

She's always been mine.

CHASING

Us

ELLA GOODE

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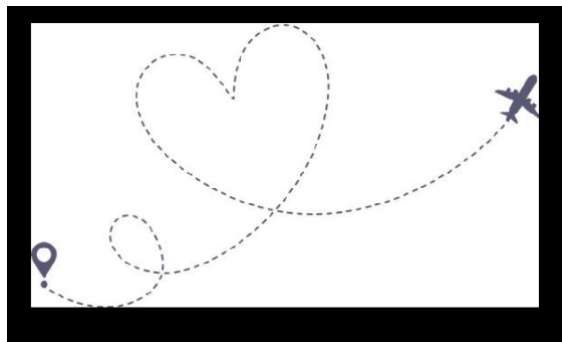
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Chasing You

Vincent

Also by Ella Goode

SUMMARY



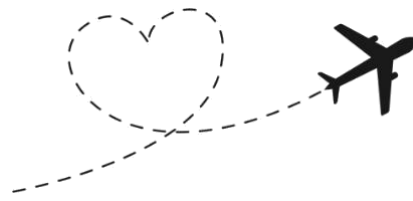
Melody

Men say women are the weaker sex but would a man have kept writing to his crush after years of silence from said crush? No! He would've given that up and moved on! Instead, I powered forward, writing letter after letter to Benson Charles as he served our country. Sure, he might've been mad that when we were ten, I named him Biscuit, but honestly, is that something to hold a grudge over for a decade? He's back in town and say he's here for good and I'm going to be his. He says it's to protect me from a serial killer who is hurting Harrisville citizens and truthfully, I think I have a better chance at finding the serial killer than I do of keeping my heart intact.

Frank

Trying to get a woman to forget the past is harder than pushing an elephant through a needle's eye. Pretty sure that's like the eleventh commandment. Here's the deal though, Melody did write me a boat load of letters and yes, I read them like a lifeline to get me through each day. I should've answered them but I'm a piss poor writer surrounded by other stupid men. I kept my mouth shut with the theory that action speak louder than words only I spent so many years up in the sky for the

Navy while she was at college that I didn't have time to show Melody I loved her. Things are different now but in between trying to convince Melody that my intentions are serious, I have to catch a serial killer.



CHAPTER 1

FRANK

“BISCUIT!” I WASN’T PREPARED FOR MELODY TO THROW herself in my arms. I also didn’t think she’d slap me. Both happened so quickly that I’m a little off center. I rub my cheek and stare after the blonde who is disappearing into the crowd.

“What happened?” asks my partner, Vincent.

“Hell if I know,” I reply. I figured she’d ignore me because I hadn’t written back to her. Over the years, she’d send me a letter now and then, keeping me up to date on the stuff happening here in town. I’d compose replies in my head like *I’d make a shit-ass partner for someone like you since half my missions are secrets and If another guy ever looks at you longer than two seconds, I’m taking his eyes and Good thing you admitted that George was your neighbor’s Rottweiler because I was about to come home and murder someone, but they never made it onto the paper.*

I’m not real good with words anyway. I’m a hands-on guy. In the Navy, I serve as a wizzo, a weapons systems officer. I sit behind the pilot, provide targeting information, and shoot down enemy aircraft. The last part we do in secret since technically we’re not at war with anyone. Unofficially, though,

we've been sent on missions that require firepower. Not that we can tell anyone about it. The Navy's changing. While there are a few missions that still require human pilots and wizzos, more and more of these tasks are carried out by drones.

Vincent and I are on extended leave because neither of us want to teach, which is basically the future of the pilots in the program. I'd rather let an F-14 run over me than have to stand

in front of a bunch of newbies telling them how to fly their fake planes.

Now I've got to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life: be a teacher or a doer.

I'm not cut out for the first role, and the second role is on the government chopping block.

"Let's get something to drink," Vincent suggests.

I send one last look toward Melody and then decide to drink my night away. Unfortunately, I don't get drunk enough to avoid seeing Vincent eye up my sister in ways no man should. "Don't forget your promise to me." If I'm not getting any, he needs to remain zipped up too. "Saved your sorry ass," I add in case he forgot the circumstances around the promise.

He presses his lips together and then shoves a handful of pretzels in his mouth. In his head, he's cursing me.

I shrug and gesture for the bartender to fill me up. If we're going to be miserable and alone, might as well be drunk too. Only that plan is tossed out when Mom texts me that she's making dinner.

As we're walking home from the bar, Vincent asks me the question I've been waiting for all night. "Why'd she call you Biscuit?"

I decide to ignore him and pretend that the alcohol has affected my hearing.

"Seriously? You're not going to tell me?" "Are you leaving my sister alone?"

There's complete dead silence from Vincent. I snort. "Exactly."

We're close to the house when he says, "You can fix things with Melody. I believe in you, Frank." He pounds me on the back. I give him a healthy push, and maybe things would've escalated had I not caught Mom staring at us from the kitchen window.

Near thirty and she still has a grip on my balls. I give her a mock salute and show Vincent the basement bedroom. “If someone else is using the john upstairs, you’re SOL,” I inform him. I learned that the hard way trying to clean up after jerking off to a memory of Melody doing something totally innocent like picking a pencil off the floor and flashing me with her honey thighs or putting a pen in her mouth and sucking on the end of it like it’s a lollipop or my dick.

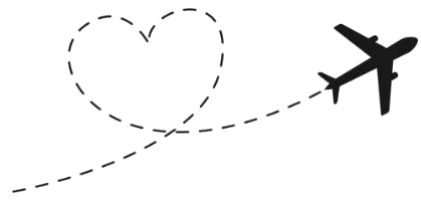
Man, I had so many dirty fantasies about Melody in high school. Sometimes she’d wear a plaid skirt and long knee-high white socks with little bows at the back of the knee. She’d say it was Cher day, which I had no idea what she was referencing, but fuck if those weren’t some of my favorite days of the week. Another time, she wore a black velvet choker, and it made me want to haul her into the locker room with a leash, push her on her knees, and fuck her face until her cheeks were painted white with my cum. Not all of my memories are about screwing her brains out. She made me want to protect her. I remember seeing her walk out of the counselor’s office, face white and mouth in a thin line. I’d mowed down half the football team that was standing in the hallway to get to her. I’d asked her what was wrong, but she refused to share with me, telling me it was none of my business. She’d always kept a part of herself private, like she didn’t trust me or didn’t think I was worthy of knowing that much about her. Not gonna lie, that stung.

I had to leave town in a hurry because if I stayed here much past graduation, I was going to do something drastic that she and I would both regret.

She’s my sister’s best friend now. Practically my parents’ second daughter before that. I couldn’t touch her without the wrath of every woman in my family descending on my head. So I ran off to the Naval Academy, got my bars, and climbed into a plane. The thing is, no matter how far away I went or how high in the air I’d fly, Melody was always with me.

She’d dug her way under my skin. I could feel her, sense her. My lungs were filled with her to the extent that every breath I took carried her scent.

Now that I'm back in town, the full force of my need for her has taken me by the throat. I'm either going to have to fuck her or escape again. Either way, we can't go on like this.



CHAPTER 2

MELODY

“DO YOU THINK HE’S GOING TO TAKE THE JOB?”

“I heard he turned it down.”

“No, I heard he already agreed.”

“I’ve got a job Frank can fill.” That last voice belongs to Steph as she comes to stand in front of the booth behind me.

Yeah, I’d been listening to every word they said. My ears always perk up when Biscuit’s name is mentioned. I guess he’s not Biscuit anymore. Ever since he returned to town with his new best friend Vincent, who stole my best friend Emma. Everyone calls him Frank because it’s the name he’d been given in the Navy.

I’m a bit curious why someone with the given name Benson Charles would be called Frank but then again, I was the one that started calling him Biscuit, and everyone else had taken to the name too. I suppose it’s for the best. I need to forget about Biscuit. He’s Frank now, and I want nothing to do with Frank.

“I thought you were seeing Corey.” One of the older ladies from the sewing club asks, fishing for gossip. They always are.

I knew when I sat down in the booth behind theirs, I’d hear a few good dirty things that might be floating around town, but it’s just my luck that they’re talking about Bisc—*Frank*, I mentally correct. That name is as dead to me as he is. No matter where I turn or go, he’s always the topic of conversation. And even though I want nothing to do with that

man ever again, I can't help but get jealous every time one of these other women talk or throw themselves at him.

"It's casual with Corey, but Frank—" She lets out a sigh. I grit my teeth.

Steph and Frank had been in the same grade. I was one year behind them. She's always had a bit of a crush on him, not that I can blame her. I was one of the many. Not that Frank ever paid much attention to anyone trying to flirt with him. Sometimes I think it went straight over his head when a girl was coming on to him. He's a man of few words and doesn't give much back when some try to lure him in. That just made them try harder.

I wonder if that has changed now. Frank is clearly a different man since he's come back home. He's no longer the boy that went off to be in the Navy. He's come back as a man. A giant one at that. He's always been tall and lean, but he's packed on some muscle, making him all the more attractive.

It's clear he's going to be sticking around if he's going to take the job as the new chief of police after the last one resigned along with the mayor. They were really run out of town, but nonetheless, alderman Katherine Reid has been appointed to take over the mayor's slot for the time being.

She'd asked Frank if he'd be interested in taking over the spot of chief of police. He's a good man who cares about this town, and I know he would be great at it. I might be mad at him, but that's the truth. There is no one better suited for the position than him. He tends to be fair and way too level-headed. The man has iron control. How else could someone be so stoic all the time?

It's going to be hard seeing him every day. I suppose it's better than not knowing if he was safe out there in the Navy doing God knows what. I really have no clue what he did because Frank never told me a thing. He never responded to any of my letters, but I kept sending them anyway, thinking he was busy. Then he showed back up in town and half pretended to have no clue who I was.

God, I'm pathetic. I've spent years pining for a man who hasn't given me much thought at all. I must have made up all those times I could have sworn he was staring at me back in high school. Or misunderstood why he got in a fist fight with James after he asked me out on a date. All along, I was the same to him as all the other girls. That reality was a slap in the face for me. One much harsher than the one I laid on Frank that afternoon.

Steph refreshes the ladies' coffee as they keep on gossiping. The bell on the diner door rings. I look up to see Emma walking in.

"I was worried you weren't going to make it," I say when she drops down across from me.

"Sorry, I got sidetracked."

"You don't say." I lift a brow, knowing exactly who sidetracked her.

"What?" She reaches up and makes sure her hair isn't all over the place. Her lips are a bit swollen, but what really catches my eye is the ring on her finger.

"I'm the one that should be asking questions." I grab her hand to see the giant ring. "You didn't tell me!"

"It happened last night, and I knew I was having breakfast with you today and wanted to tell you in person." I admire the ring. It's a simple band with a solid square giant stone that suits Vincent and Emma perfectly. It's a mix of both of them. She doesn't tend to be flashy, and he wants everyone to know that Emma is now engaged. Hence the stone being big but still simple.

"I guess your mom and I have some planning to do."

"You're right about that." She grabs one of the menus on the table like she doesn't know everything on it. "I don't know shit about weddings, but you've got all those bridal magazines."

I pick up a menu too, wanting to hide the heat that rushes to my face. Yeah, I do have a lot of bridal magazines. I've always had a bit of a storybook fantasy in my head about what

my life would be. But, unfortunately, no matter how I want it to go, life is always throwing me curveballs.

“Are you girls ready to order?” Steph asks. Emma spouts off a giant order while I go with my normal eggs and yogurt. It’s simple, and I don’t have to worry about messing with my blood sugar. “So, what’s going on with Frank?” Steph starts to ask after she jots down our order.

“You think I’m going to gossip about my own brother?” She shoots Steph a look, letting her know she’s serious.

“Fine,” she huffs. “I’ll be back with your food in a little.”

“So?” I ask for myself, knowing she will gossip with me. Emma and I became best friends a few years back when I’d passed out and she’d been the first responder.

She was quick to realize what was happening. I know it’s part of her job for her to never divulge information, but still I’d asked her not to say anything to anyone about it. I don’t know why I’ve kept it a secret for so long. I think because it makes me feel different. Which is something I’ve always felt since I wasn’t born in Harrisville. I’d come to live here with my grandmother after my mom picked up some bad habits. I haven’t seen her in years. She didn’t even show last year when Grams passed. Some things never change.

“I think he’s gonna take it. I don’t know. He’s being ornery lately.” Emma’s face grows irritated.

“Is that because his best friend from the Navy that he brought home is banging his little sister? Because that might do it,” I tease, knowing how protective Frank can be when it comes to her.

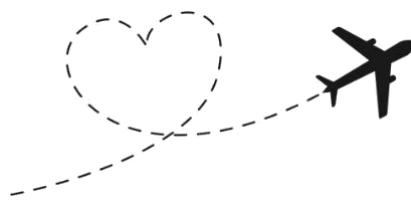
“Nah, he’s over that now. It’s something else.” She gives me a pointed stare.

“Nope.” I shake my head. “My days of being in love with your brother are over.”

“Good.” She beams at me. “I think it’s time you give Dean a chance.”

“Dean? Really?” He moved here a year ago and filled a much-needed spot at the veterinary clinic. I take my dog Teddy to him. He’s kind, and he’s handsome, but I already know there’s nothing between us. I’ve never felt any sort of chemistry or thought of him in that way. But maybe that was because I was blinded by my love for Bis... *Frank*.

“Why not?” She shrugs, but I know she’s up to something. Emma is always up to something.



CHAPTER 3

FRANK

“HEARD YOU WERE OFFERED THE CHIEF OF POLICE’S POSITION by Alderman Reid,” shouts Tom as soon as Vincent and I step into the bar. At his greeting, I turn and grab on to the door handle, but Vincent stops me, and then half the crowd comes over to drag me to the bar. They hover around like I’m about to make a big announcement.

“You thinking about taking it?” Tom asks as he slides two mugs of beer in front of us.

“Not sure I have a choice.” I dump the contents of the mug down my throat and signal for Tom to pour me another.

“We’re a good set of people,” Pratt, a local, says in a hurt voice. The big burly rancher props his elbow up on the glossy bar top. “What’s wrong with being the chief of police here?”

“I don’t see you running for that job,” I point out.

“Friend, all I’ve ever used a weapon for is to shoot varmints on the farm. I’m not qualified to be toting around a pistol and arresting people. You, on the other hand, went to the Naval Academy, got some special awards for doing shit your parents can’t talk about, and probably know how to kill people eight different ways,” Pratt replies.

“Only eight? You’re seriously underestimating Frank here.” Vincent claps me on the shoulder.

