. "So tell me about this Ember. She's not another one of your 'fun and done' relationships, is she?"

Everything in Trey objected to Ember being referred to like that. "Why does everyone think I would only be hanging around the woman for that? You know I'm helping her find her sister." Lucas even knew it was tied to Trey's work for Vanguard, and he made that assumption? Like Trey only ever had one agenda.

"I know it's not a fling. That's not what I meant. Freya said this seems different. That *you* seem different." Lucas sighed. "One day you'll meet a woman who will break your heart. And I don't mean she'll dump you or leave you. I mean she'll break through."

Trey didn't know what that meant. "It's a work thing."

Lucas had no clue he was here with the goal of keeping Ember alive. Or that he was following her up the stairwell like a stalker, leaving Ma behind in the waiting room to figure out that they had both left.

"Maybe it won't be completely a work thing."

Trey shook his head. “Don’t count on it. It’s not like that.” Then he pushed out the exit door on the ground floor into the afternoon blue sky and the chill of a December breeze.

Ember made a strangled sound. Trey whipped his head around and saw her in clutch with Brad, Annalisa’s boyfriend.

He spoke into the phone. “Get over here now. West side street.” He hung up on Lucas, hoping the detective made it here double time. “Ember.” He stowed his phone in his back pocket and moved to grab Brad.

The boyfriend’s body bucked. He let out a sob as his knees gave out and he collapsed to the ground, crying.

Ember just stood there.

“What’s going on?” Trey glanced between them.

She winced. “He wanted to know if it was Annalise in the morgue.”

Trey felt his brows rise.

Brad slumped on the ground, one hand to the asphalt. He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his other hand. “I thought it would be her.”

“Why do you believe she’s dead?” Ember stood over him, a placid look on her face.

Trey stood guard. He checked her heart rate on his app and didn’t like the look of the last few minutes. He took a step closer to her.

“Of course she’s dead. Otherwise where is she?” Brad wailed. “The boss told me to leave it. That she probably ran off. But without taking any of her things?” He shook his head. “That makes no sense.”

Trey wrapped his fingers around Ember’s wrist and felt her pulse. He refused to think about what had happened only yesterday, when he’d been forced to violently help her heart return to normal rhythm. His own heart wasn’t quite recovered from that ordeal. She needed to be back at his house, resting. As soon as possible.

Lucas sprinted around the corner and pulled up short. His partner, Eric Hummet, appeared right behind him. Both men had their guns drawn, but quickly assessed the situation, and Lucas stowed his as he approached. “Brad Cummings?”

The distraught man shrugged. “What does it matter?”

Lucas glanced at Trey, who stood by Ember.

“Organized Crime wants an in, right?” Without waiting for Lucas to respond, Trey said, “Brad?”

Annalise’s boyfriend glanced up. Not a young man. A guy who had lived life, done time, and apparently fallen hard for a woman who was missing.

“Brad, what’s going on between you and Nellis right now?” Trey asked.

Ember flinched under his fingers, but Trey was pretty sure no one else noticed.

Brad’s face crumpled again. “Nellis is shutting me out of the operation. Giving me grunt work to do. I thought it was because he was grooming one of the younger guys to take over. Now I’m not so sure.”

Lucas said, “You think your boss knows what happened to Annalise?”

Brad said nothing, his expression indicating he was assessing his options.

Ember said, “Were the two of you trying to get pregnant?”

Trey hadn’t heard about that.

“We needed the money so we could get a house, and we were gonna go to the justice of the peace. Make it official.” Brad swiped at his nose.

“Getting pregnant was a way to get money?” Trey asked. “Like Annalise was gonna be a surrogate?”

Ember rotated her wrist and linked her fingers with his, as though she needed solidarity right now rather than a medic. He held on to her hand, even though he’d rather be maintaining an awareness of her heart rate. Preferably without anyone else

realizing there was an issue. But then, maybe she did just need a friend right now.

She shifted closer until her shoulder touched his.

He had never contemplated what such a simple touch could mean. Lucas hadn't been wrong when he mentioned Trey's so-called fun and done relationships. There was so much less than that between Ember and him. And at the same time, so much more.

Lucas hauled Brad to his feet. "Let's go to my office and have a chat. See what we can come up with."

"A couple cops?" Brad levered back, but Lucas didn't let him go far. "You think I'm gonna spill all so I can get shanked in lockup?"

Lucas led the guy to Eric. Out of earshot, for whatever reasons Trey wasn't going to care about. He was here for Ember, not to help with a police case.

He turned to her, and she did the same. Ember wound her arms around his waist. Trey touched her neck, threading his fingers through her hair.

On the other side, where Eric and Lucas couldn't see, he felt for her pulse. "Breathe with me."

She clung to him, inhaling with him. They held a breath together, and he slowly blew it out over her shoulder. It would look like a comforting hug for a distraught friend having a rough day. But as with Selena, the appearance of something might be far from reality.

It made him wonder again the impression he'd given everyone he cared about of his life, and the things he wanted.

"Those are your friends?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I don't want them to know I'm..." She didn't use the word *dying*. But it hung between them, nonetheless.

"They already know you had a rough couple of days. They'll just think Brad scared you."

Ember pulled back, her arms still around his waist. “Scared is worse than about to die.”

He should’ve laughed. Relieved some of the tension in the air. Instead, he found himself saying, “I get scared all the time.”

Ember’s brows scrunched together.

He usually wasn’t this close to a woman without something else happening. He let go of her and stepped back. “We should go track down my mom. Get you home so you can rest.”

She nodded. “I don’t want to go to the apartment, if the offer of your place still stands.”

Trey held the door for her.

Eric and Lucas reached the corner. Freya’s boyfriend waved two fingers. Trey did the same back. They took Brad to the police station.

“He really seemed not to know where she is.” Ember bit her lip. “How has he not found her yet?”

“There’s more people on the case now. We’ll find her.”

The door shut behind them, and they descended the stairwell.

Ember said, “I hope so.”

TWENTY-ONE

Peter and Simon came into the conference room, but Ember didn't get up from her chair. They'd told her not to move and given her a tablet connected to the smart board on the wall so anything she typed in showed up on the giant screen.

"Okay, let's get started." Peter scooted the leather office chair up to the table and woke up his laptop.

Simon came around the table and handed her a smoothie one of the assistants had fetched for everyone. "Here."

"Thank you." She took a sip. "It's good."

"The menu said *heart healthy*." He gave her a wink and headed for his chair.

Peter frowned at him.

"It's fine." Ember showed them both her palm. "I figure it's worth a try."

"That's what I said!" Simon grinned. "Peter didn't think it was funny."

Ember returned his smile. Of the two, Peter was definitely the more serious one. Clare had told her that he was in training to be an operative. As good as he was with the technological side of the company, Clare had recognized in him the makings of something more. Simon seemed to have a lighter view of things. As the twins continued growing up through their twenties, they would likely grow further apart in their

personalities and the roles they took on. Eventually it would be easier to tell them apart.

She wanted to ask them what it was like to have a family member that close to them.

Trey had gone to work. Audrey had come with Ember.

Last night the two of them had insisted Ember sleep in Trey's room. Audrey had taken the pullout couch in his extra bedroom set up as an office. Trey had crashed on his couch. She didn't like it but figured it would expend energy she didn't have to spare if she tried to win that futile argument.

After Trey dropped them off here, so they could be safe for the day, Audrey had asked Clare's assistant if she could speak to the in-house counselor Trey had not so subtly mentioned. Peter and Simon had dragged her in here for a debrief.

Ember turned to Simon. "Will we know what they learned when those detectives are done talking to Brad?" He had already explained their sister was Detective Westbrook's girlfriend.

"Lucas will call, even if he's a homicide detective and it's not his case."

"But Organized Crime is after Brad's boss." No one except her—and it seemed like maybe also Brad—was interested in Annalise's whereabouts. She'd already emailed Sarah Carlton from the tablet and asked if there'd been another Jane Doe in the morgue in the last six months. Just in case her sister had died and been overlooked. Or unidentified.

Peter nodded. "But we explained about Annalise. They're going to find out when they ask him. Get from Brad anything he knows." He hesitated. "They're actually thinking they might be able to leverage finding Annalise in exchange for Brad's help in taking down his boss."

"As long as they actually do it."

Peter said, "Agreed."

"So what kind of detective is Lucas?"

Simon waved a hand, then went back to typing furiously on his own. “He’s solid.”

“And Organized Crime?”

Peter shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out. But let’s work on finding Annalise without them. Just in case.”

He wasn’t hedging his bets, waiting for someone else to do the work he could do himself. Either Peter didn’t trust that many people, or he relied more on what he could do on his own. Maybe a little bit of both.

“What do we have on Brad’s boss?” Ember already had Brad on the big screen. She drew a line to another circle.

“Thomas Nellis.”

Ember wrote his name in the circle. She connected his name to the couple she’d seen at the club, and then the medical center.

“He owns a number of shell corporations, and his wife has a half dozen properties around town in her maiden name. She lives up at the house on the hills and seems to have made a career out of receiving spa treatments, at least according to her credit cards.”

Ember wondered if they could leverage the wife as a weak link. She could infiltrate the spa and form a bond, get her to roll on Thomas. Unless the woman knew nothing about what her husband did.

The tablet in her hands chimed. A photo popped up. She dragged it to the screen. “What about the couple from the club?”

Simon nodded. “Clare told us about them. We pulled camera footage and found them. Kara and Steven Woodhouse.”

Another chime. Ember looked down at the image. “Yep, that’s them.” The couple they’d questioned outside the club.

“Okay, so we dug into their social media profiles.” Peter tapped his keyboard. “From the last few posts they’ve made, Kara and Steven have been trying to adopt. Go back farther,

and you see posts on Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month and infertility. A blog journey.”

Ember winced.

This thing was hitting entirely too close to home. “I need to ask Brad more about him and Annalise”—she stopped to take a breath, or Trey would halt what he was doing and call to see if she was all right—“trying to get pregnant.”

Peter nodded. “I can have Lucas ask. It would align with what we found of her medical information.”

“What Brad said actually makes sense,” Ember said. “Surrogacy could bring a big payout. It has its risks, but if Anna needed money and Brad agreed with her...” She didn’t like it, but her sister made her own choices. Ember would have supported her if she’d known.

“We can add that to the information Vanguard is putting together about an illegal adoption ring.” Simon tapped two keys and sat back in his chair. “Annalise is trying to get pregnant because she and Brad needed the money.”

“She was going to provide whoever is adopting out babies with a child for the payout.” Ember didn’t like hearing her own voice any more than she liked being the one who said it. “And then we have a strangled young woman who just gave birth.”

It didn’t spell anything good.

“But we don’t have the evidence to tie them to Thomas, right? That’s just speculation because Brad is so close to this and we don’t like Nellis.”

“How do you think most cases start?” Peter grinned, a flare of cunning in his eyes.

Ember’s mind had already begun to spin. She needed a way to get inside the operation. A sting of some kind, maybe where she and Trey posed as a couple looking to adopt. She could change her appearance enough Thomas wouldn’t recognize her as the woman from the club who had never come back, even though he told her to. He was probably

unused to that and might even be actively watching for her at the club.

Any other time she might've gone for it. But with her heart the way it was, she couldn't guarantee she'd be able to conduct every operation when at any time she could be knocked out or laid up in bed recovering. Whether just to the extent she'd need to rest—like she had for twelve hours last night. Or because she had to have her heart restarted.

“What are you thinking?” Peter said.

Ember shrugged. They'd need a more reliable plan than trusting in her fallible health. “The police might be able to convince Kara and Steven to go in, wired up, and get enough information to break this thing wide open.”

Simon nodded.

“I could pose as a patient at the medical center. Not a stretch.” Ember probably did need an examination, but she was ignoring it. What were they going to tell her that she didn't already know? “Maybe one of the doctors will talk to me.”

Simon muttered, “Shame truth serums don't actually work.”

Ember said nothing.

Peter's lips twitched.

His twin's attention flicked up to her and he pinned her with a stare. “Tell us everything.”

Ember chuckled. “You're right. They don't work. A ‘truth serum’ makes you suggestible. And just like with interrogation, the person under the influence tells the one asking questions whatever they think they want to hear. It's not reliable.”

Simon added, “Like a polygraph.”

Ember grinned. “Polygraphs aren't reliable?”

Simon snorted. “You can't get around one?”

She eyed him but said nothing. “I’m thinking you and I should compare notes sometime.”

He said, “I’d like that.”

“The two of you could easily get each other into trouble.” Peter pointed between them. “I’m not sure this is a good team.” He chuckled.

Simon grinned at her. “Bro, you won’t be saying that when we take this operation down. And find Ember’s sister.”

Ember smiled around her straw, more grateful than she wanted to let on. Saying thank you out loud would guarantee she’d end up teary-eyed. No one wanted that right now. They’d all think she was having some kind of medical emergency.

“Then let’s focus on the task at hand,” Peter said. “So we can do that.”

Ember looked down. The tablet screen swam in front of her. She hadn’t expected help, or friends, when she came back to Benson. Now she had both. If she was inclined to believe in miracles, she might even go so far as to believe this might not be the only one.

Just the first.

TWENTY-TWO

Trey slid the file cabinet door shut and headed back to the desk he'd occupied for the past few weeks. The fire department office was located down the street from the police department, but not close enough a bomb that took out that building would also take out this one. A dark kind of strategic planning, though necessary in the climate of the last thirty years.

The office of fire investigation down the hall bustled with white shirts. Upstairs were the chief offices. Down the hall, the conference room had a group of new fire recruits taking a seminar on harassment. He'd sat through all of those in his time.

Trey's office mate from the last few weeks was out sick today, so the whole room held a pallor that made him want to turn music on his phone and crank it up. Inject some life into this place.

His stepbrother, Allen, had sent him an email that morning. The guy lived in a time zone an hour ahead, so Trey always had something in his inbox first thing when it was Allen's turn to reach out.

He'd answered as best he could, considering Ma hadn't opened up yet about why she'd come. Past her saying she needed to see family for the holidays.

Allen had been a police officer in Last Chance County until he'd been injured nearly two years ago and left with paralysis. He got around in a wheelchair most of the time,

though they'd talked over video once when Allen had been working out and the man had an incredible ability to hold his body weight braced on his arms. Trey had even watched him take a couple of steps.

He and Allen might not be blood brothers, but they were certainly cut from the same cloth. They both had a terrible track record with relationships and would give what they had for the chance to save someone.

If either of them knew how to help their mom, never mind that she was Allen's stepmom, they'd do it.

And that meant taking off Christmas instead of working.

Trey was the guy who worked holidays so people with families could have time off. Now Ember was in his life, he wondered if she would be around in a couple of weeks. It didn't seem right to abandon her even after they found Annalise. He wanted to stick it out to the end—even though watching her fade away would hurt more than anything had since his dad died.

“Banning.” The EMT chief strode in, gray hair and a white shirt. The man who'd plucked Trey out of firefighter training and told him to become an EMT. A lot of firefighters were cross-trained to also act as EMTs, but that year the firefighter program had been over capacity. Meanwhile, the EMT class was underattended.

“Sir.” Trey pushed his chair back and stood.

“No, sit.” Chief Preston wandered to the window and looked out at the street below.

“Can I help you with something?” Seemed like the guy had been avoiding him for a couple of weeks. Since Trey had recovered from the stabbing far enough to get assigned to a desk until he worked his way back onto ambulance.

“How's it going in here?” the chief asked the window. “Paperwork is a bit of a bear, I'll admit. Bureaucracy and all that.”

“Sir?”

Preston turned from the window. “You’ve been stuck behind a desk for a couple of weeks. How’s it been going?”

“I don’t mind.” He hesitated and didn’t mention it was only until he got back on the ambo. “It serves a purpose, the checks and balances. It’s how you run a big organization like this one. Especially publicly funded.”

Preston frowned. “Huh.”

“Not what you thought I’d say?”

“The race commission has filed a formal complaint citing your unprofessionalism through the Wilderness Race.”

“Sure. That’s why I was the one who got punched in the face.”

Chief Preston’s brows rose.

“Sorry, sir.” Trey cleared his throat.

“I’ve filed a counter-complaint as it were, against the racer who won. Along with the trail cam footage, which I’ve also sent a copy of to the DA’s office. Just in case the race commission are accustomed to covering things up.”

Trey spotted a gleam in the older man’s eyes, as though he was thoroughly enjoying this tête-à-tête.

“The DA will be filing charges. Benson will get a whole lot more attention before this is over.”

Trey didn’t like the sound of that.

“If you could do me a favor, and steer clear of wilderness race business, I’d appreciate it.” Preston almost smiled. “I can keep you plenty busy in here, getting to know the different departments and how they work. Plus I’ve heard around that your mother is also in town for the holidays.”

Trey nodded.

“Great. In the new year, we’ll reassess.”

“Sir?” He was going to have to wait until January before he could get back on the ambulance?

“Captain Stanley will be retiring mid-January. Until then he’s on vacation, using up those days he’s accrued and never taken. After that there will be an open position as an area commander over the EMT division. A job that has applications with the training program for EMTs and fire fighters, coordination with the police department and medical center, as well as a number of other duties. Ones I feel you would be well suited to.”

“Because I got injured?” Trey needed to know.

Preston settled on the edge of his coworker’s desk. “I had planned to ask, but your injury gave me the chance to see how you operate at headquarters. Now I know you don’t openly rebel at the idea of a little paperwork, as some first responders might—”

Trey grinned. His partner Freya wouldn’t have lasted five minutes in the office.

Preston returned his smile. “It’s up to you to decide if promotion is what you see in your future, or if you’d like to stick with the ambulance until it becomes necessary to hang up that badge and either find a less physical job or get stuck here because you have no other choice.”

Trey blew out a breath. “Captain?”

Preston nodded.

Several thoughts flew through Trey’s head at once. He’d have to talk to Allen about it, and Freya. His mom. See what all of them thought about him being an officer. And yet, people’s perception of him hadn’t turned out to be what he thought it was. Maybe not with those closest to him—his family, and the friends who filled that gap as well. Trey wanted to make the choice that was right for him on his own. Because his chief believed in him.

“There’s only one snag.”

“What’s that?” Trey asked, not entirely wanting to know the answer, but needing all the information before he jumped on this.

“A captain needs complete focus on the department. The work you do for Vanguard is noble, but they’ll need to find someone else from now on.” Preston knocked on the desktop twice and strode out. He always did that—delivered the information, then moved to the next thing. His ability to achieve was admirable, so no one got on him about moving on so quickly. It might seem callous on an ambulance, but it also saved lives to be able to focus like that.

Move on. Keep going. Triage multiple people in a disaster in a few minutes.

Trey stared at the open doorway.

He could be a captain, no longer on the ambulance. A high rank, with better pay. More perks. More responsibility.

But no more working for Vanguard.

No more Ember—or helping anyone like her. Doing good in a way it felt like he was at war, on the front lines. He’d have to give that up to affect change from above.

Trey slumped into his chair, his mind curiously blank. Unwilling to think through the loss it would mean if he took the job—and gained more than he’d ever dared to wish for.

Hope for.

I don’t know what to do.

His mom, Freya, Lucas, Allen—all of them would tell him to pray. Trey hadn’t done that in a long time. He just had to figure out what to do, the way he had with so many other life decisions.

It didn’t mean he was spinning out in a crisis.

Ember would continue with her mission. He could be there, or someone else could help her. Or he could be a captain.

Trey knew which he wanted it to be.

TWENTY-THREE

Ember held on to Trey's hand as he led her through the crowded nightclub. She'd hit the Vanguard operations closet for a different outfit, tonight going with leather pants and a sheer top over a camisole. Pretty clean and unprovocative compared to what some of the women in here wore, but Ember didn't need to draw attention to herself. She'd also secured her hair up under a brunette wig.

The police were parked out front in a van, listening through the Bluetooth connection they had with Brad's phone.

Her sister's boyfriend had been coached through what he needed to do, but Ember wasn't about to leave anything to chance. Brad had to get his boss to admit he illegally sold babies as adoptions. She wasn't convinced Brad could do it, but his freedom was on the line in the deal he had struck with the DA.

The police wanted Thomas Nellis brought in. Tonight.

They'd already grabbed soda water at the bar. Now Trey's strong fingers held hers in way she knew he had no intention of losing or leaving her—no matter how many women in this place looked his way. He made a beeline for a high top table at one end, going so far as to usher away a couple of younger guys.

He turned and held her hand while she slid onto the stool, then stood beside her. The plan was to watch the DJ at the far end, as though that was what they were there for. Instead, it

gave them a decent view of the couches where Nellis had been holding court the other day.

Ember glanced at Trey as he sipped from his drink. Tight white T-shirt, blue jeans, and boots. She shouldn't entertain the thoughts about him that she did. Not when they weren't going anywhere. But as with Peter and Simon today, she could be grateful for the fact she wasn't alone trying to find her sister. She had support. Someone to stand beside her.

He looked down at her.

“Thank you.”

His brow shifted. He hadn't said much since he showed up at Vanguard after work to change and get ready to observe the police operation going down. “For what?”

“More than just saving my life the other day.” She bit the inside of her lip, not wanting to say too much when it wasn't like it could go anywhere. She was dying. He would go back to his life.

They weren't going to have a future—as much as she might want to wish otherwise.

He laid his arm on the back of her stool. “Grab a handful of my T-shirt.”

She'd been on enough operations it was a reflex to go with an instruction like that. Ember smiled.

Trey hissed out a breath and leaned his face close to hers. “I'm trying to make it look like we don't want to be bothered.”

“That's because we don't.” It could be just the two of them in the whole world. For a moment even she believed what they were pretending was true.

Two women passed them, entirely too interested in Trey.

Ember tugged on the handful of T-shirt to whisper in his ear. “You have groupies.”

