



*Indigo:
Law*

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CHAPTER 1



CONSISTENT BEEPING PERMEATED the dark recesses of Bridget's brain. Her eyelids were like glue when she tried to open them, and it took more than one attempt to pry them open even a little. Then she had to blink several times before she could see anything clearly. The bed she lay on was decently comfortable, but the beeping got louder.

The white board directly across from her had her name on it along with a slew of other information. Slow deep breaths were difficult, so Bridget switched to shallower breathing. Every muscle in her body was stiff, feeling as though it would take monumental effort to move. The room was small with a sliding glass door that was about a quarter of the way open, but it wasn't easy to move her neck to see out of it.

Bridget counted to ten, closing her eyes and trying to remember what had landed her here. A hospital was not someplace she ever wanted to wake up in alone. It scared the living daylights out of her and proved just how solitary a life she lived. Flexing her fingers, she tried to reach for a call button or something, anything that would alert someone she was awake and needed answers and that she really didn't want to be by herself, but she could barely move, and when she did, it hurt.

A new beep sounded next to her as the blood pressure cuff inflated and tightened around her arm. She couldn't do anything to help herself—it was awful. She lay there, still and silent, because she wasn't even sure if her voice would work. Or what she would say. A tear leaked from her eye, falling

down her cheek and disappearing, the hot course it had taken burning her skin.

It was light outside, that much she could tell at least, but she could barely turn to see the window and attempt to figure out what time of day it was. Her head pounded, and she closed her eyes to refocus herself. She was the fucking sheriff. She could do this, figure out what she was doing here, how she had ended up here. Slowing her breathing, Bridget centered herself. It took longer than she wanted to admit, but the technique she'd learned from the one therapist she'd fired seemed to work at long last.

Feeling slightly more even-keeled, Bridget opened her eyes, found the clock on the wall, and read the time. A little after ten in the morning. All right, now she had to figure out what day it was. How long had she been laid up in the hospital without her knowing? And again, where the hell was everyone?

Squinting because she didn't have her glasses, Bridget had to focus to make out the date on the board. She couldn't make it out, the lines too blurry for her bad eyesight. And she couldn't remember either. It wasn't like whatever happened to her was coming back full force, or any tidbits for that matter.

Bridget rustled around, attempting to find the call button. She wanted to know what happened, and it would be easier to listen to someone tell her than try and figure it out from her non-existent memory. She had an IV in each arm and medical tape in more places than she cared to count. As she moved around, the tubes pulled slightly, but she didn't stop until she found the small white remote-like device. She pressed the large button on the top and breathed a sigh of relief.

Someone would be coming soon. They had to.

Bridget tried to hold in her tears, gritting her teeth and tightening her shoulders until it hurt, but then she couldn't loosen the muscles up again. Pain edged its way into the periphery of her mind, and her shallow breaths became harder to gasp. *Fuck, what am I doing?*

She needed to calm down. That much was obvious. Managing to do that, however, was not easy. Bridget had always been a ball of nerves and tension whenever she had to sit and think and be by herself, and not knowing how she landed herself here—and having no one come in and explain it to her—was beyond comprehension. She couldn't do this alone.

Intentionally calming herself, Bridget closed her eyes and attempted to focus on her breathing, but the beeping and the gentle hum of machines kept distracting her. It took everything in her not to jump when the sliding glass door made a metallic sound as it was pushed open wider. Her eyelids flew open, and she stared at a middle-aged nurse with a short salt-and-pepper hair, dark blue scrubs, and wide hips.

“I'm glad you're awake,” she said, coming over to the machines and hitting a button. “This is your morphine drip. If you need more, hit the red button.”

A small device was shoved into her palm. Bridget moved her hand to look at it, finding the button on top. She clicked it, hoping the morphine would ease the ache in her chest.

“Has the doctor talked to you yet?”

“No.” Bridget's voice did not sound like her own. It was crackly and hard, barely recognizable.

“I'll get you some water for that.” The nurse pressed buttons on the machines and then leaned against the railing. “Do you remember waking up before?”

“No,” Bridget repeated, confused. She'd woken up before? The last thing she remembered was going to work in the morning, putting her gear on and getting into her cruiser. She didn't even remember getting to the station. “What day is it?”

“Friday.”

Bridget's eyes widened as shock rang through her. “Friday? What happened to Thursday?”

“You were in and out a lot of yesterday. Severe concussion.” The nurse's eyes softened. “I'm sorry you don't

remember waking up any. You were pretty out of it when you did.”

Parting her lips, Bridget narrowed her eyes to try and see the white board again, see if this lady was telling her the truth or not. She couldn't have missed an entire day. “What happened?”

“You were in a car accident. I'll let the doctor explain your injuries, but it was pretty nasty.”

“Car accident?” Bridget closed her eyes and sighed, knowing the answer so she didn't even bother to ask. “While on duty.”

“Yeah. We've kept the deputies out for now, but I'll let them in if you want.”

“No, please don't.” Bridget would be mortified if they all saw her like this. She couldn't even remember the accident. She wondered if she ever would, but until that came to pass, she was stuck in the hospital.

“You're in ICU, by the way. I'm not sure if you've figured that out. I'm Ann. I've been your nurse the last couple of days.”

Bridget looked at her, the compassion echoing in Ann's eyes so full of pity and pain. Bridget almost couldn't stand it. Tears welled in her eyes again, and she begged her brain to make it so she didn't cry. She did *not* want to cry.

“It's okay.” Ann reached over the railing and grasped her hand. “It's okay to cry. It's a shock to wake up in here, I'm sure.”

“I...I don't remember any of it.”

“That's okay. It might come back to you in small pieces. Is there someone I can call? Someone to come sit with you?”

That was the question of the day. Who would she call? Certainly not her parents.

“Your parents were here yesterday. I think they said they'd come back today, but they wanted to let you rest.”

“Of course they did.” Bridget tried her damndest not to roll her eyes or move too much. They wouldn’t want to sit in the hospital with their broken daughter who was no good to them. She’d never fit the mold they had created for her, and it was impossible to. She’d eventually given up—at least, she told herself that.

“Is there anyone else I can call? A partner maybe?”

Bridget stared at her, confused as to whether she meant a work partner or a lover. Either way, no, Bridget didn’t want anyone called. Yet she couldn’t very well be alone, could she? Could she do this and manage to survive all by herself?

“You know,” Ann started, patting her hand again, “I’ve got someone I can call for you, okay? She’ll love to come sit with you until someone else can come.”

“Who?” Bridget nearly shattered. How could this woman she’d never met before read her so fucking well?

“Chaplain Melville. I promise you she’s not like any other chaplain you’ve met.”

“I don’t believe.”

“It won’t matter to her.” Ann squeezed her hand. “All she’ll be is someone who can sit here. All right?”

Bridget nodded, though she wasn’t sure why she was agreeing. She did not want to be preached to or at. Her parents would do that enough when they came.

“Can I call her?” Ann looked so sincere, and the last thing Bridget wanted was to sit by herself for hours to cry out her pain.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” Ann left the room, her feet silent on the linoleum floor.

Bridget shifted as best as she could, but pain came searing back through her when she did. This time it wasn’t just in her chest but in her back and in her leg, her head, and her arm. Whatever the hell had happened must have been bad. She lay still, pushing the damn button Ann had given her and hoping it

would be enough to take the edge off. Except, it didn't dispense the medicine.

Cursing under her breath, Bridget closed her eyes. She needed to know what was wrong with her and what exactly she needed to do to heal and how long it would take. She needed to know when she could go back to work.

Ann came back in, that same soft smile on her lips. "Hey, she'll be up in a minute."

"Okay. What happened?"

"You were in a car accident."

Bridget nodded. "I mean, what's the damage? I hurt everywhere."

Ann's look turned pitying. "I can give you some oral medicine to help take the edge off if you need."

"That'd be good. This—" she raised her hand as much as she could "—isn't doing anything."

"It only dispenses every so often. It's not a continual drip."

"Perfect," Bridget muttered.

"In terms of your injuries, the doctors will give you more details, but you cracked quite a few ribs, which is probably why it's hard to breathe, you broke an arm and a leg, along with your ankle. I believe you'll need surgery to fix that before you leave the hospital, but they wanted to be sure the internal bleeding stopped first. That was the primary concern."

"Internal bleeding." Bridget's mind spun. What the hell had happened to her? It was like something had run her over several dozen times.

"It sounds worse than it was, I promise. You did have some abdominal surgery in order to stop the bleeding, but the incision isn't too large. The main reason you were brought here is because of the head injury and because you weren't waking up."

"Head injury?"

Ann nodded. “But you seem to be far more together now. I’ll let the doctors know you’re awake so they can come talk to you about everything.”

Bridget swallowed hard. “Thanks.”

Yet the one question she had still hadn’t been answered. What kind of car accident had she been in? If these were her injuries, it must have been catastrophic. She remained quiet until Ann left the room after pattering around some more and inputting information on the computer. Bridget had never much been one for small talk, but just Ann’s presence was soothing enough for her.

Almost as soon as Ann left, another woman came in, her stark white collar against her black shirt making it obvious who she was. Bridget couldn’t remember her name, however. Ann had said it so fast. Her hair was shoulder length and a nice light brown, and her eyes had that same pitying look Ann’s did.

“Hi, I’m Chaplain Melville, but you can call me June if you want. Ann said you could use some company.”

Bridget had to hold back her tears again, and she was so mad at the fact that she couldn’t stop herself from crying. She felt stupid for it. She was never one who showed her emotions like this, and the feeling of it was worse than the pain from her laundry list of injuries.

June stepped right up to the bed and grasped Bridget’s hand. “Hey now. It’s all right. It’s good to cry, you know.”

“I don’t like it.”

June gave her a small smile, her lips curving up beautifully. “I understand that. I don’t like it much either. It’s kind of a real shitty feeling mixed with the release, isn’t it? Oh, and the headache afterward.”

Bridget stared at her with wide eyes. “Did you just cuss?”

Rolling her eyes, June chuckled. “Ann said you’re the sheriff.”

“I am.”

“I thought it might make you slightly more comfortable. You don’t have to act a certain way for me, Bridget. I’m here to be whatever you need right now, okay?”

“Okay,” Bridget whispered. “When my parents show up, I need you to kick them out if they try to stay longer than an hour. I can’t handle more than that with them.”

June’s gaze softened. “Do you want me to let the nurses know that too?”

“Please.”

“Done.” June gave her a brilliant smile. “I’ll stay here as long as you need. Is there someone else we can call to come sit with you, though? Someone who is a friend or another relative?”

“No.” Bridget couldn’t look her in the eye when she admitted this. “No, there’s no one.”

June didn’t answer, just squeezed her hand. Ann came back in and pushed a pill at her with some water. It took Bridget a bit to be able to sit up enough to sip the drink and swallow it, but the water felt heavenly on her throat.

June stayed with her and chatted about whatever topics they came up with. Bridget was just sliding back to sleep when the voice she most dreaded hearing echoed down the hall. June must have caught her tension, because she straightened up and turned toward the door.

“My parents,” Bridget whispered, eyeing June like she was about to be thrown into the family secrets. “Be warned. They’ll like *you* at least, so long as you don’t curse in front of them.”

“Duly noted,” June answered.

Sharon rushed into the room, her dark wool jacket over her shoulders, her dark pin-straight hair down her back. She eyed June suspiciously, stopping right in the door, her gaze flicking to June’s hand clasped over Bridget’s. Sharon said nothing as Edward came in behind her.

“I’m Chaplain Melville. I work at the hospital.” June didn’t remove her hand from Bridget’s, for which she was very grateful.

“Oh!” Immediately, Sharon’s entire demeanor changed. “I thought...never mind. I’m glad to see you’re awake.”

Bridget stared wide-eyed at her mother and father. “I am.”

“How long have you been up?” Sharon asked.

“Few hours at most. I don’t really remember. I can’t see without my contacts.”

“Edward,” Sharon turned to her husband, “Did you bring her glasses?”

He shook his head. Bridget nearly snorted but held it in. Why would her father ever remember something useful like that? Her mother, on the other hand, would likely purposely forget the glasses if only to make it harder on Bridget. That had been the name of the game her entire life growing up. In the shadow of her perfect siblings, she was the youngest and the worst screwup of all of them. Landing herself in the hospital in ICU was only proof of that.

“Well, I’ll bring them tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Bridget said, though she didn’t really mean it. She did not want her parents rummaging through her house for anything. Except, she didn’t really have a choice in that matter, did she?

“Have they talked to you at all?” Sharon asked. “Sonny is so sorry it happened like this.”

“Sonny?” Bridget’s brow furrowed.

Sharon cocked her head in Bridget’s direction before glancing at Edward. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“They told me I was in a car accident.”

“Sonny ran you over with the combine.”

Bridget’s chest tightened, and the stupid monitor on her heart rapidly beeped and proclaimed what she was feeling. She didn’t remember any of it. She composed her face, putting on

the mask that she wore when she went into dangerous situations, and stared her mother down. “Oh.”

“He’s in the jail.”

“He would be,” Bridget commented. “Running over the sheriff is one thing that will surely land you there.”

June glanced down at her, and Bridget knew she was being judged. She couldn’t hold it back, however. Her mother would no doubt ask that Sonny be let go, given a lesser sentence or charge, because “*We’re all family in the town. We need each other to survive.*” She could hear the argument now.

“They said you’ll need surgery on your ankle.”

Bridget nodded.

“We’ll have you come stay with us when you get out.”

Uncontrollably, Bridget tightened her grasp on June’s hand. She couldn’t go stay with them, but her mother had managed to prove the point that she couldn’t stay on her own, not with the stairs in her house and the injuries she had. She was barely going to be able to function with a broken arm, leg, and ribs. She needed to find a way out of that one.

Sidestepping that conversation, Bridget said, “The doctors should be in soon.”

“Good. I have a lot of questions to ask.”

Grimacing, Bridget hoped the hour was up before the doctors came in. She didn’t want her mother knowing any more about her health than she already did. She really needed to change who her emergency contact was so they didn’t get called anytime something like this happened—not that it happened often. But who the hell was she going to put in place of them? She had no one, not a close enough friendship, not a work buddy—since she was the boss—no one.

“I hope you haven’t ruined your career,” Edward muttered, raising an eyebrow in Bridget’s direction.

That one stung. Bridget had only begun to grapple with her injuries, and while the thought had crossed her mind that she might not be able to go back to work, she hadn’t wanted to

explore that possibility fully yet. Not until she talked to the doctors at least.

“I don’t know if I have, Daddy. The doctors will have to tell me that.”

“You shouldn’t have taken this job.”

“I was elected to it.” Bridget clenched her jaw. This age-old argument was going to get old very quickly.

June interjected. “It’s probably too early to tell what the lasting effects are going to be from the accident. Until then, let’s not speculate what Bridget’s future might be. All right? Right now, let’s focus on her healing.”

“Yes, let’s focus on you getting better.” Sharon leaned forward and patted Bridget’s leg—Bridget’s very broken and shattered leg.

Cringing as pain soared through her, Bridget gripped June’s hand far too tight, no doubt hurting her. Bridget hissed and clenched her eyes tightly, trying to hold in any outward sign of emotion or pain. She had to be strong in front of them. If they saw her as weak, it would only confirm their belief that she should not have been the sheriff, or an officer of the law to begin with, and that she couldn’t be on her own when she returned home. And even though the last bit might be true, she was going to work her hardest never to go home with them again.

Sharon didn’t even seem to notice the pain she had caused, crossing her arms as she stood straight again. “I’ll stay here with you until you’re moved to another room.”

June stepped in again, thankfully. “Actually, ma’am, Bridget is only allowed visitors for a little bit today as the doctors want her to rest. You can check with the nurses’ station when you’re allowed to come back and visit.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“Right, she is.” June kept her hand firmly on Bridget’s, never moving and never backing down. “And her healing needs to be first and foremost in everyone’s minds. She needs

time and calm space to heal properly, and if the doctors limit visitors to allow that, it is out of your control.”

“They’ll be hearing about this.” Sharon stormed out of the room.

Edward gave Bridget a pointed look but said nothing as he followed his wife. Bridget could readily hear them loudly voicing their opinion, and the nurses having to deal with the situation, but at least they were out of her room. Bridget wasn’t sure what she was going to do when they moved her out of ICU and into a more accessible room. It would be far more difficult to keep Sharon and Edward away from her then, although perhaps by then they would have lost interest in her.

June leaned over the railing and lowered her voice. “You weren’t kidding.”

“I wasn’t.” Bridget wasn’t sure she could look into those eyes again, eyes that seemed to read everything she didn’t want to say. She hated it. “Can you shut the door?”

“Absolutely.” June slid the door to the room closed and took up her chosen spot next to Bridget’s bed again. “Are you sure there isn’t someone I can call who can come sit with you?”

Bridget mulled through that question again. It really did seem as though no one wanted her to be alone, even if she was surrounded by hospital workers and not at her house. She wasn’t breakable, but then again, she didn’t exactly want to be alone either.

“How bad are my injuries?” Bridget asked.

June blew out a breath as her gaze roved over Bridget. “Well, you’re in the ICU after a run-in with a combine.”

Bridget tried to hold back the snort at June’s phrasing, but she couldn’t quite prevent it. Her lips were curled upward, and it felt so good to have that light-hearted moment. “I’m going to need someone to explain how that happened.”

“I wish I could. All I know is from the reports and gossip that was given to me.”

“Right.”

“You’re going to need surgery before you can leave, but still, I’m not sure how you’re going to get out of here. You can’t use crutches.”

“Wheelchair I suppose,” Bridget mumbled.

“Most likely.”

“Then there is one person you can call for me.”

“I’ll do anything you need.”

“Elijah Wilson.”

CHAPTER 2



HER PARENTS LEFT, thankfully, and June stepped out of the room to make that phone call, Bridget remembering Eli's cell number like it was just yesterday they were dating. She'd never forget it. The quiet in the room seeped into her bones, and it unnerved her. When had she become so scared of being alone?

She lived by herself, so it wasn't that big a deal for her to be on her own, and yet she also wasn't used to lying useless in a hospital room with nothing but time to think. She hated every second of it.