Pratt tilts his head. “No one ever did explain how Biscuit became Frank.”

“It’s cuz his head is square.” Vincent holds his hands a few inches away from each of my ears, pretending to measure my

supposed box-like head.

“I don’t see it.” Pratt’s perplexed.

“It’s better than Biscuit. How’d that come about?”

Pratt guffaws, and I heave a big sigh. I guess the story was bound to come out at some point. Pratt motions for Vincent to lean in.

“When this pup was a young’ un—”

“Pratt, you are two years older than me. Stop talking like I’m about to get my tombstone engraved.”

“When this pup was a young’ un,” Pratt continues as if I haven’t opened my mouth.

Vincent grins, enjoying this thoroughly. “Go on,” my faithless friend encourages.

“His ma was making cookies for a school function. This was before, when you could bring baked goods to school. Mrs. Charles is famous for her monster cookies.” Pratt stops and stares off into the distance as if remembering the taste of them. Mom did make some good-ass cookies.

“And?” Vincent prompts.

“And I got into a flour fight with Melody, and she said I looked like a biscuit. She said it for about two weeks straight, and after that, no one called me anything else.”

“Till you got to flight school.”

“That’s right.”

“I like Biscuit better.”

“Speaking of the devil,” drawls Pratt as the door to the bar opens, and Melody and Emma appear in the doorway. “Ladies, over here.” He waves his arm.

Even though I’m sitting down, the bar’s not so crowded that I don’t get to enjoy the sight of Melody strolling over in tight blue jeans. Her thighs look edible. Actually, all of her does. I drain another beer and turn back to Tom. “Maybe I should move to shots.”

Tom makes a face but fills two glasses with some top-shelf vodka. “Don’t think the chief should be drinking so heavily.”

“I’m not the chief yet, Tom.”

“Yet, but you will be soon. Don’t want you to pick up any bad habits.”

Small towns. Love them and hate them. I down one shot and then the other.

“That was for your buddy,” Tom protests.

“Too late.” I throw it back and swivel back to face Melody.

“You,” she declares.

“Yeah. Me.” I give her an insolent once-over, taking in her round cheeks, lush hair, perky tits, wide hips, and luscious thighs. I could drink her down in one shot just like the vodka. She’d taste a thousand times better, and I’d be addicted immediately, like Tom suggested.

“Why are you here?” she snipes.

“We were telling Vincent about how you gave Biscuit his name.”

“He’s Frank now,” Melody says, pushing by me to get to Tom. “Give me a double of whatever is the hardest proof you’ve got so I can get drunk fast and forget this lunk here is going to be our chief of police.”

“You planning on breaking so many laws that you have to avoid me? You’re the one who slapped me, remember? Shouldn’t I be the one avoiding you?”

Melody, who’d had her glass halfway to her mouth, slams it to the bar. “You have avoided me. All my life you have ignored me, forgotten me, left me behind. I wrote you letters. I sent you gifts. I’ve been there for you, and you? What have you been doing? I should’ve slapped you harder.”

Her hand flies up, but I’m not in the mood to be hit again. I stop her arm mid-flight. “And if I hadn’t left you alone, I don’t think you’d like that either,” I tell her in a hard voice.

Her face turns white and then red. She jerks her wrist out of my grip. “You don’t have the right to tell me what I’d enjoy and what I wouldn’t. Come on, Emma, let’s go.”

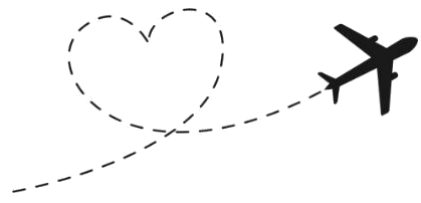
She grabs my sister’s hand and starts dragging her toward the door. A tide of anger surges through me. Since the moment I’ve come back to Harrisville, she’s been walking away from me. She’s got a fine ass, but I’m tired of seeing only that view of her. I get to my feet and stomp through the crowd until I’m right behind her. With one move, I’ve got her spun around and over my shoulder. I nod to Emma. “Best go back to Vincent. This is between me and Melody.”

Emma gives me a narrow-eyed glare. “I’m not leaving her to—”

Her voice is cut off when Vincent appears and throws my sister over his own shoulder. “Consider this repayment for my debt,” he says.

“I saved your life. How is this equal?”

“You’re right. You’re going to owe me.”



CHAPTER 4

MELODY

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD BE THANKFUL THAT I DIDN'T WEAR A dress today. It doesn't take me long to realize that beating on Frank's back isn't getting me anywhere but hurting my own fist. What is he, made of freaking iron or something?

Whack!

I gasp when a hand comes down on my bottom. My mouth falls open.

"You did *not* just smack my bottom." Who the heck does he think he is?

"Bottom." He chuckles, which only makes me madder. What has gotten into this man? "You've been hanging around my sister and picked up smacking people but not cursing?" He laughs again. "Yeah, sugar, I smacked your ass. And if you keep it up, I plan on doing it again."

"Do not give me a pet name!" I hiss and start to wiggle around again, trying to get free. It's actually a stupid idea. If I fall from this height, I'll end up with a concussion for sure.

"You can call me Biscuit but I can't call you sugar?"

"I'm not calling you Biscuit any longer. Now you're Frank," I huff. I don't know if my head is starting to spin because I'm upside down or because of how Frank is acting.

"It's Biscuit," he orders as he finally starts to lower me. I slip down the front of his very hard body. I gasp when I feel his hard cock press against my stomach. I jump back, tripping over my own feet, but Frank's arm comes out, pulling me right back against him before I can fall on my butt.

“Frank,” I hiss, glancing down between the two of us. “You’re...” I trail off because it should be obvious what I’m talking about. It is, after all, his cock.

“Hard? Yeah, I just spanked you and then you slid your soft curves down my body. What did you think was going to happen?” I open and close my mouth, not sure how to respond to that. I’ve never been manhandled before.

I should be appalled, but that’s not what I’m feeling at the moment. I’m more turned on than anything. Not that I would ever let him know that.

Nope, screw him. Years I’ve spent wanting this man, and now all of a sudden, he what? Wants to bang me? Not happening. I might have started out saving my virginity for him because he was the only person I could ever think of taking it, but things have changed. I’ve changed. At least I’m telling myself I have.

“Right, men get hard when the wind blows.” I go again to step back, but Frank’s hold only tightens on me, his fingers digging into my hips. Somehow that shoots a fire straight to my clit. My panties are growing wet. Clearly there’s not only something wrong with Frank. My body is acting weird too!

“Pretty sure I’ve only been getting hard for you since”—he drops his head—“since I knew what it actually meant when you got hard.” Again, he leaves me speechless. My heart gives a flutter. “You’re even sexier when you blush. Anyone ever tell you that? Wait, do not answer that question. The new police chief can’t be going around committing murder.” I choose to ignore half of what he says. He ignored my letters, so it’s fair. He doesn’t get to decide that I’m suddenly not invisible to him.

“So you’re taking the job?”

“Maybe.”

“Why maybe?” I shouldn’t be curious, but I am.

He is a good fit for it. He’s trained and knows everyone in town. He was born and raised here. It was him and Vincent that had a huge part in getting the mayor and the old police

chief out of town. They'd been here a few days and locked in on those two assholes and bam. They're now gone.

"Like I said. The new chief of police can't be assaulting people." I shake my head.

"Are you serious right now? After all these years, you think you can suddenly stake a claim to me?"

"Who said I never staked a claim to you years ago?" I narrow my eyes up at him.

"What does that mean?" He shrugs at my question. "You've been keeping tabs on me?" Another shrug. "What did you mean when you said if you hadn't left me alone, you didn't think I'd like that either?"

His face softens, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. "You deserve so much more than what I have to give you."

"Frank—"

"Or what I want to do to you," he adds, cutting me off. "So many things I've thought of doing to you." He trails his finger up my jaw and then down my neck. "One afternoon I was out on the Fricks' ranch and they were teaching me how to tie rope to steer the cattle. All I kept thinking about was what it would be like to tie you up."

"Biscuit." All the air leaves my lungs. Mr. Hardly Says Two Words is now saying a million, and not one of them had I seen coming.

"I knew I had to get away from you for your own good. Thought you would be better off with some, some..." He trails off, unable to supply his own words.

"Like a veterinarian?"

"Why veterinarian?"

"Okay, fireman?" I try another.

"You said veterinarian first."

"It popped into my head. I thought you were trying to name a profession or like a 9-5, white picket fence or something."

“I can build a picket fence,” he says defensively. We’ve really gotten off track here, and my head is spinning more than it was when he had me tossed over his shoulder.

“I’m sure you could, Frank.” I pat his chest. Yep, as hard as the rest of him. “I need to get home and let Teddy out.”

“You called me Biscuit.”

“It was a slip.”

“To you I’m Biscuit.” I swear he almost sounds like he’s pouting.

“I need to get home,” I say again.

“To let your dog out.” I don’t think he believes me. I don’t need to get home and let him out, but it’s an excuse, nonetheless. Being this close to Frank has all the walls I’ve been building since I slapped him coming back down. I need to rebuild.

“Yeah, if you read my letters you’d know—”

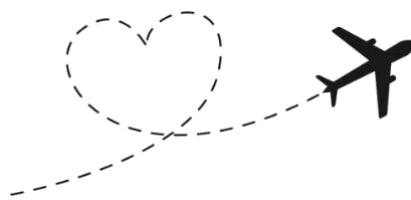
“You got him two years ago,” he finishes. So he had read them. He just hadn’t responded. “Isn’t there a new vet in town? Teddy go there?” Thankfully, my phone starts to beep, so I don’t have to answer him. I’ve never been happier for my sensor to go off to alert me that my blood sugar is low. That might be part of the lightheadedness I felt too.

“I’ve got to take this and get home.” I push off his chest but get nowhere. “Biscuit. I really need to take this.” He relents. I think because I called him Biscuit.

“I’ll let you go for now,” he says, releasing his hold on me. I hurry over toward my car. “But this is far from over, sugar.”

I don’t know what’s come over Biscuit. He’s different. Did the Navy change him? Or maybe he’s always been good at hiding some parts of himself. Either way, the man clearly has a new mission.

Me.



CHAPTER 5

FRANK

THE VET IS A GUY. I KNEW IT FROM THE MINUTE THE WORD came out of her mouth. She's interested in him, too, or she wouldn't have brought him up.

"Why are we sitting outside a pet clinic?" Vincent asks, his mouth full of sandwich. "We don't even have a pet."

Because I thought I should at least know the name of the man I intend to murder for trying to steal Melody while I was away serving the country. "Don't talk about my sister."

"I didn't say a thing about her."

"You said we. That means you and her." I don't take my eyes off the front door. The dogs have been barking loudly enough for us to hear them outside. It seems odd that no one's come in or out for the last thirty minutes. Maybe vet appointments take a long time.

"We' could mean you and me if you wanted it to, but you spent years rejecting me, and so I moved on."

"I'm going to tell Emma she was your second choice." I should go inside instead of waiting in the car.

"Speak to her with those words and I'll have to kill you. I'll be sad about it, and I'll cry at your funeral, but you'll have to die."

"Noted." I open the door.

Vincent scrambles to put down his mostly eaten sandwich. "Wait a sec. I thought we were just here to 'observe.'" He makes the air quotes with his fingers.

“We have observed. Now we’re interacting with the subject.” I glance for traffic and then jog across the empty road. Vincent is right on my heels. While I’ll never admit this to my friend, if Emma had to end up with someone, I’m glad it’s Vincent. He’s a decent guy with a deep pocketbook and appears to be madly in love with my sister. And if it falls apart, I’ll take him up in a plane and drop him out of the back without a parachute.

A bell above the door can be barely heard above the noise of the barking. The front desk is empty. A chill runs up my spine. Vincent and I exchange glances before I bolt to the back. Vincent pulls a gun from his ankle holster. The smell of blood and urine hits me hard. Out of instinct, I drop low to make myself a smaller target while Vincent hangs behind, using the doorframe as a cover. The blood is dried when I reach it, and from the brown coloring, it’s not fresh. The dogs in the kennels yip and bark at me. Their food dishes are empty, and the urine smell appears to come from the cages.

Around the corner, I find the first body. Dressed in blue scrubs, the young woman is lying on her face. Just beyond her are the sturdy shoes of the vet, a male who I guess could’ve been attractive when he was alive—enough so that Melody might have entertained the thought of dating him. I guess.

I back out slowly, careful to step in the tracks I made coming in so I don’t disturb more of the scene. Once I’m back by Vincent’s side, he pulls out his phone. I stop him before he can make the call.

“They don’t have a police chief anymore,” I remind him. Chief Blake Finley got run out of town earlier for being a serial abuser.

“There’s other officers.”

I shake my head. “This is a small town. He’s probably got five maybe six other assistants, but Blake would lead the investigation.”

Vincent tucks his phone away and crosses over to the receptionist’s desk, where a bottle of sanitizer and a box of

latex gloves rest next to a credit card machine. He tosses me a pair of the gloves. “Then get to work, Chief,” he says.

I do make a phone call to the acting mayor, Alderman Reid, so that any evidence we gather isn’t spoiled. She sighs heavily. “I’d like to blame this on Finley, but he doesn’t seem to be the murderous type. Too messy and the victims don’t match his profile.”

“No, I don’t think it’s Finley. He and his father are holed up in a beachfront property in South Shore.”

“You’ve been keeping tabs on him?”

“Just a few.” Vincent and I weren’t sure if he was going to come back for Emma.

“I’m going to send Deputy Ryder over to make sure it’s all official. You’re in charge now if you start investigating,” she warns.

I knew this before I placed the call. “Yeah. I’ll stand in for now until the next election.”

“No one is going to let you leave after this,” Alderman Reid says cheerfully.

“Unless I don’t solve it, and then they’ll be glad to see the back of me.”

“You’ll figure it out.” She hangs up.

“What’d the mayor have to say?”

“That you’re going to have to call me Chief.”

“I love it.” Vincent smacks his thigh.

“Hope you’ll be saying that after we’re done here. By the way, I’m deputizing you.”

“Aye, aye.” He gives me a salute.

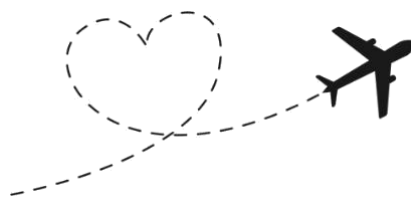
After that, we get to work, bagging and tagging evidence that we can find. Vincent takes photos with his phone, and I catalog every piece of human hair I can find. We move carefully. The floor of the clinic is clean, and the surfaces are dust free. Despite the antiseptic nature of the rooms, there is

little evidence that we can find. I glare at the assortment of dogs, cats, and lone bird. “If you could talk, it’d be helpful.”