He chuckled, and she felt the warmth of his lips touch the side of her neck.

Ember shivered, and it had nothing to do with her weak heart. They should be watching for Brad, and they'd stumbled into an entirely different minefield. She wasn't sure where Trey was at with some kind of romance, but it would only distract her. And in the end, what was the point? A guy like Trey deserved everything she could give him.

But what did she have?

Ember sighed.

Trey moved until he leaned his forehead on hers. "What's with the sigh?"

She shook her head without dislodging his. "We should focus."

"You're right. Cookies are on the line." His lips curled into a smile, and he turned to watch the DJ again, his body closer to hers. "Stupid bet."

She kept her arm wrapped around his waist. His arm across the back of her chair. Close enough she could feel his warmth. He wanted to kiss her, but the agreement with his mom was his primary reason for stopping?

Ember wasn't sure what to think about that.

The creases in his T-shirt where her fingers had curled in and held on remained. The same way she wanted to leave an impression on him when she inevitably died. But how was that fair to him when she would be knowingly causing him pain?

Ember needed to keep this thing between them to business, even though everything in her wanted to lean in. Rest her cheek on his chest.

Not just because he'd saved her life, but because he'd shown up for her. He was a good guy with stuff going on in his life, and he'd still stepped up to help her.

Ember caught sight of Brad. "There he goes." Across the club, toward where Nellis sat. Until they had the boss's confession from his own lips, the police couldn't move in. But Trey and Ember would know as soon as they did.

"It's on." Trey nodded over his drink.

Brad would chat to his boss, and the police would swarm the place. Trey was on hand to make sure no one got hurt. She could find out from the source what happened to her sister, since Brad apparently had no idea and hadn't been able to find her either. Six months, and nothing?

Something that didn't bode well at all.

Ember stared into her drink for a moment.

Trey's hand slid up her back, under the brunette wig, to touch the back of her neck. Lending solidarity even in the middle of an operation. It played to their cover story, being seen out as a couple, so it wasn't out of place.

She shouldn't like it so much.

Across the club, Nellis got off his couch and went to stand in front of Brad. If her sister's boyfriend thought this guy was responsible for Annalise being missing, he was doing a good job of not taking his anger out on the target. But that didn't get him a reduced sentence with the DA.

She felt more than heard the low rumble from Trey.

He was right. Something was going on between Nellis and Brad.

"We should get closer." She slid off the stool.

Nellis signaled someone with a flick of his fingers, and the lights switched to strobe—incessant flashes that plunged the whole place into darkness.

A blackout.

The music from the speakers pounded the floor, increasing to deafening levels until someone screamed. In the next flash, people covered their ears. She reached for Trey, who was already reaching for her. They found each other in the flashes between the darkness.

Disorienting, like the music.

Ember realized she held her breath and pushed it out so her heart rate didn't respond to the panic already pumping in her blood.

Because that was what Nellis wanted. The entire place thrown into chaos.

The music changed, and a sound like gunshots erupted from all around the room.

Everyone screamed. Ducked. Someone cried out in pain.

“We need to get this shut off.” Trey tugged her to her feet, and they clung to each other.

People brushed past them. Heading for the door, gathering more and more in the swell so that the whole crowd headed for the door. Panicked.

Trey kept her tucked against the table. Someone slammed into his back, and he grunted but kept them both from getting jostled more than that. He slid his hands up to her hair, almost dislodging the wig. “Keep breathing deep.”

The words resounded in her ears, and she squeezed his arm. The other hand found his belt. “Go.” She didn’t like what she was thinking, and if she was right, they needed to get to Brad. No way were the police going to be able to fight their way through the crowd before she and Trey could.

Trey pushed through the waning crowd. A young woman had fallen, her foot at an odd angle. He lifted her onto a chair and said, “Stay here. Someone will come and help you.”

She nodded, whimpering.

The flashing lights and pounding music kept the crowd disoriented. More than one person lay on the ground. One young man wasn’t moving.

“Help him.” She nudged Trey. “I have to get to Brad.”

She didn’t wait around for him to agree or not, just left him to do what he needed to do and used the strobe light to make her way across the room. Up the stairs. Brad lay on the floor, and Nellis was nowhere to be seen.

She knelt beside him.

The music shut off.

All the breath in her lungs rushed through her ears as she exhaled.

The lights quit flashing for a second, then came back on and didn't go off.

Ember blinked against the sudden brightness, wincing while she tried to focus. Blood pumped from a wound above his heart to cover Brad's midsection with blood. He gasped for breath, blood on his lips. Not good.

Uniformed men and women ran in every door, calling out, "Police!"

She found Trey and yelled, "Brad's been shot!"

TWENTY-FOUR

Trey held Ember's gaze for a second before someone walked between them. A cop, in full SWAT gear. The club moved in a wash of chaos and confusion. Overhead the white lights were a little too bright, washing the room in a glaring light. Showing too much. Revealing the truth that had been softened by the atmosphere only seconds ago.

A quiet moment with Ember. The chance to dance for a second, even if it was part of the operation. He hadn't been thinking about Brad at all. It'd been all about spending time with her.

Trey moved to a woman sat on a chair. "I have to go help her." He pointed at Ember and said to the woman, "Stay here, okay?" He found Lucas in the crowd of cops. "Westbrook!"

The detective looked over.

"We need multiple ambulances."

Lucas nodded. "Pulling up now."

Trey moved between people, sidestepped two guys helping a girl with blood down her face. "Take her outside to the ambulances and tell the EMTs there's a gunshot victim in here."

The woman blanched. One of the guys said, "Got it."

Trey pressed on, up the steps to where Ember crouched over Brad. "Hey." A quick assessment didn't bode well for Brad. Trey lifted the two fingers he pressed to the victim and did the same with Ember's neck. "Stick with me." Her heart

pounded under the pads of his fingers. “Blow it out, long and slow.”

The breath broke as she tried to push it out, her hands stacked on Brad’s wound, putting pressure on the blood pumping out under her fingers. Under normal circumstances she was a highly capable person. Right now she was under serious stress, worried about her sister, faced with pumping adrenaline. Probably reeling from the fact she couldn’t figure this out, or take care of everything herself. She had likely wanted to grab Nellis and interrogate him. And likely would have before she was injured on that last mission.

But all of it meant Trey got to help her. He got to support her and let her lean on him.

He got to be her hero.

Trey wanted to lean over and touch his lips to hers. Whether it put the cookies in jeopardy or not. He had to do it, there in that moment. She had to know this was exactly where he wanted to be.

Two EMTs dumped bags on either side of them.

“Uh, hey partner.” Freya’s voice brought his attention around. She crouched and rummaged in her bag. “Okay, let’s take a look.”

Her partner knelt beside Ember and took over putting pressure on the wound from her. “I’ll get you a wipe for your hands in a second.” The guy was older, probably in his forties. Trey had maybe met him before but didn’t remember his name.

“This is Pilsen,” Freya said. “He’s floating until you get back on the ambo.” From her expression, it seemed she considered the guy solid. Before he could give an awkward comment about that, she said, “And who is this?” Given the tone, she thought it was some date he was on gone wrong.

“This is Ember Hendryx.”

Lucas crouched on the other side of Brad, his attention split between the scene and the woman he loved—taking the opportunity to watch Freya do her job when it didn’t mean

anything personal for them. Different from the events of a couple of months ago. They'd come through that fire and forged a relationship out of the destruction that'd happened. Found peace.

Something Ember wouldn't get to have.

Pilsen said, "This guy needs to get to surgery ASAP."

Freya snapped into action. "Let's get him up."

Trey grabbed the yellow backboard. They rolled Brad, and he slid the board behind him. "I'll help you carry him."

Freya said, "We've got it."

Pilsen and Freya lifted Brad. The last thing he saw was the look on her face. That *we will be talking about this* look she gave the twins, Simon and Peter. The little brothers she'd raised since their mother died.

Ember didn't move from her kneeling spot on the floor. She looked completely exhausted. Lucas stood there waiting for her to get up, probably so he could talk to her. Trey moved to crouch in front of her and whispered, "Do you need a minute?"

She only blinked. *Not good.*

Trey lifted her under her arms and settled her on the couch. He had no idea which theory bouncing around his head was correct. She might just need a moment to process, or it could be something else entirely. He turned to Lucas, who was assessing Ember. "What happened?" Trey folded his arms.

"Instead of raking me over the coals for something I had no control over, how about you tell me why you and Ember are in the club." Lucas pointed at him. "I told you to stay away from this."

"We stayed out of it until necessary. Ember's quick action might've saved Brad's life." Trey lifted his chin. "Far as I can tell, you guys let Nellis get away."

Lucas's expression darkened. "We're in pursuit."

"Good." Trey nodded. "I hope you find him."

“Let me do my job, Trey. That goes for Ember as well.”

Trey shrugged. “I have no problem with that. Ember isn’t interested in Nellis, or even in Brad.” At least now they were pretty sure he had no idea where to find Annalise. “All she wants is to find her sister.”

“And you’ve appointed yourself her protector until that happens?”

“Obviously.”

Lucas frowned. “This have anything to do with your side gig at Vanguard?”

The chief’s offer of a captain position with the fire department’s EMT division included quitting working for Vanguard. He might be getting paid—technically—by Clare to help Ember, but he would do it for free if it came down to it. He just wanted to be here to make sure she completed her task.

Before...

He didn’t glance at her, even though he wanted to. He could see her sitting there still out the corner of his eye. His phone would alert him if she was having heart trouble.

Trey said, “Ember is looking for her sister. That’s all.”

Lucas glanced at her. “I’d have figured someone with Vanguard would be all over whatever this is.”

“You don’t know?”

“Organized Crime doesn’t know the extent of Nellis’s business, but they do know he’s funneling money back to New York.” Lucas sighed. “Thank you for bringing me Brad.”

Trey nodded.

“If I hear anything about Annalise Hendryx, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.”

Lucas held out his hand and they shook. “If you need me, I’ll be finding Nellis.” He glanced once at Ember. “Stay safe.”

At least he didn't make a crack about Trey's relationship history. That was the last thing Ember needed right now, and there was enough swirling in his mind that he didn't need distraction over what people thought or what Chief Preston had offered him. Trey had to get Ember out of here so she could rest. Regroup.

He crouched in front of her and took the wet wipe Pilsen had given her. "Here. Let me." He got to work, wiping the blood from her fingers. "You might have saved his life."

"He was as good as dead when he hit the floor." Some of that CIA determination flashed in her eyes. "And he knew nothing about Annalise."

If she had to put up that wall in order to hold it together, he didn't blame her. He'd compartmentalized plenty of times to get through a horrific scene and still manage to do his job. Usually afterward he fell apart, alone in his house.

"We can leave as soon as we give statements to the police. Do you want to get that done now?"

Ember nodded, her eyes a little glazed.

"Okay." Trey stood and held out his hand.

She took it and rose, not letting go after she stood.

"Let's go find an officer so we can get out of here."

TWENTY-FIVE

Ember pushed back the blanket. It took a second for her to find the strength to get up. She managed to sit with her back against the headboard. She stared at the window, the blinds open enough she could see out of the second-floor window to the tree. Stiff with frost in the December air.

A lot of people didn't like the cold. Ember had always thought that if the weather was pleasant all the time, then after a while she would start to take it for granted.

Seeing the seasons change was far better. Anticipating the holidays, the New Year, or the summer months of warmth. Spending time with family. Experiencing life. Growing.

All things that had been taken from her because Marcus wanted that promotion. The director didn't consider it to have been attempted murder, regardless of the statement she'd made—which had been buried by her supervisor. Now it was Ember who would be buried.

She didn't have the fight in her to go up against the weight of the CIA. Not when it could cost her Annalise.

If her sister was even alive for her to find.

Tears gathered in Ember's eyes. She didn't want to be frail, about to lose her life. She wanted to be everything the CIA had forged her into. Strong, capable enough to tear their whole farce wide open and show everyone how they'd tossed her aside. Left her for dead—literally and figuratively. Prove Marcus had done what he did on purpose in order to get that promotion.

But she didn't have the strength.

She didn't even have the will to fight for anything other than Annalise, and even that was killing her all on its own.

Trey, or his mom for that matter, didn't need to know how bad it was. They didn't need to worry about her. She didn't need them to waste time grieving her after she lost the fight for the last time.

If she thought her blip of a sad life was worth wasting tears on that would be different. In the end, she had no family. She had no job. She had a body determined to quit functioning whether she liked it or not.

Ember touched the glass just to feel the cold seep into her fingers.

What was the point wanting what she would never have?

She checked her phone screen, not for messages but for the time. Just after three in the morning, but she couldn't sleep anymore. Didn't want yet more dreams that would jack up her heart rate and wake Trey with notifications.

She needed tea because everyone knew tea solved a whole lot of problems.

Trey was stretched out on the couch with a blanket. His mom was in his study, her in his bedroom. He'd been relegated to folding that six foot plus body onto the couch. Thankfully it was a huge brown sectional so he could get the rest he needed.

After all, he was the one keeping her alive.

Ember stared at the contents of the fridge because that's what everyone did at three in the morning. But there wasn't anything she wanted to eat right now. She filled the stovetop kettle and set it to boil, then found a mug and a tea bag from Audrey's stash she'd brought. Trey only had coffee, not that she blamed him. Coffee was amazing—black, with milk, sugared up, whipped cream, any kind of topping. Didn't matter how it came, it was all good in its own way. She couldn't have too much of it right now, but that didn't change how she felt.

But tea in the early hours...

Ember leaned against the counter and forced her mind to still. Enough spinning. *Enough*. She nearly voiced the word aloud. She couldn't get twisted around, anxious, or fearful of the future. She couldn't let what happened to...

Enough.

She couldn't think about that either.

Not that warm blood pulsing under her fingers. Life draining from him while she could do nothing to stop it. Gone. No answers. No life left.

Ember sucked in a shuddering breath. She'd already taken a pill. She was almost out, but that meant going to a doctor. Seeing that look in their eye when they said the inevitable, "I'm sorry. Outside of a miracle, there's nothing I can do."

Aside from asking God where Annalise was, Ember had no options for that either. No one else knew—or was saying—where to find her. Too bad God would only remain silent. She'd have quit believing in Him a long time ago if her mother hadn't had such a strong faith. Ember had trusted in her training for years. Her ability to get things done.

Now she didn't even have that.

It was like He wanted her to have nothing, and then face death by herself.

Afterward, Clare would receive instructions on what to do with Ember's things in storage. She'd given up her home before she came back to Benson. Her life. Her career. Her friends—if she could even call them that. Now she had no leads.

The whole Trey thing was confusing but good. She didn't want him and Audrey to grieve her when she was gone.

Dead. Or lying there bleeding out like Brad.

"Hey."

Ember hiccupped a sob. Tears streamed down her face.

The kettle started to whistle. Trey turned it off but ignored it in favor of moving to her. He grabbed a paper towel and handed it to her with a quiet, “Hey.”

She didn’t bother holding back the tears. At least then he’d know she was a mess he didn’t need to worry about. Ember didn’t have the energy to figure out more than the normal fact that most guys didn’t like seeing a woman cry. It wasn’t attractive.

And yet he pulled her into his arms. Tucked her close to him while she dissolved under the weight of it.

Seeing Brad’s face in her mind. The precise moment the light left his eyes. Blood everywhere on her hands and his shirt, spreading to the floor.

She would die like that. There one moment, gone the next. Maybe without the blood. Probably, unless the search for Annalise took a turn. Like Brad, she would be able to mutter a few unintelligible words and then...nothing.

She would be gone.

Trey held the back of her head, his fingers in her hair. He stroked a line down the blonde strands. Threading his fingers through in a way that calmed her breath. “I won’t tell you it’s gonna be okay.” He kept running his hand through her hair, holding her with the other arm. Surrounding her with strength and doing what he could to comfort her. “But you won’t be alone.”

Brad had died right in front of her. So she knew it wasn’t true. She could be surrounded by a room full of people, but in the end, she would face death all by herself.

“I don’t want that.”

His arm flexed.

He’d misunderstood her. “I don’t want to die.” Ember wasn’t the kind of person to rage against injustice. She’d weathered too many storms to get all riled up. But this was hard. Maybe the most challenging thing she’d ever faced.

“I’m sorry.” Trey shifted, and in the dark he touched her cheeks while he looked at her. Searching with his gaze for answers she didn’t have. “I want to kick a door in, shake someone until they give me a solution. Tell me there’s a way to get you better.”

Ember shook her head.

“They didn’t even offer you the chance of a transplant?”

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“I know. I’m sorry. Those are complicated, and it can take time.”

“Someone else has to die so I can live? That’s not an exchange I’m comfortable with.” Ember didn’t want to think about what would have to happen so she could have a heart. Someone’s heart. More tears rolled down her cheeks. “I thought I’d accepted it.”

“It’s okay to falter.”

She looked into his eyes in the dim light of his kitchen. “I’m scared.”

Ember had never admitted that aloud to anyone. CIA officers didn’t get scared. That was how it was supposed to go. The reason she’d never quite felt like she fit in there, even if she was capable. Those weren’t her people. That job wasn’t who she was.

So why did standing in this kitchen, clinging to a man she barely knew, feel more like home than anything had since her mom died.

She’d spent years chasing the family she’d lost. Even Annalise was just another attempt to grasp what she could because she needed someone to love her. Ember needed to not feel so alone.

She couldn’t put that on Trey now. It wasn’t fair to rely on him or put her need for someone in her life on his shoulders. He carried enough already.

He’d kissed her earlier. At the club. If she let this get worse, who knew how hard it would be to let him go.

She had to do it now.

Ember started to shift back, away from him.

He held her tight. “I’m not going to let you do this alone.”

“Maybe it’s better for both of us if you do.”

TWENTY-SIX

Trey's phone lit up on the coffee table. He snatched it up before it vibrated loudly across the surface. Ember had curled up on the far end of the sectional, and after she fell asleep in the middle of a sentence, he'd covered her with a blanket.

She hadn't backed down from her comment about wanting to end her life alone with no help from him. He'd calmly tried to explain that wasn't going to happen. The woman was stubborn. He'd settled on refusing to quit his duties unless Clare expressly ordered him to.

Ember's death wouldn't occur because he wasn't there to help her. That was for sure.

The caller ID said *Vanguard*.

Trey slid his thumb across the screen, got up, and walked into the kitchen. "Banning."

"It's Simon. Operations had me call you because they couldn't get ahold of Ember. Everything okay?" The kid sounded scared.

Okay, so he wasn't a kid. The twins were in their early twenties. But with their sister as his partner, he'd adopted Freya's tendency to see them as younger than they were. Plus, the care in Simon's voice over Ember's wellbeing was best kept restricted by age. Simon had better not be falling for her.

"Trey." Simon snapped the word.

“Sorry. She’s asleep.” Trey ran a hand down his face. The sun wasn’t even over the horizon, and he felt like he’d barely slept. “I don’t know where her phone is. What’s going on?”

Simon sighed. “Sorry to wake you, and probably her as well, but we’ve had the couple Ember and Clare spotted at the club on surveillance since we figured out who they were.”

Ember had told him about her and Clare going to that same club the first time and seeing Thomas Nellis. How Ember had made her approach, and they’d wound up asking the couple outside if they’d seen Annalise. “Something happen with them?”

“The surveillance team reported a pregnant young woman approach the house. Dark brown hair, five four. She fits the description of Annalise, but they don’t have a good enough visual to confirm. Lights came on in the house. We aren’t sure what’s happening.”

“Text me the address.” Trey looked around for his keys.

“What is it?” Ember asked.

He turned to where she stood behind him. “I’ll explain. Grab your shoes and a sweater.”

“Sending it now,” Simon said. “We have two operatives on scene, and we can call for the police if needed.”

“Got it.” Trey hung up. He reiterated to Ember what Simon had told him as she slid her shoes on. She tugged a sweater over the coat, and he handed her a beanie with BFD on it.

“Thanks.”

He had a spare and a pair of gloves to go with his coat. Thankfully he’d been sleeping in workout pants and a T-shirt, not pajamas. They were out the door within two minutes and pulling up to the house fifteen minutes after that.

The sun wouldn’t be up for a couple of hours. Trees on the street were still, and two doors down from the house a neighbor had their curtains open, and the flash of the TV reflected in the glass of the window displaying morning cable news from the East Coast.

Ember headed first up the path. Both were unarmed, but he didn't go back to the car for the gun he kept in the glove box. He prayed because there was nothing else he could do. Not that he would tell his mom he had. It was between him and God, the way it should be. If he was going to change his beliefs, he needed to settle it in his own heart and mind first before telling everyone else. After all, with the prevailing reputation he seemed to have, most of his acquaintances probably wouldn't believe him.

Trey knocked on the front door.

"This is gonna be awkward." Ember barely got the words out before the door flung open.

The man who stood there wore pajama pants, with a robe pulled over it but open to reveal his white T-shirt. Hair askew. Creases of sleep on his face. Recognition flashed there. "You."

"Obviously this is strange, but we know you have a young woman in here."

"And you were looking for one." He gripped the door. "Well, this isn't—"

A scream ripped through the house.

Ember shoved the door open and pushed her way in. "Annalise!"

Trey followed. He didn't look at the man, but heard the guy follow him into the living room, where the young woman lay on the couch still in her coat. Not Annalise.

"I don't know what to do." A slender middle-aged woman—presumably Kara—wrung her hands together. Her robe was belted, and she had fluffy slippers on her feet. "We should call an ambulance. Get her to the hospital."

"No!" The young woman panted. "No police!"

"No one is calling the police." Trey moved to her and shifted the coffee table out of the way. If she had the baby here, the couch would need to be replaced, but that was a worry for this couple. "I'm an EMT. This is my friend Ember.

She's looking for her sister, but we can help you. Okay? Do you have a doctor, or a midwife?"