June came back in, a smile on her lips. "Elijah said she'd be here as soon as she could."

"That could mean she left already or it'll be hours until she's done playing with her cattle."

"Playing with her cattle?" June furrowed her brow.

"She's a rancher, and those cattle are her life."

"Ah. I've met several ranchers like that over my time here."

Bridget nodded and attempted to relax in the bed. At least it was a comfortable bed, although with tubes protruding every which way from her body and with broken bones, it was a struggle to find any position that was comfortable. June must have noticed because she patted Bridget's hand lightly.

"How do you know Elijah?"

Eyeing June up and down, Bridget wasn't quite sure how to answer that question. The first words that came to mind were *she's my ex-girlfriend* but any religious leader Bridget had met prior to then would have likely scorned her for that one. Instead, she answered, "We grew up together and went to school together."

"Oh, that's nice." June gave a wan smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"I don't want you to think you're stuck here all day with me."

"I don't think that at all, Bridget. I'm here because you need someone to be with you, and that is, honestly enough, my job description. So I'm here as long as you need me."

"Just until Eli gets here."

"Good. I'm glad you have someone who can come and sit with you."

Neither of them commented on her parents, and their lack of continued presence in her hospital room, whether it was because Bridget didn't want them there or because they didn't want to be there remained unspoken. Bridget knew it was a mix of both. They didn't like her as much as she didn't like them.

Doctors came in, one after the other, specialists and more specialists. Bridget's head spun from the injuries and explanation of expected recovery time. She struggled to keep track of it all, especially with the pain medicine running through her brain, but she at least understood it would likely be months before she was back to work, though perhaps she could do some desk duty prior to that. Good thing they'd installed the elevator at the courthouse, because she'd likely need it.

One of her ribs had punctured her spleen, which had been what the bleeding was about, but it was controlled now. Thankfully. They lifted the blankets, checked her injuries, made faces at the wounds before stepping back and giving a prognosis. As they left, Bridget wasn't sure if she had answers

or just more questions. But because she was doing so well by whatever standards they had set, they were going to look into scheduling surgery to pin up her ankle—not something Bridget was looking forward to.

She'd never had surgery before. Well—not that she remembered, she supposed, since they did do surgery on her internal bleeding. They told her she would be up and moving around soon enough because they didn't want her catching pneumonia from not moving. Cursing the thought, Bridget pouted as the last one left the room.

“Did you catch half of that?” June asked.

Bridget shook her head. “Other than I'm beat up, broken, and this sucks, not really.”

June chuckled lightly. “I'll make sure they share with Elijah when she gets here if you want, so she can help remember it for you.”

“That'd be good, but let me ask her first. I don't want to just dump this on her.”

“She seemed quite concerned on the phone.”

“She would be. She's got a heart of gold.” A pang of sadness entered Bridget's chest. She loved that Eli had found happiness with Sarah, but it still hurt that she hadn't been good enough or right enough for Eli herself. She wanted to be that person for someone, but her own problems would always get in the way of a deeper relationship.

“Good. I'm glad she's coming then.” June shifted her stance.

“Speaking of,” Bridget lifted her hand and pointed to the door. “Eli.”

“What the hell did you do this time, Bridge?” Eli's tone was deep, filled with concern that was echoed in the look she cast in Bridget's direction, but her rounded face, two braids, and bright brown eyes were such a welcome sight.

“Didn't you hear? I got run over by a combine apparently.”

Eli snorted. “I did hear that, actually. Gossip, you know. I just didn’t think it was real.”

“Well, it is.”

As Eli stepped into the room, Bridget could have cried. She wanted Eli to wrap her in a hug and hold on tight, comforting her like she had so many times when they were together, except she knew she couldn’t ask for that. She couldn’t cross that boundary that Eli had set. Her eyes watered and her nose stopped up, and Eli’s look softened again with pity.

June leaned in. “Bridget, like I said before, it’s okay to cry. This is not something you’ve ever experienced before, and you’re bound to be feeling some shock.”

“I’m fine,” Bridget muttered.

“Like hell you are,” Eli answered, reaching down and gripping Bridget’s IV clad hand tightly and squeezing. “But we’ve got you, Bridge. Did your parents come already?”

Bridget snorted, thankful that Eli added in the dose of reality to draw her back to her strength and anger. “Yeah. And I kicked them out and asked June here to call you.”

“Good choice.”

“They are a piece of work,” Bridget mumbled on a sigh. “I suppose I’ll have to deal with them again.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m in the hospital.” Bridget gave Eli a hard stare.

“Right.” While Eli agreed, she didn’t look convinced. Instead, she turned to June. “Are you a chaplain here?”

“I am. One of the nurses called me to come talk with Bridget.”

“Well, thank you. Bridget is not a fan of doctors or hospitals, so I’m sure it took some work to calm her down and get her to stay put.”

“Not like I could move if I wanted to,” Bridget answered. “I’m pretty broken. Which reminds me, I can’t remember a lick of what the doctors said when they came in here. Can you...”

“I can figure it out if you want, keep track of it all. That way your parents don’t have to come back.”

“Thanks.” Bridget’s eyes watered again, and anger grew in the pit of her belly at the fact she couldn’t seem to go an hour without trying to cry. It was so nice to have someone who understood all the dynamics she didn’t want to be stuck with.

Eli dragged the chair over and sat in it, crossing one leg over her knee. “I suppose we’re going to be here a while.”

Bridget could have laughed, except she worried how much it would hurt. God love Eli, commanding and sturdy as always. She’d be there even if Bridget had ruined what little friendship they had left after their breakup. It hadn’t been a pleasant one by any means, but the lingering effects of it had been far worse than she’d anticipated. She missed her best friend, more than she missed her ex-girlfriend.

June made her exit after a few more minutes sitting with them, and then Bridget and Eli were left alone. It was the first time since Bridget had tried to win Eli over again at a bingo tournament—which had been a bad choice on her part. She’d apologized for it later, and they had tentatively worked toward friendship again, although Bridget mostly maintained her distance. She didn’t want to disrupt Eli’s budding relationship with Sarah. They had enough issues to contend with, being long distance.

Bridget glanced at the clock and finally to Eli. “Can you tell me what happened? I don’t remember anything and my parents were vague.”

“Oh.” Eli pressed her lips together hard. “I can tell you what I heard from the rumor mill if you want, but I wasn’t there and didn’t see anything.”

“That’ll be fine until I can get an actual accounting.”

“Okay.” Eli folded her hands together over her belly. “From what I heard, Sonny was driving his combine down the middle of ninety-six, and when I say middle, I mean middle. He was drunk.”

“He’s always drunk,” Bridget countered because they both knew it was true. Everyone in town did, but usually he wasn’t driving the combine on the highway when intoxicated. He saved that for his fields where he couldn’t do much damage.

“Yeah, I guess this time it was bad, though. You were trying to pull him over, and he turned, and well....you landed yourself here.”

“He turned into me?”

“From what I heard. I think Old Man Darwin was there, but I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?” Bridget gave her a hard look.

Eli shook her head. “Like I said, I wasn’t there. I didn’t drive to town to see the damage and be an onlooker. I figured they had enough issues getting life flight in there with all the rubberneckers.”

“Life flight?” Bridget’s eyes widened. That was new information to her. “They didn’t bring me by ambulance.”

“No. Helicopter.”

“But...was it really that bad?”

“Bridget, you’ve been in ICU for two days. You tell me.”

Sighing, Bridget stared down at her toes, wishing they weren’t on the edges of blurry because of her poor eyesight. It was the logical conclusion. She wasn’t in just any hospital room, she was in intensive care, where they had limited beds and only kept those near death. She didn’t want to think about it because if she did those tears would start up again.

“What did your parents say?”

“Dad said I’d ruined my career.”

Eli sighed heavily. “He’s such a fucking asshole.”

Bridget didn't disagree, but she wouldn't tell Eli she was right either. That was her father they were talking about, and while Eli had never been very fond of him, she'd never understood the struggle Bridget had to stand up to him. Eli was so much stronger than she was.

"What about your mom?"

"She only wanted to talk about medical stuff. She's mad I asked them to limit how long she's here and how often, but I'm glad I did."

"Hey, that's something." Eli nodded in her direction. "I'm proud of you for that."

The implied *at least* was left off the statement, but it hung in the room like rotten chicken in the trash overnight. Bridget closed her eyes. "She said I'll have to go stay with them when I get out."

Eli didn't answer right away, and Bridget wondered what was going through that brain of hers. Eli was smart, in ways Bridget was not. And she knew without a doubt that Eli was already working through all the implications of her statement and probably three or four alternatives.

"Do you want to stay with them?"

A simple look in Eli's direction was enough of an answer for the both of them. They were interrupted when Ann came back in, walking toward Bridget and the monitors all hooked up to her. "How are you feeling?"

"Better since the extra pain medicine."

"I'll make sure we keep up with that one, then. I can remove some of the IVs if you want. This one will have to stay." She pointed to the one in Bridget's right arm. "But I can take the one in your neck out."

"The one in my neck?" Bridget's eyes widened. "I didn't know I had one in my neck."

Ann pursed her lips. "You have three IVs."

"I can't exactly see my neck," Bridget countered.

“I’ll give you that one.”

“Don’t be so hard on Ann. She’s only trying to help.” Eli gave Bridget a hard stare.

Ann looked surprised. “I didn’t think you remembered me.”

“I rarely forget visitors, but especially not ones who are so...interesting.” Eli and Ann shared a look over Bridget, which made Bridget very uncomfortable.

“I think I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Please do.” Eli relaxed in her seat, giving Bridget another hard look. “Don’t be mean to Ann. She’s doing her job. Be a good patient for once and don’t have them call me to snitch that you’re making their lives miserable.”

“I have not—” Bridget started.

Eli interrupted. “Don’t try to convince me otherwise.”

“Fine.” Bridget lay still while Ann pulled the unused IVs out of her and covered the wounds with cotton balls and tape. She checked the catheter and emptied it, embarrassment flinging at Bridget full force. She was a complete invalid, and it hadn’t fully occurred to her until then. She’d never been so in need of care before. She’d never allowed herself to get like that.

A second nurse came in, her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail but with wildly curly strands running free. Her eyes were not a dark brown like Bridget would expect, but a hazel with lighter hues swirling in them, but the freckles that littered her nose and cheeks were the topper on the cake. This dark-skinned woman was stunning. Bridget absolutely did not want her to touch anything on her. It would be absolutely embarrassing.

“Bridget, this is Jerica. She’s one of the nurses in the ER who worked on you when you first came in.”

Bridget cringed. So much for that hope.

Jerica gave a soft smile. “I came up to check on you since my shift is over. I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine,” Bridget managed to answer.

Nodding, Jerica didn’t move her gaze from Bridget’s face. “We were worried about you downstairs, and we rarely get updates after we admit patients and transfer them, so I wanted to come check for myself.”

“Could have just called like normal,” Ann muttered, quiet enough that Bridget wasn’t sure Jerica could hear, but she knew Eli had. Eli perked up immediately.

Jerica gave Ann a sharp look. “I wanted to see for myself. It’s nice to see you looking so good and awake.”

“She still looks a mess,” Eli chimed in.

Bridget and Ann shot her a dirty look, shutting Eli right up.

“I’ll let the other nurses and doctors know that you’re doing well, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t,” Bridget’s voice was soft, and she honestly couldn’t fathom why she was agreeing to let the whole world know she was fine. She hated other people talking about her. After having been the talk of town for years, she was glad to fly under the radar when she could.

“Good.” Jerica gave her a brilliant smile, dimples flashing in each corner of her mouth. “They’ll be happy to hear it.”

“Can you maybe tell me what happened when I came in? I’m a bit vague on details and asshole here is less than helpful.” Bridget pointed at Eli.

“Oh, sure.” Jerica’s smile faltered. “You came in with internal bleeding, which was the first thing we had to deal with. Once we got you stabilized enough, we took you back to have surgery and repair the puncture to your spleen. You were with us in recovery for a bit until we assessed the rest of your injuries, stabilized your arm, and wrapped your leg and ankle.”

Jerica pointed to each injury as she explained.

“Then we waited for you to be transferred up here since you weren’t waking up.”

“I wasn’t waking up?”

Swallowing hard, Jerica's plump lips parted. "No. And we were worried you wouldn't, but I suppose you just needed some time to recover first."

"I guess." Bridget wasn't sure how to answer that. She wondered if anyone was even there when she was in surgery but decided she didn't want to know the answer to that. Eli had already stated she hadn't been there, but were Sharon and Edward? Would Bridget have even wanted them there? Yeah, she would have, in the long run, wanted them to have cared enough, but she was too scared to ask because she was pretty sure they didn't. "Thanks."

"No problem." Jerica stood still by the end of the bed. "I guess I'll go back down to the ER, but do you mind if I check on you again? We just want to be sure you're recovering well."

Bridget nodded before any words formed on her lips and then inwardly cursed again at her instant agreement to whatever Jerica said. In seconds Jerica and Ann walked out of the room, chattering and shutting the door behind them. Embarrassed, Bridget didn't even want to look at Eli, knowing she would say something.

"Well, that was..."

"Nothing," Bridget finished for her.

Eli shook her head. "Oh no, *that* was something. I've seen that something before."

"It was nothing," Bridget reiterated.

"If you say so, but I've never seen an emergency room nurse come to check on a patient that isn't hers anymore, and after her shift finished. This wasn't an official call."

Not answering, Bridget crossed her now IV free arm over her stomach and instantly regretted that decision, moving back to how she had been lying. What she would kill to be able to shift and lie on her side. She just wanted to move and get comfortable, or better yet, get the fuck out of Dodge and go home. This was far too uncomfortable and confining.

"Think about it, Bridget. It doesn't have to be her, but if you're interested in someone, and she's interested in you, go

for it.”

“How do you know Ann?”

“She stayed at *Indigo* with her partners.”

Bridget glared. “Partners?”

“Yup.” Eli scrunched her nose. “I don’t judge my guests, and they’re all very sweet.”

“So she’s...she’s gay.” Bridget whispered the last word as if it was curse, but that wasn’t how she meant it.

Eli raised an eyebrow at her. “Yes, but I don’t know how out they are, so bare that in mind while you’re shouting that word to a room with two lesbians in it.”

Bridget frowned. “I didn’t...I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” Eli heaved a breath and rubbed her hands over her face. “Do you need anything at the house? I can grab it when I come back tomorrow.”

“You’re coming back?”

“Bridget...” Eli’s look immediately softened. “You look like shit, like someone ran you over with a combine a couple times. You called me down here for a reason, and while you haven’t shared why, I’m not going to leave you to the wolves. I will stay as much as you need me to. I promise. If you need me to stay the night, I can do that too, but I’d really like to go home and get some clean clothes then.”

“Sarah’s not going to worry?”

“She’s finishing up her tour, so she’s not here. Bill said he’ll do whatever needs done at *Indigo* so long as I’m here. He gets this, you know.”

Bridget didn’t say anything, just stared at Eli in awe. “Thank you.”

“Do mind telling me why you called me? I wouldn’t think your ex-girlfriend you barely talk to would be the person you’d call when you’re on your deathbed at the hospital.”

“I’m not on my deathbed.”

“Your face could have fooled me. Really, you look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Have you seen yourself?”

Bridget shook her head. “I’m not allowed up yet.”

“Where’s your phone?”

“No clue. Did it survive?”

Eli narrowed her gaze but pulled her cellphone out of her pocket. She turned the camera on and turned it to face Bridget, holding it out. Bridget clenched her jaw as she looked at herself. Her hair was a stringy mess all around her face, no doubt in tangles that would take weeks to comb out. Her left eye was black and blue, the bruise spreading down her face to her jaw. Her neck was equally bruised from the IV they’d stuck in and pulled out.

“Holy shit.”

“Exactly,” Eli responded. “You look like shit.”

“I didn’t...I didn’t realize I looked this bad.”

“So if the pretty nurse from the ER thinks you’re cute like this, I think you’ve caught yourself a winner.”

“Shut up, Eli.”

Laughing, Eli let Bridget have the phone for as long as she wanted, staring at herself and judging every injury she could see. “What the hell happened?”

“Wish I knew more than what I do.”

Bridget handed the phone back and fell silent. She did want to answer Eli’s first question, but she wasn’t really sure how to. They’d had such a strained relationship over the last few years, but she’d known Eli would show up without hesitation if Bridget needed her.

“I didn’t have anyone else to call.” She was so quiet when she spoke, she was worried Eli hadn’t heard and that she’d have to repeat herself. Luckily, when she finally raised her

gaze, Eli looked as though she'd definitely heard. "I didn't want Sharon and Edward here, but I didn't have anyone else to call, and I couldn't be alone."

Eli leaned in, covering Bridget's hand and giving her a gentle squeeze. "You know I'll always come if you call, right?"

"That's why I called." Bridget blinked back more tears, wishing them away but she couldn't help when they flooded her eyes and dripped down her cheeks.

Eli moved in, standing and bending over the bed, her arms moving around Bridget's shoulders and neck in as much of a hug as they could manage. Bridget closed her eyes, breathing in Eli's familiar musky scent, and let herself be enveloped in the embrace. She needed this, far more than she could ever explain or share with Eli, but she was so very glad Eli had come, that she had answered Bridget's call. Because she couldn't do this alone. Not anymore.

CHAPTER 3



ELI HAD STAYED with her for several days, even after they transferred her to another room and out of ICU. Bridget couldn't be more grateful for her best friend, and she was beginning to recognize that Eli was still very much that. She needed Eli like she needed oxygen. They had her up and moving around as much as she could during the day, and Eli had stayed through her ankle surgery, but as soon as Bridget was out of recovery and back in her room, Eli had begged off to check her cattle.

The time she'd spent alone in the room had become longer as each day passed, but she understood. Eli couldn't abandon her life to spend the entire week with her, but equally, Bridget needed to learn to be on her own too. She was still groggy from the surgery, but she was honestly feeling better than she had days before, even though the pain medicine had been increased temporarily.

She was going to have to stand before bed. The doctors had told her that much, and she was not looking forward to it. The amount of physical therapy she was going to need to do in order to get back into shape and pass her physical was outrageous. She'd be lucky to be back in the field inside six months.