The one dog, a mixed rottie, whines and covers his snout with his paws. The white fluffy cat mews and turns away. These animals aren’t going to be any help.

When Deputy Reid arrives, we put him in charge of figuring out who is going to take the animals. We find a vet in the next town over who promises to be here in an hour. I leave Deputy Reid and Vincent at the vet clinic and go off to give the vet’s next of kin, his parents, the bad news. That task is no fun. Neither is the part where I have to ask the parents where he was in the last twenty-four hours. The dad curses at me for a good five minutes and breaks down into tears. The mom is shell-shocked and doesn’t move. It’s uncomfortable and fucking sad.

I could go home, but I don’t. There’s not a person there I want to see. Instead, I make my way to Melody. I need her right now.



CHAPTER 6

MELODY

TEDDY STROLLS DOWN THE SIDEWALK NEXT TO ME. I HAVE HIM on a leash, but it's a bit pointless. If he wanted to, he could drag me around this town by it. I was done for the second I saw the little guy in his cage. Not that he stayed little for long. I should have figured when I found out he was a Saint Bernard that he was going to grow into a beast. But even for his breed, he's ginormous. The name Teddy Bear may not be so fitting anymore.

When I round the corner, I pause when I see a figure standing on my porch. It doesn't take me but a second to realize who it is from his shape alone. He's got his hands braced on either side of the door, and I think he's talking. I creep forward, wanting to hear what he's saying. I can't help but wonder what the heck he's doing here.

"Melody, please open the door. Your car is in the driveway. I know you're home." His tone is different than I've ever heard it. There is a sadness clinging to it. I take a few more steps closer. Frank suddenly spins around, his hand going to his waist, where I spot a gun, but he stops short of his hand landing on it.

"Hi," I say, still wondering why he's at my door. Is he here to talk about last night? I know I can't stop thinking about it. I tried to spend my day preparing coursework for the upcoming school year, but my mind kept drifting back to last night and the things Frank had said. Mainly the stuff about tying me up.

"Hi!" he barks. His whole demeanor changes. "You're out roaming the streets at dark." He steps down off my porch, coming toward me. Teddy lets out a deep growl.

“As you can see, I’m not alone.” I pet the top of Teddy’s head. “It’s okay,” I tell him. “And it’s really none of your business even if I was.”

“Even with a dog, you still shouldn’t be out roaming around.”

“This isn’t the city. It’s Harrisville.” Not a whole lot of crime happening around here.

“Inside.” He motions toward my front door.

“You can’t boss me around,” I huff. He gives me a hard look. One that goes straight to my core. My irritation grows, but with myself. “I was going inside anyway.” I raise my chin and walk right past him. Teddy stays close as I pull my keys out and enter the house. Frank follows me in. “Hey! No one invited you in here.”

“You didn’t set the alarm when you left.” He points to the pad on the wall that’s not going off. He looks even more agitated than he was about me being out for a walk. What the heck?

“I only went around the block.” Frank closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. What is going on here? I unhook Teddy from his leash. “Bed.” He does as he’s told. At least someone listens to me around here.

“You need to take your safety more seriously,” he says as his eyes begin to roam around my place.

“Is there something you need, Frank? A reason for your impromptu visit?” I ask, feigning annoyance that he’s here when I’m anything but. I hate that I like how it feels with him in my space.

“Stop calling me Frank.” He clears the space between us. My feet leave the floor, only this time he doesn’t toss me over his shoulder. My legs and arms wrap around him as he buries his face in my neck, taking deep long breaths. Something is wrong.

“Biscuit? What’s going on?”

“You always smell so damn good. Anytime I smell lavender I think of you.” I’ve always favored lavender when I picked out my soaps or body sprays. He pays more attention than I ever really knew.

“Are you okay?” I run my hand up and down his broad back. I feel some of the tension leave his body.

“Better than I was, now that I’m here with you.” He carries me over to the sofa before sitting down. I start to get up, but his hands grip my hips, keeping me in place. “It’s not safe for you to be out after dark even with your dog. And you need to be setting the alarm. Someone could have slipped in here while you were gone.”

“Really?” I roll my eyes. He acts as though he didn’t grow up in this town where nothing interesting ever happens.

“Have you really not heard? Where is your phone?” “On the charger in the kitchen.”

“Let me get this straight. You left to go on a walk without your phone!” he growls. Teddy stands up from his bed and growls right back at him.

“I’m okay,” I tell Teddy. “Sit.” He plops back down but keeps his eyes on us.

“The vet, Dean. He was murdered today.”

“Ha ha.” I shake my head. “I told you that veterinarian was the first thing that popped into my head. I don’t have some crush on Dean.” Frank stares at me, his face somber. “Wait, you’re serious?” He nods.

“The receptionist—”

“Taylor too?” I gasp before he can finish.

“I’m sorry, sugar.” I put my hand over my mouth, not wanting to believe this. I wasn’t close to either of them. Dean was still new to town, and Taylor came with him because she was a licensed vet tech. They were both so nice.

“How? I mean...” I trail off. “This is Harrisville. Things like this don’t happen here.”

“Bad shit can happen anywhere.” He reaches up and pulls the tie out of my hair so it falls down all around me.

“What happens now?” Since I moved here as a teen there has never been a murder.

“Right now, I just want to be with you before I need to get back to work.”

“You took the job?”

“Kind of walked in on the job.”

“What?”

“Vincent and I discovered the bodies.”

“Bodies,” I whisper, not wanting to think of them that way, but it’s the reality of it.

“Wait, why were you at the vet’s office?” “I was with Vincent.”

“Is that your alibi or are you saying Vincent was there to get a new pet ‘cause I don’t think Vincent is a good alibi.”

“Why not? He’s the best alibi.”

“That’s my point. You two probably know how to pass lie detectors and to withstand torture.”

“Came with the training.” He gives a small tug on a piece of my hair. I know now isn’t the time to be teasing, but it’s better than crying.

“Have you eaten?”

“No.”

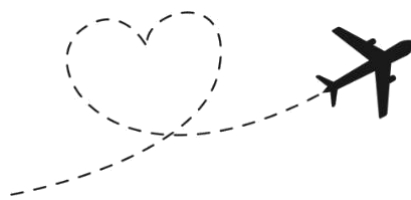
“Will you eat if I make you something?”

“Will you let me crash here for a few hours after?”

“How is that a bargain?” I snort. Though I’m not hating the idea with everything going on.

“Please.” He pulls me in closer, his mouth brushing against mine in a feather-like kiss.

“All right.” I give. Biscuit wins this round.



CHAPTER 7

FRANK

I LEAVE MELODY'S PLACE AT SIX IN THE MORNING. THE DOG growls at me, but I give him fresh water and a can full of food, and he seems appeased enough that he's not barking my ass out the door. Melody's still sleeping like an angel. I turn on the security system and lock up. I text Vincent to drive by and check up on Melody while I'm at the law enforcement center. I want to put up a murder map and try to wrap my head around why we've got two dead bodies at the vet's office.

The police chief's office is a mess. The dispatcher, Holly Rice, gives me a sheepish smile as I survey the piles of paperwork. Some of the old manila folders appear to have been created a decade ago, given the faded ink stains on the cover.

I flip one over and wave the cloud of dust out of my face. "How come none of this is digitized? Didn't the city get some kind of state grant to go completely electronic?"

"We did, but Blake didn't know how to implement it. He said it was too complicated and would type up his reports on Word or have me do it. I saved them in a folder on the city server, but he never looked at them unless I printed it out."

"What's the budget look like? Do we have enough to hire a secretary? We can't have you making copies and filing when you need to be monitoring the emergency lines."

"I don't know. Blake handled all of that."

I suspect Blake took the money and spent it, but there's no point in crying over spilled milk. "Go on back to your desk," I direct. Using the desk phone, I punch in the number to the

mayor's office. A cheery voice patches me through to Alderman Reid right away.

"I bet you're calling because it's utter chaos over there," she says. "And before you ask how I know, it's because it's a disaster here. Looks like Mayor Finley has taken all the tech and building improvement funds for his personal use."

"I'm going to go and arrest his ass today." "What about the murder investigation?" Shit. "Tomorrow then."

"You're going to have it wrapped up by tomorrow? Do you know who did it?"

"No, but I'm arresting the Finleys tomorrow because I'm in a foul mood, and it's the one thing that will make me happy."

I find a rolling evidence board and paste up two photos I pulled off the internet for the victims. After Melody went to bed, I spent the night going through all of the social accounts I could find for the vet and his assistant. Both people were newbies. The vet had bought Kevin Wells' old practice. Old vet Wells had only a son, and he went and got his architectural degree and never returned to Harrisville. When Wells turned sixty-five, he put his practice up for sale and left to join his son in Atlanta.

This all happened a year ago. Dean and his assistant, Taylor, moved into town together. Dean's parents came, too. They were older and helped to buy the practice for their son. They wanted to be close to him.

Even though Taylor had moved to town with Dean, the two didn't appear to be a couple. Dean was known in town to be single, and their social media accounts made it seem like they had dated other people. I put up a few more photos from Dean's Instagram account. He'd dated a few women in town and had photos of himself drinking at Tom's bar with various people.

I keep adding more details to the murder map, trying to whittle down who I should interview first, who I need to be

suspicious of, who would be a waste of my time. By mid-morning, I've made my list and run out of coffee.

Outside my office, I find that one of the deputies has arrived. He stands and salutes me.

"None of that. We're civilians." Or I will be soon. I'm on a temporary leave of absence but have sent in my resignation via the form on the naval website. Everyone's digital but Harrisville. I hand him a sheet of paper. "Go and interview these people about Taylor's death. We want to know every detail about her. Where she shopped, who she was sleeping with, what drawer she kept her socks in. I'll handle Dean's list."

On my way to the car, I run into Melody. "Where's Vincent?" I ask, looking for my six-foot-two friend but see no one.

"How would I know?"

"He's supposed to be keeping an eye on you. Come with me." I grab her hand and pull her toward the patrol car.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to interview witnesses, and you're going to sit in the car."

"That sounds boring and terrible." She tugs on my hand. "I'm going to meet Emma for lunch, and then we're going over to volunteer at the church. They had a fire in the kitchen and need help cleaning."

"Will Vincent be there?"

"I don't know. Does that matter?"

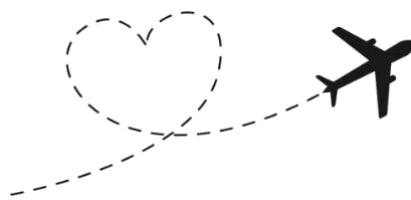
"Yeah, Melody, it does. Someone killed two people in Harrisville. I don't know who it is, and until I do, you can't be wandering the streets by yourself."

"I don't think I'm the target." She gives me this bright, innocent smile, and I want to shake her.

"You don't know that, Mel. If there's even a one percent chance you could get hurt, I want to eliminate it. It would kill

me if something happened to you. All those years I spent away —” I break off, trying to find a way to tell her that if she wasn’t safe, there was no point of me doing any of this. “I’m not taking this job to protect Harrisville. I’m taking this job to protect you. Besides my family, you’re the only person I care about, so get your fine ass into my car before I have to put it there myself.”

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CHAPTER 8

MELODY

AT FIRST, I WAS ANNOYED THAT FRANK WAS DRAGGING ME around with him, but after he came out of Dean's parents' home I was glad I was here. His parents had been alerted yesterday, but Frank was taking a deeper dive into Dean's past to see who might have wanted to kill him.

"They really couldn't think of anyone that would want to harm their son? Not even an ex?" I'm hoping that this is some crazy person that followed either Dean or Taylor down here and has now fled back to wherever they came from. The idea of someone close doing this makes my stomach turn.

"Said they can't think of a soul that would do such a thing. That Dean was the perfect son."

"Clearly one person would or else he wouldn't be...." I trail off, not wanting to say it.

"Exactly," Frank sighs in agreement as we pull out of Becca's driveway. He had me go in with him on this one. He didn't want to be alone with a female while asking pressing questions about her sex life. I seconded that one, plus I know Becca. I thought she would be more open if I were there. She didn't really give us much information besides that she'd gone on two dates with Dean, but it never went anywhere.

"How many other women are on the list?" I ask. I can't see Becca having done this.

"Four."

"Four!" He hadn't even been in town that long. "I mean, I'm not judging, I'm just surprised. Emma thought I should..."

I clamp my mouth shut, wanting to shove my foot in it.

“Emma thought what?” Crap.

“Nothing.” I stare out the window. Frank’s hand comes down on my thigh, and he gives a squeeze.

“Out with it. I don’t want to have to interrogate you too.” I roll my eyes at him. “She teased me about dating him.” “I knew it!” he barks. “You said vet for a reason.”

“See, you’ve already got the spider senses about things. You’re going to solve this.” I praise him to redirect his train of thought away from the idea of me ever going on a date with Dean. It doesn’t work. He just gives me a hard stare. “I wasn’t going to go. I’m just surprised that he’s dated so many local women when she and I always joked we’d never date people around here because you’d always have to see their exes.”

“I don’t disagree with you there.” Frank shifts the car into drive, taking off down the road. “So, it’s not gossip how many girls he’s dated?”

“I guess not, but maybe me and Emma just didn’t notice.” I shrug. Sure, we love gossip sometimes, but it can get redundant. Especially when it comes to who is dating who.

Frank drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “Okay, let’s think here.” I don’t know about him, but it always helps me to talk through things. “Do we know how many times they were each stabbed? If it was a bunch, it was likely a crime of passion. Also, in a stabbing most of the time the hand slips and people cut their own hands in the process. Becca’s didn’t have a scratch on them.” He flicks a glance my way.

“What? I like crime shows.” He shakes his head. “Stabbing is personal,” I point out too. It’s up close.

“It’s quiet.” I suppose that would be important. Someone would have heard shots in the middle of the day. “I only suspect stabbing and maybe blunt trauma, but that’s for a coroner to make the final call on. You’d be surprised—” Now it’s him that trails off.

“What? Surprised about what?” I ask, trying to get him to open up to me a little bit.

“Nothing.” Oh heck no. There is no way I’m going to let him off that easily.

“Hey! You pulled me into this.” He rolls to a stop at the sign. He pauses for a second, and I think he’s going to change the subject.

“Sometimes you look at a body and you think one thing, but it’s another.”

“You’ve seen a lot of bodies.” It’s not really a question.

