



RESCUE &
REDEMPTION
BOOK TWO

CRUEL VENDETTA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MORGAN JAMES

Cruel Vendetta

RESCUE & RETRIBUTION #2

MORGAN JAMES

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

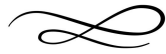
[Chapter 54](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Morgan James](#)

[About the Author](#)

One



EMERY

THREE'S A CROWD, AS THE SAYING GOES. MY HOUSE NO longer felt like home, and every day that passed made me feel more and more like a third wheel now that my mom's boyfriend had moved in. Lost in thought, I stared blankly at the TV in front of me. It would be best to get a place of my own, but I hadn't saved up nearly enough. Maybe I could pick up some extra shifts at the diner, or—

A key turning in the lock shook me from my thoughts, and I swiveled my head toward the front door. Mom's boyfriend, Alan, strode through seconds later, then closed and locked the door behind him. His gaze slid my way, and his mouth spread in a toothy smile. "Hey, Emmy. I'm surprised you're still here."

"Yep." I shot him a tight smile of my own. I hated that nickname. It made me feel like I was five, and coming from him it was even worse. He'd known me barely six months—not nearly enough time to be on a nickname basis.

I turned my attention back to the TV in front of me, and the sound of his boots hitting the floor floated on the air. A second later I felt his weight rest against the back of the couch. "Whatcha watchin'?"

I gave a little shake of my head and focused on the screen for a second. I'd completely tuned out whatever was on, not

even bothering to change the channel. “Just flipped on the news ’til I need to get ready for work.”

Alan chuckled. “Ain’t never anything good on the news.”

My stomach twisted, and I went rigid as his hands landed on my shoulders and squeezed gently. His thumbs dug into the muscles there, tracing small circles, and my heart rate kicked up. I didn’t like the way he touched me; it made me feel dirty. It’d been that way ever since he moved in: the light touches that became more frequent and lingered just a second too long. The way his eyes followed me sometimes, watching my every move. It felt like he was waiting for something—but what, I had no idea. And I didn’t really want to find out.

I waited a beat, then picked up my phone lying in my lap and tapped the screen. “Speaking of,” I said as I checked the time, “I should start getting ready.”

I sat forward and Alan’s hands slipped away as I pushed to my feet. I tossed a little smile his way, making sure to keep the furniture between us as I made my way out of the room. “Have a good nap.”

Bile crept up my throat as I practically jogged down the hallway to my room, then closed and locked the door. I told myself I was overreacting, that he was just being friendly. After all, he was dating my mom—he was supposed to be nice to me. He’d never done anything inappropriate, never said anything out of line. But something about him was just... off. He was too familiar, too... forward. There was a look deep in his eyes that made my skin crawl.

As I changed into my uniform for the Village Café, my thoughts turned back to my plan. I would talk to Irene, try to pick up some extra hours. Because the less I had to see of Alan, the better.

I quickly changed into my work uniform, then added a touch of mascara and lip gloss so I wouldn’t scare off the customers. Once I was ready, I gathered my purse and keys, then cracked the door open an inch. I listened intently, but I didn’t hear Alan moving around. Maybe he’d gone to bed

already. God, I hoped so. One run-in with him this morning was more than enough.

I tried to avoid him as much as possible, but he worked swing shift at a local factory, and it was hard to keep track of when he was coming and going. I made a mental note to leave a little earlier each morning to be out of the house before he got done with the night shift.

I closed my door behind me then slunk out of the house and climbed into my car. Recently he'd been acting stranger than usual, almost as if he wanted me to go out of my way to talk to him. He'd parked me in twice now, forcing me to come ask him to move his truck. I wasn't sure what his angle was, but I didn't like it.

I unlocked the driver side door, then climbed in and tossed my purse on the floorboard behind me. As soon as the engine turned over, I shifted into gear and headed toward the diner. My heart still beat a little too fast, and I pressed one hand to my chest. My necklace swayed, gently brushing my fingertips, and I fingered the cool metal as I drove toward town.

The *Welcome to Cedar Springs* sign greeted me as I entered the official city limits, and I flipped on my blinker before I turned onto the main drag. The Village Café was located near the town square on a corner lot, which made it a popular destination for locals and transients alike. Irene kept the diner open all day long, which was an added boon. People loved her homemade food and flocked to the diner, especially on nights when she offered her pot roast. She won best pie and jam every year at the county fair, and no one ever turned down a piece of her famous banana cream pie.

For the past year and a half I'd been waitressing at the Village Café, and though I got good tips, it wasn't quite enough to be able to afford a place of my own. Irene, the owner, was kind and understanding. I was sure she'd schedule me some extra shifts if I asked, but more than likely that still wouldn't be enough. I was going to have to look for a second job. Maybe I could learn to bartend and work at Mason's Tavern or waitress over at the country club in the evenings.

I let out a sigh. I didn't want to be a waitress forever, but there weren't a hell of a lot of other options here in Cedar Springs, not without training of some sort. And hell if I knew what that might be. I'd decided against college since I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Mom had hoped I would be a nurse like her, but I couldn't stand the sight of blood. It made me squeamish and lightheaded. The problem was, I had no idea what to do. I was good at waitressing, but the thought of doing that for the next fifty years was depressing.

I smiled when I pulled into the lot and spied Irene's car at the very end. Irene truly loved what she did. She loved to cook, loved to take care of the residents of Cedar Springs. She spent more time here than anyone else, even though I was certain she could afford to take the time off and allow her employees to run the restaurant. We often encouraged her to take a vacation, but she wouldn't hear of it. She'd been born and raised in Cedar Springs and saw no reason to ever go anywhere else. As she often said, it was the best small-town America had to offer.

Grabbing up my purse with one hand, I shoved open the door with the other. Even though it wasn't even mid-morning, it was already blisteringly hot, and sweat gathered on my forehead and between my breasts before I made it to the front door. Eventually it had to cool down; fall had technically arrived weeks ago, but summer was hanging on with a vengeance.

Inside, I waved at a couple of regulars seated at the counter before cutting through the kitchen to drop off my things. Irene came out of her office just as I closed my locker, and I hurried over to her.

"Morning, Em." She greeted me with a wide smile.

"Morning!" She was the type of woman who made it impossible to be unhappy around her, and I returned the grin despite my nervousness. "Do you have a couple minutes? I was hoping to talk to you."

"Sure thing." She gestured to her office, and I seated myself in one of the visitor's chairs. Irene closed the door, then

took a seat and nodded my way. “What can I do for you?”

“Well...” I twisted my hands together as I ordered my words. “I know this is a lot to ask, but I was wondering if you had any extra shifts I could pick up. I’m trying to save up for my own place, and anything will help.”

She glanced at the schedule on her desk, a tiny frown tugging at her lips. “I’m afraid I don’t have anything this week or next, unless you want to ask around. Someone might be willing to switch with you, or give up their shift.”

I hated the thought of someone else losing money because of me, and my heart sank. “Okay. Will you just keep me in mind going forward?”

“Of course.” She nodded. “You might want to check the bulletin board out front, too.”

A community bulletin board hung in the vestibule, and people occasionally pinned their business cards or help wanted signs there. It was mostly full of Avon or Mary Kay brochures, but it was worth a shot. “Thank you, I’ll do that.”

Disappointed but not really surprised, I tied my apron around my waist and got ready to hit the floor. I would find something—somehow. I had to.

Two



DREW

THE NOTES ON THE WHITEBOARD IN FRONT OF ME TAUNTED ME with their infuriating lack of information. Three photos were lined up along the top of the board, three women who'd suffered horrible crimes. They deserved justice, and I felt like a failure for not delivering it.

For the past month a serial rapist had been terrorizing Cedar Springs and the surrounding area, leaving at least three women in his volatile wake. Two had survived the ordeal; the third wasn't so lucky.

The first woman to come forward was Kristi Holcomb. She'd gone to Mason's one Tuesday night to play pool and have a couple drinks. The next morning she'd woken alone in her bed completely nude. A rape kit conducted at the hospital came back positive, setting into motion the events of the next couple of weeks.

It was evident from Kristi's tox screen that she'd been drugged and taken home, though we had no witnesses and no way of telling precisely how the abductor had managed to corner her. As a smoker, Kristi had admitted going out the back door of the bar to the smoking area outside. After that... no one knew. There were no cameras, no way to identify the man who'd taken advantage of her.

We could only guess that he'd somehow drugged her drink and ushered her out back. Once the effects of the drug began

to kick in, he'd more than likely placed her in her own car, then driven to her place where he'd raped her, then left without being seen.

Our second victim, Jessica Cartwright, unfortunately hadn't survived the assault. After not being able to contact her for several weeks, Jessica's landlord had found her deceased in her apartment, little more than a week after Kristi approached us. Judging from the state of decomposition, the medical examiner, Dr. Davison, had estimated time of death at least a couple weeks prior. While she was found second, it appeared that Jessica had potentially been the attacker's first victim.

Just like Kristi, we weren't able to lift any prints from her apartment, personal effects, or car. Most interesting with Jessica was that her skin appeared to have been cleaned with baby wipes to obliterate any evidence he might have left behind. Of course, we hadn't found anything of the sort in her apartment anywhere, so I was certain the killer had taken those with him.

I couldn't help but wonder if the man had known Jessica was dead when he left her. Was it an accident, or had he planned to kill her? If she was indeed the first victim, it was entirely possible that he'd unintentionally given her a dosage much too high for her system to tolerate.

The most recent victim to come forward was Amanda Miller. She'd confirmed that she, too, had been victimized by our suspect the month prior. Like the others, she'd gone out alone for drinks one night. The following morning, she'd woken in her bed. However, unlike the others, she'd managed to catch a glimpse of the man. The effects of the drugs had evidently begun to wear off by the time he left, and she'd noted a tattoo on the man's arm as he dressed.

My gaze landed on the rendering of the tattoo pinned to the board, a script letter L. According to the local tattoo parlor, the L was frequently used to represent the surname Lewis. Of course, we couldn't be certain that the man's name—first or last—was actually Lewis. People got all sorts of random tattoos all the time; it could just as easily be his mother's maiden name, or, hell, even the name of his dog. Until we had

something more substantial, it was just one more piece of the puzzle that didn't quite fit.

Amanda had also seen a brief glimpse of the man's profile, and we'd had a local artist in town do a composite sketch for both the suspect and the tattoo he sported on his left bicep. Though we'd circulated both sketches around town, we hadn't gotten any hits yet.

Too bad real life wasn't like the movies. Building a case wasn't nearly as quick or easy as those shows made it out to be. I wished like hell we could plug a name into a database, get a few dozen search results, then narrow it down with a snap of our fingers. Yeah. It didn't work like that.

And as much as I didn't want to admit it, it was also entirely possible that Amanda's memory of that night was distorted. In cases like these, people often lost chunks of memory as an after-effect of being drugged. Sometimes the brain compensated by filling in those voids with manufactured memories that weren't entirely accurate.

I couldn't hinge an entire investigation on a sketch provided by only one witness, so I knew I needed to broaden my scope. How, I had no idea. There were so few links between the victims. All we knew was that they were all single women who'd been out for a night of fun before being drugged and abducted. All were smokers, but that was the extent of their similarities. They all had vastly different jobs, lived on different sides of the city, and seemed to have no cross-over whatsoever.

And then there was the drug. It was a compound similar to GHB, but there were no injection sites on any of the women, and the two survivors hadn't ingested anything strange prior to passing out. We'd reviewed video footage of Kristi's night at Mason's Tavern, where she had dinner then played a round of pool. She never once left her drink unattended, nor did she accept anything from anyone else. It was almost mind-boggling how efficient the man was.

While we'd originally thought these were crimes of opportunity, it was now painstakingly obvious that he watched

these women closely before making his move. He knew that each was single, and he knew precisely the moment to strike. It was terrifying. Worse was that, so far, we hadn't found a single shred of evidence. The man was incredibly meticulous—there were no skin cells or DNA under the victim's nails, no defensive wounds. We hadn't even found a single fiber on or around the deceased victim, Jessica, that was out of place.

And those were only the ones we knew about. How many hadn't come forward? I hated to consider the number of women who might have kept quiet out of shame for something so completely out of their control. The need to find this prick burned like acid in my veins.

“Hey, man. How's it going?”

I blinked the tiredness from my eyes and turned to my brother. “Fine. Just seeing if anything new jumped out at me.”

His face creased with concern as he stared at me. “You look exhausted. Did you get any sleep last night?”

No, I hadn't. The faces of these three women had kept me up long into the night and haunted my dreams until I had finally fallen into a restless sleep. “I'm good,” I returned. “Just haven't had enough coffee yet.”

“We'll find him,” Grayson replied softly, a knowing look in his eyes. “We just need to give it time.”

“How much time?” I snapped. “Enough time for him to drug and rape another woman? Enough time to—”

My brother sliced a hand through the air. “I understand, and I get where you're coming from. But all we can do is follow the leads. Until we find something substantial, this is all we have to work with.”

I knew he was right, yet I seethed at the knowledge. This asshole was running free and we had no way of stopping him. I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I just feel like we're missing something.”

“You've done everything you can.” Grayson shook his head. “We need some fresh eyes on this. We'll head over to QSG and talk to Con, see what his guys have to say.”

Quentin Security Group was a local private security firm that specialized in personal protection as well as private investigation. Connor Quentin was a resident of Cedar Springs, but his office was based in Dallas. Last weekend while attending Grayson and Claire's engagement party, we'd spoken with Con about possibly setting up a sting to catch our suspect. However, there was one huge obstacle that we hadn't previously been able to get around—we only had a couple of female officers in our department, and everyone in town recognized them.

When we'd explained the problem, Con's younger sister, Abby, had immediately offered to step up and assist. Her fiancé wasn't too keen on the idea of putting her in the path of a serial rapist, so that was another huge problem that loomed in the way. It was a long shot, but if we were able to seal the deal today with Con and Abby, it could be incredibly advantageous for our investigation.

Maybe Gray was right; I was too close, too involved. We needed a fresh perspective. "All right. Let me grab my stuff and we can head out."

We left the conference room, and I detoured by my desk on the way out. I grabbed my keys from the top drawer, along with a file that contained the info we'd collected on the case so far. I slid my shades into place as I stepped out into the bright sunlight and cut across the lot to my car. I glanced at my brother as we slid inside. "I'm starving. Wanna hit the diner on the way?"

He snapped his seatbelt into place then settled back in the seat. "I could eat."

Steering toward the Village Café, my eyes roamed the downtown area of Cedar Springs. I was eager to get my life back to normal, to get our town back to normal. The sooner we could put this behind us, the better. It was affecting more deeply than I wanted to admit. The desire to catch him drove me to pour more time and effort into it, but I knew it was affecting my focus. I wasn't sleeping or eating well, and I was becoming more aggravated with every day that passed. I'd been on a razor's edge this last month and a half, struggling to

stay sane while juggling this seemingly hopeless case. I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something. I was terrified that I was going to fuck up and he'd get away.

I pushed my doubts aside. I couldn't give up now; I needed to push through this and find him. There were too many people depending on me to give up now. Just a little longer, then everything would finally—hopefully—go back to normal.

Three



EMERY

THE LITTLE BELL OVER THE DOOR JANGLED WITH THE ARRIVAL of a new customer, and I automatically glanced over my shoulder, a smile fixed on my face. The greeting that had sprung to the tip of my tongue died away and my mouth went dry at the sight of Drew Thorne entering the diner, his brother Grayson on his heels.

As if he felt the weight of my stare, Drew's gaze immediately fixed on mine. Heat swept up my neck and exploded across my cheeks. "Hey, y'all. Have a seat wherever you want."

Drew nodded once, then made a beeline for the booth in the corner where he always sat. Grayson shot me a smile, then followed his brother and slid into the seat across from him.

I wiped my palms on my apron and breathed deep, forcing myself to regain my composure. Seeing Drew always sent me into a tailspin, like my lungs didn't work and my heart was ready to beat out of my chest.

Putting off going over to their table, I busied myself gathering their drinks. It was easy enough, considering they always ordered the same thing each time they came in. I poured Drew's sweet tea, then got water and chocolate milk for Grayson. My pulse thrummed rapidly as I cut across the diner and set the drinks on the table.

A tantalizing whiff of Drew's cologne tickled my nose, and I practically swayed on my feet as it attacked my hormones. What the hell was wrong with me? You'd think after almost a dozen years I'd be used to him, but no. He affected me more than ever, like he was the sun and I was a planet falling into his orbit every time he was near.

My heart hitched and I darted a quick look at Drew. He flashed me a tired smile. "Hey, Emery."

"Hey." I felt heat climb into my cheeks, and I forced myself to break his gaze as I dug my notepad from my apron. I held my pen at the ready just in case today was the day he changed his mind and decided to try something new. "You want the usual?"

"Yes, please."

I made a notation on my pad then turned to Grayson. He was handsome too, and you could definitely see the family resemblance, but he just didn't instill the same feelings in me that Drew did. Thank goodness for that, because Gray was more than spoken for, deeply in love with his fiancée. Their other brother, Luke, looked similar as well but I was never as attracted to either of them as I was to Drew. He stood out for some reason, like a diamond among rocks. There was just something about his looks and demeanor that drew me in.

While Grayson had hazel eyes and soft brown hair, Drew's features were slightly exaggerated. His hair was a darker shade of brown, his eyes more green than hazel. Today he sported a light scruff on his jaw, and I wanted to swoon at the sight of it. Was there anything sexier than that light layer of scruff? Not in my book, at least. I wanted to run my fingers along his jaw, feel it scrape against my palm. It would be the perfect combination of soft but prickly, setting my nerve endings on fire from my chest all the way down to—

I clenched the pen in my fingers and fought to rein in my wayward thoughts. I should not be fantasizing about my best friend's brother, especially not here at work.

I forced a strained smile and met Grayson's gaze. "Usual for you too?"

He nodded, a rueful smile tilting his lips. “Please.”

I jotted it down then tucked the pad into my apron and fell back a step. “I’ll get your orders in, just let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks.” Grayson smiled but Drew just dropped his attention back to the cup in front of him, and I turned on a heel and swiftly cut across the dining room.

My heart threatened to beat out of my chest as I stepped through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. I felt like I couldn’t draw in enough air, and I leaned against the counter to catch my breath. Seeing Drew always did this to me. He was so gorgeous it hurt to look at him. Never had another man made me feel this way, like I was too hot and too cold at the same time, lungs so tight I couldn’t breathe.

I pressed one hand to my chest and rubbed at my heart. Too bad nothing would ever come of it. Though I’d known him for years, had practically grown up at his house from the time Izzy and I were in middle school, he’d never spared me a second glance. But I saw him. He was my first crush, the one man I always came back to and had compared every relationship to.

Drew was my best friend’s brother, older than us by seven years. It wasn’t a huge difference in the grand scheme of things, but never in all the times he’d been in here had he ever glanced at me with something more than the slightest affection of a passing acquaintance. Here I was, fawning over him, and he barely knew I existed. My purpose in life was to bring him his eggs Benedict and be Izzy’s friend. That was it.

It was sad, really. I needed to get a grip. It’d been more than six months since Jon and I had broken up, and I hadn’t been out with anyone else since. I’d been focused more on work and deciding what I wanted to do for school than going out on dates. And, to be entirely honest, Drew had more than a little to do with that. I found myself comparing other men to him, asking myself if they measured up to his standards. He set the bar high.

A detective on the local police force, Drew was honest to a fault, loyal, and protective. He cared for his family and was exactly the type of man I wanted to end up with. I'd seen the revolving door of women who'd paraded through his life over the past few years; I couldn't compare to them. I'd had a crush on him for as long as I could remember, and any time I went to visit Izzy at her house, I hoped to get a glimpse of him. He was the man who I measured all of my boyfriends against, yet he was the one person I could never have. Not only because of our age difference, but also because of Izzy. She was my very best friend, the sister I never had. I couldn't possibly betray her by wanting her brother.

Loving him from afar and acting on my feelings were two very different things. I knew it was best to put Drew out of my mind, but it was so hard when he came in here looking like a god among mortals. Yes, I was being a bit dramatic, but it was the way I'd envisioned him for the past ten years since I met him. I'd always found him fascinating, and now I was even more enamored with him. When I finally found a man to settle down with, I hoped it would be someone like Drew.

I refilled the carafe, then took a deep breath and pushed through the doors that led to the dining area. Drew would never see me the way I saw him; I knew that. All I could do was grin and bear it in hopes that I would eventually move on from this crush. After all, it couldn't last forever. One of these days I would find someone who attracted me as much as Drew did. Hopefully.

Pasting on a smile, I made my rounds and refilled customers' cups. Inevitably, I drew even with the Thornes' table again. "Everything okay so far?"

Drew offered a little smile that sent my heart racing, and my breath stuttered in my lungs. "Good for now," Grayson replied, jerking my attention to him.

It took a second for me to form words. "Great. Your food should be up in just a few minutes."

"Thanks."

"No problem," I returned. "How is Claire doing?"

He and his fiancée, Claire, were the cutest couple I'd ever seen. They came in each Saturday, always sitting in the same booth. For the past couple of years, ever since Claire had moved to Cedar Springs and taken the position as guidance counselor at the high school, they'd been best friends. But it appeared as though each of them had been holding a candle for the other, because common knowledge around town was that they had officially been dating for the past few weeks. Grayson had recently proposed, and we'd celebrated their engagement with a party last weekend. I didn't know of any two people who belonged together more than Grayson and Claire.

"She's okay," Grayson replied. "Thanks for asking. Already back to work, despite my suggestion to take a little time off."

"She doesn't seem like the type to let anything slow her down," I replied.

Claire had recently had trouble with a stalker from the high school who was hell-bent on avenging the death of a loved one. Claire and her sister, Jane, had been attacked, and Jane had been stabbed multiple times during the altercation. She'd attended the engagement party, and she seemed to be healing up well. "How are the wedding plans coming along?"

He shrugged. "I'm letting her do whatever she wants. She keeps asking for my opinion, but I'm not good with that kind of stuff. I don't care what it looks like, I'll just be happy enough to have her."

"That's so sweet." My heart melted a little bit at his obvious affection for his wife-to-be, and I flicked a glance Drew's way.

He stared at his brother, one eyebrow cocked as he regarded him dubiously. It was obvious he wasn't nearly as optimistic about the idea of weddings and wives as Grayson. For some reason, it sent a little pang of disappointment spiraling through my chest. I forced a smile. "Well, I'm glad she's feeling better."

Grayson leaned back in the booth and studied me. “How is everything going with you? Izzy told me you were thinking about going to school.”

At his words, the heat of embarrassment swept up my chest and neck. It was going to be a long time before I could afford school, especially if I was thinking about getting a place of my own soon. And right now, that took precedence over everything else.

I lifted one shoulder, feigning nonchalance. “I haven’t officially decided yet. Right now I’m just trying to save as much money as I can.”

“It makes sense. Too many people run themselves into debt that way.”

“That’s true.” I glanced Drew’s way, but his attention was fixed firmly on his phone. I felt a tiny spurt of jealousy flicker to life around my heart. He was probably texting some woman he planned to go out with later. I swallowed hard, forcing down the emotion that clogged my throat.

“I’m going to go check on your food,” I said as I turned to Grayson. “I’ll be back in just a few minutes.”

I checked in with the kitchen who was just sliding it through the window. I dropped off their plates, and circulated around the room, checking back every few minutes to make sure they didn’t need anything. Shortly after, they left with Grayson’s promise to be back this weekend with Claire, and I waved them off. I finished off the rest of my shift, alternately thinking about finding extra work and the memory of seeing Drew swirling through my mind.

When my shift ended just after dinnertime, I collected my things and headed home. I let out a little groan when I saw Alan’s beat up pickup truck in the driveway. I’d forgotten that this was his day off. I’d been hoping to spend a little bit of time alone with my mom, but it looked like that wasn’t going to happen.

I grabbed my purse then headed inside the house. Alan and my mom were seated next to each other on the couch, and she

shot a tired smile my way as I stepped inside and locked the door.

“Hey, honey. How was work?”

“Fine. How about you?”

“You know how it is,” my mother replied with a sad little smile. As much as she loved working at the nursing home, she loathed it at the same time. The hours were long, and it was emotionally draining.

“Hey, Emmy,” Alan spoke up from her left. He held up a bottle of beer in my direction. “Why don’t you grab a drink and join us?”

His smarmy smile made me sick to my stomach. I knew he was trying to be cool by offering me a beer, but I wanted nothing to do with it. I gave them a tight-lipped smile and shook my head. “No, thanks. I’m just gonna go relax. It’s been a long day.”

“There’s lasagna in the kitchen,” my mother called after me as I headed down the hall to my bedroom.

“Thanks,” I returned, a grimace pulling at my mouth. No doubt it was one of those frozen dishes that had been microwaved within an inch of its life. I preferred the daily specials from the diner, and I’d eaten enough at lunchtime to hold me over for the evening.

In my room, I closed my door and collapsed onto my bed. Tomorrow I was going to make more of a concentrated effort to find another job. My mother and Alan deserved their privacy, and I had no desire to be around him more than necessary. I could stick it out for another couple of months, until I saved up some cash. But the first thing I needed to do was dig into the classifieds and convince someone to give me a chance.

Four



DREW

THE SUN SHONE BRIGHTLY OVERHEAD AS I PULLED OPEN THE door and stepped inside the brick building that housed the QSG headquarters. Shoving my shades to the top of my head, I glanced around the lobby as Grayson stepped in behind me, then closed the door.

From behind the reception desk, Abby sent us a brilliant smile. She held up one finger to indicate she would be with us in just a moment, then wrapped up her phone conversation. “That sounds great. I’ll send the final invoice over right now, and we’ll see you next week.”

She hung up the phone, then braced her hands on the counter as she smiled our way. “Hey! Good to see you guys again.”

“You, too.” Grayson inclined his head at her. “Is Con around?”

“Yup. He’s getting set up right now. You guys can have a seat if you’d like.”

“Thanks.” I sank into the couch situated along the back wall and crossed one foot over my knee. I hoped like hell we could come to some sort of agreement today. Although Abby had offered to help with the sting, there was always a chance that she would back out or that Con would shut it down.

My knee jiggled restlessly as I waited, and Grayson sent me a little look of warning. I forced myself to still. I couldn't help it; I wanted to nail this bastard, and I was willing to do almost anything to achieve it. I would never jeopardize someone's safety or make them uncomfortable though, so I could only hope that Abby hadn't changed her mind.

Con appeared in the hallway adjacent to the lobby just seconds later, and I practically leapt to my feet. "Good to see you again."

He extended one hand, and Grayson and I each took turns shaking with him. He turned to the man behind him. "Dane, please cover Abby during our meeting."

"You got it, boss." He tipped his head toward an open door situated about halfway down the hallway. "We'll talk in the conference room. Come on back."

Grayson, Abby, and I fell into step behind Con then seated ourselves around a large mahogany table in the conference room. Less than a minute later, Clay joined us and dropped into the seat next to Abby. He didn't say a word, but his lips pressed into a disapproving line, which told me he wasn't fully on board. That could present a problem for us. If he didn't feel safe letting her go into the bar, this whole thing would be a no-go.

Con closed the door then seated himself at the head of the table and nodded toward me. "Let's start from the beginning. Why don't you tell us everything you can, and we'll go from there."

I passed over the file, then began to expound on the details of the three assault cases accrued over the past month, affording as much detail as I could. "The one thing we've been able to determine is that all three victims were smokers. It's possible that the suspect is somehow drugging them while they step outside for a cigarette."

Abby bit her lip. "I don't smoke."

"I would never ask you to." I shook my head. "All we need is the illusion that you fit the profile of the previous women."

“So what’s your plan?” Clay leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, pinning me with a hard stare. He was going to be a tough sell, I could feel it.

“Here’s what I would like to happen: A couple of my guys will be undercover in the bar, plus a couple of yours that no one in town will recognize.”

It would be a dead giveaway if I had my entire force there at once, not to mention I didn’t have enough men and women to spare. We needed extra bodies, preferably new faces that wouldn’t draw attention.

“Abby will have eyes on her the entire time she’s in the bar,” I continued. “We’ll have her order a drink, then move to the pool table where she’ll play a round or two before making it known she plans to step out back for a smoke.”

I gestured toward Grayson. “My brother’s fiancée is now living with him, so her house is currently uninhabited. Abby will leave the bar, then return to Claire’s house to give the impression that she lives alone. We’ll have undercovers placed around the bar, as well as out on the street and in her house.

“I don’t expect anything to happen the first day or two,” I warned. “While we originally believed that these were crimes of opportunity, this guy seems to study his victims extensively before making his move. He knows that these women are single and live alone, so there’s never a witness when he comes and leaves. Historically, the man appears to have always used the victim’s car to transport them. He takes the women back to their own home, then obliterates any evidence he might have left behind.”

“And what happens if he gets around back and manages to get her to the car before we can intervene?”

Clay’s tone was hard, almost challenging, and I forced myself to stay calm. “As I said, we’ll have eyes on her the entire time, both outside and inside both the house and bar. I’m limited on the officers I can put inside the bar, because they’ll be too easily recognized.”

“Still...” Clay trailed off when Abby reached over and settled a hand on his thigh.

“It’ll be fine, I promise.” She gestured our way. “Con and everyone will be in the bar with me keeping an eye on everything.”

Clay shook his head. “If anyone’s going to be with you, it’s going to be me.”

“No,” Abby and Con replied in unison.

Clay flushed dark red. “Why the hell not?”

“Because I can’t have you arrested for murdering anyone who flirts with her,” Con said, a trace of mirth in his tone.

Clay shot a dark look his way, mouth parted to speak, but Abby stopped him. “It’s true,” she said. “I love that you want to protect me, but... just do it from the car. Or Claire’s house. I’ll meet you there as soon as we’re done. That way we won’t tip anyone off.”

He didn’t look at all appeased. Grayson and I remained silent as we watched them debate it amongst themselves. “I’d feel better if I were there,” Clay pushed back.

Con shook his head. “It’s too much of a conflict of interest. You know this. If this guy sees you, he’ll know he’s been made, and it’ll be over before we get a chance to nail him in the act. We need time to let it play out interrupted—”

“Yeah, I fucking know,” Clay shot back. “How the hell are you okay with sending her in there like this?”

Con’s calm demeanor didn’t change. “Because we’ll all be there.” He gestured our way. “They know what they’re doing. Plus, we have plenty of equipment to keep eyes on her the whole time.”

“That’s different,” Clay protested. His face was no longer set in angry lines, but rather held the desperation of needing to keep a loved one safe.

“I understand that,” Con said quietly. “But you know this is how it has to be done.”

Con was right; if Clay lost his shit over some guy flirting with his fiancée, our suspect would slip right off the hook and disappear.

“Chief?” Clay turned to my brother, a haunted look in his eyes.

A twinge moved through my chest at the sight. It was obvious to everyone in the room how much he cared for her. Part of me wanted to give in and tell him he could stay, but I bit my tongue and allowed Grayson to take over.

“It’s best that we try to narrow the margin for error,” my brother replied diplomatically. “When emotions get involved, it’s harder to control our reactions.”

Clay threw a wry look his way. “You think? I’m basically sacrificing my fiancée to the wolves.”

“She’ll be safe,” I promised.

“Can you promise that?”

No, I couldn’t. Shit went sideways all the time, and after several tours in the military, Clay knew that as well as anyone. I decided to level with him. “Is there always a possibility of things not going to plan? Of course.” His eyes flashed, but I cut him off before he could speak. “We can’t predict how—or even if—he’ll react to Abby.”

I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, like they thought I’d lost my mind for speaking so frankly. “But... I can promise you that we’ll do everything we can to keep her safe. Your guys will be with mine, everyone working together to keep eyes on her and everyone around her. I know you trust them, and so do I; they won’t let anything happen to her.”

For several seconds, no one said anything. The silence was tense as Clay and I stared at one another, everyone else seeming to hold a collective breath so as to not tip the delicate scale. Finally, after what seemed like forever, he nodded once. “And where will you be?”

“I’ll be waiting at Claire’s house. I want to be there on the off chance anyone decides to follow her. If you’d like to be there when she comes home, you can stay there with me.”

His lips pressed into a firm line, and he sat back, quiet, knowing he was outnumbered. “I’ll have a live feed,” I added, “that way you can see everything in real time and know she’s safe.”

He was worried about his fiancée, and though I wasn’t currently seeing anyone, I understood where he was coming from. I would do anything to protect my family, and I appreciated that he wanted to analyze every detail and plan for every possible outcome. Better to be prepared than caught off guard.

Clay tipped his head my way, his silent agreement to the plan I’d outlined, and Abby leaned into his side. She whispered something to him, and he looped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

I averted my gaze, unable to watch anymore, and turned to Con. “You have equipment?”

He nodded. “Follow me.”

We left Abby and Clay behind to take a moment for themselves, and followed Con to the bullpen area down the hall. While our department had a lot of resources, it was difficult sometimes to get the city to sign off of stuff they didn’t deem necessary. Working with QSG and utilizing their equipment was going to help significantly.

Con introduced us to Cole, Clay’s twin brother, and Blake Lawson, both of whom would be assisting with the sting. A moment later, Clay and Abby entered. He still looked unhappy, and I knew there was nothing I could say to reassure him. Our best option at the moment was to come up with a fail-safe plan to make sure I upheld my end of the bargain and kept Abby out of harm’s way.

He met my gaze and held it for a moment, then gave a slight nod. I returned the gesture, then turned back to the group in front of me. “Here’s the plan...”

Five



EMERY

A SOFT CLICKING SOUND LILTED ON THE AIR, PULLING ME FROM sleep. I burrowed deeper into my covers, not wanting to get up. My alarm hadn't gone off yet; I knew that much. I couldn't tell exactly what had woken me, but whatever it was rated low on my list of priorities when compared to another half hour of sleep.

I was almost out again when I felt something tug at the comforter. Automatically I grabbed at it to pull it more tightly around me as I flipped onto my belly. Something soft and warm slid over my shoulder blades, then lower, down my spine. I froze, suspended between reality and sleep, struggling to get my bearings.

A second hand joined the first as they coasted over my back, then began to slide around my ribcage—right toward my breasts. I sucked in a breath as I jolted away from the questing fingers. Grabbing up the blanket and holding it in front of me like a shield, I spun to face Alan.

He stood at the edge of the mattress, a speculative gleam in his eyes. “What’s wrong, Emmy?”

My heart raced, my breath coming in shallow pants as I stared at him. What the fuck? Why was he in my room? “You need to leave.”

“That’s not very nice.” He lifted one brow. “Your mom and I let you stay here. Don’t even have to pay rent.”

That motherfucker. “Is this the kind of payment you have in mind?” I spat. “Get out of my room!”

My stomach twisted into a tight knot as he pressed his palms to the mattress and leaned forward. I automatically scooted away from him so far that I almost fell off the opposite side of the bed.

“I’ve seen the way you look at me.” His eyes narrowed. “You think you can flaunt yourself in front of me? Next time I’m going to take what you’ve been offering.”

Bile rose in my throat, and I forced it down. He’d lost his damn mind. The last thing I wanted was attention from him. I risked a quick glance at the clock. Just after seven, which meant my mother was already at work. The neighbors might still be around, but would they even hear me if I screamed for help? Most likely not. I was all alone. I fought to stay calm and modulate my voice. “Please leave.”

He smirked, and the icy smile sent a shudder rippling down my spine. “You gonna make me?”

I wasn’t strong enough to physically overpower him, I knew that much. I could only hope that he would listen to reason. “Touch me, and I’ll call the police.”

His eyes narrowed to snake-like slits as he regarded me. “Do that and you’ll find yourself out on your ass before you can blink.”

I bit back the urge to tell him that this wasn’t his house. It still belonged to my mom, and he had no say in what went on here. Part of me was tempted to tell him that I was looking for a place of my own anyway, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of running me out of my own home.

Mustering up every ounce of courage I owned, I lifted my chin and stared right back. “Get out of my room.”

Several seconds ticked by, neither of us giving an inch. Finally Alan snorted and straightened away from the bed. “Fine, you little bitch. Have it your way. But if you think this is over, you’ve got another thing coming.”

He strode out of my room, slamming the door in his wake. As soon as it closed behind him I scrambled from the bed and lunged toward the door. My heart slammed against my rib cage as I fumbled with the lock, my fingers shaky and uncoordinated. As soon as the lock slid into place, I crumbled to the floor, unable to stand.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there. I felt numb, cold all over. It didn't feel real, but I knew I hadn't dreamed it. Alan had always set my nerves on edge but now... Now I had to get the hell out of here—the quicker the better.

I rose unsteadily to my feet and double checked the lock before crossing to my closet. I always locked my door; I couldn't believe I'd forgotten it last night. I remembered falling into bed, exhausted after having scoured the classifieds. I must have crashed out without locking my door. It was a mistake I wouldn't make again.

Still trembling, I managed to get dressed. The bathroom was down the hall, and I didn't dare risk spending any extra time washing up or doing my makeup. I wanted to get as far away from here as quickly as I could.

Once I was ready, I grabbed my purse and keys, then crept toward the door. Steeling my spine, I flipped the lock, cringing when the metallic click echoed in the silence. Every cell of my body was on edge, just waiting for the sound to draw Alan's attention and bring him back to my room.

Holding my breath, I wrapped my fingers around the knob and turned it ever so slowly, then eased it open the tiniest bit. I peered through the inch-wide crack, listening for Alan. The house was quiet, so I assumed he was either in my mom's room or had left. I quickly slipped out, keeping my footsteps quick but quiet as I headed through the kitchen and out the back door.

Inside my car I finally allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief. Alan's truck was gone, and I hoped he wouldn't be coming back any time soon. I dug my phone from my purse and fired off a quick text to my best friend, Izzy. She was

attending college in the next town over, but she might have an idea of where I could find an affordable place to live.

Izzy came from a family full of cops; they would know the safe areas. Not that I would ever ask Drew, and it hadn't occurred to me to ask Grayson yesterday morning when they stopped in the diner. Maybe Izzy could put in a good word for me, and one of them would give me a good reference when I finally did choose an apartment. That had to look good, right?

Izzy responded a few minutes later, and we agreed to meet up at Mason's after dinner. I cranked the engine and headed toward Morningside Assisted Living Facility where my mom worked. The episode with Alan had freaked me out, and she needed to know about it. Maybe she would toss him out by the time I got home tonight—that would solve all my problems.

I parked out front and headed in. I recognized the pretty young redhead at the front desk and smiled. "Hey, Erica."

We'd met once or twice in passing, but she'd always been kind to me, and her daughter Maddie was cute as a button, with identical red ringlets and a megawatt smile.

"Hey! What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if I could see my mom for a minute."

Erica nodded. "I'll page her and see if she's free."

"Thanks." I smiled, then took a seat in one of the padded navy blue chairs that lined the waiting area. Morningside was a nice place, as far as assisted living facilities went, and the staff kept live plants and flowers blooming year-round to lend a sense of coziness to the place.

A few minutes later my mom rounded the corner and greeted me with a tired smile. "Hey, honey, what are you doing here?"

I forced a tight smile as I stood. "Just wanted to stop in and talk to you for a sec."

She eyed me for a moment before nodding. "Sure. Want to head outside?"

“Sounds good.” I followed her down the hall toward the garden that surrounded the facility out back. She took a seat at a picnic table situated in the shade of a large maple tree, and I slid onto the bench across from her.

She folded her arms on the table and peered at me, brows drawn. “Is something wrong?”

“Sort of.” I’d debated exactly how to proceed with this whole situation the whole way here but hadn’t come up with any tactful way to tell her that her boyfriend was a pervert who’d hit on her daughter. Mom had dated some unsavory characters in the past, but none like Alan. I decided to just come out with it. “I’m not comfortable with Alan in the house.”

Mom let out a startled little laugh. “Well it’s not like he can go anywhere else.”

I bit back the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he could. He was a grown ass man; I was pretty sure he could afford a place of his own. He just chose to spend his money on God knows what instead of contributing to rent or utilities. That was none of my business though, and I shook away the thought.

“He came into my room this morning,” I stated baldly.

My mom’s eyes narrowed, and her head tipped to one side but she didn’t say anything, so I elaborated. “When I woke up, he was there. He...”

I swallowed hard at the memory, unease slithering over my skin at the reminder of his touch. “He touched me. Started rubbing my shoulders and back, then tried to—”

“What did you do?” she cut in, eyes glittering with fury.

I was caught between fear and relief at the ferocious expression on her face. “I told him to get out or—”

“I meant,” she bit out the words, “what did you say to make him do that?”

“What?” My mouth hung open, stunned into silence. Why the hell would she think I’d encouraged him in any way?

“You must have done something,” she insisted. “He wouldn’t just do that.”

I choked out a little sound of shock. “I didn’t do anything. I woke up and he was there. He was sitting on my bed, touching me. He said if—”

My mom shook her head. “If you didn’t provoke him so much, wearing those short shorts and dresses—”

“You think this is my fault?” I reeled back. “Are you kidding me! You think I want the attention of some forty-five-year-old guy? You think I’d disrespect you by flirting with the man you’re dating?”

“You know what? I don’t know.” My mom crossed her arms over her chest. “There’s been a weird dynamic between the two of you ever since he moved in.”

“Because he’s a fucking pervert,” I hissed.

“Don’t say that!” she snapped. “You’re just jealous.”

Hysteria rose up, and the edges of my vision faded a bit as my lungs tightened. She couldn’t be serious right now. Part of me wanted to laugh, but the situation was far too dire. “You think I’m jealous.” I lifted my hands in front of me. “How could you even think that?”

She just stared at me, and I pressed on, needing to know. “You’re honestly telling me you believe him over me?”

Mom lifted one shoulder, and everything inside me went cold. I nodded slowly and pushed to my feet. “Good to know. Thanks for having my back.”

Emotion clogging my throat, I walked away without another word. Tears stung the backs of my eyes, but I managed to hold them in until I reached my car. Once inside, I cranked the engine and pulled out of the lot. It didn’t matter where I went; I just needed to get away. I put the car in gear and drove, letting the tears cut silent tracks down my cheeks.

Six



DREW

CLAY SIGHED. “THIS FUCKING BLOWS.”

I nodded in commiseration. For the past two hours we’d watched Con run the pool table. He’d kept it low key at the beginning of the evening, but now he was hoping to draw out the suspect by playing on our suspect’s competitive streak. The man we were looking for loved to be in control—that much was obvious from the treatment of his previous victims. He was confident and self-assured, and I hoped Con’s plan would work. If the man felt tempted, he could be drawn into the game where Abby was currently losing pitifully.

She played it off well enough, making little faces of consternation each time she missed a shot. And there’d been a lot of those. On screen, I watched as she tapped the cue ball, her pool stick wobbling in her hands. The cue smacked into the number four ball, sending it rolling across the felt. Unfortunately, it missed the pocket completely and bounced off the rails, leaving Con open to sink his next ball.

A snort escaped before I could stop it, and I felt Clay turn inquisitive eyes on me. “Sorry.”

I hoped I hadn’t offended him by laughing at his fiancée. He’d been mostly silent this evening, restlessly prowling the kitchen between watching the screen with eagle-eyes. His nervousness was adding to my anxiety, and a tight tension had taken up residence in the muscles lining my shoulders and

neck. I'd hoped that he would relax as the evening wore on, but that didn't appear to be happening. He was more on edge than ever, and I searched for a way to break the ice.

When he didn't say anything, I continued. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but... is she that bad, or is she throwing the game on purpose?"

Clay grinned like a shark. "She's just that bad."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Maybe we should have given her some lessons going in."

"Nope." He shook his head. "Don't need to give those assholes any more reason to check her out."