Bridget turned her nose up at her dinner but grimaced her way through the first bite when there was a knock on the door. Eli wasn't due back that night, at least she didn't think, and she'd told all the nurses on the floor to never let her parents in without warning her first, and not that day. They hadn't even

come in for her surgery even though they knew it was happening. *Typical.*

Turning her chin toward the door, she was surprised to find the beautiful young nurse eyeing her back. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Bridget answered, eyes widening. She at least felt better for this conversation and no doubt looked less black and blue, though she was still that sickly yellow and green color. It would fade with time, or so the doctors told her.

“You said I could check on you?” She asked as if it was a question, but it wasn’t. Bridget had agreed to allow Jerica in.

“Come in.” Bridget motioned her into the room. Luckily she had it to herself, and she was so glad she hadn’t had to share it with someone else yet. That would only add salt to her wounds. “Are you finishing up a shift?”

“I am.” Jerica gave her a sweet smile and sat on the edge of the mattress. “Is your friend around?”

“Eli? No. She went home for the night.”

“Has she been around a lot?”

Bridget narrowed her gaze. “Yeah. She’s a good friend.”

“Good.” Jerica put her hands in her lap, folding them together. “I was kind of hoping to catch you alone.”

“Why?”

“Your friend scares me a little.”

“What?” Bridget could have laughed. Eli wouldn’t hurt a fly if she could avoid it. She cried every time she had to put down one of her animals, and Bridget knew the day she had to put down old Max, the pup who lived on her deck, Eli would be devastated for months. She’d never known anyone to be afraid of her.

Jerica lifted a shoulder and dropped it. “She’s very protective of you.”

“Oh.” Though Bridget was confused. She hadn’t seen any protectiveness from Eli when Jerica had been around before. In fact, it had been the exact opposite. Eli had encouraged

Bridget to do more than talk to the pretty nurse. “Well, she’s not here, and I don’t expect her back.”

“Okay.” Jerica’s gaze dropped to Bridget’s dinner. “How are you doing?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose. They just pinned up my ankle this morning, so I’m bound to be sent home soon.”

Jerica nodded. “I hope it’s not too awful a recovery.”

“I’m sure it’ll be worse to see what my cruiser looks like.” Bridget tried to make light of the situation, but she knew it hadn’t come off right. She was so bad at this flirting thing. That was why she and Eli had worked so well—they’d known each other since they were in diapers. There was no trying to impress Eli into liking her. It was kind of a requirement of being in the same class together.

“I’m betting it looks pretty squished.” Jerica’s voice was soft.

“Probably,” Bridget replied. She didn’t really want to think about it, but she still hadn’t remembered anything about the accident, and part of her hoped that seeing her vehicle would give her the jolt of reality she needed. Although it could also prove to be too much of a jolt. “I was walking with a knee scooter thing before surgery today, so maybe I’ll get back to that tomorrow.”

“I’m sure PT and OT will get you right up and going.”

Jerica’s mood was far more subdued during this visit than the previous one. Bridget tried to pinpoint it but wasn’t finding the reason why there was such a change, especially since Jerica had been the one to come visit her.

“It was nice of you to visit.” Bridget gave her an out if she wanted one. She wouldn’t want Jerica to stay there if she needed to leave.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure really.” Jerica’s cheeks tinged darker. If Bridget didn’t know any better, she’d say Jerica was blushing. It was a lovely color to add to her already dark skin.

But she really wished Jerica would look up at her, make eye contact. “Hospital food hasn’t killed you yet?”

Bridget snorted. “Eli’s been sneaking me some food from home.”

“Tsk.” Jerica giggled lightly. “But I can’t say I wouldn’t do the same if I were in your situation. I eat this stuff all the time, and it’s not something I’d like to eat for every meal if I could avoid it.”

“Then why eat it at all?”

Jerica’s tongue dashed across her full lips. “I don’t often have a lot of time to eat, and sometimes it’s nice to walk down and get a fresh hot meal when I’m short on time.”

“Makes sense.”

Bridget cocked her head to the side, trying to decide what to say next. They didn’t know each other at all, and Bridget only remembered one very brief conversation with her. At least she was more with it this time and able to think better. The shock of her accident had eased, and she was a bit more settled now.

“I suppose I shouldn’t keep you.” Jerica moved to stand, but Bridget put out a hand to stop her.

“You don’t have to leave unless you want to. I’d enjoy the company, actually. It gets quiet in here by myself with nothing other than the television.”

“Eli didn’t bring you anything to do?”

Bridget shrugged slightly. “I don’t have many hobbies. I work a lot.”

“No hobbies at all?”

Reaching onto the table next to the bed, Bridget pulled over a book and handed it to Jerica. “She brought me a couple books, but I can’t say I’ve ever been a reader like her.”

Jerica flipped the book over and read the back. It was Bridget’s not-so-subtle hint to figure out if Eli’s suspicions were right or wrong. She wanted to know if this woman was as

interested in women, but Bridget didn't have the radar that Eli did. She needed verbal confirmation.

Handing the book back, Jerica made eye contact. "I like Ruby Scott's books. I've read a lot of her romances. I usually need something nice and light after what I deal with daily."

It was close to a confirmation. Bridget pressed her lips together hard, trying to get enough guts to just ask outright. The more Eli had talked about it, the odder Bridget thought it was that Jerica kept visiting, and this second visit confirmed that. No one else had checked in on her from the hospital.

"I'd never heard of her before Eli brought the book over."

"Is your friend a lesbian?"

Bridget snorted. "Oh yes, and she'll be proud to tell you that. She's dating a big time musician. Sadie Bade."

"Oh! I've heard of her." Jerica's eyes lit up. "I'm not a huge fan of her music, but that's mostly because I don't listen to that style very often."

Bridget was going to be hard pressed to admit that she loved Sadie's music, and she would never admit that to Sarah or Eli. "Anyway, Eli is kind of all things lesbian, hence the books."

Jerica smiled. "It's good she's proud of who she is and that she's got friends who accept her. Not everyone has that."

Bridget's stomach dropped, and she stared at the plate of food in front of her, suddenly not hungry. She couldn't even fathom what it had been like to grow up in Eli's house, so accepted. She'd never had a chance like that, and she'd known it from the start. Coming out to her parents would have gotten her kicked out of the house, or worse yet, thrown into some kind of conversion therapy. They would have found a way for it even if she'd been an adult—she was sure of that. It had gotten to the point that, after Eli had come out to her family and Sharon and Edward had found out, that Eli wasn't allowed anywhere near Bridget.

They'd thrown a loud fit down at the school board when two of the teachers had come out and announced they were

dating. They'd lost, but it still hurt that she had to face the fact she was related to two of the biggest bigots in town.

"Bridget, did I say something?" Jerica caught Bridget's attention.

"Oh, no. I think the pain medicine is finally kicking in and making me groggy. Sorry."

"I should probably let you rest, then. Did they say when they'll release you?"

"I think the current plan is in a day or two. I'm not entirely sure. I think it depends on how well I can move without help."

"Makes sense." Jerica's lips curled upward. "I hope you get out of here sooner rather than later. It's always easier to recover at home in my opinion."

"I won't be going home," Bridget mumbled. "Can't get in and out of my house. Too many stairs."

"What do you mean?"

"It's split level, so there's stairs to get to the door, then stairs up or down as soon as you get inside. It won't be easy for me to do that on my own."

"Oh." Jerica's face turned down. "Where will you stay then?"

"I haven't figured that one out yet, so I guess only time will tell."

"With your parents?"

Bridget's previous thoughts came rushing back. "I hope not. We don't exactly get along."

"Ah." Jerica touched her hand against Bridget's. "Well, I hope you find someone kind to stay with."

"Me too."

"I'll see you around, Bridget. I'm glad you're doing so well." Jerica stood up and walked out of the door without another word. Bridget leaned back into the pillows, staring after her. She still couldn't figure out why Jerica would want

to visit someone like her. Bridget was no one special. In fact, she was the complete opposite of special. She was broken.



Her heart raced and her fingers gripped the wheel tightly. Bridget clenched her eyes shut as the crunching sound of her vehicle breaking apart pierced her ears. She panicked. Every nightmare she'd had about dying in the line of duty came rushing back.

Her hands were covered in sweat as she tightened her grasp. She tried to turn away from the sound, from the danger, but she was locked into place. The seatbelt was tight against her hips, her chest, and she couldn't move. Clenching her jaw, Bridget waited for the impact, for her to be sliced in half by whatever was coming at her.

Pain seared through her body, and she screamed. Sitting straight up in the hospital bed, screaming, Bridget opened her eyes as wide as she could get them. In seconds, nurses piled into the room, the light flicking on as they surrounded her. She couldn't stop the panic, the pain, she couldn't control her breathing.

Pushing them away as they grabbed her arms, Bridget struggled to get free, to be let go, to not be stuck in a place she didn't want to be. Voices surrounded her, sharp commands not only to herself but to the other nurses. She couldn't even make out what they were saying as she struggled against the hold they had.

Someone ran out as Bridget pushed as hard as she could with her good arm, shoving one of the nurses to the side as she attempted to get free from them. She had to get out. Had to breathe some fresh air, have a moment where she could stand in the cold chilly air and take a deep breath. Maybe that would be the only thing that would calm her down.

Making that decision, Bridget had to get outside. She pushed and pulled, doing her best to get loose, but it wasn't working. It was too hard to move with her arm in a sling and

her leg and foot wrapped up. A familiar voice echoed in her ear, saying her name in soothing tones.

Bridget wrenched her eyes open, meeting the eyes of none other than Chaplain Melville. Bridget shook her head, desperate to reach out and touch June's arm, something that would root her to where she was, ground her in the moment. Perhaps June could be that connection for her.

"Take a deep breath, Bridget." June's voice was the only thing she could focus on. Their eyes locked in a battle Bridget didn't want to give up. She couldn't speak, could barely breathe. "Come on, Bridget. I need you to start breathing deeply otherwise they're going to medicate you."

"No," she managed that one small word.

June looked over Bridget's shoulder at someone. Bridget wasn't sure, but she hoped it was Eli. She needed someone who could come in and calm her down, and Eli was the only person who would be able to do that. She'd always been the one person who could.

Her stomach swirled, a mess of emotions as she tried to catch her breath, make her heart stop galloping, or stand up and get out of there. She didn't care if it did more damage to her already broken bones. She needed space.

"Bridget." The voice was soft, calm.

Bridget immediately tensed, closing her eyes and searching for the voice again. It wasn't Eli, that much she knew, but it was feminine, strong, comforting.

"Bridget, listen to my voice. Take a deep breath, open your lungs and draw in air."

Without hesitating, Bridget did as she was told, cold air filling her hot lungs and soothing her terror. She breathed out slowly, her grip on June's arms loosening, but she still held on, fearing what would happen if she did let go.

"Do it again. You're doing great." The voice had a slight accent to it—foreign. She barely noticed it though, and it was probably only because she listened to nothing other than that voice. "In and out."

Bridget did it again, slowing her entire body. Her muscles relaxed one by one. It took several more breaths, but eventually she released June and leaned back onto the hospital bed that had been her home for the past week. When she opened her eyes, the entire room was still.

June knelt in front of her, hands on either side of her on the bed, her eyes wide and hopeful. Other nurses stood around, and one had a needle ready to go. When Bridget turned her head, she was shocked to find Jerica standing next to June, her eyes wide as she stared directly at Bridget.

“Are you okay?”

That voice. It was *her* voice. Embarrassment filled her, and Bridget’s eyes stung with tears. She sniffled as she shook her head but said, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay. They’re going to leave for right now, but June and I are going to sit with you for a bit, okay?”

“Okay,” Bridget agreed. She had no idea what else she was supposed to be doing. The other nurses left after helping her back onto the bed. June and Jerica stayed put, one on either side of her, hands on hers as they comforted her.

Her cheeks heated every time she tried to think about the mess she’d just put them all through. It was so unlike her. She’d had nightmares before, but never like this, never like she had to get out and away to be safe from them.

“Your heart rate’s coming down,” Jerica murmured. “That’s a good thing. Blood pressure, too.”

Bridget hadn’t even noticed they’d slapped those back on her in the aftermath of her nightmare. Cursing herself, she closed her eyes, the lump in her throat so very hard to swallow. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Jerica said. “I’m surprised it didn’t happen before now.”

June chimed in. “Nightmares are very common after what you went through.”

Bridget shook her head, not wanting to hear platitudes. Even if it was true, she was so much better than that. She'd been taught for years to hide everything, and it was better for the world if she did. "What time is it?"

"Nearly seven," Jerica answered. "I was just coming in for shift when they called me."

Bridget's eyes snapped open. "Called you? Why would they call you?"

Jerica's lips parted, and she glanced at June for help. June and Jerica shared a look that Bridget couldn't read, and then went on to explain whatever it was away. "We needed extra help."

"Because I was out of control."

"You had a nightmare and a panic attack," Jerica started. "We're trained to help you with that."

Bridget shook her head. "Please just get out. I'm fine now. Please just go."

They both looked surprised, but Bridget couldn't handle the way they were staring at her, gazes filled with pity. She was desperate for the quiet she had abhorred only days before. She needed to sink into her own vat of shame without the two of them looking on.

Jerica leaned in. "I need to check your vitals before I can leave. Do you want June to stay or go?"

"Go," Bridget whispered, her voice breaking on the word. If she could only get rid of one of them, then she would.

June patted the top of Bridget's hand. "Please let them call me if you need me, Bridget. I'm here for you in whatever capacity you need, all right?"

Bridget didn't respond—didn't nod or speak. Instead, she folded her arm across her hips, holding herself tightly as she waited for Jerica to start the testing she had to get done before Bridget could kick her out, too. Then she could have the room to herself. She could wallow in her own self-pity with no one to look on.

June left the room, although she looked over her shoulder, eyes filled with concern. Jerica waited a few more seconds before standing and pulling the computer over. She opened the file and took Bridget's blood pressure reading, inputting in into the system. She went through the routine, Bridget moving when she needed to and being as quiet as possible. She would not speak, and she would not engage this woman.

As Jerica finished up, she sat back on the edge of the bed and touched Bridget's leg lightly. "Please talk to me."

"There's nothing to tell. I had a nightmare. Thank you for coming to help."

"Bridget."

Bridget gave her a hard look and shook her head. She didn't want to talk about this to anyone. "I'm fine."

"I'd believe it better if you weren't also crying."

She hadn't even noticed. Raising her hand to her cheeks, she found they were wet as tears slid down to her chin. Bridget wiped them away angrily. "Seems I can't control myself since coming here. It'll be much better once I get home. I promise."

Jerica sighed. "Will Eli come to get you?"

"I don't know," Bridget whispered. "I don't know where I'm going."

"You need to figure that out before you're released."

"Don't you think I know that?" The bite to her words was over the top, but Bridget couldn't control that either. She was not in the position to be nice and pleasant. Not after what she'd just experienced.

"Bridget, please, we're only here to help you."

"I don't need your help. If you're done, please leave."

Jerica sat in shock for a few more seconds before standing and walking out of the room, shutting the door behind her. Cast into the quiet, Bridget openly let the tears slide down her cheeks without brushing them away. It was so hard to cry. The

broken ribs made her sobbing hurt in ways she'd never experienced before, and still, she couldn't stop it.

What the hell had happened to her? She'd gone from the tough sheriff to the weakling, the one who cried over everything and couldn't keep her shit together. This was not her, and she didn't like this new her. Bridget hated being vulnerable, especially in front of others. Shifting around on the bed, she got comfortable and closed her eyes against the oncoming dawn. It was too early in the morning for this crap, but at least she didn't have to feign going back to sleep. She could stay awake, wait for her breakfast, and start her new day by figuring out where the hell she was going to sleep once she was released.

Her first goal was to not go to her parent's house. That meant she had to find somewhere else to crash, somewhere that would be considered more optimal than their place. The problem was, Bridget really had no one she could call to ask the favor from, no one who would help take care of her, no one who she felt comfortable asking. She was an invalid, and she was no longer the woman she had grown up to be.

CHAPTER 4



HER ROOM WAS FILLED with people, and Bridget wasn't sure who to look at. Sharon and Edward stood near the door, and Eli was right next to her. June was in the mix as well along with a bunch of nurses. No doctors in sight, though Bridget had come to realize they often made themselves scarce.

They'd signed off on her paperwork, discharging her so long as she had a place to go where she wouldn't be alone, and that was what led them to this moment. How the hell her parents had figured out she was being discharged was beyond her, that or they had really bad timing, but she'd wanted to go home by herself. She'd planned to have Eli take her out of the hospital and drop her at her house, and she'd find a way to get up the damn stairs to her bedroom.

God, she just wanted her own fucking bed for one night.

Sharon put her hand out, stopping the chatter and instructions for care. Bridget's stomach dropped, and she was desperate to put a stop to whatever disaster was about to happen. Yet, she couldn't. Her mother sucked the words right out of her every time. She sat on the edge of the bed, watching the fury in her mother's eyes.

"Where is she going to be staying?" Sharon's voice pierced the air.

"We thought she was going to your house," the nurse to Bridget's right spoke up.

Grimacing, Bridget stared wide-eyed as her plans fell apart right in front of her eyes. She had to put a stop to it, but she

was so exhausted from the nightmare last night and struggling with her panic attack. She had to do something to put an end to it. Desperately looking toward Eli, she begged her silently to step in and stop it.

Sharon's look hardened, and her anger turned on Bridget. This was worse than she had expected. If she'd talked to her mom first, it would have been less of a fight. All she wanted was for Eli to take her home and leave her alone.

Eli leaned down, whispering in Bridget's ear, "You told me you were going to your house."

Shaking her head, Bridget gave her a desperate look.

"Hold on," Eli answered, straightening her back. "Bridget is going to come stay at *Indigo* with me. She won't be alone."

"Hardly." Sharon sneered. "Our daughter will *not* be staying with you."

Eli put her hands on her hips. "I'm pretty sure Bridget gets to answer that question. Where do you want to stay?"