“Enough.” It’s not a lot, but at least he gives me something. My natural instinct is to want to ask him more, but I push it down for now.

“Whose house are we headed to next?” I ask as his phone starts to ring.

“What do you have for me?” he says into the phone. Why can’t he put it on speaker? I try to lean over and hear, but I can only make out that it’s a female voice. “All right. I’m headed that way.”

“What’s happening now?”

“I’m starting to think I shouldn’t have brought you.”

“Hey, you did the deputizing thing to Vincent without a second thought. Just so you know, I took like two”—I hold my fingers up—“criminal justice classes in college. Just sayin’.”

He lets out a low chuckle that makes me smile. “I’ve missed you.” He shakes his head, but he’s smiling too.

“I was kind of just thinking the same thing. I’m glad you’re back. I don’t know if I said that before I smacked you.”

“I don’t recall. You pressed your body into mine before that, and my mind went other places.” He flicks another glance my way. My face starts to warm.

We might have shared a bed last night, but that’s all we’ve done. There may have been some cuddling before I crashed

hard. I woke to an empty bed. I wasn't mad about it. I got that he had a job to do. He'd left a note. That's a first.

"So, the call?" I try asking again. This isn't the time to be thinking about Frank and my bed. I need to focus. People are dead, and a murderer is on the loose.

"The coroner's report is in."

"Oh?"

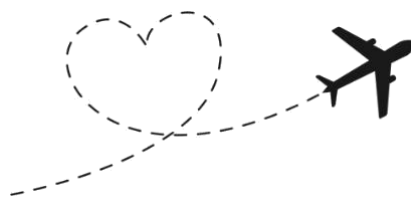
"You're not reading it."

"Whatever." I huff, folding my arms over my chest.

He pulls into the parking lot of the small police department. His brows are furrowed together, and the smile is now gone from his face. He's back to thinking about who did this.

Guilt pulls at me. He said he's only doing this because of me. Does that mean he doesn't want to stay here? What happens once he figures out who did this, and that threat is gone?

Will he up and leave me all over again?



CHAPTER 9

FRANK

AFTER I DROP MELODY OFF AT THE CHURCH, I HEAD STRAIGHT to the coroner's office.

"You ever wonder why we're stuck in the basement of buildings?" Doc Monroe says as I walk in. I pause and acclimate myself to the smell. The sterile cleaning supplies liberally used in the examination room between autopsies never fully overcome the stench of decay. Doc is immune to it. "It's because people are afraid the bodies down here are someday going to rise up. Easier to keep them contained in these concrete boxes." He waves a gloved hand around.

"I thought it was to avoid spoiling the evidence by sunlight."

"That too. Your boy did not die of stab wounds. The blunt force trauma to the back of his head came about because he fell." Doc pulls back part of the sheet and points to a needle puncture in the arm. "Someone doped him with animal tranqs. He lost consciousness, fell, and struck his head on something metal."

"The operating table," I guess.

"Likely."

"The dosage of the tranq did him in. The stab wounds were made after."

"Kind of sick." It makes me think this was a vendetta like Melody suggested. It was personal. "What about the woman?"

"She died of the stab wounds."

“Ah. She came in and surprised the killer, and the killer turned on her with the knife.”

“That’s probably right.”

The woman was a bystander. The vet was the target.

Doc Monroe pulls the sheet back into place. “Not really. Just heard that it started in the kitchen and almost got out of control. Don’t think anyone was there at the time. I’ll type up the report and send it your way.”

“Thanks for the hard work.”

Back in my office, I tape Post-it notes about the results up on my murder board. None of it makes sense to me. My best suspect is actually Blake Finley, but I don’t know what the motive is.

I call Vincent. “Want to take a trip with me to South Shore?”

“No, but I will anyway. We picking up Finley?”

“Yeah, but now that I think about it, you better stay with the girls, and I’ll go. I don’t think they should be left alone.”

“How about Emma and I go pick up Finley and you can stay here and work your case?” Vincent suggests.

“That doesn’t sound like a very romantic getaway, but I like your plan better. You have cuffs and everything you need?”

“I’ll swing by and drop Melody off. You can set me up then.”

The three of them show up shortly after he ends the call. Melody is carrying a Styrofoam box that smells like roast beef and gravy. My stomach growls.

“Before you eat, I want to talk to you.” Emma intercepts the food, whisking the to-go container out of my hands and dragging me into the corner.

“You’re coming between me and my food. Someone better have given birth or died.” I glower at my sister.

“Since Melody doesn’t have an older brother, I’m taking that role,” Emma announces.

“That means I don’t get to eat hot food?”

“No, it means that if you hurt her, I’ll hurt you.”

I give my five-foot-nothing sister a quick once-over. “You got to have some size on you to make that threat work.”

“Not really. If you don’t do right by Melody, I’ll tell Mom that you broke her Waterford crystal vase that she inherited from Grandma.”

I rear back. “Dirty pool, Emma. That was years ago and we were tussling when it fell, so that was on both of us.”

“Will she believe that, or will she say that you as the eldest bore the greater responsibility?”

Emma has me there, but I can’t let her know that. “It’s not any of your business what happens between me and Melody. Do you see me mucking up things between you and Vincent?”

“Yes. You told all kinds of lies when you first came home, including that he was dating someone when he wasn’t.”

A pang of guilt makes me frown. “I was looking out for you.”

“Which is what I’m doing for Melody. I’m watching you.” She points two fingers at her own eyes and then at mine.

I manage not to laugh and instead give my sister a solemn nod of my head before turning and walking back to Melody. She tilts her head in curiosity while Vincent grins like a damn clown. I’ll knock that off his face later.

“What are you two talking about? Frank’s food is getting cold.”

“I told you not to call me Frank.”

“And I told you that’s your name.”

She pushes me into a chair and sets the container in front of me. When I pop open the lid, steam rises from the dish, and the smell of slow-cooked beef fills my lungs.

“Guess we’re going to have to get married, Melody.”

“I didn’t make this. I just brought it from the café,” she says.

“Don’t matter. You’re still feeding me.” I notice that Vincent and Emma are watching us. Annoyed, I swipe the Go-Bag and toss it to Vincent. “Here’s everything you need. The warrant, the badge, and the cuffs. Have fun.”

“We will.”

The moment the two leave, I drag Melody onto my lap.

“Should I be here?” She squirms, rousing a different kind of hunger.

“Until I find the killer, you and me are attached at the hip.” I clamp my hand around her waist and haul her up against my chest.

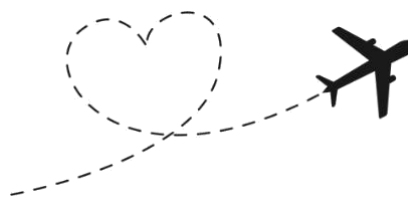
“And after you find the killer, then what? We go back to our normal activity?”

“Sure. I’m not planning on keeping you locked up forever.”

She pushes my hands away and leaps out of my lap. “You know what? You can get your own damned food next time.”

She slams the door shut, and the frame is still vibrating a minute later as I stare in shock and surprise at what just happened. Was it the marriage comment? She doesn’t want to get married? Is it that she doesn’t want to be attached at the hip? I told her it was temporary. I know women these days are independent and shit so you’ve got to walk carefully and not say all the intrusive thoughts in your head like *I’m going to handcuff you to my desk and piss on your leg so everyone knows you belong to me.*

I’m civilized. I’ll get the ring, and the collar will just be for home, but I’m keeping those thoughts to myself until I fix this murder investigation.



CHAPTER 10

MELODY

I'M GOING TO MURDER HIM. I CAN'T BELIEVE HE DID THIS. OR
can I? I probably shouldn't be shocked by it.

I recall his words about him having fantasies about tying me up before he threw himself into the Navy. Not gonna lie. That lit a fire deep inside of me that I didn't know was there. This, however, is different.

“Frank, you better open this right now.” I try to keep my tone firm. The same one I use when one of the kids is acting out at school.

“You'll just run again.” He flips through a few papers as though it's business as usual.

I hadn't made it far out of the police station before Frank was all over me. Not gonna lie, I did enjoy him chasing after me. That was until he'd gone and tossed me over his shoulder and carried me back into the police station and into one of the stupid holding cells that I don't think has ever been used.

“Can you blame me for running?” He glances my way. “You're a big jerk!” I regret my words the second I say them when I see something flash in his eyes. It fades away quickly,

though. As usual, he slips into some role he thinks he needs to be in, never showing too much of his true self, which only pisses me off more.

“If it keeps you alive, I’ll be the biggest asshole I have to be.”

“Whatever.” I walk over, dropping down on the bench. He rolls his shoulders. My indifference is getting to him.

Interesting. “I don’t understand you, Biscuit. You want to keep me safe, but you never think about other ways I might be hurting.” Within a blink of an eye, he’s out of his chair and standing in front of the holding cell.

“What does that mean?”

I shrug. “You broke my heart when you left, but I got it. You needed to go do your thing. At least that’s what I thought you were doing, but now you say you left because of me. I don’t really understand, and you refuse to give me any kind of explanation. It’s frustrating.”

“Everything I do is for you, Mel.” Here we go again with the cryptic stuff.

“See, confusing.” I stand, walking over to the bars and wrapping my fingers around them. “You keep on breaking my heart.” Frank runs his hand down his face. I think I might be frustrating him more than the case.

“It wasn’t only about me getting away. You were still in high school. Had college in your sights. You’ve wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember. If I’d stayed, would you have gone off to college?”

“I don’t know what would have happened,” I say honestly.

“I had to let you go. Let you grow and see if I was something you’d really want or if I was just some crush.” I don’t think he is completely wrong. We both had some growing up to do.

“What if I would have fallen in love with someone else and got married?”

He clenches his fists by his side. For a man that’s been gone for years he’s got a jealous side when it comes to me. I’m finding I’m quite fond of it. “You didn’t,” he grits out.

“No, I was too busy writing letters that went unanswered and thinking about you.” I drop my hands from the bars. “Were you thinking about me too?” I ask.

“You were my place.” His head drops, but he releases his clenched fists. “The hardest part of my training was survival.

The shit they did to us.” He shakes his head. “Part of our teaching was employing dissociation within the mind. It’s a psychological defense mechanism where your mind goes to a pleasant space away from what is happening around or to you. Mine always went to you. And what it would be like if you were mine. I would get lost thinking about the life we’d have together if I made it out of whatever mess I’d gotten into.” His mouth pulls up into a half smile as if he’s thinking about the place now.

“Biscuit,” I whisper. This man has me all over the place. One second I think he wants to get away from me, and another I think I’m his entire world.

“I always think about you, Mel. You’re the only girl I’ve ever thought about.”

“Then why—” I stop talking when my alert starts to chime. I glance over to my bag sitting on the floor next to the desk Frank’s been sitting at to be close to the cell.

“Expecting a call?” He walks over to my bag.

“Don’t!” I shout as he picks it up.

“Who is it?”

“It’s not anyone. Give me the bag,” I order, holding out my hand through the bars. “Biscuit!” I snap. He reaches into my purse, pulling out my phone. He glances at the screen.

“Low glucose?” His brows pull together. “The hell does that mean?”

“It means give me my bag!” I snap. He walks over, unhooking the door and hands me my phone and bag.

“You have diabetes?”

“Great. Another reason for you to treat me like I’m glass.” I pull back the sleeve of my shirt and press my phone against the sensor to get my reading.

“What’s it say?” He tries to look at my phone.

“That I need sugar.”

“I’ll get something.” He starts to rush away.

“I have something.” I pull out a snack-size bag of Skittles and pop a few into my mouth.

“Why don’t I know about this?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, fucking seriously.”

“I don’t know, maybe because you think I’m a person incapable of taking care of or making decisions for myself.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Really? That’s why you ask me anything when it comes to the idea of you and me?”

“You just stormed out of here to get away from me but now you’re saying there is a you and me?”

“Is there?” I toss back at him.

“For me, there’s only you and me. How many times do I have to say it’s only you, Mel?” He runs his hand through his short hair, clearly frustrated with this conversation. That makes two of us. I swear we speak two different languages.

“You don’t act like it’s only me.” I could be his sister with the way he acts sometimes. Besides the soft brush of a kiss against my lips, that’s all there’s been. Plus a bit of cuddling.

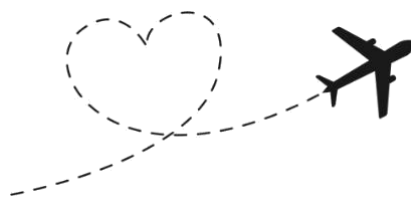
“How do you mean?”

“You know I’ve never been kissed. That one yesterday doesn’t count. Never!” I actually stomp my foot, my anger getting the best of me now. “How pathetic is that?”

“Yesterday counts,” he says. “And unless you count the time I had to give junior CPR, which I’m not, I haven’t been either.” I let out a gasp of surprise. How is that possible?

“Really?”

He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. I’m really pissing him off now. “I’m going to say it one more time, Mel.” He closes the space between us. “Only you.” He drives his point home before he claims my mouth with his.



CHAPTER 11

FRANK

MY CONTROL SNAPS LIKE A WORN RUBBER BAND THAT HAS been stretched too many times. “I left you because you were young. Because you had dreams. I left you here because you were fifteen, Mel,” I growl against her mouth. “Eighteen-year-old men can’t be looking at fifteen-year-old girls like I was looking at you. Can’t be fantasizing about what I was fantasizing about.”

The nights I spent in that basement bathroom, jerking off feverishly to visions of her with her legs spread, her juice dripping onto my tongue, her tits heavy in my hand. Want makes me dizzy. I kiss her deeply, imagining that it’s my cock inside of this wet heat instead of my tongue. I lick the roof of her mouth, behind her teeth, across the top of her own velvet tongue.

I drop my hand between her legs and press the heel of my hand against her sex. She gasps. “Right now I’m having thoughts about you that I shouldn’t be having, and it’s not just about taking you. It’s about taking you hard. Putting you on your knees, chaining you up, making you deep throat my cock until your eyes water and I can see the outline of my shaft in your neck.”

I grind my hand harder, reveling in the way she shudders and moans. I knew it would be this good. My dick hardens to steel. I throb with need. I’m going to take her right here in the

“Right here in the jail?” she pants.

The real world rushes back into my head, along with a healthy dollop of sense. I drop my forehead to hers in sad recognition. This is not the place or time for us to be making love, not even the tender, virginal kind.

“Maybe not your first time,” I concede.

“Your hand is still on my...down my...you know,” she struggles to say.