Fair point. Abby had received her fair share of attention over the course of the evening, and Clay tensed each time a man approached her. She was incredibly adept at playing the game, offering teasing little smiles and flirty tosses of her hair while never allowing the men close enough to actually touch her.

"Seems like she can hold her own, though."

Clay nodded, his eyes fixed on the screen. "She's tough. I know she can handle it, but..." He lifted one shoulder. "Hard to turn that off, you know?"

"I can understand that. How long have you been together?"

Clay thought about it for a second. "Five months or so."

I almost fell out of my chair. They'd been together for only a handful of months, and they were already getting married?

He must have felt my shock, because he turned a wry look my way and lifted one shoulder. "When you know, you know."

Damn. I guess. I just couldn't fathom falling that hard and fast, even for a woman as smart and beautiful as Abby. Maybe it was a conditioned response from working in law enforcement, but I didn't trust easily, and I'd never met a woman who made me want to change my entire life for her. I tried to wrap my mind around Clay's words. How the hell did you know it was right?

“It feels... different,” he mused quietly from beside me, almost as if he’d heard my unspoken question. “The moment I met her, there was this... feeling.” He shrugged a little self-consciously. “I can’t explain it. But there was just this X factor, like I knew she was made for me.”

It was the most he’d ever volunteered, and I was strangely intrigued to learn more about them. “How’d y’all meet?”

Clay’s expression changed, his lips twisting into a wry smile. “Hotel bar of all places. She was there while her house was being repaired, I was watching a mark, trying to blend in. A woman came up to my table and made a scene.”

At my curious glance, he reluctantly elaborated. “We’d hooked up, but...”

He’d ghosted her afterward. I nodded my understanding. “Gotcha.”

“Right. So, anyway, this woman is pitching a fit in the middle of the bar when all of a sudden, here comes this little bombshell,” he said in reference to Abby. “She slides right into the booth next to me and tells the woman off. Claims that I’m her boyfriend, and it couldn’t possibly have been me.”

I snorted. “I can’t believe she just came up to you in the bar.”

“No shit.” He chuckled. “So there I am, trapped in the booth with this spitfire who can’t shut up to save her life...”

I grinned at the description. That definitely sounded like Abby.

“...And she’s just going on and on about literally everything, and I realize... I’m invested. It was one of the strangest conversations of my life, but... she intrigued the hell out of me. Kinda scared me too, to be honest. That mind of hers is something else. And that mouth.”

He gave a little shake of his head, and I pressed my lips together to stifle a grin as he continued. “I never saw myself with someone like her. We’re so different, but... it just works.”

I glanced at the screen, studying Abby. “She seems like a good woman.”

“The best. Loyal as hell, and always does the right thing. It’s one of the things I admire most about her—even if she is too damn trusting,” he added wryly. “She wants to see the good in everyone.”

“That’s good and bad,” I murmured.

“Tell me about it.”

I’d heard about the man who’d tried to kill Abby a couple months back when an old family secret had come to light. My brows raised when something occurred to me. “So you didn’t know who she was before you met at the bar?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Shocked the shit out of me when I showed up at work that next week and saw her...” He shook his head. “I knew it was going to be a bitch telling Con, but I’d do it a thousand times over just to have her.”

I could tell he was crazy about her and despite her teasing, I knew she adored him, too. “I’m glad it all worked out for you.”

“Me, too.” He sighed. “I can’t wait ‘til this is over.”

“Only a couple more days.” Hopefully. If we didn’t get any hits soon, we’d have to try something else.

On screen, Abby took her last shot and missed. She congratulated Con, then returned her pool stick to the rack. Con moved on as if he didn’t know her, reracking the balls for the next game. Abby pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse and set them on the rails of the pool table. In a careless move, she bumped them with her hip, sending them tumbling to the floor. A man who previously had been standing in the corner watching quietly approached, then bent to pick them up for her.

Clay tensed, watching intently as the man passed her the pack. She smiled and toyed with a strand of hair as she tucked them into her purse. The man leaned one hip against the pool table, settling in to speak with her.

“Never seen you here before.”

Abby tipped her head. “I just moved from the Dallas area, so I’m getting a feel for everything Cedar Springs has to offer.”

The man leaned closer, and a strangled sound left Clay’s throat. “I can show you around if you want.”

Abby made a little humming sound as she studied him. “Maybe... What were you thinking?”

He put his hand next to hers where it lay on the rail, so close their fingers almost touched. I saw the slight stiffening of Abby’s posture, and I sent up a silent prayer that she could hang in there. Across the table, Con flicked a look their way from the corners of his eyes, his ever-vigilant gaze keeping her in his sights at all times.

“Let me buy you a drink,” the man suggested.

Abby licked her lips. “Tomorrow, maybe? I was just getting ready to head home. I have to be up early for work.”

The man nodded slowly, not seeming deterred in the least. “Want me to pick you up?”

Abby smiled teasingly. “Think I’ll give you my address on the first date?”

He grinned. “It was worth a shot. We might have more fun at your place anyway.”

Clay breathed out a harsh breath through his nose, and I grimaced. Assholes like this were the type who gave men everywhere a bad rep. They didn’t know when to fucking quit.

To her credit, Abby stayed in character and played along, letting out a tinkling laugh. “Quite the optimist, aren’t you?”

The man offered a cocky grin. “Just calling it like I see it.”

“Hmm...” Abby pretended to think it over for a second. “Drinks tomorrow night, and then...” She coyly dropped her lashes. “We’ll see where the night leads.”

He winked at her. “It’s a date. I’m Dave, by the way.” The man held out his hand and stared at her expectantly, waiting

for her to offer her name.

“Maria.” I thought Clay was going to hit the roof when Abby slipped her fingers into Dave’s and shook. “See you tomorrow, Dave.”

“Want me to walk you out?”

“No, thanks.” Abby smiled and started walking backwards, slowly putting distance between them. “It was nice meeting you.”

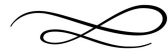
Con shifted slightly to the side, keeping both Abby and Dave in his sights as she left the room. The man didn’t move as she blended into the crowd, weaving her way through the tables and making it almost impossible for anyone to anticipate her movements. A minute later, she exited the front doors where Cole Thompson, Clay’s twin brother, was stationed close by so he could keep an eye on Abby as she made her way to her car.

I waited a beat. “Report.”

“She’s in her car,” came Cole’s response. “Falling in behind her now.”

Clay raked a hand through his hair and made an unhappy sound. He and Abby had both done well, and it was possible we had a suspect. The night had gone well, but it was just the beginning. We still had a lot of work to do.

Seven



EMERY

I GRINNED AT IZZY AS SHE SWAGGERED PAST A PAIR OF cowboys sitting at the bar. She threw a wink over her shoulder at them and added a little extra wiggle to her hips as she walked. I barely managed not to roll my eyes at the show. She loved to laugh and flirt and have fun, and men were drawn to her like a moth to flame. Izzy could have any man she wanted, just snap her fingers and make them fall at her feet. The most miraculous part though, was that she was still a virgin.

While I'd lost my virginity on prom night to the guy who'd been my high school sweetheart, Izzy wanted to wait for the right man. It was ironic, almost, because she was so outspoken and flirtatious, yet one of the most morally conscious people I'd ever known. It could also have something to do with her family. Her father had retired from the police force several years ago, and Grayson was currently Chief of Police for Cedar Springs, while Drew worked under him as detective. While the youngest brother, Luke, had broken tradition and joined the fire department, it was evident that the desire to protect and serve ran deep in their blood. All that aside, I was pretty sure the decision was mostly Izzy's. I had a feeling she was holding out for one man specifically, but she'd never revealed who it might be.

Izzy turned her grin on me as she slid onto the tall bar stool across from me. "Hey!"

“I see you have two new admirers.” I smirked and tipped my head slightly toward the bar.

Her nose wrinkled up as she shook her head. “Nah, they’re not my type.”

I rolled my eyes. Male was Izzy’s type. Or, rather, Izzy was every man’s type. There wasn’t a single guy who didn’t watch Izzy when she walked into a room. She was beautiful and vibrant, and she exuded a natural confidence that seemed to make her glow with happiness. I would be jealous if I didn’t know that she was just as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. Izzy was sassy, but she was also the nicest person I’d ever known. She was always the first to step up to help others, and she would give you the literal shirt off her back if you needed it.

“What’s going on with you?” Her brow creased as she leaned her elbows on the table and studied me. “You sounded serious.”

I sighed and took a sip of my drink. “It kind of is. Mom kind of.... kicked me out... so I need a place to stay.”

“What?” Her eyes rounded.

“It was kind of a mutual decision. I just... need some space to myself.” And wasn’t that the understatement of the year? I couldn’t stand to be under the same roof with Alan one more day.

Her expression turned wary. “Did something happen?”

My best friend had always been able to read me like a book, so I quickly pasted on a bright smile. “No, no. But you know mom and Alan have been dating a while now. Ever since he moved in, I feel like I’m just in the way.”

“I would get a place with you, but I’m in the dorms until the end of the semester.” She bit her lip. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ve been looking at apartments, but I can’t afford the first and last months’ rent. There are some places closer to Dallas that don’t require a deposit, but...”

Izzy's eyes widened and she picked up my train of thought. "You don't want to stay in a place like that. We'll figure something out. Are you still working at the diner?"

I nodded. "It's just not enough to cover anything nice. I'll need to look into getting a second job." Which meant foregoing the classes I'd planned to attend the spring semester.

"I know!" Izzy snapped her fingers then leaned forward. "You can stay with my brother."

I blinked. "What?"

I knew for sure she wasn't talking about Grayson since he and Claire had just moved in together. That left Luke, the youngest of the Thornes and the closest to our age, and... Drew. I cautiously ventured forward, wondering if she was really suggesting what I thought she was. "I thought Luke had a roommate."

"Not Luke." She rolled her eyes. "Drew."

I shook my head. "I couldn't."

"Please." She waved one hand in front of her like my protest was of no importance. "He's perfect. His house is big enough, and he works, like, all the time so you wouldn't even have to see each other."

Um, no. That was not perfect—not in any way. The thought of living in the same house with Drew was simultaneously tempting yet nerve-wracking. On one hand, yes—I would practically sell my soul to be that close to Drew every day. But I was also a realist. It was obvious he didn't have any interest in me romantically, and no way in hell was I going to watch him bring other women home.

My stomach tied into one big knot just thinking about it. "Um... I really don't think that's a good idea."

"Of course it is." She leveled me with a look. "If you're worried about being a third wheel, don't. He hasn't dated in months."

Really? Although I didn't say anything out loud, my expression must have given me away, because Izzy nodded.

“He’s always busy with work, and so are you. He has a spare room that’s already furnished, so you wouldn’t have to worry about moving any of your furniture yet.”

My mind was still stuck on the fact that Drew hadn’t dated anyone recently, and my heart skipped a beat. Maybe if I was there with him, I could make him see me as a woman instead of the little girl who’d once tagged along behind him. Then—

“What do you think?”

I forced myself to focus, snapping my attention back to Izzy. “Honestly, it sounds too good to be true. Do you think he’ll be open to it?”

“Absolutely!” A huge grin overtook her face. “He won’t mind at all.”

Was I really going to do this? My heart raced in my chest, and my lungs felt like they couldn’t draw in enough oxygen. This could be an epic disaster, or it could be the turning point that finally made him see me as more than just his sister’s best friend. “Well... Maybe I’ll ask him, just to make sure.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” Izzy said. “I’ll ask him at dinner tomorrow. Are you coming?”

As much as I wanted to see him, I decided against it. Maybe it was better to let Izzy present my case; she knew Drew much better than I did. Once she’d introduced the topic, I could follow it up in a couple of days. I shook my head. “Sorry, I have to work. But maybe I can stop by after?”

Izzy waved me off. “He won’t be able to say no, especially if I ask him in person.”

“Okay.” I truly hoped that was the case. I tried to tamp down the hope that had sprung up. “That would be great, thank you.”

“No problem.” Izzy’s gaze slid over my shoulder, and a calculating gleam entered her eyes.

Seconds later, a man stopped beside our table. I recognized Aiden Blackwell, a lieutenant who worked with her brothers.

His gaze homed in on her, his eyes dark with displeasure. “What are you doing here?”

Izzy lifted a brow. “What, I’m not allowed to go out?”

His lips flattened into a thin line at her challenging tone. “You shouldn’t be here alone.”

“I’m not alone, in case you missed it.” She waved one hand my way. “Emery is here, too.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He dipped his head and leaned closer, pitching his words low so only we could hear him. “You’ve heard about the women being raped. Two of them were here those nights,” he said harshly. “You need to stay together all the time. Don’t let each other out of your sights.”

Izzy’s gaze sharpened. “That’s why you’re here. All of you.”

“Shh.” Aiden immediately hushed her, even as he glanced around the bar, surreptitiously studying his surroundings. “For God’s sake, don’t draw attention to anyone.”

“It is.” A satisfied look settled on her face. His mouth parted to speak, but she cut him off, her voice quiet. “We won’t interrupt anything. And we’ll stay together. I parked next to her when I came in.”

His posture relaxed a fraction. “Good.”

For several long seconds they remained that way, just staring at one another. And then it clicked. *This* was the man Izzy was waiting for.

I cleared my throat and slid off my stool. “I need to run to the bathroom. Will you stay with Izzy ‘til I get back?”

Aiden hesitated, then finally gave a tiny nod, and I turned away to hide my smile. I was happy for Izzy. He seemed like a good guy and though they might not be involved yet, it was obvious from his protective demeanor that he was interested in her, too.

I pushed through the crowd and made my way to the bathroom. Inside, I took my time washing my hands and reapplying my lipstick. I stared at my reflection in the mirror,

a thousand thoughts circulating through my mind. Aiden was Grayson's age, and one of his best friends. What would he think if Izzy and Aiden started dating? Maybe that's why neither of them had made a move yet. Izzy had never said anything to me about him, and I wouldn't push, but I hoped it worked out for them.

My thoughts immediately turned to Drew. It was a very similar situation. I'd had a crush on him for as long as I could remember, yet he was my best friend's brother. There were several years between us, though not as much of a gap as there would be between Izzy and Aiden. Would she approve of me dating Drew?

I drew in a deep breath, then slowly let it out. I knew I was getting ahead of myself. Drew wasn't even interested in me.

Yet, whispered the little voice on my shoulder.

If Izzy could really make this happen, if I moved in with Drew... I smiled. I was going to find a way to make him see me—and fall for me.

Eight



DREW

THE FAMILIAR SOUNDS AND SMELLS WRAPPED AROUND ME AS soon as I stepped into my parents' house. Laughter filled the air, cutting over the sound of the TV in the den, and I closed up before heading deeper into the house.

My mother bustled around the kitchen, while my youngest brother, Luke, and Izzy stood at the counter. "Hey, ma."

"Hey, baby." She paused just long enough for me to press a kiss to her cheek, then continued to mash the potatoes she was working on.

"Hey, man." Luke nodded my way, and I tipped my head as I settled on a stool across from them. "How's work?"

"Same old. Staying busy." That was the understatement of the year. I almost hadn't come today, but I knew I needed a break. "What about you? Still sleeping on the job?"

"Fucking hilarious." He rolled his eyes, and I cracked a grin.

Though Gray and I harassed him relentlessly for not going into law enforcement, Luke truly loved what he did, and I knew he was damn good at it. Law enforcement and firefighters were competitive by nature, but I appreciated his dedication to the job. Didn't mean I couldn't tease him once in a while, though.

“What about you?” I switched my gaze to my baby sister. “You wreaking havoc up at school?”

She smirked my way. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I snorted. Growing up with three boys, there was really no chance for her to turn out to be anything other than a hell-raiser. She was smart and sassy, and she always gave as much as she got. She was way too damn headstrong, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. I knew she could take care of herself. “Where’s the boyfriend?”

She lifted one shoulder, focused on rolling the cookie dough in front of her into tiny balls. “Didn’t invite him.”

“Hmm...” I was more than a little suspicious of that whole thing. A couple weeks ago she’d dropped a bomb and told us she was not only dating someone, but thinking of getting married. None of us had ever met the elusive man she called her boyfriend, and it made the hairs of the back of my neck stand up. Something didn’t add up here.

I studied her for a second, waiting for her to elaborate, but she stayed quiet. Deciding not to push for the moment, I flicked my gaze toward the hallway when I heard the front door open and close.

“Hey, y’all!”

Seconds later, Grayson and Claire rounded the corner. Ma welcomed Claire with a huge hug, and even I had to admit—she and my brother looked damn good together. They’d been friends for years and they knew every aspect of each other’s lives. They just... fit.

Claire paused when she saw me, an uncertain look on her face. I’ll be honest—there was a time when I wasn’t the biggest fan of Claire’s. I thought she was leading my brother on, but I was wrong. They were getting married, and in just a few short months she would effectively be my sister. I wanted to put the past behind us where it belonged.

“Hey, Claire.” I stood and opened my arms in invitation. Relief creased her features as she wrapped me in a hug.

“All right, y’all,” Ma called out. “Let’s eat.”

We each carried in a dish and settled at the table, pulling up extra chairs and squeezing in wherever we could find space. If our family kept growing, we were going to need a bigger table. It was a good feeling, though, having everyone packed in here all together.

Chatter filled the air, and I snuck a look across the table at Grayson as he leaned in close to Claire and whispered something in her ear. She glanced up at him, silently communicating something with her eyes, then turned her attention back to her meal. They looked happy as hell, and the spurt of envy that rippled through me caught me off guard.

It was a strange feeling. I’d never really had the urge to settle down before. For the past few years I’d been so focused on my career that I hadn’t taken the time to truly date. And when I did, I found that a majority of the women were self-centered, not the nurturing type like Claire. Admittedly, I hadn’t dated the right type of woman. I was drawn more toward the ones who understood the score—both of us looking for instant gratification, but nothing more. There’d been no substance to those relationships—not even an underlying friendship. Though I’d liked the women well enough, I hadn’t been disappointed when the relationships eventually fell apart.

I hated that I was envious of Grayson and Claire, because they were great people. My brother always had my back, and Claire was perfect for him. I was glad they’d finally figured things out, but it made my own situation seem even more pitiful. I couldn’t believe I was admitting it, but I wanted what they had—someone they loved and trusted and knew they could count on. Maybe not today, maybe not even tomorrow. But someday.

After dinner, I carried my plate back to the kitchen. Izzy passed behind me, bumping me with her hip. “Come talk to me.”

Rolling my eyes, I followed her out to the back yard. Izzy plopped down on the garden bench and patted the seat beside

her, indicating I should sit. I lifted a brow her way. “What do you want?”

“Me?” She turned a pair of innocent blue eyes on me. “Why would you think I want something?”

I scoffed as I sank onto the bench beside her. “Maybe because I’ve known you your entire life.”

She waved away my retort. “Why can’t I just talk to my big brother?”

I hummed a noncommittal sound. The whole thing was suspicious as hell, but Izzy worked at her own pace. If I wanted to find out what she was up to, I’d have to play along.

Several seconds passed in silence before Izzy spoke. “I’m happy for them.”

My brows drew together. “Who?”

“Gray and Claire.” She tipped her head toward the house. “I was worried, but they seem happy.”

I nodded but stayed quiet. Izzy bumped me with her shoulder. “How have you been?”

“Busy.”

She studied me. “You look exhausted.”

“I am.” I nodded. “Things have been hectic.”

She turned slightly to see me better and settled back against the armrest of the bench. “How’s the case coming?”

I snorted. “It’s not.”

I couldn’t hide the disgust in my voice, and Izzy made a sympathetic sound. “Emery and I were at Mason’s last night and ran into Aiden.”

“What?” I snapped my head toward her, and she held up a hand.

“We already got the lecture from him. He told us about your setup or whatever you’ve got going on.”

“You need to be careful—both of you,” I warned. “And it goes without saying that you can’t tell anyone. We don’t need

someone tipping the guy off.”

No way in hell was I going to get this close just to lose him now.

“Of course not.” Izzy shook her head. “I know how much this means to you.”

I immediately relaxed. “I’m sorry. I know you wouldn’t say anything. I’m just... worked up.”

“I get it.” She offered a little smile. “You’ve got a lot on your plate.”

We fell quiet for a minute, but I could tell something was on her mind. I swiveled my head in her direction. “Whatcha thinking?”

She lifted one shoulder. “Lots of things. School, life, what I’m going to do once I graduate.”

Izzy was currently finishing up her business degree, but she was worried about the economy. “You’ll figure it out. You have lots of time.”

“I guess so.” She forced a smile. “Don’t get me wrong, I love it here, but... I don’t want to be stuck living at home forever.”

“I can understand that. You deserve to have your space and freedom too. You’ll land on your feet.”

“I hope so.”

“So.” I cleared my throat. “How are things with the boyfriend?”

She rolled her lips together and dropped her gaze to her lap. “It’s... complicated.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what nagged at me, but something about her expression was... off. Izzy was almost perpetually positive and confident, yet when she spoke of this guy her voice dropped and she seemed to retreat into herself.

I’d never been comfortable talking about dating with my baby sister. In my mind she was still ten and tagging along after us boys as we climbed trees and played in the mud. It

was almost strange to think of her as an adult with her own life. I wasn't entirely sure what advice to offer my sister; I'd never excelled at relationships, either. "When you find the right guy, you'll know."

"That's what everyone says." She lightly backhanded my knee. "What about you? You never bring anyone around."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'd have to be dating someone in order for that to happen."

One brow lifted. "I know you've been busy, but you should make some time for yourself too. Maybe go out on a date."

There was really no one I was interested in at the moment. I hadn't even spoken with another woman in... over two months? Pathetic. "Maybe after this case is over," I said lamely.

Izzy shook her head. "I know your job is important, but so is your personal life. When are you going to put yourself first?"

I shifted on the bench as her words sank in. Thirty was right around the corner, and I certainly wasn't getting any younger. Granted, Gray had waited to settle down, but he'd had his eye on Claire for the past two years. Now they were engaged, and while I truly was happy for them, it left me more than a little unsettled.

Though I'd had a few serious relationships when I was younger, there'd been no one special for the past five years or so. I'd thrown myself into working for the police force, my sights set on moving up the ranks. I hadn't gotten laid in... eight months, maybe? Christ, had it been that long?

Still, there was too much work to be done. I needed to finish this case first, then I could worry about dating. These women were more important than a one-night stand.

"I'll think about it," I finally said.

Izzy was quiet for several seconds, then she gave a slow nod. "Okay."

I looped one arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “Thanks for the pep talk, though.”

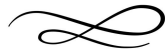
“That’s what I’m here for.” She grinned. “But when you finally fall in love, I expect a thank you.”

I snorted. “Yeah, yeah. You might be waiting a while.”

“Never know.” Izzy lifted one shoulder. “It could be right in front of you.”

If only that were true.

Nine



EMERY

I WIPED ONE HAND ACROSS MY BROW AS THE HEAT OF THE kitchen blasted me. I shook my head and smiled ruefully at our cook, Donny. “I don’t know how you guys handle it back here.”

It was sweltering hot, even with the air conditioning cranked and the fans circulating the stifling air that emanated from the huge grill. He grinned back at me. “Ain’t so bad, Miss Emery.”

“I doubt it.” I scoffed. “It’s no wonder some of those chefs on TV are so grouchy all the time. I’d be grumpy too if I had to work back here.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I dug it out. A message from Izzy lit the screen. **He’s in!**

My heart leaped in my chest, and I couldn’t help the swell of excitement that filled my heart. Oh, my God. This was really happening! I had a new place to live far away from Alan. And not only that—though that in itself was reason to celebrate—but I’d get to see Drew every day. That was both exhilarating and worrisome. The thought of being so close to him all the time sent nervous flutters ricocheting through my belly. Oh, lord. I felt faint just at the thought of living in the same house with him.

“You okay?”

Donny's voice cut through my introspection, startling me, and I almost dropped my phone. "I'm... great, actually." I grinned. "Just got some really good news, is all."

"You deserve it." Donny nodded my way and winked as he flipped a burger patty.

"Thanks." I quickly tapped back a message to Izzy. **That's awesome! When can I move in?**

Her reply came just a few seconds later. **Today. I'm finishing up class now. Meet at his place around 4?**

An excited thrill ran through me, and I bounced on my toes. **See you guys then!** I tapped back before storing my phone in my apron.

Somehow I made it through the next two-and-a-half hours without going completely crazy, and when I finally finished my shift, I practically ran to my car. Drew's house was only a fifteen-minute drive to the outskirts of town, and my heart slammed against my ribcage the entire way. I didn't think my pulse had slowed since I'd gotten that text from Izzy earlier this afternoon. I was terrified that he would suddenly change his mind, and I wanted to get over here to talk to him as soon as possible. I'd never lived on my own before, but I would be a stellar roommate—I would make sure of it.

When I pulled into the drive, I was more than a little surprised to see only Izzy's car parked in the driveway. Spotting her seated on the front porch steps, I pulled to a stop, then climbed from the car. "Hey!"

She popped to her feet, a huge smile on her face. "I'm glad you decided to come."

"Of course." I glanced around, then met Izzy's gaze again. "I thought Drew would be here."

She bent to retrieve a key from beneath a flower pot in the corner of the porch. "He got tied up at work, so he asked me to let you in."

I nodded. That made perfect sense. She held the door for me, and I followed her into the living room. She passed me the key and gestured around. "Welcome home."

“I can’t begin to tell you how much this means to me.” I turned to Izzy with a grin. “This is amazing!”

She waved one hand in the air as she rolled her eyes. “It’s not a problem. Drew is so busy you probably won’t even see him half the time.”

Well, that was slightly disheartening, though not unexpected. “I promise I’ll be the best roommate ever. I can take care of the place, whatever he needs.”

I glanced around the messy living room, and Izzy laughed. “He told me to apologize for the mess. Like I said, he’s been working crazy long hours with this new case.”

“Oh, it’s fine!” I rushed to assure her. “I’ve heard all about it. I hope they’re making progress.”

She lifted one shoulder. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

I smiled. “Well, I’m sure he’s doing all he can.”

“He will. Drew’s like a dog with a bone; he won’t let it go until he figures it out. But enough about that.” She grinned. “Let’s get you settled.”

“Actually, I only brought a couple bags of clothes,” I admitted. “I don’t have furniture or anything.”

I’d made a quick run home after work and shoved as many clothes and toiletries as I could fit into two duffle bags. It was all I really needed, and I didn’t want to have to go back this afternoon once Alan was home.

“That’s no problem.” Izzy gestured for me to follow, and I fell into step as she led the way toward the staircase, then ascended the steps. “He’s got a second room set up. It only has a pull-out couch, but we can definitely get a bed for you.”

I shook my head. “The couch is perfect. You guys are already doing so much for me.”

She paused on the landing and peered down at me. “You’re like family, Em. You never have to ask. Anything you need, it’s yours.”

“Thanks.” I smiled, but the small stab of guilt didn’t abate. I still hadn’t told Izzy about Alan—not because I thought she wouldn’t believe me, but because part of me felt ashamed. I didn’t want to admit that it had happened, not even to my best friend.

Izzy continued down the hall, then pointed to a door on the left. “There’s the bathroom. Linen closet is the next door on the left.” She moved to the door on the right, then gestured for me to enter. “Here you go.”

I peeked my head around the door frame and took in the simple room. There wasn’t much; the fold-out couch Izzy had mentioned, an end table, and a small dresser with a lamp on top. But there were two windows that let in in the bright sunlight, and a closet that would hold anything I needed to store. I smiled. “It’s perfect.”

“Glad you like it.” She smiled. “Do you need help unpacking anything?”

“I’m good. And seriously.” I placed one hand on her shoulder. “I really do appreciate this.”

“I know you do.” She gave me a quick hug. “Well, I should let you get settled. If you need anything, just text me.”

“Sounds good.”

I walked Izzy to her car, then grabbed my bags from the trunk and carried them in. Since I didn’t have much, it took me less than an hour to unpack, and I began to wander the house. The bathroom was messy, and I wrinkled my nose at the short, dark hairs Drew had left behind in the sink.

Well, that was just one thing I’d have to get used to living with someone new. Drew had been nice enough to let me move in, and I was determined to uphold my end of the bargain. I went in search of cleaning supplies, which I found beneath the kitchen sink. I took my time cleaning the bathroom and kitchen, then tidied up the living room.

By the time I looked at the clock, it was already past dinnertime. Did Drew typically eat dinner at home? I had no idea. A scan of the fridge and cupboards told me he didn’t

have much on hand, and that I would definitely need to do some grocery shopping tomorrow.

I debated what to do for dinner, but I didn't have many options. Drew would more than likely grab something to eat at the station or on his way home, so I would have to fend for myself. I didn't want to miss him when he came home, so I'd have to be fast. I made a quick run back to town and got a meal to go from the Dairy Queen, then headed back to Drew's place. I ate dinner alone, then left a note on the counter while I hopped in the shower. By the time I went to bed, he still wasn't home.

I lay on the foldout couch, staring up at the ceiling, lost in thought. Today hadn't gone anything like I'd expected. Disappointment ricocheted through my chest, and I tamped it down. It wasn't Drew's fault he hadn't been able to be here. He had a lot going on, and although I wished he could have been here when I moved in, it was way more important that he catch the guy they'd been searching for.

Sleep was elusive, and being in a strange place didn't help. With a little sigh, I tossed back the covers and climbed from the bed. Navigating my way through the darkness, I headed toward the kitchen. I couldn't remember where any of the light switches were, or what they controlled, so I didn't bother looking for them.

Keeping one hand on the wall, I felt my way through the house. I'd almost reached the kitchen when a large, dark figure rose up, and a gasp stuck in my throat as it slammed into me.

Ten



DREW

MY HAND FLEW TO MY SERVICE PISTOL BEFORE I EVEN thought about what I was doing. I had the gun drawn and pointed in the person's direction by the time I'd reached behind me and flipped on the lights.

"Oh, God!" The woman threw her hands up in front of her defensively. "Please don't hurt me!"

Shock momentarily rooted me in place at the sight of the half-dressed woman in my kitchen, but her scream jolted me into action. I reholstered the weapon as she stumbled backward into the fridge.

I blinked as the woman's form took shape before my tired eyes. "Emery? What the hell is going on here?"

"Drew?" Her eyes widened almost comically as she placed one hand over her heart. "Oh, my God. You scared the life out of me!"

I'd scared her? What the hell was she doing in my house in the middle of the night? "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I came down for a glass of water." Her voice was shaky, and her hand trembled as she pointed toward the sink.

"Uh huh." I was obviously missing something.

Her teeth cut into her lower lip as she crossed her arms over her chest. Following her movement, my gaze swept automatically over her, taking in the tank top she wore along with a tiny pair of sleep shorts. I catalogued her features in seconds, but it felt like time had slowed to a crawl as I took in every inch of her.

She had the smoothest, silkiest-looking skin, and I had the strangest urge to run my fingers along her arm to test it for myself. The tank scooped low enough that I could see the tops of her breasts, and it pulled taut as she shifted, highlighting a pair of tight nipples that pressed against the fabric, just begging for—

Holy shit. I immediately clenched my eyes closed, trying to shut out the sight that had just burned itself into my brain. This was bad. So, so bad. Christ, this was Emery! But the knowledge that the little girl I'd known for the past decade stood before me couldn't stop my body's reaction to her. Because with every single curve on display, she looked very much like a woman—a very beautiful, very desirable woman.

Desire like I'd never known sank its teeth into me and refused to let go. My body felt like it was on fire, and my pulse sprinted in my veins as my blood flooded south. Shit. Guilt immediately swept over me. I could *not* get turned on by her. She was like my sister, for God's sake!

I drew in a deep breath. This was a completely natural reaction, the result of going too damn long without a woman. Except... I didn't normally get turned on by random women, even scantily clad ones.

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to think about something—anything—other than the woman in front of me. Maybe I was just overly tired and this was all a dream. I rubbed the heels of my palms against my eyes, but when I reopened them, Emery was still there, still half-naked. And still looking just as delectable as she had a few seconds ago.

Every curve was clearly outlined in stark relief, and my fingers itched to trace every dip and hollow. I cleared my

throat, forcing myself to focus on her face instead. “What I meant was, why are you here? You know, like—in my house?”

A mixture of fear and worry was still etched into her features, and I tamped down the urge to pull her into my arms. I was too on edge, my mind still buzzing from the potent sexual attraction crackling between us. If I touched her, God only knew what the hell would happen.

“I moved in this afternoon.” Her hand lifted to her throat. “I was going to wait for you, but Izzy told me you’d gotten sidetracked at work, so she let me in. I didn’t want to bother you, so—”

One word of utter importance stuck out, and I held up a hand to stall her rambling. “Did you say my sister was here?”

Her head tipped slightly to one side as she studied me. “Well, yeah. She let me in.”

What. The. Fuck?

Emery must have sensed my fury, because she shifted nervously. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, twisting her face into a mask of confusion as she fidgeted with the pendant hanging from her neck. “She, um... talked to you about this, right?”

All at once Izzy’s words from this past weekend came flooding back. While I originally thought she was just offering advice, I should have known she had ulterior motives. How dare she do something like this? I knew she wasn’t a malicious person, but this was too much. This time, she’d gone too far. Next time I saw her, I was going to wring her neck.

A glance at the clock told me it was already after midnight. I couldn’t very well send Emery packing right now. I blew out a deep breath. “It’s late. Why don’t we get some sleep and we can talk about it tomorrow?”

“Um... Okay?” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I thought... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” That was a bold-faced lie. This wasn’t fine in the least. “See you in the morning.”

“Well...” Her shoulders hunched inward as she curled into herself. “Good night.”

I forced a smile. “Night, Emery.”

She slunk upstairs, presumably back to her room, and I locked up before doing the same. Once I’d closed and locked my bedroom door behind me, I dug out my phone and hit speed dial.

After a half-dozen rings, Izzy’s voice, thick and raspy from sleep, filled the line. “Drew? Is everything okay?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said sarcastically. “The strangest thing happened today. I came home from work and found Emery standing in the middle of my kitchen.”

Half-naked. And looking good enough to spread across the table and eat. I shoved that thought away, intent on clinging to my anger.

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “About that—”

“I thought she was a damn intruder!” I whisper-yelled. “She could have been hurt! I wasn’t exactly expecting someone to be in my home.”

“Is she okay?”

I rolled my eyes. Nice of her to show some concern now. “Are you freaking kidding me? You’re worried about her now? She shouldn’t have been here in the first place!”

She sighed. “She needed a place to stay.”

“Well, it sure as hell can’t be here,” I hissed. “Jesus, Iz, what the hell were you thinking?”

I closed my eyes, but the memory of Emery standing there, every smooth, silky inch of her on display immediately flashed to the forefront of my brain. My eyes popped open again, and I bit back a groan as I adjusted myself. She was still probably scared out of her mind, but I couldn’t help that. After what had happened in the kitchen, I didn’t trust myself to come within thirty feet of her.

“I was thinking you’re single and have a whole house to yourself. She just needs a place to crash for a while.”

“No.” I sliced one hand through the air. “Absolutely not. Tomorrow you need to tell her you made a mistake, and that she can’t stay here.”

“If you want rid of her that bad, tell her yourself.”

Izzy yawned, and I gritted my molars together. “You’re her best friend. I really think it would sound better coming from you, especially considering you’re the one who invited her to stay in my house.”

“I still don’t understand why she can’t stay, just for a while,” she complained.

“Because I said so.” It was the only thing I had to fall back on. This was my house, damn it.

My sister sighed. “Seriously. How much trouble can one woman be?”

I thought about the way her curves had looked in those tiny shorts and tank top, the way her big violet eyes had peered up at me, all wide and innocent. Sweat broke out across my forehead, and heat swept up the back of my neck. Shit. This wasn’t good—at all.

I swallowed hard. “A lot.”

I could practically hear Izzy roll her eyes through the phone. “She works all the time at the diner; she’s even looking for a second job right now. You’ll never see her.”

Somehow I doubted that very much.

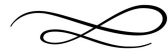
“Look,” she continued. “She didn’t tell me everything, but I think her mom threw her out. I’m stuck here for the rest of the semester, otherwise I’d get a place with her. Just give it a couple weeks, maybe a month until we can figure out a permanent solution. Please?”

Son of a bitch. I felt my resolve waver. If she truly had nowhere else to go, I couldn’t kick her out. “I hate you,” I muttered into the phone.

Izzy laughed. “Just a few weeks, big brother. You won’t regret it.”

Now that was a lie if I’d ever heard one.

Eleven



EMERY

DAMN IZZY. THIS WASN'T THE FIRST TIME WE'D HAD A FIGHT, but this was by far the most serious. She'd lied about Drew giving the okay for me to move into his place, I knew she had. His expression at seeing me standing in his kitchen had been too genuine to be anything but complete and utter shock. He hadn't forgotten I was moving in; she'd neglected to tell him on purpose.

I was tempted to text her and call her out, but I was still too upset. I couldn't believe she'd done this to me. Drew hadn't said a single word about it either, so I had no idea what was going to happen. He'd been up with the sun the very next day, and I'd seen only the tiniest glimpses of him in the two days since. I supposed I should be grateful he hadn't immediately kicked me out, but I knew he wasn't happy with the situation. I'd stayed out of his way, working as much as possible and staying in my room otherwise so as not to disturb him. The last thing I wanted to do was give him a reason to kick me out. Maybe if I kept to myself he'd see it wasn't so bad and let me stay.

I let out a deep breath and tilted my face toward the sky. It was hard to hold onto my bad mood when the weather was so beautiful. It wasn't ungodly hot today as it had been for the past couple of weeks. Today was perfect, with the sun shining brightly overhead, and a slight breeze carrying the first scents

of autumn with it, and a smile curled my face as I meandered down the aisle of the local flea market.

Tired of being cooped up in the house and worrying about what might or might not happen over the next few days, I'd come here. I knew I should be scouring the classifieds, looking for another job, but I couldn't resist the pull. It was my one indulgence. I loved the antiques that popped up in the most unsuspecting of places; I could lose myself for hours here. Occasionally I would find something that I could fix up and resell, make a little bit of a profit on.

That was my goal today. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but I would know as soon as I saw it. I swiveled my gaze left and right, nodding to several of the regular vendors. One woman brought her essential oils each week, and I occasionally bought a small vial to support her even if I didn't need any. I strolled past wood carvers and a man who had ventriloquist dummies on display. My nose wrinkled as I automatically took a step in the opposite direction. I'd never liked dolls, not even as a child, and I especially hated those creepy dummies with their gleaming eyes and wide, gaping mouths. Other stands sold fruit and homemade birch beer, kites and homemade knickknacks.

I paused at the end of the aisle, my gaze drawn toward a large China cabinet. It had initially caught my eye because it was currently painted a bright apple green with pink trim on the scalloped edges. The longer I looked at it, the more details I picked up. The vintage knobs, the delicate moulding...

I ventured closer and drew my fingers along the fragile glass of the center window. It was good quality despite the fact that someone had painted over the wood several times.

"You beat me to it," came a soft voice over my left shoulder.

I turned toward the blonde woman and met her sparkling blue eyes. "Oh, I'm just looking."

"I don't blame you," she replied. "It's beautiful."

“It would be if they hadn’t chosen this godawful color.” My eyes widened at the realization that the woman may have been drawn to the cabinet for that very reason. I snapped my gaze back to hers. “I mean, the green is great if you like that kind of thing.”

She laughed, a soft tinkling sound, and waved one hand in the air. “No, no. I agree with you. I would love to see the original wood underneath.”

“Me, too.” I nodded. “I’m sure it’ll be gorgeous all restored.”

“Well, good luck,” the woman said with a little smile. “If you get it back to its original state I’d love to see it.”

“Oh, no.” I gave my head a little shake. “I can’t buy this.”

Her brows drew together. “Why not?”

I thought about Drew. What would he say if I showed up with something like this? “Well, I really don’t have space to refinish it right now. Plus I’ve never done anything this elaborate. I’ve fixed some things up but to completely strip it down and refinish it...” I let my words trail off.

“It seems like you have a good eye,” she said.

A tiny smile curled my lips as satisfaction rolled through me. “Thank you.”

“I’m Grace, by the way.”

She extended her slim hand and I shook it. “Nice to meet you. I’m Emery.”

The woman pursed her lips. “Is this something you might like to do?”

“Restore furniture?” I shrugged when she nodded. “Maybe. I’ve never really tried it before so I don’t know if I’d be any good.”

She tipped her head inquisitively. “But you’ve done something similar?”

I suddenly felt as if I were being interviewed, and heat swept up my cheeks. “Nothing important, really,” I admitted.

“Once in a while I’ll find a cute little nightstand or something that I can repaint and flip. Actually...” I dug my phone out of my purse. “I have some pictures of a bookshelf I painted recently if you’d like to see?”

Her smile lit up her entire face. “Definitely!”

I scrolled through my pictures until I came to the ones I was looking for, then held my breath as she silently studied the photos for several seconds. The bookshelf had been a plain, boring brown, and I’d picked it up for ten dollars. I’d repainted it a bright white, then stenciled flowers growing up the sides.

“This is beautiful.” She met my gaze as she passed my phone back to me. “Truly. I love that.”

I smiled self-consciously. “Thank you. I saw it in a magazine and thought I would try it.”

Grace nodded slowly looking lost in thought. “Is that something you like? Decorating and stuff?”

“Sort of.” I nodded. “I like taking something old and making it new again.”

She eyed me. “I used to have an interior design business back when I lived in New York.”

“Wow.” I’d heard of people decorating houses, but I’d never known anyone who actually did that. “That’s exciting.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s not as exciting as it sounds. Oh, the designing was fun,” she quickly elaborated, “but the city was... exhausting.”

I couldn’t even imagine. I’d never been out of Cedar Springs.

“What if I paid you to restore it?”

I turned wide eyes on her. “What?”

“I think you would do a great job. Besides, my husband would lose his mind if I tried to do it right now.”

My gaze was drawn downward when she propped one hand on her hip and rested the other on her swollen belly. The flowy bohemian style dress had concealed the fact that she

was pregnant, and I couldn't help but smile. "I can understand that."

She rolled her eyes, a playful smile on her lips. "So, what do you say? I've been thinking about getting back into it, and it's something I can do from home once this little one is born."

"That sounds like a good idea," I ventured warily. "But... are you sure? I've never done this before and—"

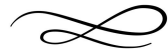
Grace waved one hand in the air. "You learn by trial and error, right?"

I slapped my lips together. She had a point. "I guess so, yeah."

"Then what do you say?"

"Well..." I mulled it over for one more second, then grinned. "How are we going to get this thing out of here?"

Twelve



DREW

I SAT BACK IN MY CHAIR AND SCRUBBED MY HANDS OVER MY face. For the past six hours I'd reviewed the footage from last night's recon at the bar—twice—analyzing every single person who'd been in that room with Abby.

For the past few nights, Con and Cole had taken turns watching over Abby. If Dave or another man was watching her closely, he would definitely notice the same man playing pool with her each night. The worst thing a person could do in their personal life was establish a pattern—but that's exactly what we were doing with Abby. We wanted the man to see that she was predictable, that she did the same thing each night. That made her an easy target, and hopefully he would bite.

Con had done an excellent job of keeping the occupants in view, though the faces on some were slightly blurry since they were so far away. Several of the men flirted with Abby, but none had done anything remotely suspicious. None had paid her any undue attention, and no one had tried to follow her when she left.

It was reassuring and frustrating in equal measure. I wanted this man with a vengeance that grew stronger every single day. It was driving me nearly to the brink of insanity, and coupled with the situation at home, I was almost at my wits end. I glanced up in time to see my brother turn into his office, and I pushed my chair back.

Grayson threw a tired smile my way as I entered, then gestured for me to sit. I dropped into the chair opposite him, watching as he booted up the computer. Although he looked tired, there was an underlying sense of contentment that seemed to shroud his entire being. I knew most of that was due to his fiancée, Claire.