All eyes turned on her. Bridget's heart thundered, and she worried she was going to be thrown into another panic attack. June moved in and grasped her hand, holding on as if to center her. Bridget was thankful for the move, but Sharon's sharp gaze filled her with shame about it. She shouldn't need anyone's comfort and support to answer this question. She should just say what she wanted and be done with it. Drama be damned.

But she couldn't speak. No matter how many times Bridget tried to get her voice to work, no words came out. She was silent in her defense of what she wanted.

"That's it. She's coming home with us, as short notice as it is." Disdain leached from every word.

Bridget shook her head and took comfort in June's tightening grip. "No. I want to go with Eli."

Sharon snorted, crossing her arms, her eyes pure fury. "You won't go with *that* girl."

Eli straightened her spine. “I hardly think I’m a girl, Sharon. And Bridget has spent more nights at my house than you probably remember.”

Surely Sharon wouldn’t make a spectacle of herself in front of all these people. She wouldn’t dare say what Bridget thought she would, she wouldn’t lob those accusations in Eli’s direction in the middle of a room filled with witnesses.

“Bridget will be perfectly safe at my house. She can have the spare room, and there’s easy access to everything on one floor.”

“You live in the middle of the country,” Edward started. “What will you do if she needs to see a doctor?”

“The same thing I would do with anyone who needed to see a doctor. I’ll take her to the doctor.” Eli crossed her arms, stubbornly, but she didn’t move from Bridget’s side.

June moved to step between them, but Bridget held her back and shook her head. “I want to stay with Eli, so that’s where I’m going to stay.”

“You will not stay with *her*.” Sharon scrunched her nose in Eli’s direction.

Bridget clenched her jaw. “I’m an adult, as much as you don’t want to admit it, and I am going to stay where I want to stay.”

“I won’t allow you to leave this hospital with her. You’re my child, and you’ll come home with me.”

“I won’t do it. I’ll stay here longer if I have to, but I’m not going home with you.” Something had happened, and Bridget finally found her voice. Eli nodded at her in appreciation, and pride bloomed in Bridget’s chest. “I’m going with Eli, and I would appreciate it if you and Daddy didn’t come visit me while I’m healing. I hear it’s not good to be agitated when you’re trying to rest.”

Sharon’s jaw dropped. Eli snickered behind her hand, and June stepped between them then. She let go of Bridget’s hand and moved to block her from her parent’s view. “I think

Bridget is right in one way, none of this energy is good for her healing. Let's talk about this outside, shall we?"

"She's our daughter!" Sharon screeched, and Bridget knew they were all about to be in for the rage she'd been holding in. "She won't go with that woman. She'll be corrupted if she goes with her."

Bridget's stomach twisted hard, sharp pain filling it. She hated when her mother talked about Eli like that. She'd heard it far too many times over the years to count, and yet she'd never stood up to defend her best friend. Not when they were teenagers, and not even now. The words escaped her again. The pride she'd just felt vanished in the blink of an eye.

June and the nurse stepped between her parents and Bridget. They walked them out of the room, shutting the door behind them. Eli collapsed onto the side of the bed, sighing heavily. "If you needed some place to go that wasn't with them, you should have just asked."

"I know." Embarrassment filled her, not for the first time since she'd come to the hospital. She hated being the center of attention, and she hated being in her parents' line of fire just as much if not more. She just wanted everyone to be peaceful with each other and to let her do what she wanted, which was to go home and be by herself.

"So they won't release you unless you stay with someone?"

Bridget nodded. "I can't...I can't even go to the bathroom by myself right now because I can't get my pants down. It's ridiculous, Eli. I hate it."

"We'll figure it out. I promise, I won't let you go with them unless you really want to."

"I don't." Bridget nearly broke. "I don't want to go with them. I can't—I can't be stuck with them. I'll never get out."

"Then you'll come with me. I did lie, though—I don't have a bedroom on the main floor anymore."

"What about the small one?"

“It’s my office. You’ll have to crash in the basement with me, but I do have a spare room there. We’ll get you up and down the stairs when you need it until you can manage yourself, okay? But let’s not tell them that, because I don’t think they’ll let you stay with me if that’s the case.”

Bridget nodded. “Thank you, Eli. Thank you so much.”

“I know what kind of people they are.”

She was almost in tears again. Fuck, this had to stop. She needed to bolster up and man up. The wuss she had become was not the person she wanted to be. Her parents didn’t come back into the room, but June did. She had a small smile on her lips as she stepped inside. “They said they’ll come visit you.”

“I’ll only let them in if she wants them in,” Eli stated firmly.

“I think that’d be wise. In all my years being a chaplain, your parents are some of the hardest to get to listen.”

Bridget snickered lightly. “Welcome to my life for the last thirty years.”

“I don’t envy you.”

“No one does,” Eli mumbled, grasping Bridget’s hand. “She’ll come home with me, and I’ll take care of her as long as she needs until she can go home on her own.”

“Thank you,” Bridget whispered. “Really. I’m sure you never thought we’d end up living together this way.”

Eli snorted, her laugh echoing through the room as she wiped the tears of laughter falling from her eyes. “Oh hell, Bridget. No, I thought we’d be married first. Jesus, what would make you say that?”

Bridget shrugged lightly with her good shoulder. “It’s true.”

“Damn straight it is.” Eli was still laughing when she stood up. “Come on, let’s get you in this fucking wheelchair so we can spring you from this place.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Bridget gave a half-salute. She shifted slowly to the edge of the bed, knowing every movement was going to be slow. Nurses came in to help her, but soon enough they shooed Eli out to go get the truck.

She cursed when she thought about that. Getting into the truck in her condition was not going to be fun. The nurses were just about to wheel her out of the room when Jerica showed up at the door, a smile on her lips and her hands folded together in front of her.

“I heard a rumor you were leaving.”

“Finally!” Bridget smiled. “No offense, but I don’t want to stay here any longer.”

“None taken.” Jerica walked with them to the front of the hospital where Eli had been instructed to pull the truck up. “I’m glad you’re doing so well. There are a lot of people worried about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You came in looking pretty rough,” Jerica added. “Your fellow deputies stayed outside in the lobby until you were cleared of surgery. The chief of police from town came too.”

“Really?” Bridget’s brow furrowed. “I hadn’t realized so many people were there.”

“There were a lot.”

Bridget licked her lips, taking the risk to ask the question she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer to. “W-were my parents there?”

Jerica’s pitying look was the only answer she needed.

“I suppose they showed up later.”

“They did,” Jerica answered. “They arrived about the time we took you up to ICU.”

“Wonderful,” Bridget muttered.

They stopped out front and waited for Eli to pull her black truck up. Eli had the door open and was waiting for Bridget to get inside, or to help her inside. It was not going to be easy.

She folded up the knee scooter she'd been given and shoved it into the back seat.

"Are we ready?" Eli asked, a happy look on her face.

Bridget had always admired that about her. She was someone who always found the silver lining, the glass was always half full, and there was always light at the end of the tunnel. Bridget was the complete opposite, jaded and shattered.

"Yeah." Bridget sighed, staring at the step up she was going to have to take. "This is going to be fun."

"We've got you." Eli stepped in and so did Jerica and another nurse. It took all of them, but Bridget finally managed to get into the truck and buckle herself in, although it was not going to be a comfortable drive to *Indigo* on the rough roads with a seatbelt pushing against her still-broken ribs. It was a necessary evil, and one she wished she could do without for at least one drive.

Eli slipped into the driver's seat and grinned.

"What?" Bridget asked.

"I gave the cute nurse your cell number."

Bridget wrinkled her nose. "You did what?"

"She's cute. She obviously likes you. You can thank me later."

"I don't even have a phone."

"Sure you do." Eli handed a brand new cell phone over and still had that shit-eating grin on her lips. "I got it for you yesterday while I was in town since your other one got ruined in the accident."

"Thanks." Bridget stared at it. "I don't think she's going to call me."

"Text, Bridge. Come on. She'll text you."

"She won't."

“I bet you she will, and if I win this, then you have to get married at *Indigo*. Deal?”

“Sure, because you’re insane, and that won’t happen.” Bridget shook her head, but at the same time, it felt so good to be over that awkward stage with Eli, to be able to talk like they were best friends again, and chat about girls. It was almost as if the breakup between them had never happened, and Bridget honestly couldn’t have asked for more right then. She needed a friend more than anything.



The drive to *Indigo* was so long, and Bridget’s ribs ached massively from sitting in one position. She managed to lean forward and push the door open, but looking at the ground below, she panicked. It was way too steep a drop for her, and there was no one but Eli to help her down.

Eli stepped into her view, her face bright and shining as always. “Jerica told me a tip to help you down.”

“What’s that?” Bridget stared, knowing she was pale from just the thought.

“She said slide down the seat until your feet touch. I’ll make sure you don’t fall, I promise.” Eli reached forward and put her hands on Bridget’s hips. “I’ve got you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Your scooter is out, and we’ll get you to the house. Then we can take a break before going downstairs if you want.” Eli looked so sincere. Bridget had to trust her. There was no other option at this point.

Bridget bolstered herself and moved off the edge of the seat. True to her word, Eli grabbed her hips and held her so she didn’t fall. As soon as her good leg touched the ground, Bridget reached up and wrapped her good arm around Eli’s shoulder. Taking a deep breath, and a moment, Bridget pressed her forehead into Eli’s shoulder, breathing in that same musky scent she’d always appreciated.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Bridget knew she’d disrupted Eli’s life in an awful way, but this was all she could manage to do until she got better and could go someplace on her own. Or drive again, since it had been her entire right side that was crushed in the accident.

“Let’s get you inside.” Eli moved the knee scooter closer, and Bridget put her bad leg on it. She used her opposite hand to hold herself up and pushed forward. It was awkward on the dirt, but it was the best they could come up with for then. As they got to the stairs on the deck, Eli used her body to help Bridget maneuver up them. As they got into the house, Bridget stopped and stared at it.

She had not been there since Eli had started the renovations, and holy shit, it looked amazing. “Eli.”

“What?” Eli stared at her.

“This house is stunning. I can’t believe what you’ve done with it.”

“I forgot you haven’t been here in years.”

The floors had been resurfaced, the old wood brought back to life. The fireplace had been redone so it reflected rustic red brick instead of the marble Mrs. Wilson had insisted on. Bridget moved into the dining room, gasping when she saw the kitchen. “Holy shit.”

“It’s a dream, isn’t it?”

“This is a chef’s kitchen. But you hate cooking.”

“Yeah, but Sarah loves it.”

“You did this before Sarah moved in.”

Eli shrugged. “I needed it for my guests, and trust me, it’s come in handy. But Sarah does use it often.”

“I can’t even—this doesn’t look like the same house you grew up in.”

“The basement does, mostly.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Want to go down or take a break?”

“You know what I want?” Bridget eyed Eli up and down, trying to decide if she could ask this one favor of her.

Eli shook her head.

“I want a shower, or a bath. I don’t care which, but I want to get the hospital grime off me.”

“I can totally understand that.” Eli grinned. “Let’s get you downstairs.”

They made it halfway down the stairs when Bridget abruptly sat down and stretched her legs out in front of her. Eli sat next to her.

“Need a break?”

“I think it’ll be easier if I go down like this.”

“Then let’s do that.” Eli smiled at her. “I’ll still make sure you don’t fall.”

“Thanks.” Bridget knew she was going to be saying that a lot in the upcoming weeks. It was going to be a long recovery, and she’d be depending on Eli for quite some time.

They took one step at a time, moving until they got to the bottom of the stairs. Bridget had been right and it was easier to go down them that way even if it was slower in some ways. Still, she felt safer doing it, as though she wasn’t going to hurt one of her broken bones in the process.

When they got to the bottom, Eli ran back up to the top to grab the scooter. Bridget wheeled herself into the bathroom, knowing exactly where it was. They had done so many movie nights down there when they were kids that she knew the basement like the back of her hand. It was her preferred place to be in the house, actually, since it was the fun zone, the zone where they couldn’t damage much and get underfoot of Mrs. Wilson.

Eli followed her into the bathroom. Bridget sat on the closed toilet seat and slowly began to pull off what clothes she could. Luckily, Eli had gone to her house and picked up a

bunch of her workout sweatpants and loose T-shirts, because anything else would have been a pain in the ass to wear.

“They said you can’t get your ankle wet.” Eli bent over and started the tub full of water. “I can wrap it if you want, or you can stick it on the edge of the tub.”

“I think the edge will work well.”

“You can’t get your arm wet either.”

Bridget sighed. “You’re going to have to help me in, aren’t you?”

“Did you manage to get in on your own at the hospital?”

“They gave me a halfway-decent sponge bath one day.”

“That’s it?” Eli raised her eyebrow.

“Yeah, hence why I want to get clean.”

“I can imagine.” Eli tugged Bridget’s shirt up and tossed it onto the floor. “I can swing by your house again and get anything you want and bring it here.”

“I’ll think about it. You’ve honestly done so much for me, Eli. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Eli knelt down in front of her, staring up at Bridget. “You know, Bridge, I would do anything for you. All you have to do is ask. You’re my best friend, and even though it hasn’t seemed that way in the last few years, I do mean it.”

Bridget smiled, warming at the sentiment. She felt the same way, and for the first time in years, they were finally understanding each other.

“But you do know,” Eli started and winked, “I’m going to have to see you naked again.”

Bridget flushed. “Yeah, I understand that.”

“And touch you.”

“Yes.” Bridget clenched her jaw. “Not how I thought this would happen.”

“I’m pretty sure no one thought you were going to get run over by a combine. Like, who does that, Bridget? Were you

trying to win an award or something? Like the Darwin award?”

Bridget shook her head. “No, but I think Sonny might have.”

Eli laughed. “God, he would win that, wouldn’t it?”

“He’s such a drunk, but at least he’s usually a fun drunk.”

“Except when he runs the Sheriff over.”

“Yeah.” Bridget sighed.

“Hey, I meant to tell you, but I did vote for you.”

Bridget’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, we need a Democrat in office around here.”

Laughing, Bridget rolled her eyes. “Do you know how much shit I got for that?”

“I’m sure your mother fainted.”

“She nearly had a heart attack, but then thought about the political strategy of it and decided that it was good enough for her.”

“She still doesn’t know, does she?” Eli’s tone turned somber.

“What? That I’m into women? No, she doesn’t know. I don’t even know how to tell her that one. She’ll disown me.”

“She might,” Eli stated, checking the water in the tub and turning it off. “But she might not. You never know.”

“Oh, I know. And I’m pretty sure she knows and just doesn’t want to admit it.”

Eli sighed. “You’re probably right. You ready for this?”

“Hell yes.” Eli helped her to finish undressing and eased her into the steaming water.

As soon as she was alone, with strict orders to call for help when she wanted to get out, Bridget closed her eyes and relaxed. It felt fucking amazing to be in that water, even if a lot of her body was propped up and out of it. She moved the

washcloth with suds across her chest and belly, cleaning off the iodine from surgery.

She couldn't stop the tears this time, but since she was finally alone, she let the tears come. She needed to let it out and this was the only safe place she could. She was protected by Eli, in Eli's house. Her parents wouldn't be allowed anywhere near her. She could be exactly who she'd always wanted to be here. She knew that. Outside of being with Eli, she could just be Bridget. It was probably the best gift that Eli could have given her. Wiping away the tears, Bridget let more fall into the water. She would cry her share, and then she would put her mask back in place and fall asleep for the first night in a real bed—even if it wasn't hers.

CHAPTER 5



THE EMERGENCY ROOM was a bustle of energy and people. Jerica enjoyed it, as harried as it was. She loved keeping busy and not having downtime, though she'd pay for it that night when she was exhausted. Doctors moved through rooms as they checked on patients, and so did nurses.

Jerica had the opportunity to take a step up and switch to night shifts, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to do that to herself yet. The promotion and pay increase would be nice, but it would also mess with her life and friendships. Not to mention, she'd fought hard to be moved to day shift. She shuffled some papers around on the front desk, organizing them even though she didn't have to. It was such a bad habit.

Her shift was almost over, which was a good thing. She stepped into the break room and started a pot of coffee for those who were coming in. She always liked to leave them with something warm to drink, something that would perk them up for their long night. If the day had been as busy as that, then the night would be worse. It was Friday the thirteenth and a full moon. Some people—not her, of course—would think it would be the worst night in ER history.

June stepped into the break room and smiled. "Please tell me you're not just starting it."

"I am, sorry." Jerica gave her a soft look. "If you wait about ten minutes, it'll be ready."

"I'm off in ten." June shrugged. "And I'm not on call tonight, so I probably shouldn't."

“Do you have a hot date then?”

June shook her head. “No, I was thinking about going out with some friends, see if I can just have some fun and relax.”

“Oh, that sounds fantastic.” Jerica smiled at June. “Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure! We’ll be at Pete’s at eight.”

“Perfect.”

Jerica smiled and turned the coffee maker on, letting it percolate. Within thirty minutes, Jerica had her jacket on and her phone in her hand. She leaned against her car in the early fall breeze and stared at it. She’d input the number Bridget’s friend had given her, but she hadn’t called or texted yet. She wasn’t sure which she wanted to do or if the contact would be well-received.

Bridget had seemed to warm up to her each visit, but Jerica was still a nurse, and that could have been purely kindness wrapped in professionalism. She wasn’t sure where the boundary line was. Equally, she had no idea if she should text first or call instead. Bridget didn’t seem like someone who would readily respond to texts, at least not what Jerica had seen of her. She was never on a phone, though the one she’d come in with had been absolutely crushed in the pocket of her uniform.

Jerica had been the one to deal with it once Bridget had been in surgery. Yet, she’d also been stuck with Bridget through most of the rest of her shift as soon as she’d come back. Bridget had been her patient, but beyond that, the only time Bridget’s heart rate stayed even and steady and her vitals stayed right in line with where they should be was when Jerica was there.

She’d stayed in ICU all night with her, leaving only in the morning when Ann had shooed her out. Jerica pressed her lips together tightly, staring at the number in her phone. Eli had given it to her, although she was pretty sure Bridget hadn’t known. Yet, the entire week since Bridget had been released

from the hospital, Jerica had struggled not to wonder how she was doing.