“Your pussy? Technically I’m not there yet, but I’d like to be. I’m sure it’s warm and juicy—like your mouth.” I give her one last thorough kiss before pushing away from her. “Go sit in the chair like a good girl, and don’t make me put you back in the cell.” I point her toward an empty chair next to the small round table and then hide myself behind the desk. I re-apply myself to the case, making phone calls, following up on interviews. I pin up a couple more details on the murder board.

Head pounding, I return to my chair with a regretful sigh and peer over at Mel, who has been quietly reading a book. At one point, she got up from her chair. I rose, too, but she said she was just going to the vending machine to get herself a candy bar. She was only gone for a minute, but it took thirty for my heart rate to go down even after she returned. “How long have you had diabetes?”

She groans loudly and flips a page without looking up. “Does it really matter?”

“You take shots for it or do you manage your diet?”

“Meds and diet for now.” She narrows her eyes. “Why? Are you turned off by the insulin port?”

“No,” I reply flatly. “The port would be sexy because it keeps you healthy. I’m not going to be turned off by anything that keeps you alive and kicking. Tomorrow we’ll go to the hospital and get my blood drawn to see if I’m a match for you.”

“For what? A kidney? I do not need a kidney from you.” The frown deepens.

Other than when I kissed her, Mel always seems pissed at me. I’m going to chalk that up to sexual frustration because

my perpetual state of horniness puts me in a constant state of orneriness. The only solution is to fuck, and in the state I'm in, I don't think I could solve a round of Clue. I jerk open the desk drawer, grab my keys, and shove away from the desk.

Her eyes widen as I approach. "You are not putting me back into the cell," she warns with her hands up.

"I know. We're leaving."

"I've been staying in my chair except for that one time when I needed a little sugar."

"I said we are leaving. Not you." I haul her upright and throw open the door. An unfamiliar face in the dispatcher's chair greets me.

"Sheriff?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Colin." He clears his throat. "The night dispatcher."

I glance up at the clock to see that it's past dinner. "Shit. No wonder we're both in a bad mood." I start for the door with Mel in tow. "I have my radio. Give me a buzz if anything comes in."

"Copy that."

"Why didn't you tell me what time it was?" I lightly chide Mel. "You need more than a handful of Skittles and a candy bar."

"You were busy earlier." She shrugs. "I'm not going to bother you while you're trying to solve a crime. I wouldn't want you in the classroom while I'm trying to teach either."

"All right, but next time, you tell me when it's time to break for a meal. I need to eat just as much as you do." I put her inside the car and then climb behind the wheel. "Do you have steak at home? I'll grill two of them for us."

"I don't. I have peanut butter and some ham for a sandwich."

"Good enough for me, but tomorrow I'm stocking you up."

“Are you moving in?”

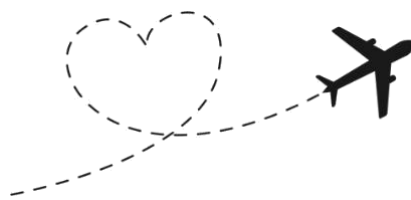
“Yeah.”

“Did we talk about this?”

“Not really, but if I’m bedding you, we’re living together. Once the murder is solved, we’ll get married.”

“Married?” she nearly shouts.

“I’m not letting you sleep with me without putting a ring on it. I can’t have you thinking I’m easy.” I flash her a big grin and then press the gas pedal. I’m speeding, but who’s gonna check me? I’m the chief.



CHAPTER 12

MELODY

“I THINK I’LL DO MY NORMAL CHEESEBURGER,” I TELL STEPH. There are about five or six different meals I order here. At least for dinner or lunch time. I’m a creature of habit. Once I like something, I tend to eat it over and over again.

“You want your normal salad or the mozzarella one?” she asks.

“Mozzarella please.”

“You have mozzarella salad?” Frank asks, flipping the menu to the other side. I think it’s been the same menu for the past ten years, so he probably knows it by heart.

“It’s not on the menu. We have the stuff to make it, so Mark makes it special for Melody.” Steph nods her head toward the kitchen window, where you can see Mark cooking in the back. Frank furrows his eyebrows for a second. I swear he almost looks jealous of Mark making me a special salad. Which is ridiculous since Mark is three times my age.

“I’ll just have whatever she’s having.” He hands Steph the menu.

“You want the burger the same way too?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“All right.” She takes my menu next.

“You don’t have to eat what I eat, Biscuit. It doesn’t bother me. You should get whatever you want.”

“If we’re going to live together, I should get used to eating how you eat,” he rebuffs.

“I don’t always have to eat perfectly. I have mealtime insulin if I want to splurge, but I’m kind of used to eating what I eat at this point.”

“What exactly is a Mozzarella salad?”

“Just sliced tomatoes, mozzarella, and some balsamic dressing.” It’s simple but yummy.

“And a burger is okay?” His brows pull together, and I can tell he’s really thinking this all over. I have the feeling he’s going to be googling the hell out of this.

“I get it with no bun.”

“Right.” He nods. “And your blood type?” I snort a laugh. Frank scowls at me.

“I’m A positive, but I’m fine, Frank. I’m probably in better health than most people in this diner. Type 1 diabetes isn’t a death sentence if you take care of yourself. It’s just a lifestyle change that you have to get used to.”

“I hate that I didn’t know about this.” From his tone, I can’t tell if he’s irritated with me or himself. “I should have responded to your letters.” My heart melts at that. The man really is battling himself when it comes to me. As much as it annoys me, it’s endearing too.

“I wouldn’t have told you even if you had responded to my letters. You had enough to worry about. There is no way I would’ve added to that. That wasn’t the purpose of my letters.”

“Is there anything else I should know? Something else you’re keeping from me?” I think for a second but don’t come up with anything significant. I shake my head no. “There has to be.”

“I have this.” I dig through my purse and pull out a nose spray. “If I ever pass out, you shoot it up my nose.”

“Do you pass out a lot?!” His eyes widen.

“Only once, but it was a sensor issue which has been fixed. I’m fine, Biscuit. I’m not made of glass,” I try to reassure him. He doesn’t seem so sure. “I have my normal checkup in a few

weeks. You can come and ask the doctor anything you want.” He relaxes a bit back in his seat. I might be enjoying Biscuit obsessing over me a bit too much.

“You’ve been living alone. What if you passed out at home and no one was there?”

He surprised the heck out of me when he threw out that we’ll be moving in together. I should have told him to pump his brakes, but I’ve been so alone since Grams passed. I hate how quiet the house can get. I often leave the TV on just to have sound when I’m not even watching it.

“Is that point moot?”

“Yes,” he grunts. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. He reminds me of a grumpy bear with a thorn in its paw.

Thankfully, Steph returns with our food. It’s later in the day, so the diner is pretty empty. It doesn’t discourage people from stopping at our table to ask Frank about the investigation. He tells them all the same thing. The investigation is ongoing, giving none of them any details. One little slip and the whole town will be buzzing with speculation.

“Have you heard from Vincent?” I ask as I take a bite of my burger.

“They are staked outside the Finley beachfront property in South Shore waiting for someone to come back.”

“You really think Blake would do this? I don’t see a motive,” I say in a low voice so no one can hear me.

“He and his father misused city funds. I’ve got them on that. We’ll see about the rest once they get here.”

“Do you know how to interrogate people? Will there be a good cop and a bad cop? Who would be the bad one and who would be the good one?” Frank smirks at my barrage of questions.

“Yes, I know how to run an interrogation.”

“Without torture?” I smirk back at him, only making his smirk turn into a full smile. Damn he’s sexy when he smiles.

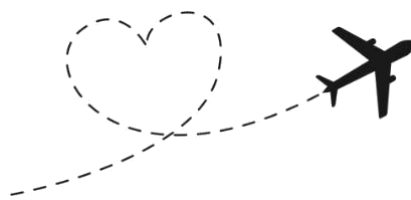
“I was thinking of having Kelly in on it.” My eyes widen.

“That’s brilliant!” I squeal. I put my hand over my mouth when everyone turns to glance our way. “Sorry,” I whisper to Frank. “God, he’ll hate having a woman interrogating him.”

“Yep.” He takes a giant bite of his burger. I made Steph get him a bun for it. He protested until I reminded him our bodies don’t work the same. It’s not fully healthy for him to eat the way I do. He relented I think only because he wanted to suck up any information I’d give him on the subject.

“I know you said you only took this job because of me, but I think you’d make a great chief of police here even after you solve this,” I tell him.

“That’s nice to hear, babe, because I’m not going anywhere.” I think I love those words as much as I’d love hearing him say *I love you*.



CHAPTER 13

FRANK

HER BELLY IS FULL, AND WHATEVER DANGER SHE MIGHT'VE been in due to me not properly feeding her has passed. Still, I'm going to do a lot of research on this so I can best take care of her.

"Are we going back to the station?" Melody wonders when I make a left turn, opposite of the direction of her home.

"No. We're stopping by Mom and Dad's to get my clothes."

"Nooo!" she wails and slumps down into her seat.

I cast a quick glance to see she's covering her face with her hands. "Why no? I thought you loved my parents."

"They can't know we are sleeping together. That's embarrassing. Turn around right now." She shakes my shoulder, but it's too late. We've already arrived.

I pull into the drive and cut the engine. Melody clutches the vinyl-covered door panel. "I'm not getting out," she declares.

"Mom is going to raise hell if I leave you out here." "I don't care. Go on and get your stuff."

I've never seen her wear a more determined expression, and her grip on the door is so tight I think I'd have to take the door off the hinges and carry both her and the auto part inside.

"I'll be five," I say.

She gives me a tight jerk of her head and then stares out the window so she can't see the house, as if by not seeing it,

she can pretend she's not here. I swallow a chuckle.

Inside, Mom is making fried chicken. A big pile of fried pieces are piled onto a layer of newspaper so the grease drains off. My stomach rumbles even though I just had a burger and the salad.

"Smells good." I sniff over her shoulder.

"You staying for dinner?"

"I picked up something with Melody, but I'll take any extra."

"What do you mean take?" She cranes her neck to peer out the kitchen window that overlooks the drive. Lines appear between her eyes when she spots Melody in the car. Mom rears back and gives me an evil eye. "Now Benson Charles, why is that sweet girl sitting in the car like she's some kind of unwelcome disease?" She waves the flour-coated tongs she's been using to turn the chicken in my face. "Go on and bring her in here. You can eat at the table like civilized people."

"She won't come in." I sneak a wing and chomp it down.

"Now why is that?"

As I toss the bone in the trash, I reply, "Cuz I'm staying over there."

"Because of the killer?" Mom wants to know.

"That and because I want to." I figure it's best to be honest with Mom.

Her eyes narrow. "You can't be fooling around with Melody. She's a good girl, and just because her family is all gone doesn't mean she's alone. If I have to protect her from my own son, I will."

Moms are terrifying. I put up my hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm not fooling around with her. It's going to be permanent once I solve this murder."

"Permanent as in what?"

I grin and wink. "Marriage. Feel free to reserve the church."

“Then you’ll be staying here and taking the chief’s job for good.”

“I reckon I am.”

Mom’s face grows smug. “And that Vincent boy?” “I suppose he will have to be a deputy.”

A smile so bright that it’s blinding creases her face. “That’s good. You’re making good decisions.” With all the details of her pups back in the kennel called Harrisville, she returns to flouring and breading her chicken.

I hurry to my bedroom, stuff my shit into a bag, and then make a beeline for the exit. Mom hands me a paper bag full of fried chicken. “I put some extra wings in there since you’re doing a good job.”

“What’s that?” Melody asks when I climb into the car.

“Mom made fried chicken. I’m going to put it in the fridge, and we can have it later.”

“Did she see me?”

“Yeah, and she threatened to chop my balls off if I don’t treat you well.”

“Hmmm. I have always loved your mom.” Melody shakes the bag of chicken. “Smart and a good cook.”

“She’s taken, so you’ll have to settle for me.” I rest my hand on her knee. She covers it with her smaller palm, and the fire of need races through my veins.

When we get home, Melody puts the chicken in the fridge while I feed the dog. Once that’s done, I lean against the counter and watch her tidy up the already clean kitchen. She’s a little jittery.

I snag her by the waist and pull her against me. “It’s going to be good.”

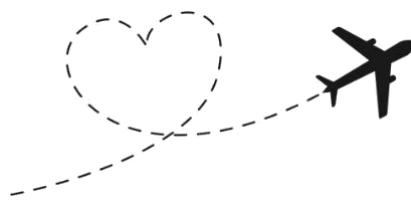
“What will be?”

“All of it. You, me, this.” I tangle my hands in her hair and kiss her leisurely, enjoying every corner of her mouth. I cup

my hands around her ass and lift her jean-clad pussy against the hard outline of my cock. I rock against her until the heat of her sex burns through all layers of clothes.

My years of training kick in, and the rigid self-control I learned in the Navy helps me to maintain my composure. I carry her down the hall to the bedroom. Between long, deep kisses, I remove her clothes and then mine. I lay her naked body down on the bed and lick and bite and kiss my way down to her cunt. Her legs spread easily for me. I fill myself up with her taste, tonguing her deep, drinking down her essence. When her orgasm overtakes her, I pierce her virginal veil and glide into her tight channel.

Teeth clenched, ass tight, I hold myself back from ramming myself to the hilt. Instead, I finger her tiny clit, suck on her tits, and tell her how pretty she is, how good she feels, how she should let me inside, deeper, deeper, until there's no space between us, until we're one.



CHAPTER 14

MELODY

“OH GOD,” I MOAN AT FRANK’S FILTHY, SWEET WORDS.

I thought a girl’s first time was supposed to hurt. I’d felt a pinch, but I’d been in the throes of an orgasm. My mind is not only wrapped up in the pleasure he’s giving me but also that this is finally happening. So many years we’ve both waited for this moment, and it’s here.

“I knew you’d be so damn sweet and soft.” He thrusts deeper inside of me. I let out a small gasp. I’m stretched to the brim. He’s so damn big, but I love the sensation of being stuffed full. I’m overflowing with him. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.

“You’re so big.” I grip his shoulders as he pulls out and thrusts back in.

“I thought that was a good thing,” he says through clenched teeth. My sex flutters around his cock, seeing him fight for control. I love that I’m the only one that can tempt his self-control.

“I’ll get used to it.” I lick my lips.

“This pussy is going to mold to my cock. It’s the only one it will ever know.” He picks up speed, the pleasure starting to build all over again. I am about to go off again. I didn’t think that was possible. “Mel, I’m going to come.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be a good thing?” I use his own words.

“Inside you. I’m going to come inside of you.”

“Oh.” My sex flutters around his cock, my hips lifting to meet his thrusts in silent invitation. I want this as much as he does—for him to spill inside of me with nothing between us.