It was hard to imagine that, barely a month ago, he thought Claire was dating another man. She'd been having issues with a student at school and had started to pull away from him. They'd had their fair share of trouble recently, but I truly liked Claire, and I knew they were the type of couple that could survive anything life threw their way. "How's Claire?"

"Good." He sank into his chair, then laced his fingers over his abdomen and stared at me. "What about you?"

I lifted a brow. "What about me?"

Gray lifted one shoulder. "Heard a rumor that a certain waitress is staying at your house."

"You heard right." I wasn't surprised that he knew; Gray was both my older brother and the Chief of Police, and it wasn't like anyone could hide gossip that big in a town like Cedar Springs.

His hazel eyes narrowed a bit as he studied me. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

I dropped my head back and stared at the ceiling. "Hell, I don't know. This is all Izzy's fault."

Though I couldn't see Gray's expression, I could sense his confusion and continued. "I got home late a couple nights ago and found Emery standing in the middle of the kitchen."

I lowered my head in time to see my brother's eyes widen in surprise. "You didn't know she was there?"

"Not a clue." I shook my head ruefully. "Apparently she needed a place to crash, and Izzy offered to let her stay with me. Since, you know, I have nothing better to do than babysit," I added sarcastically.

Gray just stared at me. “I doubt she’ll require much watching. She seems to work all the time.”

I scowled across the desk at him. “Yeah, thanks. That’s what Izzy told me, too.”

Even worse, it was true. Each morning I got ready for work, half-expecting her to pop into the kitchen for coffee, or to be awake watching TV when I got home. But she remained in her room, locked away where she knew she wouldn’t bother me. But the thing was... it did bother me. A lot. Because the moment she moved in, I saw her. And now I couldn’t get her out of my mind. Despite our difference in age, Emery was probably the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen.

I resented it, because I didn’t *want* to want Emery. I didn’t want a serious relationship with anyone. I had a career to focus on, especially this case. I didn’t need any distractions. But this whole thing with Emery had thrown me for a loop. It was like everything had changed in the blink of an eye. One day she was hanging around the house with my sister, giggling like a schoolgirl. The next, she was a young woman, rounded in all the right places, her violet eyes more sultry than I remembered, her full lips begging to be kissed.

But not by me. I was well aware that nothing could ever happen between us. She was much too young, her friendship with my sister aside. I’d never crossed that line, and I didn’t plan to. So instead, I’d made myself scarce, throwing myself into work and avoiding my house—and Emery—as much as possible.

“She must have a good reason for staying with you,” he said quietly.

Yeah, I knew that. Izzy wouldn’t have offered up my place without a good reason. Regardless, I didn’t know what that reason was, and it bothered the hell out of me. “Well if you find out why, let me know,” I grouched. “I fucking hate being the last one to know shit.”

Gray grinned a little. “It’s good for you. Keeps you on your toes.”

I snorted. “That’s the last thing I need right now.”

His face turned serious. “We’ll find him.”

I sincerely hoped so, but every day that passed without another lead was harder than the last. With any luck, this sting with Abby would pan out and there wouldn’t be any more victims. We’d put out a statement a couple of weeks ago for women to be on guard, especially while they were out. We asked them to stay with friends and always travel in pairs, whether it was to the bathroom at a bar or restaurant, or while walking to their cars after a long day of work.

“Did you see anything on the footage?” my brother asked.

I shook my head. “Nope. I watched it again but nothing jumped out at me.”

“Maybe we should have Con’s guy take a look.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Can’t hurt to have a fresh set of eyes.”

I shook my head. “Doyle already reviewed it too. He didn’t find anything.”

Gray made a face. “Whoever this guy is, he can’t hide forever. He might be lying low now, but I guarantee you he can’t resist the urge much longer.”

I hoped he was right. I hope the guy took the bait and came after Abby as planned.

“After all this is over, you should take some time off.”

Oh, God. The thought of being stuck at home alone with Emery was more daunting than working eighteen-hour days. I shook my head. “I’ll be fine.”

Gray leveled me with a hard look. “It’s not an option. You’ve been spending too much time on this. As soon as it wraps up, I’m taking you off for a while.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” he replied. “Couch surf for a week or go on vacation somewhere. Just do something that isn’t here.”

The idea of taking a vacation did have merit, but who wanted to go to the beach alone?

My brother seemed to read my mind. “Are you seeing anyone?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair as Emery’s violet-blue eyes flashed to the forefront of my mind. I shook my head. “Not at the moment. When the hell would I have a chance?”

Not to mention the fact that I couldn’t think about another woman besides Emery. She took up every conscious thought that didn’t revolve around work.

“Do yourself a favor and don’t bring other women home,” he advised. “Don’t need to make things more complicated than they are.”

“No shit.” Almost on cue my phone rang, and I dug it from my pocket. Shit. My stomach twisted as Emery’s number flashed across my screen. I tapped the screen, acutely aware of my brother’s intuitive gaze on me. “Emery?”

There was a slight pause on the other end, and my pulse kicked up. “Drew? Hey, um... I know this is kind of a weird question, and I don’t want to put you out or anything so I totally understand if you don’t want to, because I—”

“What is it, Emery?” My tone was harsher than normal, driven by a combination of frustration and worry, and I fought the urge to apologize when she fell silent on the other end. I opened my mouth to speak when she cleared her throat.

“I was wondering if I could use your basement. A friend of mine bought a curio cabinet and she’d like me to refinish it. Since I don’t have any place to work, I was wondering if it would be too much trouble to move it into the basement.”

I hesitated as I absorbed her request. If I let her move more stuff in, it would make her presence that much more obvious. Did I really want that? On the flip side, if I told her no, would she move out? I knew the thought had crossed her mind. Izzy had told me that she and Em would be looking for a place of their own as soon as they were able. How long would this extend Emery’s stay? A few weeks? A couple of months?

The only thing worse than her moving more stuff in was the thought of her moving out. If she had this cabinet delivered—did she say she was refinishing it?—it would be a reason for her to stay a bit longer. Her presence in the house was both welcome and unnerving, though I knew I hadn't been entirely receptive. Like, at all. I liked having her there as much as I loathed it. But—

“Never mind, it's fine,” I heard her say on the other end of the line. Her tone was rife with disappointment, and it sent a twinge of regret straight through my heart. “I'll just—”

“No, it's fine,” I quickly spoke up, cutting her off. “Sorry, I was just...”

Unable to come up with a suitable excuse, I trailed off for a second. “I might have to move some stuff around, but I can have it ready by tomorrow. Do you need help moving it?”

“You don't have to worry about that,” she replied. “Her husband will bring it over.”

I was still a little confused about the whole situation, but I had neither the time nor confidence to ask. I nodded slowly. “Tomorrow should be fine.”

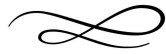
“Perfect, thank you so much.”

“No problem,” I said weakly before hanging up. Drawing in a deep breath I met my brother's gaze across the desk.

He lifted one brow. “So much for not complicating things.”

I dropped my head back and flipped him off.

Thirteen



EMERY

NERVOUS EXCITEMENT BUBBLED IN MY VEINS, AND I DRUMMED my fingertips on the counter as I waited impatiently for Grace to arrive. Despite knowing that her husband would be here to help move the cabinet into the basement, Drew had opted to come home after his shift to help.

To say I was surprised to see him was an understatement. He'd basically ignored me for the past four days since I'd moved in, leaving before I woke up and coming home long after I'd gone to bed. I had no idea what he was doing... or with whom. Even though I had absolutely no claim to him whatsoever, it still hurt to think of him with another woman.

A hot spear of jealousy sliced through my chest. Why else be out at all hours of the night? I knew he was busy, but none of the other officers worked hours like that. Izzy had told me once that they had to have several people available at a time so no one was overworked. What else, then, could he possibly be doing if he wasn't working? I hated to consider the answer.

My attention was drawn toward the basement when the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs met my ears. My heart gave a funny little lurch, and my breath caught in my lungs as the top of Drew's head appeared in the open doorway. More of him was revealed as he continued to climb the stairs. First his strong, broad shoulders. Next, his narrow, tapered waist. God, he was so handsome.

His gaze flicked to me, and I gave a little jolt, hyperaware that I had been staring at him. My cheeks flushed red, and I ripped my gaze away, feigning interest in my phone. My stomach tightened into knots, and I grew more tense with every step that brought him closer to me. I stared at the screen, unblinking, unable to draw in a full breath.

“They should be here soon, right?”

The sound of his deep voice did funny things to my insides, and I pressed my thighs together as inconspicuously as possible. I nodded. “Shouldn’t be too much longer.”

Drew nodded, then moved to the opposite side of the counter and leaned one hip against it. I watched him surreptitiously from beneath my lashes. A deep, uncomfortable silence filled the space between us, and I shifted on my feet before clearing my throat. “Thanks again for letting me do this.”

He let out a little grunt. “It’s no big deal.”

His voice was low and gravelly, almost rusty sounding. I opened my mouth to say something else but the words halted at the sound of a vehicle pulling up out front. “That must be them.”

Drew held out one hand and tipped his head, gesturing for me to precede him outside. My heart beat almost impossibly fast as he fell into step behind me, acutely aware of just how close he was to me. Was he watching me? Despite the unlikelihood, I could stop myself from hoping. I reached for the door handle, but one strong arm came out of nowhere, halting me in my tracks.

“Thanks,” I murmured as Drew opened the door and held it for me.

He gave a single, perfunctory nod, then followed me out onto the small front porch. A large black SUV sat in the driveway, and seconds later a silver truck pulled in behind it. Drew’s expression morphed into one of shock as the doors of the vehicles opened and the passengers spilled out. I recognized Grace immediately, and I waved to her as she

climbed from the SUV. The man who I assumed was her husband stepped out of the driver's side, and the second couple approached from the direction of the truck.

Drew crossed the yard to meet him. "Hey. I had no idea you were bringing this over."

My brows drew together. "You know them?"

It didn't really surprise me, considering Drew was a cop; people in law enforcement seemed to know everyone. A petite brunette moved to the other man's side while Grace greeted me with a hug then gravitated toward her husband.

"Yeah." Drew made introductions, pointing first to Grace's husband, a dark-haired man with dark eyes. "Em, this is Con."

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hand then turned to the other couple.

Drew continued. "This is Clay."

The man nodded my way. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too." There was something in his tone I couldn't quite decipher, and the way he studied me with hawklike golden eyes made my nerves coil even tighter in my belly.

One tawny brow ratcheted upward as I shook his hand too, and I watched with interest as he shared a look with Drew.

Clay released my hand and introduced the woman next to him. "This is my fiancée, Abby."

"She's Con's sister," Grace piped up.

Abby wrapped me in a hug. "It's so good to meet you! I can't believe you're going to tackle this thing. Do you do this a lot, refurbish antiques?"

Heat raced up my neck and over my cheeks. "Not exactly. I mean, I've flipped some things—mostly just repainted them so they look better—but this is a first."

"I think that's awesome," Abby enthused. "I wouldn't have any idea where to start."

I didn't either. Feigning a confidence I didn't feel, I plastered on a smile. "I'm going to do my best."

"It'll be perfect," Grace stated confidently before turning her gaze on Con. "Why don't you go ahead and get it unloaded so Emery can tell you where she wants it."

I stepped off to the side to speak more with Abby and Grace while the men moved to the back of the truck to remove the large cabinet. My eyes widened as I watched the men maneuver the large cabinet out of the truck. More muscles than I'd ever seen in real life bulged as they moved, their skin slightly shiny with perspiration. It was ridiculously hot.

"Wow. Someone found the deep end of the gene pool."

Abby burst out laughing, and Grace pressed her fingers to her lips to contain her smile. Across the yard, Drew flicked a curious glance our way. The other two just grinned and shook their heads like they knew exactly what we'd been talking about. And they probably did; looking the way they did, I was sure they got that all the time.

Abby made a low humming sound in the back of her throat. "There's something to be said for a man with good stamina."

"Abby!" Grace admonished.

"What?" Abby lifted one shoulder and stared unrepentantly at her fiancé. "It's true."

I slid a look back to Grace, who watched her husband with hungry eyes. It didn't look like she disagreed with Abby's statement—just the opposite, in fact.

"But it looks like you know that."

Abby slid a sly look my way, and I blushed furiously. "Oh, we're not together. Drew is my best friend's brother. He's just letting me stay here until I get on my feet."

Abby glanced toward them and again, and her head tipped slightly to one side. "You sure about that?"

"I'm sure." I nodded absently, completely aware of the way I watched him with longing as he helped the others carry

the cabinet into the house and down to the basement.

Abby lifted one shoulder. “You might be able to change his mind.”

“I doubt it,” I murmured more than a little unhappily. “I don’t think he even knows I’m alive.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Grace replied softly. “He doesn’t strike me as a man who misses much.”

It was true; Drew was one of the most aware people I’ve ever met in my life. Still, that didn’t change facts. “Okay, maybe he knows I’m alive. But he only sees me as his sister’s friend.”

“Do you want more?”

Abby’s penetrating brown gaze stared into mine, and I shifted uncomfortably. “I mean...” I trailed off, terrified to put my feelings into words. It didn’t matter, though. She seemed to know exactly what I was thinking.

“If he’s what you want, I say fight for him. You’re living here, right?” I nodded at the rhetorical question, and she continued. “Then make him see you. Put yourself in front of him and make him realize what he’s missing.”

“Abby...” Grace warned.

Abby leveled her with a stare. “Would you have let my brother walk away again?”

Grace’s blue gaze drifted toward the house, and her face took on an expression I couldn’t quite read. Finally, she shook her head. “No,” she said softly. “I would fight every day for that man.”

“Exactly.” Abby turned back to me. “It might not be easy. Hell, half the time you have to beat it into their heads. But I say go for it. What’s the harm in telling him exactly what you want?”

I stared at her. “Getting shot down.”

She shrugged like it didn’t matter in the least. “Maybe. But at least you can say you tried.”

I wished I was as brave as her. “Maybe.”

My voice lacked conviction and she thankfully changed the subject. “The guys have been so busy lately. We should get together for a girls’ night.”

“That sounds really good, actually. Maybe once everything settles down with... you know.”

Footsteps drawing near announced the return of the men, so we quickly swapped contact info and hugged each other goodbye. Once they were gone, I turned to Drew. “I was thinking about making dinner. Are you hungry?”

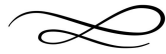
He offered a flat smile. “No thanks. I need to get caught up on some work.”

An irrational pang of hurt sliced through my chest, and I quickly excused myself. I was vaguely aware of Drew leaving, and I spent the rest of the evening alone, watching TV. Late that night I lay in bed staring at the ceiling once more. Beyond the bedroom came the soft creak of floorboards as Drew prowled through the house. I tossed a quick glance at the clock, and my brows drew together. It was almost one a.m. Was he just now getting home from work? Or had he been elsewhere? Maybe with a woman?

My stomach twisted into a giant knot as bile crept up my throat. I knew he’d never seen me as anything other than Izzy’s best friend; he still didn’t. To him I was just the young woman who needed a place to crash until I was on my feet. I was the charity case. The one he pitied.

Tears burned the bridge of my nose and squeezed from the corners of my eyes even as I clenched them closed. God, I hated this feeling so much. I was close to him yet I’d never been further away. Being so close to him but knowing we’d never be able to be together broke my heart. I snuggled deeper into the covers and yanked the comforter over my head. All I wanted to do was block out the world, forget about the pain and everything that was wrong.

Fourteen



DREW

AS I STARED AT THE COMPUTER SCREEN, EMERY CAME TO MIND once more, as she often did these days. Having her in my house for the past week was slowly driving me crazy. For my own sanity, I tried to avoid her as much as possible. Because if I gave in to the chemistry burning between us, there was a very real possibility that I would cross a line that was better off left alone.

I wasn't even sure she'd welcome my advances. I'd caught her looking at me from time to time, but what the hell did that mean? It could be that she was just grateful for a place to stay. But could it be more? Soon after she moved in, I noticed more groceries in the fridge. She'd offered to make me dinner, but I'd declined, escaping back to work instead. The thought of sitting there with her, having an intimate dinner all alone... Christ, it was enough to drive any man insane.

I worked as much as I could to avoid being home alone with her, but I couldn't tune out the nagging voice at the back of my mind demanding to know more about her. Though I'd known her for years, I didn't really *know* her. I wanted to know her favorite color. Did she prefer rom-coms or thrillers? What did her future look like?

A thousand questions hovered on the tip of my tongue, all of them destined to remain unanswered. I would never ask Emery outright, and I couldn't bring it up to my sister without arousing her suspicions. I couldn't begin to imagine what the

hell Izzy would say if she found out I was interested in Emery. But that didn't mean I couldn't look. And I did look—every single chance I got.

When I did finally go home at night, all I could think about was her in the spare bedroom, curled up in bed all alone. I wanted to climb in next to her, pull her close and kiss every inch of her from the top of her head all the way down to her toes. I wanted to fuck her slow and hard and deep, show her that I was the only man she needed.

But I couldn't do any of that. So I took a cold shower and rubbed one out instead—sometimes twice. It never fully took the edge off, though. I wanted more. I wanted *her*. I just wasn't sure if she wanted me.

I studied the screen for a second before voicing an observation that had tugged at my brain for the last few days. “Abby seems to be about the same age as my roommate. I bet they'd get along.”

At that, Clay's eyes snapped my way. “I think you missed the memo on that one. Pretty sure the girls already have plans to go out in a couple weeks.”

That was certainly news to me. Not that it was any business of mine, of course, but I couldn't help the slight burn of jealousy that snaked through my gut at the thought of Emery being out at a bar, surrounded by men who would love to tumble her into bed.

“Don't worry,” he said, a hint of a smirk tugging at his lips. “Grace is going too, so they can't get into too much trouble.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think you severely underestimate what happens when women get together.”

“True story.” He snorted. “But at least Abby can go gab with the girls for a while and leave me in peace. Damn woman could talk the ears off a donkey.”

I couldn't help but grin. Despite his words, there were no bite behind them. By now, I'd seen Clay and Abby together often enough, and I knew he was absolutely crazy about her.

They accepted one another, faults and all, and embraced their differences.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. “Do you mind if I ask what the age difference is between you and Abby?”

His golden eyes flicked back to mine. “About seven years. Probably just a little more than you and your girl.”

An itchy sensation formed between my shoulder blades and crawled up the back of my neck under his penetrating stare. “Emery and I aren’t dating. She’s just staying with me for a while.”

He studied me for another moment before turning his gaze back to the computer screen. I breathed out through my nose, both relieved and disappointed that the conversation was over. But Clay surprised me. “If you’re worried about the age gap, don’t. She seems crazy about you.”

My heart ricocheted off my rib cage as my breath halted in my lungs. Was she really? Clay didn’t offer anything else, and I didn’t either. He’d certainly given me something to think about, though.

On screen, Abby took her last shot and missed. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse and almost immediately, it slipped from her fingers and hit the floor at her feet. One of the men who’d been waiting his turn stooped to pick them up for her. Abby smiled at him as she reached out to take the pack from his fingers. But the man didn’t let go. Instead, he gave a little tug, pulling Abby closer to him.

Clay shot straight up in his chair, a low growl rumbling up his throat. “Relax,” I murmured quietly.

Abby tipped her head to one side, teasing smile in place as the man leaned even closer and spoke into her ear. Placing one hand on her lower back, he gestured toward the door, then smoothly maneuvered her out of the room.

Con was still at the pool table, but Blake was seated at a table in the corner, and he had a vantage point of the entire bar. The man urged Abby down the hallway toward the backdoor.

“Cole, they’re headed your way,” Blake said as he stood and fell in behind them.

Clay looked like he was ready to tear the guy apart—not that I could blame him. “Anyone have eyes on them yet?”

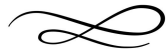
“10-4,” came Cole’s low response from where he was stationed behind the building, in a small spot where smokers gathered.

“Everyone in position?”

Each radioed in their confirmation, and adrenaline zinged through my veins. We’d lost video feed since only Con had been equipped with a camera, but I trusted them to make sure everything went smoothly.

A full minute passed in tense silence, then all hell broke loose.

Fifteen



DREW

CLAY ERUPTED FROM HIS CHAIR. “WHAT THE HELL IS GOING on?”

I held up one hand, listening intently to the cacophony of voices and scuffles on the other end. On screen, Con sank his last two shots, then nodded his thanks to his opponent and meandered out the door. Faces bobbed and weaved as he cut through the bar, exiting the front door to make his way around back.

It was too dark to see anything, but I could still hear the men speaking in the background. When their voices died down, I spoke into the comm. “Report.”

Vaughn came on a second later, sounding a little breathless. “Asshole tried to run, but Lawson took him down.”

Anticipation zinged through my veins. Running at the sight of an officer was almost a complete admission of his guilt. “Everything under control?”

“Yup. Mac is reading him his rights and loading him now. We’ll be at the station in fifteen.”

“We’ll meet you there.” I shut the lid of the computer and scooped up all the devices, then tipped my head toward Clay. “Let’s go.”

He threw an aggravated look my way. “What about Abby?”

“The guys will bring her into the station and we’ll meet her there.”

Relief and worry warred in his expression, but he fell into step next to me as we left Claire’s house. I took a second to lock up before cutting across the back yard and making my way to the cruiser where we’d parked it a couple streets over. Clay’s fingers drummed a nervous tattoo on the console, and I threw a little look his way. “I appreciate both of you doing this.”

“I just hope we don’t have to do it again,” came his frank reply.

“Me too.” I meant that with all sincerity. I hoped to God this was the guy we’d been looking for.

Ten minutes later we pulled into the station, and I immediately spotted Mac’s cruiser. The officers had already beat us here and hopefully had the suspect in the interview room. Clay threw the door open as soon as I pulled to a stop, and I bit back a smile despite the severity of the situation. “Let’s go find your girl.”

I buzzed myself in and found Vaughn behind the reception desk. “How did everything go?”

He sported a bruise high on his cheek, and the left side of his upper lip was bleeding. “Asshole got combative as soon as he saw us coming.”

I dipped my chin. “Make sure you get that taken care of.”

He nodded. “Will do.” He turned toward Clay. “Abby and the others are in the bullpen.”

Without waiting for me, Clay took off at a fast clip to find his fiancée. I had just rounded the doorway when I saw him wrap his arms around her waist and lift her right off her feet. A tiny arrow of something that felt a lot like jealousy sliced through my heart at the sight. They clung to each other, and my gaze slid to Con, who stood just a few feet away. He watched on, his expression a mixture of wry humor and mild disgust.

Forcing down the strange emotion that plagued me, I inclined my head toward Mac. “Wanna sit in?”

Though he had escaped the fight unscathed, I saw a glimmer of retribution in his eyes. “You bet.”

I led the way to the conference room and peered through the small window. Our suspect sat cuffed to the table, his expression infuriatingly blank. Mac passed me a folder, and I skimmed the contents.

Seth Stratton was thirty-four and currently resided in Mineral Forge, a small city just southwest of Cedar Springs. He worked at a local mill, and aside from a few minor traffic violations, his record was pretty clean.

My gaze strayed lower, and my pulse kicked up when I saw his next of kin listed at the bottom. Stratton’s mother, Muriel Lewis, lived in Mineral Forge as well, at the very same address as her son.

I snorted. “Guess that explains why he took the victims to their own homes.”

Of course, we couldn’t be certain the man seated at the table was, in fact, responsible. But we were going to find out.

Stratton didn’t so much as blink when I shoved open the door and stepped inside. “Mr. Stratton. Nice of you to join us this evening. Wasn’t sure we’d have the pleasure of your company. You know, with you running away from my officers and all.”

“They weren’t wearing uniforms.” He lifted one shoulder. “Wasn’t sure why they were chasing me.”

“Right.” I nodded. “And after they identified themselves? Still thought it was a good idea to try to bolt?”

“I was just trying to get out of the way. Didn’t know they were coming after me.”

“Didn’t you?” I lifted a brow his way. “I’d say they had a pretty good reason for intervening when you coerced the woman to go out back with you.”

That dead-eyed look didn't change. "Is flirting a crime now? Far as I can tell, the woman came with me of her own accord."

"Like all the others?" I tipped my head at him. "Tell me—how'd you drug them?"

His expression never wavered. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't." I flipped open the file folder and spread the images across the top of the metal table, then tapped Amanda's photo. "Do you recognize this woman?"

"Should I?" Stratton stared at me across the table as he dodged my question, answering it instead with a question of his own.

There was no doubt in my mind that he was practiced in effectively invading peoples' questions, and it had probably kept him out of more trouble than I could imagine. I slid Kristi's photo an inch closer to him. "How about this one?"

"Don't recall."

"Are you sure? Because I'm fairly certain you met her at Mason's last month."

He lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. "There are a lot of women in that bar. Can't say I keep track of them all, officer."

"Detective, actually."

"Detective, then." His dark eyes stared back at me, not a single iota of remorse or guilt to be found in the depths.

Despite the fury coursing through my body, I forced myself to stay calm. I saved Jessica's photo for last, dangling it in front of him by the tips of my forefinger and thumb. "This is Jessica. Don't suppose she looks familiar either, huh?"

He barely even glanced at the photo. "Sorry."

The single word escaped without an ounce of sincerity. I set the photo down in front of him and extracted one more

from the bottom of the file and slapped it on top of the other. “Recognize her now?”

The picture had been taken postmortem, several weeks after her death. His gaze dropped to the photo of Jessica and for the tiniest fraction of a second, he froze. *There*. There was something in the depths that reflected his acknowledgment. It wasn't guilt. It wasn't even sympathy. It was something far darker—a brief flash of pride, maybe, or excitement. It was enough to make my stomach turn.

I let out a slow breath through my nose before speaking again. “Mr. Stratton, do you have any distinctive characteristics—birthmarks, tattoos, anything of that nature?”

One dark brow ratcheted upward. “Why?”

“Well, you see, one of the women reported that the man had a tattoo.”

“Lots of people have tattoos.”

“Sure they do,” I agreed. “But not many have this one.”

I pulled out the composite drawing that had been supplied for us, and set it down in front of him. “Your mother's maiden name is Lewis, isn't it?”

He held my gaze, but the cocky confidence had leached away, leaving him looking incredibly unsure. Finally he responded. “I think I should call a lawyer.”

My muscles trembled with barely restrained rage, and I channeled it toward the man in front of me. “We can certainly do that. Or you could just make both our lives easy and show us. You're going to have to do it one way or another,” I stated plainly, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning back in the chair. “Either we do it now, or we keep you in lock-up overnight, call your lawyer in the morning, and do this all over again.”

He seemed to know he was caught, because he slowly stripped out of his blue flannel button up. He wore a plain white tee shirt underneath, and I gestured with my chin toward his sleeve. “Left bicep?”

Reluctantly, his movements jerky with anger, he peeled the sleeve of his shirt up just enough to reveal the tattoo. I glanced at Mac. “What do you think?”

“Looks identical to me.” I turned my gaze back to Stratton. “I think that answers our questions. Please stand up.”

He followed my instructions, his eyes burning with a cold hatred as Mac read him his rights, then cuffed him. I called two of our officers on night shift to load him up and transport him up to the county jail, then headed into the bullpen.

Several sets of eyes stared at me as I walked in, and I couldn't contain my grin. A round of congratulations rose on the air, everyone shaking hands and slapping backs. There would still be a trial, and a fuck ton of paperwork, but we'd found him. It was finally over.

Sixteen



EMERY

NONE OF THIS WAS WORKING OUT THE WAY I'D PLANNED. I SAT on the cool concrete floor of the basement, staring up at the cabinet. My arms and back ached, and my fingers were stiff from the constant pressure of wielding the sanding block. Despite spending almost all morning on it, I'd made almost no progress. The paint was stubbornly thick and uncooperative, and just the thought of removing all of it left me exhausted.

Of course, my tiredness could be attributed to the fact that I hadn't gotten a full night's sleep since I'd moved in. If I'd thought Drew was avoiding me before, now he was barely more than a specter. And last night... Tears pricked my eyes. He hadn't come home at all last night.

I knew he didn't want me here; that was painfully obvious. No matter what I did, he refused to acknowledge me. I turned my phone over in my hand, debating whether to call Izzy. The truth was, I was still upset by her betrayal. It had cut deep. She wasn't a malicious person by nature, I knew that, and I was certain that she had good intentions. But that didn't change the fact that she'd lied to me and deceived Drew. We hadn't spoken since I moved in, and it was tearing a hole in my chest. We'd never gone this long without talking before.

Part of me wanted to text her, to ask her what the hell she'd been thinking, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It Wouldn't fix anything. I needed to figure this out on my own. I needed to focus on my immediate problem, which was finding

a new place to live. Which meant I needed to pick up as many shifts as I could, and continue to look for a second job. But that would mean taking time away from working on the cabinet, and if I didn't finish the restoration, I wouldn't get money from Grace. I was damned if I did, damned if I didn't. The situation felt hopeless.

The numbers on the clock rolled over, revealing a new minute, and I sighed. I had a shift at the diner this afternoon and though I didn't need to be there for an hour and a half, it wasn't like I was accomplishing anything at the moment anyway. Might as well get ready for work.

I trudged up the stairs, completely unsurprised when silence greeted me in the house. Drew might be absent, and it was lonely sometimes, but it was still far better than being at home with Alan. Just the thought of his beady eyes leering at me sent goosebumps sweeping over my skin. I couldn't go back home even if I wanted to. I needed to stay here. Drew's reticence might make for an uncomfortable living arrangement, but it was better than locking my door every night wondering if Alan would try to slip into my room again.

I didn't bother to look for Drew's car as I passed through the living room and made my way upstairs to the bathroom. The soft creak of floorboards had woken me in the middle of the night—or morning, really, since it was almost four o'clock when he finally came home. I'd listened intently as he made his way down the hall to his room, his footsteps heavy and slow, then finally closed his door with a quiet click. I hadn't seen him since. As soon as I woke up I'd come down to the basement to work on the cabinet. It was stupid, but I couldn't help the disappointment and hurt that lingered. Everything was such a mess. I had no idea what to do about Izzy's interference, and this whole situation was a wreck.

A sigh filtered from my lips as I stripped off my clothes and stepped into the shower. The warm water helped to soothe my muscles, but my mind still raced. I hated feeling in limbo, not knowing where I stood. It would be so much better if I could just address it with Drew head-on, but he avoided me at every turn. I knew I should be grateful that he seemed to just

let things go on as they were, but the utter lack of communication was stressing me out.

I flipped off the water and let the water run off my body for a second before reaching for my towel. I clasped at the bar but my fingers found only air. I peeked around the shower curtain and barely held back a little groan. Damn it. After I'd washed the laundry earlier, I'd forgotten to replace my towel. I shook the excess water from my feet before stepping onto the bath mat in front of the tub. Well, I could either pull on my dirty clothes—not the best option—or grab a fresh towel from the linen closet in the hallway.

I stared at the pile of dirt-spattered clothes discarded on the floor at my feet and made a split-second decision. I was getting worked up over nothing. Drew was probably either still asleep or had left again for work already. Carefully, I tiptoed across the small bathroom and twisted the handle to open the door. Throwing a quick glance around, I checked up and down the empty hallway before venturing out of the bathroom.

Goosebumps broke out over my skin, and water pooled on the wood floor as it dripped steadily from the ends of my hair. I yanked open the linen closet and grabbed a towel, then quickly wrapped it around me. I would clean up the trail of water droplets once I was dressed. Eyes on the floor, dodging the tiny pools so I wouldn't slip, I darted toward my room. My momentum was abruptly brought to a halt, and the towel slipped from my fingers when I slammed into a hard, warm body.

Seventeen



DREW

“SHIT!”

Emery’s tiny body slammed into me, and I automatically wrapped my arms around her torso to steady her. My fingers slid over hot, wet flesh, and I recoiled. Holy Jesus. She was naked.

“Why the fuck are you naked?” Grabbing her biceps, I shoved her away before I’d fully considered what I was doing.

Emery let out a startled yelp and her arms windmilled as she fought to regain her balance. One foot slid out from under her, sending her crashing to the ground. I heard a hard *thunk* as her elbow hit the floor and her head snapped backward.

“Ow!”

“Fuck!” I lunged forward, dropping to my knees next to her. “Are you okay?”

I’d just stepped out of my room and I hadn’t gotten more than a glimpse of her when she barreled into me. The sight of her now stunned me momentarily, and protective instincts warred with desire as my eyes roved her naked body. She had curves in all the right places, from her rounded hips to her pretty, high breasts tipped with soft pink nipples.

Shit.

Forcing my gaze upward, I focused on her face as Emery struggled to a sitting position, her elbow cradled against her chest. Red flamed over her face and neck as she fought to cover herself from my view. “I’m fine. I’m sorry, I—”

“It was my fault. Come here.”

My gaze landed on the towel that lay twisted beneath her. I assumed it had fallen during the scuffle, and I folded it around her as best I could, then looped her good arm around my neck. Sliding one hand around her back, the other under her knees, I carefully stood. I clenched my teeth, trying to focus on anything other than how fucking good she felt. Her body was sleek and slim, sensually soft. As I moved toward the bedroom, I was acutely aware of the way she curled into me, her breast rubbing against my chest.

I settled her on the edge of her bed, and a bolt of lust shot straight to my groin at the sight of her naked, damp flesh. Christ, she was gorgeous. It wasn’t the first time I’d noticed, but damn... It was a testament to my strength that I hadn’t pinned her to the bed already so I could run my mouth over every inch of her.

“You okay?” I flicked a glance at the red spot on her elbow before meeting her gaze.

She dropped her arm to her side and offered me a little smile. “Just a bump. No big deal.”

My gaze skimmed upward. “Is your head okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Our eyes locked and held for several seconds. Neither of us moved. I didn’t even breathe. The moment was broken when a bead of water escaped the ends of her hair and landed with a splash on her shoulder, diverting my attention.

The tiny rivulets slithered across her flesh, and my breath caught as I watched one slip from her collarbone. It descended down her sternum, between the valley of her breasts, then lower until it was finally absorbed into the fabric wound around her torso. Grasping a corner of the towel, I ran the fabric over her body, wiping away the droplets of water. Her

chest rose and fell on a broken breath, and the sound cracked something open inside of me. She was just as affected by me as I was by her.

I carefully wrung the water from her hair, then smoothed it away from her face. Tentatively I ran my fingertips over her forehead, acutely aware of those giant violet eyes locked on me. Her skin was so soft, so smooth, and I couldn't help myself as I trailed my fingers along her temple, across her jaw. I continued lower, tracing the gentle slope of her neck, over her collarbone to the curve of her bare shoulder.

I'd never considered shoulders to be erotic before, but I was quickly finding that everything about Emery was different; everything about her fascinated me. My gaze slid upward, and it felt like I'd been kicked in the chest when her eyes collided with mine.

I cupped her face in my hands and stroked her cheeks, just staring at her as she stared back at me. I didn't say a single word, afraid to break the moment. Desire crackled in the silence between us, hot and potent. Her pupils widened as I cradled her head and slowly brushed the pads of my thumbs across her cheeks.

I wanted to spread her out on the bed, kiss her everywhere from the soles of her tiny feet to the tips of her pretty breasts. I wanted to pull the towel away and explore every inch of her body, lick up every droplet of water that clung to her skin, then delve lower and explore the essence between her legs.

A soft sigh filtered from her lips as she swayed toward me. Threading one hand into her damp hair, I tipped her head so she was looking at me. Her eyes were twin pools of desire, and electricity zipped along my nerve endings. Lowering my head, I pressed my lips to hers. Soft at first, then more demanding as her scent and taste cascaded over me.

The force of the kiss hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. It was a head-fucking mixture of sin and sweetness, and everything around me dimmed until all I could see, all I could feel, was Emery. Sliding my tongue past the seam of her lips, I

probed deeper. Her mouth parted, allowing me entrance, and I delved into the hot cavern, reveling in the sensation.

It was better than anything I'd ever experienced. I couldn't remember a kiss ever feeling this way before. It was potent, all-consuming, stealing my senses and leaving me reeling. I felt off-balance, like my whole world had been knocked off-kilter, but at the same time, nothing had felt more right.

There were so many things I wanted to do to her—do with her—but something tugged at the periphery of my brain. I pushed through the fog of desire, blinking back to reality and trying to figure out what my mind was trying to tell me. She'd just come out of the bathroom when I ran into her—literally—so it stood to reason that she'd been getting ready to go somewhere.

Reluctantly I pulled back, dropping a trail of soft kisses over her cheek and temple before brushing the tip of my nose against hers. “You going to work?”

My voice was low and guttural, drenched with need, and she nodded haltingly. Damn. It was probably a good thing, because without the interruption, I wouldn't have hesitated to lay her back on the bed and take her hard and fast, driven by the sexual tension pulsing between us. But as tempting as that was, I wanted our first time to be special—not just a quick fuck before she had to run in to work.

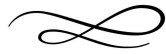
Though she'd been like a member of the family for years, there was still so much I didn't know about Emery. I wanted to delve deeper into what made her tick. I wanted to win her heart, then claim her for myself. I breathed her in, then reluctantly released her, eyes locked on hers, the tension between us ratcheting up to almost impossible levels.

Leaning in, I placed a whisper-soft kiss on her forehead, then straightened. My restraint was rapidly wearing thin, and I had to get the hell out of here while my—mostly—good intentions were still intact.

Eyes locked on hers, I slowly backed away. At the door, I paused for a long moment, wanting to say a thousand things but finding all of them inadequate. With one last long look I

closed the door behind me. It was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do.

Eighteen



EMERY

THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND DREW WITH A SOFT CLICK THAT sounded like a gunshot in the quiet stillness of the room. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. I felt frozen in place, my pulse thundering wildly out of control as I stared at the slab of wood between us. The room held a mystical quality like time had stopped, and I blinked dazedly, still not quite believing what had just happened. I couldn't be certain I hadn't dreamed all of it. Maybe I'd knocked myself out when I fell and imagined everything. I lightly pinched my forearm and jumped a little at the jolt of pain. Not a dream, then.

I fell back on the bed and stared blindly at the ceiling as a huge breath rushed from my lungs. My pulse refused to slow and I could feel every heavy thrum of my heartbeat echoing in my ears. I pressed one hand to my chest like the touch could physically slow its rapid pace. I massaged the spot, then dragged my fingers upward to my collarbone, tracing the path that Drew had drawn along my skin just a few moments ago. My nerve endings still blazed, and I allowed my hands to drop to the bed.

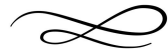
Holy shit. He'd kissed me. The way his gaze had slid over every single inch of me from head to toe was a feeling I would remember for the rest of my life. He'd stared at me like he wanted to devour me, those green eyes deep and dark with lust and a hunger I'd never seen before. It set my soul on fire, igniting the flame low in my belly.

My core ached, and I pressed my legs together in an attempt to relieve the pressure. It only made it worse. I wanted Drew so damn much, and the desire I felt for him settled deep in the marrow of my bones. I wanted his hands on me, his lips on mine. I hadn't expected the kiss. It had started soft and tender, the most heartbreakingly sweet gesture I'd ever experienced. Then it had morphed, swamping my senses as his mouth claimed mine. Never had a man turned me on the way Drew did. There was just something about him that drew me in like a magnet to steel, an earthy attraction that was centuries in the making.

A smile started slow, then grew. Abby had been correct; he'd finally noticed me. Just when I was ready to give up, he'd finally acknowledged me. And, God, it felt so good. The kiss, of course, was amazing. But more powerful than that was the way he looked at me—really looked at me—and I knew he'd finally seen the real me. There was a dawning realization in his gaze like the veil had been ripped away and there was no longer anything between us. The age difference didn't matter, or even the fact that I was friends with Izzy. In place of the young girl he'd known before, he'd seen a woman. Finally.

I rolled from the bed, a bounce in my step as I strode toward the closet and pulled my uniform from its hanger. It didn't matter that he hadn't said anything; it was enough for now. And I couldn't wait to see what happened next.

Nineteen



DREW

HAPPINESS UNFURLED IN MY CHEST AS I STEPPED INTO THE kitchen and saw Emery standing in front of the sink. I hadn't seen her since yesterday's incident, and I was more than a little nervous. I had no idea what was going through her mind right now. Part of me was concerned that what I'd done was out of line. She was younger than me by several years, and completely at my mercy here.

Over the past couple of weeks, she'd done her best to fade into the background. Because she didn't want to be around me, or because she thought that's what I wanted? I couldn't tell. She hadn't pushed me away yesterday, though, so that was a good sign. I just hoped it was because she was attracted to me, too, and not because she felt some kind of weird obligation. The last thing I wanted was to make her uncomfortable and have her leave, especially now that I'd gotten a taste of her.

That kiss had haunted me all night long. It was like the floor had opened up at my feet, swallowing me whole until it was all I could think about. She was so soft and sweet, so utterly perfect, and I couldn't wait to do it again. But first I needed to get inside her head, figure out exactly what she wanted.

Her back was to me as she vigorously scrubbed her hands, and a tiny smile curled my lips. She'd been working on that cabinet all morning; part of me wanted to ask how everything was going, but I didn't want to invade her space. She'd been

awfully private about it, and I didn't want to push her beyond her comfort zone. The last thing I wanted to do was make her question herself. She'd been doing tons of research and spent every free moment slaving over it down in the basement.

I watched as Emery flipped off the faucet then leaned against the counter, her chin drooping to her chest. Her shoulders shook gently and the smile slipped from my face. "Emery?"

Her body went rigid. "Hey."

She reached for a towel to dry her hands but didn't look at me. "Everything okay?"

"Of course," she responded, but her tone lacked its usual enthusiasm. I hesitated, debating what to do. I didn't want to step on her toes, but I couldn't stand to see her so upset. "Is there anything I can help with?"

She tossed the towel down on the counter then shook her head, her gaze still fixed on some far-off spot as she stared out the window.

"Emery." I slowly ventured closer until I was just a few feet away, then leaned a hip against the counter. The profile of her pretty face showed evidence of tear stains cutting down her cheeks, and the sight tore at my heart. I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to it.

"I can't do this," she admitted on a broken whisper.

"Can't do what?" I asked softly.

"That stupid cabinet." She made an agitated gesture with one hand. "I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm afraid I'm going to ruin it. No matter what I do, it doesn't work. Grace is paying me to fix this up for her. What will she say when she finds out I've gotten literally nothing accomplished?"

Another tear squeezed from the corner of her eye and slipped down her cheek. I swiped the towel off the counter, then lightly grasped her wrist in my free hand and turned her toward me. "First of all..." I swiped at the moisture with the towel. "You can do this. You just need a little practice. No one is good at anything their first time. Second of all, Grace won't

be upset with you. I promise,” I added when her lips parted to speak. “We’re going to figure out how to fix this. Trust me.”

Emery gave a little nod, and I tossed the towel down. “Come on. Show me what you’ve done so far.”

A dubious look crossed her face. “Nothing,” she muttered miserably.

I lightly squeezed her wrist. “That’s not true,” I replied. “Let’s go take a look.”

With a sigh, Emery led the way to the basement, then flipped on the light and trudged downstairs. “There you go.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the ground while I studied the cabinet. She wasn’t wrong. Despite the amount of time she’d spent on it, there didn’t appear to be much progress. I ventured closer and ran my fingers over a spot along the side where the first layer of paint had been sanded away. Discarded sanding pads littered the floor at my feet. There had to be two dozen of them, yet she’d barely broken through the first layer of lacquer.

I glanced over at Emery. “Are you trying to sand all of this by hand?”

She nodded. “That’s what the directions said to do.”

“You’re going to kill yourself trying to do that.” I used a thumbnail to scrape at some of the loose paint. “There has to be at least four layers of paint on this thing. We need to strip it all off and start fresh.”