She shook her head, fear and pain in her eyes. Sweat beaded on her brow. Her stringy brown hair shifted around her shoulders. "I couldn't have the baby there. I didn't want to die." She gasped. "I'm sorry."

Ember sucked a breath in through her nose. She came over and sat on the coffee table Trey had moved back. "You have nothing to be sorry for." She touched the girl's hand. "What's your name?"

"Luciana." She gasped. "Kara and Steven are adopting my baby. But I didn't want to die."

"No one is going to let that happen." Trey let go of his gentle hold on her wrist. "Your pulse is strong."

Luciana's face contorted.

"Your contractions are pretty close. How long have they been coming this strongly?" He glanced at the woman he assumed was Kara.

Still wringing her hands together. "Since she got here. I wanted to take her to the hospital."

Luciana hissed. "They'll find me."

Trey glanced at Steven, who wore a different kind of expression. "Don't want to answer uncomfortable questions when you're asked how you were paired with this young woman who seems to think having her baby means she's going to die?"

"I don't know anything about that," Steven said. "But she can't have the baby here."

"We could go in the nursery," Kara said. "Or the bathroom?"

Trey tugged his coat off. He helped Luciana with hers. "You're going to be okay. I've delivered babies before, but getting you to the doctor is preferable." Before he was even done talking, Luciana had another contraction.

Ember said nothing.

Trey touched her hand. “You and Kara get me blankets. And gloves if you’ve got any.”

Kara nodded. Ember went with her.

“She can’t seriously have this baby here.”

“The baby comes when it comes,” Trey said. “They show up when they want to, not on our timetable. But you’re welcome to call for an ambulance. Luciana will need medical care, and the baby will need to be checked out by a doctor.”

She started to object, but Trey laid a hand on the young woman’s. “No one is going to hurt you or your baby,” he said. “I promise.”

Kara and Ember came back with towels and gloves. He pulled on a pair and laid a towel over the couch, even though it was already soaked. “Is it okay if I take a look? I need to see where the baby is and how it’s going, down there.”

Steven crossed the room, away from the line of sight. He stared out the window.

Ember almost smiled. He saw the flash in her eyes.

“Luciana, I *promise* no one is going to hurt you or your baby,” he said. “You have my word.”

“And mine.” Ember laid a hand on Luciana’s.

The young woman glanced at Kara. “You promise you’ll take good care of him, always? I want to hear you say it.” Luciana panted.

Kara nodded. “We will.”

Trey didn’t like the ease with which she intended to give away her baby, but he also didn’t know Luciana’s situation or her story. If Thomas Nellis had arranged this adoption, it wasn’t legal. It was just so he could make money.

Steven peered out the window. “There’s someone sneaking around outside.”

Trey paused in the middle of having Luciana lay down. He glanced at Ember. “Vanguard.”

“Not if anyone spotted them.” Ember frowned. “I’ll go check it out.”

Luciana screamed.

Before he could object, Ember was out the door.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Ember hit the front step and scanned. The husband had been on the east side, looking out the window. In this neighborhood that meant the grass and trees between the house and the fence that divided one property from the next.

A car door slammed.

Peter jogged over with an older man she'd seen at Vanguard behind him. As they slowed their approach, the man said, "That's a point deducted."

Peter flinched and glanced over his shoulder at the older man.

"You slammed the door. Drew attention to yourself." The man wore black boots, tactical pants, and a T-shirt. Under his sleeves, tattoos stretched down to his elbows. If she wasn't mistaken, one was a prison insignia. "Dark figure in the trees?" He pointed to the east side.

"The husband saw something."

Peter said, "This is Bob Davis."

She nodded. "Ember Hendryx."

Bob said, "Gun?"

She shook her head.

"Peter and I will take the lead."

Ember had no objections. The two of them jogged, both agile despite the age difference. She got the feeling she should know Bob Davis from somewhere but couldn't place the

reference. Later she could ask. Peter deferred to him in a way Ember knew he was solid—and apparently Peter’s operations trainer. At least for tonight.

“Left.” Bob flicked out two fingers, then went right. The two of them circled around while Ember walked behind them.

She might not have a pistol, but she was carrying a stun gun. A balancing act for sure, considering it could kill her if it was used on her. But these two men were her backup. Or she was theirs. Either way she held position by a tree and waited in case the dark figure ran this way and it landed on her to stop him.

From inside the house she heard Luciana cry out.

Ember had wanted it to be her sister so badly. Pregnant. Alone and in need of help. Even though it wasn’t Annalise, she intended on following through with the promise she and Trey had made to the young woman. The way he said it made Ember wish he’d made her the same promise. She wanted that passion, that goodness and determination to save others, directed at her.

But they both knew how pointless that would be.

Later today she was going to move into the Vanguard office. No matter that Clare had told her they had no room. They’d just have to make room for her, and if she had to, she would just sleep on the couch in Clare’s personal break room. The CEO wasn’t even in town right now, but off on some top secret assignment.

The deeper into this she got, it seemed like the more things had shown up to distract her. Ways she could lend a hand and help others, or get caught up in police investigations. All the CIA training she’d had told her to divorce herself from all that. No empathy. No loyalty to the justice system. Just find Annalise.

That would certainly make it easier to contend with her growing need to be with Trey. To have his arms around her when she needed them. To see the intensity in his eyes and

know it was because he cared about her. But it wouldn't last, and they would both wind up alone and heartbroken.

Is that really what You had in mind all along?

It seemed easier to wrestle with God about things she didn't understand than it was to have to find peace. Anger was often simpler than the hard work of getting to a good place.

A grunt echoed to her. Ember followed the noise and found Bob and Peter in a dog pile with a man at the bottom.

"...and get his hands secured."

Peter used plastic ties, and they hauled the man to his feet. "Caught him."

The guy had dark hair, jeans, and an open jacket. Tan boots. His hair fell over his forehead, and his breath puffed white when he blew it out.

Bob grinned. "That was fun." The skin of his forearms didn't indicate he felt the chill of the temperature out here.

Meanwhile she shivered from the cold even with the coat and the beanie Trey had given her. "Who is he?"

Bob searched the man and came up with a wallet. "Marco Aletto. Care to explain what you're doing out here?"

Luciana screamed again. Someone had closed the curtains, so she had no idea how Trey was doing delivering a baby—unless an ambulance could get here in time.

In the distance she could hear sirens. They were on their way.

"Talk," Ember said. "Or we turn you over to the cops."

Marco snorted. "I won't last an hour."

"Your lawyer is that good?" Bob asked. Ember almost believed he was genuinely interested.

"I'll be killed before they can interview me."

"Great." Ember smiled. "That means you're valuable. Which means you have plenty to tell us."

"I ain't tellin' the cops nothin'."

Peter grinned. Bob tipped his head back and laughed.

Marco glanced at them. “What?”

“Did either of these skilled gentlemen identify themselves as police?” Ember said.

Marco frowned.

“Right.” Ember pulled out her phone and swiped to a photo of Annalise. “Have you seen this woman?”

Marco’s expression hardened in the light from her phone screen.

“You’re here for Luciana.” She couldn’t ask a young woman having a baby if she’d seen Ember’s sister. Maybe later, though. “Or you’re here for her baby.”

Bob shifted his hand. Ember couldn’t see what he did, but Marco gritted his teeth.

“The baby.”

“And this woman?” Ember waved the phone.

“Just like all the others. Trouble.”

Except this one is my sister. “So Nellis has an adoption business set up. Is that it, or are the girls used in other ways?” She didn’t want to be thinking about her sister in context with any of this, but the fact was she’d had no idea what was going on at home. Brad was dead. This guy needed to spill.

Bob shifted slightly.

Marco sniffed a breath in through his nostrils. “Troublemakers who get themselves knocked up know what’s coming to them.”

“But the parents don’t know what they’re getting,” Ember said. They likely had no idea a thug had coerced a young woman into handing over her baby. “Even if they know it’s not legal.”

“It’s just business,” Marco said. “Like everything else.”

Luciana had been convinced having the baby meant she would die. “And after they have the baby, that’s it? They’ve

outlived their usefulness?” There was a woman in the morgue who could attest to that. She’d been killed after giving birth. A young woman with the same ace of spades tattoo at the base of her right thumb as Luciana. “Did you kill her?” She shoved the phone in his face, her eyes burning with unshed tears. “Did you?”

The sirens were louder now, the ambulance probably pulling onto the street.

“They get knocked up, you sell their babies, and get rid of them so no one will ever come looking for the child. What other horrors do you put them through?”

“Sign up.” Marco looked her up, then down. “You’ll find out.”

Peter slapped him on the back of the head. “We’re done.”

“Agreed,” Bob said. “This guy is going to Vanguard before the police get wind of it. We can gift wrap him for them later when we have what we need.”

Peter seemed to like that idea.

Marco struggled against their hold. “You can’t do this.”

They dragged him away from her.

Luciana had quieted down. Ember didn’t know if that was good or bad. She’d never seen a birth or had any friends who were pregnant. She’d been little when her mom came home from the hospital with Annalise, and she’d been glad she didn’t have to stay anymore with the crusty old lady from next door. She smoked too much, and she was mean.

Ember brushed the tears from her face and went to the front door.

As she climbed the porch steps, a baby cry rang out. She rushed in the door. Kara and Steven clung to each other. Trey handed the baby to Luciana, tucking the pink squealing bundle close to her before he wrapped a towel over the child.

Ember didn’t bother brushing the tears away. It was a wonderful sight, even with the pain and sadness inherent in the scene, and all those unknowns.

The EMTs swept in behind her. “Trey, what did you do now?” The female EMT’s voice shook with laughter. The uniformed man with her hauled a folding chair with wheels into the room.

The female EMT headed for the young woman.

Trey glanced at her, then looked at Ember, a wide grin on his face. “It’s a boy.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

A nurse padded into the waiting room, her steps silent on those white sneakers. She found Trey and smiled. “She’s asking for you.”

He stood. Ember roused from her doze and stood as well. He took her hand.

“Are you the couple adopting her baby?”

Ember shook her head. “No, we’re just friends. We were there when the baby was born.” She squeezed his hand and lifted it. “Trey is the EMT who delivered the baby.”

The nurse walked ahead of them down the hall. “She’s doing well. So is her son.”

Trey had no idea what was going to happen with Luciana and the couple who’d been lined up to adopt her. It wasn’t legal, but with the proper procedure, it could be. Depended on whether Luciana still wanted to give up her baby. She’d been through so much and was probably still suffering trauma. She needed help and counseling. “I hope we can point her in the right direction that she can get help.”

Ember glanced at him, walking by his side, her hand in his. “Is she going to have to talk to the police?”

Trey shrugged one shoulder. “It’s possible, though probably only about Nellis. As far as I can tell, Luciana hasn’t done anything wrong.”

The police might want her to give a statement, and ultimately testify against Nellis about all this. She might end

up putting her life in danger. They would have to offer her protection. Trey had seen some of the nastier side of the justice system, where the ball got dropped and people were hurt.

He squeezed Ember's hand. "We'll do whatever we can to help her."

The smile she gave him remained flat, her attention on the nurse. She didn't want him to see the look in her eyes? Ember might be thinking about how she might not be around to help out. Or any of the other things she would miss out on when her heart gave out.

At the door, he paused to tug her under his shoulder. He kissed her forehead. "We do what we can with the time that we have."

"Easy for you to say." She let go of his hand and trailed into the room.

The nurse shot a questioning look after her.

"Thank you for bringing us back here," Trey said. "We've been anxious to see how she's doing." He followed Ember in, where Luciana lay in the bed resting. Her eyelids rose, then fell as though too heavy for her to hold them open.

Ember stood over the bassinette, all her attention on the newborn with the full head of dark hair. She leaned down. "Welcome to the world." She laid a kiss on his forehead. "Everything is going to be okay."

The baby stirred.

Ember picked him up and held him close, her cheek on his head, as she swayed in some instinctive way. Maybe she'd comforted a baby before.

He let out a tiny mew.

Luciana stirred on the bed. Trey moved closer to Ember so he wasn't looming over the bed when she blinked enough to brush off sleep. Luciana rubbed her eyes and sighed out a long breath. It took a second for her to recognize them.

"I thought you might be them...Kara and Steven." Her voice held a trace of an accent. In the bed she looked far

younger than she was.

Trey glanced at Ember and felt a lump rise in his throat. Which was ridiculous. He'd seen a woman hold a baby before. But the way she did it was like soaking up every second she could, knowing she'd likely never get the chance again.

He refocused on Luciana. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Kind of achy." She didn't look at her baby.

"You did a good job getting him into the world."

"He shouldn't be in here." Luciana's lip quivered. "They won't take him away."

"Did Kara and Steven come over?" Maybe she was hoping they would continue with the adoption.

"The nurse just told me to rest. They think I should be taking care of him." She waved a hand at the baby. "Feeding him." Tears filled her eyes.

Trey rounded the corner at the end of the bed. He stayed by her feet but let her focus away from her child. "Whatever choice you make now, it's up to you. No one will force you to do anything. But you have to know that whatever you do decide is forever. No takebacks."

"I know." Luciana scrunched the blanket in her fists. "I don't want him." She paused. "That couple? They want a baby. They should take him."

"That could work, but you won't know until you talk to someone from child services probably."

"I'm not a child."

The way she said it, Trey wasn't sure. "How old are you, Luciana?" She looked like she was in her early twenties. Now he wasn't so sure.

She looked away. Her gaze skirted over the baby and Ember, then settled on the door.

"Luciana," he pressed.

"I'm fifteen."

Trey bit the inside of his lip.

Ember turned away with the baby, putting her back to them.

He sighed. “Thank you for trusting us with that.”

“The police want to talk to me. They’re going to lock me up. I don’t want them taking him. He should be with Kara and Steven.”

“I promise you, he’s going to be safe.”

“Then he can’t be with me.”

Trey leaned against the bed. “I have friends in the police department. The EMT who brought you in, Freya?”

Luciana nodded.

“Her boyfriend is a police detective. They’re not going to let anything happen to you. Just like Ember and I won’t. You have lots of people on your side.”

“Why do you care about me?”

Trey wondered if she was accustomed to no one caring about her. “Because it’s the right thing to do. As soon as we saw you, we knew we needed to help.”

Ember settled the baby in the bassinet and came over to sit on the bed on the other side. Trey thought he saw the lingering damp of tears she’d shed. “We were at the house in the first place because we’re looking for someone. We thought that might be you, but maybe you can help us.” She slid out her phone and showed Luciana the screen. “This is my sister Annalise.”

The young woman’s eyes flared. “Your sister?”

“She went missing a few months ago, and I’ve been trying to find her.”

“Have you met her?” Trey asked.

Luciana smoothed down the blankets. “I knew her. I haven’t seen her in a while. She never came back.” Her lip

quivered and tears filled her eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what”—she swallowed—“happened to her.”

Ember laid her hand over the girl’s. “Thank you. You’re the first person that’s been honest with us.”

Luciana stared at Ember. “She didn’t live with the rest of us. Working...with us.” She swallowed again. “She was already pregnant, but she went to the same doctor. That’s where I saw her. At the afterhours clinic.”

Trey kept his tone soft. “Can you tell us the doctor’s name?”

“Doctor Bessy. She told me to call her Marion, but I never did. I didn’t want her to try and be my friend.”

“And she was supposed to deliver the baby?”

Luciana nodded. “Sometimes they use a midwife, or a nurse, if she’s working. But I knew what they would do to me after I had him.” She lifted her chin in the direction of the bassinet. “It was stupid, but I didn’t want to die.”

Ember shifted on the bed. Most likely thinking about her sister still.

Trey didn’t feel a notification from the app about her heart rate. He said to Luciana, “It wasn’t stupid. You gave yourself a chance to have a life. One that could include your baby with you if you want. There are people who would love to take on you and him, and they would support you so you can go to school and know that he’s cared for. They would give you a place to live that’s warm, where you are safe, and you both have enough to eat.”

Ember swiped a tear from her cheek.

Luciana looked at Trey with a whole lot of hope, mingled with disbelief. As though she was scared to believe in what probably felt like a miracle.

“You concentrate on resting.” He paused. “No decisions have to be made now.” And the police would want to talk to her in the interim. She might be able to help bring down Nellis

and his heartbreaking business. “I’ll leave my number, and if you need anything, call me. Okay?”

Luciana nodded. They said their goodbyes and headed out into the hall. As soon as the door clicked shut, Trey pushed out a sigh.

Ember nudged him to face her, grabbed two handfuls of his jacket, and lifted up to touch her lips to his.

A camera shutter clicked.

Ember made a noise in her throat and lowered her heels to the ground. They both looked at the nurse.

“No one’s going to believe me you were here, kissing someone else, like *days* after Selena dumped you.” The nurse disappeared into a side hall.

Trey stared after her, unable to even pull together one thought about what was going on. This was so much bigger than that social media mess. Even the possible promotion at work seemed not so important. Not when this was a scared young girl with a newborn, Annalise, and another missing woman.

Now they had an actual lead.

“Let’s go find that doctor.”

Ember said, “Are you sure you don’t—”

“It doesn’t matter.” He slid his arm around her shoulders. The only thing that mattered right now was helping Ember.

TWENTY-NINE

“Okay, thanks.” Trey hung up the phone. They’d come back to his house to eat and shower while Peter and Simon and the team at Vanguard tracked down the doctor Luciana had mentioned.

Ember sat on the edge of the sectional. “What did Lucas say?”

He’d called his detective friend almost immediately after they got in the car, and she’d filled in Vanguard on her phone. Ember wanted to make the approach to the doctor today. Especially now she knew Annalise had met with this doctor, and she’d been pregnant.

Trey put his phone on the coffee table and blew out a breath. “The girl they were looking for? The one whose apartment we went to, the cops were there, and she was missing?” She only nodded, and he continued, “They tracked her down at her grandmother’s. Apparently she had a fight with her boyfriend, packed a bag, and left in a hurry. She didn’t think it was odd the door was left open. I guess he goes out with his friends, loses time for a few days, and shows back up hungover and smelling like weed. She figured he’s the one who left the door open.”

Ember didn’t know whether to be happy for the girl, that she was alive, or sad for her situation. “It’s good she’s safe.”

Trey nodded. “That’s one thing we can cross off the list.”

Ember pressed a palm over her heart. She took a few long breaths, hearing Trey’s voice in her ear telling her to hold it

then push it out slowly.

“Doing okay?”

She felt more than heard him settle beside her. When he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, she leaned into his side and rested her head on his chest. Under the soft material of his T-shirt, she could hear the steady beat of his heart.

“Talk to me.” His voice rumbled under her cheek.

Ember sighed. “If she was pregnant before she disappeared, then she’s about ready to have the baby.” Or she already had, things had gone wrong, and Annalise was an unidentified dead body. Buried in the woods somewhere. Dumped like trash.

Thrown away because she was no longer useful.

His shirt grew damp under her face. Ember sniffed. He didn’t need to see her cry anymore. She’d wanted to do this by herself but when it came down to it, she wasn’t strong enough.

“If they need the baby she’s having, then it’s in their best interest to keep her alive.”

Before he could say more, his mom came in with three mugs. She set the two in one hand on the coffee table and offered the third to Ember. “I thought you might like some tea.”

“Thank you.” Ember blew on the hot liquid and let the warmth seep into her chilled fingers. “I should be out there finding her, but I’m not strong enough.”

“This isn’t about being physically capable,” Trey said.

“He’s right.” Audrey settled on the couch. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met.”

Trey’s mom had told her a little of her story. How she’d lost her husband, Trey’s father, a US Navy pilot in a mission during the Gulf War. A few years later, she’d married a marine and Trey had gained a stepbrother, Allen. They were a family of heroes. People who put their lives on the line for others, who cared about those they helped and made the world better every day.

Ember nodded. She'd joined the CIA when they recruited her and made her own mark. Used the natural skills she had and trained her way to completing several missions. She never knew if she made the world better, because her part was only some task in a sequence—part of a larger whole she didn't have the clearance for. All she did was follow orders.

Until Marcus nearly killed her.

That was the kind of person she was. Maybe not before her mother died, but definitely after. What had there been to keep her on the straight and narrow instead of doing whatever it took to get the job done?

Audrey held her own mug. “We know that God knows where Annalise is. He isn't surprised by anything that happens, and He holds everything in His hands.”

“He held my mom. But He never had me.” She felt like she'd been dropped if she was ever in His grasp. “I prayed that she wouldn't die. That the cancer wouldn't take her. But He didn't listen.”

Audrey's face softened. “We don't know why some prayers get answered and others don't. All we know is that His will is sovereign. And His love for us covers every kind of hurt.”

She wanted God to be like a person on the other end of the phone. She could call, and he could tell her where to find her sister. Or at least point her in the right direction. Instead, it was as if there was a wall between them she couldn't climb over.

Ember set the mug down and wiped her face.

“We think we have to do things ourselves,” Audrey said. “That our plans and our desires are the things we should chase. When what we need to do is surrender to Him and seek His face.”

Trey shifted beside her. “You still believe that?” He paused a beat. “Doesn't seem like being a Christian has made your life better. Things are still messed up.”

“I'm not looking for a life that's better than what I have,” she said. “I'm looking for what's true.”

“I don’t think I have time to find it,” Ember said. The reality was, she’d be dead soon. “All I want is to find Annalise.”

Trey laid a hand on her back and rubbed. “If God was going to make something of my life, He would’ve done it already.”

“Because you surrendered to Him?” his mom asked.

“I did once.”

“And then your father died.” Audrey’s expression softened. “I’m sorry I didn’t help you through it. That you felt like you had to measure up to your image of him. He wasn’t perfect, but he did love us. He taught you how to show that love to the people you help every day.” Her eyes flashed, and Ember wondered if there wasn’t more to it that Audrey wouldn’t say in front of her.