Sliding into her car, Jerica started the engine to warm it up. She bit her lip as she hit the call button and pushed the phone to her ear. It rang and rang and rang. Her heart was in her throat, nerves tangling with anticipation. What was she supposed to say if Bridget actually answered?

When it clicked to voicemail and a standard automated message, Jerica breathed out a sigh of relief. She hung up before leaving a message, staring down at her phone. *What was she thinking?* It was stupid of her to think Bridget would want anything to do with her, not after she'd been one of the first to work on her when she had been brought in.

She was just about to back out of the parking spot when she stopped short. A sedan pulled into the spot next to her, Ann waving through the window, no doubt coming in for her shift. Jerica lowered her window as Ann came over. "Hey! How was the ER today?"

"Busy. Really busy."

"Oh boy," Ann answered. "Guess I have it in for me then, huh?"

"Probably." Jerica winced. "I think we sent two or three your way, actually."

"I'll check them out when I get in." Ann straightened her back but stopped short, leaning down again. "Everything okay?"

Jerica pressed her lips together hard. "I don't know. It was a good day, not too bad by normal standards."

"Normal? In the ER?"

"There is a rhythm to it, you know." Jerica smiled lightly.

"I don't think that's what's bugging you."

Jerica shrugged, not sure she wanted to confess she'd called Bridget, but then again, she and Ann had had long conversations while Jerica had been sitting with Bridget to keep her calm. "I called Bridget."

“Oh?” Ann’s eyes lit up. “And?”

“She didn’t answer. I don’t know that I wanted her to.”

“Then why did you call?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? Jerica gave Ann a long look before she gave in. “Because I want to talk to her.”

“Do you like her?”

Jerica gave a very small nod as an answer. “I think I do. I want to get to know her better, that much is for sure. I’ve never had a patient quite like her.”

Ann grinned. “Then give her another call in a few days if she doesn’t answer this one. She’s got a lot going on, Jerica. Give her some time to settle into maybe wanting to think about a relationship. You don’t even know if she’s single.”

“Don’t you think if she was with someone that they would have shown up at the hospital?”

“Were you with her the entire time?” Ann raised an eyebrow in her direction.

“No.”

“Exactly. You weren’t there twenty-four seven, so you don’t know if they visited and left.”

“Her best friend was with her more than anyone. I don’t think she’s dating someone.”

Ann pursed her lips. “Are you sure she’s a lesbian?”

“Pretty sure.” Jerica flushed at that memory. “She almost asked me once, but I think she chickened out.”

Sighing, Ann put her hand against the window. “Call her, because if I have to listen to you do this for the next few months, I’m going to hurl.”

Chuckling, Jerica shook her head. “Fine, I’ll try to call her again if she doesn’t call me back.”

“Thank you.” Ann tapped the window. “I’m off to work. See you around.”

“Bye.” Jerica waited for Ann to be clear of her vehicle before she backed out of the parking space and headed to her small apartment.

After she changed, she drove to Pete’s to meet up with June and some of the other queer women she knew. She stared down at her phone again before she got out of the car and decided to take the chance Ann suggested she did. She dialed Bridget’s number again.

It was the same thing. Hanging up before leaving a message, Jerica switched and sent Bridget a text, reading it over three times before she hit the send button.

Hi. It’s Jerica. Your friend gave me your number. I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately and wanted to make sure you were doing okay. If you’d like to talk, just give me a call or text.

It felt so odd and formal in some ways, but she had no idea what to say. The conversation she wanted to have with Bridget would be far better to try over a phone call than text, but since Bridget likely didn’t know her number, that might be the reason she hadn’t answered. Or she could be lying in bed in so much pain from all her injuries that it was impossible to answer.

Beyond that last text, she wasn’t going to try and contact Bridget again. She didn’t want to be labeled the crazy stalker nurse. Shoving her phone in her pocket, Jerica looked at Pete’s before getting out of her car. She was going to have some fun and relax and try to push the phone calls and text out of her mind. She wanted to focus on her friends, not on this growing crush she seemed to be harboring.



It was the end of her work week when Jerica stepped out to the front of the waiting area in the ER. Immediately, she stopped.

Bridget sat with her leg propped up in a wheelchair, Eli right behind her pushing her toward the front desk. Bridget looked so forlorn and lost, and Eli looked absolutely determined. She'd seen those looks many times.

Cocking her head, Jerica stood against the front desk and eyed Bridget head to toe. She did look decently well, which was good. Her color was coming back from all that blood loss in ways it hadn't while she'd been in the hospital. She didn't have that ashen look to her anymore.

Attempting to turn her nursing brain off, Jerica plastered a smile on her lips and waited for them to walk by. Eli saw her right away, eyes lighting up. She stopped the wheelchair right in front of Jerica. Chuckling, Jerica saw it for what it was. Eli liked this little flirting relationship they were doing, and she was trying to make it easier for Bridget to join in.

"In for a check up?" Jerica planted a smile on her lips.

Bridget's chin jerked up, those beautiful blue eyes lighting on Jerica's face, and her lips quirking upward into a smile as soon as she realized who was talking. Jerica had been right, Bridget wasn't paying a lick of attention outside of the residual pain she was still feeling. Eli, surprisingly, didn't answer for Bridget.

"I am," Bridget's voice was far firmer and stronger than when she'd been admitted. It felt so good to hear what she must sound like in full force. She'd been so close to death, and Jerica wasn't sure if Bridget realized that.

"I hope it goes well." Jerica crossed her arms, leaning against the front counter, eyeing Bridget like she had all the time in the world. She didn't, but she wanted to spend the time with Bridget that she could. Perhaps this was the way to her heart instead of phone calls and text messages.

"I'll be right back," Eli said and walked away.

Bridget tossed an annoyed glance over her shoulder, but Eli missed it as her back was already turned. Jerica raised her eyebrows. "Guess she had something to do."

"Yeah, be a jerk," Bridget muttered.

“Why is she a jerk?”

“She’s really not.” Bridget sighed. “She thinks she’s helping.”

“Helping with what?” Now Jerica was intrigued. She’d never seen a dynamic duo quite like them, and she could tell they must have had a close relationship for a long time. They talked like they knew everything about each other.

“Nothing important.” Bridget shifted in the wheelchair. “She insisted I use this thing.”

“It’s a good break while you’re traipsing the hallways. It takes a bit to get from one side of the hospital to the other.”

“I could have used the scooter,” Bridget argued.

Jerica put her hands out, straightening her back. “Hey, I didn’t make you sit in it.”

“Right. Sorry. I guess...I hate being such an invalid.”

“Now *that* I can understand.” Jerica chuckled lightly. “It’s never fun to have to rely on other people for help, but at least it seems as though Eli keeps it interesting.”

“That she does.” Bridget looked around for her friend, but when there was no sign of her, she turned back to Jerica, effectively stuck in place until someone pushed her. It was somewhat useful for Jerica.

“How long have you two been friends?”

“Since kindergarten.” Bridget eyed Jerica. “We were in school together through college and then moved home. I became a sheriff’s deputy, and she’s been working her parent’s ranch.”

“Sounds interesting. I can’t imagine working on a ranch.”

“No? It’s a quiet life, that’s for sure. She doesn’t talk to a lot of people so when she gets someone around, she won’t shut up.”

Jerica laughed lightly. “In other words, you’re all talked out after a week.”

“I am.” Bridget grimaced. “Don’t tell her I said that though.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Jerica smiled broadly. “I’d ask how everything is going with recovery, but I imagine you’re also tired of that question.”

“I am.” Bridget shifted her shoulders as if she was suddenly uncomfortable.

Jerica took the sign for what it was and changed the topic of conversation. “Then we won’t talk about that. Since you’re obviously out of work for a bit, are you finding any time to read those steamy books Eli gave you?”

Bridget scoffed. “No. Reading is really...not my thing. I’d like it to be, but I’m so bad at it. Eli was always the one who had the brains.”

“You are the brawn, then.”

Bridget opened her mouth as though she was going to retort but stopped. “I suppose that’s true.”

Jerica’s cheeks heated with embarrassment. She wasn’t sure she wanted to admit to Bridget that she had looked at her arms, the strength in the muscles in her body, proven every time she had to get up when she was half-broken. But she had looked, more than a time or two, and she wasn’t about to try and forget those moments.

“Eli did get into sports with me for a bit there. We even did intervarsity in college for a few years before we got too busy with studies.”

“What did you major in?”

Bridget pursed her lips. “Communication. It was an easy A. I needed the degree to do what I really wanted.”

“Police work?” Jerica took a guess.

Nodding, Bridget stared up at Jerica. “Yeah. I always wanted to be Sheriff, though I never thought it’d happen as soon as it did. But when the previous Sheriff resigned and I was undersheriff, I was put in the position temporarily until there was a special election the following year.”

“How long have you been Sheriff then?”

“Almost two years. I was just re-elected last fall for another two-year term.”

Jerica smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corner. “Sounds like they like what you’re doing.”

“Oh yes, but it was a scandal because I ran as a Democrat.”

Chuckling, Jerica shook her head in disbelief. “Why would that be a scandal?”

“No one runs as a Democrat and wins where I’m from.”

“So why did you do it?”

Bridget smirked. “One, because I had to in order to run. There was a Republican running against me. Two because I really am a Democrat. I just hadn’t registered until then.”

“This story gets more interesting by the second.”

“It’s really not that interesting.”

“I think it is.” Jerica gave her a hard look, hoping Bridget would open up. One thing she had learned about Bridget in her time at the hospital was she did not open up easily. This was the most straightforward and eye-opening conversation they’d had, which was saying something. Jerica would have to be patient.

“It’s not. I promise you.”

“Well, then, I’ll just have to wait and see what I can come up with.”

Bridget’s lips parted, and her gaze narrowed. “You do that. Where did Eli go off to?”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll be back before you’re late. I’m sure you’re at least twenty minutes early for your appointment.”

“How did you know that?”

“Seems like something you would insist on. Never be late, am I right?”

“Yes.”

Chuckling, Jerica gave her a brilliant smile. “You seem like someone who is set in their ways, too.”

“You might be right about about that.” Bridget gripped the arm of the wheelchair tightly, her knuckles turning white. It was the only sign that the conversation was slightly uncomfortable. “Tell me about you, since you seem to know so much about me.”

“You’re a Sheriff, and you can’t read me?”

Bridget pulled her lip between her teeth, seeming to debate whether or not she wanted to take the bait. Finally, she raised an eyebrow in Jerica’s direction. “You’re bold.”

“Sometimes.”

“This is your territory, though, so it would make sense that you would be bolder here than anywhere else.”

“True.” Jerica was enjoying this conversation, the push and pull as they quietly flirted in a room full of people. “What else do you see?”

“You’re a kind and caring person. I don’t think you would have checked in on me otherwise.”

Jerica’s heart melted. Bridget may have been right, but it was so much more than that. She wouldn’t have checked in on any patient, but Bridget had been special from the start. She wasn’t quite sure she could explain it any other way. They had a connection, one that Jerica wanted to tug on and see how far it went.

“I also think you have an ulterior motive in mind, but I can’t figure out what it is.”

Squatting down so they were on a more even level, Jerica pressed a hand to Bridget’s good knee and squeezed. “You’re not entirely wrong. You made some hints the other day, before you were released, and I wanted to confirm them, as boldly as possible, you might say.”

“What hints were those?” Bridget’s pupils dilated, but her gaze was locked on Jerica’s.

Lowering her voice so it would be hard for others to overhear in case Bridget wasn't as out as Jerica, she asked, "Do you like women?"

Bridget sucked in a shallow breath of air, the noise hissing through her lips. Her voice trembled as she answered. "Yes."

"Well then." Jerica eyed her up and down. "Would you want to perhaps go on a date with me?"

"I'm in a wheelchair."

"Unless your prognosis has changed from when you left, you won't be in that wheelchair forever, not that it would make a lick of a difference to me whether you were or not. While I might be interested in your body, Bridget, it isn't the only thing about you that intrigues me."

Bridget stared at her hard, her gaze unnerving, and Jerica almost backed off, gave in, and gave Bridget an out, but on a very basic level she didn't want to. Jerica wanted an answer, one that was clear as day.

"Yes," Bridget answered so quietly Jerica almost missed it.

"Really?" Jerica raised her eyebrows.

"Yes." She sounded far more confident the second time she said it. "I'll go on a date with you."

Grinning from ear to ear, Jerica squeezed Bridget's knee. "I'll call you if you like, but we can only go on a date if you actually answer my call or text me back."

Giving an embarrassed smile, Bridget nodded. "All right. I promise I'll answer."

"Good." Jerica stood up straight. Eli came around the corner, glancing at the two of them before waiting for a sign that she should approach. Jerica gave her a confident nod before moving back to the counter. "I'll see you around, Bridget, and good luck on your appointment today."

"Thanks."

"Ready?" Eli asked, her hands curling around the handles of the wheelchair.

“Where the hell have you been? You’re a crappy chauffeur, you know.”

Eli laughed the admonition off. “Sure I am. I assume you got the girl?”

Bridget’s cheeks flushed with red, and it moved down her neck.

“And I see I’m right. Catch you later, Jerica.” Eli laughed as she walked off, pushing Bridget in front of her. Jerica heard Bridget call Eli an asshole before they turned the corner. She couldn’t help but laugh at the two of them. It was the perfect way to end her work week. With a much lighter step, Jerica went back to the ER to finish out the few hours she had left and head home to make one very particular phone call.

CHAPTER 6



THE SHAKING WOKE HER UP. Flinging her arm out around her, she tried to find purchase, but her body wouldn't do what it needed to. Her heart rate ramped up, her stomach twisting with nerves as she tried to see what was happening. Bridget pried open her eyes as the scent of cow shit and coffee greeted her.

“Chill out, Bridge.” Eli's rough voice hit her, and Bridget calmed, lying back on the mountain of pillows they'd needed for her to be comfortable, and rubbing her hands over her face.

Even after staying there for just over a week she still couldn't get used to the fact she wasn't home and someone else was there. “What time is it?”

“It's late, actually, but I don't think you slept all that well.”

Embarrassment hit her hard, but she didn't comment on it.

“It's close to nine.”

“Really?” Turning as much as she could, Bridget grabbed for her cell phone. She hadn't been able to sleep, the drugs she'd been taking to mitigate her pain were affecting her brain, and she'd had trouble quieting it down. Then when she had fallen asleep, the same damn nightmare hit her as before. At least this time she hadn't flipped out like she had before.

“Yeah, and I'm sorry, Bridget, but they're coming. We'll make you look your best, you'll push through it, and then we can break down afterward. All right?”

“What?” Bridget's sleep-addled mind struggled to keep up with everything Eli said.

“Your parents.”

Her heart sank. She wanted to mold back into the bed and hide away. She absolutely did not want to see them, not at Eli’s, not where it was safe.

“They said they’d be here in an hour.”

Groaning, Bridget covered her face. “Okay. I’ll get up.”

“Good.” Eli leaned over and turned on the lamp on the night stand. She stared down at Bridget expectantly. Yet Bridget still struggled to convince her body to move.

“Eli?”

“Yeah?” Eli ran a hand down Bridget’s arm.

“Make them go away.”

Eli chuckled lightly. “I will boot them out after an hour at least, but I can’t make them not come up here. I’m pretty sure they won’t listen to me if I tell them not to come.”

Sighing heavily, Bridget grimaced. “Fine. Is there coffee at least?”

“Right here.” Eli reached to the nightstand and grabbed a mug.

“Thank you, sweet Jesus.” It took some maneuvering with only one good arm, but Eli helped a little so she could lean against the headboard. Bridget sipped her coffee while Eli rustled around the duffel bag with all her clothes in it, clothes that were loose fitting and easy to get on. “Grab something that looks nice, will you? I don’t want to look like a slob.”

“What’s nice? Can’t exactly fit jeans over that thing on your leg yet.”

Bridget knew the request was stupid as soon as she’d said it. “Maybe a button up?”

Eli eyed her. “I’d let you use one of mine, but I don’t think you’ll fit.”

Pursing her lips as she sipped the coffee, Bridget shrugged. “I guess just clean is fine.”

Eli rummaged some more and came back with her academy t-shirt and dark blue sweatpants. It would have to do. The first week of needing Eli's help to get dressed was outright embarrassing, but at this point, Bridget had given in to needing help. She could at least maneuver some of the clothes up her body, but she needed to lean on Eli while she finished dragging them into place, and then Eli always finished adjusting so she didn't look like a slob.

“Are the guests upstairs?”

“They went out for the day, so we have the den without them.”

“Good. I don't really need anyone else to witness the disaster that's coming.”

Eli lightly snorted. “I should hope not. Do you want me to stay the entire time or come in only when you want them gone?”

“Please stay.” Bridget shifted as Eli pushed the strap of her sling over her head and got everything in place. “I don't know if I can handle them by myself.”

“What are friends for, anyway?”

Bridget made her way upstairs with Eli's help and collapsed onto the small love seat in front of the fireplace. Eli started the fire and brought over a second mug of coffee, which Bridget thanked her for. She put her leg up to ease the swelling her doctor had complained about from her doing too much. Eli brought over her medications, and Bridget realized she didn't even know what she was taking. Instead of asking, she just popped them into her mouth and swallowed around her next sip of coffee. Eli wouldn't do her any harm, ever.

They were an hour later than they said, but what else was new? Eli let Sharon and Edward into the house and showed them into the den. Bridget attempted to shift to sit up straighter, then chided herself. She didn't need to do anything for them. Sharon sat on one of the chairs adjacent to the love seat, Edward on the other. Eli stood awkwardly for moment before sliding onto the edge of the sofa with Bridget. Sharon

eyed her suspiciously, her lips parted as if she was going to tell Eli to scram.

“Eli’s staying, Mom.”

Sharon said nothing about it as she focused on her daughter. “How’s your recovery?”

“As well as can be expected. I’ve been resting.” Bridget clenched her hand tightly.

Nodding, Sharon slid a glance to Edward. “We think you should come home, stop putting such a strain on Eli.”

“She’s no strain at all. In fact, I’m quite enjoying the company.”

“You have strangers in this house all the time.”