“But won’t that damage the wood?”

“We’ll find something that’s not too harsh,” I responded. “But the first thing we have to do is get all this paint off. There’s no way you’re going to do it by sanding it off, especially by hand.”

“What do I need?” Her eyes met mine, and I felt the world shift as I tumbled into the vulnerable violet depths.

Me. She needed me.

I began to make a mental list in my head as I headed for the stairs. “We need to hit the hardware store. The sooner we leave the sooner we can get this stuff off.”

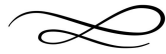
“Um...”

I turned to her when she remained frozen in place. I wasn’t entirely sure when or why I’d decided to jump head first into the project with her, but I’d already come this far. “Don’t you want to see what it looks like without all that paint on it?”

That got her moving. Emery fell into step behind me as I headed upstairs and grabbed my keys, then headed for the car. At the store, I began to pile items in the cart. “You’re going to want these.” I handed her a set of plastic scrapers, along with a small wire brush to remove the paint from the delicate scrollwork.

She accepted them looking more than a little dazed. I couldn’t deny that I was starting to look forward to this; I wanted to spend more time with Emery, wanted to know everything about her. And what better way than to bond over the restoration project? I could teach her everything she ever needed to know—in so many ways.

Twenty



EMERY

THE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF MY NECK LIFTED, SENDING A warning to my brain only seconds before I felt a light touch brush against my shoulder.

“You have a regular at table eight,” Lynne said from my left.

Replacing the coffee carafe on the burner, I tossed a quick glance around the room. My heart jumped into my throat when my gaze clashed almost immediately with Drew’s. I managed a shaky smile as I nodded at Lynne. “Thank you.”

Though Drew and I had spent a good portion of the past two days together, we still hadn’t spoken to one another about what had transpired in the hallway. He’d mentioned that the case he’d been working on had wrapped up and that he was taking a break, but he didn’t offer anything more than that. Not one to be idle, he’d thrown himself into helping me with the cabinet, and we’d made a huge amount of progress already.

I appreciated his help, but the whole thing left me feeling confused. It seemed like everything between us had shifted, though I wasn’t entirely sure where to go from here. I couldn’t figure out exactly what he wanted. After the way he’d touched me, held me close, I was almost certain he wanted me, too, and it had filled me to nearly bursting with hope. Was he as attracted to me the way I was to him, or did he just want to be friends? I couldn’t tell.

I didn't want to look needy or insecure, so I hadn't brought it up, either. If all he wanted was to live in harmony as roommates, it would break my heart, but at least I wouldn't look like a fool by throwing myself at him. It was bad enough that I had to deal with the uncertainty at home each day, and work was a brief reprieve from the turmoil. Seeing him here was like having the ground ripped from beneath my feet. The sight of him was as welcome as it was unsettling, and a single question haunted me as I stared at him from across the room—why was he here?

With my heart pounding steadily against my rib cage, I cut across the dining room to where Drew sat as his usual booth in the corner. Never tearing his gaze from mine, he offered a little smile as I approached, watching me like a hawk the entire time. My body felt entirely too hot, like I might burst into flame at any moment. I stopped awkwardly aside the table and swallowed hard. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." He draped one arm over the back of the booth as he studied me. "Have you been busy tonight?"

I glanced around and lifted one shoulder. "You know how it is. We get a steady stream, then it clears out."

He nodded a little, still watching me, and I shifted uncomfortably. "Can I get you something?"

One corner of his mouth kicked up in a little smirk that set my blood on fire. "I think you can."

Heat swept over me from head to toe. Did he mean that the way it sounded? Deciding to play it cool, I battled my emotions down and pulled my notepad from my apron. "We have the roasted chicken on special tonight."

"Breasts or thighs?" Drew's eyes sparkled with mischief, and my cheeks blazed red.

It hit me then, all at once. He was flirting with me. Like, really flirting with me. I'd waited so long for this moment, yet at the same time my head spun with the abrupt change between us. I couldn't deny that I loved the feeling, though,

and I wanted more of it. I wanted *him*. “Depends what you like,” I replied saucily.

His eyes dropped, leisurely roaming all over my torso before slowly making their way back up to mine. “I like it all.”

Pleasure tingled low in my belly, then swelled until I could barely contain it. I dropped my chin to hide the smile that burst across my lips. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” His eyes bore into mine. “Dessert. Something sweet.”

My breathing turned shallow as I stared back at him, and I managed a tiny nod. “I think I can find something for you.”

“I know you can.”

We stayed that way for several seconds, our eyes locked, a haze of sexual tension crackling between us, until the sound of my name being called jolted me from the trance. I threw a look over my shoulder at the other customer and smiled my acknowledgment.

My heart beat rapidly as I turned to Drew and fell back a step. “I have to...”

I hitched one thumb over my shoulder, and Drew smiled. “I’ll be right here.”

I felt like I was floating on air as I circulated around the room after putting in his order. I pinched myself once just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. This whole thing felt so surreal. I still wasn’t entirely sure what had brought him in tonight, or what would happen a day or a week from now, but the desire that sparked to life between us was palpable.

When Drew’s food came up, I delivered it to his table and refilled his glass of tea. “Anything else?”

He shook his head. “Not at the moment.” He threw a quick glance around the room which had rapidly emptied after the dinner rush. “What time do you get off tonight?”

“Seven.” I quickly check the clock. “I’ll probably head out once you’re done.”

“Good.” He gave a single nod. “I’ll walk you out.”

Happiness filled my chest. “That would be great, thanks.”

I spent the last half hour of my shift checking on customers, making sure everything was settled before I headed out. At seven o’clock on the dot, Drew slid from the booth and made his way toward the cash register. I rang up his order and then passed him his change.

His green gaze swept over me. “Are you ready?”

“Yep. Let me grab my things.” All of my other customers were gone, so I quickly replaced my apron and clocked out, then grabbed my belongings from the staff lounge.

Drew stood just outside the front door, and he sent a little smile my way when I stepped onto the sidewalk. He fell into step next to me as I made my way toward my car, then he held the door and waited for me to climb inside.

I started the engine then rolled the window down, and he rested one elbow on the sill. “Are you headed straight home?”

“Actually, there are a couple things at my mom’s house that I wanted to grab.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I opened my mouth, tempted to tell him yes. I had no desire to see Alan again, but my mom should be home from work by now. Instead, I pasted on a smile and shook my head. “I’ll be okay, thanks.”

Drew tipped his head my way. “All right. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay.” I smiled. “See you soon.”

Drew took a couple steps away from the car, waiting until I had shifted into gear before lifting a hand in a little wave. I returned the gesture and turned onto the main drag, heading toward my mom’s house.

It felt like a thousand butterflies battered the inside of my stomach, turning my body to mush. I still felt unbalanced. Things between Drew and me had changed so much over the

past twenty-four hours that I was struggling to keep up with it. Maybe he'd been fighting his feelings all along.

I remembered the feel of his hands and lips skimming over my face the other day, holding me securely as his mouth trailed kisses from my forehead down to my cheek. I wanted to feel that again. I wanted him to touch and kiss me, wanted him to take me to bed. I wanted all of that and more.

Twenty-One



DREW

SOMETHING FELT OFF. HER LIPS HAD PARTED LIKE SHE'D wanted to say something, but what, I had no idea. Immediately her face cleared, replaced by her typical bright and sunny smile. I replayed the memory over and over, yet I couldn't figure out exactly what bothered me about it. Something about her going home. Everything about her posture and expression had changed when she'd mentioned going back to her mom's house.

I didn't know much about her home life. Admittedly, I'd avoided her as much as possible for the two weeks she'd been living with me, and I hadn't wanted to know. But now... now I did. Now I wanted to know everything there was to know about Emery Harcourt, and luckily, I knew exactly who to ask.

I pulled to a stop in my driveway then dug my phone from my back pocket. I glanced up at the house in front of me as I waited for the call to connect. It seemed dark and uninviting without Emery, and I didn't even want to venture inside without her.

On the fourth ring, my sister answered, her tone wary. "What's up?"

"Hey, Iz. What are you into?"

"Nothing, why?"

The way she drew out the word, drenched in suspicion and curiosity, made me roll my eyes. “I’m not upset with you,” I said. “About the situation with Emery, I mean.”

We hadn’t talked about it for the past couple of weeks, and I knew I needed to apologize. “Sorry I was such a dick about it. I’ve been stressed and it just all hit at a bad time.”

“It’s fine,” Izzy replied, her voice soft. “Sorry I sprang it on you. I just figured it was the only way you’d agree.”

The hell of it was, she was right. I never would have given the green light. Emery was too damn tempting for her own good. I didn’t know what was going to happen between Emery and me, but I knew I didn’t want her anywhere else. She’d flirted back at the diner, those pretty eyes of hers flickering coyly, and I’d wanted to drag her into my lap, kiss her again the way I had two days ago.

I couldn’t get the taste and smell of her out of my mind, and I couldn’t wait to do it again. I’d been on my best behavior, intent on helping her with the restoration of the cabinet and learning everything about her that she offered up. I wanted her to know that it wasn’t just sex I wanted from her. It was that, too, of course, but there was more. Emery had no doubt seen the women come in and out of my life before, none of them sticking around for more than a couple of months at a time. I didn’t want her comparing herself to them, because there was nothing remotely similar about the situation.

I’d seen her peeking at me occasionally over the last couple of days, and I had to admit—I liked it. I liked helping her, I liked the way she stared when she thought I wasn’t looking. Because I did the same thing. I knew she was probably wondering what would happen next, but she hadn’t brought it up. I knew I should communicate my intentions to her, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I kept to safe topics, determined to take things slow. I wanted her to see that I truly valued her not only as a potential lover, but as a friend, too. I wanted to win Emery’s trust, as well as her heart. She deserved that, even if the way we came together was unconventional at best.

I still couldn't help but wonder about my sister's motives. Had she been trying to help a friend, or was there an ulterior motive for moving Emery into my house? How would she feel about me dating her best friend? I decided to segue into the topic.

"Emery seems to be settling in at the house okay."

"Good, I hoped she would. How do you feel about it?"

There was something cagey in her tone, and I grinned. Little brat knew exactly what she was doing, but hell if I was going to give her the satisfaction of knowing she was right. "She keeps to herself, so she hasn't been any trouble."

"Oh." Her tone was flat, and I could sense her expression falling on the other end. "Well... That's good. I guess."

I bit back a laugh at the pout I heard in her voice. "I was wondering though, do you know how long she'll be around?"

"No." Izzy sighed. "I know she's working as much as she can to save up money to get her own place. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Are you seeing someone?"

There was an edge of protectiveness to her words, and I was incredibly grateful that she cared so much about Emery. "Not yet," I hedged. "I was just wondering."

"I don't know." Izzy paused. "She really hates it at home, though."

That piqued my interest. "Do you know why?"

"She never talks about it, but I think her mom's boyfriend makes her uncomfortable."

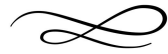
I was instantly on alert, adrenaline kicking my pulse into overdrive. "Has he hurt her?"

"I don't think so. It's just... I'm not sure," my sister replied slowly. "It's just this vibe I get. He's kind of strange, and I wouldn't trust him with her."

I swallowed hard, my hand automatically moving to the keys in the ignition. “Iz? Something came up, I’ll have to call you back later.”

I ended the call as I started the engine, then headed toward Mrs. Harcourt’s place. The itchy sensation tickling the back of my neck could be nothing. But I wasn’t going to risk it.

Twenty-Two



EMERY

MY HEART THUNDERED IN MY CHEST, AND MY PALMS WERE damp with sweat as I unlocked the house and stepped inside. Part of me wished I'd asked Drew to come with me. It was irrational, I knew, but being back here gave me the creeps. It brought back all the memories of Alan's unwanted advances, and a shudder rippled down my spine. Thank God I wouldn't be here long. I just wanted to get my things and get back to Drew's.

Dropping my purse and keys on the counter, I swept my gaze over the house. Everything was quiet and dark, and both Alan's and my mom's cars were missing, both of them probably still at work. A sigh filtered from my lips and I pressed one hand to my chest to slow the rapid beat of my heart. I was alone.

Cutting across the room, I moved down the hall to my bedroom. When I'd packed my things to go to Drew's, I had taken only what I needed. Pictures and memorabilia were still plastered all over the walls and dresser as if I'd never left. I traced a picture of Izzy and me taken several years ago. When I finally got my own place I would come back for all of these. For now though I just needed to get the rest of my supplies and get out.

Slipping the duffel off my shoulder, I dropped it on my bed then began to gather the rest of my things. It took only a few minutes to clear out my dresser and the remaining items in my

closet. There were several books and magazines on DIY projects that I wanted to take with me, so I gathered them, stacking them in my arms. The one on top slipped, landing on the floor at my feet with a soft thud.

“Shit.” I lowered myself to a crouch, using my fingertips to draw the book closer, then replaced it on the top of the pile. My balance wavered as I straightened, and I bumped into something behind me.

A gasp flew from my throat when a pair of hands landed on my hips. All of a sudden the air was sucked out of the room. My breath turned shallow and my heart raced as Alan’s putrid breath wafted over my cheek.

“Haven’t seen you in a while.”

I cleared my throat. “I wanted to give you and mom some space. She should be home soon, right? I—”

His fingers tightened on my waist. “She’s working late. Someone called off.” His cheek brushed mine, and bile rose in the back of my throat. “Just you and me tonight.”

A tremble started low, then worked its way up from my toes, goosebumps speeding along my flesh like wildfire. “I really have to go.”

“Hmmm...” Alan hummed a little sound as he skated one hand along my rib cage until it rested just beneath my breast. I sucked in a breath as he pressed his body to mine. “No, I don’t think so. We’re just getting started, Emmy.”

The hand on my ribs roughly clasped my breast, and I dropped the books as he slammed his hips into me from behind. The motion sent me pitching forward, and I shot out my hands, catching myself on the bed at the last moment. I clawed at the comforter, grasping for purchase, but it slipped away in a waterfall of material. Alan followed me down, pinning me to the bed. His lips landed on my neck in a series of wet, sloppy losses, and anxiety ratcheted through me as his free hand slid forward and between my legs.

“Alan, don’t,” I begged. “Please stop.”

His body vibrated on a chuckle, the rough sound grating to my ears. “Think you’re too good for me?”

“I’m living with a police officer,” I warned, desperate to find something that would stop him.

Alan only laughed. “Where’s your police officer now?”

My upper body was pinned to the mattress, and I kicked my feet in an attempt to dislodge him. My bottom wiggled against his groin, and horror washed over me as he groaned, his hard shaft swelling where it pressed against me.

“I knew it would be good with you.” Alan tugged his hand free from where he clutched my breast and tore at the waistband of my pants.

“Alan, no! Please, God... Please stop!” My skin chafed as he yanked on the material until the upper half of my bottom was bared to him. I drove my elbow backward, but my limited range of motion prevented me from putting any power behind it.

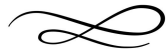
Alan grasped my hands and shoved them in front of me, holding tightly to them as he ground himself against me. “Love when you get all rowdy.”

His vile words made me want to vomit, and shame washed over me. But I refused to go down without a fight. I thrashed wildly, determined to get away. “Stop!” I screamed as loud as I could, and Alan slapped a palm over my mouth.

“Shut your fucking mouth!”

Tears crept into my eyes as he levered more of his weight over me. Like this I felt vulnerable. Helpless. And there was no way out.

Twenty-Three



DREW

I SPOTTED EMERY'S CAR PARKED AT THE CURB AS SOON AS I turned onto the street, and I pulled to a stop behind it. A second vehicle, a small pickup truck, sat in the driveway, and the lights on the bottom floor of the house blazed brightly.

I sat in silence for a moment, just watching. The feeling I'd had on the way over hadn't abated, and I was growing more anxious with every passing second. It had been almost half an hour since Emery left the diner. She said she only needed to grab a few things; what was taking so long?

I glanced around as I climbed from the car, unable to sit still any longer. I headed up the sidewalk to the front door, my gaze roving the side of the house for a doorbell. When I couldn't find one, I knocked lightly. Several seconds passed without a sound, and I knocked again. Still nothing.

I hopped off the small stoop and wedged myself between the small, overgrown hedges to peer through the window. Inside there was no movement, and I let out a little growl. Where the hell was she? I extricated myself from the branches of the hedges that clutched at my shirt, then cut around to the back of the house.

The door opened into the kitchen and the blinds were open, affording me a view inside. Emery's purse sat on the kitchen counter next to her keys. But she was nowhere in sight. I knocked rapidly, pounding the side of my fist against the door.

Something was wrong; I could feel it. Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I stepped toward the car parked in the driveway.

On the other end of the phone, Mac greeted me. “Hey, Thorne. What’s up?”

“Hey.” I tossed another quick look at the house but I saw no movement inside. “Need you to run a plate for me. Got a car that’s parked in front of a fire hydrant, and I just wanted to let him know.”

The lie slipped unrepentantly off my tongue. I was sure Mac wouldn’t say anything but I didn’t want to arouse suspicion if it was unwarranted.

“Plate number?”

I rattled it off then moved to the back door, hoping for a glimpse of Emery.

“Let’s see here.” Keys clicked in the background before he came back seconds later. “Registered to Alan Roddick.”

Shit. I tuned him out as he read off the rest of the details, my pulse thundering wildly. “Thanks, Mac. I’ll take care of it.”

I ended the call then shoved my phone into my back pocket. “Emery!”

I pounded on the door once more, louder and more forceful this time. “Emery!”

I kept it up, hammering on the door so loud I was shocked the neighbors didn’t come out to see what was happening. Abandoning the pretense of trying to be polite, I tried the knob. It refused to budge, and my heart lurched into my throat. I had to get in there. Stepping back, I shifted my weight and delivered a well-placed kick to the door just below the knob. The crack of wood filled the air as the door frame split but stayed intact. I kicked the door once more, and wood splintered as it flew open.

I cursed myself for leaving my pistol at home as I rushed inside, my gaze rapidly sweeping every corner of the room. A

high-pitched sound lilted on the air, and my blood ran cold as it was almost immediately muffled. As quickly and silently as possible I darted through the bottom floor of the house, then took the stairs two at a time. Frantically I glanced around, listening again for the sound. A stifled grunt followed by an anguished cry came from a room at the end of the hall, and I launched myself forward.

The door was partially closed, obscuring my view, and I braced myself for whatever I might find inside. The sight hit me like a brick to the chest, my blood boiling as fury like I'd never known swept over me. Emery clawed at the mattress, her tiny body pinned to the bed by a man's much larger form.

An unholy sound bellowed up from my throat as I grabbed him by the back of the shirt and hauled him off her. He let out a startled cry as he slammed into the dresser behind us. "You motherfucker!"

Rage enveloped me as I leaped on him and drove my fist into his face. Then once more for good measure. I wanted to keep going; I wanted to fucking kill him. But I was bound by the law and I couldn't risk it. My body shook as I levered to my feet and stared at the piece of filth lying at my feet.

Blood trickled from his nose and mouth in thin rivulets, staining his teeth as he sneered at me. "Fuck you, pig. You can kiss your job goodbye."

"Your word against mine," I challenged. "You think anyone on the force will side with you? You forced yourself on a woman who didn't want it," I seethed. "That's sexual assault."

"Not if she wants it." He pushed to a sitting position. "Little slut was begging for it, walking around in those short ass shorts and tight jeans."

Fucker just didn't know when to quit. I dropped to a crouch next to him and pitched my tone low. "You touch her again—you even think anything inappropriate about her ever again—and I will kill you."

“Is that a threat, officer?” His smile held no warmth. “Nice to see police brutality is alive and well.”

I drew in a deep breath and pushed to my feet. He wasn't fucking worth it. The only thing that mattered was Emery. I turned to look at her. She stood next to the bed, arms wrapped around her waist, chin lowered until it almost grazed her chest.

“Emery.” I kept my voice low and controlled as I slowly closed the distance between us. She flinched when I wrapped a hand around her elbow, and I silently cursed as I dropped my hand away. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head emphatically, but I wasn't sure I believed her. “Come on.” I shouldered her bag and a handful of books that lay scattered on the floor. “Let's get your things and go home.”

I didn't touch her as we left the house. Once we were outside, I nodded to my car. “Get in. We'll have yours picked up later.”

She nodded once more as she silently slipped into the passenger seat. Using the key fob I popped the trunk and deposited her things inside, then climbed into the driver seat. My stomach felt like it was twisted into a knot and my heartbeat refused to slow the whole way home.

Emery didn't say a single word until we got inside. She paused near the living room, then shot a tentative look my way. “I'm going to shower.”

She turned away, but I caught up to her and lightly grasped her hand, urging her to look at me. I didn't want to ask, but I had to. “Emery.” She swallowed hard, her gaze fixed on my chest. “Did he...?”

She licked her lips then shook her head, seeming to read my mind. “No. He... tried. But you showed up before...”

Thank God. I couldn't help the relieved rush of air that burst from my lips as a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. Wrapping my arms around Emery's back, I pulled her into me and hugged her close. For a moment she resisted, holding herself rigidly away from me. By slow increments she began

to relax until she melted against me and threw her arms around my waist. Then the tears came.

I rubbed her back and soothed her with soft, nonsensical sounds, holding her tight as she let it all out. Her sobs tore at my heart, and I buried my face in her hair. “I’m so sorry.”

I apologized over and over. For allowing her to go by herself. For not getting there sooner. For not asking what was wrong in the first place. I didn’t know much time passed until she finally ran out of tears. Could have been ten minutes or an hour; I wasn’t sure.

Emery slowly extricated herself from my hold and swiped at the tears staining her cheeks. “Thank you. For...” Her gaze slid away.

I brushed one hand over her head, then cupped her chin in my palm. “What can I do?”

She shook her head, a tiny smile teasing the corners of her mouth. “Nothing. You already took care of it.”

Unable to let her go, overwhelmed by some unidentifiable emotion I didn’t dare examine, I framed her face in my hands. Her warmth seeped into my palms, helping to calm my riotous emotions and racing heart. Leaning in, I pressed my lips to her forehead. Then again. I wanted to keep kissing her, but I would be the worst kind of asshole to take advantage of her when she’d been assaulted barely an hour prior. Somehow I managed to rip myself away, and every muscle protested as I released her. “Go shower. Or take a bath and relax. I can get you a glass of wine, or—”

“Drew?” Giant eyes stared up at me, and she placed her hand lightly on my arm.

“Yeah?”

“I’m okay.” She squeezed my arm. “Thanks to you, he’s gone. I just feel... dirty. And I want to get rid of him.”

That I understood completely. I also could sense that she just needed some time alone, and as much as I hated it, I had to respect it. She’d been through too much tonight as it was; I

didn't need to make it worse. I pressed a soft kiss to her cheek.
"Just call me if you need anything."

Forcing my feet to move, I walked away knowing it was the right thing to do, yet hating every second of it.

Twenty-Four



EMERY

GOOSEBUMPS BROKE OVER MY SKIN AS ANOTHER SHUDDER rippled down my spine, and I sank deeper into the water. I couldn't get warm. And I couldn't stop the memory of Alan's hands raking over me from assaulting my senses. I could still feel him. Smell him. My stomach roiled, and I forced down the bile that crept into my throat. Though I tried to push it from my mind, it was too fresh. Too... shameful.

I was both incredibly grateful and humiliated that Drew had found me like that. On the one hand, he'd prevented Alan from raping me, and for that I was thankful. What would have happened if he'd shown up even ten minutes later? Or not at all? But on the flip side of that, I hated that Drew had seen me like that, with Alan's clammy hands holding me down, my bottom exposed as he fought to get my pants off.

Emotion clogged my throat, and tears sprang to my eyes once more. What would he think of me now? Deep down I understood that what had happened wasn't my fault, but I could only imagine the image was burned on Drew's brain. How could he ever want me after something like that? Afterward, when we got back to his place, he'd hugged me, held me tight. Like a friend. Or... a cop. He hadn't offered words of devotion or love, not that I expected any. But it was a hard pill to swallow. He'd kissed my forehead like a child and let me go. It wasn't that I craved intimacy so soon after what

had happened with Alan, but... some sign of affection deeper than friendship would have been nice.

I shouldn't be disappointed. He'd made his stance clear the other day when he'd walked away from me in the bedroom. He could have laid me back and taken me—hell, I wanted him to—but he hadn't. He'd given me the same look he had half an hour ago, then walked away. I was upset with myself for being disappointed, but I couldn't help it.

A soft triple knock on the doorway startled me from my introspection, and water sloshed against the side of the tub as I quickly sat up.

“Emery?”

My heart thudded hard in my chest. “Yeah?”

“Just wanted to check on you.” The knob turned and the door opened just a crack. “Do you need anything?”

I bit my lip as I wrapped my arms around my knees. I knew it was a terrible idea, but... “You can come in if you want.”

For a second, neither of us moved. I didn't even breathe. But then the door swung slowly inward, revealing Drew one heart-stopping inch at a time. “Hey.”

He offered a small smile as he ventured forward. “How are you—” He immediately cut off, second guessing his question as to how I was feeling. “I didn't hear any noise, so I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I nodded. “I'm fine, thanks.”

“Good.” He rocked back on his heels. “Well, then...”

I tipped my head. “You can, um... stay and talk. If you want,” I hastily added.

Looking relieved, Drew knelt on the floor and rested an elbow on the lip of the tub as he regarded me. His penetrating gaze saw too much, and I dropped my eyes to his chest. He'd changed out of his jeans and was now clad in a pair of gray sweats and a tight black tee shirt.

His soft voice broke the silence. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I swallowed hard. What could I say? Something niggled at the back of my brain. It had occurred to me before, but I hadn’t spent much time examining it. Now, though, I was curious. “How did you know about...” I swallowed and started over. “Why did you come?”

In my peripheral vision, I watched Drew shake his head. “I can’t explain it. I just... I wanted to ask you at the diner. Something seemed... off, I guess. I called Izzy and—”

At that, I snapped my head toward him. “Your sister knows?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I only asked why you needed a place to stay. She said you were looking to get out of there.”

I nodded slowly. “I hated it there. Ever since he started coming around... I could feel him watching me.”

“What about your mom?” he asked softly. “We should tell her.”

I raked my teeth over my lower lip as I shook my head. “She knows.”

Beside me Drew went utterly still. “You’ve talked to your mom about this before?”

My skin flushed hot with embarrassment, and I ducked my head. “She said I just wanted attention, that it was all in my head.”

Drew was quiet so long I thought I’d lost him. When I looked up, I froze at the sight of him. His expression was dark, the fire in his eyes fiercer than when we’d left Alan behind. My breath caught and I dropped my gaze back to my knees, a mixture of worry and fear spiraling through me.

Finally he spoke, his tone strained. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I’m sorry you had to see it,” I countered quietly.

“Emery.” His hand covered mine where it was wrapped around my knees. “That wasn’t your fault.”

When I stayed quiet, he lightly squeezed my fingers. “You understand that, right? You didn’t invite that—not any of it. And a real man would never take advantage of a woman. He’s a weak, pathetic excuse for a human being. A predator. Only he is responsible for his actions—not you.”

I knew it was true—I did. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that I in some way had caused this. Like none of this ever would have happened if I hadn’t gone there tonight. Almost as soon as the thought popped into my head, Drew spoke.

“He was just waiting for the right opportunity. If not tonight, it more than likely would have happened some other time. I’m glad I was there this time to stop him.”

I twisted my head to look at him, a strange feeling welling in my chest. “Me too.”

Drew tightened his hold on my hand, and I twined my fingers with his. His gaze dropped to where our hands were joined, then traveled over my knees and up my body. Heat enveloped me as I watched his gaze drag over my torso. I felt... empowered. Turned on. Desirable. I knew I shouldn’t, all things considered, but Drew wasn’t Alan. He would never hurt me. My breath came faster as his eyes, dark with lust, met mine. “I... I should get out.”

“Of course.” Drew stood, simultaneously pulling my towel from the rack and passing it to me. “I’ll just...” He jerked his head toward the doorway. “I’ll be in the living room if you need me.”

“Thanks.” I offered a small smile as he left the bathroom. Part of me wanted to tell him to stay. He’d looked at me with such potent desire that I could feel the effects of it deep down in my bones. He seemed as flustered as I felt, and I couldn’t help but wonder... Did he feel the same way? Did he want me the way I wanted him? Maybe I’d been mistaken earlier in thinking he was keeping his distance. Maybe he just needed some encouragement and a little push in the right direction.

Twenty-Five



DREW

I SCRUBBED MY HANDS OVER MY FACE, FIGHTING THE GROAN that threatened to burst from my throat. What the hell was I thinking? She'd been through hell tonight, yet I couldn't seem to stop myself from lusting over her. Back in the bathroom I wanted nothing more than to lift her from the bath, wrap her in my arms and cuddle her close. Christ. I needed to stop. I needed space. I needed—

“Hey.”

The sound of Emery's soft voice made me jump guiltily, and I whirled toward her. “Hey.” I pressed my heels into the floor, tamping down on my urge to go to her.

“Want to watch a movie or something?”

My brows drew together, and I slanted a quick look at the clock. It was already almost eleven. I turned back to Emery, whose cheeks burned brightly.

“Never mind.” She fell back a step. “I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking, and—”

“No.” I cut her off with a shake of my head. The last thing I wanted was for her to pull away from me. “A movie sounds perfect.”

No doubt she was still rattled and needed some time to decompress. And I wanted to be with her, even if it was just to

provide a shoulder to lean on. “Your choice. I’ll make popcorn.”

I didn’t give a damn about the popcorn, but I needed a few extra minutes to get my head on straight. Once it was done I carried it to the living room where she’d cued up a movie on Netflix. Emery was settled in one corner of the couch, toying with the pendant that hung around her neck. It wasn’t the first time I’d noticed it. I’d never seen her without the necklace, and the motion seemed to be a nervous tic of sorts. Witnessing her discomfort was like a knife to the heart. I wanted to put her at ease, but I didn’t know how.

Keeping my movements slow and measured I rounded the couch and sank into the corner opposite her. Emery startled me by scooting next to me. She pressed a button on the remote to start the movie then settled back, her shoulder brushing mine.

From the corner of my eyes I studied her. She seemed more relaxed, more at peace than she had earlier, and I thanked God once more that I’d gotten there when I did. Emery was so sweet, so damn perfect. I wanted to protect her from everything, never let anything bad touch her ever again.

An hour into the movie, Emery’s head tipped toward me and I looped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into me. She nestled close, turning my blood to fire. Her head nuzzled against my chest until it was tucked under my chin, her body curling into mine so one hand rested over my heart. Though her eyes were closed, her fingers wove themselves into the fabric of my shirt, holding on to me like an anchor in a storm. She seemed to crave my touch, like it comforted her, gave her strength to deal with everything that had happened.

Fuck, she felt so damn good. I’d had women cuddle up to me before, but never like this. Heat shot straight to my groin, and my cock went rock hard. I shifted slightly to alleviate the pressure, a grimace pulling at my mouth. I didn’t think I’d ever felt this way about a woman before. Certainly I’d never had to deal with this kind of restraint. The women I’d been with previously knew exactly what I wanted—a quick fling, no commitment, no emotion. But Emery deserved better, and I

found I wanted more with her. I didn't know what it was I felt for her, only that I had to find out.

“Em?” I whispered her name in case she was asleep, but her head slowly swiveled until she peered up at me. I couldn't resist the urge to touch her, and I cupped one cheek in my hand. “You're probably exhausted. We should get you to bed.”

“Not yet.” Her head shook, sending silky tendrils of hair sliding against my hand. “I thought... Maybe you could...” She trailed off, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

I moved my thumb in a gentle sweep across her cheekbone, silently urging her to continue. “What do you need, Em?”

“I don't want to be alone,” she admitted on a broken whisper.

There was no way I could deny her, especially not now. But I sure as hell couldn't take her to my room. The thought of having her in my bed was enough to tempt a saint, and I was far from a saintly man. “Of course.”

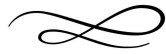
I shifted until I lay next to her, tucking her small body between my larger one and the back of the couch. I grabbed the blanket and draped it over us, then slid my arm beneath her head. Her hand moved to my chest and her nose nestled against my throat. Resting my cheek against the top of her head, I breathed deep, drawing in the scent of flowers and soft, sweet woman.

Her chest rose and fell gently against mine, and I could feel the warm puffs of breath wafting over the base of my neck. Her fingers twitched where they rested against me, and her body was stiff as a board. Holding my breath, I decided to take a leap. Coasting one hand down, I curled it around the back of her thigh and parted her legs. I slid my knee between hers, then hitched her leg over my hip. Heat emanated from her core, and I bit back the urge to grind against her.

This was enough for now. Emery curled into me, her breasts brushing against my chest. I splayed my hand over her

thigh and held her tight. It was the sweetest torture imaginable, but I wouldn't change it for the world.

Twenty-Six



EMERY

WARMTH EMANATED FROM THE FIRM SURFACE BENEATH MY cheek, and I shifted slightly, confused. As soon as I opened my eyes, the events of yesterday evening came flooding back. I tensed, taking stock of my current situation.

We'd shifted during the night and I now lay draped over Drew's torso, our legs still twined together. His chest rose and fell steadily beneath me, and I took a moment to appreciate him. He'd been the epitome of caring and sweet, taking care of me and indulging my wish not to sleep alone.

"You awake?" Drew's deep voice pulled my attention upward until my gaze collided with his.

I offered a tiny smile. "I am."

"Mmm..." He shifted slightly beneath me. "I haven't slept on the couch since college. My back is telling me what a bad idea it was."

"I can't be helping." My weight was mostly suspended over him, and I was sure he was uncomfortable.

"Stay." Drew placed one hand on my lower back to still my movements, but I shook my head.

"I should really get up anyway." My knee brushed his morning wood, and I immediately pulled back, cheeks hot. "Sorry."

“Don’t be.” Drew’s voice was gravely and rough from sleep. And... something else? One hand swept up and down my spine, the motion both comforting and erotic. “I like you right where you are.”

He arched a little, pressing the ridge of his erection to the soft spot between my thighs, and I blinked. He was turned on... because of me? Drew smiled and dragged the backs of his fingers across my cheek. “Christ, you’re pretty.”

My heart beat hard and fast in my chest. “You think so?” I wasn’t looking for a compliment; I was truly baffled by the fact that this gorgeous man found me attractive.

“You’re beautiful.” He twisted a strand of hair around his finger. “You know, I’ve been wondering something.”

His tone was teasing, and I tipped my head to one side, curious. “What’s that?”

“When are you going to kiss me?”

My mouth dropped open at the question. It was literally the last thing I expected and I couldn’t think straight. Drew grinned up at me.

“Well?” He played with a strand of hair, gently winding it around one fingertip. “You gonna kiss me or not?”

“That’s—I—” I lightly smacked his chest when he laughed at my sputtering. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You know you want to,” he countered. My cheeks burned, and I couldn’t meet his gaze.

He tugged on the lock of hair wound around his finger, bringing me the tiniest bit closer. “I want to kiss you again.”

I peered up at him, hope and happiness fluttering in my chest. I understood that he was putting the ball in my court, forcing me to make the decision, and I appreciated the gesture. While the incident with Alan last night still loomed in the forefront of my mind, I was ready to put it behind me. And I wanted Drew to help with that.

I refused to allow Alan to make me feel like a victim, refused to give the bastard that kind of control over me. I

wanted to feel Drew's hands all over me, each gentle touch replacing the feel of Alan's clammy hands. I wanted Drew to kiss me again, to replace every bad memory with something good.

His eyes were hooded and dark with desire as he stared at me, and I licked my lips. "Okay."

"Just okay?" The corner of his lips quirked up. "Let's see if we can do a little better than that."

Every movement slow with intent, Drew threaded one hand through my hair and cupped the back of my head. He pulled me toward him slowly at the same time leaning in. He stopped a fraction of an inch away, his breath wafting over my lips, tension zinging between us. And just like that, he froze. Waiting. Waiting for me to make the next move.

Give in or pull away? Was there really even a choice? Throwing caution to the wind, I closed the last few millimeters between us and pressed my lips to his.

Drew's groan filled my mouth, vibrating through my body and shaking me to my core. His tongue rolled over mine, and his hands roamed my body, his touch firm and possessive. His kiss was drugging, and my head spun with the potent delirium. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It singed me all the way down to my marrow and obliterated my control.

His hands coasted downward to cup my bottom, and I let out a little mewl when he squeezed both cheeks. The sound evaporated on a gasp when he abruptly shifted so that I was straddled over him, the hardness of his arousal pressing against my core. I rubbed against him shamelessly, the fire in my belly growing with every second that passed. Drew rolled his hips in silent encouragement and I began to ride him in short, uncoordinated grinds of my hips against his. Judging from the intense expression on his face, he loved it as much as I did.

Abandoning my bottom, his hands slipped beneath the hem of my shirt until he cupped my breasts in his palms. I kissed him harder, driven by need and fueled by desire. He teased my nipples, mimicking the motions of his tongue. I arched at the

sensations shooting through me, and Drew let out a little growl.

Before I could protest, he lifted me slightly away from him then rolled us. Grabbing my hips, he yanked me down so I lay flat on the couch staring up at him. One hand moved to the band of my sweats, his gaze locked on mine. Did he think I would stop him? Knowing he needed the green light, I nodded and lifted my hips in offering.

His grin turned positively feral and my pants hit the floor almost before I could blink. I felt exposed in my teal panties, but Drew just spread me wider. He massaged my inner thighs, up my abdomen, dropping kisses along the way. I was nearly mindless with need when he peeled my underwear down my legs and tossed them on the coffee table.

He made a low sound of appreciation as he stared at my exposed center, and my cheeks flamed hot. I'd never had anyone study me with such intense perusal, and it was both gratifying and embarrassing. I wanted to snap my knees shut but Drew beat me to it. Snaking a hand between our bodies, he tested my readiness. I sucked in a breath as his fingers sank deep inside me, the moisture from my core easing their way. Placing his thumb directly on my clit, he pressed down and rubbed a small circle. I was already so turned on that my hips jerked and I had to stifle a cry.

“There’s my girl,” he praised. “Your sweet little clit is so hard and tight. You ready to come, sweetness?”

I was embarrassingly close, and I tipped my head back, burrowing it into the cushion of the couch. Above me, Drew chuckled. “Not yet? Let’s see if we can change that.”

I opened my mouth to protest as he pulled his fingers free of my channel, but all of a sudden his lips landed on the tight bud and sucked hard. A squeak of surprise flew out as I grabbed the back of his head.

“Drew!” He didn’t respond, and I couldn’t decide whether I was grateful or not. I writhed beneath him, my legs clamping around his head as he dedicated himself to the task of teasing

me mercilessly. His hands curled around mine and peeled them from his head, pressing them to the arm of the couch.

He lifted his head, a devilish smirk on his handsome face. “You want me to keep going?”

I bit my lip, unable to say the words. Instead I shifted slightly, arching my hips toward him.

His grin grew. “Gonna need you to tell me.”

“Yes!” The word fell from my lips on a broken, whispered plea, and Drew slid his hands beneath my bottom, spreading me further.

“Good girl. You just keep your hands right there, sweetness, and I’ll take care of you.”

One thumb circled my clit, sending a spark of heat shooting through me. I curled my fingers into the fabric of the couch and clenched my eyes closed, lost in the myriad sensations that assaulted me.

“I’ve imagined this thousands of times—watching your pretty face twist in ecstasy, making you writhe beneath me, feeling you come all over my fingers.”

He stroked in and out, his fingers stretching me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. “I want to drain you. Want you to barely be able to stand up. Want you to think of me each time your legs tremble while you walk.”

Oh, God. He was already all I could think about, and right now I was on emotional and sensory overload. “Please!”

A sexy smirk tilted his mouth and his eyes glinted as they captured mine. I watched in a sort of rapt fascination as he lowered his head between my thighs, his gaze locked on mine. My hips jerked, and I sucked in a breath as his tongue swiped through my folds.

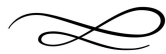
Heat built low in my belly as his tongue rasped over the sensitive bundle of nerves. His teeth scraped over my clit, and a shudder rolled down my spine at the sensation.

“Drew...”

He increased the suction with his mouth, his finger sliding in and out rhythmically, stroking the deepest part of me. All at once it was too much and not enough, a myriad of sensations swirling through me, my emotions ping-ponging back and forth. Heat raced through my body, and the fire that had been building in my core suddenly flared into an inferno. My muscles contracted, and I let out a silent scream as pleasure like I'd never known crashed over me.

I couldn't think, couldn't breathe; I couldn't do anything but hold on as he swept me away to a place higher than the stars.

Twenty-Seven



DREW

A GRIN SPREAD ACROSS MY FACE AS I TIPPED MY HEAD BACK and stared at the ceiling. A half hour ago I'd taken Emery to her car so she could get to work. Our goodbye kiss had turned to two, then an innumerable amount as I held her close. I loathed the fact that she had to work today. The past twelve hours with her hadn't been nearly enough. I was still hard, still tasted her on my tongue. And I desperately wanted more.

I swept one hand over the cushion of the couch, the very spot where Emery had lain just a couple hours ago, cheeks flushed and her chest heaving under the force of her orgasm. Christ, I swore I'd never seen anything as beautiful or perfect in my life. Emery was sweet. Seductive. Sensual. She was... everything. I had fought this feeling between us for so long, but now I could no longer deny it. For years I had focused only on work, but with Emery, all I could think about was coming home to her each night, seeing her across the dinner table or next to me each morning when I woke up. She'd existed on the periphery of my life for years, yet I felt like I was only just now getting to know the real woman beneath the surface.

Had Emery never come to live with me, I never would've learned how incredible she truly was. I was counting down the hours until she got off so I could see her again. Kiss her pretty lips. Carry her to bed. It was all I'd been able to think about since I'd lifted away from her this morning. As tempted as I

was to keep going, to take her right here in this very spot, I couldn't. It didn't matter that we were on a time constraint because she was due at the diner, she deserved better than a quick fuck on the couch. When I finally got her to bed, I wanted to spend an inordinate amount of time learning every curve of her body. As it was, I lay in bed each night thinking of that day in her room. I could still see her rounded hips, her full, ripe breasts tipped with pretty light pink nipples.

My fingers twitched just thinking about them, and I swallowed hard. Pushing to my feet, I stood and strode to the kitchen. Damn it. Less than an hour had passed and I already ached to see her again. I shifted restlessly and adjusted myself. All it took was thinking about her to make me hard. She didn't even have to be in the same room. Hell, she didn't even have to be present. I'd been aroused for weeks, if I was being entirely honest, and I'd only seen the barest glimpses of her. But the knowledge that she was here in my house, close enough to touch, made my blood run hot and cock swell.

Ever since I'd finally allowed myself to see her as the grown woman she was, I'd been damn near insatiable for her. Part of me still felt it was too soon, especially after what had happened last night. Just the memory of walking in on her mother's boyfriend molesting her sent my muscles trembling with the urge to plant my fist in his face. But I refused to give him the satisfaction. I would let the law handle it.

It infuriated me that the one person Em should have been able to count on had let her down. Not only that, but Mrs. Harcourt had outright called Emery a liar and chosen that asshole over her own daughter. I wasn't sure I could ever forgive the woman for that. Emery still hadn't talked about pressing charges, but I would do everything in my power to make sure he never came near her again.

A strange sensation swirled in my gut, expanding outward with each passing second. I jiggled my knee restlessly until I could no longer bear it. I had to see her. I strode back to the living room and snatched up my cell, then dialed up my older brother.

Gray answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

“Have you eaten?” It was ten o’clock; I was sure he’d had breakfast already, but I desperately needed an excuse to go to the diner.

“Yeah. Why?” he ventured warily.