“I want the words,” he orders, never slowing his speed, his cock moving in and out of me.

“Yes, you can come inside me. You can do anything you want to me.” A growl rumbles from him. His fingers go back to my clit, stroking me.

“There is no going back now. You’re mine.”

I cry out as another orgasm hits me like an avalanche. My nails dig into him as black spots dance in my eyes. I hear him groan my name before his seed spills inside of me. His cock jerks when he tries to push himself deeper in me, but he’s as deep as he can go.

His body collapses partly onto mine. I know he doesn’t give me all his weight, but it’s enough to keep me pinned beneath him. I wrap my arms around him. He buries his face in my neck. His breathing is heavy. I run my fingers up and down his back, never wanting to move. I’ve waited for this moment for so long that I don’t want it to end.

Being pinned beneath him makes me think of all those dirty fantasies he said he’s had about me.

“Me,” he groans. I realize my sex is fluttering around his cock that’s still lodged inside of me.

“What?”

“You’re tempting me.”

“So?”

“We can’t. I’m not a small man, and you’re so damn tiny. You need time to recover.” That only makes me do it again. My body obviously begs to differ with him.

“Sorry! It’s doing it on its own. It’s kind of turning me on that I’m pinned beneath you. That you could do anything you wanted to me. I keep thinking about the things you said you fantasized about doing to me before you left town. Tying me up and stuff,” I remind him in case he’d forgotten.

“Melody.” He nips my neck, making me gasp. “Don’t be a bad girl.” He slowly slips out of me. I somehow whimper and wince. “See.”

He drops back onto his knees between my spread thighs. His eyes travel down my body to linger there. My eyes remain on his cock, which is still hard with traces of his release and a smear of blood. How the hell did that fit inside of me?

I can feel some of his release start to spill out of me. He runs his finger down between the lips of my sex before slowly pushing it back in. Is he doing what I think he’s doing?

“You know I’m not on anything?” I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

“I was hoping you weren’t.”

“Frank, this is a big deal. You know. A baby.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I’ll take care of you. I’ve saved every penny. Didn’t have anything or anyone to spend it on. I can build you your dream home, or we can stay here. I don’t care. As long as each night I’m in bed with you. That’s all that matters.” I sit up, wrapping my arms around Frank’s neck to pull his mouth down to mine.

“That’s all I care about too. I’d never doubt that you’d be a good father.”

“A husband too.” My stomach flutters at the idea of us getting married. “I promise I’ll be good to you.”

“What if I want you to be bad sometimes?”

He grips my chin, tilting my head back to stare up into his eyes. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” I breathe out the one word.

“You should be careful what you ask for.”

“I know what I’m asking for, Biscuit. I knew I was going to belong to you even before I really understood what that fully meant. But I always knew deep down that I was meant to be yours and you mine. When I hear you talk and say those things to me, it only makes me believe we were made for each

other.” I crawl into his lap, straddling his thighs. “Because I want all those things too. I want you to do every single one of them to me.”

He moves faster than I knew was possible. The next thing I know, my back is on the bed with my hands pinned above my head, his big body looming over mine.

“Is this what you want?” He rakes his teeth down my neck.

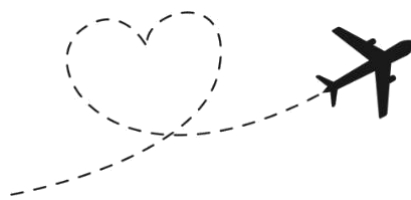
“Yes,” I moan.

“Then be a good girl and I might give it to you.” Within a blink of an eye, he’s gone and standing on the side of the bed.

“What the hell?”

He only plucks me right off the bed and carries me into the shower. “Going to clean you up and then dirty you up again.” He turns the shower on, letting it warm before he steps under the spray. “But first I want you on your knees, sugar.” He slides me down the front of his body. I keep going, dropping to my knees in front of him. “Hands behind your back with your fingers laced together, mouth open,” he orders.

I do as I’m told, loving every second of it.



CHAPTER 15

FRANK

MY PHONE WAKES ME UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. I silence it immediately and then quickly check to see if Melody woke up. Thankfully, she's still sleeping. As gently as possible, I pull my arm from underneath her head. Before leaving her, I place a pillow against her chest for her to hug. Teddy lifts his head as I make my way out of the bedroom, but thankfully, he doesn't bark.

Once I'm in the kitchen, I press the call back button.

"You got news for me?" I ask.

"I heard you're getting married. Congrats!" booms Vincent.

"It's three in the morning. Please don't tell me you called to hassle me about my bachelor status."

"Sadly, no. We just picked up Blake, and are on our way back to Harrisville. He claims he's innocent, and frankly, I kinda believe him. At the time of the murder, he was in a bar down here, causing a scene. There are several witnesses and even CCTV coverage of him getting smacked down by a woman he tried to grope. I have a copy of it for your amusement."

"This story would be funnier if it didn't shoot a big hole in my investigation."

"Yeah, sorry. But we both knew it would be too easy if it was Blake's doing. Don't want your job to be too easy."

I grunt in response.

Vincent chuckles and changes the subject. “No good leads?”

“None. I’m gonna reread the file and do more interviews tomorrow.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. It’s only been 48 hours since we found the bodies.”

“That long, huh? Take care of my sis. I’ll see you in a few.”

“10-4.”

Only 48 hours? It seems like it’s been longer than that, but I suppose that’s because every minute that passes where I don’t solve the crime is another moment that everyone in this town is unsafe.

I grab my duffle that I dropped at the doorway when we got home and pull out my laptop. Using Melody’s coffee machine, I make myself an instant, and settle in for a long night of work.

The thing I need to figure out is motive. The coroner said the vet was tranquilized and then killed. The assistant got knifed because she surprised the killer. If the vet was the target, it’s likely one of the women he was sleeping with, but they all had pretty good alibis. Two of them live with their parents. One of them has a roommate, and the last one wasn’t even in town. She was at a conference in LA and had the flight ticket to prove it.

The vet being tranquilized before he died is my biggest clue. It means that whoever killed him was smaller, less powerful. They used drugs to subdue the victim before killing him. The other thing that bugs me is that no one heard the dogs barking. Vincent and I heard the dogs from the street when we were staking the place out, but all the neighbors around the clinic said they didn’t hear a thing. Teddy barked at me the first time I came into Melody’s house. Dogs bark at strangers. I tap my fingers against the table and then, on a hunch, start typing. The target of the crime was the vet, and all the women the vet dated or slept with had alibis. The only other person connected

to the vet was Doc Wells, who moved to Atlanta to be with his son, Kenny Wells, an architect, but the search results don't pull up any architects by the name of Wells in the Atlanta area. I check the time. It's only four in the morning. The state licensing offices that would have a complete list of all the licensed professionals in the state aren't open for another five hours.

I look at my cold coffee and decide to get some shut-eye. As I'm scraping back the chair, I notice Melody in the doorway of the kitchen, leaning against the doorjamb with a bemused smile on her face.

"How long have you been up?" I say.

"I was about to ask the same question of you." She pushes upright and comes over to pull out the chair across from me. The duffle bag tumbles off, and the contents spill out. Because I'm tired, my reflexes are shot, and she gets to the papers first. Wordlessly, she picks up the packet of letters, tied together with a leather string.

"These look familiar," she says, setting the pile onto the table.

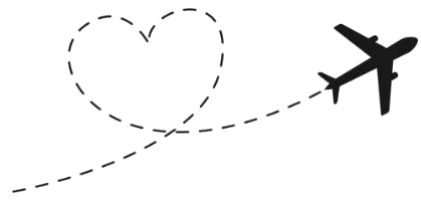
"Yeah." I exhale heavily. I don't know if I've felt this nervous since I was in the plane trying to graduate from flight school. I drag a hand down my face. "I said I didn't respond, not that I never read them."

Slowly she undoes the tie and takes off the first letter. It falls open easily. I lean back and close my eyes because I don't need to read it to know what it says. I have it memorized. "Dear Biscuit, I got my first dog. It's a rescue dog. Vet Wells saw me at the diner after Grams died and asked if I needed some company. I went straight to the clinic with him. Teddy's hair was all matted, and his eyes were watery. Vet Wells said he pulled about ten ticks off of him. Teddy was in bad condition, but it was love at first sight. That's how I'm built, you know? Anyway, I loved him and took him home that day. He didn't trust me at first, but we're inseparable now. I can't remember what life was like before Teddy. I think you'd love

him when you meet him. Come home soon. Love, Melody.” I recite without having to see the note.

“I probably shouldn’t have said come home soon. You had a job to do.” She refolds the letter and places it on top of the others. “Why didn’t you write back?” she says after a long silence.

“Because I’m not good with words, Mel. I wrote you a thousand responses in my head, but when I put the pen to paper, it sounded dumb. I told myself I’d say all these things when we saw each other again, but Uncle Sam kept sending me on missions, and I figured you were happy, so I stayed away. I see that was wrong, and I’m sorry.” I hold out my hand. “If you let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”



CHAPTER 16

MELODY

TEARS STING MY EYES. “I KNOW YOU WILL, BISCUIT.” I LEAN in and kiss him. None of that matters anymore. We’re here now, and we’re going to be together. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. It’s just nice knowing that he’d been pining for me too. His fingers slip into my hair, gripping a handful. He pulls, tilting my head back to kiss me deeper.

I shift in the chair to straddle him. I love this other side of him. It’s one I know no one else will ever know. When people think of Frank, they always put him into this cookie-cutter perfect hero role, and don’t get me wrong, he is. I mean, there is a reason he was made the chief of police and no one batted an eye. What they don’t know is how filthy the man can be. To be honest, I hadn’t even seen it coming. Hell, I didn’t even know it was something I’d crave and need until he put those thoughts into my head.

“You sore, sugar?” he asks me between kisses.

“I’m better,” I try to reassure him, wanting a repeat of yesterday. He refused to let us have sex again last night, but we did other things. I rock against his cock that’s pressing into my bare sex now. I hadn’t bothered to put any bottoms on. I’d only slipped his shirt on when I’d gotten out of bed.

He pulls my hair harder to expose my neck to him. He nips at my skin there, the same way he’d done when we made love. I noticed the mark on me when we got out of the shower and he towel-dried me before putting us both to bed. When I woke to see the other side of the bed empty, it didn’t scare me. I knew he wouldn’t be far, and I wasn’t wrong. Any doubts I’ve

had about what is happening between the two of us are gone. I don't fear him leaving anymore.

He yanks my shirt off over my head, leaving me naked in his lap. "Take me out," he orders. I lick my swollen lips as I do what I'm told.

"Where did you learn to be so filthy?" I ask. "And bossy?" I add.

I squeeze my thighs together, remembering how he had me kneel in front of him with my hands behind my back as he thrust his cock in and out of my mouth, ordering me not to move. He'd braced one arm on the shower wall as he'd used the other to keep my head in place as he took what he wanted. I'd been so turned on after he came in my mouth it only took him a few swipes of his fingers to my clit as he kissed me to have me orgasming too. I had no idea how erotic a blowjob could actually be until he showed me.

"I've had you so many ways in my dreams over the years, sugar. Anytime I wrapped my hand around my cock to get myself off, I was thinking of ways I'd possess you. I thought you might need time and space. That I needed to shake these ideas from my head, but I think they've only gotten worse the more I tried to deny what I wanted to do to you."

I scoot back to pull off his sweatpants, his cock springing free. "What is something you've wanted to do to me?" I wrap my hand around his cock and start stroking him.

"Harder," he orders. I tighten my grip on him. "You're dripping all over me." I am. I'm soaked, my juices coating my inner thighs. "Fuck. Is all that from you thinking about what I want to do to you?"

"Yes," I breathe out. "And thinking about you stroking yourself while you thought of me." He stands, taking me with him, only to lay me out on the kitchen island. The counter feels cool against my skin.

"Spread your legs and place your feet flat on the counter." The second I do as I'm told, he pulls me to the edge. My thighs spread even wider, the need intensifying. He wraps his

hand around his cock and starts to jack himself off. “Don’t move.” He smacks the side of my thigh, making me gasp when I start to wiggle.

I bite the inside of my cheek as I watch his every movement. It’s impossible not to move. My clit throbs, begging for his attention. The thing is I already have it, just not how I want it. His eyes eat up every inch of me as though he can’t get enough.

“Please.” I start to beg, wanting him to give me more.

“You want me to take you?” My sex clenches at the thought of him filling me up again.

“Yes!” I shout. He releases his cock to grab me. As if I weigh nothing, he flips me over onto my knees.

“What a beautiful view.” He runs his hands up the back of my thighs, causing goosebumps to break out along my skin. I glance over my shoulder at him. “Think I need a better look,” he says before he buries his face between my legs from behind. He eats me as though he’s a starved man.

I gasp when he stiffens his tongue, thrusting it in and out of me a few times before it slides back out to tease my clit. My body starts to stiffen, my orgasm pressing down on me, but he pulls back. I cry out, pushing my ass back.

His hand comes down on it in another smack. “You don’t move unless I tell you to.”

“I’m sorry,” I scream.

“Now where was I?” His mouth goes back to devouring me.

“Oh God.” I moan when he drags his tongue up higher, licking every inch of me. His tongue probes my back entrance as his fingers go to my clit. He gives it a small pinch, and I go off harder than I ever have before. I scream his name as the orgasm takes over. I gasp for air as my body shakes. My knees try to give out, but he wraps his arm under me, keeping my ass in the air as he thrusts his cock all the way inside my sex to the hilt.

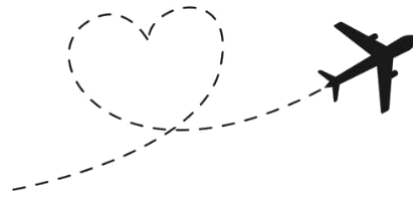
He holds me up as he fucks me from behind. The sound of the smacking skin fills my kitchen. I lie there and enjoy every damn second as Frank does as he pleases with my body. He is already making another orgasm grow. I'm not sure how the heck he knows exactly what buttons to push, but he definitely does.

“Go on. Show me how much you want it,” he says, giving me permission to finally move. I start to push back with each of his thrusts. “You want this too?” He presses his thumb against my puckered hole that is still wet from not only my own juices leaking down as I watched him masturbate but from his mouth too.

“Yes, I want it.”

“That’s my girl,” he encourages as he pushes in a little more. His other hand slips between my thighs to stroke my clit. It’s too much. I feel him everywhere. “Give it to me. Come for me, and I’ll come deep inside you. Prove you want my seed in your womb.”