Eli’s shoulders stiffened. Bridget knew they would. It was an argument Bridget had made to Eli when she’d found out Eli’s plans for a bed-and-breakfast, but Eli wouldn’t hear anything of it. Bridget doubted she’d listen to them now.

“I think I’ll continue to stay here. The doctors said I can start bearing weight soon, so I’ll be less of a strain on anyone.” Bridget eyed Sharon sharply. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to mess up your schedule.”

Edward coughed, as though he was trying to cover something up. Bridget narrowed her gaze at him, having to twist to look over her shoulder to see him. Everyone ignored him.

“It’s not right to put this on strangers,” Sharon tried again.

“Eli is hardly a stranger. I’ve known her my entire life.” She didn’t add the part about living together in college, since she’d never shared that with her parents, just that she’d had a roommate. She also hadn’t mentioned it had been a one-bedroom apartment where they’d shared the bed. Sharon would no doubt have a heart attack if she knew that.

“She’s not family.”

Bridget wrinkled her nose. “She’s more family than a lot of my family.”

It was probably the closest she would get to outright saying she didn't really consider them family except that she was biologically related to them and had been forced to live with them until she turned eighteen.

"How dare you say something like that?" Sharon screeched.

"Because it's true." Bridget raised an eyebrow. "And I'm not going to say more or less about that. I will not go home with you, and if that's the reason you came here, then feel free to leave."

Eli grinned at her like she'd won the lottery, while Sharon shifted in her chair unable to sit in the awkwardness of Bridget standing up for herself. Bridget couldn't honestly remember a time when she'd actually told her mother to leave, but they were disrupting Eli's routines, not only by being there, but by being an hour late.

"Was there anything else?"

Sharon's look hardened. "We think it would be best if you came home with us."

"You can think that all you want," Eli chimed in. "Bridget has clearly stated where she wants to stay, and she is welcome here no matter what. We may not have always had the easiest of friendships, but I like to think those small blips don't matter in the long run. She's been my best friend for as long as I can remember."

Bridget stared wide-eyed at Eli. While she felt the same way, she hadn't been sure Eli would ever say that out loud, not since they broke up. When Eli faced her, her look softened. Bridget smiled at her, glad to have found someone who was so damn near perfect for her, even if they wouldn't ever date again.

"You disgust me," Sharon snapped. "If you corrupt—"

"Stop right there." Eli put her hand out. "If you're about to say something derogatory about the fact that I'm a lesbian, you can kindly shut up. I don't want to hear it, and you're in my house."

“It’s unnatural.” Sharon leaned forward. “You’re unnatural.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t bring God into this, because I have been working on a damn good argument for that one.” Eli flashed Sharon a brilliant smile. “Are you done lobbing accusations around?”

Sharon seemed stunned. It was the first time Bridget had ever witnessed it, though it was also the first time she’d ever seen Eli be so blunt about her sexuality in front of someone who very clearly didn’t support her.

“Good.” Eli slapped her hands against her thighs. “Now, if you’re done trying to get Bridget to do something she doesn’t want to, you are free to leave. Bridget has stated she doesn’t want you here any longer.”

Sharon took a second before she stood up, huffed, and stormed out the front door. Edward, however, stayed put, eyeing the two of them with his lips thinned. “I hope I don’t find out the two of you are together.”

Bridget’s stomach sank. She flicked a glance at Eli, who didn’t look at her but stared at him, nothing revealed on her face. Damn, she wished she could do that. Eli was so much stronger than she was, able to be out and proud in a town and part of the country that would almost never be supportive. At least not in their lifetime. Bridget had seen the devastation that had come to those who were out. Their old teacher, Azalea, being one of those who had felt her parents’ wrath.

“We’re not together. However, I don’t think that’s any of your business. You’re making quite the assumption about your daughter.”

“I know you two dated, went against God.”

Eli curled her lips up as if he’d just invited her into the best debate ever.

Bridget interjected, not wanting to cause more conflict than necessary. “Daddy, we’re not together. Eli is helping me recover in a calm and quiet environment, which you know wouldn’t happen if I went home with you.”

He nodded at her firmly. “I will agree with you on that. But I also don’t think this is the best situation.”

“I promise you it is.” Bridget held her ground. “I’ll see you around, Daddy.”

When he stood up, Eli escorted him out of the house, shutting the door. She came back, sitting in Sharon’s vacant spot and sighed heavily. Bridget cocked her head in Eli’s direction. “That could honestly have gone worse.”

“Sure.” Eli pinched the bridge of her nose. “Does everyone really think I’m going to take advantage of you?”

Laughing, Bridget grinned. “No, only them. I promise. No one else would ever dream of it.”

“Did you know that he knew we dated?”

“No.” Bridget raised her eyebrows. “Not a clue, and I’m not sure he actually knows we did or not, but this is a small town. Maybe he heard a rumor?”

“We were so careful.”

“We were, but your parents knew, and your sister knew. We didn’t hide it in school.”

“No, but we did here.”

“It’s a small town,” Bridget tried again. “Rumors are just rumors.”

“But these ones are true.”

“Yeah.” Bridget trailed off, not sure how to continue arguing. “Thank you, for staying through that. I didn’t think they’d start attacking you.”

“I had a pretty good idea.” Eli stood up sharply. “I’ve got to check the cattle.”

“Right.” The silence was loud as Eli left the house and loneliness seeped into her chest, an unwelcome companion.



She'd sat on the sofa in the den for hours before managing to make her way into the kitchen for lunch. It wasn't easy to maneuver around, but she was able to. The worst part was holding onto the plate while trying to find a place to sit down. It took everything in her to make it to the head of the dining room table.

She was halfway through her meal when her phone rang. She recognized the number even though she hadn't input a contact for it. Jerica. She'd called and texted several times over the last week, and Bridget hadn't answered any of them. Then they'd seen her the day before at the hospital, and Bridget had missed her call later that night, unable to get her to her phone in time.

Honestly, she couldn't say why she was avoiding. Eli had asked her that very question, but she hadn't been able to find an answer. Her heart thundered as she reached for her phone, once again locked in a great debate of whether to answer or not. After the incident with her parents that morning, and Eli's sudden departure from the house, she really needed someone to talk to, someone so she wasn't alone in this massive house.

Bridget lifted the phone to her ear, hesitation filling her voice. "Hello?"

"I wasn't sure if you'd answer." There was happiness in Jerica's tone, filling each word, but also an underlying hesitation and worry. "You haven't answered yet."

"I missed your call last night. My phone was not nearby, and as you may well know, I don't move as quickly as I used to." Bridget locked the phone against her shoulder and ear, moving the half of her sandwich around her plate.

"But you didn't call back."

Bridget frowned. Jerica was right about that. All the phone calls and texts and she hadn't returned a single one of them. Yet, for some reason, Jerica kept trying to get hold of her.

"I didn't. I'm sorry. I should have. I wanted to." The jumble of words fell from her lips. She sighed and pushed back into the chair before putting the phone on speaker and

setting in on the table. Talking on the phone was not super comfortable when she was already restricted in her movements.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Bridget looked out the window, wondering if she could see Eli coming in for a meal.

“Why didn’t you call me back?”

She wasn’t sure she could answer that, even if she wanted to. “I don’t know.”

“Bridget, if you don’t want to go on a date with me—”

“I do. I do want to go on a date with you. I just...it might be bad timing.” Bridget fiddled with her plate.

“You do have a lot going on.” Disappointment echoed through the line. “But life isn’t generally full of good timing. If you hadn’t landed yourself in the ER, I would have never met you.”

“You’re right about that. I still don’t even know what happened.”

“You haven’t read the report yet?”

“They’re withholding it, unofficially, I think, and I don’t have access to a computer to get it.” Bridget picked up her phone. “It’s not just the accident, though.”

It was the first step to opening up, something she knew she needed to do, but she also didn’t want to weigh down a new relationship with all the drama going on in her life.

Bridget clenched her eyes shut as she chickened out. “I just have a lot going on.”

“You know I am here to listen, if you want to talk. I know we don’t know each other well, but I would like to get to know you.”

Bridget warmed at just the thought. She found herself smiling even though she hadn’t fully realized she was doing it. “I want to get to know you, too.”

“Good. I’m glad we’re in agreement there.” Jerica laughed lightly. “Everyone has their own demons, Bridget. I hope you know that. I’ve got some, you’ve got some, and I’m pretty sure your friend Eli has some too, despite her strange ability to seem to ignore them.”

“Her life is pretty perfect, if you ask me. It always has been.”

“No one’s life is perfect.”

Bridget could agree with that, but in terms of good families, Eli had gotten the better end of the deal. “My parents were here, and to say I don’t have the best relationship with them is an understatement.”

“I met them.”

“Oh.”

“I was the one who brought them in when you were being transferred. It wasn’t my job, but...I seem to have an affinity for you that I can’t quite get rid of.” Jerica sounded like she was smiling, but Bridget couldn’t tell. She wished they were together in the same room, then she would be able to figure it out.

“Well, thank you, and I’m equally sorry.”

“Don’t be. They were scared for you.”

Bridget had her doubts of that, but it was a nice sentiment to think about. She would never be the daughter they wanted, but then again, they had the perfect daughter and son. Bridget was the black sheep and would never be anything else. Perhaps it was time she lived into that title. “I’m not sure that’s what they were afraid of, but I’ll let you think that.”

“What else would they have been scared of?”

Bridget sighed. “My parents...I don’t exactly live up to their standards. Having their daughter be a cop was a pretty big problem for them. Having their daughter die in the line of duty would be a scar they’d never escape from.”

“I agree with you there, but I think we’re talking about two different things.”

“Probably.”

“What are you talking about?”

Bridget sighed, debating whether or not to share even more. Pulling back, she stared out the window at Eli’s old farm truck bumbling along the dirt road. “That’s probably a story for another day. I do thank you for taking such good care of them, and me.”

“It’s what I do,” Jerica answered, a wistful tone. “But I enjoyed taking care of you.”

Bridget smiled again, pleased that Jerica could so easily pull that from her. “Did you know, I think I’ve smiled more in this one conversation than I have all week.”

“Really?” Jerica seemed surprised.

“Yes. Eli and I...it’s not always been easy, and until I called her when I was in the hospital, I hadn’t really talked to her in years.”

“How could you not talk to your best friend?”

“She’s also my ex-girlfriend.”

“Oh.” Jerica’s tone dropped.

Bridget winced. She could have introduced that concept a little easier. “Nothing’s going on now, but it made it tough for a few years.”

“I can imagine. It’s hard to fall out with your best friend.”

“It is.” Bridget played with her plate again. “I know this might be forward of me, but when can I see you again?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Bridget had thought for a moment she wouldn’t, but she did want to see Jerica, see those beautiful hazel eyes and the freckles on her face. She wanted to, as Jerica had said, get to know her better.

“You’ll have to come here, I’m afraid, unless I can convince Eli to bring me to town.” Bridget stared down at the

barn, barely able to make out Eli's truck. "Though I have a feeling she wouldn't mind."

"Really?"

"She likes to go to town sometimes, and I think Sarah is coming soon."

"What if I come up there on my next day off?"

"When will that be?" Bridget pulled her sandwich closer, suddenly finding some interest in it again.

"In four days? Today is my only day off, and then I have four days of work."

"Well, I'm suddenly out of work for the immediate future, so my schedule is wide open."

"Minus all your follow-ups."

"Yeah, those." Bridget rolled her eyes. "Is it really necessary to be checked over every week? I mean...it's a long drive into town."

"What if I promise to see you when you come through next time?"

Another smile. Bridget could easily get used to this if Jerica were to become something regular in her life. Pressing her lips together, Bridget rolled her eyes at how ridiculous she was being, but she was giddy with joy. "I'd like that."

"Good. Text me when your appointment is, and if there's no emergency going on, I'll try to catch you on your way in or out."

"Seems fair. Will you come up here then?"

"Yes."

"Good." The back door opened. Bridget grabbed her phone quickly and turned it off speaker, shoving it to her ear. "I'll see you then."

"You'll have to text me where I'm going."

"I will. I've got to go. Eli just came in." Bridget looked over her shoulder at her friend, who looked very suspicious

about the conversation.

“See you soon, then.”

“Talk to you later.” Bridget hung up and set the phone down. She said nothing as Eli came closer, a single eyebrow raised.

“See you soon, then?”

Clenching her jaw, Bridget’s cheeks burned. “Yes.”

“Who, exactly, were you talking to?”

“Don’t you have something to do?”

“Yes, and I’m doing it right now.”

Bridget scoffed. “I meant with your cattle.”

“No.” Eli crossed her arms. “Who are you going to see?”

“Jerica.”

Eli’s smile was brilliant. “I knew it.”

“Shut up.” Bridget couldn’t stop her cheeks from burning. She grabbed her napkin and threw it at Eli.

“Nope!” Laughing, Eli walked back into the kitchen. “Want anything to go with that half-eaten sandwich?”

“Water? I couldn’t manage a drink with my food.”

“Coming right up.”

CHAPTER 7



BRIDGET'S second full weekend at *Indigo* was much better than the first. Her pain levels eased up, and she felt far more able to do things, stay awake, and not be as grumpy. She'd even stopped taking most of her pain medications, which was a bonus in her opinion. She was not a fan of the side effects from most of them.

The house was oddly empty on Friday. She'd gotten used to Eli's guests being around, even though they seemed to stare at her oddly when trying to figure out her relationship with Eli and why she was there. Eli said there was a day with no one before more guests came, and it was their night to relax and have fun.

Bridget dragged herself up the stairs from the basement and situated herself in the den. While she normally would have stayed downstairs most of the day, she wanted the sunlight, and since she wasn't going to bother anyone, she claimed her spot on the love seat in the den again. She put her leg up and stared out the large picture window in the back the house.

She'd always loved Eli's house, even as a kid. The Wilsons had done a good job when finding land for it and making it a home. For years she'd felt more at home here than in her own house. If only it had been. She wondered how she would have turned out different, if she'd have been as confident as Eli in her sexuality.

Rain clouds moved in swiftly, though it didn't look to be a bad thunderstorm. The water would be good for the crops since they were in such a permanent drought lately. Bridget

was somewhat happy she could avoid working that shift. Being out in the rain was not her preference, but it was all part of the job.

A job she missed.

Eli plopped down in the chair adjacent to the couch and eyed her. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing important,” Bridget avoided.

Scrunching her nose, Eli set her mug on the coffee table before shifting to start a fire. “It’s going to rain.”

“I can see that.” She glanced out the window again. If she was feeling more up to it, she would take herself outside and sit in one of Eli’s many porch swings and watch the storm come in like she was some old lady. But she didn’t have the energy for that. “I made it up the stairs by myself today.”

“I see that.” Eli winked over her shoulder as she set the logs ablaze. “That’s good. Didn’t damage yourself in the process?”

“Only hit my ankle once.”

Eli snorted lightly and shook her head before returning to her seat. “What were you thinking about earlier, though?”

“It’s really not important.”

“Was it that girl?”

“No, actually.” Bridget rubbed her temple. “Though I probably should figure out what kind of date we can do here that doesn’t require a lot of work.”

“You know I’ll help with it.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“But you were thinking something. I’ve seen that look before, what is it?”

“What look?” Bridget furrowed her brow, giving Eli a hard stare. She wasn’t quite ready for this topic of conversation yet. She needed to ease into the fact that she missed everything she couldn’t do because if she dove straight into that one she

would likely end up in tears again—something she was determined to go a whole day without doing.

“I don’t know how to describe it.” Eli took a sip from her mug. “But that look usually doesn’t mean anything good.”

“What are you even talking about?”

Eli sighed. “That look usually means you’re sliding into a depression.”

“Oh.” Bridget pressed her lips together, cold washing through her body at the thought. She wouldn’t deny that she’d been close to that a few times. The amount of crying she’d done lately was a testament to it, but she had been making progress. “I suppose you’re not wrong.”

“So what were you thinking about?”

“Work, honestly. I miss it. I miss doing something.”

“You and me have always had that in common, haven’t we? The need to do something, otherwise we get in trouble.”

Bridget nodded, though she couldn’t look Eli in the eyes. She hadn’t realized Eli was still so good at reading her. Yet she should have figured that out. Knowing each other their entire lives made it easy to do. Bridget bristled. “I don’t know when I’ll get back.”

“It’ll be too soon, I guarantee that.”

“Probably.” Bridget chuckled lightly and stared at her hands.

“Why don’t you invite some of the deputies up here and hang out with them tonight? The house is ours since I don’t have any guests, and I know they’d love to see you. They’ve been asking after you every time I go to town. They find my truck and pull me over.”

Bridget shook her head, bewildered. “Do they really?”

“Yes. You’re apparently not answering phone calls and have gone AWOL on them. Fix that please. I have a small heart attack every time I get pulled over.”

“Jesus, I’ll talk to them about that.”

“Just answer your fucking phone once in a while and they won’t have to.”

Bridget gave her a mock glare. “Fine, I’ll invite them up tonight. But I’ll make them bring the beer.”

“Good thinking.” Eli pointed at her. “Now, what’s your hesitation with Jerica? Because I see you already trying to get out of that one.”

“You are not my therapist, Eli.”

Eli knocked her head to the side, pinning Bridget with a determined look. “We can talk about that some other day, but I am the person in this town who knows you the best. Can we agree on that?”

“Yes.”

“So I can tell when you’re hedging, and ever since you agreed to a date, you’ve been trying to figure out a way to get out of it, from being too busy—which everyone knows you aren’t—to not being able to do anything nice for it. What’s going on?”

“I just got run over by a combine and you think I should be dating someone in the middle of that?”

Eli narrowed her gaze, and Bridget could tell that Eli didn’t quite believe her. To be fair, Bridget didn’t believe her own line of bullshit either, but it was a decent enough reason to avoid dating. They sat in silence for a bit, Eli definitely working through something in that brain of hers. Bridget withdrew, hiding within her own thoughts and fears until Eli’s voice drew her out again.

“Is that why you’re avoiding the deputies?”

“What?”

“Because you don’t want to know what happened.” It wasn’t a question.

Bridget frowned. “I suppose that’s part of it.”