“I thought we could hit Irene’s.”

There were several seconds of silence on my brother’s end before he finally replied. “Sure. I can be there in half an hour.”

That wasn’t nearly soon enough. A soft growl escaped before I could stop it.

“Everything good?” There was a measure of concern lacing Gray’s tone, and I immediately pumped the brakes.

I was completely overreacting. It wasn’t his fault Emery had me twisted up like a pretzel. I was acting like a fucking nutcase, and we hadn’t even slept together. Last night aside, because that didn’t count. Having every inch of her pressed against me but not able to touch her had been the worst kind of torture. I didn’t delude myself into believing I was a good man for not pushing her to have sex, because I’d wanted to. God help me, I wanted her more than anything.

I knew I had to be patient, had to give her time despite the fact that she said she wanted it too. I couldn’t imagine all the things she’d been through, the emotional trauma, not only from yesterday, but from the past several months. I was man enough to be strong and give her the time and space she deserved to heal. That didn’t mean, though, that I couldn’t show her how much I cared. Like earlier. I couldn’t wait to do that again.

“Drew?”

“Yeah.” I turned my attention back to Grayson. “Half an hour is good for me. See ya then.”

I hung up and jogged to the bedroom where I took the fastest shower of my life, then dressed. Twenty-two minutes later, the jingling of the bell over the door welcomed me as I stepped inside The Village Cafe. Lynne waved to me from the bar, and I lifted a hand her way as I cut toward the corner

booth near the windows. I slid into the seat facing the kitchen so I had a full view of the room.

I scanned the familiar faces and smiled at a few of the patrons before turning my attention to the saloon doors that led to the kitchen. I was gratified when, just seconds later, they swung outward, revealing Emery. Her gaze canvassed the room out of habit, and her steps hitched when it landed on me. Her expression morphed from one of surprise to pleasure, and her lips curled into a shy smile. I winked at her, then watched her deliver the plates of food to the customers across the room.

The bell over the door jingled again when Grayson strode through. His gaze immediately found me, and he smiled at Emery before seating himself across from me. He studied me for several seconds. “You good?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He lifted one shoulder. “The case, the stress. Take your pick.”

“Nah.” I surreptitiously watched Emery return to the kitchen. “I just needed to get out of the house.”

One brow lifted and he slanted a look across the room where Emery had been standing just a few seconds ago. I knew exactly what he was thinking. If she was here, why did I feel the need to leave? I was saved from answering when the saloon doors swung open again and Emery strode toward us.

She paused near Grayson and smiled as she delivered his chocolate milk and water. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“Drew.” She plunked a sweet tea down in front of me. “Are y’all eating?”

I battled back the smirk that pulled at my lips as I studied her. “You know, I actually already ate this morning, but I’m still starving.”

Emery went bright red, and her mouth opened in a small O of shock at my licentious words. Biting back a laugh, I continued. “Go ahead and bring my usual, please.”

I gestured toward Gray, who shook his head. “Nothing for me, thanks.”

She blinked rapidly and swallowed hard. “O-of course. I’ll get that right in for you.”

I couldn’t resist one last remark. “Looks like you’ve had an exhausting morning, Em. Maybe you should take a break and put your feet up.”

Preferably around my shoulders, but I wasn’t too picky. I battled down the urge to grin when she flushed profusely, her gaze dropping to her toes. “I should, um... I have to...”

She took an abrupt step backward and bumped into the chair behind her. It screeched along the tile floor, causing her to jump. She whirled and fled toward the kitchen as fast as her feet could carry her.

Grayson lifted his chocolate milk, took a sip, then peered over the rim of his glass at me. “So. Emery, huh?”

I pressed my lips together. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

He rolled his eyes and set down the glass. “Right. I’m just going to pretend I didn’t hear about your early morning sexcapades.”

“We haven’t had sex. Yet,” I added at his lifted brow. “And it’s nothing official.”

He leveled me with his best older brother look. “Nothing official?”

I should have been offended that he even had to ask if I was truly interested in her, but it’d been a long time since I’d dated anyone, let alone had a serious girlfriend.

“Not like that.” I wanted so much more from Emery than a couple quick fucks. “She’s got... shit going on, so we’re just taking it one step at a time.”

His expression said he wasn’t entirely sure he believed me. “You’re my brother, and I love you, but I care about Emery, too, and I don’t want to see her get hurt.”

His words stung. “I’m not going to use her.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He held up a hand in my direction. “But you’ve been so focused on your job over the last couple of years that you haven’t really invested any time into a relationship. I just don’t want her to be disappointed if she can’t measure up.”

A retort automatically jumped to my tongue, but the look he shot me stopped me cold. He was right; I knew he was. No woman had ever rivaled the adrenaline rush I got from my job. Each relationship had fizzled out due to lack of interest on my part. But with Emery... I couldn’t explain it. She intrigued me in a way no one else ever had. “I don’t know how it happened.”

“Please.” He snorted. “I saw it coming a mile away. That’s why I told you not to bring other women home. Seeing you with someone else would have killed her.”

“How’d you know?”

“You mean the way she looks at you like you hung the moon and every single star?”

She did? I’d never noticed. How was it that both Clay and my brother had seen this, but I hadn’t?

“She’s had a crush on you for as long as I can remember.” He glanced over my shoulder, looking lost in thought. “I remember her following you around, watching your every move. I can’t believe you didn’t know she was in love with you.”

My pulse kicked up at his words. “I... I had no idea.”

“What about you?” He pitched his voice low. “Do you feel the same? Because if not...”

It wasn’t a threat so much as a warning. But Emery was different. She made me feel... something. She made me crazy with my constant need to protect her, to sweep her off her feet. I wanted to shield her from everything bad in the world, wanted to rip to shreds anyone who hurt her. The memory of Alan’s hands on her last night still had the power to make my blood boil. I should have hauled him into jail right then and

there, but I wasn't on duty. Not to mention the fact that Emery hadn't officially said she wanted to press charges. I hadn't pushed her yet, but if it came down to it, I might have to override her wishes and have him brought in anyway.

"Judging from the look on your face, I'll take that as a yes." Grayson's voice floated toward me, breaking me from my introspection.

I nodded. "I can't explain it. It's like... As soon as she steps into the room, everything changes. There's this huge weight off my shoulders, and it's just..."

I trailed off, and he tipped his chin. "Yeah. That's love."

Was it? I'd never felt this way before. This was a completely different type of feeling than the love I felt for my family. I'd been attracted to other women, even cared for a few of them. But this was new. None had made such a deep impression on me as Emery had. I couldn't categorize it, and I wasn't ready to classify it as being in love. Both of us needed time to process it and work through things.

What I did know was that I wanted to see how far this thing between us would go. I did care for her, far more deeply than I had for any other woman I'd ever been with. I couldn't imagine not having her by my side in a month or two, or even a year. The more time I spent with her, the more of her I wanted. Her time, her attention and affection... I wanted it all. Although I wasn't ready to accept it or say it aloud, I had a feeling my brother was right.

Though I was tempted to tell Grayson about the ordeal with Alan, I needed Emery to initiate it. I would bear witness, but she needed to be the one to press charges. Despite the fact that I was keeping the ordeal from the other night close to my chest until Emery followed through with the charges, that didn't mean I couldn't do some digging of my own.

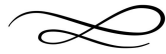
After breakfast, Gray went home and I headed into the station and settled at my desk. It took less than fifteen minutes to run a background check on Alan, and my jaw clenched as the computer populated the results. The asshole had two prior assault charges. Figured.

I hit print, then gathered the papers and waved to Aiden as I left the station. Once I got to my car, I dug my phone from my back pocket and dialed up Izzy.

She answered cautiously on the fourth ring. “Hey.”

“Hey, Iz.” I cranked the engine and pulled out of the lot, my mind spinning with plans. “I’m working on something right now, and I need a favor...”

Twenty-Eight



EMERY

MY FEET ACHED FROM BEING ON THEM ALL DAY, AND I grimaced as I made my way up the sidewalk to the house. The door swung inward before I made it to the porch, and Drew peered out, a concerned expression on his face. “Are you okay?”

I forced a smile as I brushed past him. “I’m good. Just tired is all.”

Drew closed up and turned to me. “Are you still working extra shifts?”

“When I can.” I nodded and rolled out my shoulders. “Until I find something better, I’m stuck with it.”

His brows drew slightly together, and his voice pitched lower. “You don’t have to work all those extra shifts if you don’t want to. You know I don’t mind you staying here.”

“I just don’t want to... overstay my welcome.”

“Not going to happen.” He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “I like having you here.”

A smile spread across my lips before I could stop it, and Drew grinned in response. “Come on, I made dinner.”

“You did?” I turned a surprised look on him. It was the first time he’d offered to sit down to dinner with me, let alone cook. Most often we’d eaten separately, and I was excited at

the prospect of being able to sit across from him, learning everything about him.

“It’s not much,” he warned me as I followed him into the kitchen. “Definitely nothing as good as Irene can make, but I tried.”

“I’m sure it’ll be great. It smells delicious,” I assured him. I dropped my purse and keys on the counter, watching as he moved toward the oven. “Do you want any help?”

“Nope.” He used a spoon to point toward the small table in the corner. “You just sit and relax.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” I dropped into the chair, eyes glued to his backside as he moved efficiently around the kitchen, plating up chicken and vegetables.

“How was work?” he asked as he slid a plate in front of me, then handed me a fork.

“Good. Busy.”

He snagged two cans of soda from the fridge then passed one to me as he settled across from me. “Do you enjoy waitressing?”

“I don’t mind it.” I lifted one shoulder. “It pays the bills. Kind of, anyway.”

He nodded a little. “I remember Gray asking you about going to school. Is that still something you want to do?”

The heat of embarrassment swept up the back of my neck and I dropped my eyes to my plate. “I’m not sure. It kind of depends on a lot of things.”

He was silent for a beat. “Well, like I said, you’re welcome here as long as you want.”

I offered a tiny smile. “Thanks.”

We dug into our food for a moment and silence fell before he spoke again, his voice quieter and far more intense this time. “Have you thought at all about pressing charges?”

My stomach swooped, and I settled my fork at the edge of my plate. “Not really.”

His mouth parted, probably to ask what the hell I was waiting for, so I continued before he could speak. “I want to. Believe me. I just... I don’t know how it will affect things with my mom.”

He absorbed that for a moment, his expression conflicted. “Didn’t she kind of make her position clear when you last talked to her?”

Yeah, she had. It didn’t get much clearer than that. Still... “I’d just hoped that once she’d had time to cool down and really think about it...” I shrugged.

“I understand.”

I could see that it still bothered him, though, and I appreciated his concern. I hadn’t spoken with my mom since the day I moved out, and she’d made no attempt to contact me. “She’s all I have left,” I admitted quietly.

“What do you mean?” His head tipped to one side as he studied me, and I fiddled with the fork.

“My dad left when I was just a kid. Took off without a word and never looked back. Mom’s never been real good at being alone, so after a year or so we came here.”

He eyed me. “That’s when you were twelve or so, right?”

My cheeks flushed with pleasure that he knew that. “Yep. Gram and Gramps lived here, so we moved in with them while mom looked for a job.”

“Are you still close with them?”

I shook my head, a wave of sadness washing over me. “They died in a car accident a little over a year after we moved here.”

“That’s rough. I’m sorry.” Drew made a face. “I can’t believe I didn’t know that.”

I smiled. “I wouldn’t expect you to. It was a long time ago. Though it doesn’t feel that way sometimes,” I mused. “You know, it’s crazy. Sometimes it feels like it happened just yesterday. I remember what I was wearing, what I was doing...”

I trailed off, my fingers toying with the pendant that hung at the base of my neck. I held it up so Drew could see it. “This was the last thing they gave me.”

I was so excited when my grandmother had picked out the gold necklace for my thirteenth birthday. I’d never felt more grown-up than I did when she’d clasped it around my neck. Years had passed since then, but I had never taken it off. I glanced down at my empty plate before flicking a wry look at Drew. “Sorry, that was some pretty heavy conversation for dinner.”

“You know I don’t mind.” He stood and gathered both plates, then carried them to the sink. He turned around and rested one hip on the counter, studying me. “I want to know all about you.”

A flush suffused my cheeks, and a shy smile curved my lips. Would he kiss me again? I slipped from the chair and closed the distance between us. “Thank you for dinner.”

“My pleasure.” His gaze dropped to my mouth, and my pulse kicked up as he lifted one hand and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. His hand curled around the back of my neck, and I swayed toward him. His lips came down on mine, soft and sweet, but the kiss was over before I was ready.

His chest rose and fell as he stared at me for several long seconds. Finally, he let me go, and my heart dropped my toes as he took a step away. “I should let you get ready for bed.”

I forced a smile and nodded. “See you tomorrow. Thanks again for dinner.”

I couldn’t quell the disappointment that spread through my body as I trudged upstairs. Inside the bathroom I stripped and climbed into the shower, every thought centered on Drew.

I knew he felt the same sexual tension that I did, he just refused to act on it. He seemed to want to take his time, but I was ready. More than ready. After this morning, I wanted more. The pleasure I’d felt with Drew had completely eclipsed every previous encounter I’d ever had with a man. I’d take care of the issue of Alan and my mom soon enough, but what I

needed right now was Drew. And if he wouldn't come to me, then I would go to him.

I quickly dried off, then pulled my robe around me and tied the sash at my waist. With one last long look in the mirror, I took a deep breath and gathered every last ounce of courage I possessed before striding down the stairs to the living room.

Drew sat on the couch, and I saw lust flare in his eyes before his expression shuttered. "Em? Everything good?"

His voice was strained, and I didn't miss the way his gaze strayed lower over my breasts. My nipples tightened under his scrutiny, and I watched as he shifted ever so discreetly.

"Actually, no." Drew's gaze zeroed in on my hands as they moved to the sash of my robe and slowly pulled one end free. "I realized that this morning was a little... one sided."

His pupils widened as the silky material slid down my arms and landed with a whisper near my feet. "I'd like to fix that."

Twenty-Nine



DREW

HOLY SHIT. I FELT MY TONGUE TIE INTO KNOTS AT THE SIGHT of all those gorgeous curves, and my brain fell out of my head as all my blood flooded south.

Emery smirked, then dropped to the floor in front of me and pushed my knees apart. I swallowed hard and finally found my voice when her palms flattened on my thighs, then slid toward my groin. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

It looked like every wet dream and dirty fantasy I’d ever had about her was unfolding before my eyes. This couldn’t be real. I blinked just to make sure I wasn’t imagining it, but when I opened my eyes again she was still there, those pretty violet eyes peering up at me, a tiny, teasing smile curving her lips.

“I’m still not entirely sure I’m not dreaming,” I admitted.

My hips jerked as she palmed my cock through my sweats. “Awake now?”

“Fuck yes.” Hooking my thumbs in the waistband of my pants I shifted just enough so I could shove them down.

My dick sprang free of the material, hard and throbbing for her attention, and Emery’s eyes widened slightly at the sight. My chest swelled with vindication at her reaction, a powerful,

primal force that caused the blood to pulse more forcefully through my veins.

Emery's small hand skated upward then curved around the base of my shaft. I sucked in a breath at the contact, every cell of my body screaming for her to keep going. Still, I forced myself to pause for a second, waiting for her to meet my gaze. "You sure?"

She flicked a look up at me and licked her lips. "I'm just returning the favor."

"It's not a contest, sweetness." I framed her face with one hand. "If you don't want to—"

Her tongue darted out and swiped along the swollen head, and my words trailed off into a gargled groan. I only had so much control, and it was fraying rapidly. If this gorgeous woman wanted to wrap her lips around my cock I sure as hell wasn't going to question it.

That sweet little tongue swept out again and curled around the tip of my cock, sucking lightly, and I slid my hand deeper into her hair to cup the back of her head. "Again."

She obliged, and my eyes closed as my head fell back on a groan. Christ, that felt so damn good. Up and down, she kept the movement slow and steady, each pass deeper than the last. The silky waterfall of her hair brushed my thighs as she took me deep into the back of her throat.

"Fuck!" My hips jerked automatically at the sensation, and Emery pulled back, eyes watering. "Sorry, baby, that—"

Before I could finish she was on me again, her perfect little mouth enveloping me and pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

"God, yes..." I closed my eyes again, losing myself in the eroticism of the moment. "Feels so good."

She squeezed the base of my shaft a little tighter and worked it up and down as she licked and sucked my cock until I was ready to explode. Finally I couldn't stand another second of the sweet torture.

“Emery.” I choked out her name but she didn’t slow.

“Baby, stop.” I tightened my hold on her hair and gently pulled her off. “No more. You keep doing that and I won’t be able to stop.”

Her lips turned down in a tiny pout. “So?”

“So…” I growled as I coasted my hands down to her waist then yanked her to her feet. Even though it fucking killed me, I tucked myself back into my sweats. I needed to slow this train down before I lost it completely. I was already so fucking hard that a stiff breeze would push me over the edge. “Get your sexy ass over here.”

Grabbing her hands, I tugged her toward me so she straddled my lap. Banding one arm around her lower back I crushed my lips to hers. I could taste my slightly musky essence on her tongue, and I delved deeper. Her hands slid up my biceps then around my shoulders, her breasts pressing against my chest as she plastered herself to me.

I wandered lower to cup and knead her ass, and she wriggled restlessly, the taut points of her nipples brushing my chest. My dick sprang up between us, hard and insistent, desperate to be inside her. “Hold on, sweetness.”

I shifted to the edge of the couch then pushed to my feet. Emery tightened her hold on me and hooked her ankles together at my lower back. The motion brought her even closer to me, and I gritted my teeth. Curling my fingers into the lush cheeks of her ass, I lifted and lowered her, rhythmically rubbing her core over my dick, teasing us both. I winced as Emery grabbed my hair and jerked my head up, then slammed her mouth over mine. The sudden boldness of the movement caused me to miss a step, and I bumped into the wall.

A growl welled up my throat, and I whirled so Emery was sandwiched between my body and the wall. She gasped at the motion and her body jerked when I thrust my hips forward, pressing hard against her core. Her nails cut into my shoulders as she wriggled shamelessly, and I captured her mouth with mine. My tongue slid over hers, and I nipped her lower lip. I slid one hand upward to cup her breast, and my thumb found

the tight bud of her nipple. I circled it as I trailed kisses lower, over her jaw then down her neck. I paused at her pulse point then tweaked her nipple and sank my teeth into the sensitive cords of her throat.

“Drew!”

I chuckled against her neck. “Like that, sweetness?”

“Yessss...”

She hissed out the word, arching her back and pressing her breast into my hand. I obliged, rolling the tip between my fingers as I took her mouth again and spun away from the wall. By the time I reached the bedroom we were both panting hard, nearly out of breath from desire. My entire body felt like it was on fire, and a fine sheen of perspiration coated my skin.

I laid her back on the bed, then quickly stripped out of my clothes. Christ, she looked so gorgeous all splayed out like that, ready and waiting for me. My cock swelled at the sight, and I grabbed a condom from the nightstand. I sheathed myself as I moved toward the bed, and she automatically reached for me when I propped a knee on the edge of the mattress. A wicked smile curved my face as I let her drag me down until I was suspended over her.

As my body covered every inch of her from head to toe, all I could think was... *She's mine.*

Thirty



EMERY

I'M HIS.

It's all I can think as his heat and scent envelop me. His head dipped, and his mouth fastened over the cords of my throat in a hot, open-mouthed kiss. I arched into him, reveling in the pleasure sparking through my body.

A soft cry ripped from my lips when he scraped his teeth along my throat. He dropped another kiss, tender this time, over my fluttering pulse point before lifting his body away from mine.

“God, Em...” His heated gaze skimmed over me, stirring the fire in my belly. “You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

My hands sank into the short, coarse hair at the back of his head as his lips brushed across my navel. Feathering kisses lower, his fingers traced a line across my hipbone and down the crease between my torso and thigh. Deftly he slipped his hand between my thighs, and I arched into him as he swept his thumb over my clit. “Drew!”

With his free hand he brushed the backs of his fingers over my nipple, sending a shiver down my spine. His kisses changed direction, taking the stiff peak between his lips and teasing it with a gentle scrape of his teeth. My hips jerked at the sensation, and I could feel the moisture pooling in my core, easing the way for Drew’s questing fingers.

He lifted his head and smiled down at me. “You’re drenched. You like that, sweetness?”

I couldn’t respond; The only sound that left my mouth was a little whimper of need as Drew pumped his fingers slowly in and out of my channel.

His nostrils flared and some unnamed emotion glinted in his eyes. I sucked in a breath as he withdrew his fingers, then jerked me toward the edge of the bed. My heart pounded with excitement as he spread my legs in a wide vee and ground his pelvis against mine, the soft fabric of his sweats brushing over my sensitive folds. I bit my lower lip, choppy breaths escaping in shallow pants as I watched him drink in every inch of me. He took my feet in his huge hands, gently massaging the arches before sliding his palms over my ankles, up my calves. His hands hooked behind my knees and dragged me up his body until I rested on my shoulders on the bed, my core inches away from his face as my legs dangled over his back.

Holding my hips firmly, he met my gaze and dipped his head to my center. I nearly shot off the bed as his tongue speared into me, hot and insistent. I pressed my head into the mattress as he nipped my clit, curling my fingers into the fabric of the comforter to ground myself in the storm of violent emotions. He licked and teased and ate at me, drawing out the sensual torture until I was nearly mindless with need and crying out for release.

Drew lifted his head and smiled down at me, his lips shiny from my arousal. “You ready to come, sweetness?”

“God, yes, please!”

He chuckled and flicked his tongue over my clit once more before lowering me to the bed. “I’ve been thinking about this for days. How beautiful you are, how good it’ll feel to finally be inside you.”

I watched as he stripped out of his sweats, my gaze caressing every taut line of his body. Propping a knee on the edge of the bed, he slowly climbed between my legs and caged me between his lean, muscular arms. His lips came down on

mine, soft at first, then more forcefully as he rolled his tongue over mine.

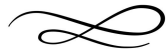
Tension drained from my muscles, and my head dropped back as he kissed his way over my jaw, scraping his teeth along my throat, sending tingles of pleasure to the tips of my toes. Holy shit. I'd never experienced anything like it. The way his mouth felt on mine, the way we connected... It was perfection, like he'd been made for me.

He braced his hands on the mattress beside my shoulders, and I felt the head of his cock brush my sensitive folds as he stretched his body over mine. My hips lifted of their own accord, inviting him in. His lips covered mine, and he swallowed my gasp as he thrust hard, seating himself deeply inside me. The sensation was almost overwhelming, bordering on painful as he stretched every inch of me.

He didn't give me time to adjust, just pulled out and slammed back in again, stealing my breath. My already heightened awareness tipped me over the edge, and the sensation within me boiled over, rocketing toward another orgasm. I clutched his shoulders as heat raced through my body, and I let go on a silent scream. Drew pumped into me several more times before emptying his seed into the condom with a ragged groan and slumping over me.

He lay heavily on my chest, covering me from head to toe, and I absorbed the heat from his body. His lips brushed over my collarbone, and I shivered as the tingles of pleasure fanned outward, down to the deepest recess of my body, spurring me on. He was still inside me, and I couldn't bear to break that connection with him just yet. I needed more time, more of him. I wasn't sure I'd ever get enough.

Thirty-One



DREW

MY STOMACH CLENCHED AS I HELD THE PHONE TO MY EAR, each ring twisting the knot tighter and tighter. I was not looking forward to the conversation ahead, but I knew it had to happen. On the fourth ring my sister answered breathlessly. “Hello?”

“Hey, sis. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No, you’re good. Hold on one sec.” There was some rustling in the background before she came back on the line. “Sorry. I was packing some stuff up so I can stay at home this weekend.”

“Nice. What time are you coming in?”

“I’m leaving in just a few, so I’ll be there within the hour.”

That was perfect. This was a conversation I’d rather have in person so I could gauge her reaction. “Want to grab some ice cream?”

“Seriously? Ice cream? Do you think I’m ten?”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “I just thought...”

“Of course I want ice cream,” Izzy responded.

I shook my head. “Brat.”

My sister laughed. “I can meet you at Duncan’s in an hour. Is that okay?”

“Works for me.” I hung up with my sister and mentally rehearsed what I planned to tell her. I had no idea what she was going to say about me dating Emery, but my gut told me she had planned this all along. She’d orchestrated the entire thing and had even seemed disappointed a few weeks ago when I told her that Emery and I were just friends. Of course, it was always the off chance that I was wrong and Izzy was just trying to protect her friend. My sister knew that my house was one of the safest places Emery could be, so it stood to reason that the arrangement was solely for convenience.

I cooled my heels until it was time to leave, then headed toward Duncan’s. The antique gold script on the front door gleamed in the sunlight, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I stepped into the welcome air conditioning. Though summer had turned to fall, the warm weather was hanging on. Inside, I slid into a booth and glanced around the quaint shop. The owner, Duncan, loved all things retro. It had the feel of a 1950s malt shop, and it was like a blast from the past.

I scrolled through my phone while I waited, and nearly ten minutes later the jingling bell over the door announced the arrival of another patron. My sister bounced inside, already scanning the small shop. A bright smile lit her face, and she dropped into the seat across from me. “What’s up, big brother?”

“Not much.”

The waitress came to take our order, and Izzy and I made small talk for a minute while we waited. “How’s the boyfriend?”

She lifted one shoulder. “I don’t know. He’s more of a friend. He’s nice and all, but...”

“Just not feeling it?”

She made a little face. “I wish I could, but no.”

I nodded. “That’s okay. If you don’t feel a spark, then it’s not meant to be.”

She took a bite of her ice cream. “What about you? How’s everything going with Emery?”

It was now or never. “Good,” I ventured slowly. “It was kind of a rough beginning, but we figured things out.”

Izzy watched me intently. “That’s... good.”

“Yeah.” I fiddled with my spoon for a second. “It’s actually been kind of nice having her around.”

“See? I told you,” she said, a teasing smile on her face.

“Well, after seeing what she went through at home, I don’t blame her for wanting to get out.”

Izzy immediately sobered. “Did she ever tell you what happened?”

I didn’t want to break Emery’s trust and confide in my sister without her permission. If she wanted Izzy to know, that was Emery’s choice. “All I can say is that her mom’s boyfriend is an asshole, and her mom’s not real high on my list of favorite people at the moment either.”

My sister’s face twisted. “I wish she’d said something sooner.”

“It’s over.” I shrugged, though fury at the memory simmered in my veins. “She won’t have to worry about it anymore.”

She nodded, toying with her spoon. “I assume she’s staying with you for a while then?”

“Yeah.” I drew in a breath and steeled my spine. “Actually, I wanted to talk with you about that.”

Izzy’s eyes narrowed a fraction, but I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “Emery and I have gotten closer over the last couple weeks and we’re kind of... dating.”

“Finally!” Izzy threw herself back against the booth with a little squeal. “I thought you’d never grow a pair.”

My mouth dropped open. “What the hell, Iz?”

“Seriously.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been waiting forever for you to pull your head out of your butt.”

“Thanks.” I rolled my eyes. “So I guess it’s safe to assume you’re okay with me dating her?”

“Yes!” Izzy splayed her hands on the table. “I’m so glad it finally worked out. I’m happy for you guys.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “Thanks.”

“So what now?” she asked. “Is she staying with you permanently, or—”

I held up one hand. “Slow down. We’re just going to take it one day at a time.” But yes, if I had any say in the matter, Emery would never leave my house or my bed ever again.

Izzy didn’t look appeased, but she held her hands up in surrender. “All right. It’s your life. Just don’t screw it up.”

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t believe I’m taking dating advice from my baby sister.”

“Only because I know best.” Izzy grinned, and I shuddered dramatically.

It was funny, actually, how everything had worked out. “I do owe you,” I said quietly. “If you hadn’t invited her over...” I wasn’t sure I ever would have had the guts to ask Emery out.

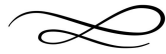
“You would have figured it out eventually,” Izzy said softly. “But I’m glad you noticed her sooner rather than later. I think she’s had a crush on you for years.”

Funny how Gray had said almost the exact same thing. And if Izzy had noticed, it must be true. “Really?”

She nodded. “I can’t say for sure, because she never admitted it, but it was little things. I would catch her watching you sometimes, like you were her knight in shining armor.”

Damn if that didn’t inflate my ego a little bit. Okay, maybe a lot. I liked the idea of being her savior, her protector, the man she came home to every night. I wanted it all—for a long damn time.

Thirty-Two



EMERY

I HAD JUST DROPPED OFF A PLATE OF CORNED BEEF FOR ONE OF our regular lunch guests when the door chimed behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to call out a greeting to the new patron, then froze. Izzy stood just inside the doorway, and a grin spread across her face when her gaze landed on mine. Shoving her sunglasses to the top of her head with one hand, she shot me a little wave with the other.

With a quick promise to check back with Mr. Hawkins soon, I cut across the dining room to meet my best friend. “Hey!” I pulled her in for a quick hug. “You’re home early, aren’t you?”

“Our prof cancelled class today, so I decided to come home early.”

“You hungry?”

She craned her neck toward the pastry box behind the bar. “Got any pie?”

I did a quick check to see what was left. “Chocolate or banana cream.”

“Chocolate.” She grinned. “Do you have a couple minutes, or are you busy?”

I glanced at the clock. “My break should be coming up in just a few anyway. Let me check in with my customers, then London can take over.”

“Cool. I’ll chill ‘til you’re ready.”

She moved off to take a seat, and I circulated around the room with the coffee pot, checking in with all my tables. Once everyone had been taken care of, I popped my head into Irene’s office. “Do you mind if I take my break a little early?”

She glanced up at me and smiled as she pushed to her feet. “No problem. I can help pick up the slack. Need to move around a little anyway.”

“Thanks.” I shot her a grateful smile, then untied my apron and hung it up before grabbing two plates of pie and making my way back toward Izzy.

“Thanks.” She dug into the pie almost before I slid the plate in front of her. A little moan escaped and she closed her eyes. “Don’t tell my mom, but Irene’s pie is even better than hers.”

I grinned. There were few people who made dessert—or much of anything—better than Irene.

“How are things going?” Izzy asked between bites.

“Same old.” I shrugged and allowed the creamy chocolate confection to melt over my tongue. “Still trying to save up money and figure out what I’m going to do next year.”

“My advisor was really good about helping with financial aid,” she offered. “I can give you her info if you want.”

“Thanks.” I shot her a tiny smile. “I’ll let you know. I’m actually kind of working on something else at the moment.”

I told Izzy about meeting Grace at the flea market and refinishing the cabinet, and her face lit up. “That sounds perfect for you.”

I nodded. “I don’t know if it’ll pan out, but I’m keeping my fingers crossed.”

Izzy set her fork on the edge of her plate. “That’s good. Are you still looking for an apartment?”

I shifted uneasily, my pulse kicking up. “Not yet,” I said slowly. “Things are a little up in the air right now.”

She folded her arms on the table and studied me, head tipped slightly to one side. “Between you and Drew, you mean?”

I cleared my throat. “Sort of. So...” I drew in a deep breath, preparing to tell her the truth. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Her eyes flickered the tiniest bit, but her expression never changed. “Well, um... Obviously with Drew and me living together, we’ve been spending more time together and...” I squirmed in my seat. “I really like him as a person. I think he’s a great cop, and he’s been really amazing, helping me out with everything. And um...”

She blinked at me expectantly, brows raised, and I closed my eyes and went up a silent prayer she wasn’t going to freak out. “I’m in love with your brother.”

When she didn’t respond, I finally cracked my eyes open. She stared at me, an amused expression on her face. It was not at all what I was expecting. “Uh...”

Izzy laughed. “Was that supposed to shock me? You’ve been in love with him for years.”

I blushed. “Was it that obvious?”

“Only to me,” she said easily as she settled back against the booth. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

I lifted one shoulder. “I mean... He’s your brother. I wasn’t sure...”

“And you’re my best friend. I want you both to be happy; that’s why I suggested you move in with him. I was hoping if you were around each other all the time, it would just happen naturally.”

I smiled. “Looks like you were right.”

“Well, I just met up with Drew and he said basically the same thing.”

My heart jumped into my throat. “Really? Did he say anything about me?”

She smiled a little. “He’s a typical guy. Not really one to share emotional stuff, ya know?”

I deflated. So that was a no.

“But...” She propped an elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand. “He seems happy. And I think it’s because of you.”

At that, I blushed, my body warming at her news. He made me feel alive, protected me without patronizing me. I looked forward to seeing him every single day. I wanted to make him happy, because he made me happy. “I’ll try my best,” I promised.

“I know.” Izzy offered a soft smile. “I have a good feeling about it.”

“We actually have our first official date tonight.”

Tonight he was taking me to an Italian restaurant in Dallas that I loved so much. I’d only been there once before, because it was more expensive than I can typically afford. But Drew had insisted on spoiling me, and I reluctantly agreed.

“That’s great!” Izzy grinned. “Where are you going?”

I told her about our plans, and her eyes widened enthusiastically. “See? I told you he cares about you.”

I sure as hell hoped so. I checked my phone and grimaced. “I’m sorry, I should get back to work.”

“Of course.” Izzy slid from the booth and gave me another hug. “See you for dinner Sunday?”

“Um, maybe?” I wasn’t too sure that Drew and I were exactly on “meet the family” terms yet, even though I’d been around the Thornes for nearly a decade. This new dynamic changed things, and I wasn’t entirely sure how they’d react.

“Come to dinner. Don’t let Drew keep you all to himself.”

When she pulled out her wallet to pay, I waved her off. “It’s on me.” She started to protest, but I shook my head. “No, really. I owe you—for everything.”

“All I did was push things along a little.”

“It was more than enough,” I assured her. “See you later.”

With a little wave, she was gone and I headed back to work. But for the next couple of hours, my mind floated somewhere among the clouds, completely fixated on Drew. My blood pumped excitedly through my veins, and I fought to contain the smile that curled the corners of my lips at the thought of seeing him tonight. Typically I picked up as many shifts as possible, but London had offered to cover me tonight so I could take off a little early to get ready.

I glanced London’s way as I untied my apron and hung it on the hook by the back door. “Thanks again. I really appreciate it.”

She waved away my concern. “You know I don’t mind. Just go have fun on your date.”

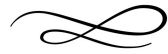
I grinned. “I’m sure I will. See you tomorrow!”

I grabbed my purse from my locker, then practically bounced out the back door, a silly smile on my face and my head in the clouds. Our reservations weren’t until seven, so I had plenty of time to go home and shower, wash away the scent of greasy diner food that clung to my hair and skin.

I was mentally flipping through all of my appropriate outfits to wear when a scuffling noise behind me grabbed my attention. I whipped my head toward the dumpster to my right, but a huge hand fisted in my hair and yanked me back. A soft cry ripped from my throat, but it was quickly extinguished when a brawny arm wrapped around my neck, constricting my air supply.

I fought against his hold, kicking at his legs and scratching at his arms and face. My vision began to dim and my lungs burned from the exertion. He uttered a muffled curse behind me, and something hard pressed into the nerve that ran along my neck. My muscles spasmed and my legs gave out as everything around me disappeared into a fog of nothingness.

Thirty-Three



DREW

EVERYTHING WAS... PERFECT. I STROLLED THROUGH THE FRONT door of the house, a huge smile stretching my face. I couldn't wait to show Emery what I had found today. Yesterday we had stripped the remaining layer of paint off the antique cabinet, and I'd given it a light sanding this morning to prep it for cleaning so she could re-stain it.

I remembered our discussion about the knobs we'd removed, so under Izzy's recommendation, I'd hit up an antique store downtown this morning to see if they carried anything. As it turned out, they had the perfect style. My stomach twisted with excitement and worry. I hoped Emery would like them, and I couldn't wait to give them to her this afternoon. We had our first official date tonight, and I was counting down the minutes until I could take her out.

Although we hadn't officially discussed anything, the more time I spent with Emery, the more I wanted to be around her. I wasn't entirely sure how she would react, but I wanted to ask her to be my girlfriend. I knew it sounded a little lame, but for me, it was a huge step. I hadn't dated anyone serious before, so Emery would be my first official girlfriend. Pretty sad, considering I was close to thirty years old, but I didn't mind. I felt like I'd been waiting for her to come along, and I didn't regret a single thing that had brought us together.

I set the bag from the specialty store on the counter, then dug my keys and phone from my back pocket. I had no

notifications, but that wasn't surprising. Emery wouldn't get home from work for another half hour, and our reservations weren't until seven. I headed upstairs to the bathroom, then stripped and stepped into the shower.

I didn't know what it was about Emery, but she was different than any other woman I'd ever known. She was sweet and strong, smart and independent. Not to mention passionate. Each time we fell into bed, we set the sheets on fire. It was almost like she was made for me. We connected on a level I hadn't previously known had existed, and I craved her with every fiber of my being. Although she had only been with me for a few weeks, I couldn't get enough. I could see a future with her. It should have scared the hell out of me; instead, I felt only excitement. I couldn't wait to see what happened between us. Even though she was young, she had a good head on her shoulders. Talking with Clay the other day had helped, too. If he and Abby had made it work, that gave me hope that Emery and I could make it, too.

I showered, then took my time getting dressed. I changed several times before settling on a dark pair of jeans and a blue shirt that Emery said was her favorite color. I wanted to look extra nice tonight, and anticipation swirled in my stomach as I counted down the minutes until I could see her again.

I threw a quick look at the clock as I cut through the living room, and my brows drew together. Normally Emery was home by now. I peeked out the window next to the front door, but the only car in the driveway was my own.

Grabbing my phone from where I'd left it in the kitchen, I checked the screen. I had no texts, no missed calls. Not altogether strange, but still... Where the hell was she? I dialed Emery, and my heart rate increased when it rang over and over until her voicemail picked up.

My foot tapped an impatient rhythm on the floor, and I mentally scolded myself. More than likely she was just running a few minutes late. I checked my emails to waste some time. Five minutes later there was still no sign of Emery. What the hell? She always answered my calls, or called me back as soon as she could. This wasn't like her—not at all.

I hit speed dial, but the call went unanswered. Heart in my throat I grabbed my keys, then hopped in the car and headed toward town. As I drove, I used the Bluetooth function to try her again. When it too went unanswered, I immediately ended the call and dialed her again. Over and over it went to voicemail.

I pulled into the parking lot at the Village Café, my heart in my throat. There were more than a dozen cars in the lot, but none were the car I was looking for. Every instinct screaming at me, I threw my door open, and I headed inside at a fast clip, practically ripping the door off its hinges in my haste to get inside.

Irene herself greeted me from behind the low bar area. “Hey, detective. Just you tonight?”

“Hey, Irene.” I waved her off, glancing distractedly around the dining area for my violet-eyed blonde. She wasn’t there. “I’m not eating today. I actually need to see Emery for a second.”

Irene gave a slow shake of her head. “She took off a little while ago.” Her brow drew together in concern. “Is something wrong?”

Fuck. “Maybe. Her car’s not in the parking lot, and I can’t reach her on her phone.”

“Oh, my.” Her hand fluttered to her throat. “Maybe her phone’s off?”

She didn’t look convinced, though, and neither was I. Emery never turned her phone off.

“Any idea where she might have gone?”

Irene shook her head. “She didn’t say anything to me. London?” She caught the attention of the other waitress on duty and waved her over.

London’s head tipped to the side in question when she saw me. “What’s up?”

“I haven’t heard from Emery this afternoon. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?”

She shook her head. “She said she had a date. I assumed she was on her way to your place.”

Worry and fear mingled in my gut. “Let me know if you see her, would you?”

“Of course.” Irene nodded emphatically.

London stared at me, eyes wide. “I hope everything is okay.”

“Me, too. Thanks for your help.”

My chest felt tight as I tore back outside, fear clutching at my throat. Pulling my phone out, I called Emery again. One ring turned into two, then three. Impatiently, I glanced up and down the sidewalk, checking for any sign of her. It was always possible that she’d stopped at one of the local shops after work, but why wouldn’t she have called to let me know? And why wasn’t she answering her phone now?

My worry only increased as her phone continued to ring in my ear. When it rolled over to voicemail again, I curled my hand into a fist. Something was wrong. I needed to find her—now.

I was halfway across the parking lot when something shiny on the ground caught my attention. I stooped to pick up the necklace, then froze. I recognized the tiny script letter E, and my heart skipped a beat. Rocking back on my haunches, I studied the gravel around the necklace that lay discarded on the ground. Most of the small rock was compressed from cars driving over it repeatedly. But the disturbed area around the necklace didn’t bode well. I turned my attention back to the necklace. The clasp had been broken, almost as if—

Oh, Christ. My stomach pitched violently as I dialed my brother, my hand shaking.

“Drew?”

It took me a minute to form the words, still not quite able to believe it. Finally I pushed them past my lips. “She’s gone.”

Thirty-Four



EMERY

I TRIED TO OPEN MY EYES, BUT A DARK, DENSE FOG SHROUDED my mind. I fought against it, listening to the faint sounds swirling around me, barely penetrating the darkness.

After what seemed like forever, I finally broke the surface and managed to crack my eyelids open the barest fraction. My eyes felt heavy and tired, and I blinked them open wide before letting them slide closed again.

Almost immediately, a blinding pain slashed through my brain like a dagger. I winced as it ripped through my synapses, distorting everything around me to the point that all I could focus on was the pain. I didn't dare open my eyes again; not yet. Just the glimpse of gray light that had flashed into focus had sent my mind reeling. Instead, I forced myself to breathe through the agony crushing my skull until it lessened to a more tolerable amount.

Where was I? And why did everything hurt so much?

Somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, memories swirled, and though I desperately grabbed at them, they remained elusive and out of reach. My mind remained a blank void, and a soft buzzing filled my ears. As my heart rate increased, the rapid pounding of my heart replaced the white noise, and my lungs rose and fell rapidly, threatening to hyperventilate.

What was happening? Why couldn't I remember anything?

Keeping my eyes closed, I forced several slow, deep breaths into my lungs and tuned into my other senses. Sound swirled around me, reaching my ears in fragmented pieces: A low humming sound. Soft music. The rustle of fabric.

My brows drew together. It all seemed so familiar, yet it remained elusively out of reach. My headache had dulled to a throb, and I risked opening my eyes again, just for a second. This time wasn't nearly as bad. I blinked several times and squinted into the dim light, trying to discern where exactly I was.

It seemed so obvious, yet still so out of reach, and I willed myself to open my eyes again. Dark and light objects blurred together, and I studied them intently as they swam in and out of focus. In one of the squares, a large, silvery-white object glowed brightly. *The moon.*

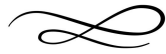
I felt almost giddy as it came to me, but confusion quickly replaced my joy at recognizing *something*. If that was the moon, then those must be windows. And if those were windows... My eyes scanned the ceiling, and my brain finally made the connection. I was in a vehicle. My vehicle, to be exact.

My mind still throbbed, but memories came trickling back. I remembered walking out to the parking lot, then that drugged feeling where consciousness slipped away. My gaze sluggishly moved away from the tan fabric to the seats in front of me. My head was cocked at an unnatural angle where I lay directly behind the driver's seat.

I looked out the window again. Besides the white sliver of moon, all I could see was inky blackness. I couldn't make out anything in the near-dark—no trees, no signs overhead, nothing. And who was driving? And where the hell were we going?

Some age-old instinct kept me from asking. Until I knew the answers to those questions, I would have to bide my time and figure out how the hell to get out of this mess.

Thirty-Five



DREW

MY HEART FELT LIKE IT WAS BEATING RIGHT OUT OF MY CHEST, and my lungs felt tight, like I couldn't draw in enough oxygen. Emery's face flashed before my eyes—that bright smile, her huge violet eyes that made me want to fall into them and never resurface. Oh, God. She couldn't be gone—she just couldn't. My throat tightened, and my stomach clenched into a tight knot.