He tilted his head. “She knows about the social media stuff.”

Audrey glanced at Ember.

“I haven’t hidden anything.” Trey took a sip of what smelled like coffee.

“You’ll stick by a woman you barely know for the chance to help her before she dies?” Audrey paused. “The bet is off. You can have the cookie recipe. Besides, I’ve seen you guys together. If I’d have known Ember was going to come along so quickly, I wouldn’t have made that stupid bet.”

“I’m glad you did.” Trey set his cup down. “It made me realize what people think of me, and that I do care. I’m still going to live my life the way I want. I just think I might make some changes.”

Ember glanced at him and spotted a flex in his jaw. What did that mean?

She wouldn’t live long enough to find out who Trey would wait to be...after she died. She occupied herself with her tea, trying to convince herself it didn’t matter. She cared enough

about Trey to wish him well after she was gone. And she needed to focus on Annalise.

Where is she?

Audrey was right that God could change a situation.

Help us find her.

She was willing to believe He might “make a way,” as her mom used to say. But it seemed like there were no miracles in store for her. The future was written already. She would die and be buried. Life would go on without her.

But if He could make a way to give her this one thing, she would give Him what she had left.

Ember’s phone buzzed in her purse. She dug in and pulled it out. “Peter found the doctor. She had a cancelation. We have an appointment in an hour.”

THIRTY

“**Y**ou can wait right here.” The medical assistant ushered Trey and Ember into a nice corner office. Private practice, specializing in fertility treatments.

Ember had straightened her hair, then smoothed her blue dress that hugged everything in a way he appreciated, but which would be entirely appropriate for a day at the office. The Vanguard team had dressed him in slacks, a button-down shirt, and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. They’d parted his hair on one side and slicked it down.

Neither of them resembled the two harried people in the hallway at the hospital, but it wasn’t a foolproof disguise. He could be a hindrance to Ember if someone recognized him. They’d coached him to let her do most of the talking. She’d been trained to captivate people’s attention.

With that dress, it was working on him. That was for sure.

Ember glanced at him before she sat.

The assistant shut the door.

Trey shifted closer to her and touched his lips to hers. “You look amazing.”

She smiled wide. “I know. That’s the point.”

He chuckled.

“I checked her out,” she whispered. “Trust me, this will work.”

They'd gone over the plan a few times but hadn't had much of an opportunity to prep for the appointment with having to go by Vanguard on the way here. Ember would use her phone to allow Vanguard into the doctor's computer system, and the two of them would distract her with their desire to have a baby while the investigations firm discovered if she had Annalise in her system.

If they got nothing, the plan was to follow her.

He was pretty sure Ember would do it anyway.

He held her hand while she sat.

"Is this because your mom canceled the bet?"

Trey winced. "Not really." *Maybe.*

Truth was, he had no idea what to think about the things his ma had said. She trusted in God even if he couldn't see that doing so had done her any favors. Then again, he'd walked away from what she believed and lived the life he wanted to, and what did he have to show for it?

Not much other than a reputation on social media for being a chump who tried too hard to tear Selena from Alex. *As if.*

Whatever might have been with Ember, if God allowed it, was all he had now. A whisper of something that was more like nothing. *What might've been.* But never would be.

He was supposed to trust God when not even a miracle could get Ember's heart to beat right again? God would let Trey lose her the way Ember lost her mother. With only silence for answers.

He needed to focus, not get all sidetracked with questions that would keep him awake at night. That could happen after Ember was gone and the search for her sister had ended. He just might have a lifetime of nights like that ahead of him.

The door opened, and Dr. Marion Bessy entered, wearing those expensive heels with red soles. She had on a pencil skirt and purple silk shirt under a doctor's white coat. "Good morning. You're Elias Benning, and your lovely wife, Amber?" She held out her hand.

Her fingers were far too soft, and the squeeze almost nonexistent. Trey found it more like a monarch of old extending her hand for them to show deference to her. Too bad for Marion this was modern-day America. They didn't do that bowing and scraping thing here.

"Nice to meet you." Trey held Ember's hand as she sat again, and he settled into the chair beside her. "Thanks for fitting us in at such short notice."

Dr. Bessy smiled. Dark brown hair, slender with glasses on a string hung around her neck. No wedding ring. Probably in her late forties.

"How long have you been treating infertility?" he asked.

"Oh," Dr. Bessy sat back in her chair. "At least twenty years now."

Trey glanced at Ember, a practiced move he hoped the doctor didn't see through. His lack of training could blow this thing apart. But he had only a small part to play in this. "Great. Then I'll trust you can explain to my wife why her having a baby now, or at any time, isn't worth the risk of her losing her life." He sat back in the chair and folded his arms.

The doctor glanced at Ember. "You'd like to have a baby, Mrs. Benning?"

"Of course I do." Ember touched her fingertips to her upper lip and made a noise like she was fighting tears.

If he hadn't known better, he would believe it.

Ember continued, "I want to feel a baby kick inside me. Bring a life into the world."

Trey spotted the sheen of tears in her eyes, even though she was looking at the doctor.

With the way her words sounded, he knew there was no way that didn't come from somewhere very real. She knew what dying so young would cost her, and she grieved for her own loss. Never getting married. Never having children.

Trey found his own eyes burning.

The fact it probably helped sell the story wasn't a concern past the initial thought. He would continue to live past her, experiencing things she never would. He'd always thought he might get married one day. Now he had a ring on his finger, and they were pretending—only a shadow of the real thing.

Kind of like a lot of his life.

As Ember kept talking to the doctor, Trey leaned forward and squeezed the bridge of his nose. His mom was right that he hadn't found anything real. *I'm looking for what's true.* He hardly knew what that meant. He'd never known true love. He'd never possessed true peace.

"I have a weak heart," Ember said. "A baby will put stress on it that my body might not be able to handle."

The doctor retrieved her stethoscope from around her neck and came over. "May I?" Ember nodded. Dr. Bessy listened to her heart.

When she pulled back, Ember said, "We heard you can do miracles."

If Trey needed a miracle, he wouldn't go to this woman for it.

Dr. Bessy sat on the edge of the desk, her stethoscope in one hand. "There will be risks. I'd like to look at your medical file, but I don't think there's any harm in running a few tests. We'll be able to see the scope of what we're facing."

Trey figured this was a good time to say, "What's the point, if it just gets her hopes up for something that will never happen?"

"I understand you don't want to lose your wife."

"If she's pregnant and something happens, I'd lose *both* of them." Trey had seen it at work. He'd felt the husband's grief the moment he realized he'd lost his entire family in one tragic minute. He sniffed away the burn of another man's loss. He didn't like using empathy like this. If it was anyone but Ember, he wouldn't have done it.

Ember had her phone out, a planned move. “I’ll get you my regular doctor’s information. He can send my file over, and I can be done with him and his negativity.” She glanced at Trey, still tapping on the screen. “We can look to the future and finally plan for a family.” The sadness in her eyes, buried deep, drew another lump to his throat.

“Great.” He tried to smile, but it probably looked like a poor attempt at being supportive. He took the opportunity to distract the doctor from Ember’s use of her phone. “If having a baby of our own is too risky, what other options are there? I mean, there’s got to be other safe ways for us to have a child. Like surrogacy.”

The doctor nodded, a placid look on her face. “There are alternatives. Surrogacy is one. Adoption is another a lot of people, I find, are quick to dismiss. But the chance to provide a home for a child in need, a situation where life with you where they are loved and cared for, is so much better than whatever suffering they would’ve gone through.”

“That sounds like a calling.”

“Parenting can be that.” The doctor paused, thoughtfully. “And I work closely with a private adoption agency that provides loving homes for abandoned newborns.”

They’d coached him not to jump on the chance to connect over that. Trey nodded, trying to look like he needed a second to think it through. He reached over and touched Ember’s knee.

She was done on her phone.

“We should get all the information,” he said. “Just in case.”

She smiled, a tiny movement. A woman who didn’t want her hopes dashed.

He turned to the doctor. “I’d like to hear about this private adoption agency.”

THIRTY-ONE

Ember stretched as she awoke on the couch in Clare's break room. Her friend had replied to her voicemail with a text saying she could have full access to Clare's office. Ember found herself filtering everything through the impending end of her life—for good or ill. It was what it was.

If I'd have known Ember was going to come along so quickly, I wouldn't have made that stupid bet.

Audrey's words about God being in control of everything felt like they were just out of reach. Even if Ember wanted to see what trusting Him now would be like, how did she do it? For years she'd turned her back on Him because He'd failed her. If He hadn't, and it had been His will that her mom not be healed from her cancer...

Did she even have time to contend with Him about it?

Then again, maybe she always had been contending with Him about everything. She'd used up so much of her life being angry with God. If she didn't believe He existed, she'd have walked away. But she'd stayed in a place where she was often aware of His presence.

Because He had been with her?

She didn't understand how that worked, and if there wasn't time to figure it out, she didn't know why she was even worrying about it.

A chime sounded, indicating the door to Clare's office had opened. "In the back!" she called out to whoever was there, figuring it was either Trey or the twins.

Even though she'd rather see Trey walk in, it would be better if Peter and Simon had some good news. *Give me a lead or leave me alone.* She didn't need God distracting her with things to think over. She had one priority.

Ember pushed up to sitting as Peter came in, followed by Bob. "What's up, guys?"

Simon came in last, practically bouncing. "Did they tell you?"

"We didn't get to it. We only just walked in." Peter shot his twin a look. Simon had started to grow his hair out, whereas Peter kept his short. It was one of the few ways to tell them apart by their features. Otherwise, it would be impossible to tell who was who. Other than studying the way they processed information.

The same excitement that energized Simon caused Peter to focus.

"What is it?" She wanted to ask where Trey was, but that would distract everyone.

"Your connection with the network at the doctor's office got us into her system." Peter glanced at Bob. "We've been talking to Marco as well."

"Any correlations?"

Bob's eyes lit. "That's where we went, too. You see, Marco wasn't overly forthcoming. Since we didn't want to drop him off at the police department with a mess of bruises from beating information out of him, we settled on the techno thing I don't understand." He shrugged.

Simon had told her before the nap that Bob had been a cop, busted for being dirty, who'd served his time. Now he worked for Vanguard. Ember wasn't entirely sure about Clare's staffing choices—or whether she would get to ask her friend about the situation.

Peter took up where he left off. "We checked her location history as tracked through her phone's connection to her email server. People really should have better security. We correlated

it with Marco's location going back as far as we could look. It didn't take long to find a common denominator."

Simon stepped between them and showed her the screen of his tablet. "It's a warehouse."

She didn't need to look at it. "Let's go." She strode to the chair and grabbed her coat. Reaching out caused a wrenching sensation in her chest. She slammed her hand on the coat. The chair tipped over, and she nearly went with it but managed to catch herself on one knee.

The guys rallied around her. Bob on one side. Peter on the other.

Bob said, "Go get Trey," right beside her ear.

I'm okay. She tried to get the words out.

Feet pounded into the room.

She smelled Trey's body wash and felt him gather her up. The world spun, and he deposited her on a chair.

"Do you need a pill?" He held her wrist, but not in a comforting way. He was feeling her pulse.

Ember blew out a long breath. "Just a blackout. Lost power for a second there." She rubbed her chest. "We need to go to a warehouse."

"Hmm. Sure." Peter looked at his watch. "But the team we dispatched should be raiding the place about...now. So there's really no need."

Ember turned to Trey. "Did you know they were waiting until it was too late to give me this information?"

"You were asleep."

She slumped back against the chair. "I was taking a nap. I don't need to be managed."

"I know that." Trey touched her knee. "But Vanguard has people. You don't need to be raiding a warehouse when there are others. It's their job."

“It’s my sister.” She looked at Peter. “Tell me what else you found out about these people.”

He glanced at Simon, who flicked a finger on his tablet screen. “Doctor Marion Bessy was up to her eyeballs in debt. Medical school, car loans, mortgages for her house and rental properties that didn’t make any money. She was in serious trouble.”

“Was?”

“Two years ago, Nellis—as far as we can tell, since it was one of his shell corporations—drops the money to pay everything. He completely bailed her out. Then all of a sudden she’s got the money for this swanky private practice. Once a month she does clinic hours at the medical center you found. So that’s the connection to that place. She does free hours there.”

“How charitable.”

Simon made a face. “She’s been laying low ever since. Not even a parking ticket. She’s squeaky-clean as far as we can see. And so is the business.”

“So we have no leverage to flip her into pointing a finger at Nellis.” Bob seemed particularly perturbed about that. “She wins nothing if she blows it all up and flips on him. In fact, she’s in a position to lose everything.”

Ember said, “Boo. Hoo.”

Trey snorted. “Yeah, I’m with you on that.”

“At least that missing girl is okay. And Luciana.”

Peter nodded. “We took the photo of Bessy and showed it to her. Luciana positively ID’d her as the doctor who treated her and worked after hours for Nellis. We have a meeting later with Lucas and Eric to go over everything with them. Hopefully, with the addition of whatever is gained from the warehouse.” His watch flashed, vibrating on his wrist. “That’s the team commander.”

He turned and trailed out of the room.

She glanced at Trey. “Do you think Luciana will have to tell the police everything in order to end this?”

He tipped his head to the side. “It could grant her protection and help her get settled. If she can give them enough to bring charges against Nellis and some of his people. There should be justice for what was done to her.” He laid his hand over hers. “And for whatever happened to your sister.”

Ember shut her eyes, clinging to his hand with the strength she had. “Is God going to take everything from me?”

He was quiet for long enough she opened her eyes. “Sometimes I feel like the whole way I view Him is somehow backwards, or upside down. Like I’m staring at the wrong side. I can only see loose threads or overlapping colors. I can’t see the design that’s being made.” Before she could ask about that, he continued, “My mom used to say that to me when I told her I didn’t understand why my dad had to die. Why he gave his life to serve a country of people who don’t even know him, and I had to lose my father.”

“We can’t see the design.”

He nodded.

She wanted desperately to believe there was a purpose in her mom’s death and all of this. But how could there be?

Peter raced to the doorway, one hand on the frame. “The raid team commander found something he needs you to see.” The young man swallowed. Simon appeared right behind him, the same tablet in his hands. Peter looked at Trey.

Trey’s arm slid around her, his strength holding her upright as Simon showed her the screen of the laptop.

A woman lay in a hospital bed. The camera showed white blankets. An arm, with an IV inside the elbow. The camera moved toward her head. Her shoulder was bandaged. Scars trailed up the side of her neck, up her face and where the hair should have been on the right side of her face.

The team commander’s voice echoed through the tablet speakers. “This woman is pregnant.”

Ember gasped. “Annalise.”

Trey tugged her closer. “Is she alive?”

“Yes,” the team commander replied. “We’ve got an ambulance coming to get her to the hospital.”

THIRTY-TWO

A uniformed officer held the door for Trey, who had dropped Ember off at the hospital so she could be there for her sister. A nurse he knew had been on shift, so he'd put a bug in her ear to check on Ember as well. More for his own peace of mind. With him away from her, if her heart stopped then he wouldn't be nearby to help her. The fact she was in a hospital would play in her favor, and he wasn't sure if he'd have left her alone otherwise.

"Bro, earth to Trey." Lucas waved a hand in front of his face.

Trey stopped and looked around. Eric and Lucas, both BPD detectives, stood beside him to his right. All around were uniformed officers and SWAT guys in their gear. The operation was over, and all that was left was to comb through the place and look for evidence.

"You okay?"

Trey wasn't sure how to answer that.

"Have you been in a warehouse since you were stabbed?"

"It's not that." Trey shook his head. "I'm just worried about Ember." He pulled out his phone and looked at the app so he could see for himself if she was all right. He had the nurse's phone number. If anything happened, he could call right away and get someone to help. He'd also left his ma a message asking if she would go to the hospital and sit with Ember, but she hadn't responded yet.

Lucas squeezed Trey's shoulder. "I'm praying for them both, and the baby."

Trey blew out a breath. "Let's get this done." He wanted to be at the hospital so he could find out if Annalise and her unborn baby would be all right, but Ember had made him promise to find out everything that'd been going on here so he could tell her. Tag teaming this situation.

Lucas glanced at Eric.

Trey said, "Guys. Debrief me so I can get back to her."

"You're falling for this woman." Eric studied him.

Trey frowned. There were things he wanted to say, but none of it explained why he was here. "The longer this takes, the longer Ember has to wait for answers."

Lucas glanced at Eric again. The two shared a look, and Lucas said, "Thought so."

Trey scrubbed his hands over his face. "What does it matter how I feel about her? She doesn't need that on top of everything else. She's got enough to deal with."

Eric folded his arms. "You aren't going to tell her how you feel? It was pretty obvious, given how you were looking at her."

"What are you talking about?"

"A picture of you guys went viral on social media. You're rebounding after the Selena thing."

Trey didn't know either of these police detectives all that well. They were both Christians, and Eric was married to an FBI agent. Lucas was in a new relationship, so of course they'd think that meant things should work out for Trey. As if that was possible, which it was not.

"No, I'm not going to tell her anything. I'm going to support her and not give her even more regret piled on top of what she's already carrying."

"So it's a done deal?" Eric shifted his stance, getting rid of some frustration. "No heart transplant? She's just accepted

she'll die?"

"I don't want to debate the issues with the transplant system right now." Trey was trying not to think about it for the most part. Ember's choices, her life, weren't his to take on board. He barely knew the woman, even if they'd grown close the last week or so. "Can you guys just walk me through this place?"

Eric started to object, but Lucas cut him off. "Let's head this way first."

Trey followed Lucas, Eric behind them. Through a set of interior doors beyond which was a long hallway.

Lucas said, "The warehouse area is pretty empty. I don't think this place was used for much. If you look in the windows, the warehouse looks abandoned."

From behind him, Eric said, "And yet the security system here is top-notch, digital and connected to the cloud. Motion sensors, heat sensors, door sensors on the exterior and interior. Whoever ran this place knew exactly what was happening here at all times."

"So they were keeping their eye on Annalise?" Trey said. He figured it was mostly the doctor, but maybe also Nellis.

Lucas headed down the hall ahead of him. "They had a security guard on duty. SWAT is talking to him now. He gave us access to the system, but he had no idea what was in here. Said a lady visited every other day. Aside from that he never saw anyone."

"He ID'd the woman as Bessy," Eric said.

Trey nodded. "She was taking care of Annalise." And yet they'd left her with no one. For how long? He didn't want to think what could have happened.

Lucas stopped at a door and pushed it open. Empty except for a few sheets on the floor, covered with blood. A light on a stand, and a computer on a rolling trolley turned off. "We think this is some kind of surgical suite."

"For what?" Trey's stomach flipped over.

Eric laid a hand on his shoulder for a second. “Given Annalise’s condition—her obvious injuries—we think she required surgery in order to keep her alive. To keep the baby alive. Then they kept her here, prolonging her life.”

“The baby’s life.” Trey blew out a breath. He needed to run but wanted to go to Ember as well.

“We’re looking for Nellis.” Lucas continued to the next door, which had been furnished like a regular hospital room. Except the patient had never woken up. “We’re tracking where they got this equipment. Because the monitors had to come from somewhere, and this hospital bed didn’t just spring out of nowhere.”

“And Bessy?” Trey glanced at Eric, hoping for a particular answer.

“We aren’t going to stop looking for her.”

Trey nodded.

“We’re also on the lookout for Nellis,” Lucas said.

“But you have no idea where he is?” Trey ran a hand through his hair.

“We know he didn’t leave town.” Lucas squeezed the back of his neck. “We keep getting reports of him being sighted around town, but the guy is slippery.”

“He’s on the run. He’s probably in Mexico by now.” Trey figured a man who knew everyone in Benson was looking for him had already split. “Or he headed for Canada.”

The northern border wasn’t that far. It was good for camping in the warmer months, and a man on the run with law enforcement looking for him could disappear. Meanwhile, a beautiful woman who cared about the people in her life and had never had a shot at a family had to face death and try and do it with dignity.

There was nothing dignified about death.

“We’re going to find him.” Lucas wasn’t placating him. Trey could see the detective honestly believed what he said.

“You don’t need to worry about Bessy or Nellis. Just focus on helping Ember.”

Eric nodded. “She needs you.”

Trey shot a glance at the guy. “You think I don’t know that?”

“I’m just saying, she’ll want your support.”

“So I get to watch a woman I just met die in front of me so I can support her.” Trey’s chest hurt. He tried to inhale. Ember was going to die, and there was nothing either of them could do about it. She knew now what had happened to her sister. That wouldn’t bring about her end any faster, unless her heart couldn’t take the strain.

But she’d done what she came here to do. There was only one thing left.

Ember was going to die.

Eric said, “This isn’t about you, bro. This is about her and doing what’s right instead of blowing off responsibility for whatever feels good.”

“And I get dragged into it...whether I like it or not?” He didn’t like it. Black spots flickered in front of him. In his mind he could hear Ember crying and feel her in his arms, facing his own hatred of the fact she wouldn’t be around much longer. “I have to watch her die.”

“She should go through this alone?” Eric’s face swam in front of his.

“I don’t want her to go through it at all!” Trey screamed the words. He slammed Eric back against the wall, grasping two handfuls of the man’s jacket. “She isn’t supposed to die!”

Lucas pushed back against Trey’s chest. “That’s enough.”

Eric shook his head. “It’s okay.”

Trey didn’t let go.

“It’s okay if you love her,” Eric said. “None of us knows what will happen. But what we do know is that God can

handle all our pain and frustration. You don't have to be afraid to tell Him how you really feel."

Trey gritted his teeth. "He doesn't want to know how I feel."

"Yes, He does."

THIRTY-THREE

“**Y**ou found her,” Clare said.