“Here’s the thing. This accident is going to be the talk of town for a while. When you go back to work, it’s going to all

come back up again. When you get back to full duty—which I know you will—it'll start up again. You can't run away from it unless you move to another town, and even then you're going to have to explain to your new boss what happened."

"I suppose you're right."

"So just get it over with already. Rip the Band-Aid off, do it on your own terms, and I can always kick them out when you get too tired."

Bridget laughed lightly. "Are you my protector now?"

Eli shook her head, her eyes squinting in the corners as she held in her laugh. "I think you'll always be mine, no matter what our friendship has done. But no, I'm the one who pushes you to think outside your little box, remember?"

"I suppose," Bridget mumbled.

"So about Jerica, I like her, and I think you do, too, otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here debating yourself for weeks on end."

"I do not do that."

"You do. But you agreed to a date with her, so don't cancel it."

Bridget huffed. "How am I supposed to date a girl when I can't even walk?"

"I don't think she cares about that, and plenty of people do it, to be honest." Eli took another sip of her tea. "You've got to get out of your comfort zone if you're ever going to meet someone, because as you well know, I'm no longer available."

"Yes, I know." Bridget rolled her eyes dramatically.

Eli set her drink down and leaned over, her elbows resting on her knees as she pinned Bridget with a heavy look. "Here's another thing, you need to open up to her. You're not someone who does that naturally, and it's going to take a whole lot of effort on your part, but if you really want this relationship—or any relationship for that matter—to work, then you need to let someone in."

“You’re in.”

Eli shook her head. “No, I’m not. I used to be, but I haven’t been for a while.”

Bridget pursed her lips. She knew Eli was right, even if she didn’t want to admit it. “I know. It’s not easy.”

“It’s not supposed to be, and you have a lot to contend with when it comes to that, but I think you can do it. I have full confidence that you can.”

“What makes you the expert?” Bridget narrowed her eyes.

“You did, apparently.” Eli laughed and leaned back in her chair again. “This group of visitors is the last one for a few weeks.”

“Why?”

Eli raised an eyebrow at her. “Sarah’s coming into town for our wedding.”

“Your...” Bridget stopped. She’d been so damn caught up in her own drama that she’d forgotten. “Right. She doesn’t...I can leave—”

“Sarah’s fine with you being here,” Eli answered, assuming where Bridget was going with that. “She’s not too thrilled about you being in the basement with me, but she understands there isn’t really any other place to put you.”

“I can go home.”

“You just figured out how to get up the stairs on your own and you still need help in the bath. You’re not staying on your own.”

Bridget didn’t respond. She knew it was true, and she wasn’t going to offer to go to her parents’ house, ever. That was far out of the question, especially if she was going to start dating Jerica properly—if they made it beyond their first date.

“Sarah doesn’t mind, I promise you,” Eli continued. “It’s just with the wedding coming, all the family is coming in, and it will be a very full house.”

“You’re getting married here?”

“Where else would we do it? This is home, and I host weddings here all the time.”

“I suppose.”

“Bridget, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m happy for you, really, even if I made an ass of myself when you two first met.”

Eli snorted. “Yes, an ass is a good term to use. Sarah’s over it.”

“Because she got the girl.”

“Probably.” Eli smiled. “You’ll get one too someday. I have faith in that.”

Bridget wanted to tell her that it was good thing she did because Bridget wasn’t so sure on that. She liked Jerica enough, but everything was so new, and her life was in such upheaval. She wasn’t sure it would work out that way. Hell, they hadn’t even had their first date yet and she was already thinking about the future and weddings. She shook the thought from her head and focused on the here and now. *One date.* That was what they needed to start with, and at some point Bridget was going to have to come out to her parents, even though she suspected they already knew.

If she wanted to get married to a woman, and have any semblance of a normal life, she was going to have to take that step and stop avoiding it. She just hadn’t found the woman she was willing to do that for yet—which should have told her something about her relationship with Eli all those years before. Sighing, Bridget eyed the window as rain fell outside. The scent of wet dirt surrounded her, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the quiet moment for what it was.



She’d put the word out and just about everyone jumped on it, except for those who were still working, though she was sure they would stop by at some point during the night when they had a few moments. Eli gathered together what food supplies

she had since there was no way to have deputies there without feeding them.

The dining room table was filled with snacks, and Bridget was sitting up on the couch, her leg propped on the knee scooter to keep it elevated. Eli bustled around as Bridget watched her from a distance, somewhat envious of the fact that Eli could still move like that while she was stuck in one damn position for hours on end.

She hated not being able to help out in any way other than being out of the way. Sighing, Bridget rubbed her temples. She did have to stop thinking about it like that. She needed to buck up and stop wallowing in self-pity. Hopefully having her deputies there would help.

Eli came in and handed her a plate and a drink. “They should be here soon.”

“I know,” Bridget mumbled. “I don’t look like I got run over by a combine, do I?”

Eli knocked her head back and forth as she eyed Bridget over carefully. “Only halfway run over.”

“Perfect.”

“Your bruising looks a lot better, if you ask me. I think the most obvious things are the broken limbs. They probably won’t even notice the yellow tint to your skin.”

“Some friend you are!” Bridget would have thrown something at her to make her point, but then she would feel bad because she couldn’t pick it up. “You think they’ll tell me what happened?”

“Do you want to know?”

“Kind of?” Bridget raised an eyebrow at her. “Yes. I do want to know.”

“Then ask. I saw your cruiser out in Jensen’s lot. I can always bring you by it if you want to see.”

“You know, I would.”

“Next appointment then, we’ll swing by on our way in.”

“Good.”

The front door opened. The rain that had started earlier that day was still falling outside, so the pinging against the tin roof was loud. Bridget twisted as best as she could to look over her shoulder and grinned when she saw Chip and his wife.

Everyone else arrived soon after, and Bridget found herself laughing and enjoying their company. She was slow to drink, but at least she was relaxed. Eli played hostess most of the night, but Chip eventually coaxed her into joining them for a bit.

When there was a break in the conversation, Bridget dared to ask. “Does anyone want to fill me in on some of my missing memories?”

Silence fluttered around the room, Bridget looking at each of her deputies openly.

“I’d really like to know.”

Chip sighed heavily. “Sonny was drunk. He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“He didn’t,” Oscar chimed in. “Just a drunk fool.”

“All right, so then what happened? All I remember is getting ready in the morning, so I’m missing most of that day.” Bridget waited for an answer.

Chip was the first to break. “You were pulling Sonny over for drunk driving. He was in the middle of the highway, weaving back and forth. No one dared pass him. We got maybe ten calls in about it.”

Oscar nodded his agreement.

Chip continued, “You were the only one on, so you followed him for about two miles, and he never noticed you. According to witnesses, you pulled up on the side of him to try and get his attention or something, and he just...he turned into you. He sheared off about half your cruiser.”

Bridget clenched her jaw. “Sheared off?”

Oscar nodded. “I was first on scene. You were halfway stuck under the wheel, your arm...well, it wasn’t good, Bridget. It took us about an hour to get you out. You were bleeding pretty bad. The whole highway was shut down for hours while we got everything moved.”

“Okay.” She brushed her good hand over her face. “Thanks. Thank you, really. You probably saved my life.”

“Nothing you wouldn’t do for us.”

Bridget eyed them as if she was debating, though they all knew it was a lie. However, it was enough to lighten the mood of the conversation back to the jovial tones it had before. Eli brought out another round of beer for everyone, Bridget taking her up on the offer this time. Now that the tension she’d been carrying was out of the way, she wanted to fully enjoy herself while she could, because who knew how long this was going to last.

Because nothing good ever lasted for her.

They drank late into the evening, but at some point, Eli ushered them out. Bridget’s head spun as she sat on the couch that she hadn’t moved from in hours. Eli flopped next to her, tipping a beer bottle to her lips as she stared across at the glowing fire.

“I’m glad you invited them up,” Eli mumbled.

“Me too. I missed them.”

“They’re part of your family, you know. They love you.”

Bridget wanted to reject the notion, but at the same time, she didn’t. It felt good to be needed and loved like that. It was in some ways one of the few times she had felt like she was a part of something in her life. Instead, she remained quiet, not answering Eli one way or the other.

“Think we should head downstairs?”

“Yeah. Not sure I can move, though. I’ve been stuck here for so long.”

Eli laughed, tipped her bottle up so she could chug the rest of it and then slapped her knee. “Let me clean up a little while

you loosen up your muscles.”

Bridget rolled her eyes, but Eli stood up, wobbling a bit as she made her way through the den, cleaning up after everyone. She came back, holding her arms out for Bridget.

They stumbled upright, Bridget wobbling far more than she thought she should. Eli laughed and held her still until she could grab her knee scooter and roll herself to the basement. They got to the stairs, and Bridget shook her head at it.

“It was stupid to get buzzed.”

“Sure it was, but it was fun.”

Snorting, Bridget sat on her butt and moved down a step. She giggled as she went down the next step. Eli carried her scooter down and waited for her until she got to the bottom, then helped her to stand up.

“Thanks, Eli.”

“Any time.”

Bridget grabbed Eli’s hand to get her full attention. “No, I mean it. Thank you. I don’t deserve a friend like you.”

“Sure you don’t.” Eli clapped her good shoulder hard and turned to leave, but Bridget wasn’t done yet.

She snagged Eli’s hand again. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are, Bridge. You’re always serious. I think tonight was the first time I’ve seen you have fun since college. You should do it more often. You light up the room when you’re relaxed.”

“You...you don’t have to say things like that anymore.”

“I say it because I mean it.” Eli eyed her.

“Thanks.” Bridget awkwardly stared at Eli before sighing. “And I really am sorry about how everything started with Sarah and me. I like her, and I’m really happy that you found her.”

“I think she found me more than I found her.” Eli winked and tried to walk away, but Bridget held her firmly. “What is

it?”

“I’m being serious.”

Eli laughed again. “Like I said two seconds ago, you’re always serious.”

“I’d like to meet her again, when I’m not such a bitch.”

“Well, I think that can be arranged. She’s coming home soon.” Eli’s gaze danced with laughter. “Maybe the two of you will become the best of friends.”

“Doubt that, but at least maybe we can be personable. She’s not...she’s not upset that I’m staying here?”

“No, Bridge. Why are we rehashing this? Sarah encouraged it. She’s not an idiot. You needed a place to stay, I have the room, it made perfect sense for you to come here, and she supported the idea. I talked to her about it before I even mentioned it to you.”

Confused, Bridget cocked her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing, Bridget. You’re always welcome here, no matter what.” Eli gave a wan smile. “But, Bridget, I’m drunk, I’m tired, and I have to get up for chores. So I’m going to bed.”

“Right.” Bridget pressed her lips tightly together. “Can you help me get changed?”

Eli laughed. “Yes.”

They maneuvered into the guest room Bridget had been staying in. She sat heavily on the edge of the mattress and pushed off her slippers. She could get her pants off by that point, but it took forever. She’d do it, though. What she still needed help with were the damn shirts.

Eli gripped the edge of her shirt and tugged while Bridget pulled her arm through. Eli stretched the arm out so they could get her arm through with the least amount of movement. The X-rays she’d gotten most recently proved she was healing well, but it was still annoying to have to wait for her body to do what it needed.

As soon as she had a night shirt on, Eli told her goodnight and left. Bridget spent the next ten minutes shimmying slowly out of her sweatpants and pulling on her pajamas. She was exhausted by the end and her head spun from the alcohol. She'd needed the break with her deputies, but more than that, she needed to get back to normal life.

Staring at the ceiling in a room that wasn't hers in a house she didn't belong in, Bridget closed her eyes as the tears fell. She hated being weepy, but it had almost seemed like her norm lately. She didn't like it. She needed to find something in her life she enjoyed because right now everything seemed pretty damn bleak. Except for Jerica. She was a light in this tunnel of darkness.

Latching on to that thought, Bridget stayed still on her back and calmed her mind. She'd need water in the morning so she wouldn't be so hungover, but for now, she was going to lie there until she fell asleep. When morning came, she was going to try to have a different attitude about life, about her prospects and her future, and maybe she would find a little bit of the elusive happiness that Eli seemed to have stumbled upon.

CHAPTER 8



BRIDGET HADN'T PLANNED ANYTHING. Four days of sitting on her ass and she hadn't done a single thing to get ready for her date. She stared at her phone with a text from Jerica saying she'd be up in a few hours, which meant she had exactly two hours or less to plan a date when she could barely move.

God, she was an idiot.

If she wanted this to go right, then she should have done it right. Instead, she'd wallowed and avoided and tried not to think about the fact that she was going on her first real date since Eli. Though hell would freeze over before she told Eli that.

Years had gone by and she hadn't even noticed. She'd become the old maid she'd always worried she would be with no hope of finding someone to spend her life with. And yet, there was Jerica. They had a date, a mostly proper date as much as could be expected with Bridget still an invalid, and she had done nothing to prepare for it.

Shifting out of the bed, Bridget grabbed her scooter and pushed herself into the bathroom. Eli was already out in the fields for the morning, doing her rounds, but Bridget had gotten lazy about sleeping in and using the time to literally do nothing but stare at the ceiling.

Ugh, it's not even just the date.

Bridget had forgone doing anything normal lately simply because she had no desire to work on it. Maybe all the stress and trauma was hitting and the shock was finally wearing off.

Or maybe she still only had half a working body and wasn't thrilled about having to figure out how to do things on her own in a house that wasn't hers and felt like such a damn burden.

Yeah, that last one was it. Pushing the knee scooter into the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and stared at her reflection. She was looking older by the minute. Her skin was still pale and somewhat ashen from all the blood loss, even though she was doing well on that front according to the doctors. It would take a few months for that to vanish. But the wrinkles around her eyes were growing deeper, she had a few gray hairs here and there that she didn't want to admit were present.

She was not a beautiful woman. She'd always known that. Her sister had gotten her looks from their mother, and Bridget had been an awkward mix of their father and his father. She'd always known she was ugly, and her mother had told her as much, multiple times. She'd also insisted Bridget keep her hair long to try and look more like a girl since her features were so boyish.

She tossed her toothbrush onto the counter and gritted her teeth. She had to get their damn voices out of her head. She'd worked so hard to do that in the past few years, but since the accident their voices had come raging back.

She couldn't do the date. She should just text Jerica, cancel, blame it on pain or something, and never try to reschedule it. Bridget had learned over the years that she was not someone who should be bothered with attempting relationships. She wasn't built for them, and as nice as they sounded, as wonderful as they seemed, she always seemed to ruin them.

"Hey!" Eli stepped into the doorway, leaning against it. "Glad you're finally up."

"Yeah," Bridget mumbled.

Eli scrunched her nose. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Shaking her head, Bridget picked up her toothbrush, cleaned it and put it back where it belonged. She had to remember this wasn't her house, and she had to take

care of things that weren't hers. She and Eli had lived together once before, but that was before their relationship and friendship had gone south.

"I can see something's wrong. What is it? Jerica cancel on you?"

Bridget flicked her gaze to Eli's eyes before dropping it to the ground.

"Oh my God, she didn't, did she? I'll kick her ass."

"What?"

"Yeah. Why would anyone cancel on you?"

"Why *wouldn't* they?"

Eli paused, sighed, then cocked her head at Bridget. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Why wouldn't they cancel? I mean...*we* dated. You know I'm not exactly a good girlfriend."

Clenching her jaw, Eli shook her head. "Come sit down and talk. You look like you're going to fall over."

They made their way to the couch in the small living room the basement boasted. Eli crossed her ankle over her knee and pressed her lips together. "Don't be so hard on yourself because our relationship didn't work out."

"I should be."

"No, you shouldn't. Yes, there were mistakes made on both of our parts, but we just weren't meant to be."

"I still love you, though." Bridget risked a glance to Eli, testing her reaction on that one. She'd said it before and it hadn't gone over well, but they'd also been arguing and Bridget had been crossing boundaries. This time she said it in honest truth.

Eli nodded. "I love you, too, but I'm not in love with you anymore. You were my first love, and I've always loved you as a friend. There's no way around that. I think I'll always love you in some way."

“Hence why you answer calls for help?”

Eli laughed. “You know I can’t resist a woman in distress. I must help.”

“You do like to be the knight in shining armor. You always wanted to be the guy.”

“Shut up.”

Bridget snickered and then groaned, dropping her head back onto the couch. “I didn’t plan anything.”

“For what?”

She shifted her gaze to Eli. “For my date with Jerica. I think I should just tell her not to come.”

“You’re an idiot. First, you should plan better. Second, I told you I would help.”

“I know. I just...”

“You’re chickening out.”

Bridget shrugged. “What can we do up here for a date with a gimp?”

Eli gave Bridget a sharp look. “Don’t call yourself that. When is she coming?”

“In a couple hours.”

“We can do lunch out on the deck, if you want. There are guests here, so I imagine there will be people around. You can come down here, though.”

“And have her watch me scoot down the stairs on my ass?”

Eli snorted, trying and failing to hold in her laugh. “You’re right about that. Hmm...what about a puzzle?”

“I should just cancel.”

“No! We can figure this out. You wanted this date, right?”

“I guess,” Bridget mumbled.

“You guess?”

Eli's tone made Bridget's stomach twist. "I don't know, Eli. I'm not sure I should do this."

"Why not? What's holding you back?"

Initially, Bridget wanted to say that Eli was holding her back, but that had been the excuse she'd used for years, and she really couldn't anymore. She was so happy for Eli, for what she and Sarah had found together, and she'd taken the long, hard journey to get to that conclusion. Pressing her lips together, she thought deeply, wanting an answer. Finally, when she looked up at Eli, she had tears in her eyes. "I'll fuck it up."

"How will you fuck it up?" Eli's voice was so gentle. Bridget wanted to fall into it, use it for support.

"Because I always do."

"Do you know why?"

Bridget nodded, though she wasn't sure she had words for it. She had tried for years to figure it out and stop it from happening, but she'd always ended up back in the same damn spiral. "I'm not worthy."

"Oh, Bridge."

That pitying tone was back, and Bridget wanted to run away from it, but she was stuck on the damn couch because she couldn't move fast enough to escape. She blinked her eyes to try and keep the tears at bay, but it wasn't working. Eli reached up and cupped her cheek, lifting her chin.