“Start from the beginning,” Grayson ordered. “Who's missing?”

“Emery.” I choked out her name, pain like I'd never known shooting through my chest. I pressed one fist over my heart, clutching the necklace so tightly that the ends pricked my skin. I barely felt it, my mind was so focused on finding Emery. Where could she be? Who would have any reason to take her. Why—?

“Where are you?” My brother's question cut through my dismal thoughts, and I forced myself to focus.

“At the diner. No one's seen her since she left half an hour ago. We were supposed to go on a date tonight. She was going to come home, then—”

I immediately cut off as her mother's boyfriend came to mind. He'd been so furious that night I found them. What if he was stupid and vindictive enough to come after her?

“That motherfucker!”

I was already striding toward my car before my brother’s words registered. “Drew! What’s going on?”

“Her mother’s boyfriend,” I ground out as I threw open the car door. “He assaulted her two weeks ago. I walked in on him practically getting ready to rape her when she went there to get some stuff.”

I heard a low growl on the other end. I knew I should have told him about it before, but it wasn’t my place. Now that she was missing... that changed the game. And if Alan had something to do with it, I was going to rip him limb from limb.

I cranked the engine as my brother spoke. “Do not go there alone. I’ll need details later, but we need to approach this as we would any other domestic call.”

Except Emery wasn’t like everyone else. She was mine. “You did what you had to do for Claire,” I reminded him. “I’m going to do the same.”

“Drew—”

I hung up and stomped on the gas, navigating toward Mrs. Harcourt’s house, sending up a silent prayer as I drove. My phone rang incessantly, vibrating against the passenger seat where I had tossed it earlier. I knew it was my brother calling again, just as I knew he would try to stop me from going to Alan. But that wasn’t going to happen. I had seen the way he had hurt Emery before; I wasn’t about to let that happen again.

My heart beat hard and fast in my chest, my pulse kicking up as each mile brought me closer. My fury grew as I drove, billowing up inside me until it was all I could focus on. Alan’s truck came into view as I turned into the street where Mrs. Harcourt lived, and my vision went red.

I was dimly aware of sliding to a stop at the curb in front of the house then throwing open my door. I didn’t bother to kill the engine before charging up the walkway and pounding on the front door. “Open up!”

Over and over I slammed my fist against the steel door until I heard the rapid shuffle of footsteps inside. “Hold your

horses! I'm coming!"

Just the sound of his voice made me borderline homicidal, and I stepped back, balanced on the balls of my feet as the knob turned. The door started to swing inward, and I shoved it the rest of the way open, already reaching for him. "Where is she?"

"Wh—?"

I wrapped one hand around his neck and slammed him into the wall. "What did you do to her?"

A feminine scream echoed behind me, but I paid her no mind. Alan's eyes were wide with fear and surprise. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Emery!" I tightened my grip and shoved him against the wall again. "Where is she?"

He clawed at my hand in an attempt to get free. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

"Don't lie to me, motherfucker!"

A cacophony of raised voices lilted on the air, the sound dim beneath the force of my rage.

"Drew, stop!" My brother grabbed me and pulled me away.

Surprise flared for a brief second. I had no idea when he'd shown up. I fought against his hold, reaching for Alan. "That piece of shit knows where she is, I know he does!"

"I didn't do shit." Alan sneered. "Little slut is probably fucking someone else."

"You son of a bitch!" Breaking free of Grayson's hold, I swung at him, narrowly missing his face when he jerked back out of reach.

Gray was on me half a second later, holding me back. The screech of tires from the direction of the street dimly penetrated my brain, and all of a sudden Mac and Vaughn were there. I was furious that they'd intervened, but at the same time I was immensely relieved. I knew they would have my back.

Mac stepped in front of Alan. “Let’s all calm down.”

But I wasn’t done. “If you hurt her, I swear to God I’ll kill you!”

“I’m pressing charges,” Alan yelled at Gray. “I want him out of my home!”

“You fucking think so?” My blood boiled in my veins, but I stopped fighting against the men holding me back. “Why don’t you tell him what you did to Emery, you piece of shit!”

Alan faltered for a second. My gaze darted over his shoulder to Mrs. Harcourt, who stood off to the side. Her eyes were wide, a mixture of fear and confusion, one hand pressed to her chest as she watched the events unfold.

I changed my tact, speaking to her instead. “Emery came to you. She trusted you.” Mrs. Harcourt met my gaze, guilt rife in the depths. Her eyes were bluer than Emery’s but I saw the similarity, and my heart cracked wide open all over again. I would do anything to bring her home.

As I spoke, Gray and Vaughn loosened their hold on me. “You took his word”—I flicked one hand toward Alan, my voice tinged with disgust—“instead of your daughter’s. Do you have any idea what he did to her?”

Her lips parted, but no sound came out. I switched my attention back to Alan. “Tell her!”

He shook his head, determined to stand his ground. “Got nothing to say.”

“Actually,” my brother spoke up, “we have a report that you assaulted her a couple weeks ago. Is that true?”

Alan’s eyes narrowed with fury. “Little whore was begging for it! Can’t blame me ’cuz she changed her mind!”

At that I nearly lost it, and Gray caught me as I lunged forward. Alan leaped away, and Gray hustled me out the front door.

“Goddamn it, Gray!” I fought my brother all the way out to the sidewalk. “He knows something!”

“You need to calm down,” he commanded. “We’re not going to accomplish anything by screaming at him.”

“We have to do something,” I retorted. “He knows where she is. If he hurt her again... Fuck!” I punched the hood of my car.

“We’ll figure it out.” He didn’t try to comfort me this time. “We’ll check the house, run down all the leads until we find her. And we will find her.”

Christ. I scrubbed my hands over my face. “I should be looking for her, not standing around.”

He stared implacably at me. “The best way to find her is to follow the evidence, you know that.”

Yeah, I fucking knew that, but that didn’t help right now.

“Why didn’t you tell me about him before?” Gray asked, his voice pitched low.

I laced my fingers together behind my head and stared up at the sky, eyes stinging. “She didn’t want to cause drama with her mom.” I dropped my arms and turned toward my brother. “Em tried to talk to her, but she didn’t believe her.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked as he glanced toward the house. “I’ll have a couple officers start looking into him, check his alibi. Is there anywhere else she would have gone?”

“Absolutely not.” I shook my head. “We had a date scheduled for seven thirty.”

“All right.” He flicked a look toward Vaughn and Mac who had separated Mrs. Harcourt from Alan, and were currently questioning them separately. “They’ve got this under control. Let’s head into the station and see what we can find.”

I didn’t like it, but I nodded regardless. I moved toward my car, but Gray stopped me with a hand on my arm. “I’ll drive.”

Anger simmered in my veins. What the hell did he think I was going to do? “What the fuck, Gray?”

He shook his head. “You’re upset right now and not thinking clearly.”

I was thinking more clearly than I ever had. I knew what was important, and the only thing that mattered was finding Emery. I was also smart enough to pick my battles. No matter how much I hated to admit it, I knew I couldn't find her by myself. I didn't even really know where to start.

My stomach twisted into a knot as I slid into the passenger seat of Gray's cruiser. He was silent as we drove toward the station, and I was grateful for the reprieve. My head pounded, and my heart felt like it'd been shredded. If Alan truly wasn't involved, then where the hell could she be? Her car was gone, which didn't bode well. To an outsider, it would look like she'd left of her own accord. But I knew better. For one, she would never take off her necklace. It meant too much to her. And she wouldn't have left me—I was absolutely confident of that. So what the hell had happened?

I could feel my brother's gaze on me as we pulled up in front of the station and climbed from the car. I could sense that he wanted to say something, but he stayed quiet. Or maybe he just wasn't sure what to say. Inside, I turned to him. "Tell me."

He shook his head. "Nothing."

Annoyance flared. "Go ahead and say it. You think she left."

"I never said that."

"You were thinking it," I accused. "Her car's gone, so the obvious answer is that she went somewhere and just didn't tell me. But you're wrong," I cut him off when he opened his mouth to speak. "She wouldn't leave me anymore than Claire would leave you."

He took a deep breath. "We need to look at all options—"

"Not that one," I snapped.

His eyes flashed. I knew I was pushing his buttons as both my brother and my chief, but I couldn't help it. I would do whatever the hell I had to in order to find Emery, and if it pissed him off, then so be it.

His phone rang, cutting off his response, and he held up one hand my way in a warning gesture as he swiped the phone

to take the call. “Thorne.”

My brother’s gaze stayed locked on mine as he listened to the person on the other end. His brows drew together, and he let out a swift curse. “Thanks for the heads up.”

He hung up looking more than a little disturbed, and anxiety swirled in my stomach. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Maybe we should head into the station and—”

His expression was far too serious to be anything other than bad news. Cold washed over me. “Where’s Emery?”

“I don’t know.” Even as the words left his mouth, he didn’t look very sure of himself.

Panic gripped at my throat. “Where is she?”

“I’m not—”

“Where is she?”

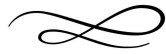
I was dimly aware of everyone’s eyes on me, watching me warily after my outburst.

My brother cast a quick look around before closing the distance between us and taking a deep breath. “I don’t know where Emery is,” he said quietly. “That’s not what the call was for.”

But it was something equally as bad. “Tell me.”

He breathed a long breath out through his nose before speaking. “Stratton slipped his handlers this afternoon.”

Thirty-Six



EMERY

WHERE WERE WE GOING, AND WHY?

My headache remained, but the stabbing pain in my skull subsided a little with every moment that passed. Shifting the tiniest bit, I tested my muscles. I didn't feel any aches and pains like anything had been broken. My legs were cramped, and I started to stretch then froze when I thought better of it. I knew nothing about this man—not who he was or why he'd abducted me. I had no idea how long we'd been driving or where he was taking me. I needed to figure out a plan of escape.

I cursed myself for not being the type to leave any kind of tool or weapon in the car. If I could somehow get to my cell phone, I could text for help. Taking care not to move too much, I glanced around, hoping to see my purse. It was a futile effort, though, because there was nothing within reach. Damn. I needed to get the hell out of this car—now.

Unfortunately, throwing myself from a moving vehicle wasn't high on the list of things I wanted to do. I might escape my captor, but the fall was likely to leave me with a concussion—if it didn't kill me. There had to be another way. He'd put me in the backseat, and I wasn't sure if it was a blessing or curse. I'd heard stories about captives flagging down help by kicking out the taillights and waving down another driver. But here in the backseat my captor would see

every movement; he would be on guard. For the time being, I needed to stay quiet and come up with a plan.

It was dark now, and it was almost impossible to tell where we were or how long we'd been traveling. The glow of lights were few and far between, so I guessed that we were on some sort of back road that wasn't well lit or well-traveled. I had to get out of this car. But how? Another idea suddenly came to me. If I could incapacitate the man, maybe I could escape. It would be dangerous, since he was driving, but I didn't see another option. There were no weapons in my car. I didn't even have an old CD to use as a makeshift knife. All I had were the clothes on my back... And the sneakers I'd worn to work.

Ever so slowly, keeping my movements as quiet as possible, I inched my leg upward until my fingertips brushed the top of my shoe. I wrestled with the double knot in my shoelace for what seemed like hours before it finally came loose. I slowly began to pull the shoelace through each eyelet, and my heart stopped when I heard the soft scrape of plastic against leather. I froze, watching the man in the front seat, waiting for him to catch me. He continued on as if nothing were out of the ordinary, and I let out a breath.

One at a time, I pulled the ends of the lace until it was free. My heart slammed against my rib cage as I gripped the thin piece of material between my fingers. I'd seen this in a movie once. Someone trapped in the backseat had used the rope binding their hands to choke out their captor. The shoelace was significantly flimsier, but it would have to do. I could only pray that when he wrecked the car, he wouldn't kill us both.

Keeping my arms tucked in close to my chest, I grasped the end of the shoelace in my hands, then wrapped it around my palms one time for good measure. The shoelace wasn't very long, and I didn't have a great grip on it, but it was my only hope. Never taking my eyes from the man in front of me, I gingerly levered myself to an elbow as I lowered my feet to the floor, one inch at a time. I needed to take him by surprise. The stealthier I overtook him, the better my chance of

succeeding. He still hadn't noticed anything was wrong yet. Thank God for small favors.

Bracing myself, I started a countdown in my head. Five, four, three... I drew in a deep breath through my nose, then slowly let it out. Now or never. Adjusting my stance in the footwell of the backseat, I placed myself directly behind his chair. My movement drew his attention, and his eyes darted to mine in the reflection of the rearview mirror.

“What the—”

Before the rest of the words could leave his mouth, I reached over the headrest and looped the shoelace around his throat like a garrote.

“You fucking bitch! I'm going to—”

His words cut off with a gargle as I leaned backward, pulling on the lace with all my might. The man thrashed, and the car swerved wildly as he fought against me. I could feel the lace slipping through my fingers, and I clamped down as hard as I could, desperate not to let it go. Perspiration beaded on my forehead and the back of my neck as I clung to the shoelace, gritting my teeth through the pain as it cut into my hands. I didn't dare let up. This was my only hope of escaping. Right now, it came down to two options: him or me.

Maintaining the wheel with one hand, he reached the other behind him, clawing at my hand and arm, swinging at my face in an effort to get me to stop. His nails sliced along my cheek, and I winced at the sharp bite of pain. Fear and anger in equal measure rose up as we struggled against one another, but I couldn't let go. I leaned back even further, but his hand closed over a handful of hair and yanked hard. I screamed as agony ripped across my scalp and tried to jerk away. That only made it worse. I could feel the shoelace slipping from my hold, and my heart nearly fell out of my chest.

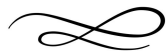
The man continued to fight me, and the engine accelerated as his body tensed, his foot pressing down on the accelerator. Suddenly, my entire body jolted as the tires drifted over the berm and hit a hard bump. I watched in horror as a giant tree bloomed in the headlights just a few yards in front of us. A

tiny gasp escaped my throat as it grew larger and larger. There was no avoiding it.

Releasing the hold on the shoelace, I threw myself flat on the floor just as the car slammed into the trunk of a giant tree. For a second, nothing happened. Then the entire world around me shifted. I was suddenly weightless, my body floating in midair. A split second later the back of my head slammed against something hard, and agony speared through me. I was dimly aware of the crunch of metal and the shattering of glass as I was thrown once more, then finally landed in a crumpled heap. Pain seared my body, and I watched with a sort of detachment as the headlamps flickered then faded altogether.

A white light appeared in the distance, and I blinked hard, fighting to bring it into focus. The agony ripping through me began to lessen by increments as the light grew brighter and brighter until I winced at the harshness of it. Then, finally, I felt nothing at all.

Thirty-Seven



DREW

I FELT THE WORLD SHIFT BENEATH MY FEET. THIS COULDN'T BE happening. Stupidly, I shook my head. "No. That's impossible."

I stared at my brother, willing him to take the words back. But the concern and pity in his eyes told me it was true. "How the hell could this happen?"

My brother kept his tone calm and soothing. "We'll figure it out. He can't have gone far."

"Unless someone was helping him," I snapped. "That son of a bitch managed to escape however many guards were transporting him. That doesn't just happen by accident."

Gray studied me. "Throwing around accusations won't help. All we can do is look at the evidence and follow the leads."

I let out a little growl. When the evidence led me to Stratton, I was going to make damn certain he wouldn't live long enough to hurt another woman.

"Listen." My brother cleared his throat. "I think maybe you need to sit this one out."

A strange numbness spread over my body as I stared at him. "I'm sorry, what? Do you think I'm just gonna stand around staring at the goddamn walls while Emery is out there..."

I choked on the next words, unable to complete the thought. I didn't want to think about what she might be going through at this very moment. She should be home, with me. How could shit go sideways so quickly?

"Here's what we're going to do." My brother's voice cut through my thoughts. "Gather everything you can on Stratton. We still have his information on file from the arrest. Get anything you can find. Track down every family member, friend, possible acquaintance within 100 miles. I want to know everyone he's interacted with over the past year."

"We don't have time for this." Getting phone records could take weeks. We needed something now.

"This is the best way to do that," Gray said stoutly. "We find out who he's been talking to, we find Emery."

Gray tipped his head toward the group of officers assembled around us. "Find what you can and report back to me ASAP." With a concise nod, he dismissed them then closed the door, sealing us inside the office alone.

Gray leaned back on the door, then regarded me silently for several long moments. Each second my heart rate, amping up my anxiety until it spilled over. "We should be out there looking for her!"

"No." Gray gave a slow shake of his head. "We need to be doing exactly what we are doing. I understand that running all over town will make you feel useful, but..."

I advanced forward and shoved my finger in his chest, nose to nose. "Don't you fucking dare say that to me. This has nothing to do with wanting to feel useful. I'm going to do whatever I have to do to bring her home."

"You will," Gray said softly. "But do you really think that checking every hole in the wall will bring her back any quicker? What are the odds he would keep her here?"

My shoulders deflated at his logic. Though I didn't want to admit it, he was right.

"He's not going to make it easy on you," my brother stated quietly. "He resents you for putting him away."

It hit me all at once, and I stumbled backward, grasping for the arm of the chair in front of Grayson's desk. "Christ."

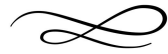
I laced my hands together behind my neck and dropped my head between my knees, my breath coming in heaving pants. I thought I might be sick.

A strong hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed. "We will find her. He thinks he's smart, but we have more resources. We have you. You're the best damn detective I know, and I trust you to bring her home."

I didn't know if that made me feel better or worse. I clenched my eyes closed at the burning sensation that flared across the bridge of my nose. "What if I can't?"

"You will. *We* will," he emphasized. "We're right behind you."

Thirty-Eight



EMERY

PAIN RADIATED ALL THE WAY DOWN INTO MY BONES, AND I winced as I fought to crack my eyes open. A crusty material clung to my lashes, and I gingerly picked it away with my nail. I blinked several times to clear my vision, but nothing made sense. I struggled to bring my surroundings into focus, and I lifted one hand and pressed it against the surface in front of my face. Tracing the contour with my fingers, I finally realized that it was the headrest of the backseat.

As everything came into focus and settled, I realized why everything looked so strange. The car was on its roof. Glass tinkled as I shifted slightly. Moonlight glinted off the silvery trim that surrounded the opening where the back window used to be. Sticky fluid ran down my forehead and into my eye, obscuring my vision. I wiped it away with one hand and examined the liquid. It was dark and I recognized it immediately. Blood.

Summoning every ounce of effort, I turned my head to look toward the front of the car. The man lay motionless in the driver seat, still strapped in. Swallowing hard and pushing down the pain, I rolled first to my side, then flopped onto my stomach. Panting with effort, I forced my arms under me and began to army crawl toward the opening. Glass sliced my forearms, stinging my skin, but I pushed inward.

Inch by inch I dragged myself through the back window toward freedom. My hands finally encountered grass, and I

dug my fingers into the earth. I nearly cried with relief as my upper body came free of the car, and my success spurred me on. I moved my legs in tandem with my arms, skittering through the opening and out from under the trunk of the car. I rolled to my back and stared up at the moon, tears coursing down my cheeks. Everything hurt. But I was free. Almost.

Heaving a gasping breath of effort, I rolled to my hands and knees. The blood coating my hands and arms stood out in the pale moonlight, and I closed my eyes against the sight as I forced my pulse to slow and my breathing to return to normal. I was just grateful to be alive.

Pressing my hands to the dewy grass, I gathered my strength to stand. Through the rear window of the car, my gaze snagged on the driver seat, and I froze. The man was gone.

My heart rate accelerated, and I staggered to my feet. The road. I needed to find the road. I spun in a circle, but everything looked the same in the dim light. A large, dark presence appeared in my vision, and my lungs hitched.

Automatically I sprinted away from him, but he was too fast. One hand clenched the back of my shirt, dragging me down to the cold, hard ground. I screamed and fought, kicking and clawing, but the man was too big, too strong. A blur cut through the light of the moon as his arm whipped through the air. What felt like his fist connected with my face, snapping my head to the side. Pain radiated through my body, and blackness fell like a curtain once more.

Thirty-Nine



DREW

A SOMBER PALL HUNG IN THE AIR, EXHAUSTION AND disappointment etched into everyone's faces. Emery had been missing for nearly twelve hours now, and we didn't have a single lead. Even worse, it was dark now; we couldn't even search for her.

The officers had checked Mrs. Harcourt's house and found no trace of Emery having been there recently. Her alibi, along with Alan's, cleared both of them. I wasn't happy about that, but at least I could cross that scumbag off my list. That left the only other person who would have any sort of motive to hurt Emery—Stratton.

We had a BOLO out on her car, but so far there'd been radio silence on that end. Vaughn and Finn had made the trek to Mineral Forge to speak with his mother, but she denied speaking with him since he'd been arrested. Every available officer had spent the past several hours poring over records, checking into every acquaintance Stratton had in the surrounding area. He lived with his mother but aside from work, he didn't seem to have any close relations or friends. Every dead end chipped away at my heart a little more.

Our system didn't have the capability to search GPS, and though we could outsource it to a larger department, there just wasn't enough time. We were going to have to find her the old-fashioned way.

Gray and I stood in the conference room, reconstructing the timeline and studying the info we had on Stratton. He'd been up all night, too, and we were both feeling the effects of it. I was dead on my feet, but I couldn't bring myself to sleep—not with Emery still out there somewhere.

Claire had brought food sometime late last night, and Izzy had shown up not long after, intent on helping any way she could. Both were now dozing in Gray's office, and I threw a look in that direction. "We should send them home."

I understood them wanting to be here, but there was really nothing they could do. It was already half past four in the morning, and we wouldn't be able to do anything else until daylight when we could start tracking down Stratton's acquaintances.

Gray made a face and scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "I tried. She insisted on staying."

I rolled my eyes. He was such a pushover for her. If Claire told him to wrangle the moon, I was certain he'd try to do it. I knocked lightly on the door before pushing it open, and two pairs of sleepy eyes locked on me. Claire recovered first, jumping to her feet. "Did you find something?"

"Not yet." I shook my head, glancing between her and my sister. "It's going to be a long night. You two should head home and get some sleep."

Claire's brows drew together. "Isn't there something else we can do?"

I appreciated her effort, but I smiled gently, trying my best to keep it together. "Not right now. Once it's light out, we can organize a search party. Until then..."

I trailed off, and Izzy rested a hand on my arm. "You should sleep, too."

"I'm fine." I wasn't. I was far from fine, but I couldn't rest now. Not until Emery came home.

Her lips parted to speak, but I cut her off. "I'll sleep here," I lied. "I'll catch a few hours, then let you guys know once we have a plan."

Izzy didn't look convinced, but she seemed too tired to argue. "If you're sure."

"I am. I'll call you first thing," I promised.

Claire moved toward Grayson, who enfolded her in a tight hug. My throat constricted at the sight. Would I ever get to hold Emery like that again? I couldn't bear to think of life without her, and I forced myself to focus on my sister. "Do you need a ride?"

"Nah." She shook her head. "I rode with Claire. I'll stay the night at their house so we can be back first thing."

"Thanks." My eyes burned as I hugged her tight. "See you in the morning."

Claire and Izzy left, and I sank into the chair. A moment later, Gray collapsed into the seat next to me, dropping his head back and closing his eyes. Fatigue pulled at my body, but the need to find Emery was stronger. I wouldn't be able to relax until she was back in my arms again.

Silently so as to not disturb Gray, I pushed to my feet and crossed to the desk. The officers on night shift had pulled everything they could find on Stratton, and I quietly sifted through the papers. Doubt loomed in front of me. What if we were looking at the wrong person? What if Stratton's escape was a coincidence? Almost automatically, I discarded the idea. I didn't believe in coincidence, especially not of this magnitude. I was almost certain he was responsible for Emery's abduction.

As Grayson had mentioned earlier, Stratton would harbor a grudge against me for putting him in jail. He wouldn't take kindly to me stopping his extracurricular activities, and he would want to hit me where it hurt the most. I wasn't sure how he knew about Emery, especially since she and I had only recently begun to date, but that only reinforced my belief that he was working with someone.

Had the person helped him escape from jail? Maybe a guard he'd paid off? That would explain how he'd gotten free, but how had he gotten back to Cedar Springs?

It was always possible he had another accomplice outside the jail. Though he'd admitted nothing during his interview, I couldn't help but wonder how he'd drugged his victims. Since all were smokers, I had to imagine the drug had somehow been ingested when they'd stepped outside. There'd been no injection sites on any of the victims, so it had to have been administered another way. Dozens of unanswered questions loomed before me. How, exactly, had he managed to incapacitate the women? Was Stratton manufacturing the drug himself, or was he just purchasing it to suit his own needs?

My brother's voice cut through the silence. "We need to find Stratton."

"I know," I murmured quietly.

But that was easier said than done. I assumed he'd been traveling on foot, having either hitchhiked or walked back to town. The jail wasn't far—maybe twenty miles or so—but it would have taken a long time.

I threw a look at Gray. "Do we know the exact time he escaped?"

Gray shook his head. "Last I heard they were reviewing the footage, but they noticed when he didn't appear for lunch."

So he could have left immediately after breakfast. It would have taken the staff a while to search the facility for him. If he'd slipped out sometime during the mid-morning, he could have made the trip back to Cedar Springs in approximately five hours. He'd have to stay off the main roads, but he was familiar with the area; it wouldn't be too difficult to move around undetected.

I swallowed hard, shoving my emotions down and clearing my mind. I tried not to focus on the fact that it was Emery we were talking about and mulled over the facts. "He abducted her after work, taking her own vehicle. Which means he doesn't have one of his own, or isn't working with someone else. Otherwise, they would have teamed up and grabbed her off the street."

Gray leaned back and crossed one ankle over his knee, waiting patiently as I worked through it aloud. My mind spun with possibilities. “All of his assets are frozen, and the house he shares with his mother was clear, but I don’t think he would take her there anyway. It’s too obvious.”

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the facts. “If I were Stratton, what would I do?”

“If it were me,” he contributed, “I’d take her somewhere quiet. Remote.”

His goal was to hurt me, I knew that. But the man had raped several other women, and whether it had been intentional or not, he’d killed at least one. I couldn’t live with myself if the same thing happened to Emery.

“Focus on the facts,” he said, not the what-ifs.”

I swallowed down the bile that had risen in the back of my throat. “We need to see if any of his immediate acquaintances have places outside of town. He’ll be flying under the radar and—”

There was a brief knock before the door swung open, revealing Mac. “Chief? Can I talk to you for a second?”

He very deliberately didn’t look my way and a chill skittered down my spine. I slowly rose from my chair. “What happened?”

Mac stared at Grayson, obviously conflicted. “What did you find?” I demanded.

His gaze reluctantly slid to mine. “We just got a report of a car accident up in Dresden. Late model Corolla.” Cold washed over me as he delivered the next blow. “Registered to Emery Harcourt.”

Forty



EMERY

IT WAS UNBEARABLY HOT. BEFORE I EVEN OPENED MY EYES, IT was the first thing I became aware of. I tried to suck in a breath, but the thick, humid air clogged my lungs. My body was stiff, so sore I could barely move, but I forced myself to blink my eyes open.

Much like in the car, it took a moment for everything to come into focus. The room was dim, lit only by moonlight that filtered through a small, dirt encrusted window. The wood paneled walls were bare, the ceiling dingy with age. I cocked my ears, listening for any sound from the outer room. Ten seconds passed, then thirty, but there was no movement of any kind. I didn't know if that was a good thing or bad. Where was the man who had abducted me? Would he come back to kill me, or had he left me here to die alone?

Neither of those options was appealing in the least. I had to get out of here one way or another, especially if he decided to come back and finish the job. My left cheek rested on the roughhewn wooden plank floor, and I grimaced as I tried to lift my head. My skin stuck to the floor, and the wound on my temple re-opened as I peeled the flesh away. Tears pricked my eyes and burned across the bridge of my nose, but I bit my tongue to stifle the cry that sprang to my lips. If the man was here somewhere, I refused to give him the satisfaction of hearing my misery. Besides that, if he knew I was awake, that might accelerate any plans he has for me.

Steeling myself, I battled down the pain ravaging my head and lifted one hand to wipe away the blood that trickled freely down my temple. Both hands moved at the same time, drawing my attention to the rope that bound my wrists. My heart plummeted to my toes. Damn. Pain speared through my body as I struggled to lever myself up on one elbow. Just that small movement took a huge amount of effort, and I dragged in several lungfuls of the stale, musty air. After a minute of laboriously maneuvering my uncooperative limbs, I finally managed to shift so I knelt on my knees.

I glanced around the spartan room, looking for any kind of object that might be able to cut through the thick rope. It didn't look much better from this perspective. If anything, now that I was more coherent, it looked even worse. The small window in the wall opposite me was cracked, the glass so caked with dust that I couldn't see what lay beyond. Several dark spots had accumulated on one wall, which I could only assume was mold. The only piece of furniture in the room was a twin size bed, but if it had ever held a mattress, it was long gone. The frame was made of sturdy wood, and I scooted forward on my knees, running my hands lightly along the grain, checking for a loose screw, a nail, anything I could use. But there was nothing.

I sat back on my heels with a sigh of frustration and glanced around again. I still wore my uniform from the diner, but my shoes had been removed and tossed in the far corner of the room. I felt a moment's vindication at having used the shoestring against him. I was sure he'd never expected that. But even having my shoes wouldn't help me escape the ropes binding my hands. The door to the bedroom was closed, secured only by a single doorknob. Not that that would be helpful. And until I knew whether the man was truly gone, I refused to move from this room.

With no other option, I lifted the rope to my mouth and began to chew through my bonds. The coarse rope tugged at my skin, chafing it until it was raw, but I kept going. Using the edge of my teeth like a saw, I cut away at the fibers for what felt like hours. Despite the time I'd spent gnawing at the rope, I'd only managed to tear a tiny sliver away—not nearly

enough to make a difference. Tears burned the bridge of my nose, and I dropped my head back, exhausted, lungs panting with effort. At this rate, it would take days to get out of here.

A noise from outside the bedroom made my heart stop. Every muscle froze as I listened to the scuffle of footsteps against the hard floor followed by muttered curses. Shit, shit, shit.

My pulse kicked up, and I scuttled to my feet. Nearly a minute passed as I waited for him to enter, but the door remained closed. Silence from the outer recesses of the house fell again, but I knew he was still out there. What was he waiting for? If he hadn't come for me, that had to mean he didn't intend to kill me. At least... not yet. But my timeline to escape had just moved up.

I glanced around again. I could break the window... but the sound would surely bring the man running. Resigned to using my teeth, I snatched up my shoes then retreated to the wall farthest from the door and sat beneath the window. The shoestring I'd used to choke the man was missing, but I would worry about that later. If I could get the rope off, I could use a sliver to tie my shoe before going out the window. But I had to be ready to run—and I needed to get this damn rope off first.

I tugged on my shoes, then went to work on the ropes again. As I did so, I glanced up at the window above me. The soft light that spilled in was the gray of twilight, and I wondered how long I'd been here. What was Drew doing right now? Was he out looking for me? How would he ever find me?

My mind spun. Someone had to call in the car accident eventually, right? But I had no idea how far we'd traveled before we wrecked. Who knew how long it would take someone to find the car on the back road, or when CSPD would be alerted, if at all. I could only hope it was soon. But even so, how would they find the cabin? I didn't even know where we were. From the rough look of the room, I doubted the rest of the house was much better. It probably wasn't equipped with many modern conveniences, and hardly anyone

had a landline anymore, so that ruled out calling for help. No, it was up to me to get out of here and go for help.

I chewed at the rope, tugging on the frayed fabric and tearing it loose one strand at a time. The skin at my wrists slowly peeled away until blood and fluid began to drip down my forearms. With single minded focus on escaping, I pushed through the pain and kept going. Footsteps echoed in the outer room, and I momentarily froze. I listened as the man crossed the room, his footsteps growing softer as he moved away from the bedroom.

Muffled sounds came from the other side, and my heart stopped when I recognized it. Another man's voice. Clambering to my feet I crept to the door and pressed my ear against the wood.

“You look like hell.”

“Stupid bitch tried to strangle me with a goddamn shoelace. Caused the accident.”

“Pity.” The second man sounded impassive. “Did anyone see you?”

“No. It was dark when we got here. I tied her up, then called you.”

“Have you been in contact with anyone else?”

“Only you.”

“Good. The girl is in the bedroom, you said?”

“Yep. Found some rope and tied her up. Won't get away so easy this time.”

“Taking her was a mistake.”

“So?” The first man sounded angry. “That son of a bitch had it coming when he put me away. I should kill her and dump her on his doorstep, see how he likes it.”

Bile rose in my throat as goosebumps sprouted over my arms. Oh, God. I slapped my hands over my mouth to stifle any noise to avoid drawing attention to myself.

“You were sloppy,” the second man stated dispassionately. “Someone will call in the accident by morning, and the cops will come crawling around.”

“That’s why I called you,” the first man spoke confidently. “I knew you’d help fix things.”

There was a moment of silence, and every muscle in my body tensed as I waited for them to continue. I didn’t want to miss a single word of what was being said, but I knew one thing for certain—they weren’t just going to let me go.

The man who’d kidnapped me said he held a grudge against Drew for putting him in jail. Was this the man who’d raped all those women? My stomach flipped. There was no way in hell I would allow myself to end up like that—not by choice. He was going to have to fight me every inch of the way. Two men against one woman left my odds of escaping terrifyingly slim, but I had no other option. It was either get out of this room, or die trying.

My gaze drifted toward the window across the room. For the past hour or so, I’d avoided making any noise at all, but the time for secrecy was over. I needed to get out of here right now, and the only option available to me was to break the window and escape. I had no idea what lay outside the house, but I had to chance it. The unknown was infinitely better than sitting here just waiting for those men to come in and...

A shudder rippled down my spine. I wouldn’t even think about that. I wished there was something in the room I could use to break the window, but the man had removed everything. I didn’t even see a cloth I could use to at least cover my hands. Well, all things considered, a few cuts and bruises were worth saving my life.

I had just started to shift to my feet when the voice of the second man stopped me cold.

“You were right to call me. I can fix this.”

The first man blew out a breath, and I imagined his satisfaction. “Good. Let’s—”

“Now, now, just a minute.” The second man’s more cultured voice made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “You asked me to fix the problem, so I will be the one to make the decisions, is that understood?”

The first man huffed. “Fine, but—”

“Are you absolutely certain no one saw anything? You spoke to no one?”

“No, I—”

“And no one knows where you were going?”

“No.”

“Excellent,” came the second man’s reply. “Complications are like weeds; they arise most often where you least desire them. So it’s best to start at the root of the problem.”

There was a brief pause, then—“What—No, wait!”

The words had barely left the man’s mouth when a gunshot split the air, freezing my lungs and halting my heart.

Forty-One



DREW

THE FLOOR TILTED PRECARIOUSLY, AND A THOUSAND THOUGHTS raced through my mind as I fought to stay upright. Why the hell was she so far away? Where was she going? Had she left by herself, or was someone with her? More than anything, I needed to know... “Is she okay?”

Mac cleared his throat, but he never glanced away from my brother. His shoulders were straight, the skin at the corners of his eyes pulled taut.

Oh, God. I’d seen that look before. *No*. “She has to be okay. She’s okay, right?”

Mac opened his mouth but no sound came out. Before I realized what I was doing I was across the room, and I fisted my hands in his shirt. “Tell me, damn it! Where is she?”

Two strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me off my friend and fellow officer. Gray whipped me around, planting himself between us. “You need to calm down. *Now*. Losing control isn’t going to help her. If you can’t handle it, I’m going to have to send you home.”

“That’s bullshit!”

“Tough.” My brother was unyielding. “I know how badly this is affecting you but you need to keep a cool head. Understand?”

Swallowing down the retort that formed on my tongue, I reluctantly nodded.

“Good.” Gray turned to the patrolman. “What did you find?”

Mac looked conflicted, and he gave a tiny shake of his head. “I—I don’t know. The police up that way found the car, but...”

His gaze darted my way, and ice sluiced through my veins at the pity I found in the green depths. My heart felt like it was lodged in my throat, and I swallowed hard before speaking. “Where is she?”

Mac shook his head. “They don’t know.”

The edges of my vision bled to black and I felt my knees buckle. My lungs constricted, and I fought to drag in a breath. It was like the air had been sucked right out of the room.

“Thank you, Mac. I’ll take it from here.” Gray took the report, then closed the door.

I felt frozen, my feet rooted to the floor. If she wasn’t in the car... Oh, God. Nausea roiled, threatening to expel the meager contents of my stomach all over the floor.

Gray placed a hand on my shoulder. “If you’re not up for this...”

I shook my head. “I need to see. I need to...”

I trailed off, my mind conjuring the worst scenarios possible. What if she was hurt and alone somewhere out there? If we didn’t find her quickly, she could very well die of blood loss, or exposure, or a thousand other things. She could have internal injuries that slowly killed her from the inside out. If anything happened to her—

Christ. It felt like my heart was being ripped from my chest. I couldn’t live without her. I had to find her and bring her back to me.

Grayson studied me for a long moment, then finally nodded. “Let’s go.”

Worry and fear sat like a lead ball in my stomach, and I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I left the station on my brother's heels. I knew I wasn't handling this well, but... Damn. This was Emery we were talking about. We'd just turned a corner; I couldn't lose her now.

It was silent for several minutes as my brother drove toward the scene of the accident. I still couldn't begin to fathom why she had been so far away. The only logical explanation was that she'd been abducted. Coupled with the broken necklace I'd found in the diner parking lot, it made sense. She'd probably been caught off guard and struggled before he'd forced her into the vehicle. Had he drugged her, or had she gone willingly, terrified of what would happen if she refused to comply? My stomach twisted. Every scenario was worse than the last.

"Don't think like that." My brother's words, seeming to read my mind, penetrated my introspection.

I flicked a look his way. "You know how this works."

The first forty-eight hours were the most critical in cases like this, and it had already been upwards of sixteen hours since she'd gone missing.

He nodded slowly. "At least we have a lead." He fell silent for a second. "I know you're worried. I felt the same way with Claire."

"That was a completely different scenario," I snapped.

Gray didn't respond, and a cold silence filled the car. I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. "I'm sorry. You're right. I just... Every time I think about it..."

"I know," he said quietly. "The thought of losing someone you love is terrifying."

At that, my eyes popped open. It hit me suddenly how true his words were. I loved her. I would never stop fighting for her, and I wouldn't give up until I'd found her. She was going to be okay—I could feel it.

Adrenaline kicked in, and I steeled my spine as I sat up a little straighter in my seat. I grabbed up the report Gray had

tucked between the seats and skimmed it. According to the authorities, the car had hit a tree, then flipped over to rest on its roof.

My heart lodged firmly in my throat. I'd responded to a handful of accidents like that, and they were deadly, often resulting in fatalities. If Emery hadn't been found at the scene, that likely meant she'd survived, and had hopefully gone to look for help. That was a good thing.

Unfortunately, we hadn't heard any reports of her being found. "Doesn't look like they've found much so far." I skimmed the last page. "They need to check the residences nearby, see if anyone has seen her."

Gray nodded. "We'll get a full run down as soon as we talk with the officers on scene."

My knee jiggled nervously, and my pulse kicked up with each mile that brought us closer to the scene of the accident. By the time I saw the lights pulsing I was nearly beside myself. Two cruisers and an unmarked car were pulled off to the side of the tree-lined country road, and several officers milled about.

Gray pulled to a stop and I was out of the car before he'd cut the engine. One of the patrolmen intercepted me almost immediately, and I flashed my badge. "The woman involved in the accident is a resident of Cedar Springs," I said, tipping my head toward her car. "We heard the report and came to check it out."

I could see the confusion in the man's eyes and Gray stepped up next to me, one hand extended in greeting. "Chief Grayson Thorne, CSPD."

"Roberts." They shook hands, and the patrolman gestured over his shoulder. "Our lieutenant just arrived. Let me get him for you."

My body vibrated with anxiety as Roberts moved toward a group of officers and spoke to a man dressed in slacks and a sport coat. The man's head lifted, his gaze roaming over us before he nodded and headed our way.

“Gentlemen.” The lieutenant shook first Gray’s hand, then my own. “I’m Lt. Richard Horton. Nice to meet you.”

Gray tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Emery Harcourt is a family friend.” He held up one hand. “We don’t want to interfere, we’re just trying to figure out what happened and see if we can help at all.”

My eyes strayed toward the car, and my heart clenched. It lay on its roof in the ditch, the glass blown out from impact. I bit down on my tongue and forced myself to rein in my emotions, allowing Gray to take control.

“Any updates so far?”

Horton shook his head. “We’ve got patrolmen canvassing the area, but there’s not much out this way.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but a quick warning look from my brother had me freezing in place. He turned his attention back to Lt. Horton. “Mind if we take a look at the car?”

“Be my guest,” he replied. “We retrieved her ID, but there wasn’t much else. We’re waiting on the rollback to bring it in.”

Gray dipped his chin in acknowledgement. “Thank you.”

My body flashed hot then cold as we approached the car. Twenty-four hours ago I’d watched her climb inside and leave for work. Emotion clogged my throat as we drew even with the rear end of the car.

I dropped to the ground and examined the back window. “Looks like she might have escaped through here,” I said, indicating a path of glass that had been swept aside and flattened down. “Maybe she wrecked and managed to crawl out.”

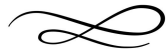
“Makes sense,” Gray responded from beside me as he studied the interior. Suddenly he stiffened.

I glanced his way. “What?”

He paused for a second then tipped his head toward the front seat. “Blood.”

Though it wasn't entirely unexpected, I had the sudden urge to throw up. She'd been hurt, then crawled out. But where had she gone? There were no houses in the surrounding area, and the next best thing was to follow the road. But if Stratton was with her, had she run into the woods to escape him? If she was injured and lost... Christ. I couldn't bear to think about it. We needed to find her—before he did.

Forty-Two



EMERY

MY BODY RECOILED AS THE SHOT RANG IN MY EARS, AND MY heart leapt into my throat. There was a loud thud, then ominous silence. The whole thing couldn't have been more than two or three seconds, but it felt like a lifetime.

Goosebumps lifted the hairs on my arms, and I could practically see the man's head swiveling my way, staring at the paper-thin door that separated us. The time for being stealthy was over. I needed to get out of here now.

I took a step backward just as the first footfall sounded in the outer room. He was coming for me. I raced for the window and closed my eyes, bracing myself for the impact as I swung my bound hands like a club. The glass shattered in the pane, and I spread my wrists as wide as they would go, using the short length of rope to hastily swipe away the remaining shards that speared upward.

The door to the bedroom exploded inward, and I pressed my hands to the sill, one leg already swinging over the ledge. I didn't spare a glance at the man, my only goal to put as much distance between us as quickly as possible. Heart racing, I tumbled through the opening onto the grass below. I landed with a thud on my side, then rolled ungracefully to my hands and knees. Thank God it was only a few feet off the ground; I hadn't even bothered to look, and the dust on the glass had obscured my view.

My feet slid in the dewy grass as I launched myself around the corner of the house. No shot came from behind me as I'd expected, and I ran for the tree line, pumping my arms and forcing my legs to move as quickly as I could. Branches whipped at my face as I weaved through the forest, around trees and over upraised roots. Broken twigs slashed at my legs, but I didn't dare slow down.

Suddenly the earth dropped off. One second it was there, the next it gave way beneath my feet. I tumbled down the embankment, rolling and bumping along, my teeth gnashing together until I landed in a heap at the bottom. A groan stuck in my throat as I stared at the leafy canopy above, black spots dancing before my eyes. Every cell of my body screamed with agony but I forced myself to roll to a sitting position.