Ember sank into the chair, holding the phone tight to her ear. Clare had called a few minutes ago. Since there was nothing to do but sit with her sister, she’d answered. Opting to stay in the room because she’d been separated from Annalise for too long.

Ember stared at her sister. “I did.” She wasn’t sure what to do with the situation now.

“At least you know.” Clare said something to whoever she was with, then said, “Talk me through the situation. What did the doctor say?”

Ember smoothed a crinkle in her pants and crossed one leg over the other, feeling the need to curl into herself. “She has massive injuries consistent with an impact. Like she was hit by a car. It’s a miracle she survived. That the baby survived.”

The doctor had been just as astounded that Annalise’s baby was alive as he was that her sister didn’t perish immediately. The injuries were from months ago, most likely right around the time her sister had disappeared.

Ember cleared her throat. “They think the baby is underdeveloped, probably because of everything. She should stay in utero as long as possible, but if they had to deliver now, they think she would have a fighting chance.”

One Ember would never get to see. She would die before her niece ever grew old enough to remember her. A life lived without her to love the child and give her everything an aunt

should. The baby wouldn't have her and would have to live with the loss of a mother she never got to meet.

"It's a girl?"

"Yep." Tears gathered in Ember's eyes, and the room blurred in front of her. *I could ask You for help.* She wanted to, but the fear of what was unknown overpowered the desire to reach out. She cleared her throat and continued, "They think she was treated right away, like whoever did this was right there."

"Vanguard will find out." Clare sounded adamant. "We aren't going to let them get away with this."

"They kept her alive, kept the baby alive. Got Annalise stable, at least as much as they could." Ember squeezed her eyes shut. "She's technically gone. The machines are what is keeping her alive."

"So they could still have the baby." Clare huffed. Someone spoke in the background of the call, and she said, "I've got to go."

"What are you working on?" Ember could only spin out in inactivity here. She needed something to latch onto.

"Once I have a conclusion, I'll read you in. For now, just stay where you are."

"I might not have that much time." Ember could be dead before Clare even returned from whatever trip this was. After the last few days, she should probably have the hospital wheel in a bed for her beside her sister and admit her so they could watch her die.

"You need to do me this favor."

"What?" Ember pressed her lips together. Getting mad at Clare wasn't going to help. It would just jack up her health issues.

"Hang on until I get back."

"You know I can't guarantee that's going to happen."

"Talk to the doctors."

Ember frowned. “About what?”

The line went silent for a few moments.

“Your sister is medically deceased,” Clare said. Before Ember could ask what her point was, she continued, “You need a heart.”

Cold washed over Ember. She might as well have been dunked with an ice bucket.

She fumbled with the phone and ended the call. It clattered to the floor as the door swung open.

Someone came over. She saw the shoes at the last minute, then Trey crouching in front of her. “Hey, hey,” he crooned, his hands on her face. Thumbs swiping tears from her cheeks.

“I can’t... I don’t...”

Trey gathered her up, then sat down again with her on his lap turned to the side. So he could gather her against his chest and hold on to her, all while she freaked out like someone who couldn’t handle their own life.

She shouldn’t be surprised anymore.

Ember squeezed her eyes shut and held on to him.

You need a heart.

She couldn’t even think about that. It was too much. Too soon. She’d only just gotten Annalise back. Now she was supposed to lose her all over again?

Let her die, just so I can live?

They sat there like that while the doctor came in and checked on her sister. No one spoke to them. Ember didn’t look at the hospital staff. Trey didn’t move. He just kept holding her and being there for her.

She didn’t want to need him, or anyone else. It wasn’t fair to rely so heavily on him when he was only with her because it was his role with Vanguard. She needed to let him go back to his life before intruding any more than she already had.

She should be stronger than this. Better able to divorce her emotions from what was going on. She could do it on missions, so why couldn't she do it now when it would be so much more helpful? This was too real. She needed the space between what was happening and how she felt about it. Instead it was like everything had collided.

Ember let out a long shuddering breath.

Trey shifted enough to pull out his phone. She saw the contact's name on the screen right before he put it to his ear. "Hey, Ma. It's me. Just wondering where you're at. Call me back."

Ember shifted. Her cheeks flamed. She must look like an absolute mess.

"What's that look?" Trey's gaze scanned her face.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to fall apart."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for. You've been handed a raw deal. How you deal with it is up to you." He shrugged. "Have whatever feelings you want to have."

That was fine, but she did need to get off his lap before this got more awkward.

Ember went to the tiny sink on the far wall and splashed water on her face. She dried it off with a hand towel. "And your mom?"

"I've been trying to call her, but she isn't answering." Trey shrugged. "Maybe she's seeing that counselor at Vanguard again."

"You could ask Peter to track her phone. Just to make sure she's all right."

He winced. "I don't know if I want to surveil my own mother. I'm sure she'll call back."

She moved closer to him but stood by the bed. The lines on his face seemed more pronounced today, and he still had that late-day stubble. Only it was more like a three-day shadow at this point. There was something...edgy about his appearance.

She'd have been extremely interested if she had any life expectancy.

Ember didn't look at her sister, even though she should. It hurt too much to see the bandages. The scars. They'd kept her alive for the sake of the baby, but the truth was that Annalise was gone. Maybe she'd died the night the car hit her...or whatever had happened.

She focused on Trey again instead. "Are you doing okay?" He seemed more subdued than he had been before. Could be all this was getting to him. "You can take a break if you want. I don't have anything to do but be here, and the doctors are nearby. You don't need to stay."

Trey frowned. "You want me to leave?"

"I'm just saying I'll be okay if I have any problems. I found my sister. You were assigned to stick by me until that happened. Now I have, so..."

"So what? You think I'm going to abandon you?"

"Trey, you seem like you need—"

He cut her off and stood. "Don't tell me what I need. I've got enough people telling me who I am and what I feel."

"I'm not trying to..." She sighed. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. There's nothing to do. I'm going to die. Annalise is gone." Her voice broke. "This baby is all we have left, and both of us are going to abandon her. She'll grow up in foster care never knowing either one of us." She took a breath.

He didn't need to get stuck here with her out of obligation, because he was the best guy she'd ever met.

"None of that is your problem," she continued. "So if you want to go, I'm not going to stop you. You *should* go. Take care of your family and don't worry about me." She couldn't even look at him. Instead, she focused on the blanket covering her sister, tracing the lines of the weave with her gaze.

She heard a shuffle. Trey moved, and the door clicked closed.

He was gone.

“It’s for the best,” she whispered to the room.

THIRTY-FOUR

Trey stopped beside his car, keys in hand. He didn't remember walking the hall, or the elevator ride down.

All he could see in his mind was Ember telling him to leave. That she didn't need him. She wasn't his family.

He set his hand on the window and stared at the key fob in his other palm.

There was nothing they could do. Still, she didn't get how he felt about her. Maybe it was better if she never knew. Or at least never realized how deep his feelings for her went.

It wasn't like they had a future.

One thing she'd said stuck out now. He should focus on that.

Trey pushed everything else out as he climbed in and started the engine. The heater blasted—because Ember had needed the warmth. He shut it off. Who cared if it was freezing in here?

He dialed the number for Vanguard, and Peter's extension, figuring the guy would be at his desk. The call connected in his speakers.

"This is Simon." Answering his brother's phone apparently.

"Hey." Trey gritted his teeth. "Can you run a trace on a phone number, tell me where she is?"

"Did you lose Ember?"

He started to say no. The word stuck in his throat.

“What happened?”

A click sounded over the line, and someone said, “I’m here, too.” Double identical voices.

Trey said, “Peter, hey.”

“What’s going on?” one of them asked. Trey had no idea which.

“My mom isn’t answering, and she hasn’t called me back in hours. I have no idea where she is.”

“Number.” Trey was pretty sure that had been Simon. He seemed to pick up on emotional cues less, and right now that was a good thing.

Trey told him the number.

“Run it.” The line clicked again. “It’s just Pete now. What’s going on?”

Trey squeezed his eyes shut. “Can you just let your brother find my mom, and leave it?”

“Not when you sound like that,” Peter said. “Talk.”

Trey scrubbed his face. “What’s there to talk about? She’s dying. So I should...what? Tell her I’m falling in love with her so she can at least die with that. Or keep it to myself, and she’ll never know there’s at least *someone* in the world who feels that way about her, and she’ll take *that* to her grave.” He blew out a breath. Yelling to himself in the car in the dark of evening wasn’t what he wanted to be doing right now.

Peter broke the silence. “You think she feels the same way?”

“What does it matter if she does? We get a day or so—or a week—all that time on eggshells wondering which minute is the one where her heart stops beating?” Trey paused. “She doesn’t want that. She just wants to spend the time she has left with her sister.”

Peter’s sigh crackled across the car speakers. “So that’s it?”

Trey couldn't see any other way through this. Not if he was going to respect Ember's need for space so she could deal with this the way she wanted. Have the life she had left the way she wanted it to be. Figuring out who would look after her niece when she was gone.

"Simon said your mom's phone is at your house."

Trey sat up in the seat, put the car in gear, and pulled out. There was little point sitting here and wallowing about what never would be with Ember. "Great. I'm headed there now."

"I'll tell Freya to call you."

"No, don—"

The radio came on. Peter had hung up already.

Trey nearly turned his phone off. He didn't need his partner calling him. Especially not if she might not be his partner for much longer. She would be assigned a permanent replacement if he was officially given the job of captain.

It would be a leap, but the department just wasn't big enough to have a person in every rank. He was a senior EMT, but everyone would be surprised he was the chief's choice to take that supervisor position.

Some might even object.

Sure, they might have grounds even. Who knew? With all the social media kerfuffle, and getting punched by Alex, he couldn't exactly blame them.

He'd been content in the role of EMT—hero—and squeezing as much living out of life as he could. Which had meant experiencing love the way everyone seemed to view it.

Now he could honestly say for the first time his feelings for Ember were real. He'd never felt for anyone what he felt for her.

He didn't want to hear Ma talk about God. Trey left that behind. Life seemed to diminish his beliefs, watered down by what everyone else did. The pressure to fit in high school, carried over into adulthood. He'd gone with the flow because it was so much easier than taking a stand. He hadn't thought

about it like he was caving to what was popular. He was just “living his life.”

Now that *I do what I want* attitude left a sour taste in his mouth. All it did was gain him a reputation. It gave him no tools to stand up and be different. To realize what Selena and Alex were about before he got dragged into their dysfunction.

Trey’s phone rang.

He stared at the screen in his phone holder, up beside his steering wheel. Freya’s name lit up.

He almost didn’t answer.

In the end he swiped his finger across the screen, waited a beat, then said, “I don’t want to talk about it. Any of it.”

“Good, because you should be praying.” She sounded so certain. After months of a waning faith where he could tell she struggled to hold on to what she believed, Freya had found a devotion to what she held in her heart.

Trey let out a sigh and pulled onto the highway, headed for his townhouse. Just having Freya on the phone felt like all those times they rode in the ambulance in silence, both lost in their thoughts.

“You know I’m right.”

Trey felt his lips twitch. “Nobody likes a know-it-all.”

Freya chuckled. They often fell back on banter when the situation in front of them meant neither could process, and it required a distraction, or they would fall apart. She was the friend he didn’t need to pretend with. She’d always accepted him exactly as he was, whether she agreed with his choices or not. She hadn’t condemned him.

The truth was, if Ember didn’t want him with her, he wasn’t going to force himself into the situation against her wishes. After all, he’d only be making the situation that much harder for both of them.

The alternative was to walk away. If he wanted to get on with his life now rather than waiting until after she was gone, he could walk away from it all and forget everything that had

happened. And he could focus on work and spend the holidays with his mom and his stepbrother, pretending everything was normal. He could show the chief he was the right person for the job.

Get the promotion.

See if he met someone else. Forget about Ember.

Trey slammed his hand on the steering wheel.

“Do you want me to come over?” Freya asked.

“I need to find my mom,” he replied. Then she would probably tell him the same thing as Freya. It was the only reason he was inclined to listen. Because the two women he respected most believed the same thing meant he should at least consider it.

But right now? In the middle of this? He wasn't so sure about just reacting when his whole life was falling apart.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Freya said. “I'm on until midnight.”

“Copy that.” Trey hung up.

He headed down the street to his house and pulled onto the drive beside Ma's car. She hadn't gone somewhere and left her phone at home.

He gave himself a moment before getting out of the car.

Maybe it was for the best.

As much as he wanted to help Ember through the last days of her life, it was better to cut it off now before he fell even deeper in love with her. That would only hurt more. And it already hurt plenty.

He grabbed his backpack and headed to the door.

Which stood slightly ajar.

Trey pushed it all the way open. “Ma?”

Could be it hadn't been latched and the breeze blew it open. Open didn't mean...

The lamp in the living room lay on the floor, the shade dented. His mom's phone had been discarded—or fallen—to the floor, where it was now. Shattered.

Trey pulled out his phone and dialed Peter.

“Did you find her?” the twin asked.

Trey moved through the rooms, checking for his ma. “Looks like someone got in a fight. She isn't here.” He circled all the way back to the open front door. “She's gone.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Ember stared at the wall. A nurse offered her coffee, but that would only increase her heart rate. She didn't need anything to jeopardize her health right now. She wanted to see the baby once. Just once, before her body gave out.

All because of Marcus.

Clare's comment about remaining alive until she got back just wasn't something Ember could deal with right now. Nor was the fact Clare had gone to DC purposely to blow the whistle on Marcus's promotion. Ember wouldn't be around to see that either. What was the point in wishing for what she would never have. A family. Love. Children of her own.

Life she'd never had. Now she never would.

The clock ticked.

Machines beat that steady rhythm by her sister's bed. Ember's heart settled into the same cadence. Her sister's life kept her alive.

The rest of it she chose not to think about. Annalise wasn't gone until Ember let her go.

Her child would live on after both of them had lost their lives.

The door to the room opened. Instead of the doctor she expected, the woman who entered was Dr. Marion Bessy. The obstetrician from the private practice Nellis had co-opted into helping him. A woman the police were looking for.

Ember launched out of the chair. She tried to speak, but the words stuck in her throat. All the strength she had drained to her feet.

The OB strode down the far side of the bed. “A woman in your condition should remain calm.” She turned to Annalise. “But I think you know that, don’t you?”

“Don’t touch her!” Ember yelled. “Nurse!”

A young woman in scrubs raced in. Ember had seen her before. She’d said she was a couple of months out from nursing school, but like the doctor, she seemed like she knew what she was doing.

“Call Detective Lucas Westbrook at the Benson PD,” Ember said. “He’s looking for this woman.” She gasped a breath. “And get security in here. She can’t be allowed to do anything or touch the patient.”

Why was Dr. Bessy even here? She worked the illegal adoption ring with Nellis. She probably knew where to find him, and she could tell the police.

Ember tried to formulate a plan to get Dr. Bessy around to a deal with the police where she told them everything she knew. But in the heat of the moment, when she tried to think, all her training went out the window. “Don’t touch my sister.”

“I think you’ll discover this is all a misunderstanding.” Dr. Bessy smiled at the nurse but motioned at Ember. “That woman is in end-stage heart failure, if you haven’t been able to tell from her labored breaths and the other symptoms present.”

The nurse glanced at Ember and didn’t move.

Dr. Bessy had successfully made her doubt everything Ember said and her own abilities. The nurse would now defer to the doctor, and likely stand down instead of doing what Ember asked. Before Ember could undermine Dr. Bessy, the woman had undermined her.

She tugged out her phone and called Lucas, who had given her his card earlier.

It rang once. “Westbrook.”

“This is Ember.” She gasped. “Doctor Bessy is here, in Annalise’s room.”

“I’ll be right there.” He hung up.

“The police are on their way.” She lifted a finger at the doctor. “Don’t touch my sister.” She wasn’t sure how else to get the message across. Dr. Bessy didn’t have anything in her hands. She wasn’t on the side of the machines. What did she have planned? She seemed to be beside Annalise’s bed to assess her condition.

The OB didn’t seem fazed by anything Ember said, or the people now gathered at the door. She simply peered down her nose at Ember, then glanced at the nurse. “You’re welcome to get security, of course. But you’ll find that I am perfectly within my rights to treat my patient.”

Ember gasped, her heartbeat pounding in her head.

She thought of Trey and the app on his phone. Maybe he didn’t even care anymore, but he’d been her lifeline through this.

She sat back in her chair and tried to calm her heart. Alone. The way she would die. “I’m not going to let you touch Annalise.”

“Your sister is not my patient.”

“Then why have you been prolonging her life in secret for the past six months?”

The nurse shifted her stance, probably with questions about that.

Ember continued since there wasn’t time for explanations, “You treated her injuries and kept her alive when she was dead. Locked away in a warehouse. For what?”

Dr. Bessy reached into her lab coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

Before she could say anything, two police detectives raced into the room.

Eric, the dark-haired detective, said, “Doctor Bessy, you need to come with us. We have a lot of questions.”

Lucas came over to Ember, a questioning look on his face.

She waved him off. “That woman is trying to... I don’t know what she’s trying to do. But she can’t be in here with Annalise.”

“You know,” the doctor began, “your sister is braindead. Once she has that baby, there won’t be any point prolonging her life. Her heart was undamaged. You need a heart.”

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT I NEED!” Ember collapsed forward, breathing hard. Her chest wrapped in a vice so she couldn’t get the air she needed. She pressed a hand to her chest. Her watch vibrated nonstop.

Lucas called out, “This woman needs medical attention!”

Ember gripped his arm.

He crouched, and his face came into view. “I won’t let anything happen to your sister.”

Maybe it wasn’t just Trey. Maybe all the men in Benson were like this. Eager to give what they could to help someone who needed it.

The doctor’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “That baby is legally my responsibility.” Ember lifted her head, and she continued, “This contract is fully binding. It states that in the event of medical incapacitation, all rights to the unborn child and power of attorney for Annalise Hendryx are given to me. It’s my duty to ensure the baby is born, healthy, and turned over to the adoptive parents, who also signed a legally binding contract. Once the baby is born, rights are turned over to the parents if the surrogate is unable to make medical decisions.”

The nurse crouched in front of Ember and felt for her pulse.

“She can’t be”—Ember had to catch her breath—“serious.”

“Let’s just worry about you, and let the detectives worry about your sister and the baby.” The nurse frowned, her

attention focused on Ember. Instead of Annalise.

“That’s not going to happen.” Ember couldn’t let the doctor do whatever she wanted. She couldn’t let a woman involved with a criminal take her sister’s baby. End her sister’s life because she decided she wanted to.

Lucas squeezed her shoulder.

He’d told her he wouldn’t let anything happen to her sister.

Was that true?

God, You didn’t hear me before. Or You didn’t listen. I need You now, though. I don’t have anyone else. You have to help me.

Dr. Bessy turned to speak to someone in the hall, approaching the door. “I want this patient taken to surgery. We’re doing a C-section. The baby can spend a few weeks in the NICU before the parents take her home.”

The nurse in front of Ember gasped, twisting around in her crouch. “She’s not developed enough for that.”

Dr. Bessy didn’t even flinch. “I believe she has a fighting chance. Annalise Hendryx won’t last much longer, and that will put strain on the baby.”

Ember took another breath. She didn’t even have the strength to stand. How was she supposed to fight this woman?

God, help me.

Ember pushed out of the chair. The world swam around her, and the nurse caught her arm. Lucas helped hold her upright as she spat the words, “No. You. Will. Not.”

“She’s right,” Lucas said. “Nothing happens to the patient until Doctor Bessy answers our questions.”

Dr. Bessy opened her mouth.

“If we need to, we will get a warrant for your arrest,” he continued. “And I don’t think your other patients are going to want to hear about that.”

Eric said, “You need to come with us now, ma’am. This situation can wait until later.”

“It will be done as soon as I get back.” She lifted her chin. “Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

Lucas’s phone rang. He ignored it and turned to Ember. “Let the doctors treat you so you’re strong enough to fight this.”

But what would happen after?

Someone had to take care of the baby, and it wasn’t going to be strangers in some sham adoption. Ember was her sister’s next of kin.

He squeezed her shoulder. “We are going to fight this.”

And then he was gone.

Ember moved to her sister’s bedside and laid her hand on Annalise’s. Tears rolled down her face. “Thank You, Lord.”

She had prayed.

And He had listened.

THIRTY-SIX

Trey ended the call before it went to voicemail.

Simon stared at his laptop, open on the kitchen counter. “No answer?”

“Lucas is probably busy with a case.” And Trey’s mom was missing, but Vanguard had rallied as soon as he called, sending over a whole team.

“Your mom managed to dial nine and one before whatever happened. She tried to ask for help.”

“Great. So now we know...what? That she’s definitely in danger?”

Simon glanced over then. “I don’t have a mother, but when Freya was in danger, I wanted to shake everyone I came across until someone told me where she was.”

“You think I want to shake you?”

“How about I just tell you what else I found instead?”

Trey nodded, just standing in his kitchen feeling useless. Trying not to think about Ember and what had happened between them. He never even got to tell her how he felt about her. She’d kicked him out before that.

“Well, as soon as I find something, I will,” Simon said. “Until then, just keep praying or whatever you’re doing.”

Silently freaking out?

Trey wandered into the hallway, where the door stood open. He should turn off his heating so the warm air didn’t

continue to pump and then go right out the open door...and okay, that wasn't really relevant right now, but his mind wanted something simple to settle on.

Everything else meant contemplating the impending death of a woman who had only recently come into his life.

Or what was happening to his ma right now.

He was working under the assumption Nellis or someone from his organization had taken her. The fact was, he had no idea.

Trey ran his hands through his hair, wishing for his phone to ring in his pocket. Someone... Something...

Keep her safe. She believes in You. She's trusting You. I'm trusting that You won't let her down.