“Frank!” I scream, the orgasm exploding all around me. I faintly hear him groan as his warmth spills deep inside of me like he promised. My whole body gives out, but he has me. He lifts me into the cradle of his arms, carrying me back to bed and holding me close.



CHAPTER 17

FRANK

I DROP MELODY OFF AT EMMA'S. VINCENT FOLLOWS ME OUT to the car. "You want me to come in and help you question Blake?"

"No. Besides, you look like you're about to fall asleep standing up."

"I'm fine," he says but can't hold back a yawn that nearly cracks his jaw.

"I'm going to Atlanta to check something out. You get inside and protect the family."

He gives me a salute, which he holds like a damned smartass until I can't see him in the rearview mirror.

"Should've never saved your damned life," I mutter under my breath, but not gonna lie, having Vincent around is a huge relief. I gave him and Emma some grief when they first got together. It's not that Vincent was a player. I'd actually never seen him with a woman, but a sailor's life, even if you're a pilot, means living away from home for long periods of time. Flight school is full of single people, and the chem trails are

littered with dead relationships. I never wanted that for Emma and definitely not for Melody.

I'm going to be here for Melody from now on, and I can sleep at night knowing Vincent is here for Emma. Now all I have to do is solve this damn crime.

The licensing office is still closed when I arrive in Atlanta, so I get a cup of coffee and sit in the parking lot. About fifteen minutes before the hour, it begins to fill up. I give a few

people time to unfold themselves from their cars before going in. I hand my credentials to the clerk, who obligingly looks up Wells' name. Unsurprisingly, there is no Wells who is a licensed architect.

“That doesn't mean he doesn't have a business that he advertises as doing architectural work. There are a lot of scammers out there, and we can't catch them all,” the clerk advises me.

“Got it.” I collect Wells' address from the state police and head over to the apartment that he calls home.

“Who is it?” a surly voice calls from inside. He sounds like he just woke up. Since it's after ten by now, I'm guessing that the architecture stuff is a story that he cooked up to make it sound good for his dad.

“ABC Fiber. We're looking to extend coverage to residents here for free as part of a trial program, and we're wondering if you want to sign up to be a participant. It's no cost and—”

The door opens before I can finish my fake spiel. Wearing a thin white T-shirt with a faded image of Thor peeling at the edges, Kenny Wells glares at me. “What's the catch?” he growls.

“No catch.” I step forward into the doorway so he can't shut me out. “It's free. I just need to get your details. Name, address, date of birth, that sort of thing.” I hand a clipboard to him. When he looks down, I bring the clipboard up and smash it into his face, driving him back inside the apartment. I kick the door shut and grab him by the collar, turning him around and shoving him against the wall. “I lied. The catch is that I'm Benson Charles, chief of police from Harrisville. When's the last time you saw your old man?”

“Dad?” he bleats.

“Yes, your father, Kevin Wells. Where is he?” “Man, I don't know,” he whines.

I twist his arm higher. “Try again.”

Kenny falls silent, likely trying to think of some lie. I increase the pressure a notch.

“Fine. Fine. He came down here three months ago after selling his practice, and then when he found out I lived here, he went back to Harrisville.”

“And the new vet wouldn’t sell the practice back to him,” I guess.

“Yeah. I never told him to sell the practice. I never told him to move here!” Kenny cries.

I release the pathetic slug. “You both lied about your degree.”

Kenny clutches his arm to his chest and stumbles over to the sofa, where he collapses into a cushion. “Sure, so he could look good to his bridge friends.”

“We are from Harrisville. We don’t need to look good to your friends.”

Kenny throws his head back against the edge of the sofa. “That’s what I said when he came down here and threw a tantrum for an hour. But he ranted and said I ruined his life because he gave up the one thing he loved to be here with me, but I’m just a failure living in a shack.”

“Where is he now?”

“If he’s not in Harrisville, he went to his hunting cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

I toss him a pad and pen. “Write it down.”

Kenny picks up the pen and starts writing. Halfway through, he stops and cocks his head. “Why do you want him so bad?”

“The new vet is dead.”

Kenny drops the pen. “Huh?”

“The new vet is dead. Your dad probably killed him.” I withdraw my cuffs and reach out and slap one around Kenny’s wrist.

“What’s this for?” he yelps. “I told you everything I know.”

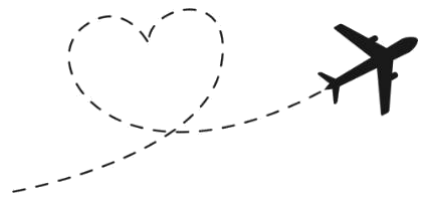
“I can’t have you tipping off your old man, now can I? You’ll come and stay in Harrisville for a couple days while I round up your father. Then you two can have a touching reunion in the Harrisville jail before we send you both over to the state prison.”

“I didn’t do anything! I was here! In Atlanta.” “Got an alibi for that?”

Kenny stares at me with a stricken expression. Likely he was drunk off his ass but alone.

“No,” he whispers. He starts crying.

I haul him to his feet and drag him out to the car. He puts up no resistance. Instead, he blubbers almost the entire three hours back to Harrisville, pleading with me to believe that he had nothing to do with the murders. He’s likely telling the truth, but I don’t trust him not to warn his father I’m coming. The ride home is a helluvalot more comfortable. At least I know who the killer is. It’s a matter of finding him now.



CHAPTER 18

MELODY

“WHAT THE HELL IS ALL THIS?” EMMA YAWNS AS SHE WALKS into the living room where I’m sitting on the couch with Grace. She and Vincent had crashed when they’d gotten back early this morning.

“I’ve had these old things for a while.” Her mom picks up one of the five scrapbooks dedicated all to weddings. Actually, I don’t think they are dedicated to just any weddings, but for *my* wedding apparently. That’s what I’ve gathered at least over the last hour or so.

“Years?” I ask. After Frank dropped me off, Grace forced food on me before she pulled out this box full of wedding things. I can’t even judge her for having them. I have a giant stack of bridal magazines at my house.

Ever since I came to Grace’s, I’ve had this cookie-cutter idea of what I wanted. I know it might sound lame to a lot of people, but the whole white picket fence and a family is something I’ve always longed to have. This town was made for that kind of dream. I knew it the second I landed here—that this was where I was going to spend forever. That idea was solidified when I met Biscuit.

“I’ve just picked some things up here and there over the years.” She shrugs nonchalantly. She may not think it’s a big deal, but it means a lot to me.

“Is that a swatch of tablecloths?” Emma picks up a ring with a bunch of different colors.

“Of course not.” Grace takes it from her hand. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s for bridesmaids dresses.”

“I tried to tell her I’m not engaged.” I hold up my hand that is ring free. For now, at least. Frank has made it very clear the direction we are headed in.

“I’m engaged.” Emma holds up her hand. The ring sparkles. “And you never showed me this box.”

“Well, honey, I thought I’d have more time with you,” Grace says. “We all knew Melody and Biscuit were going to get married one day.”

“You did?” I smile over at her. Grace has always been more than sweet to me. I had no idea she had been making all these plans already. It warms me. I don’t have a mom or anyone, for that matter, to do these things with, but I do have Grace.

“You thought I was going to be a spinster, didn’t you?” Emma puts her hands on her hips. “You probably thought I’d end up with a bunch of cats or something.”

“I mean it’s not completely out there to think that.” I come to Grace’s defense.

“Where was this box when I got engaged? We haven’t started planning my wedding.”

“This is Melody and Biscuit’s box.” She picks up the now empty box from off the floor. It’s then I notice it actually has our names scribbled across it in black marker.

“Mel?” Emma says, pulling my attention away from the box. “Mom! You’re going to make her cry.”

“I’m not crying.” I blink quickly, relaxing my eyes that have filled with tears.

“Oh, honey.” Grace pulls me in for a hug.

“I should be mad that I clearly don’t have a box, but I think we all knew Mel was going to get married at some point. I mean, it sucks she’s stuck with Frank, but it is kinda cool you’re going to be my sister.” That does it. I burst into tears. I hadn’t thought about that. “Shit! I’m not that bad!” Emma teases, rushing over to hug me next. “Stop crying. You were family even before Frank pulled his head out of his ass.”

This is true. Since Emma and I became close, I've spent many days here hanging out with the family while Frank was away. It always made me feel closer to him when I was here. It made the time pass by a little quicker. Sometimes I'd even slip into his bedroom and smell his shirts. Fine. Maybe I stole one or two, but it's not like he needed them.

"I think there is more than enough stuff to plan ten weddings here." I sniffle.

"I don't know. There is a lot of pink." Emma picks up one of the scrapbooks.

"It's Melody's favorite color."

"I know my best friend's favorite color, Mom."

I snort a laugh. "What colors do you think you'd go with?"

"Everyone will wear white, and I'll wear a black dress." Grace rolls her eyes at her daughter. "Maybe if I had a box then I'd pick something else."

"When was the last time you ate?" Grace asks her.

"I'm not hangry." Grace gives her a look. "Okay, I might be a little hungry."

"I'll make you something. I'm sure Vincent will be up soon."

"Yeah, he's taking a shower."

"I should take Teddy out." I stand and grab his leash.

"You want something to eat too?" Grace asks.

"Sure," I respond because it's the only right answer. I'm still stuffed, but Grace will make me a plate either way. And I'll eat it because her food is delicious.

Teddy jumps up when he sees I've got the leash in my hand. I clip it onto his collar before I head out of the front door. I can hear Grace and Emma in the distance still going back and forth about a black wedding dress.

"It's nice out," I tell Teddy as we walk down the driveway together. He doesn't really need a leash for the most part

except here he's got a thing for chasing the chickens that roam around, and you never know when you might cross one.

I stop walking when I see a white pickup coming down the driveway. I start to pull back to head toward the house but realize it's Doc Wells. His truck rolls to a stop.

"Hey, Doc," I say when he rolls down the window. I wonder if he's come back because of what happened with Dean. The local vet isn't only needed for people's pets in town, but most of the work around here for them is farm animals. I bet they called him in as a backup until they can find someone else.

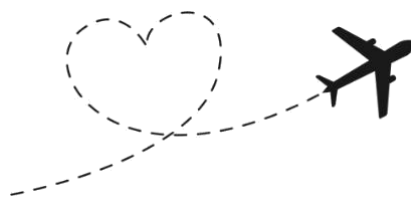
"Melody. How are you doing?"

"I'm good. You?" Teddy growls. I glance down at him. "Teddy. It's Doc Wells." I run my hand across his head to soothe him. His reaction strikes me as odd, considering I'd gotten him from Doc Wells.

"It's all right. He's protective of you."

"Yeah, I think—" I stop speaking when I lift my head and see what appears to look like a gun, but I know it's not one. Before I can make out exactly what it is he's holding, he pulls the trigger. I gasp, my hand going to the dart lodged in my chest. "Doc?" I whisper in shock as my knees give out and I fall. I blink as I stare up at the sky. Teddy growls louder, and I hear the dart gun go off again before Doc Wells comes into view over me.

"I'm sorry, Melody. I don't want to do this. If it was Blake, I'd get away, but your man... I'm going to need your help," I hear him say before everything goes dark.



CHAPTER 19

FRANK

“I CAN’T MAKE OUT A WORD YOU’RE SAYING, MOM.” BUT I know it’s bad or she wouldn’t be ugly crying on the phone. “One word at a time.”

“Melody...taken...not sure,” she pants out.

“Doc Wells, isn’t it?” I press my foot to the pedal. I read Italian police have Lambos, and at the time I thought it was some damned extravagance, but I could really use a vehicle that went 200 miles per hour over the Taurus that the city provides.

“I don’t know.” She starts sobbing.

There’s a commotion, and then Emma comes on the phone. “Someone said they thought they saw Doc Wells coming out of her house with a big bag over his shoulder. I don’t know if I believe it, but—”

“It’s him. Who’s taking care of
Teddy?” “We’ve got him here at the
house.” “Vincent there with you?”

“Yes. He’s right here.”

“Yo,” my friend’s deeper voice booms over the line.

“Take care of them.”

“Already on it.”

“Put out an all-points bulletin that I’m coming. I don’t want to deal with a traffic stop.”

“Will do. What about Wells? You have an idea where he is?”

“No, but I know someone who does. I have his son in my back seat. I’ll find Wells. You tell Emma that.” I hang up and look in the rearview mirror. “I know you heard my conversation, so you need to start talking.”

“What’s this all about? Why would my dad take Melody anywhere?”

“Because he has figured out or somehow suspects that we know he’s the killer, and he’s taken Melody as insurance.” Which means he can’t hurt her or his leverage is shot. Then again, he’s crazy, so all bets are off.

“My old man is a nut bag, but he’s not a killer,” Kenny insists. “He’s a vet, for God’s sake. He saves animals. He loves animals. He sees a small bird injured on the side of the road and he’ll pull over and bring it back to the clinic to save it. He’s not hurting anyone.”

“He loves animals, but maybe he sees people differently. Tell me where his hunting cabin is.”

“He’s not going there,” Kenny says. I wait for him to tell me more, but the guy clams up, starting to realize the gravity here. I grind the back of my teeth together in frustration, but I’ve got some time. The miles speed by too slowly. Every minute that passes is another minute that Melody’s in danger. My patience ends. I slam the palm of my hand against the steering wheel. “Tell me where the fuck they are or I’m going to run this car into the nearest telephone pole.”

“Man, you wouldn’t do that. You’d die yourself.”

I meet his eyes in the rearview mirror. “If I don’t save Melody, I don’t have a life worth living.”

“You serious?” He gapes.

“As a heart attack.” I redirect my eyes on the road so that we don’t crash accidentally.

Kenny slumps back into the seat and raises his cuffed hands to his face. “There’s a cabin over by Fellows Lake. He’d

take her there because it's closer. It's probably where he's been living ever since he left my place. I don't understand, though. Why would he do this?"

I don't have a clear memory of Doc Wells, but he didn't seem the type to commit two murders with a knife. That doesn't matter now. The only thing I'm concerned about is getting to Melody in time.

Kenny reluctantly directs me to the cabin. I barrel down the dirt lane, noting the fresh tire tracks. I spin to a stop and jump out. Kenny bangs on the window of the car, but I ignore him. I'm almost to the stairs of the porch when the cocking of a shotgun echoes loudly in the air. In the doorway, old Doc Wells stares at me over the barrel of his long gun.

"Son, you get back into that car of yours and go back to town."

I put my hands in the air and keep walking toward the man. "I can't do that. You have something that belongs to me. Let Melody go, and we'll talk."