I held my hands up in front of me and studied the rope now hanging limply from my wrists. That was a blessing at least. The shoe without the lace had come off during my descent, and I found it about ten yards up the hill. I sat still for another moment, listening, watching for the man, but it remained blessedly quiet. The only sounds were the soft chirping of birds overhead and the buzz of insects.

I gingerly stood then carefully picked my way back up the hill toward my shoe. Twigs pricked the sole of my sock-clad foot, and I winced as they cut through the fabric and bit into the tender flesh. I finally reached it and tugged it on. A blister was already forming on the back of my heel, but there was nothing I could do about that at the moment. The man hadn't appeared yet, but I wasn't going to stick around and wait for him to catch up.

Reorienting myself, I continued in the direction I'd been headed before my fall down the hill. I had no idea where I was going, no clue where I even was. I needed to find some sort of landmark. Adrenaline bubbled in my veins and my heart pounded against my ribs as I cast a quick look overhead.

The sun peeked through the trees to my right, which meant I was going north. I drew in a deep breath, willing my heart to return to its normal rate, and cocked my ears to the sounds around me. No rushing water, no cars... nothing. I pushed

onward, stopping every few minutes to listen. Finally, something far off caught my attention. It was a faint humming sound, like...

A road!

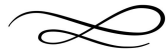
My pulse kicked up and I ran as quickly as my feet could carry me, nearly crying with relief as I broke through the edge of the tree line and the dark pavement came into view.

There were no cars in sight, but it was a road! That meant civilization. Feet aching, I practically dragged myself along the side of the road. If I walked far enough, then...

The soft rumble of an engine came from behind me, and I stumbled into the road, waving frantically. The car slowed, and I could make out two people in the older sedan. It slowed to a stop fifty yards away, and tears streamed down my cheeks as an elderly man climbed from the driver seat. "Miss, are you okay?"

I nodded, the gratitude welling up my throat threatening to choke me. It took several moments to finally form words. "My name is Emery Harcourt," I panted out before I collapsed to the ground, "and I just escaped the man who kidnapped me."

Forty-Three



DREW

A SUDDEN COMMOTION ROSE AROUND THE POLICE OFFICERS, and my head jerked up. “What’s going on?”

My heart thudded heavily against my ribcage as I watched them talk amongst themselves.

“Wait.”

Gray grabbed my arm as I started to move forward, and I threw a look over my shoulder at him. “If they—”

“I know.” His voice was quiet. “But this isn’t our jurisdiction.”

Fuck. I hated that we had to play nice. It grated on my nerves. All I wanted to do was find Emery and make sure she was okay.

Several officers climbed into their cars and pulled away from the scene. A moment later, Horton broke away from the group and made his way back toward us. “Today might be our lucky day,” he started, and hope bloomed in my chest. “Dispatch just got a call that an Emery Harcourt was found a couple miles from here.”

My chest felt tight. “Is she okay?”

“Medics are on their way.” Horton’s dark gaze pinned me in place. “The officers are heading over there now to check it out.”

I wanted to ask a thousand questions, but I bit down on my tongue as my brother spoke up. “Mind if we tag along?”

Horton stared at me a second longer, then switched his gaze to Gray. He seemed to know instinctively that this was more than a case of us just checking in on a friend, and he nodded slowly. “We’re going to need to question her. And there’s always the chance...”

He lifted one shoulder as he trailed off, and I immediately picked up his train of thought. She might be hurt, or even... I pushed the thought away and swallowed hard. “I understand.”

His gaze met mine, and he nodded. “Follow me.”

Gray and I climbed into his car, and we fell in behind Horton as he led the way to the location.

“Are you ready for this?” my brother asked quietly from the driver seat.

Not really. I nodded anyway. “I have to be.”

Gray was silent for a second. “Whatever happens, we’ll figure it out.”

A sedan was pulled to the side of the road, and an older couple stood a safe distance away, speaking with a couple of the patrolmen. But it was the small form on the ground that grabbed my attention. A uniformed officer knelt next to Emery where she sat huddled on the grass a few feet away from the road, arms wrapped around her knees.

With no other thought than of getting to her, I threw the door open and leaped out of the car.

“Drew!”

I stumbled and slid on the rough ground but managed to right myself and kept running, ignoring my brother as he called my name. “Emery!”

Her head slowly turned my way, and the fear and confusion in her eyes immediately morphed into relief as she recognized me. She clambered awkwardly to her feet and took a step my way. The officer next to her stood also, reaching out

to steady her, but neither of us paid him any attention as I rushed forward.

“Emery!” I wrapped her in my arms, yanking her against my chest, and her arms looped around my shoulders as she buried her face in the crook of my neck.

Relief rushed over me, and I couldn’t help the tensing of my muscles as I tightened my hold on her. For second it was silent, then a great, gasping sob left her throat as she finally gave in to the overwhelming mass of emotions swirling inside her. The sound threatened to break my heart in two, and moisture pricked my eyes.

“I’m here, baby.” My knees went weak and I sank to the ground, cuddling her close. I stroked her hair, her back, every place I could reach as I rocked her. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

My gaze strayed to her arms and legs, filthy and bloody, and rage curled through me. I was going to kill him. Her small body trembled under the force of her sobs, and tears saturated my shirt as she curled into me. “I’ve got you, sweetness. I won’t let you go.”

In my peripheral vision, I watched the other officers surround us, and I heard the first strains of the siren’s wail as the ambulance approached. I knew as soon as the medics got here I would have to relinquish my hold on her. But right now it was just me and her, and no one was going to pry her away from me.

Gray moved in front of us, then dropped to a knee. He met my gaze over Emery’s head, concern etched into his features. I gave a slight nod to indicate that she was okay—at least, as okay as anyone could be after everything she’d been through.

Her tears gradually began to slow, and her sobs turned to sniffles. Emery pressed her cheek to my chest, her arms wound around my neck like a noose. “He...”

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” I murmured. “It can wait.”

“N-no.” Her breath was ragged, the words whispered. “He came to the diner. I left early, but then he was there in the

parking lot waiting for me.” The words began to spill from her lips, so quickly I could barely keep up. “I—I think he’s dead. He-he took me to a house and then... And there was a man, and he had a gun. He was going to kill me, but... I escaped, went out the window, through the woods, and...”

“Shhh...” I soothed. “All that matters right now is that you’re okay.”

I stroked one hand over her head. I couldn’t begin to decipher the jumble of words that spilled forth, except something about the man taking her to a secluded house in the woods, and that he was possibly dead. I sure as hell hoped so. We could get all of the details from her later; right now we had to get her to the hospital so they could treat her wounds.

I shifted her slightly in my lap, but she burrowed further into the crook of my neck, seemingly alarmed that I would leave her. “I’m not going anywhere,” I assured her. “The ambulance is on its way, and we’ll need them to take you to the hospital. Is that okay?”

I felt her nod against my shoulder, and Gray’s face creased with pity. He pushed to his feet, then joined the other officers off to the side where they began to talk in low tones. I knew he was probably relaying the information Emery had just admitted, but my focus was solely on her. A few moments later the ambulance pulled up to the scene, and I knew our time together was almost over.

“The ambulance is here,” I said softly as I rubbed her back in soothing circles. “In just a minute, they’re going to come over and get you loaded onto a stretcher so they can take you to the hospital.”

I walked her through step-by-step of what was about to come, needing her to be prepared. She’d already been through too much today; she needed the assurance that everything from here on out would be all right.

She released her hold on my neck and slowly nodded, despite the tears that still trickled down her cheeks. “Can you come with me?”

“Of course.” I gave her a little squeeze. “I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

There would be times when the doctor needed to speak with her alone, but we’d cross that bridge when we came to it. A minute later, two medics wheeled over a stretcher.

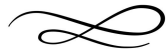
“All right,” I murmured low in her ear. “Are you ready?”

She gave a single nod, and I rearranged her in my arms before standing, then gently placed her on the gurney. The medics checked her vitals then loaded her into the ambulance, and I watched as they started an IV.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Grayson said quietly.

I nodded, then climbed in beside Emery. She swiveled her head my way, stretching her free hand toward me. I took her hand in both of mine and pressed a kiss to her fingers. Looking at her like this, so small and frail, sent anger spiraling through me. I almost hoped the son of a bitch wasn’t dead, because I would gladly kill him myself.

Forty-Four



EMERY

I SENSED HIM BEFORE I SAW HIM. THE FIRST THING THAT filled my vision when I blinked my eyes open was Drew, slouched in the chair next to the bed. His head was rolled slightly to the side, eyes closed as he slept.

I took a moment to study him. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, and the skin around his mouth was pulled taut, even in sleep. He still looked worried, and it tugged at my heart. I wondered if he'd gotten any sleep over the past couple of days. More than likely not.

I had no idea how long I'd been asleep this last time, but I'd crashed out almost as soon as the doctor had bandaged my hands and feet. My headache lingered, but that was probably due to the concussion I'd sustained during the wreck. The painkillers they'd given me earlier had helped, dulling it to the point that I'd been able to fall asleep for a bit and allow my body to rest.

My throat felt parched, and I shifted slightly, glancing around to see if the nurse had left a pitcher of water nearby. The rustle of the sheets brought Drew immediately to attention, and he jerked upright in his seat, his gaze zeroing in on me.

"Sorry," I murmured. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"Hey." He wiped one hand over his face as he sat forward. "You're all good. How are you feeling?"

I cleared my throat. “A little thirsty, actually. I was looking for water.”

“Sure.” He stood to retrieve a pitcher from a small, mobile table then filled a plastic cup. Drew moved back to my side and picked up the remote to lift the bed. I shifted as it changed positions, wincing as my muscles protested.

“You okay?”

I waved away Drew’s concern. “Fine.”

So that might be overstating it a bit, but things could definitely be worse. He lifted the rim of the cup to my lips and I sipped at it, allowing the water to moisten my tongue and lips. I lifted my bandaged hands and awkwardly extracted it from his hands. He watched warily but didn’t say anything as I drank more deeply.

“More?” he asked when I passed it back to him. I shook my head as I wiped the excess water from the corner of my mouth using the gauze wrapped around my hand. “Hungry?”

I took stock of my body, then shook my head again. “I’m okay, thanks.”

He nodded then sat, staring at me, and I felt suddenly self-conscious. “How long have I been out?”

He glanced at the clock. “About five hours.”

I nodded a little. I had a hundred questions. Had the police found the house? Had they apprehended the other man? What had happened to the man who’d kidnapped me? Was he dead or just injured?

I snapped my head up at the sound of my name, and I met Drew’s concerned gaze. I blushed, suddenly realizing he must have been trying to get my attention for a while, but I’d been lost in thought. “Sorry, what did you say?”

He smiled softly. “The police would like to speak with you.”

I blinked at him. “You’re the police.”

“Because you were in Dresden when the accident occurred, they’re in charge of the investigation. But, since you were...” He stumbled over his words. “Since Stratton came to Cedar Springs first, they’re allowing us to sit in.”

I peered up at him. “Can you stay with me?”

“Of course.” He wrapped his fingers around my hand. “I’ll stay unless you ask me to leave. Are you up for that? I don’t want to push you, but...”

I knew what he meant. The sooner I told the police about the men in the cabin, the faster they could find them. I nodded. “I’ll talk to them.”

Drew made a phone call, then turned to me once he’d hung up. “They’ll be here shortly.”

My nerves felt shredded, and I wanted to just get it off my chest. Had it really only been this morning that everything had happened? It felt like a lifetime ago already.

Two officers I recognized from earlier knocked on the door less than half an hour later, and Lt. Horton settled in the chair next to me. “Miss Harcourt, can you please walk us through what happened?”

I told them everything I knew, from the abduction at the diner, to the car accident, to waking up in the cabin. All the while Drew listened intently from his place on the bed next to me.

“I was trying to cut through the ropes around my wrists when the other guy came into the house.”

“There was a second man?” the patrolman, Roberts, clarified.

I nodded. “I could hear them talking. At first their conversation seemed...” I fished for the right word. “Not friendly, exactly, but cordial. The first guy had called him for help—that’s why he came to the cabin. The second man told him he was stupid for taking me. Then...” I drew a breath. “I heard a gunshot.”

Lt. Horton studied me. “You didn’t actually see it?”

I shook my head. "I was still locked in the bedroom. But one minute they were arguing and the next..." I flinched, remembering the pop of the gun and the eerie silence that followed. Drew squeezed my hand, lending silent comfort.

"The first guy was talking, then all of a sudden he just... cut off. I knew the other guy would come for me next. I smashed out the window just as he came into the room."

"Did you get a look at the man?" Roberts asked, pen poised over his notebook.

I bit my lip and shook my head. "I was too scared. My only thought was to get away."

He nodded. "What happened then?"

I explained how I ran through the woods, then fell down the ravine before finally making it to the road.

"Can you tell us anything about your surroundings? Did you notice any landmarks, or where the sun was?"

I paused for a moment, drawing back to that moment, then slowly nodded. "I remember the sun coming up through the trees to my right, and I just kept going until I heard the cars."

The three of them exchanged looks, and Lt. Horton dipped his chin my way as he stood. "Thank you for your time. I hope you feel better."

I offered a small smile. "I hope you find them."

Drew showed the officers to the door and murmured his thanks, then closed up behind them. I was certain the nurse would be along soon to check in on me again, but for the moment we were finally alone.

"What now?"

Drew's chest rose and fell on a deep breath as he made his way back to me. "From what I've heard, they've been searching the area but came up empty. Hopefully your statement will point them in the right direction."

"I hope so."

Drew laced his fingers with mine. "You did great."

I offered him a wan smile. “I didn’t do anything. I couldn’t even tell them where to go.”

“What you did was amazing.” His fingers wrapped around my bandaged wrist and lifted it to his lips. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

My heart fluttered as he kissed the spot where the ropes had burned my wrists. Part of it felt like a bad dream I couldn’t snap out of. An impending sense of doom hung over me. “What about the other man?”

My voice was small, unsure, and a fierceness flashed across Drew’s features as he settled on the bed next to me. “We’re going to find him, too, and we’re going to put him away, just like we did with Stratton.”

I bit my tongue to hold back the retort that had automatically jumped to my tongue. Stratton had managed to escape; what would stop this other man from doing the same? Would he come after me again to finish me off? Goosebumps broke out over my skin, and I shivered at the thought.

Drew seemed to read my expression, because he leaned in close and cupped my chin in his hand. “I will never let anything happen to you.”

But something bad had already happened. “You can’t be there every second of the day,” I said softly. “What if—?”

“No.” His voice was firm, his eyes cold. “I almost lost you once, and that damn near killed me. I will make damn certain nothing like that ever happens again. Someone wants you, they’re going to have to come through me. Do you understand me?”

I nodded meekly. “I didn’t mean...”

“I know, sweetheart.” His expression gentled. “I thought we’d put Stratton away for good. That never should have happened. I never expected him to go after you. That was an oversight on my part, but it won’t happen again. I promise.”

His thumb swept over my chin as he stared intently at me. “I’ve never been more scared in my life than I was when I

found out about the car accident. When I heard you were missing, all I could think was—God, I hope she’s okay.”

Tears blurred my eyes. “All I thought about was you. I knew you’d find me. I knew you would come.”

“Of course I would, baby. I’d have torn the whole state apart to find you.” He shifted, settling next to me so he could loop one arm around my shoulders. I leaned into him, and he pulled me close, then pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “You’re so strong. So brave. I don’t know anyone else who would have had the courage to do what you did.”

“I did what I had to do. I knew it was either me or him, and...” I lifted one shoulder self-consciously, the memories of the past two days pressing in on me.

“I’m glad you did.” He gave his head a little shake and pulled me closer. “When you went missing, it was like a part of me had been ripped away. And that was when I knew... I couldn’t live without you.”

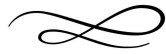
Happiness unfurled in my chest at his admission, and I turned my face into his shoulder to stifle the tears that had begun to fall in earnest. My head was a jumble of emotions, elation mixed with fear and anxiety, all of them ping ponging all over the place.

One hand cupped the back of my head and cuddled me close. “Are those happy tears, or are you crying because you’re stuck with me?”

I couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up, and I lightly smacked his chest. Drew captured my hand and kissed my fingers, then pressed my palm to his heart. A smile spread over my lips as I snuggled into him and tipped my head up to look at him. “I don’t think I’ll mind being stuck with you.”

He took my chin in his hand and pressed a soft kiss to my lips before meeting my gaze again, his eyes dark with promise. “I’ll make sure you don’t.”

Forty-Five



DREW

OFFICERS SURROUNDED THE SMALL CABIN, AND I WATCHED THE detective nod to the others. I held my breath as he reached for the knob, ready to breach the house. Miraculously, it turned and the door swung open. I tensed from head to toe, waiting for something, someone. But the interior of the cabin was silent and still. I expelled the breath I'd been holding and glanced at the detective.

The patrolman went in first, sweeping the corners of the room before venturing into the depths of the cabin. It didn't appear to be too large, maybe two bedrooms at most, and it took them less than thirty seconds to clear it. As soon as the signal had been given, I followed them inside.

Before I even crossed the threshold, the scent of bleach hit my nostrils. I shared a look with the detective. "Looks like we found our place," he said unnecessarily.

I nodded grimly. It was both gratifying and disappointing, because I doubted we would get anything useful. The cabin was empty, completely devoid of anything except basic furniture. Stratton was nowhere to be found, but that wasn't any great surprise. If he'd been killed by the second man as Emery stated, I was certain the bleach had been used to remove the blood. And if the man had gone so far as to come in and clean up and dispose of the body, it was likely that he had also wiped down the entire cabin to eliminate any

evidence left behind. Still, we could afford to leave no stone unturned.

The crime scene techs went about their business, dusting every solid surface for prints and looking for any hairs or fibers that might be useful in the investigation. Luminol confirmed that there had been blood on the floor, but it could take weeks before we got a confirmation of DNA, if at all. Stratton was our only lead at the moment, and even that was a dead end. There had been no deposit into his bank account, no unusual activity while he was in jail, not even a single phone call. We needed to figure out who had come to the cabin—and how many men had walked out alive.

From Emery's statement, I could only suspect that Stratton kidnapping her was a spur of the moment decision and not orchestrated by someone higher up. I had no idea what he was involved in or how, and that bothered the hell out of me. Without some idea, it would be nearly impossible to find the person who killed him.

Hours later, after the team had collected the minimal evidence left behind, I climbed into my car with a resigned sigh and headed back toward Cedar Springs. I couldn't help but feel that it had been a waste of a day, time taken away from Emery. All I wanted to do was go see her, but I forced myself to drive to the station instead. Inside, I headed straight for Grayson's office. His door was open and he was seated at his desk, a mound of paperwork piled on the surface.

He glanced up at me when I gave a quick triple knock on the door jamb, then leaned back in his chair and scrubbed his hands over his face. "How'd it go? Get anything?"

"Jack shit. I expect they had a cleaning crew come through." I didn't need to explain to him why that was a bad thing.

He gave his head a little shake. "There must be some sort of tie-in. You're sure there's nothing in his background that stands out?"

I shook my head. "No transactions, no communications through social media or phone messaging." We got phone

records, but all the calls prior to his arrest were accounted for, and we'd had his phone locked up in evidence ever since.

“Burner?”

I lifted one shoulder. “Can't rule it out. We'll check the list of visitors who came to the county jail, but from my understanding he didn't have anyone come to see him before the transfer.”

“Inside job?”

I blew out of breath. “Can't rule that out, either.” It was entirely possible that another inmate had acted as liaison between Stratton and the other man. Tracking that down would be a bitch, though not impossible, just... not easy. “We can rattle some cages, see what shakes out. We would need to find out who Stratton aligned himself with in the county jail and do some digging. Maybe dangle some opportunities in front of his face to get him to roll on Stratton or the second man.”

My brother nodded. We'll figure it out. Hey, this came in while you were out.” Gray reached down to grab something, then deposited Emery's purse on his desk. “Apparently Stratton had tossed it on his way out of town. Someone found it in a ditch and brought it in. License and cards are all there, but...”

He pinned me with a look, and I nodded. She'd need to have her credit cards cancelled and replaced, just in case. And thankfully her license showed her mother's address. “Phone?”

“It's in there.”

That news was bittersweet. Even if we'd had time to try to use the GPS function to locate her phone, it wouldn't have done us much good. But at least she had her belongings back. It was one less thing she'd have to deal with.

I better go,” I said as I pushed up from the chair. “Emery is probably ready to kill me. I've been gone for hours already.”

Gray lifted his chin. “How's she doing?”

“Surprisingly well,” I responded slowly.

Emery had wanted to come, but I'd finally managed to talk her out of it. Instead I'd asked Izzy to sit with her until I could get back. Em didn't have anyone else around since her mother was devoted to Alan, and that motherfucker wasn't allowed to come within a hundred yards of her. I hated to leave her there all alone, but I knew Izzy would keep her occupied at least for a little while.

In theory, she could probably be discharged now. She would just need to stay off her feet for a few more days until she was fully healed. She was doing phenomenally well, handling it better than I expected. I thought after everything she'd endured that she'd be scared. But she was pushing for answers, insisting on finding the asshole who had kidnapped her, and the man who'd killed him.

I hoped to hell that we would get some answers. She was strong, more so than I ever dreamed, and I was so fucking proud of her. An ordeal like that would have done a number on anyone, even members of the police force. It was possible that she was repressing her emotions until the dust had settled, and if she was, that was okay. Everyone dealt with trauma differently and I would be there for her if and when she needed me. I was straddling a fine line, wanting to care for her without smothering her, and I didn't want to push her too hard. I wasn't completely certain of her emotional stability despite her outward attitude, and I preferred to play it safe. "I don't think it has all caught up with her yet."

He nodded in understanding. "Go home, take your time with her. You deserve it."

"Thanks." I left the station, then headed back toward the hospital. Worry and doubt plagued me the whole way to the hospital, because I had a horrible feeling this was far from over.

Forty-Six



EMERY

I WAS READY TO RIP MY HAIR OUT, THE NEED FOR ANSWERS pressing in on me and driving me nearly to the edge of insanity. My gaze strayed toward the door again. Where the hell was Drew?

Though he'd stopped in first thing this morning to check on me, he'd been gone almost all day, and I was dying to see him. I hope they'd found the cabin and that man, Stratton, who'd abducted me. So far I hadn't heard a single peep from him, and worry churned in my stomach.

"He'll be here soon." Izzy's teasing voice floated toward me, and guilt rose up as I turned to her.

"I'm sorry, I'm just... anxious."

"You must be bored as hell listening to me all day."

"Of course not," I defended. "But..."

"I get it." Izzy held up one hand. "It's different."

I nodded. "It is. I worry all the time when he's at work, praying he'll stay safe. And when he's gone, all I want is for him to come back to me."

A soft smile curved her mouth. "I'm glad everything worked out."

"I was worried what you'd say," I admitted. "About us dating."

She laughed. “Why do you think I suggested you go live with him?”

A wave of heat swept up my cheeks. “It all felt too good to be true,” I said.

“It’s not.” Izzy shook her head. “He’s crazy about you. Speak of the devil,” she said, her gaze flicking toward the door.

Drew stood outlined in the space, a tiny smile on his face. My heart leaped at the sight of him. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” He sauntered into the room and looped one arm around Izzy’s shoulders in a loose hug. “Was our patient well behaved today?”

He cocked an eyebrow my way, and my blood thudded heavily in my veins. Those deep green eyes zeroed in on mine, holding me captive, and I felt hot all over.

“Mostly,” Izzy teased. “But I’m pretty sure she’s ready for you to take over. She’s been watching for you for the past hour.”

My cheeks heated again as his lips curled into a knowing smirk, and I lifted my chin. “I was just curious about the case.”

“Mhmm...” He made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat before dropping his arm. “Thanks, Iz. I owe you one.”

“Glad I got to see you.” She leaned over the bed and I returned her warm hug.

“You, too.”

“Hey, mom wants both of you to come to dinner Sunday if you can make it.”

I flicked a little look at Drew, who just stared at me. I smiled at my best friend. “I’ll keep you posted.”

“Sounds good. See you later!”

Izzy gathered her things then left, and Drew and I stared at each other for a moment before he approached the bed. I was practically vibrating with the need to ask a thousand questions,

and they spilled from my lips before I could stop them. “Did you find the house? Was he there? How long until they’ll be able to find who shot him?”

Drew snorted. “Is that all you care about?” That dark eyebrow went up even further as he sauntered toward the bed like a panther stalking his prey. “You didn’t miss me?”

“I did,” I murmured. But I was still dying to know what happened.

Drew seemed to know instinctively that I would pester him until he told me what I wanted to know, and he relented with a soft sigh. “To answer your questions: yes, no, and I’m not sure.”

“But—”

He settled on the edge of the bed, facing me, and rested a hand on my thigh. “One step at a time.”

I snapped my mouth shut, and a grin curled his lips.

“So that’s the only reason you wanted to see me? To see if we’d found Stratton?”

He pressed his hands to the mattress on either side of me then leaned in so close his lips almost touched mine, and my breath turned shallow as I shook my head.

“Good.” He brushed the tip of his nose along mine. “I thought about you all day.”

Light as a feather, he pressed his lips to mine. As soon as it started, the kiss was over, and Drew straightened to his full height. “So, what did the doctor have to say?”

I shrugged. “Should be able to go home soon.”

He peered down at me. “How do you feel?”

“Like I never want to see the inside of a hospital ever again,” I said honestly. I was tired of being poked and prodded, checked on every two hours. My hands and feet still felt tender, but it wasn’t unmanageable. The nurses had helped me get to and from the bathroom when needed, but I figured in

another day or so I would be able to do that all by myself. “I want to go home.”

Drew’s face creased. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

I wasn’t entirely mobile by myself yet, and it irked me to admit that I would need someone around to help with even the most basic things. Plus, I was certain the last thing Drew wanted to do was care for me like a toddler for the next couple of days. “Izzy said I could stay with her at your parents’ house —”

“Not a chance,” he cut in, a scowl on his face. “If you’re leaving, you’re coming home.”

I swallowed hard as my heart slammed against my ribs. He’d said home—as in, he thought I belonged there. “Are you sure? I look like a crab.”

Drew bit back a smile. “But you make a cute crab.” He wrapped his fingers around one wrist and pulled my hand toward him like he could inspect my wounds through the bandages.

“It’s really not as bad as it looks,” I assured him. His head tipped to one side, a silent reprimand. “In two days I’ll be back to normal.”

“Debatable,” he murmured. “We’ll talk to the nurse and see if they’re ready to release you.”

Still not fully appeased, but grateful he’d at least agreed to consider it, I settled back on the bed. I wasn’t used to being so stagnant. At the diner, I was always on my feet, and to be lying here doing nothing grated on my nerves.

Drew’s gaze canvassed the room and came to rest on the giant bouquet of pink lilies that had arrived this morning, joining the vast array that had already been sent by the Thornes and people from the diner who had wanted to express their sympathy.

“Those are new.” He jerked his head toward the vase. “Who are those from?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think the card was signed.”

His brows drew together as he rose and extracted the card from within the bright blooms. Turning it over, he inspected both sides, then gave a slow shake of his head. “Just says, ‘My sincerest apologies, and best wishes for a quick recovery.’”

“Who knows?” I shrugged. “Irene has apparently been telling everyone what happened, so it could be anyone.”

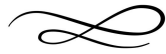
She’d stopped in this morning to see me as well, offering her condolences and assuring me that I was welcome back whenever I was ready to return to work.

Drew replaced the card and nodded slowly. “There’s just something about the phrasing that—”

Our attention was fractured when the nurse entered, and I jumped at the chance to ask if I could leave. An hour later, discharge papers in hand, Drew wheeled me out of the hospital then helped me into the passenger seat of his car. Automatically I reached for the belt, then realized I couldn’t grasp it with my bandaged hands.

“I’ve got you.” Drew extracted it from my fingers and snapped it into place, then kissed my temple. I settled into the seat as he closed the door, a warmth surrounding my heart. It was true; I knew he would always be there for me.

Forty-Seven



DREW

THE DRIVE HOME WAS QUICK AND RELATIVELY QUIET. AS SOON as I pulled into the garage and parked, I turned toward Emery. “Don’t move.” I rounded the car and opened the passenger door, then lifted her out. Her arms looped around my neck, and I held her close as I navigated around the car to the door.

“Anything particular you’d like to do?” I asked once we got inside.

“I’d kill for a bath,” she said. “My hair feels disgusting.”

“I can do that.”

Her face tipped up to mine. “Really?”

“Sure. But How about a shower?” I countered. “I can use the hand nozzle to rinse your hair.”

A shy smile curled her pretty lips. “If you wouldn’t mind, that would be great.”

“Not at all.” I wanted her close, and if that’s what she needed, I was here for it. I knew they would have cleaned her in the hospital, but it wasn’t the same as having a true shower. I set her on the toilet then started the shower to let it warm up.

I returned to find Emery stripping her shirt over her head, and I helped her wiggle out of her pajama bottoms. I held up a hand when she started to remove her underwear. I only had so much restraint; it was killing me not to pull her close right

now, kiss every inch of her. I was already hard and aching for her, but she was still hurt. I wasn't so much of an asshole that I'd try to initiate sex after everything she'd been through.

Leaving my clothes in place, I moved her to the shower then detached the spray handle. As gently as possible I sprayed her off, starting with the top of her head. I massaged shampoo into her scalp—twice—then watched as the bubbles ran down her back and into the tub. Her long strands of hair slipped through my fingers, and every moment of the past few days flashed before my eyes. Those hours without word of her had been excruciating.

Grasping her hair in a loose ponytail, I turned her head toward me. It took a second for her eyes to meet mine, and I cradled her face in my hands. I just stared at her for a second, thanking God she was okay. She seemed to understand, because she offered a tremulous little smile. I leaned in and kissed her. Not like I had in the hospital, a bare brush of our lips. This kiss was hot and feral, a declaration of things to come. All the worry and love I felt for her poured from my heart in that moment, and I knew she was the one for me. I'd never felt this way about a woman before.

Breaking the kiss, I brushed the damp strands away from her face. "I can't begin to tell you what was going through my mind that night," I said. "I knew something was wrong. I just knew it."

I hadn't told her about going to her mother's place the night she was abducted, but I did now. "I thought for sure Alan was involved. But then we heard about the crash. Christ, Em..." I touched my forehead to hers. "I thought of you alone and hurt, and it fucking gutted me. I thought I would lose my mind without you. I couldn't breathe, couldn't focus... All I could think about was bringing you back to me."

A watery smile curved her mouth. "I knew you would come for me."

"I wish it'd been sooner," I apologized. "I wish we'd found out about him sooner so you never had to go through that. I would give anything to take back what happened."

“I know.” She pressed her palms to my chest. “Nothing happened. What I said was the truth. He didn’t...” Her gaze darted away for a second. “He didn’t hurt me. Well, aside from this.”

She lifted her hand to the cut along her eyebrow. “Most of these scratches and bruises are from the car accident.”

I still couldn’t believe that. “You’re so damn incredible. Most people would have been terrified.”

“I was,” she admitted, “but I didn’t have a choice. He would most likely have killed me if we’d made it to wherever he planned to go. I don’t think the cabin was his place,” she said.

We didn’t think so either, but I was curious why she thought so. “What makes you say that?”

“Just in the way he was acting—not that I’m an expert or anything. But... the place was nearly empty, and I heard him complaining. He only used a piece of rope to bind my hands. If it’d been his place, I think it would have been better planned.”

“By causing the accident, you forced him to change his plans.”

She nodded. “I think he called the second man for help. Either to take us somewhere else or to kill me there, I’m not sure. But he had to be fast, because someone would notice the car and eventually come looking.”

My blood ran cold at the thought. She was damn lucky she’d managed to escape. “I never would have stopped looking for you,” I said fiercely. “I would have torn this whole town apart looking for you.”

“I know.” The look she gave me was so pure, so honest, it made me want to throw myself at her feet.

Shit. I had to get out of here before I did something I’d regret. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get dried off.”

I helped her from the shower, then took her to the bedroom where she slipped on a pair of dry sweats and a tank top.

While she changed, I quickly toweled off and dressed. I'd been so focused on her the last couple of days that I'd forgotten all about her project downstairs. "Hey, I want to show you something. You up for a trip to the basement?"

She shrugged, a curious expression on her face. "Sure."

"Good." I grinned. "Come on."

I scooped her up, carefully carrying her down the narrow stairwell, cautious not to bump her feet against the wall. Once we were down, I settled her in a chair and grabbed up the hardware I'd selected nearly a week ago. "I have a surprise for you. You said you wanted vintage knobs, so..." I pulled one from the bag and held it up for her inspection. "What do you think?"

Her mouth fell open a fraction. "Drew, that's..." She swallowed hard and plucked it from my grasp, tracing the intricate carvings. "These are beautiful. Where do you find them?"

The sheer awe in her expression made pleasure flare to life in my chest. "At a little specialty store. I saw them and thought of you."

Her eyes misted over and she lifted her hands my way. I met her halfway, pulling her against me as she wrapped her arms around my neck. "Thank you."

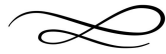
"You're welcome."

Her legs wound around my waist as I lifted her from the chair, and the heat of her core pressed against me. She arched into me with a sweet little sigh of pleasure as my erection swelled. Damn. I bit down on my tongue and willed my arousal away. I couldn't allow myself to get this turned on right now. I carried her easily back up the stairs toward the living room, then deposited her in the corner of the couch.

"Why don't you relax for a bit? It's been a long couple of days." I dropped a kiss on her forehead, a fierce protectiveness welling up inside me. Those moments of worrying I'd never see her in this house again, never feel her by my side, had

turned me inside out. I would do anything to protect her and keep her safe, no matter what it took.

Forty-Eight



EMERY

MY HEART BEAT NERVOUSLY IN MY CHEST AS WE PULLED UP TO the brick ranch, and Drew laid one hand over mine where it rested on the console. “You good?”

This was the first time Drew and I were visiting his family as an official couple. Though I’d been friends with Izzy for ten years and was practically part of the family, this put an entirely different spin on things. “Just nervous.”

Drew lightly squeezed my fingers, then lifted them to his mouth and pressed a soft kiss to the tips. Most of the bandages had come off a couple of days ago, but the skin was still tender in some places. “There’s nothing to be nervous about. You know my mom loves you.”

“Yeah, but...”

He shook his head. “Look at Gray and Claire. Did she hold a grudge against Claire?”

“No.” I rolled my eyes. “But that was an entirely different situation. They were best friends for years before they started dating. Plus they’re only a couple of years apart. I don’t want them to think...”

“That I took advantage of you?”

I shot a guilty look his way. “Kind of. I just don’t want them to think that we started dating after we lived with each other because it was convenient.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up in a smirk. “There’s nothing convenient about you.”

I lightly smacked his bicep. “Would you be serious for a second?”

His green eyes met mine and held. “No one in their right mind would think we’re together for any reason except that we want to be.”

I swallowed hard at his words and gave a little nod. “Okay.”

His hand slid around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a quick, sweet kiss. A smile pulled at his lips as he lifted away. “We’d better get out of the car before I turn around and take you home.”

It was definitely tempting. After my two days spent in the hospital, Drew had taken me home and cared for me. But unfortunately, that didn’t extend to the bedroom. Aside from a couple of chaste kisses, he hadn’t touched me intimately in more than a week. A huge part of me wanted to crawl into his lap and throw my arms around his neck. I wanted his lips on mine, his hands roving over every inch of my body. Before I could come up with anything to say, Drew pushed open the door and rounded the car.

A moment later my door swung open, and he was there, ready to help me out. The blisters on the back of my heel were still tender, and it made walking difficult. Drew lifted me from the car then carried me toward the house. He deposited me lightly on the stoop so he could open the door, then ushered us inside. “Hey, y’all. We’re here.”

Vera tossed down the dish towel and wrapped me in a motherly hug. “Oh, sweetheart, I was so worried about you.”

Irrational tears pricked my eyes. I’d spent so much time at the Thornes’ house when I was younger that Vera was like a second mother to me. She’d certainly shown herself to care more than my biological mother had recently. She pulled away, clasping my shoulders and giving me a thorough once over from head to toe. “How are you? Should you be up and

moving around already? You know you're always welcome here if—”

“Relax, ma, she's fine.” Drew kissed her cheek, then settled a hand on my waist, effectively drawing me away from Vera and into his side. “She was begging to go home the very next day. Besides, I'm still off work right now.”

“Not for long.” Her expression was still concerned as she turned back to me. “If you need anything, call me right away.”

“I will, thank you.”

“All right then.” She gave a brisk little clap. “Let's eat!”

We all moved to the dining room and dug into the pot roast she'd made. It was tender and perfect, and I couldn't help but study the people gathered around the table. They were all so familiar, and each of them had played a huge part in my life growing up. I'd never considered myself the type of woman who needed a man around. Did it make me happy? Of course, and that was even truer with Drew. But I couldn't help the anxiety that clutched at my throat when I thought of the future. What would happen if things between us didn't work out? Would I lose everyone I cared about?

My father had left when I was ten, just picked up and walked away as if we meant nothing to him. For the longest time I wondered what I'd done wrong to drive him away. As an adult I could see the situation a little more clearly, and I knew that it wasn't my fault my parents' marriage had dissolved. Without her husband around, my mother had moved us to her hometown of Cedar Springs to be closer to her parents. My mother threw herself into any relationship she could find, trying to replace the one she'd lost. With no family left, I felt abandoned. I'd found a true home with the Thornes, and I didn't want to give that up.

“Em?”

I jerked to attention at the sound of Izzy calling my name, and I swiveled my head in her direction. “Sorry, I was...” I fluttered one hand in the air, embarrassed. “What did you say?”

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I told Drew I'm stealing you to talk."

"Oh, sure."

Drew slid my chair back, then extended one hand to help me stand. Izzy shortened her stride as I shuffled along next to her until we reached the back porch. I gently lowered myself to the steps and turned my attention to my best friend. "What's up?"

Her blue eyes lasered on mine. "I was actually going to ask you the same thing."

A sigh filtered from my lips before I could stop it, and tears burned across the bridge of my nose. It was a culmination of every pent-up emotion that had them sliding down my cheeks.

"Oh, Em." Izzy draped one arm over my shoulders and pulled me close. She didn't ask questions, she just let me cry until I'd exhausted myself.

"I'm just... worried."

Her brows drew together. "About what?"

I couldn't tell her that a huge part of me was feeling neglected and abandoned by Drew. Logically I knew it didn't make sense, but my heart refused to listen. Though he'd been incredibly attentive, it felt like he'd pulled away emotionally. I needed the physical reassurance that we were okay, that everything would work out, but it worried the hell out of me. Coupled with seeing his family all gathered together today, it had hit me hard all at once.

"I just..." I trailed off and gathered my thoughts, carefully choosing my words. "Drew hasn't had many relationships." Izzy opened her mouth, but I held up a hand. "We both know it's true. He even admits that. He was so focused on work for so long that he put everything else aside. Which is great," I added. "Don't get me wrong—I want him to be successful and happy. I just worry that..."

She nodded slowly, seeming to grasp my concern. "There has to be a happy medium."

“I don’t want him to feel like I’m holding him back. And if things don’t work out...” I drew in a sharp breath. “I don’t want to lose you guys, too.”

“Never.” Izzy squeezed my shoulder. “I love you both and I would never choose one of you over the other. Same with the rest of us.” She gestured with her free hand to the house. “You were family before you dated my brother, and you’ll be family forever, no matter what.”

“Thanks.” I turned a watery grin her way. “I appreciate that.”

“It’s true. I hope things work out for you two, but if they don’t...” She shrugged. “It wasn’t meant to be. That doesn’t change anything between us.”

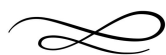
I wrapped her in a hug, grateful that she’d helped to ease my fears a little. I still needed to talk with Drew, and that would be the hardest of all. The door behind us slid open, and I glanced up at the man in question.

His gaze roamed my face, taking in my tear-stained cheeks and red eyes, but he didn’t comment. “You ready to go home?”

“Sure.” He extended one hand and guided me to my feet. I threw Izzy one last smile. “Talk to you later.”

We said our goodbyes and Drew helped me to the car once more. Sealed alone inside with him, my heart kicked into a frantic pace. How did I make him see that I was okay? Would he always see me as wounded and broken? And how could we ever move on from that?

Forty-Nine



DREW

I WAS INTENSELY CURIOUS TO KNOW WHAT EMERY AND IZZY had been talking about before I walked up, but I figured it was better not to ask. At least for now. The whole ride home Emery had been quiet, almost disappointed, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out why. I hoped to hell it didn't have anything to do with us. Part of me didn't want to ask, but it would drive me crazy if I didn't. "Everything okay?"

"Hmm?" Emery turned to me, her gaze faraway. "Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

I flipped my hand upside down, and she slipped her fingers into mine. I gave her hands a little squeeze. "I know my family can be a little overwhelming.

"You know I don't mind that." She smiled. "I love it, actually. You guys are so close. I wish..." She trailed off, and sympathy assailed me.

I knew exactly what she was about to say. She wished she and her mother would resolve things. "Were you guys close? I mean, before...?"

She was silent for a second. "Not really. Not like you guys. I mean, she's my mom and I love her, but... it's difficult. She's been single for so long, ever since my dad left, and I think that left a huge void. I was there, but it wasn't the same. She needed to be loved. And unfortunately she just kept looking in the wrong places."

No shit. Banked fury simmered in my veins at the memory. I would still gladly put that fucker six feet under the first chance I had. I turned into the garage, then rounded the car to let her out. I held out a hand to steady her, but released her as soon as she was upright.

Over the last couple of days, Emery's mobility had improved drastically. Although she stopped frequently to rest her feet, she no longer needed help going from place to place. She walked slowly and carefully, so it took her longer than normal, but I could tell she was glad to have that aspect of independence back. I knew how badly it had grated on her to rely on people for help.

We slowly made our way inside, and I dropped my keys on the counter. Emery sidled to me, wrapping her arms around my waist. Every cell of my body tightened with the need to pull her close, kiss her from head to toe. Her breasts pressed flush against my chest, and I imagined the feel of them under my hand, the way they tasted. My dick swelled against my jeans, and I fought the urge to grind into her.

I wanted nothing more than to scoop her into my arms and carry her to bed, love her for hours until we were both exhausted and sated. It'd been so damn long, and I missed her like crazy. Not being able to touch her had driven me nearly to the brink of insanity, and I was too close to the edge. I needed to distance myself so I wouldn't lose control. She'd been through too much, and I wouldn't add to her pain.

I gently extracted myself from her hold and forced the words past my tongue. "You should go relax."

She dipped her head and turned away, but not before I saw the shimmer of tears glazing her eyes. Shit. I hated that I'd made her cry, even if I wasn't entirely sure why. "Baby?"

I lightly grasped the back of her shirt but she pulled away. "It's fine, Drew. I just need a minute to myself."

I was certain that was a lie. In fact; that was the last thing she needed. She hadn't spoken about the incident last weekend, and I wondered if it plagued her. Did she not want me to touch her? I'd been so careful all week, trying to keep

my hands to myself, even though it was hell. Almost immediately I discarded the idea. She'd allowed me to carry her, and she hadn't balked whenever I pulled her close at my parents' house. Whatever was bothering her, we needed to move past it.

Settling my hand at her waist, I gently squeezed. "Talk to me."

She shook her head, refusing to look at me, but that only strengthened my resolve to fix things. I moved in front of her so she couldn't run away from me, literally or figuratively. "Are you still hurting? Still worried about Stratton?"

"No, I..." Her voice cracked, and she looked away, swiping angrily at an errant tear.

"Then what, sweetness? What's bothering you?"