If his ma was, even right now, determined to hold on to what was true, then she could at least hold on to that. God held her in His hands. Surely He would keep her safe. Even if she was out of her mind with terror, in pain. Suffering at the hands of Nellis.

Movement up the front walk brought his attention out of the prayer.

Peter strode up the path and into the house. "Si, doorbell cam footage from the neighbor across the street." He glanced at Trey. "Actually a camera that overlooks their driveway has a view on the edge of the frame of your front door."

"Any other time I might object to them having recordings of activity at my house."

Peter nodded. "Tonight it could save a life."

"Got it," Simon called from the kitchen.

Trey headed in there while he pulled it up and they watched the recording, a grainy clip. "Dark car at the curb."

"Bob is asking your other neighbors if anyone saw it, particularly if they caught the license plate."

"So you didn't have to hack anything for this footage?"

Peter shook his head. “We could have, but we just asked. A couple didn’t care, or don’t have cameras. Most of your neighbors, when they heard your mother might’ve been kidnapped, jumped at the chance to help out.” He squeezed Trey’s shoulder.

The younger man was turning into a solid guy. Trey was proud of him, and knew Freya was even more so. Her twin brothers were good men. Solid employees of Vanguard. Willing to pitch in and help out regardless of whether it was officially their job.

It would take the police time to rally and perform the same canvas. They might not get the same helpful response from Trey’s neighbors. He’d tried Lucas but didn’t need uniformed cops unless Vanguard couldn’t pull this off for some reason.

“I want to say don’t worry, but...” Peter didn’t finish.

Trey nodded. “I know. I’m holding it together.”

“No one would blame you if you didn’t.”

“She came here to get away. Get some space and be somewhere she was at peace.” Trey blew out a breath. “This isn’t ideal.”

Simon exhaled a breath that would’ve been a laugh any other time. “We’ll find her.”

He sounded convinced. Trey didn’t know where they were at in terms of faith. The twins’ relationship with their father, especially after their mother’s death, had been complicated. Freya had managed to regain what she’d believed as a child—the same way Trey was beginning to feel like he might as well.

After all, if he was going to survive this, and the prospect of losing Ember in the coming weeks, he might need to have faith to fall back on.

“Here we go.”

Simon’s comment drew Trey to the laptop screen. They watched as his front door opened on the edge of the feed, the top boundary of what his neighbor could see. A man exited

Trey's house, dressed in jeans and a jacket with a beanie on his head from the look of the poor-quality footage.

What was plain? His mother didn't want to be dragged along, but she was.

The man, who he was assuming even with the cold weather getup was Nellis, dragged her to the car and shoved her in the trunk. She struggled and flailed. He punched her in the head.

Trey sucked in a breath. Peter muttered something under his breath, and Simon just stood there, frozen. Like he wanted to punch the computer.

Nellis slammed the trunk shut, climbed in the driver's side, and pulled away.

Simon looked at Peter. "We need different footage if you want a license plate number we can track."

Trey wanted to be sick.

Bob strode in. "Got it." He waved a flip phone above his shoulder.

"What's that?"

"It's his phone," Peter said.

"Which has the license plate on it." He showed the screen to Simon. "One of the neighbors was out, two teens recording a video on their drive. They were angled the other direction so they didn't see your mom," he told Trey, "but they got the car headed away from here."

Trey nodded.

Simon smirked. "You could just hit Send and text that to me."

"But then I'd have to learn how to do that." Bob glanced at Trey. "Prison doesn't keep you up to date on the latest technological leaps."

"I'll teach you," Simon started.

“Bro.” Peter said that one word, and Simon refocused back on the laptop.

Trey watched him enter the license plate in some kind of database. Should they have access to that information? Whether it was legal or not, the name and address of the person the car was registered to popped up.

“Elizabeth Carrington. Address is on Northview, so he probably had one of his guys steal it.” Simon paused. “I’d be surprised if it wasn’t reported stolen.”

Trey shifted his weight, so the blood didn’t pool in his feet and make him even more lightheaded. “How does that help us? Can we track her?”

“We’ll contact Elizabeth Carrington and find out if she has GPS on her car. And if it was stolen.”

“I’m on it.” Bob waved his phone. “Text me the address.”

Simon frowned. “I’ll send it to the GPS in your car.”

“Right.” He trailed out to the front door and called back, “On it!”

“Okay, so we might find the car.” Trey rolled his shoulders. “What else? How do we know where he took her?”

“The police have people outside every residence and business Nellis controls.” Peter folded his arms. “So he can’t take her to any of those. He has to be on the move—”

“Which will make it impossible to find him, I’m guessing,” Trey said.

“Or he has somewhere we don’t know about.”

“Which we’re looking for,” Simon said. “Any property he could possibly have access to that the police don’t know about. It actually makes our search more focused. We know what type of places to look at.”

“Unless he got a motel room...or something else.” Trey swallowed back his frustration. His phone started to ring in his pocket. He pulled it out. “Unknown number.”

Simon twisted around.

Peter said, “Answer it. Put the call on speaker.”

Ice moved through Trey’s body. He set the phone on the counter, swiped the screen, and tapped the speaker icon. “Hello?” He overcompensated, and the word came out louder than it needed.

Someone gasped. “Trey?”

He braced his palms on the edge of the counter. “Ma?”
Sickness roiled in his stomach.

A shuffle brushed across the phone speaker. “You want her back alive, unharmed? You do exactly as I say.”

Trey gritted his teeth. “What do you want?”

Simon tapped on the computer. He lifted his head and shook it at his brother. Peter’s jaw flexed. Trey didn’t know what that meant, but it wasn’t good.

“A trade,” Nellis said. “Here’s what I want you to do.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

Detective Lucas Westbrook needed to call Trey back, but he also wanted news for Ember before he did anything else.

Eric stopped at the door to the interview room. “You believe any of this?”

Lucas blew out a breath. Dr. Bessy sat, back straight, at the table in the interrogation room. She’d turned down their offer of any kind of drink. “I think she covered herself,” he said. “She got in deep with Nellis, but she was smart about it. Now that everything is unraveling, she has a way to keep herself out of jail. Or at least, she hopes she does.”

Eric nodded. “We could wait for the judge to make a ruling on the contract and whether it’s legally binding.”

Lucas shot him a look that let his partner know how he felt about that.

Eric scratched his chin, a smile tugging at his lips. “But I also want information on Nellis and where he is.”

“You think she knows what he’s up to?”

“Worth a try.”

“Maybe we’ll catch a break and she’ll roll over on him.” Lucas pushed into the room. “Doctor Bessy, as we stated at the hospital, we’d like to ask you a few questions. You aren’t under arrest, but we can accommodate that request if you’d like a lawyer present.” By which, of course, he meant they were legally obligated to.

She lifted her chin. “I’ve already told you I don’t need anyone to speak for me.”

Lucas pulled out a chair and sat while Eric hung back and leaned against the wall. They switched off who took what role in an interrogation, and it was working well so far. They’d only been partners a couple of months. “We’d like to hear about your relationship with Thomas Nellis, specifically pertaining to adoptions for which it’s our understanding you provide medical services.”

“All completely legally, I assure you,” she said. “As is that contract. I’m a private doctor, and private citizens pay for my services with no need for the entanglements of insurance complicating everything into a bureaucratic mess.” He’d given her a bunch of information that would let her believe what she thought they knew about her activities. She, in turn, had tried to play on how Lucas was supposed to feel about the state of medical insurance in this country. It was an interesting tactic.

Lucas leaned back in his chair like he had all night to chat. “How did you get involved with Nellis?”

“He approached me with this business venture.”

“And you thoroughly vetted him, made sure everything was on the up-and-up?” He figured it was more likely that she’d covered herself and planned to let Nellis get hung out to dry. Actually, he was counting on it.

“I’d like to retrieve something from my briefcase.” She held up both hands. “I know how you cops get about people reaching for something.”

“Go ahead.”

She slid out a manila folder. “Here are the results of a DNA test that will prove Thomas Nellis is the father of the child Annalise Hendryx is carrying.”

Lucas frowned.

“In addition to that, I’m prepared to tell you everything I know about his *business*. In exchange for full immunity for anything related to his private adoption business.”

“That’s what it is?” Lucas said. “Private adoptions?”

“If you call stealing babies from young women and selling them, then yes. Although the adoption paperwork is legit.” From her expression, she didn’t seem to care all that much. But it could be as much of an act as everything else about her.

“But not Annalise?”

“Nellis wanted a child. His child.” She interlaced her fingers on the table in front of her. “And he chose Annalise.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

The doctor pulled over a rolling stool and sat. He remained quiet, though all the monitoring equipment in the room filled the silence as did the ticking of the clock on the wall.

It was starting to drive her crazy, watching the beats count down until they would inevitably alarm. The clock would run out. Her sister would flatline.

The doctor looked up from his tablet. “Thank you for letting me take a look at your situation.” He seemed so hopeful, given the chance to help her. As if it would change anything. Then his expression flickered, and the hope went the way of everything else.

Ember knew what was coming, the way she’d known since the CIA doctor had done the same thing. Then it went on her personnel file. Two hours later she got cut loose from the Agency without so much as a *Thank you for your service* or any kind of severance package, considering she’d been injured on the job.

Surely even clandestine agencies had workmen’s comp.

Ember smoothed out the edge of the hospital gown they’d insisted she change into. “You don’t need to say it. I already know the prognosis.” They’d hooked her up to monitors just like Annalise and admitted her, but she didn’t care so long as she could be in the room. “All I want is to spend the time I have left with my sister.”

The doctor, an older man with silver hair and laughter lines around his eyes, looked at his tablet. “I can certainly understand why you might feel that way, given the situation. Your sister doesn’t have much time left.”

“And neither do I.” Why beat around the bush?

“That might come down to a decision that’s entirely yours.”

Ember bit her lips together. Of course it was her decision, and as far as she could tell, she’d already made it.

“Ordinarily a transplant recipient never knows who supplied them with the organ.” He shifted, and the chair rolled a couple of inches. “Unless they want to know. Sometimes family members of the recipient opt to meet the next of kin of the person whose organ their relative received, so they can thank them. Find out about the person who didn’t survive.”

“My sister wouldn’t have chosen to give her life to save me. And having her heart right here?” Ember touched just below the collar of the hospital gown. “That’s not sweet. That’s morbid.”

“Your sister won’t survive. But you can. And given there’s a child in need of someone to take care of her after she’s born, perhaps it could be worth taking the chance.”

Ember’s eyes filled with tears. She should be all tapped out by now, with no more supply left. But the waterworks just kept coming. “I don’t want hope. Not when it’s more painful than being realistic.”

Still, a tiny part of her wanted to curl into a ball. Cry, and pray. Ask God the same way she had when she’d begged Him to heal her mother for a chance. Just one chance. But what was the point when there was only one answer?

Taking Annalise’s heart.

Allowing her sister to die so she could live. Taking care of her baby when that might not even have been what Annalise would’ve wanted. They hadn’t been that close. It wasn’t like her sister told her half of what she was up to—let alone that she was pregnant.

Ember couldn't fathom having to live with the knowledge that her sister's death meant she lived.

It was too much. She never would have asked for that. Who would? And yet, people signed up to be organ donors every day. Maybe they didn't understand the implication of what they were offering. Or they weren't worried about what happened after their death, and just wanted to give life to someone.

Ember didn't know if her sister had signed up. If she would've ever considered it.

She just didn't know.

Ember shook her head. "I can't do this."

"So the choice you've made is to play it out," the doctor said. "Your sister dies. We try to save you, but in the end you'll die as well."

"I can make sure her child will be taken care of after I'm gone, but that's all I'm prepared to do." Ember had to be realistic about the chance of this being successful when nothing else in her life had been. Her mother. Her relationship with her sister. Her job success and her shot at that promotion. Whatever nascent thing existed between her and Trey.

All of it ended the same way.

The doctor held the tablet to his front, as though determined to comfort himself. "And the possibility for a life?"

Ember was thankful enough her gratitude was directed at God that he didn't mention Trey, even if the doctor did know about her and the EMT. She had no intention of thinking about all those could've, should've, would'ves, might have beens, and possibilities. "This is the one I was given. It ends when it ends."

"You could live another fifty years, or more," the doctor said. "I meet people every day who have no shot. No chance." He turned the tablet. "Your name is at the top of the transplant list, and a heart is about to become available. It's within my power as your doctor to do whatever I deem necessary to save

you, including hoping that your body won't reject your sister's heart. After all, you signed the paperwork to get yourself on this list."

She stared at it, knowing full well she had signed no such thing. *Clare*. "Someone else in desperate need of a heart can have it. You'll deny them life?" When she got on this list because her friend had done something high up, covertly. Clare probably thought it was recompense from the CIA. Their severance package had finally come through—and Ember was now top of the transplant list.

"The next person on the list is you." He stood. "Just think about it."

"But you'll do what you want?"

He turned back to her at the door. "I'll do what I *can*. Which is all any of us does."

The door clicked shut.

Ember slumped back onto the hospital bed, pretty sure he was subject to her wishes in the end. She should ask the nurse about a Do Not Resuscitate order. It might not apply exactly, since trying to restart a failed heart would be a waste of time.

Ember felt a tear soak the pillow beside her cheek.

She slid her arm up to press two fingers to the spot between her eyebrows. The ID bracelet they'd fastened on her wrist scratched her cheek. She turned her head to look at her sister.

The nurse had put a fetal monitor on her sister's belly. Now Ember could hear the monitor tracking every beat of the baby's heart.

Her niece.

She wanted to live. Of course, she did. There was no point trying to convince herself or anyone otherwise. But there were so many risks in trying to live. A heart transplant might fail. Her body could reject the organ. She could try and try and try and put all her hopes into this...only to have it fail anyway.

Ember wasn't sure she had the energy to find out.

“Annalise.” Ember let out a sigh, watching her sister’s barely moving body. She wasn’t even here. She was gone. “What did you get yourself into?”

Ember buzzed the nurse and asked for paper and pen. She could fight Dr. Bessy and that contract with a legally binding document of her own.

When the nurse showed back up with a paper and pen, Ember rolled to her side and started writing, *This is my Last Will and Testament*.

Probably it needed to be notarized, but Clare could also work more of her magic—even if Ember didn’t always agree with it, she could help with one more favor.

Putting her at the top of the transplant list? That was crazy. It shouldn’t be, even for the sake of convenience and the probability of success.

Ember touched the pen to the paper and laid out her wishes for her niece.

Halfway through the first paragraph, one of Annalise’s machines emitted a high-pitched alarm. Ember pushed off the bed and sat up, the pen wedged painfully between her fingers.

The nurse raced in, followed by the doctor. The nurse said, “She’s flatlining.”

“We need to get that baby out, now.” He disconnected two wires. “We’re going to the OR.”

Ember took a breath that got stuck in her throat. Her watch buzzed on her arm.

Spots pricked at the edges of the world, blurring her vision, and everything she was looking at shrank from the edges as her awareness closed in on itself.

She collapsed to the bed.

Trey appeared in front of her. An apparition, just a glimpse of what she wanted. His fingers touched her cheek. “Stay with me.”

THIRTY-NINE

Trey had seen them wheel out Annalise, his app going haywire trying to keep up with Ember's heart rate.

Stay with me.

He wanted to stay with her. Wanted her to be the one to usher those words, asking him to stick around. Even if it wasn't for long before he had to let her go.

"You need to give us some space." The nurse urged him toward the door, past the doctor who swept in.

The words spoken around him blurred. Trey trailed out into the hall, found a quiet alcove, and bent his knees until his butt hit the floor. He covered his face with his hands and prayed because he had nothing else he could do.

There was no way to find Ma. Vanguard had it covered. Bob and Peter had told him to come here, so if Nellis was watching, he would at least believe Trey might actually do what he asked.

Get the baby, and I'll give you instructions on where to bring it. Then I'll release your mom.

His child. Trey still couldn't believe Nellis was the father of Ember's niece, but the guy had all but admitted to an affair. Just so he could prove how badly he wanted the baby—that their exchange was a family member for a family member. No cops. No one else. Just the two of them.

Trey had left his house alone and come here, Vanguard tracking his every move. Waiting for Nellis to reveal his

location so they could get his ma back.

God, help us.

He'd certainly never been able to help himself. Not in any way that counted. Instead all he amassed was superficial. Fake, like that social media relationship. All for show, relationships that didn't mean anything and never lasted. Now he'd met Ember he knew what true feelings felt like. What love meant when it was real.

Two guys approached Trey and grabbed his biceps. "Up and at 'em." They hauled him to his feet.

He readied himself to fight.

"It's just us." Bob held up his hands. He and Peter were dressed in scrubs, surgical masks over their faces. "Let's go."

They led him to a side room two doors down, shoved him in what he realized was a storage closet, and shut the door. Peter tugged the mask down and folded his arms.

Bob tore his mask off, breaking one of the ear elastics. "Vanguard narrowed down the location Nellis called from."

"They did?" Trey glanced between them.

"We have a team going house to house in that area, so if he's there holding your mom, we'll find him."

"And if he isn't?"

Peter motioned to a duffel. "That's what this is for." He unzipped it. "Nellis wants you to take the baby. He can't get close enough to know this isn't real." He pulled out what had to be a doll.

"That's so real looking it's freaky."

"Right?" Peter shuddered. "We can give you a carrier, or something to bring 'her' out in."

"Do we have to wait until they officially deliver the baby?" Trey asked. "Is he watching that closely?"

"We have no idea how close he's watching." Bob shrugged. "We have to do what we can to keep your mom

alive. Okay?”

“I’m all in for that.” Trey didn’t know what else he could do, anyway.

“So you take the fake baby, walk out like you stole her.”

“Right.”

Peter said, “Then you call Nellis from the car. Which we wired up before we came here, so Simon will know precisely where you are at all times.”

“This might actually work.”

Bob slapped Trey’s shoulder. “Of course it will.”

The door swung open. Peter had been leaning on it. The guy nearly fell backward but was caught by Lucas—who would likely soon be his brother-in-law.

The detective grabbed him. “You okay there, kid?”

Peter cleared his throat. “Yeah, good.”

“Dressed for the job you want?”

“Uh...” He glanced at Bob.

The second detective—Lucas’s partner, Eric Hummet—said, “Bob” with a frown on his face.

Trey glanced between them. “You guys know each other?”

Eric said, “Bob is my father-in-law.”

Peter grinned. “Then it’s all good. We’re family, just trying to do right by family.”

Lucas frowned now. “What did you do?”

Trey motioned to the hall. “Could we get out of the closet?”

Bob waylaid him. “Nellis’s orders were that you can’t contact the cops. We don’t know who in the hospital he has on his payroll. Could be there’s someone up here working on that baby under orders from him to ensure everything goes to plan.”

“Talk.” Lucas folded his arms.

“Nellis has my mother.” Trey’s stomach roiled. “He wants to trade Annalise’s baby for her release.”

“*His* baby.”

Trey flinched. “You know?”

“The doctor let it slip. It was her ace card, and she played it well. We can hold her overnight, but I don’t know what the district attorney is going to charge her with.” Lucas blew out a breath.

“Just to clarify”—Eric lifted both his hands, palms out—“Vanguard isn’t asking you to take the baby. Are they?”

Trey glanced at the duffel. “Sure they are. It’s the plan.”

Eric blanched.

“Dude, it’s a doll.” Lucas patted his shoulder.

Trey shifted his weight from foot to foot. “There are too many people in this closet.”

Lucas backed out into the hall. “Heads up. Trey needs to move.”

Trey frowned at his partner’s boyfriend. “What does that mean?”

“Freya said sometimes you just need to bleed off energy. Pace it out.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Trey always figured he wasn’t that unique.

Lucas shrugged. “Walk.”

Trey glanced back. Peter lifted his chin. Eric had gone in the closet to talk to his father-in-law, further proof it was a small world. “I don’t like waiting.”

“If people knew how much of police work was waiting for something to happen, or gathering information hoping on the slim chance of a lead...”

“Nellis is going to kill her when he realizes I don’t have his baby.” Trey turned and paced back. “I need to say that out loud. Because it’s true, isn’t it?”

Lucas folded his arms. “We don’t know that.”

Peter glanced at Lucas.

Trey said, “He doesn’t believe you,” and pointed at the younger man.

“I’ve worked kidnapping cases before.”

Trey waited. “And?”

“They’re all different. It’s impossible to draw conclusions,” Lucas said. “You have to let it play out to its end and not do anything rash.”

“I’m not going to do something rash.”

“You just don’t like waiting. Which makes you the same as every other human on the planet.” Lucas gave him a flat smile.

“So...pray or something.”

“You’re asking me to pray?”

Trey stopped in front of the cop. “I’m not good at it. You do it.”

Peter shifted closer to their huddle. Lucas laid a hand on Trey’s shoulder and asked for God to protect his ma. He asked for wisdom for them all. For the doctors to keep the baby safe, and for her to never be in any danger. Lucas lifted up Ember and her situation as well.

Trey wanted to interject an amendment to the prayer that she should accept Annalise’s heart like Clare had suggested. Even though it seemed impossible to get her to change her mind and acquiesce.

Lucas squeezed his shoulder. “Thank You, Lord, for the hope You give us every day.”

“Amen.” Peter took a step back.

Trey echoed the word.

“It’s not a guarantee everything will be fine,” Lucas said. “Your mom knows what she believes in, and she trusts God. Nellis has no reason to harm her, because you won’t give him

the baby if he does.” He paused. “Like I said, we let this play out.”

“As soon as the surgery is over, I take the fake baby and we get this done.”

Peter said, “Vanguard will be right behind you every step. We won’t let anything happen to Audrey.”

Trey’s phone buzzed. He pulled it out. “Might be Nellis.” But it wasn’t. “It’s Ember’s app.”

She was dying.

Trey sprinted down the hall, through the open door.