He shakes his head, but the barrel doesn't move. "I didn't go through the trouble of tranquilizing her and bringing her all the way out here to just let her go."

"I don't know what happened that caused you to take the actions you did, but I know you're a good man, Doc Wells. You cared for the Harrisville animals for nearly four decades. Killing people isn't your style. Hurting people isn't your style either. Let Melody go before someone gets hurt." I place a foot on the first step.

"Not another move, Charles."

I'm faster than Doc Wells, driven by both fear and desperation because only a fool would rush a man holding a 12-gauge shotgun at his chest. I grab the barrel and twist to the side, pulling Doc Wells around. His 65-year-old frame is no match for my strength, and he stumbles, losing his grip on the shotgun. I crack it open and drop the shells to the ground. Doc Wells lunges toward me. I bring up the butt and whack it against the side of his face. His eyes roll into the back of his

head, and he drops to the porch. I rush inside and find Melody lying on her side on the sofa.

“Baby, baby, wake up.” I pat her gently on the face.

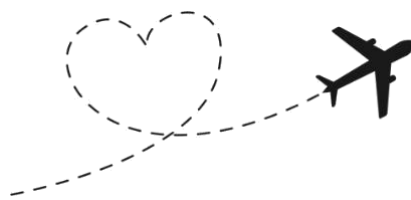
Her eyes flutter open. She lurches forward and throws her arms around my neck. “You’re here,” she cries.

“I’ll always come for you.” I lift her into my arms and walk out of the home. Doc Wells is still lying on the ground. I nudge him with the toe of my boot. He stirs and struggles to sit up.

“Why’d you do it, Doc?”

“He wasn’t taking care of the animals. He was too busy screwing all the ladies in town. He didn’t deserve my practice. When I went to buy it back, he laughed at me and told me to get out. I didn’t want to hurt that girl, but she came in while I was finishing him off.” Unrepentant, Doc Wells raises his chin. “He wasn’t meant to be a vet.”

“Maybe so, but he didn’t deserve to die for it.”



EPILOGUE

MELODY

“YOU DID IT, MEL.” EMMA CLIPS MY VEIL IN FOR ME. I CAN’T believe this day is finally here. It had been a small fight with Frank. After everything that happened, he wanted us married that same day, but I managed to calm him down. The town of Harrisville was once again safe, and he knew that I wanted to do our wedding right. He gave us four months.

Emma looks over my shoulder into the mirror in front of me. We’re in her childhood bedroom getting ready for my big day. Vincent and Emma moved out a few months ago to a rental in town while their home is being built. Grace thought it was silly that they’d go pay rent when they could stay here for free, but I understood it. If her husband is half as kinky as mine, then they need space and very thick walls.

They are actually only a few houses down from Frank and me at the moment. I’ll be sad when they move. Their house will sit on the edge of town with a bit of land. I love having her close, especially with us both being knocked up. Emma is already showing, but my fluffy dress covers up my small baby bump.

“Did what? Got you to wear pink?” She rolls her eyes at me, but a smile plays on her lips.

“Not only did you do that, but you had this dream and you made it come true.”

“I think you’re living a dream too.” I point out the fact that she and Vincent got married quickly. The wedding was small but exactly how they wanted it. Ours, however, is the exact opposite. I think the whole freaking town was invited.

“I am, but I didn’t know what I wanted in life. I never thought I’d find what my parents had, so I pretended I didn’t want it. Pushed it to the back of my mind. You always think I’m the tough one out of the two of us, but you weren’t scared to reach for every star you wanted, and that’s brave. Always putting yourself out there.”

“You’re going to make me cry.” I blink quickly. My makeup was just done. I turn around and hug my best friend, who is going to be my sister in a matter of minutes.

“Ladies.” A knock sounds at the door before it opens. “Are you about to make her cry, Emma?” Grace scolds her. “She does look beautiful.” Grace’s bottom lip starts to quiver.

“Hey! You’re going to make us all cry, Mom,” Emma scolds her right back.

“I’m about to come up there.” Frank’s voice booms through the house.

“You’re supposed to be at the altar!” Emma shouts right back.

“No, we had a change of plans,” I tell them both as I step out of the bedroom to see Frank standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Mel.” He stares up at me, his eyes wide. I start to go down the stairs, but he’s already coming up them to meet me in the middle. “How do you manage to get more gorgeous every time I lay eyes on you?”

“It’s because pregnant girls glow,” Emma chimes in, making me laugh. Frank shakes his head, probably thinking she’s ruining the moment, but she’s not. These are the moments I love most. All the sweet family banter that goes on between all of us.

“What are you two doing? This isn’t the plan,” Grace huffs at both of us.

“I’m walking her down the aisle,” he answers her before he leans in and kisses me.

“It’s not time for that either,” she grumbles. “This is supposed to be a traditional wedding.”

“If that were the case, then she shouldn’t be in white.”

“Emma!” I hiss, my face warming. With the things Frank and I do, nothing should make me blush anymore, but I can’t help it.

“No need to blush. If he’s anything like his father—”

“Do not finish that sentence, Mom. I swear,” Emma shouts.

“All right. Let’s do this. You all already made me wait long enough.” Frank takes my hand, guiding me down the stairs. We line up and wait for the music to start so the wedding can begin. I had a hand in planning every detail, but I haven’t gotten to see how it turned out. It was going to be a surprise. For the past two days, I have not been allowed to go anywhere near the back of the Charles home where the wedding is taking place, along with the reception.

I can remember being a young girl and dreaming of marrying Biscuit here one day. “Babe.” Frank turns me in his arms. “You with me?”

“I’m always with you.”

“And I’ve always been yours.”

“Not yet.” Now it’s the wedding planner cutting in on us.

I hear the music change over. The back door swings open. I step out, my arm linked with Frank’s. A knot forms in my throat when I see how many people are here. The whole freaking town must be shut down because everyone is here. When I came to Harrisville, all I had was my grandma. This town took me in as one of their own and has become my family.

Frank walks me down the aisle. It had been his request. I thought about asking his dad. I’m really close to both of his parents, who have asked me to call them Mom and Dad now too. But Frank said no one was giving me to him. I was already his. He wasn’t wrong.

I barely keep it together through the ceremony. I think the only thing that keeps me from full-on crying is Frank kissing me throughout the ceremony, making everyone laugh.

“Now you may kiss your bride. Again,” Mayor Reid says. Frank takes my mouth in a deep kiss, his arm wrapping around me to lean me backwards. Everyone cheers. “I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Charles.” Everyone cheers even louder.

Frank sweeps me up into his arms, carrying me back down the aisle and into the house. “What are you doing?”

“Something I’ve been dreaming about doing most of my life.” He carries me into his childhood bedroom, kicking the door closed.

“We have guests!” I remind him.

“It’s cocktail hour or some shit while they switch over to the reception. I made sure we’d have a chunk of time to be alone.” Of course, he did. He places me on my feet before flipping the lock on the door. “I want inside you, but first, I need to show you something.” He walks over to the dresser, opening the top drawer. I wonder if he’s pulling out a note. He writes me little ones all the time, leaving them places for me to find. I think it’s his way of making up for all of those letters I sent that went unanswered by him.

He grabs a rolled-up sheet. I watch as he unrolls it. “You got me the blueprints to Emma’s house?”

“It’s not Emma’s house.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Weren’t you wondering why she took every suggestion you made?” She had. I often felt when I was helping her do the floor plan with the builder that I was building my own dream home.

“Biscuit?” He places his hand on my stomach, rubbing the small bump through my dress.

“It’s ours. I got the plot of land next to Emma and Vincent. I know what family means to you, and you’ll want them close.” This time, I burst into tears. Frank gathers me up in his

arms, carrying me over to the bed. “You know I hate it when you cry. Even if they are happy tears, as you call them.”

I go for his belt. “Mel.” He grabs my hands in a possessive hold, pinning me to the bed. My whole body lights up as the side of Frank I only know comes out to play.

“What did you think about doing to me when you lay in this bed at night when we were in high school?” I wiggle under him.

“You’re about to find out,” he growls, pushing my dress up.

We’re going to miss more than cocktail hour. The reception will have to wait too because when it comes to Frank, there is no more waiting.

It’s us forever.

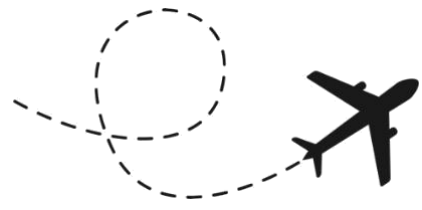
DEAR LOVELIES:

Chasing You features Vincent and Emma and it’s part of Kindle Unlimited! [Run and get your copy.](#)

It’s holiday time and for some that means it’s the best time in the world and for other’s, it’s stressful. Let’s send good energy out to all our friends and loved ones so that this holiday season is the best one yet.

Love you so much,

Ella



CHASING YOU

VINCENT

Read on for an excerpt after the blurb

Vincent

Flying fighter jets was easier than wooing Emma Charles. If it isn't her brother (and my best friend although seriously reconsidering that title) trying to block me at every turn, there's the town's Sheriff trying to claim what I consider already mine. In between trying to convince my (maybe former best friend) that I'm fit to fly Emma's plane, we have to dethrone this tyrant.

Emma

I know better than to fall for my brother's best friend. For one, my brother would never allow it. For two, my brother's a flight jockey which means his best friend is one, too. Do I really want to lose my heart to someone who loves the sky more than the earth? I know better! In all seriousness, though, I think I have a better chance at finally showing my small town who the Sheriff really is than I do of keeping my heart intact.

“Is that you, Biscuit?” screams a blonde no taller than a couple of Coke bottles stacked on top of each other. “I can't believe you're home! Finally!” The woman throws herself into the arms of the six-foot brick house next to me. His good reflexes, the ones that saved my life about nine months ago, kick in, and he catches her.

“Biscuit?” I mouth over the blonde's head. That nickname is a new one. I'm used to calling the tawny-haired seaman Frank, which isn't his name. It's Benson Charles, which no one in my unit ever used because that is the name of some dog that wears pink bows and shoes, not for an officer who can hike twenty miles a day carrying a hundred pounds of shit on his back.

Nah, we call him Frank because his head is square like Frankenstein. Never in my time with him in the squad did I ever hear the name Biscuit.

Frank avoids my gaze and directs his attention to the girl in his arms. “Hey, Melody. Good to see you, too.”

“Good to see you?” She squirms out of his arms. “That’s all you gotta say to me?” Before Frank can react, the palm of her hand is whipping his face to the right. For a tiny thing, she’s got some power. She storms off, more like a tornado than a sweet song.

“What happened here?” I ask.

“Me being a dumbass,” Frank mutters. The tips of his ears are red, and there’s some color on his cheekbones. If we were back in the unit, I might give him more hell, but since we’re in his hometown and he saved my life, I keep it to myself.

“Let’s get a drink, eh? I’m parched.” I use my height and size to part the crowd and make my way to the bar. Beside me, Frank does the same. We reach the bar at the same time.

“Biscuit!” The bartender raises his hand for a high-five.

Frank grimaces slightly but slaps the hand in front of him anyway. “I need two beers. One for me and one for my squad mate, Vincent.”

I reach in my back pocket for my wallet, but Frank shakes his head. “Nah, Tom won’t take a dime from us.”

“That’s right,” chimes the bartender, grinning behind his unruly ’90s-era pornstache. “Can’t be charging Biscuit and his buddies drinks. That’s against the rules, and don’t ask me what rules. They’re the rules up here.” He taps the side of his head. “It’s all karmic balance and shit. My old lady did me a card reading the other day and said my chakras are out of balance, so I’m getting them straightened out by not charging Frank and you for drinks. Don’t mess me up now.”

“Got it.” I take the frosty mug from Tom and tip it in his direction. “To healthy chakras. May your Virgo sun rise.”

Tom beams. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, do you?”

“No clue,” I admit.

He bellows a laugh. “You got a good one, Biscuit.”

“You can call me Frank, if you want, Tom. Biscuit’s kind of an old name, ain’t it?”

“Nah, you’ll always be Biscuit to me.”

“Don’t mess up his chakras by suggesting otherwise,” I add.

Frank glares at me over his own mug of beer. “You gonna be like this all week?”

“Yup. You gonna tell me what’s the deal back there?” I tilt my head toward the entrance where Frank got slapped.

“With Melody?” He rubs his thumb across his cheek.

“Yeah.”

“I guess she’s mad because she was writing me and shit.” I nearly drop my beer on the counter. “What in the hell?”

Frank’s flush deepens, spreading from his ears down to his neck. “I’m no good with women, you know? What am I supposed to say to her? Like the first thing that comes out of my mouth earns me a slap. Besides, just cuz she’s writing to me don’t mean she’s that interested.”

“That wasn’t the slap of a disinterested woman, Frank.”

“She named me Biscuit when I was ten, and that’s all anyone calls me now.”

“Okay, you have a point there, but she was also mad as hell that you didn’t say something sweet to her. Make her know she was wanted. That her efforts in letter writing weren’t for nothing.”

“I kinda want to take my time.”

“Why? What’re you waiting for? Your signs to be aligned or some shit?”

“Are you telling me that you would rush into things? You spent the entire time in the squad keeping your dick zipped so tight that the guys were thinking about renaming you Catholic.”

“I just haven’t found the one, but once I do, I’ll take her, no matter what.” My eyes fall on a bright head in the middle of the room. I can’t see anything but the crown of her head, but her copper penny hair shines in the midst of the crowd like a treasure in the middle of a dusty cavern. Something deep inside me stirs, like a dragon seeing a priceless object for the first time. “If I see something I want, I’m gonna go for it.” I keep my eyes pinned on the head as I drain my beer. When I hit the bottom of the mug, I let it drop to the counter and get to my feet.

Before I can move, though, there’s a big paw pushing me back. I look down at Frank’s hand and then up to his face. “What’s going on?”

“You looking at my sister?” he asks, and his tone isn’t questioning. It’s belligerent.

“Your...sister?” I think back to all of Frank’s photos, and not one of them had a redhead in it.

“Remember when I was bleeding from taking that bullet that was meant for you and I made you promise that if anything happened to me, you’d come to my home and take care of my sister for the rest of her life, and that you’d make sure that no asshole would touch her or hurt her?”

“Yeah, I remember.” The dragon inside me paces. He doesn’t like what he’s hearing.

“You renegeing on that promise?” Frank’s square chin juts out.

“No.”

“Then sit your ass back down on the stool and never look at her again because that’s my baby sister, and she’s off-limits.”

Chasing You available here!

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Ella Goode

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Insta Holiday

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Making Her Mine

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Friends to Lovers

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