Her gaze drifted off to the side, doing her best to shut me out. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," I insisted. "If you don't tell me what's wrong, I can't do anything—"

"That's exactly the problem," she snapped.

I blinked at her outburst. She was mad because I couldn't fix things, or because she was afraid I wouldn't? I couldn't do anything because—

I suddenly stopped, her words turning around in my mind until they sank in. I wasn't doing anything. "That's the problem, isn't it?" I asked. "I've been so focused on everything else that I haven't been giving you what you need."

Heartbreakingly soulful eyes stared up at me, and I brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "I never thought to ask you how you felt. I just assumed..."

I'd assumed wrong. I'd taken care of her physically, but emotionally she continued to flounder. She needed to know that I was still here, for her, that I would always be here for her. "I'm sorry." I framed her face with my hands. "I wish you'd said something sooner."

She shrugged helplessly. "I didn't know how to ask."

She shouldn't have had to ask, that was the problem. I'd let my girl down. Wrapping my hands around her waist, I lifted her up and placed her on the counter. Her legs spread automatically, and I stepped between them, then wrapped her in a tight hug. Her arms looped around my neck, loosely at first, then more tightly as she burrowed her face in the crook of my neck.

I breathed her in, running my hands up and down her back, feeling the pulse of her heart against mine. The longer we stayed like that, the more all the bad shit seemed to slip away. All that mattered was her.

Turning my head, I kissed my way along her collarbone and up her neck. She melted into me, and my lips found hers for a long, tantalizing kiss. Christ, the things this woman did to me.

I pulled back and cupped the back of her head, guiding her gaze to mine. "I'm sorry I've been so distant. I didn't mean to."

Her fingers played with the neckline of my shirt, eyes dropping to fix on my chest. "I thought maybe you'd changed your mind and didn't want to be with me anymore."

Not want her anymore? Impossible. I would crave her until the day I died. I gently squeezed her chin, and her eyes reluctantly met mine. "I don't ever want you to worry that I don't want you. I'm so crazy in love with you, I can't think straight."

She blinked in shock, her mouth falling into a little 'O'. "Really?"

I couldn't help but smile. How could she ever think otherwise? "Of course. I wanted you the moment I saw you standing here in my kitchen. It just took me a while to admit to myself just how much I cared."

Her expression softened, her eyes going liquid. "I love you, too."

I leaned in and kissed her once more, because I couldn't stop touching her, couldn't stop kissing her. I never wanted to

let her go ever again. I lifted her into my arms so I could carry her to our room. Halfway there my steps slowed and I smiled. “Feels like déjà vu.”

She blushed a little, remembering the day in the hallway. “It does seem vaguely familiar,” she teased with a shy smile.

I carried her into the bedroom and lay her in the middle of the bed. Between kisses, I managed to strip away each layer of clothing until she was beautifully, perfectly bare. Leaving my boxers in place I climbed over her, caging her in my arms. I couldn't help the burn of lust that coiled through my stomach as I stared down at her. “You sure?”

Her eyes lit up and she nodded emphatically. She reached for me once more, but I grasped her wrists and pressed them to the mattress next to her head. “Nope. You just lay there and look pretty.”

I kissed my way down her sternum, and her stomach muscles contracted as I settled between her thighs. I wasn't going to make love to her, not yet. But I was going to make her feel damn good.

Lowering my head between her legs, I swiped my tongue through her slit. Emery arched at the sensation, and I grinned as a low hiss left her mouth. I loved how sensitive she was, how responsive. I could spend a thousand days just like this, watching her revel in her pleasure.

I delved back in, thrusting my tongue deep inside her, letting her sweetness flow over me. Her hands captured the back of my head and slid through my hair as she held me close. She didn't have to worry about that; I wasn't going anywhere.

I dedicated myself to the task of drawing out her pleasure, kissing and nipping and sucking every inch of her sweet folds. Her body trembled beneath mine, her breaths coming in stilted pants. Perspiration coated her body as her musky scent wafted into the air, tickling my senses.

Using my tongue to tease her clit, I slid one finger deep inside her. Emery's walls rippled around me, her muscles

contracting and trying to hold on tight. Back and forth, I moved in and out of her on deep, even strokes until she cried my name.

“Drew! I—” She struggled to draw in a breath. “I can’t, I need—”

She broke off on a mewl as I sucked her clit into my mouth and thrust my finger particularly deep. I tongued the tiny bundle of nerves, keeping her right on the edge, not allowing her to come. Not yet. I wasn’t ready for this to be over.

Something had changed drastically over the last few days. What I told her earlier was true—I loved her more than I thought possible. Those few hours without her, not knowing where she was or whether she was okay, had been the absolute worst of my life. I didn’t know what the future held, but I was going to make certain we made the most of whatever time we had together.

I wanted Emery by my side every single day, wanted to know everything about her no matter how trivial. She was the type of woman I could envision spending the rest of my life with. I wanted to make her mine in every way, if she would let me. I wanted to convince her that I was enough, that what we had was all she would ever need. And I was going to prove that to her, starting right now.

She writhed, mumbling incoherently as I tormented her over-sensitized body. The little nub was hard to the touch, and I knew she was aching to come. Sliding two fingers deep into her channel, I lifted my head and watched her face contort as her muscles stretched to accommodate me.

“You ready, pretty girl?”

“God, yes,” she panted out. “Please, Drew, no more.”

I smiled, and deciding to take pity on her, dipped my head between her legs. Moving my fingers in and out, I flicked the tight bundle of nerves then sucked it into my mouth. Emery whimpered and her hips bucked, but I stayed right there with her. I plunged my fingers in faster, harder, and rapidly flicked her clit with my tongue.

Her fingers curled into the back of my head, and a keening cry welled up and out of her throat as she shattered, her juices flooding my mouth. Addicted to the taste and feel of her, I drew out her orgasm until she cried for mercy, and I gradually slowed.

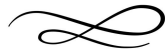
Her breathing was erratic, her entire body flushed with pleasure, her long locks strewn haphazardly around her shoulders. She'd never looked more beautiful.

She made a little face as I pulled my fingers free of her, then lifted them to my lips. She watched through hooded eyes as I licked up her essence. Her breathing gradually returned to normal, and I pulled the blanket over us as I tucked her in close. She cuddled up against my side, burrowing her face into the crook of my neck and draping one leg over mine. Wrapping one arm around her back, I held her tight.

“Sleep, sweetheart. I’m right here.” I brushed a kiss across the top of her head. “I’ll always be right here.”

Her muscles relaxed as she slowly drifted off, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I’d never felt this way before—this combination of lust and love all wrapped into one. I wanted to give her every part of me, shelter her from every storm, keep her safe and bestow on her everything this world had to offer. Loving her came as easily as breathing, and I wanted her in my life and by my side—forever.

Fifty



EMERY

I COULDN'T REMEMBER A BETTER NIGHT'S SLEEP IN ALL MY life. Rolling my head to the side, I spied Drew next to me, one arm tossed carelessly on the pillow above his head. A smile tugged at my lips, and I felt an answering tug in the region of my heart. I loved this man so much it hurt.

My gaze strayed downward to his naked chest, his defined pecs and sexy abs on full display. As if they had a mind of their own, my fingers found the thin trail of hair on his abdomen, and I followed it beneath the sheet.

A tiny smile stretched over my face when I encountered the waistband of his boxers. Drew shifted and stretched, lifting his hips and pressing himself into my hand as I delved under the elastic. His morning wood was already thick and full, and I gently massaged his balls. Above me, he hissed in a breath and clenched his hand into the sheet, as if to restrain himself. Well, that just wouldn't do.

I climbed to my hands and knees next to him, then stripped his boxers down and off. His lungs hitched as I wrapped my fingers around his shaft and his torso came off the bed when I stroked him firmly from root to tip.

“Fuck, baby.” Voice raspy with sleep, it flowed over me as one huge hand buried in my hair. “Feels so good.”

And we hadn't even gotten to the good part yet. Biting back a grin, I leaned forward and flicked my tongue over his

engorged tip. His fingers tightened on my scalp, silently urging me on, and I gladly obliged, fastening my lips over him and drawing the head of his cock into my mouth.

“Fuck, babe...”

I pulled back a bit, then slid lower, taking him deeper with each pass. He hissed under my touch, shifting his hips toward me as if seeking more. I swirled my tongue around the broad head, licking up the salty bead of precum, the musky taste slipping over my taste buds. I relaxed my jaw and flattened my tongue, taking him a little deeper with each pass until he bumped the back of my throat. His hand fisted in my hair and his hips jerked, thrusting his cock deep. I fisted his shaft in one hand, working the base of his shaft while I used my mouth to take him harder and faster.

“Oh, Christ.” His voice was strangled and breathless, rough with desire. “Fuck, baby, that feels so good.”

His hand left my hair and skimmed along the vertebrae of my back, then over the curve of my bottom. Still on my hands and knees, my ass pointed straight to the ceiling, my pussy completely exposed to his questing fingers. One digit slipped inside, and my inner walls clenched around him, claspings tightly. I let out a needy whimper as I pushed my hips backward, fucking his fingers.

My motions became jerky and borderline uncoordinated as I poured my eagerness into my movements.

“Yesss...”

His hips lifted as he pulled my mouth down at the same time, thrusting his cock to the back of my throat. I gagged a little as tears spring to my eyes, but his fingers delved into my slick channel again, spurring me on. I handed over control, allowing him to direct my movements as he fucked my mouth and pussy at the same time.

Finally, his fingers slipped from my channel and he pulled my head free of his cock. “Damn, babe. Gonna make me come.”

I smiled a little. “That was kind of the point.”

“Huh uh.” He shook his head as he grabbed my biceps and pulled me over him, arranging me over his lap. “As much as I want to fuck that pretty mouth some more, I need to feel this tight little cunt wrapped around me.”

His dirty words turned me on, and I couldn't help but wiggle in place, feeling his shaft swell beneath my bottom. He hissed in another breath, and his fingers tightened around my thighs.

“Condom,” he managed with a jerk of his head.

I leaned over and swiped one from the nightstand, then unwrapped it and rolled it over the head of his cock, torturing him with little strokes as I positioned it in place.

“Better fucking hurry up,” he said between gritted teeth, his eyes glittering up at me, full of desire. “You have about two seconds before I take over.”

Circling the base of his shaft, I positioned it at my entrance, sliding it through my folds once, twice, to wet the tip. Drew had apparently had enough of my teasing, because his fingers curled into the flesh of my hips as he speared into me with one hard thrust, stealing my breath. Our mingled moans filled the air, and his hold tightened and yanked me down, pulling me onto him as far as I could go.

I leaned forward slightly, changing the angle so he could go even deeper, then began to lift up and down. His lips found mine for a ravaging kiss as he pounded into me, pulling me onto his cock as he thrust upward, each stroke harder and deeper than the last. He hit my G-spot over and over, and heat began to build deep within me. The fire grew until it expanded outward to my limbs, and I shattered on an ear-splitting cry.

“Fuck, Em...” His face twisted into an expression of agonized pleasure as he let go.

I slumped over him, completely sated, and his hands wandered up and down my back. Our hearts beat fast and furious against one another, and I could feel every inch of him still buried inside me.

His arm tightened around my lower back. “Love you so damn much.”

Hearing him say those three words completely changed the dynamic, added a depth of emotion I wasn't prepared for. Even though he'd told me before, it hadn't quite felt real. Now, though, in this very moment, everything felt different. Tears stung my eyes, and I closed them tightly, not wanting him to see. If he saw me crying, he would worry that I was still hurt—or worse, emotionally damaged. I couldn't bear for that to happen. I didn't want a single thing to break this moment.

Drawing in a deep breath, I swallowed them down. But Drew was too intuitive. When I blinked my eyes open again, I found myself caught in his intense gaze.

For several seconds, neither of us said a word. Then, gentle as a whisper, he lifted one hand and tenderly wiped away a single tear that had escaped down my cheek. “You're crying.”

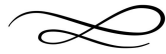
I shook my head, and a lopsided grin tilted his mouth. “No, you're not crying, or no, you're not going to tell me why?”

I couldn't summon words, only shook my head again, and Drew gave a single, slow nod. “It's a lot to process, isn't it?”

I wasn't entirely sure what he meant until he continued. “I never thought I'd feel this way, either. But with you...”

I flung my arms around his neck, unable to hold back anymore. Two strong arms wrapped around me, holding me tight and easing the pressure in my chest. No matter what life threw at me, I knew I would get through it with Drew by my side.

Fifty-One



DREW

WARMTH ENVELOPED ME, AND I SMILED AS I OPENED MY EYES. Emery was cuddled up close to me, her face tucked against my chest, one leg tossed over mine. I'd never been the snuggly type, but Emery had changed that for me. There was nothing I wanted more than to wake up like this every single morning in a tangle of limbs, her warm body pressed to mine.

I shifted slightly and curved my arm around her lower back. She let out a sleepy sound as she wiggled, her thigh brushing my morning wood. Her small hand splayed over my chest, gently caressing the space over my heart. I kissed the top of her head. "You awake?"

I pitched my tone low in case she was still asleep. Her chest rose and fell, and she turned her head slightly. "I am now."

I smiled ruefully. "Sorry, baby."

I still had about half an hour before my alarm went off and I'd have to get up to go to work, but I wanted to steal these few precious moments with her. Running one hand up and down her spine I breathed her in. She was so soft and sweet, strong and delicate at the same time. Her fingers brushed lightly over my chest, and my groin tightened painfully. I willed it away; we didn't have nearly enough time for that, no matter how much I wanted to roll her to her back and slide deep inside her.

I captured her hand to stop its progress, then flipped it over to inspect it. The lacerations had scabbed over, and a handful had already fallen off, leaving pale pink scars in their wake. I lightly kissed her palm, then clasped her hand in mine and laid it on my chest.

“What are you getting into today?” She was still supposed to take it easy on her feet for another week, so that ruled out working at the diner.

“Grace wants to come over and see the cabinet, so I told her I’d give her a call sometime this morning.”

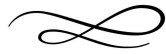
She lifted one shoulder, and the blanket slipped down, exposing the slope of her breast. Heat raced over me, and I forced myself to focus. “That’s good. I’m sure she’ll be happy.”

“I hope so.”

She shifted closer, and my gaze strayed back to her breast. It plumped against my flesh, the nipple pink and begging for attention. Trailing my fingers along the back of her hand I skimmed along her arm and up to her shoulder. I traced her collarbone, then dipped lower, stroking my knuckles along the slope of her breast. I thumbed her nipple and she arched into my touch with a soft little sound of contentment. The tip pebbled, standing firm and erect, and I gave it a gentle tweak.

Emery turned her head, pressing her breast further into my palm as she bit down on my shoulder. The slight sting of pleasure/pain curled through me, sending an electric shock straight to my groin and making my cock swell. What was another hour when I’d been off for a week? My girl wanted to play, and she was all that mattered. I rolled her to her back and settled between her legs, and a contented sigh escaped her lips as I slid deep inside her wet heat. It was my favorite place in the whole world.

Fifty-Two



EMERY

I TRAILED MY FINGERS ALONG THE SCALLOPED EDGE OF THE curio cabinet, testing the finish. It was smooth and slick, without a hint of roughness. We'd added another coat of lacquer yesterday to seal the wood, and it gleamed as if it were brand new. Thanks to Drew, the corded light inside had been replaced as well to make sure there would be no electrical issues.

A smile curled my lips. It had been a ton of work, but it was worth it. I wanted to make sure Grace was entirely happy with it, so I sent her a quick text asking her to come over when she could.

She responded a moment later. **I'm at the coffee shop right now. I can be there in ten.**

Stowing my phone in the back pocket of my shorts, I headed upstairs to wait for her. True to her word she arrived just a few minutes later, and I grinned as I held the door for her. "Hey! Good to see you."

"You too." She hopped up onto the front porch, an iced coffee in each hand, and gave me a tentative hug. When she pulled back, she offered me one of the cups. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I took a gamble. It's caffeine free," she warned, rubbing her belly. "Totally defeats the purpose, but I'll never hear the end of it otherwise."

Personally, I thought it was sweet that Con was so protective of her and the baby, and I had a feeling that, despite her teasing, she was, too. I took a sip of the vanilla sweetened brew and smiled. “This is perfect, thank you.”

“I’m addicted to iced coffee,” she admitted. “It’s kind of a moot point since I’ve had to cut out caffeine, but I can’t give it up.”

“I don’t blame you.” I closed up behind us, then took a seat on the couch. I watched as Grace lowered herself to the chair next to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Better now.” She leaned back and rested one hand on her swollen belly. “For the first couple of months I wanted to hibernate. Now I’m back to normal—kind of.” She smiled ruefully. “I feel as big as a house.”

“You look beautiful,” I rushed to assure her. And it was true; her face glowed with happiness.

“Thanks.” Her gaze turned serious as it swept over me. “How about you? I heard about...” She waved one hand in the air. “Are you holding up okay?”

Drew had smoothed the way for me a lot, and though it was still fresh in so many ways, the shock of the situation had begun to wear off a bit. I was healing both emotionally and physically, and I was working on focusing on the future instead of getting stuck in the past. “Actually, I’m okay.”

I gave her a quick rundown of what had happened, though I was certain Con had imparted most, if not all, of the details. When I was done, Grace gave a little shake of her head. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. I know what that feels like; that’s something I wouldn’t wish on anyone.”

I knew her words were sincere, and I appreciated her concern. I couldn’t help but wonder how she’d handled everything after the fact. “It’s kind of strange,” I said slowly. “Sometimes it doesn’t feel quite real, like it was all just a bad dream. Other times...”

A shiver skittered down my spine as I remembered the sound of shattering glass, the feel of the rope scraping over my

skin. “It seems all too real, like it happened just yesterday.”

Grace’s face twisted into an expression of empathy. “It might be like that for a while. Even though I wasn’t hurt, I still think about it all the time. If even one thing had happened differently, there’s a good possibility I wouldn’t be standing here today. I could have lost Con that day. It makes me even more thankful for the things I have, and every minute I get to spend with him.”

Her words brought tears to my eyes. She was exactly right. It put things in a completely different perspective, made me evaluate life in a whole new light. “I know exactly how you feel.”

Grace smiled gently. “How have things been between...” She made a little rocking motion with her hand, and I immediately picked up on her question.

“Good. Great, actually. He took all last week off. Today’s his first day back at work, and he’s already called to check in on me twice.”

Grace grinned and rubbed her belly. “Better get used to that. It only gets worse.”

I blushed. I wasn’t sure what the future had in store for Drew and me, but I could only hope that we ended up like Con and Grace. She was in so many ways like the older sister I’d never had, and it felt good to be able to talk with her. I had Izzy, of course, but I was dating her brother and some things were just better left unsaid.

“I cried the other night. After we...” My cheeks flushed with heat.

But Grace knew instantly what I was thinking. “You’ve been through a lot. Both of you have. You’ll have good days and bad, but you’ll get through it.”

“I just...” I hesitated and bit my lip. “I don’t want him to think I’m weak. He’s seen me at my absolute worst, and...”

I trailed off, and Grace studied me quietly for a moment before speaking. “You know what I noticed about Drew the first time I came here?”

Intrigued, my head tipped to one side. “What’s that?”

“The way he couldn’t take his eyes off you.” My breath halted in my chest, but she continued before I could gather myself enough to reply. “It didn’t matter where he was or what he was doing, he always kept you in his sights. He was always checking to make sure you were there, making sure you were okay.”

Did he really watch me that closely? Grace nodded a little as if answering my unspoken question. “That’s the true measure of a man’s love. The way he looks at you when you’re not paying attention. He would never think you were weak. He loves you.”

Happiness suffused me. I’d heard his words, but hearing Grace confirm it made it seem a thousand times more real. Part of me had been holding back, knowing I could never be enough for Drew. But maybe, just maybe, it would work.

Grace smiled and stood. “I don’t want to take up all your time. Why don’t you show me what you have so far?”

I rubbed my palms on my shorts and pushed to my feet, suddenly nervous. I hoped she liked it. Grace fell in behind me as I made my way to the basement, then flipped on the lights. There was a sudden intake of breath from behind me, then... Silence.

My heart dropped to my toes. Oh, God. She hated it. I opened my mouth to speak, but Grace was suddenly moving past me, headed straight for the hutch. She circled it, tracing the intricate engravings, a look of sheer awe on her face. “This is...” She shook her head then met my gaze. “I can’t believe you did this. It’s incredible.”

I lifted one shoulder self-consciously. “It wasn’t all me. I had some help from Drew. And YouTube videos.” I smiled wryly. “Lots of videos.”

Grace grinned. “We all need help sometimes. This is just... I can’t get over it. It doesn’t even look like the same cabinet.”

“I promise it is.” I laughed. “The four layers of paint I scraped off are still around here somewhere.”

“You really enjoy this, don’t you?”

Her big blue eyes stared into mine, and I gave a little nod. “I do. I love this process, taking something old and making it new again.”

She nodded slowly, looking deep in thought. “Would you do this all the time if you could?”

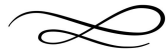
“If I didn’t have bills to pay? Sure.”

“I’m starting up my interior design business,” Grace stated. “Obviously, I’ll need some help for a bit until the baby’s a little older. I thought maybe you’d be interested.”

My mouth dropped open. “Really? That—” I swallowed hard. “I would love that.”

“Perfect.” A grin pulled at her mouth. “Here’s what I’m thinking...”

Fifty-Three



DREW

THE FAMILIAR SOUNDS AND SMELLS ASSAULTED ME THE moment I stepped into the station. Despite my relief at having the past week off to spend with Emery, I had to admit—it was good to be back.

Mac’s head lifted as the door swung shut behind me, and he met my gaze. “Hey. Glad to have you back.”

I tipped my head at him. “Thanks, man. Good to be here.”

Not as good as being in bed with Emery, of course, but I’d exhausted her enough for one day. Half an hour ago I’d left her curled up in bed, soft and warm and very, very satisfied. I battled back the smile at the memory, wondering just how quickly I could get back home to her for a repeat.

Though I’d tried to persuade her to go stay with my parents while I was at work, she’d politely declined. Actually, that was overstating it a bit. She flat-out refused, saying that she had too much to do, and that she had no desire to have a babysitter. I understood where she was coming from, but I also wanted to make sure she was safe.

Over the past week, she’d spent the time healing up, but we hadn’t heard about the man who’d shot Stratton. He’d made no attempt to find Emery whatsoever, and I couldn’t determine whether that was good or bad. It could have been because I was with her every minute of the day, and he hadn’t been able to get close. But if he was intent on tying up loose

ends, it would have been easy enough for him to try to take out both of us at once. There'd been no disturbances at the house, nothing out of the ordinary at all. According to Emery, she'd never seen the man's face, so maybe he was intent on leaving well-enough alone. Stratton was presumed dead, and with him, any evidence of the killer's identity.

“Emery okay?”

I never knew how much to share with people. It was a private matter, and not really even my own to share. Still, these were my brothers and I appreciated their concern. “She's healing up, seems to be doing okay. Thanks for asking,” I added.

“Glad to hear that.”

“What about you?” I leaned one hip against the desk. “How have you been since...?”

He'd been through a hell of an ordeal with the woman he dated about a month ago. She'd manipulated Mac for information about a case we were working, and I knew he still occasionally blamed himself.

He tipped his head from side to side. “Fine.”

“You dating anyone?”

“No way.” He shook his head. “I'm hanging my hat up for a while.”

“Can't let one bad experience ruin it for you.”

Aiden caught my eye across the room and headed toward us. A tiny smirk tipped my lips when I saw the protein shake in his hand. In all my life, I'd never seen him drink anything that wasn't either water or protein powder mixed with water. He took extremely good care of himself, and I teased him mercilessly.

“Hey, man.” I fist-bumped him. “How's it going?”

“Same shit, different day. How about you? Everything good?”

“Good enough.” I tipped my head toward Mac. “Trying to get this one back out on the field.”

“That’s rich, coming from you. Practically robbing the cradle.” Mac grinned. “That’s like me dating Izzy. Think she’d go for it?”

“Hell, no,” I shot back. “She’s got better taste than that.”

“Ouch.” He slapped one hand over his chest and affected a mock wounded look. “That hurts, Thorne.”

“Not as much as it’ll hurt when I have to kick your ass for talking about my sister.”

Mac just laughed, and I pushed away from the desk with a grin. It felt good to be back, to joke again and laugh. Aiden fell into step next to me as I headed toward my cubicle. I swiveled my head his way. “Haven’t seen you around lately.”

He was usually a regular at Sunday dinner, but he’d been absent for the last few weeks.

He shook his head. “Got some shit going on.”

I shot him a concerned look. “Anything I can help with?”

“Nah, but thanks for asking.”

Aiden wasn’t the most talkative of our group, but he and Gray had been friends for years. We all hung out from time to time, though with everything going on, Gray and I had been busier than usual. We were all due for some time to chill and relax, even though I’d just spent almost two full weeks with Emery. “We should hang out soon.”

“Sure.” He flashed me a tight smile, then tipped his head toward the bullpen. “I’ve got some stuff to finish up, but I’ll catch you later. Glad you’re back.”

Something was bothering him, but I decided to let it go for the moment. “See ya later.”

Familiar faces popped up from the cubicles as I wound my way through the bullpen, everyone calling out welcomes and well-wishes for Emery. Almost as soon as I sat down, my brother materialized next to my desk.

“Got a minute?”

“Sure.” Curiosity pricked at me. Judging from the tightness of his tone, it was something serious. Once we were sealed in his office I closed the door behind us and turned to him.

Gray crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against his desk. “Emery okay?”

I was a little surprised at the question considering he’d just seen her yesterday. “She’s good.”

“I mean, is she good to be home alone?” Concern creased his features. “If you need to work from home, or—”

I lifted one hand and waved him off. “She doesn’t seem to be nearly as bothered by this whole thing as I am.”

He nodded slowly. “Well, the offer stands.”

I dipped my chin. “I appreciate it, but I need to be here. I promised Emery I would figure out what happened to Stratton and find whoever else was in the cabin that day.”

“Might be able to help you with that—at least the first part,” Gray said as he reached behind him and swiped a file folder off the desk. “Monroe County found him two days ago—what’s left of him, anyway.”

At his words, a huge weight seemed to lift off my shoulders. There was no remorse, only immense relief in the knowledge that the man who’d terrorized Emery was dead. “Does the timeline match?”

“From the look of him, I would say yes. Haven’t heard anything official from the ME yet.”

He passed me a photo, and my gaze immediately flew to the small, round hole just below Stratton’s left eye. Single shot, just like Emery had said. My mind raced, already considering the new lead. “We didn’t find a slug at the scene. If the ME can pull it—”

Gray snorted. “Yeah, that’s not gonna happen.”

He passed me a second photograph that afforded a view of the back of Stratton's head. His scalp had been pinned up, exposing the man's cerebral cortex, a large portion of which was missing.

I blinked. "What the fuck?"

"Yep."

I lifted my gaze to my brother. "They actually removed an entire section of his brain before they dumped him?"

Gray shrugged. "Didn't want to leave evidence. They also wiped him down. The ME hasn't found a single fiber yet."

Jesus Christ. I wiped one hand down my face then handed the photos back to him. "Any idea when he might have been dumped?"

"A fisherman found him late Friday afternoon. He'd just come off the lake and was apparently picking up trash in the area when he stumbled over Stratton." His face twisted into a wry smirk. "Literally."

"Fucking awesome." I thought that over for a second. Why the hell drop him in Monroe County? It was only half an hour away. "Whoever killed Stratton wanted him to be found. Not right away, but..."

Gray cleared his throat. "That's not all."

I lifted a brow and he extracted another photograph. "They performed some.... Surgical work."

It took me a moment to realize his genitalia had been removed. "So... I'm guessing whoever killed Stratton didn't approve of his extracurricular activities."

"That would be my guess."

My mind spun. I'd initially thought that the unidentified man was an accomplice of Stratton's. But perhaps I was wrong. "Maybe a family member or friend who found out?"

"We've interviewed the people he was in contact with most recently, but nothing came up."

"A fellow inmate from jail?"

“Possible,” he conceded. “Except this doesn’t really seem like a low-level job. Whoever it was wanted to send a message.”

Dread filled my gut as he passed one last photo my way. My mouth opened, and I snapped it shut again. The first photo had focused on the bullet wound in his cheek; the photo now gave me a full glimpse of his face. Whoever had killed him definitely had not approved of Stratton’s proclivities. Not only had they removed his genitals, but they’d then placed them in his mouth, forever silencing him.

“Well.” I cleared my throat. “Looks like someone wanted to make sure their message was received loud and clear.”

“Yeah.” Gray took the photo and tossed it on his desk. “Guessing this was some sort of justice kill.”

“Could be.” If that was true, then Emery wasn’t in danger. Something had been niggling at the periphery of my brain for the past few days, and the memory of the flowers she’d received in the hospital flashed to the front of my mind. The card had read “my sincerest apologies, and best wishes for a quick recovery.” Who apologized for her being hurt, unless...

Had the killer sent the flowers? It was possible. At that very moment, all I wanted was to see Emery, hold her close, and tell her how much she meant to me.

“Hey.” I flicked a glance at my brother. “I’ve gotta get out of here for a bit. Let me know if something comes up.”

I knew I was shirking my responsibilities, but the smirk that crossed my brother’s face told me he understood completely. I grabbed a couple files off my desk as I passed, then headed home. Emery’s face creased with both surprise and pleasure when I strode through the door twenty minutes later.

“Hey! I didn’t expect you back so soon.” She rose from the couch and made her way toward me as I dropped my phone and keys on the table. “Did you forget something?”

“Just this.” Stooping down, I wrapped my arms under her bottom and lifted her to my chest. Her palms moved to frame

my face as her mouth unerringly found mine.

When I finally pulled back, she smiled down at me, a happy flush tingeing her cheek a soft pink. “What was that for?”

I squeezed her gently before I set her back on her feet. “Because I missed you.”

Her head fell back as she let out a tinkling laugh. “You were gone for less than an hour.”

I grinned. “It was an hour too long.”

Her eyes sparkled, and she bounced on her toes. “I have good news! Grace was just here and you’ll never guess what happened.”

Taking her hand, I dropped into a chair, then tugged her over my lap. “What did I miss?”

“Well...” She toyed with the top-most button of my shirt for a second before sliding her gaze up to meet mine. “She loved the cabinet. And in case I haven’t told you recently, thank you. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

I coasted one hand over her hair, a smile curving my lips. Though it had been a hell of a lot of work, it was one of the best things I’d ever done. It gave me the chance to work side-by-side with Emery and get to know her on a deeper level than I ever imagined. Plus, I’d truly enjoyed it. “You know I don’t mind. I liked it, actually.”

“That’s probably a good thing, because...” She paused for dramatic effect. “Grace wants to hire me!”

“Really?” She nodded, her eyes bright with excitement, and I cupped her face. “Baby, that’s awesome. I’m so happy for you.”

I pulled her to me and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. She was back where she belonged, doing what she loved... Everything was finally falling into place.

Fifty-Four



EMERY

THE DOORBELL RANG, SENDING MY PULSE SKITTERING WILDLY. I froze where I was currently curled up in the corner of the couch, a book open in my lap. Ever so slowly I swiveled my head toward the door. Though the offer to stay with the Thornes while Drew was at work was still open, I'd declined. He still called every few hours to check on me, and I was glad to not have someone hovering over my shoulder every second of the day. But now I was starting to regret that decision.

Drew had told me yesterday about Stratton's body being found in the next county over, and the thought of it still turned my blood to ice. It seemed like the man who had killed him had no intention of coming after me, but who could tell? He'd killed Stratton; what would stop him from tying up all the loose ends?

I almost laughed at myself. Would the killer ring the doorbell when he showed up to take me out? More than likely not. Unfurling my legs from beneath me, I stood and made my way across the room. Through the narrow, frosted pane of glass I could just barely make out the form of a person—a woman, if I wasn't mistaken. The hair was too dark to be Grace, and the person was too tall to be Abby. Who the hell could it be?

Moving to the window, I peered out and my breath caught as the woman came into view. I shuffled toward the door, apprehension gripping me as I slowly turned the knob then

swung the door open to face my mother. For several seconds we just stared at each other. Three days ago I had officially filed charges against Alan. Was she here to try to get me to retract my statement?

I stiffened as her gaze swept over me from head to toe before locking on mine again, and her lips turned up in a tiny, awkward smile. “Hey, Emmy.”

“Hey.” I forced a smile of my own. “What brings you by?”

She shifted on her feet, her gaze darting over my shoulder into the house before returning to me. “Can we talk for a second?”

The muscles in my neck and shoulders twitched, but I forced myself to step back and open the door wider. Despite everything she was still my mother, and I couldn’t bring myself to cut her out of my life completely. I’d give her the courtesy of listening to whatever she wanted to say. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.” She stepped in and looked around as I closed up.

I gestured toward the couch. “Do you want to sit?”

“Sure.” She sat primly on the edge, and I set my book on the table before taking a seat on the opposite end. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I just stayed quiet and waited.

Finally her eyes slashed back to mine. “So, this is where you’ve been staying.”

I nodded, vaguely surprised she’d cared enough to find out. “Who told you?”

“News around the diner is that you’re dating one of the detectives.” She lifted a shoulder. “There were only two options.”

I gave a slow nod but didn’t say anything else.

“Is he treating you well?”

My brows lifted. After everything that had transpired with Alan, I couldn’t believe she had the gall to doubt Drew’s

intentions. “Yes,” I replied coldly. “I’m glad to be here, with him. He loves me and keeps me safe,” I said pointedly.

Her chin dropped and her gaze focused on her fingers where they twisted in her lap. “I heard about...” She slid a look my way. “You look like you’re healing well.”

“I’m fine.” That was all I had to say on the matter. If she thought she could come in here and judge the situation, then she had another thing coming. I opened my mouth to send her on her way, but the next words out of her mouth stopped me cold.

“I wanted to apologize.” She blew out a breath. “And tell you that Alan’s gone.”

I sat in a sort of stunned silence, watching, just waiting for her to continue. She fidgeted nervously, unwilling to look at me.

“I never should have taken his word over yours.”

You think? I bit back the urge to roll my eyes.

“I asked him about it, but he acted like it was no big deal.” She gave a helpless little shrug. “I knew you didn’t like him, so I thought maybe you were just trying to find a way to split us up.”

I studied her for a second. “What changed your mind?”

“When the detective came to the house, I saw how upset he was and worried about you. It was obvious how much he loves you, and I knew that everything you had said about Alan was true. I kicked him out that very night.”

I took a moment to absorb everything she had said. It wasn’t nearly enough to eliminate the hurt she’d caused, but it was a start.

“You’re right,” I said. “I never liked him. But I would never try to ruin your relationship for no reason.”

She hung her head dejectedly. “I know that. It was selfish of me, and I’m sorry. Ever since your dad left, I’ve been looking for a man to fill that void. It’s not an excuse, but it’s

true. I became too reliant on trying to find a man to make me feel whole again when I should have focused on you.”

She paused for a second. “I’d really like us to try to move on. Do you think you can forgive me?”

Part of me understood where she was coming from, but it would take a long time for the feelings of betrayal to dissipate. I opened my mouth to say something, but I was saved from responding when the front door swung inward.

Drew appeared in the space, his shrewd green gaze sweeping the room, assessing everything and missing nothing. I saw the slight stiffening of his posture as my mother’s identity registered. He tipped his head her direction in a barely polite greeting, then made his way to my side. Resting one hand protectively on my shoulder, he pressed a kiss to my cheek. I leaned into him, absorbing his strength and love.

My mother watched us for a second, something that looked a lot like regret flashing in her eyes. She met my gaze and forced a small smile, then stood. “I don’t want to keep you.”

I followed suit, standing then making my way toward the front door. Drew was close behind, and he held the door for my mother as she left. She paused in the doorway, then tossed one small smile our way before escaping.

Drew closed up and turned to me, a single dark eyebrow arching toward his hairline. “Should I even ask?”

I shrugged. “She wanted to apologize. Said she kicked Alan out.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and I read his thoughts: too little, too late. Sliding my hands around Drew’s waist, I leaned into him and pressed my cheek to his chest. I could hear his heart beating next to my ear as he wrapped me in his strong arms and held me tight. A feather-light kiss brushed across the top of my head. “How are you doing?”

“Fine.” My chest rose and fell as I let out a sigh. “I can forgive her, but it’ll take a lot longer to forget everything.”

One big hand moved up and down my back in sweeping strokes as he seemed to consider what to say. “I’m glad she

apologized.”

So was I. She was my mother, and I still loved her even if we weren't on great terms at the moment. It still made me a little sad, though, because she was my only living relative.

Intuitively, Drew squeezed me tight. “Families occasionally go through rough patches. But you've got me and Izzy and my parents to get you through it. Always remember that.”

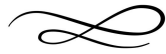
I tipped my head up and smiled. “You know, you make a pretty good roommate.”

He smiled and framed my face with his hands. “So do you. You're my favorite roommate so far.”

I rolled my eyes. “I'm the only roommate you've had.”

“Exactly.” He pressed a kiss to my lips. “But I know without a doubt that you're the only roommate I'll ever want.”

Epilogue



DREW

“HEADS UP.”

I glanced up in time to catch the manila envelope Aiden tossed my way. “Thanks, asshole.”

He smirked. “Just keeping you on your toes. You had a nice, long vacation. Gotta check those reflexes, make sure your head’s still in the game.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fucking hilarious.”

No way was I going to apologize taking time off to spend it with Emery. I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat. As crazy as it sounded, Emery was adjusting to all the recent changes better than I was. Considering my profession, one would think I’d view the whole thing more clinically. The opposite was true.

After everything with Alan and Stratton, I never wanted to let her out of my sight. I wished I could keep her wrapped up in my arms all day, every day where I knew she’d never be hurt again. But I also knew I couldn’t hold her back. She’d been working with Grace Quentin a lot over the past few days, and she seemed to love her new job.

She’d officially left the diner and though Irene was sad to see her go, she understood completely. We’d stopped in over the weekend to have breakfast and all of her regular customers had stopped by to wish her well. It was humbling to see how

many people she'd affected, and it made me even more proud to be with her.

At home, things were even better than before. Though we'd been sharing a bed already, she'd kept her own room up until last week. We finally transferred all of her things into our room, sharing the space just the way a couple should. Living with someone was a completely new experience for me, especially sharing every aspect of our lives. But I loved every second of it, even when she complained that I'd left my clothes on the floor instead of putting them in the hamper. She got so grouchy over that, but I always teased her out of her mood, and we made up in the best way possible. I'd never admit that I sometimes did it on purpose.

She was everything I'd ever wanted, and I was looking forward to spending the next fifty years or so learning everything about her. It physically hurt sometimes to be away from her, but it made coming home to her each night all the sweeter.

“For real, though. Everything good?”

Aiden's voice cut thorough my introspection, and I nodded. “Great, actually.”

“Good.”

He looked a little forlorn, and I wondered again at his recent change in disposition. “How about you?”

“What about me?”

“I don't know.” I studied him for a second. “You just haven't seemed like yourself recently.”

He lifted one shoulder, but didn't say a word. Curiosity piqued, I pressed once more. “Trouble with a lady?”

His gaze skittered away almost guiltily, and he scrubbed at the back of his neck. “I wish it was that easy.”

My gaze narrowed. Something was going on. I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it.

“I'll be glad when this case is over.”

I bit back a sigh. It was obvious that Aiden wasn't ready to talk about whatever was weighing on him, so I allowed the change of subject. "Me, too."

Dropping my gaze to the envelope, I turned it over in my hands. It was standard issue, addressed to me, and though a return address was listed, there was no name.

I flicked a quick look at Aiden as I slid my finger under the flap to break the seal. "Any news on who might have killed Stratton?"

"Not yet." He sank into the chair across from me. "I'm still checking," he continued as I ripped open the envelope and dumped the contents on my desk. "But every lead turns into a dead end."

A photograph landed face up on the surface, and my brows drew together as I studied the image. Cold washed over me as I realized what I was looking at. The picture of Stratton had been taken postmortem—and not at the scene where he'd been found.

"Maybe not," I said slowly as I gestured to the photo. "Look at this."

Aiden leaned forward to get a better look. His eyes widened and jumped to mine. "Holy shit."

"Yeah." I reached into my top drawer to grab a pair of nitrile gloves, then slipped them on before flipping the photo over. The back of the photo had been labeled with the victim's name, and I nodded to Aiden. "Grab an evidence bag."

I catalogued it, then turned my attention to the second photo that had fluttered out. The photo had captured a man—very much alive—standing next to a brick building, smoking a cigarette. I flipped it over, but the back was blank.

"What do you make of that?"

I met Aiden's gaze, and his wary expression reflected exactly what I suspected.

"I think we just found our next victim."



WHEN WOMEN GO MISSING FROM IZZY'S COLLEGE CAMPUS,
Aiden must protect her before she becomes the next victim...
Don't miss Reckless Devotion, coming soon!



WANT MORE OF DREW AND EMERY? JOIN MY [NEWSLETTER](#)
(always spam-free!) and get their exclusive extended epilogue!

Also by Morgan James

QUENTIN SECURITY SERIES

[TWISTED DEVIL](#) – JASON AND CHLOE

[THE DEVIL YOU KNOW](#) – BLAKE AND VICTORIA

[DEVIL IN THE DETAILS](#) – XANDER AND LYDIA

[DEVIL IN DISGUISE](#) – GAVIN AND KATE

[HEART OF A DEVIL](#) – VINCE AND JANA

[TEMPTING THE DEVIL](#) – CLAY AND ABBY

[DEVILISH INTENT](#) – CON AND GRACE

[QUENTIN SECURITY BOX SET ONE](#) (BOOKS 1-3)

[QUENTIN SECURITY BOX SET TWO](#) (BOOKS 4-6)

*EACH BOOK IS A STANDALONE WITHIN THE SERIES

RESCUE AND REDEMPTION SERIES

[FRIENDLY FIRE](#) – GRAYSON AND CLAIRE

[CRUEL VENDETTA](#) – DREW AND EMERY

RETRIBUTION SERIES

THE FROZEN IN TIME TRILOGY

[UNREQUITED LOVE](#) – JACK AND MIA, BOOK ONE

[UNDENIABLE LOVE](#) – JACK AND MIA, BOOK TWO

[UNBREAKABLE LOVE](#) – JACK AND MIA, BOOK THREE

[FROZEN IN TIME: THE COMPLETE TRILOGY](#)

THE DECEPTION DUET

[PRETTY LITTLE LIES](#) – ERIC AND JULES, BOOK ONE

[BEAUTIFUL DECEPTION](#) – ERIC AND JULES, BOOK TWO

*EACH BOOK CAN BE READ AS A STANDALONE, BUT ARE BEST READ IN ORDER

THE SINFUL DUET

[SINFUL ILLUSIONS](#) – FOX AND EVA, BOOK ONE

[SINFUL SACRAMENT](#) – FOX AND EVA, BOOK TWO

*BOOKS SHOULD BE READ IN ORDER

[THE COMPLETE RETRIBUTION SERIES](#)

BAD BILLIONAIRES

(RADISH EXCLUSIVE)

[DEPRAVED](#)

[RAVISHED](#)

[CONSUMED](#)

*EACH BOOK IS A STANDALONE WITHIN THE SERIES

STANDALONES

[DEATH DO US PART](#)

[ESCAPE](#)

About the Author

Morgan James is a USA Today bestselling author of contemporary and romantic suspense novels. She spent most of her childhood with her nose buried in a book, and she loves all things romantic, dark, and dirty. She currently resides in Ohio and is living happily ever after with her own alpha hero and their two kids.

Keep up with Morgan and stay up to date on sales, giveaways, and new releases:

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [BookBub](#) | [Goodreads](#)