“Leave, now!” The nurse held up her hand.

Ember’s body convulsed, fighting to stay alive. To get her heart to beat a regular rhythm instead of out of control and way too fast.

Trey spun around. “Do something!”

“There’s nothing we can do.”

Trey shoved the nurse out of the way, glad it was a guy. Then he fisted his hand and slammed it down on her chest. Someone tried to grab him, but he shoved them off.

Ember sucked in a breath and coughed.

“That isn’t going to last longer than a couple of seconds!” the nurse shouted. “Then you’ll be fired and arrested, too!”

Ember’s eyes opened.

Trey touched her cheeks. “Don’t do this.”

She stared at him. He didn’t even know how much she understood.

He touched his forehead to hers. “Don’t leave.”

“Trey.” Her voice was a whisper of breath.

“I need an answer,” a man said.

Trey glanced back.

The doctor he'd talked to earlier, the one who would deliver the baby, and could do the transplant stood at the doorway. "Time is running out."

Yes, it was. Trey looked at Ember again. "Do you want to live?"

She stared at him. Everything in Trey wanted to tell everyone she mouthed the word *yes*, whether she had or not. But he'd have to live with that.

The doctor walked to the side of the bed. "Ms. Hendryx, do you want your sister's heart?"

Trey blinked against the gathering tears. "Please."

Her body bucked. "Yes."

Ember's heart monitor flatlined.

FORTY

Trey held the decoy baby in the carrier as he walked through the parking lot.

“You’re doing great, bud.”

The voice in his ear came from the van parked across the lot, Lucas trying to be reassuring. The two detectives had co-opted the Vanguard operation and were now in the loop—but according to them, they were the ones calling the shots.

Trey clicked his car key fob and buckled the baby carrier into the back seat. Securing a baby with just a seatbelt wasn’t a good idea, but if Nellis were watching, he probably wouldn’t care even if this were his child.

Annalise would never be able to tell anyone what happened with Brad, and between her and Nellis. Brad had seemed under the impression she was having a baby because they needed the money they’d get from the adoption. As if Nellis would’ve paid them? Instead he’d had Brad killed.

Trey gripped the steering wheel, sat parked in the space.

“Make the call, bud.”

He dug out his phone and stared at the number Nellis had called from. The team from Vanguard going house to house hadn’t come up with anything. It was up to him to do this so they could locate Ma and get her back.

His gaze drifted up to the window of the hospital. He didn’t know which one was the exact room Ember had been in

with Annalise. The tone of her monitor, indicating she had no heartbeat, still rang in his ears.

The doctor had yelled orders, Trey was pushed out of the way, and they wheeled Ember to surgery to try to save her life. A heart could only be out of a body for under six hours, and they had to prep her to receive it. There wouldn't be word on her condition anytime soon, let alone confirmation the transplant had worked.

There was nothing he could do for Ember.

But he could do what he needed to save his ma—or help Vanguard save her.

Lucas spoke in his ear again. “Freya should be here in a minute. She had the chief take their ambulance out of service and cut out early so she can wait for word about Ember while you’re doing this.”

“Thanks,” Trey croaked. He cleared his throat. “Thanks.”

“Call Nellis,” Lucas said. “Get your mom back, then you can get back here for Ember.”

“Okay.” Trey pushed everything from his mind and hit Dial.

“You have my baby?” Nellis asked.

“It’s a girl, in case you’re curious.” Trey had to act like this meant nothing to him. Like he wasn’t spinning out about Ember. If Nellis thought he was overcome with terror for Ma’s safety, the guy would use that to his advantage and make things worse. At least, that was what Bob had said. “Tell me where to bring her, and we do this trade. You give me my mother back, safe and sound.”

Nellis rattled off an address.

“Prove to me my mother is unharmed, and you get your daughter.” *As if.* He was glad Nellis thought this was real, because otherwise it wouldn’t work. But the guy seriously thought Trey was the kind of man who’d abduct a newborn from the hospital?

The phone rustled.

“A baby, Trey? You can’t do that.” She gasped. “Don’t worry about—”

Tears filled his eyes.

“Bring me my child.” Nellis ended the call.

Trey dropped the phone in the cup holder and took a few long, choppy inhales. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, then realized that was a bad idea and started the car. He had to focus and not think about Ember.

The feel of her hair between his fingers.

That breathy yes, she wanted to live. She wanted her sister’s heart and all the pain that meant taking on board along with the organ. Choosing to allow her sister’s death to mean she could continue her own life.

A judge had that contract.

There was no way they’d agree the baby belonged to whoever had paid for an illegal adoption, even if Dr. Bessy had paperwork to cover herself.

They would surely give the baby to Ember as the closest relative—as soon as she was able to care for the child. If everything worked out, Trey wanted to be the one to help. He could care for the baby and Ember, ensuring they had whatever they needed.

Ma could help out as well. Maybe he could persuade her to stay in Benson for a while, lend a hand with a newborn and a woman with a brand-new heart.

That’s what I want, God. For things to be good, and right. Ember needs something good in her life. I need her.

He gripped the wheel and headed for the address Nellis had given him, in a part of town he was familiar enough with that he didn’t need GPS.

“Okay, Vanguard is in position. They’re breaching the house now.”

“Copy.” Trey sniffed. All he had to do was drive there, on the off chance Nellis could track him. Or had someone

watching him.

Ember.

He prayed she pulled through because he had no power to affect the surgery. He had done everything he could, and now there was nothing left but to leave it in God's hands.

Trey pulled onto the street. A For Rent sign in the yard, a car in the drive. It looked like any other house. This was where Ma was being held?

“We're right behind you.”

Trey pulled into the drive. Darkly dressed figures crept around the exterior of the house.

“Stay in the car. If your mom needs medical attention, you'll be the first to know, and you can help her.”

Trey said, “Copy.”

In his mirrors he saw the black van pull up across the street. A couple of SUVs parked a few houses down probably belonged to the Vanguard team, prepping to breach the residence.

Most of the employees were cross-trained to work in different divisions and were on call for operations like this. He had no interest in doing that kind of job—before or after now. He got enough excitement as an EMT.

But now that he had the prospect of a family?

He needed to call the chief tomorrow and tell him he was interested in the promotion. If he had a newborn and a woman in his life—one who would hopefully soon be wearing a ring—he needed to get off long shifts and settle. Buy a bigger house. Take a white-shirt position with the fire department. Start thinking about savings, and long term.

Power inside the house cut out. Lights on one moment, the next there was darkness throughout. Like Ember's heart. Beating one moment and then blackout, like someone killed the power.

The way his heart felt when he heard his father was dead.
Killed in action.

A flash lit up inside the house, and the team raced inside.

Trey didn't move, sat in his car on the drive. He'd held on to his dad's death like it was a betrayal ever since it happened. In reality, he'd been tossed into pure fear. Trying to figure out how to do this without his dad.

Scared. Like Ember had been when she kicked him out of her sister's hospital room.

Too scared to hope.

The way he had been. Ignoring a loving heavenly Father his mother said held them all in His hands. Even her. Even in this.

Forgive me.

Trey had reacted just like Ember, scared because he couldn't have what he wanted and didn't dare dream again. He'd settled for what he could get for himself instead of waiting for what God had for him. Waiting for Ember.

He'd lived his entire life in a blackout.

No hope.

In reality, he needed to let God light up everything.

Two men in tactical gear exited the house, hauling Nellis between them. His head hung down. Trey pushed out of the car.

"Stay back, Trey." Lucas jogged across the street, Eric beside him.

Trey stayed by his vehicle.

Right then, Nellis walked by and shoved himself upright, hands cuffed behind his back. "You!"

Trey said nothing.

"I'll kill you! You're dead!" Nellis struggled, handed from the Vanguard guys over to police custody.

“Where’s my mother?” Trey called out the question, not asking anyone in particular.

“I’m here.” She stepped out of the house, a Vanguard operative holding her arm. Walking gingerly, but unharmed. Her face was a little puffy, like she’d been crying.

Trey jogged over to assess her up close. “You okay, Ma?”

She lifted her chin. “Tell me you didn’t put a baby in danger, Trey Michael Banning.”

The Vanguard operative chuckled. It was Peter. “We used a decoy, ma’am.”

“A doll,” Trey told her. “Don’t worry.”

“Good.” She smoothed down her sweater and shivered. “How’s Ember?”

“Let’s go see her. You can ride in my warm car.” Still, he removed his jacket and wrapped it around her. “You can give the police a statement later.” He walked with his arm around her. “Are you okay? You must have been pretty scared.”

“Of course I’m fine, honey. I wasn’t alone. I had the Lord with me.”

Trey felt peace settle inside him. “So did I.”

FORTY-ONE

Four days later

“Audrey is really okay?” It wasn’t the question Ember wanted to ask. She also didn’t have the energy for a drawn-out conversation.

Clare stood at the foot of the bed so Ember didn’t have to crane her neck, dressed in PPE because Ember couldn’t be exposed to germs her body didn’t have the energy to fight off. Along with a dizzying amount of additional information she wouldn’t possibly remember. But the short of it was that Ember’s body didn’t need to have to work harder than it already was. This would be a long road to recovery.

She would get there.

Her niece needed Ember there to look out for her.

Clare nodded. “Audrey is fine. Nellis is in jail. First thing he did was flip on Doctor Bessy, so you don’t have anything to worry about there. I spoke to the couple who were set to adopt Annalise’s baby and explained the situation. Vanguard refunded the money they’d paid Nellis and pointed them to a reputable adoption agency.”

“But that’s not what you came here to tell me?” Ember wanted to ask about Trey, but she had no right. She remembered his face like a dream. Him in front of her.

Do you want to live?

She wanted to live if she had him as part of her life. It wasn’t an all-or-nothing thing. She had a baby to take care of

now, and a life of her own to build. But not having Trey? That would be a hard road to walk.

Clare said, "Marcus was also arrested recently."

There it was.

"Your CIA partner had irregularities in his tax returns that indicated fraud. When the Department of Justice dug deeper, they discovered a pattern of indications he's been receiving kickbacks for years. Selling secrets. Weapons. Deadly chemicals that could leave an unfortunate victim with heart failure."

"I'm not a victim." She'd walked into that room of her own accord. He'd duped her, but she should've realized it.

Clare patted the blanket over her leg. "No one thinks that. But thanks to that arrest, he won't be hurting innocent people through his careless actions in the future. He won't see the light of day."

"Interesting. So the CIA had that job open back up." Like Ember didn't know Clare had orchestrated that whole thing as recompense for the injury Marcus had caused, just so he could get the promotion over her.

So long as Clare didn't think...

Ember shook her head. "I'm not interested in going back to the CIA."

"Good." Clare drew out a white envelope and handed it over. "Because with the severance the CIA just handed you, they don't want to see you again. They'd rather pretend you don't exist and feel you should agree."

"I've been burned."

"More like you're dead to them." Clare blanched. "I didn't mean that."

"It's fine." Ember wanted to laugh. "I've been dead more than most people the last few weeks. Days. Whatever. But we can wait and laugh about it later. After I figure out what to do now." She slid a finger under the envelope flap and pulled out what turned out to be a check. With several zeros. "Wow."

“That should tide you over.”

Ember blinked. “For the rest of my life.” She stuffed the check back in the envelope because looking at it seemed weird.

“Until you get on your feet. Then you’ll be starting your job as a consultant for Vanguard—the other reason the CIA no longer has any interest in you.” Clare smiled. “I made it clear. You work for me now.”

“I do?”

“They know how I am about my people. Even ones who haven’t started working for me quite yet.”

Ember thought about the baby. Her niece. Where she was going to live. So many things to figure out, and right now she couldn’t even get out of bed on her own. She wanted to ask Clare where Trey was but didn’t have the right to. “How is she? The baby?”

“You haven’t picked out a name for her yet?”

“Oh. Uh, I guess I need to do that.” Ember worried her lip between her teeth.

“You’ll figure it out. She’s fine right now, being taken care of in the hospital nursery.”

“And Trey?” The question slipped out. So innocent, and yet not.

“He’s busy.”

Ember nodded. “He has a life. He should live it.”

“*Right.*”

Ember lifted her head and looked at her friend. “What does that mean?”

“I figured we’d get around to this.” Clare pulled out her phone from the folds of the PPE and tapped the screen.

The voice that picked up was audible through the speakers. “She asked?”

“Yep. Thanks, Audrey.” After a second, Clare turned the screen.

A video call between Clare and Audrey, but all Ember saw was a row of babies. Audrey shifted the phone to a man sitting in a rocker, holding a baby to his chest. Eyes closed. Gently swaying.

So much warmth rushed through Ember. A little of the pressure in her chest she’d woke up with yesterday eased, and she sucked in a breath. “Trey.”

“He’s been here every day,” Audrey whispered. “Took vacation from work, after he told the chief that he definitely wants the captain’s job so he can be in the office and work regular hours. I keep catching him on his phone, looking at three-bedroom houses for sale.”

On the phone screen, Trey’s eyes opened. He glanced around. “Ma?”

“Let me take the baby for a minute. You take the phone.” The view shifted to the wall, then the ceiling. “Ember’s awake.”

“Ember?”

“Yeah, honey,” Audrey said.

Ember saw him take the phone. Clare held hers out to Ember. “I’ll give you guys a few minutes.”

“Thank you.” Ember didn’t know what else to say that would encompass what she was feeling. She waited for him to settle, a bland painting behind him. His face came into view. “Hey.”

Trey’s lips spread wide. “Hey, yourself.” He stared for a second. “I wanted to come and see you, but the doctor said if I’m spending a lot of time with the baby that I should hold off until you’re stronger. I figured you’d want to know she’s being taken care of, so I’ve been in the nursery making sure she’s good.”

“Is she?”

“She’s amazing, Ember.” He shook his head. “I thought it might make a difference knowing who her father is. But she has no idea. She’s just a baby.” He sniffed. “How are you?”

“They gave me a lot of meds.” She shook her head. “I’m a little out of it, but I don’t feel like my chest was spread open and someone else’s heart was put in, so it’s probably working, whatever they’re doing. And the instructions. I’m exhausted, and my head is spinning.”

Trey’s expression softened. “You’re slurring your words, but I get what you’re saying. You’re okay.”

“I want to see you.” She also wanted to snuggle down in the bed and fall asleep listening to his voice, but she was already as far down as she could get without a major rehashing of every pillow and tube coming in and out of her.

“I’m so glad you decided to give this a try.”

“Life?”

Trey chuckled. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I have things still to do.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said.

“It’s what Annalise would’ve wanted. I’ll be able to tell her daughter about Mom, and about her. So she feels like she knows them.”

“I love you.”

Ember sucked in a breath. The persistent ache roiled through her chest. She wanted to press a hand there and move it over the bandages, trying to rub away the feeling. Then she remembered the last time she tried to see the wound. Straining. Adding the pressure of her hand. Bad ideas.

“I’m sorry. You don’t need this right now.”

“I love you, too.” Ember thought maybe he should’ve already known. “How could I not? You’re an amazing man.”

“No one’s ever thought that about me before.”

From the background of the call, someone yelled out, “Except your mother!” A baby started crying. Ember heard the apologies and shushing.

Trey frowned. “I just got her to sleep.”

“I’m sorry.” Audrey’s voice was a loud whisper.

He glanced back at Ember. “Do you know what you want to call her? If you think about it, I can make sure the doctor gives you your phone, and you can call me.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

Fatigue pressed down on her. “Really?” She didn’t have the energy to explain it all. “Everything.”

“I’ll see you soon, okay? The baby is good. We just need you to heal and get strong enough so we can come and visit you.”

“Kay.” She saw Clare reappear as her eyes drifted shut.

“Bye, Ember.”

“Love you.”

“I love you, too, honey.”

The phone was tugged from her fingers, and Ember fell all the way asleep.

FORTY-TWO

Three weeks later

Trey heard the doorbell ring. A second later the baby, tucked in a crib in the office where Ma insisted on sleeping on the pullout, started to cry. He got up off the couch with a groan, tugged open the front door, and stared at the man on his doorstep.

“You gonna let me in? It’s cold.” Allen Frees—Trey’s stepbrother by marriage, not blood—hammered down the brakes on his wheelchair.

Trey grinned and held out one hand.

Allen grabbed it, and they both used their strength together to lever Allen up to standing. They grabbed each other in a hug, which consisted of Trey using a good deal of strength to keep his brother upright. But neither cared, or commented.

His brother had been a police officer in Last Chance County and was now the liaison between city hall and the fire department. Running point with the mayor. Trying to wrangle the firefighters into some semblance of a team. Allen was the reason Trey’s life hadn’t gone full speed off the deep end.

Allen slapped him on the back.

As soon as he quit, which was the signal, Trey helped ease him back down into his wheelchair. “It’s good to see you.” He backed up enough Allen could push himself inside. They’d already talked over Trey’s new faith. Or rediscovered faith. It felt new, and far more solid than it had been when he was younger.

Allen glanced down the hall. “How is she?”

Trey shook his head. “Baby crazy. Is anyone surprised?”

Allen chuckled. “Her first grandchild. Let’s just say if it happens to me, I’ll be keeping it to myself for a while before I let her wade in.”

“I’ve been very helpful, thank you very much.” Ma stood at the end of the hall, one hand on her hip and the other holding the baby.

“Hi, Ma.” Allen grinned.

“And I made cookies and everything.” She huffed and headed for the kitchen, calling back, “Did you bring my package from Natalie?”

“Yes, ma’am. I did.” Allen followed her into the kitchen, where Trey had pushed the table to the wall to make more space for his brother to move around. And Ember when she got here.

Trey stood in the doorway and watched them chatter.

The baby fussed, so Allen poured two cups of coffee.

He was too antsy to drink more. She should be here soon. Hopefully then, he’d be able to persuade her to never leave. That was the plan, anyway. Ma could bribe her with cookies. The baby would be sweet and not puke on her like she had with Trey yesterday when he’d been burping her.

He needed to fold that laundry.

Allen said, “I think he fell asleep standing up.”

Ma chuckled. “Fatherhood will do that to you.”

“How long until she gets here?” Allen glanced up at their ma.

“Long enough for this.” She swiped something off the table with her free hand and held it out to him. An envelope. Trey tried to reach for it, but she held it back. “You are sworn to secrecy.”

“Okay.” Trey took the envelope and moved the flap enough to see inside. Then he looked up and frowned. “But you canceled the bet.”

“I wanted you to find something real. To wait for it to come to you, in God’s timing. That’s exactly what happened.” She lifted up on the balls of her feet and kissed his cheek, the baby between them. “I’m proud of you, honey.”

Trey’s eyes blurred.

“I’ll hold that for you so it doesn’t get wet.” Allen motioned to the envelope with his fingers.

Trey took a step back.

“Darn.” Allen chuckled, pointing at Trey. “I *will* get that recipe.”

“No, you won’t.” Ma laughed, swaying with the baby. “You keep that safe, Trey.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The doorbell rang.

Trey spun around so fast the envelope fluttered. He stuck it in his back pocket, thinking he could make those cookies for Ember every year on their anniversary.

He strode to the door.

“I still don’t see why Clare had to be the one to pick her up from the hospital.”

Trey glanced back. “You want them to wait out in the cold so I can tell you Ember wanted to get her hair done?”

Ma frowned, patting the baby’s back. “I guess not.”

Trey opened the door, a smile so wide his face hurt from it.

“She didn’t want to use the chair.” Clare pulled a suitcase up to the door and stood it upright, the handle extended. Ember’s things, because she was here to stay.

Ember stood in front of him, at eye level. Dressed in slacks and a Christmas sweater, her hair freshly cut and styled to

frame her face. Makeup. She didn't look like someone who'd had a heart transplant only weeks ago.

"I just have to make it to the couch." She reached out and held the doorframe. "Then I want to see my niece."

She'd waited weeks to see the baby so they could both build their immune systems. They'd still spent hours on video chat before that. Getting to know each other. Talking for hours.

"I've got a better idea." Trey stepped forward, got his arms in the right spots, and lifted her.

Clare chuckled. Ma let out an audible sigh and said, "Come in, girl. It's cold out."

"Actually, my work here is done." Clare took a step back. "Selena called for a meeting, so I need to head to the office."

From Trey's arms, Ember said, "Bye, Clare."

He glanced back, halfway down the hall now, and saw her wave. "Selena?"

Clare shrugged. "I'll find out, I guess." She grinned.

He grinned back, then continued to the couch. He stopped across the room, though. Wondering...

"Don't you dare put me in a bed," Ember said. "I want to sit like a normal person before I take fifty-eight pills and sleep for three days because I'm exhausted."

Trey chuckled.

Ember patted the shirt right next to her cheek. Tucked against his chest.

He sat, shifting her so she was beside him but also still kind of in his lap.

"Here you go." Ma leaned down and laid the baby with her feet to Ember's stomach. Her back along Ember's legs. The baby blinked open her eyes.

"Hi, lovely." Ember touched the onesie over her belly.

"She likes it when you hold her hand." Trey reached out with his finger, and the baby curled her tiny fingers around his.

“She’s strong.”

“Good.” Ember’s eyes filled with tears. “She’s so beautiful.”

Trey settled his arm around her, moving closer to be near to her. Finally, the three of them together. They’d been waiting weeks for this. Tomorrow they would celebrate Christmas, even though December twenty-fifth had come and gone.

No one cared.

Allen rolled his wheelchair down the hall, dragging a suitcase behind him. His. Ember’s. The house was full, like his heart. Trey leaned over and kissed Ember’s forehead.

She turned to him.

Trey shifted and touched his lips to hers, deepening the kiss when he caught the wave of all the promise ahead of them. All the moments to come and the hope of what could be. What might be. The life they would live. The children they would have together. All of it swelled in that moment, and he realized he’d been smiling since he opened the door to her.

He leaned back. “Marry me.”

Ember smiled.

“You were supposed to wait to ask!” Ma rushed in and stopped, exasperation on her face. “What are you doing?”

Ember burst out laughing, then groaned. “Still hurts.”

“Ma!”

The baby’s face scrunched. Trey scooped her onto his chest. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

Ember put her hand on the baby’s back and laid her head on his other shoulder. Face-to-face with her niece.

Allen’s low chuckle drifted in from the kitchen. “I’ll make coffee!”

Trey groaned and leaned his head back on the couch. “Maybe you and Ma could go see a movie tonight. Give us some space.”

Ember chuckled quietly.

“Not on your life.” Ma came in with a dish towel.
“Dinner?”

“Yes, Ma. Thank you.” Trey sighed.

“Yes, please,” Ember said.

“I’ll make a bottle for the baby,” Ma said. “She’ll be hungry soon.”

“Her name is Cassie.” Ember sat still as she stroked the baby’s cheek.

Trey looked down at them both, resting against his chest. “Cassie?” Ember hadn’t decided what to call the baby, hanging on to it until she met her niece for the first time. Clare had expedited the adoption paperwork. As soon as they had her legal name, they would file the amendment for her name change.

“Cassie. It was my mom’s name.”

Ma turned back to the kitchen, swiping away tears.

Trey kissed the top of Ember’s head.

Ember shifted and lifted her face. “And the answer to your question is yes,” she said, her face soft. “I will marry you.”

I really hope you enjoyed this story, would you please consider leaving a review? It really helps others find their next read.

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LAST CHANCE FIRE AND RESCUE BOOK ONE



EXPIRED
RETURN

U.S.A. TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LISA PHILLIPS

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ONE

Pepper pulled into the police department parking lot. She stared at the building and tried to figure out how long since she'd been inside for a visit.

“Are we going inside there, Auntie?”

Pepper shut off the engine and turned to her niece in the back seat. “Yes, we are. They're all really nice, and I just need to talk to them for a second before we go to the vet's.”

Her smile cracked, but she'd been pretending everything was fine since Christmas, so that was nothing new.

Eight-year-old Victory, her niece, jabbed the button to release her seatbelt. “Cool.”

Pepper climbed out of the car, chuckling. Victory took her hand as they crossed the parking lot—something they'd been doing since the kid learned to walk.

She'd been putting this off for a week. She had to rip off the bandage, ignore how they would react to her, and ask for help.

Pepper shoved open the front door on that note and immediately pulled up short. The woman behind the reception desk had a white pixie cut, better makeup than Pepper could pull off, and earrings that swung when she turned her head.

Ruby's red lips widened, and the smile lit her eyes. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Hey, Ruby.” Pepper blinked. “Where's Kaylee?”

“Girl, she hasn’t worked here in months. After the third baby, I don’t blame her.” Ruby tipped her head back and chuckled. “Kaylee and Stuart bought a cute house in the hills. Enough rooms to fill with a whole football team of kids.” She smiled wider, still amused. “I get to squish them all every Sunday in the nursery.”

Meanwhile, Pepper’s chest felt like she’d been hit with a shot of something that burned all the way to her heart.

Victory shifted and looked up at her.

Pepper’s cheeks flamed as she realized she’d been holding on to Victory’s hand too tight. “I’m sorry, Ruby. That was rude of me, just because I expected Kaylee.”

She loosened her grip on her niece’s hand, ignoring why she needed that solidarity. Victory shouldn’t have to carry the weight of Pepper’s insecurities on top of everything else going on in her life.

She lifted her chin. “I need to file a report, please.”

Ruby frowned. “Sure thing, doll.”

A uniformed officer in the sea of desks behind the counter got up and headed for their break room.

Ruby pretended that was normal. She pasted on a smile. “I’ll find someone you can...”

Aiden Donaldson, now the sergeant, walked out the back hall and saw Pepper. He stopped to frown at her. Not exactly openly hostile, but the woman who’d broken his friend’s heart wasn’t welcome here.

Ruby waved him over. “Can you take a statement from Ms. Miller, hon—uh, Sarge? She wants to file a report.” Before he could say yes or no, Ruby hopped off her stool and motioned to Victory. “This lovely young lady and I will get to know each other.”

Victory openly smiled, which didn’t happen often. Not exactly surprising, given the people who’d been in and out of her life. The kid had more street smarts at eight years old than Pepper had managed in thirty-eight years.

“Why don’t you come around, *Ms. Miller?*” Aiden waved her to the half door.

Pepper and Ruby exchanged spots, during which Pepper didn’t meet the other woman’s gaze. Why did this feel like *she* was the one who’d done something wrong? Oh, right. In their eyes, she had. She’d broken their brother’s heart right before his tragic accident.

Pepper glanced back at Victory.

“She’ll be fine. Ruby is great with kids.”

That’s not just any kid. Maybe everyone who cared for a child thought that about theirs, but it was true with Victory. “I know she is.”

“Then have a little trust in us.”

Eighteen months, and the police in Last Chance County still hated her.

“Come on. Let’s get this done.” Donaldson motioned her to a seat, unaware of his brash tone.

She settled into the hard plastic chair on the short side of the desk. The edge had a metal ring fixed to it for securing handcuffs. Great. She’d been given the criminal’s chair.

Go figure. How about they have a little trust?

Donaldson lifted his brows.

Pepper said, “Aren’t you going to ask me a question?”

Thankfully, no one else was around to see this. It was seven thirty in the morning, which was why she’d chosen this time. The police department wasn’t exactly on her way to work.

“I figured you knew how this worked.” Donaldson slid over a legal pad. “But okay, what did you want to report?”

Pepper held herself very still. “I came here because I need help, not to be browbeaten.”

“I apologize.” He didn’t look apologetic. He looked like he wanted to get this over with as soon as he could.

That was what her actions had accomplished.

She'd turned a perfectly nice family man and good cop into a guy with an attitude who wanted her out of here as fast as possible.

Pepper stared at the desk across from her. "My sister asked me to watch Victory for the holidays. She was supposed to be here four days ago to pick her up, but she never showed. She's not returning my calls. That was the first couple of days, and now it's just going to voicemail. Like her phone ran out of battery or something, and I just—"

"Let me stop you there."

She bit her lip.

"Pepper."

"What?"

His face had blanked. "Can you tell me your sister's legal name?"

Of course he needed that. "Sage Katherine Burns."

Aiden scrawled the name on a notepad. "Is she married... or are you?"

Pepper spoke carefully. "Miller is our family name." In the sense she'd changed it legally to match the foster mom they'd lived with for years. "Sage got married ten years ago but they're divorced now."

He asked her for a few other pertinent details, like Sage's address and date of birth. Her phone number.

"She was supposed to be here."

A muscle in his jaw flexed. "Sorry, I can imagine it's an inconvenience having to care for a child."

That wasn't fair. Wasn't the reason at all, but she reined in her reaction. She knew well the story of his child and the reunion that'd happened between Aiden and Bridget. They had two more children now.

It seemed like everyone in Last Chance County had children. There were kids all over town these days.

All the places she liked to go for peace and quiet were overrun with munchkins that Victory loved to make friends with while everyone ignored Pepper and treated her like the pariah she was.

“I can call social services if you don’t feel you can—”

Pepper stood up. “How dare you.” She could spit fire at him right now. She’d loved and supported Victory since the day she was born. “You know *nothing* about me.”

“What’s this?”

Pepper whirled around at that voice. *Heart. Breaking.* She loved that gruff, commanding voice more than anything else in the world.

He wore a look a lot like Aiden’s. Blank, which she knew—or hoped—had to do with protecting his heart because he still cared for her. Except he probably hated her.

Donaldson sat back in his chair. “Allen.”

Former police officer Allen Frees had both hands on the wheels of his chair. He wore a fire department uniform of slacks and a white shirt. Emblems. A badge. His life of service hadn’t ended when he landed in that chair after a building blew up over his head.

As far as she’d been able to tell, it barely slowed him down.

He looked at Aiden, dismissing her completely. “What is this?”

“She’s filing a report about her missing sister.”

“She’s done.” Pepper turned to the sergeant. “Thanks anyway.”

She would have to find her sister on her own, even if the police department in the town where Sage lived hadn’t returned any of her calls.

She sucked in a breath and squared her shoulders. “Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

Pepper went the opposite way around the neighboring desk. She got almost to the dividing half door when Allen rolled in front of her.

“Hold up a second.” His dark brows drew together.

She couldn’t look at his shoulders or his arms. They were even stronger than they’d been when they dated.

The two-year anniversary of their first date was coming up in just a few days. Victory was supposed to be gone, and Pepper had gotten the night off work. She’d planned to watch a tragic movie and eat far too much ice cream so she could go to bed and cry herself to sleep.

So what? Her choices were between her and the Lord. They certainly weren’t anyone else’s business. But she did *not* need Victory to be a witness to her tragedy.

Allen’s voice rumbled over her. “Since when do you have a sister?”

Pepper couldn’t get into the fact they’d dated for nearly a year and he had no idea about her family. She had to get to work.

“Sage is ten months younger than me. Everyone thought we were twins, even though I was in the grade ahead of her at school. She’s missing, and I was hoping the sergeant—or anyone here—could help me figure out how to find her.”

He shifted in the chair. He could stand for a few seconds if needed, and she was thankful for that.

She’d seen him getting in and out of his truck in town, sometimes standing to do it and sometimes hauling himself up and lifting the chair across his lap to put it on the seat behind him. She’d *never* stopped what she was doing and watched him move.

Nor had she been hiking and seen him riding his horse in the mountains and paused to watch him pass by. Definitely *not* stalking him like a crazy woman who couldn’t let go.

Allen was six feet—four inches taller than her. He was as imposing in his chair as he was at full height. The accident had done nothing to diminish the pull she felt toward him.

He started to speak, but a running Tasmanian devil hit the reception counter. “Auntie, can I have a *sucker*? They have the *blue ones*.”

“Wow.” Pepper grinned at Victory. “The blue ones.”

Thank goodness she’d managed to talk Victory into a breakfast not involving sugar.

“Sure, Nugget. We need to leave, though.” Pepper looked at her watch. She wasn’t late, but they did need to leave for her shift at the veterinarian’s office where she worked as a nurse. So that wasn’t a lie.

Sergeant Donaldson came over, probably thinking he needed to rescue his friend from her. “Coffee, Allen?”

He nodded but didn’t look at his friend. He kept staring at her instead. “Thanks. Got some business for the PD.”

Aiden headed for the break room.

Allen said, “I’m sure these guys can help you find your sister.”

Tears burned her eyes. Pepper didn’t even know which thing she was going to cry over. Maybe all of it. Her whole life. She sniffed. “Thank you. I do need to go now.”

“Is your sister similar to you in height and weight? Does she live here?”

Pepper frowned. “She lives in Cheyenne.”

“Never mind, then.” Allen slid his phone from a little pocket on the side of the chair by his leg. “Though, you could tell me what kind of car she might be driving. Color, or make and model. That kind of thing.”

Pepper held her body tight so he didn’t see her flinch. “Did something happen?”

“I don’t know yet. That’s why I’m here.”

“My sister drives a brand new white BMW. An SUV.”

His expression gave nothing away. Something he did when he didn't like a situation. “Any chance she could be driving something else?”

Pepper had to admit it. “I have no idea.”

Two police officers strolled out of the back hallway into the bullpen, as they called it. Both saw her. Both looked at her with distaste.

One called out, “You good, Frees?”

He glanced at them, then at her. “I've got it covered.”

“I have to go.” Pepper resituated her purse on her shoulder. “Can you please text me if there's anything I need to know?”

Assuming he hadn't “lost” her number.

He gave her one sharp nod. “I can do that.”

She wanted to say more, but what good would that do? Pepper strode to the front door. “Let's hit the road, Nugget.”

Victory jumped up from the chair. She held out her hand to Ruby. “It was nice to meet you.”

The older woman smiled widely. “You as well, babycakes.”

Victory giggled, took Pepper's hand, and they went outside. Pepper shivered with the chill of January air, and her niece looked over. “You should've worn your coat, Auntie.”

“I guess so.” She needed a change of subject. “Do you think it might snow again?”

“Oooh, I hope so.” Victory hopped to the car and pulled the door open. “Let's go see the bunnies. And the puppies. And the snake, even though it's gross. And I hope that old cat is still there.”

Pepper climbed into her car. This was the life her choices had given her, the only thing she'd been able to do after her family made their own decisions. If there was a problem, she would solve it.

She would find her sister.

With Victory here, this life certainly wasn't a bad one.
Maybe everyone thought their own life was a disaster.

At least she wasn't alone.

TWO

“**A**nyway, I might have something for you to look into. So give me a call back.” Allen tapped the dash screen and ended the call to Tate, where he’d left the local private investigator a message. Maybe his friend could help Pepper. It certainly wasn’t in Allen’s purview as the City Hall liaison to the fire department.

He shoved the truck into park and let out a long sigh.

I have to go. And wasn’t that the truth? The woman did nothing but try to get away from him.

Instead of letting that go around and around in his mind, Allen shoved the door open. He moved his seat back and dragged the folded wheelchair across his body. He set it down on the ground beside his vehicle.

In the process, he got the thing mostly unfolded. Enough he could sit in it.

Allen shifted his body to the edge of the seat and clasped the tether that hung from the grab handle. He braced his foot and lowered himself hand over hand using the rope knots, so he didn’t fall too fast.

He’d learned that one the hard way.

He grabbed the last knot and lowered his butt into the chair. Shifted his foot. The other foot. Shut the door. Clicked his keys.

Done.

He thanked God every chance he got that he'd managed to figure this process out—with some modifications to his truck so it was drivable for him. People had tried to tell him the process was too convoluted or that someone with a disability like his couldn't drive anything but a van—as if—or a tiny car. Barf. Well, they could quite frankly pry this truck from his cold dead hands. Or bury him in it.

His grandpa had driven a pickup all the years he'd helped raise Allen. He'd had a heart attack in the middle of his cornfield the summer before Allen turned twelve. That same pickup was parked in front of his cabin to this day, the bed filled with dirt where his stepmom had planted flowers years ago.

The same cabin he'd been advised to move out of after he found himself confined to a wheelchair 99.7 percent of the time—which he'd worked down to sixty-five, thanks. Just like he'd been told he'd have to give up his truck.

Show me a roadblock. I'll bring a bulldozer and go through it.

He locked up his truck and headed into City Hall, only slightly late for his meeting with the mayor. Thankfully, the security guard on duty knew him and got Allen through the check-in process quickly.

His dad's words still rang in his head, followed by Grandpa's favorite verse.

The one he'd printed out and stuck on his fridge at home came to mind. *All things are lawful, but not all are expedient.*

Since he got out of the hospital, he'd been working on widening the boundaries of what was practical every day. *He* determined what he was capable of—not other people.

His teachers had learned the hard way not to tell him what he couldn't do. Then his drill sergeant. Then Conroy, his former boss—the police chief. Now his physical therapist at the Ridgeman Therapy Center's PT annex was working on getting a clue.

So he couldn't go for a run. So what? He'd never liked foot chases, even when they ended with the suspect in handcuffs.

The mayor's assistant opened the door for him, announcing his arrival. "Coffee?"

Allen smiled, even though one of the firefighters he worked with told him it made him look like a serial killer. "Black, please."

"Of course, Mr. Frees." She gave him a nervous smile and turned to the mayor. "Sir?"

The new Last Chance County mayor turned from the window. Gregory Harrelson wore a suit and silk tie. Dark hair and a mustache. He looked like that actor whose name Allen could never remember. "Green tea, please, Lyla."

Since their meeting was a standing one every Monday morning, one of the chairs in front of the mayor's desk had been removed. Allen eased into the space and pushed the lever down on his wheels.

Thankfully he'd had enough time before this meeting to touch base with Sergeant Donaldson. Even though Mia Barnes—the chief's wife and a former ATF agent turned cop—was technically still the liaison between City Hall and the Police Department, he liked to keep his old friendships going. Plus he was a firm believer in over-communicating.

Allen twisted his upper body and reached into the backpack hanging behind him for his tablet. He had a copy of the statement Pepper had given to Aiden in his email, even though the sergeant had initially been reluctant to give it to him.

Don't think about her.

Harrelson turned from the window. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Allen tapped the screen of his tablet. "Just after midnight last night, the department responded to a car fire. It was all pretty standard, except for the victim inside."

The mayor perked up. “Oh?”

Allen had learned the hard way the guy possessed no stomach for gory details. The victim had two gunshot wounds in her chest, sustained before the car was set alight. She’d been burned beyond recognition.

He hadn’t even been there, but by the time he got to the firehouse he could tell how bad it was from the weary looks on the firefighter’s faces—and the smoke smell they all carried in with them.

Allen said, “The police department’s homicide detective was looped in. They’re going to work with the medical examiner to identify her.”

The vehicle had been a green car and not the white SUV Pepper said her sister drove. It was unlikely, though not impossible, that her sister was the victim. He intended to follow up with her, though.

“And the preparations for the Winter Carnival?” Gregory accepted his tea from Lyla, who put Allen’s coffee on the edge of the desk in front of him.

Allen lifted his chin. “Thank you.”

Since the Winter Carnival had been the biggest topic of their conversations for the last month, the mayor knew he was on top of it. Considering it was the start of their attempt to turn the tide on local community opinion of the fire department, no one was willing to make a mistake.

“We’re all set for a huge demonstration involving a crash scene, where the firefighters will work to pull a victim from a car and demonstrate their skills. Both the rescue squad and the fire engine crew will have tasks to work on. The EMTs will also be on hand to treat ‘injuries’ sustained by the victims.”

The mayor frowned.

“Students from the local high school who are involved in the HOSA community will play the victims.” Allen waited a beat and made sure the mayor was familiar with the future health professionals student organization. “They know how to

use makeup to simulate injuries and are well-versed in critical incident response themselves. So no worries there.”

“Good.”

Allen realized he should have figured out better how to let the mayor know they were using real people in the fake incident scene.

What mattered was that the public who attended the Winter Carnival got to see the firefighters’ skills in action when it wasn’t a high-stress, real-life situation.

He continued. “Through the day we’re going to have firefighters on hand to show people all the parts of their truck and the equipment used. Kids can climb up and get their pictures taken in the driver’s seat. The arson investigator is going to bring his dog for a sniffing demonstration. And there will be a friendly pickup basketball game between the fire department and police department. We’ll have hot dogs and burgers for the barbecue, and the church ladies have pledged plenty of sides.”

They’d see how friendly the basketball game turned out. Allen had overheard a wager happening but ignored the rivalry, since the guys at the firehouse weren’t hurting anyone by making it interesting.

Harrelson nodded. “Great.”

Savannah, the police detective he’d formerly worked with, had informed him hot dogs and burgers were a “Yankee barbecue” and not what anyone in the South would think of when that word was used. As long as no one got food poisoning, he didn’t care what she thought *barbecue* meant.

Allen read down his list. “Face painting. Balloon animals. A firehouse-themed bounce house...” He wasn’t sure there was anything else.

“You’ve thought of everything, it seems.”

“Of course. This is important.” The town had suffered enough at the hands of the previous fire chief. It was high time for some family fun.

When the new mayor offered him the job, Allen had jumped at the chance to be the liaison between the fire department and City Hall. He could make a real difference in how the community saw the fire crew. Everyone loved the local police department, including their newest officer and his K-9. The fire department? Not so much.

He intended to change things. After all, it was the only thing in his life that *could* change.

Which only made him think of Pepper. Dang it, he needed that woman out of his mind.

Everyone believed she'd dumped him because of the accident. He never got the chance to explain otherwise, even though their relationship ended hours before that building exploded over him and trapped half the officers in the department with him in the basement.

He was grateful no one had died, but his life had been indelibly changed.

Eighteen months later and he had to run into Pepper at the police department. It was almost unfair. Still, the conversation they'd had earlier, though it was brief, was probably the most honest conversation they'd ever had.

She had a sister and a niece he hadn't even known about.

That only solidified his belief it was for the best that they'd broken up. After all, she'd shown him only part of who she was when they dated. He'd been all-in, almost ready to propose.

She'd broken it off with barely an explanation.

Then this morning she'd looked at that kid the way he'd always imagined she would look at theirs one day.

"How about a petting zoo?" The mayor turned to his keyboard and typed. "I'll have Lyla ask the local vet...oh, what's his name?"

"Brett Filks." Allen swallowed. Why didn't this town have a vet Pepper didn't work for? They could've used them for this.

“I’m sure he’s got some goats, turtles, or something the kids can pet.”

Allen knew Brett had a miniature horse or two. But he wasn’t sure about a turtle. “Great.”

“I’ll have him liaise with you about that.”

“Sounds good.” The lump in his throat proved hard to swallow against. As long as he didn’t have to deal with Pepper.

Regardless of all the grief he’d spoken aloud to his horses where only they could hear, the accident had taught him not to wish for what would never be. Their relationship was over. Pepper didn’t want him in her life.

Allen wasn’t interested in dead dreams. There was too much life to live.

“I’m hoping the Winter Carnival at the fire department is a great success.” Harrelson smiled wide, even though there was no press here. “I’ll be there promptly at ten to officially open the festivities.”

“Sounds good, sir.”

He wondered if Pepper would bring her niece, though there had to be a good reason he didn’t often see her around town. They should run into each other more. The fact they didn’t, aside from the odd occasion, made him wonder if she’d figured that out on purpose. Like she made a point to avoid him.

The kid at the police department this morning had been adorable and rambunctious. Polite. But her life had nothing to do with him.

No matter if he wished for it to be different, it wasn’t like anything would ever change.

As he drove back to the fire department, his phone rang.

Tate calling.

Allen swiped the screen. “Put your private investigator hat on. Pepper needs your help.”

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