"You are so worthy of love. I promise you that. No one is more worthy or more in need of it than you are."

Bridget clenched her jaw hard, no idea what to say or how to make this flood of emotions stop. She'd always been able to keep herself composed in situations like this, but her mood had been all over the place since the accident.

"I love you. That's a good place to start, isn't it?" Eli was so earnest.

"Yeah, I guess."

“Good.” Eli’s smile was brilliant, a light in Bridget’s darkness. “You need to make sure Jerica knows all this, if she’s really someone you want to be with longer term, all right? You need to be open with her and with yourself to make this work.”

“I know,” Bridget mumbled, wiping her hand over her face to clear the tears from her skin. “It’s not easy.”

“No, it’s not.” Eli sighed. “Want a hug?”

“Yeah.” Bridget melted into her as Eli dragged her in for an embrace. It was nothing more than mere friendship that Eli offered, but it was exactly what she needed and when she needed it. She’d been so alone for so long, and comfort blossomed, knowing that she wasn’t going to be alone any longer, that someone would be there for her, even if it was just as a friend.

“Good. When you get your shit together, we’ll figure out that date, okay?”

“Okay.” Bridget swallowed down more tears, silently thanking Eli for the break in the emotion so she could pull herself together.

They sat there for the next hour, tossing ideas back and forth about the impending date. Finally, Eli slapped her hands on her thighs and stood up. “If we don’t actually get doing something for a plan, then there will be nothing for the two of you to do.”

“I suppose.”

Eli held out her hand to help Bridget up. “Come on, you’re going to help me cook lunch at least. Fuck, I wish Sarah was here. She’s so much better at this than I am.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. She likes dates. I prefer...other things.” Eli’s cheeks tinged red, and Bridget could only guess what she was thinking of. “So, lunch, deck, and card games. I think that’s an adequate first date with limited mobility in a strange place. Don’t you?”

“I guess.” Bridget sounded morose again, even though she didn’t want to. She wanted to give this date a good chance at succeeding, but everything in the pit of her belly told her it was going to fail. Massively.



Bridget was at the dining room table when Jerica arrived. Her stomach fluttered as she came into the house, Eli trailing right behind her. She was absolutely gorgeous, her long curly hair around her shoulders and down her back. She’d dolled up her makeup this time too, compared to any time Bridget had seen her at the hospital.

“Hey,” Jerica said, her eyes locked on Bridget’s face.

“Hey,” Bridget answered, all the other words she could have come up with vanishing from her mind.

Eli grinned at both of them before moving into the kitchen. “Want a drink, Jerica?”

“Uh... sure.”

“Water, tea, lemonade?”

“Lemonade sounds good.”

Bridget couldn’t tear her gaze away. Jerica sat kitty-corner from Bridget, putting her purse over the back of the chair and smiling.

Eli came over, set the drinks in front of them, and eyed them both. “When you two finally stop eyeing each other like candy, just to let you know, Jerica, this is a B&B, so I have guests here. They’ll be in and out but shouldn’t bother you too much.”

“Thanks.” Jerica flicked her gaze to Eli, then focused back on Bridget.

Eli made herself scarce, though Bridget knew she’d be around to check on dinner. “We thought we’d eat on the deck to avoid the crowds.”

“We?”

Bridget balked. Wiping her sweaty palms on her pants, she tried to backtrack, but couldn't find a way. “Eli and I.”

“So she helped plan this?”

“I'm not super useful right now.” Bridget raised her broken arm. “So I needed her help, yeah. And it's her house, so I didn't want to do anything without her permission.”

Jerica nodded. “I get it. How are you doing, though? It's been a few weeks.”

“Moving better.” Bridget clenched her jaw. She didn't want to go down that road. She was so tired of talking about how she was doing, how she was healing, if she was still in pain. Jerica might be a nurse, but she really didn't want to talk about that.

“That's good. So, since you planned this whole thing, what are we doing?”

“Uh...” Bridget glanced around for Eli, wishing she was there as a buffer and to help explain what all was planned because Bridget had forgotten it as soon as Jerica walked in. Her heart raced, and she fiddled with the edge of her shirt. “Dinner.”

Jerica chuckled lightly. “I assumed that, but anything else?”

“Cards?”

Jerica eyed her suspiciously. “What kind of cards? I have to tell you, I'm undefeated at *Go Fish*.”

Bridget laughed. “No, something else.”

“All right, your loss.” Jerica reached over and touched Bridget's upper arm where the cast wasn't covering her skin. “Are you sure you're all right?”

“Yeah.” Bridget breathed heavily. “I'm fine. We uh...we can go into the den if you want. I think the cards are in there.”

“Sure. This house is gorgeous.”

“It is.” Bridget maneuvered herself so she could stand up, grabbing her knee scooter so she could take it most of the way. Jerica followed her. “I spent a lot of nights here when we were growing up. We always preferred to be here than at my house.”

“I can imagine why,” Jerica murmured.

“Right.” Embarrassment flashed through Bridget’s chest, rising to a flush in her cheeks. She always seemed to forget that Jerica had met her parents. She forgot most people outside of town had met them—or rather, she chose to ignore that fact.

They got to the den, and Bridget stopped short. She’d forgotten about the stairs. Two fucking stairs down into the den, and she could then get to the couch and sit down, where she was far less likely to fall on her face. Pressing her lips together hard, Bridget moved off the knee scooter and dropped it down the stairs. She would not sit down and scoot. That was her one requirement. She had to not embarrass herself completely.

Before Jerica could say anything, she leaned forward with her good hand on the scooter to hold herself up and kind of halfway jumped down the two steps on her one good leg. Except the wheels to the scooter flew from where she’d put them, forcing Bridget’s upper body to slide with it. She knew she was going down, and there was no way to stop it. No railing to grab onto, nothing to do with her one good arm as she clung onto the handle of the scooter, but it moved so far away from her.

Bridget was falling hard. She knew it, she knew Jerica knew it, and she was going to be beyond embarrassed. Turning to her good side, she tucked her arm against her chest and hit the wood floor, with her shoulder taking the brunt of the hit. Grunting and groaning, she clenched her eyes tight as Jerica swooped in, squatting next to her.

“Don’t move. Give it a second.”

Breathing through the pain and shock, Bridget closed her eyes as she heard Eli’s thumping footsteps on the stairs from the basement. *Fuck, this is so embarrassing.* “I’m fine.”

“Just give it a second, then we’ll see if you’re fine.” Jerica put a hand on Bridget’s cheek, turning her face so Bridget stared up into those light brown eyes. “Take a deep breath.”

“I’m fine.”

“You just fell down.”

“She what?” Eli’s shrill voice echoed through the den. “What were you thinking?”

“I said I’m fine!” Bridget nearly yelled it but bit back most of her volume at the last minute.

Both Jerica and Eli backed up, thankfully, giving Bridget the much-needed space. Her ankle hurt the worst, but that was probably from twisting it as she landed and having it land perfectly on the fucking step. Without a word, Bridget bent her knee and moved her injured ankle so she could put it into a better angle.

“Help me up, Eli.” Bridget shot Jerica a look, knowing she’d be better at this, but she trusted Eli. She knew Eli. She couldn’t very well have Jerica help her up on their date. Eli got her standing, held onto her hips while Jerica moved the scooter over. Bridget remained silent as she used the scooter to get to the couch, where she sat, absolutely ashamed. The date needed to end, and she needed to manage to get herself into the basement where she could crawl in a hole and never come out.

“Bridge, you okay?” Eli asked.

“I’m fine,” she answered, her face covered by her hands.

She wasn’t sure what happened next, but someone left and someone sat next to her. When she dared to peek, she found Jerica watching her carefully. “What card game are we playing?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend like this is fine. It’s a disaster and we’re not even ten minutes in.”

Jerica pressed her lips together, then reached out and settled her hand on Bridget's thigh. "Here's the thing, Bridget, and I want you to understand this. I really like you. I don't know what it is about you, because you were my patient, and I've never done anything like this before with a patient, but...I really like you. I realize you're not exactly at the best place to woo me like you may be used to with other women, but I don't need to be wooed. I need you to be you."

Bridget's lips parted unexpectedly. She didn't know what to say, other than she didn't quite know who she was, but she knew that wouldn't go over well. Nodding, Bridget eased the tension in her muscles. "The cards are on the bookshelf over there."

"Good." Jerica winked before she got up to retrieve them.

They were halfway through their game of poker when the front door flung open, slamming into the far wall. Bridget jumped, every nerve in her body on edge as she reached for the weapon that wasn't on her hip. Jerica stared wide-eyed at the door as a black bull with white horns and dark beady eyes stared them down. He snorted at them as he put one hoof inside the house, then the next.

Bridget's heart raced. She shifted on the couch, spinning so she could keep the bull in full view. His head was down as if he was going to charge, in which case she wouldn't stand a chance. Her voice caught in her throat, otherwise she would have yelled for Eli, even though that probably wasn't a good idea. She could scare him or piss him off more, and then he would come right at her.

Jerica gripped Bridget's hand tightly, her fingers squeezing as she gripped hard. Bridget took slow breaths, moving into work mode. The bull stepped all the way inside the front entrance, his huge body blocking the entire door. They were lucky no one else was down there except the two of them.

"Eli!" Bridget croaked out. The bull jerked his head right at her. She didn't look him right in the eye, scared it would set him off, but she kept her gaze in his direction so she would know if he started coming at her. She tried again. "Eli!"

“Wha—for fuck’s sake, Buddy, get the hell out of my house.” Eli came around the corner with her hands on her hips, glaring at the giant bull. She clapped her hands at him and walked closer as he backed up. “Get out! You know better than this!”

The bull snorted but raised his head at her twice before he was out on the porch. Eli frowned and shut the door, turning on them. “Sorry. He has zero manners.”

“I’ve never...” Jerica lost her voice. “I’ve never had that happen before.”

“Well, they get pretty friendly around here sometimes, but this asshole takes the cake. I knew I should have sold him when I had the chance.”

“Why didn’t you?” Bridget asked, not sure she was ready for the answer.

“Love.” Eli spat the word out like it was a curse. Then she grabbed her jacket off the hook and went out the front door.

Jerica and Bridget sat in stunned silence for a full minute before Bridget finally spoke. “I feel like we should end this and never speak of it again.”

“Are you kidding?” Jerica’s eyes went wide. “This is epic first date material.”

“This is an awful first date.”

Jerica giggled. “Bridget, look on the bright side for once.”

Bridget was about to object when Jerica lifted her hand and curled it around Bridget’s cheek, bringing their mouths together in a sweet and quick kiss. Stunned, Bridget wasn’t sure what to do or say, and Jerica backed away, sheepishly.

They looked at each other awkwardly for a few tense seconds before Bridget broke the silence. “Dinner should be ready soon.”

“Good.” Jerica wouldn’t look her in the eye, and Bridget knew she’d ruined whatever moment Jerica had been going for.

Chastising herself, she picked up the cards and shuffled them, not sure what to do or say.

“I would like a second date, maybe a redo if you don’t think this was a good one.”

Surprised, Bridget cocked her head to the side. “Why? I mean, everything about this date has gone wrong.”

“Not everything. I got to spend time with you, outside of the hospital, and see some of where you live, even if this isn’t your house. I got to know you better, and isn’t that the entire purpose of dating?”

“I guess,” Bridget mumbled. “The only person I really dated I knew from childhood so there wasn’t a whole lot to get to know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Eli.” Bridget moved her thumb over her shoulder. “She’s the only other person I’ve dated.”

“Oh.” Jerica pursed her lips. “Just to be clear, you’re not...”

“No. She’s getting married to Sarah. We broke up almost five years ago now. It’s taken time for us to be able to talk again, but I think we’ve made a lot of steps in that direction lately.”

“Good, I suppose. It’s hard to be without our best friends.”

“Harder still when you’re the asshole who screwed it up.”

Jerica laced their fingers together. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes.”

“I suppose.”

She leaned her head against Bridget’s shoulder, and they stayed there, mostly in quiet, until Eli came back in with a mission. “Dinner will be ready in five!”

Bridget smiled.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile.” Jerica echoed the smile. “I like it.”

Bridget was racked with guilt. This time when she took the stairs out of the den, she let Jerica help her so she didn't fall flat on her face again. She'd had enough embarrassment for one day. Maybe they would survive dinner unscathed.

CHAPTER 9



AS SOON AS Jerica had left the night before, Bridget's stomach had plummeted. The date had been a disaster, and it wasn't either of their faults—well, some of it was Bridget's. She'd made an absolute fool of herself, trying to do things she couldn't. Her cheeks still burned at the thought of it.

Eli had tried to convince her everything was fine, that Jerica hadn't seemed perturbed by what happened—except maybe with Buddy—but that hadn't done anything to sway Bridget in another direction. The date had been awful from the start, and there had been no recovering from it. Even the kiss on the couch had felt awkward and out of place, and Jerica hadn't seemed to want to try again after that.

It must have been pity.

Groaning, Bridget brushed her hands over her face and stared at the ceiling in her bedroom, something she was becoming quite familiar with. The knock on the door surprised her. Furrowing her brow, Bridget stared at the time on her phone, which told her it was mid-morning. Her new wake up time.

The knock again.

“Bridget?”

“What?” Bridget pinched her nose and shifted to try and sit up a little better, but it was harder than she'd anticipated so she gave up.

The door to her bedroom opened, and Eli popped her bright and cheery face in. “You awake?”

“I am now.”

“Good. Let’s get you dressed.” Without asking, Eli moved over to Bridget’s bag and rifled through the clothes until she found something and tossed it at her. “Want help?”

“Why am I getting dressed?”

“It’s mid-day.”

“And I have nothing to do. I could just sit down here all day.”

“Nope. I won’t let you. Do you want me to strip you or are you going to do it?”

Groaning, Bridget grabbed the clothes. “Let me try this time.”

“Okay. I’ll be out there if you need a hand.”

Pouting, Bridget took her time changing from one pair of baggy clothes to another. She spent nearly thirty minutes in her room before wheeling herself to the bathroom. She was still half asleep, no caffeine in her system to help wake her up, and when she came out of the bathroom, she stopped short.

Jerica sat in the La-Z-Boy facing the television. How long had she been there? More importantly, what the fuck was she doing there? At a loss for words, Bridget stared directly into those beautiful hazel eyes, much like when Jerica had shown up the day before. She had no idea what to say or do in that moment.

Eli snickered from the bottom of the stairs, a coffee mug to her lips. “You have a guest.”

“I can see that, asshole.”

Laughing, Eli walked up the stairs and left them alone. Bridget faced Jerica again, still unsure of what to do or say. Jerica stood up and moved to the couch. “Want to talk?”

“What is there to talk about?”

“Well, I made a two hour drive up here, I’d think the least you can do is talk to me.”

Sighing heavily, Bridget scooted her way around the couch and eased herself onto it. Jerica sat next to her, close. Their thighs touched, and Bridget clenched her hand tightly in her lap to prevent herself from reaching out. With her jaw tight, she stared at the blank television screen, trying to come up with something to say or do or just something, anything so they weren't sitting there in awkward silence.

"I know yesterday didn't go like you thought it should," Jerica stated.

"That's an understatement."

Jerica reached and turned Bridget's chin up so they had to look at each other. "Yeah, but here's the thing, nothing really goes to plan, does it? And while yesterday might have been a bit more adventurous than I'm used to, I enjoyed my time here. With you."

Bridget narrowed her eyes, not sure whether she wanted to believe Jerica or not.

"I like you, Bridget. I told you that yesterday, and things don't have to be perfect for me to like you."

Bridget mulled through that one. Had that been her issue the entire time? "Why did you come here today?"

"Because I had an inkling you weren't going to answer my texts or calls if I tried to get hold of you that way."

Snorting lightly, Bridget nodded her agreement. "Probably."

"Do you often ghost dates like this?"

"I..." Bridget stopped and pivoted from what she was going to say. "I don't often have dates."

"Well, I for one want a second date, and since I'm here, why don't we do it right now."

"I don't have anything planned."

"Bridget." Jerica's gaze softened, and she reached over, her hand covering Bridget's clenched fist. "You don't have to plan something fancy for a date to happen."

“But...”

“No. It doesn’t have to be perfect, and it doesn’t have to be a production.”

Bridget’s stomach swirled.

“Let’s just get to know each other, okay?”

“Okay,” Bridget agreed, though she wasn’t entirely sure why she did it. “What are we going to do then?”

“Mostly we’re going to talk and listen.” Jerica grinned. “Then I don’t know, maybe we can eat something, or go out on the deck. There’s supposed to be a storm coming in we can watch, but really, I want to spend time with you.”

“I can do that,” Bridget whispered, unsure where her voice had gone except that the tenacity of this woman had stolen it. Bridget, for some reason, was perfectly comfortable with that.

“Good.” Jerica leaned against Bridget’s good side. “I have a sister.”

“Oh, we’re starting with family?”

“Why not?”

Sighing, Bridget grimaced. “I have a sister and a brother. I’m the youngest and the disappointment.”

“Hmm...is your sister as bitchy as mine?”

Bridget snorted. “She thinks the world revolves around her, and our parents gave her anything she wanted. I had to work for what I wanted.”

“Isn’t it usually the opposite? The youngest gets everything and the oldest has to work for it?”

“I think so.” Bridget reached over and threaded their fingers together. “But I was a surprise, and Mom didn’t want another kid. Her conservative beliefs prevented her from doing anything about it, however, so she just punished me for the rest of my life.”

“I’m sorry.” Jerica gave her hand a squeeze. “My sister almost died.”

“What?”

“She was engaged to this guy, and it got bad. He killed himself and tried to take her down with him I guess. I was working that night when she came in. It was a bloody mess.”

“I’m so sorry.” Bridget kept her hand firmly on Jerica’s. “I’ve seen my fair share of mangled bodies.”

“I suppose you would have.”

“Yeah. The worst was when a loader got stuck, the farmer went to try and get it unstuck, and it smashed down on top of him. His wife found him, and I can still hear her screams if I think about it too long.”

Jerica’s look was soft, but Bridget detected no pity in her gaze. “I can’t imagine walking onto that scene.”

“It was a mess, as you said.” Bridget shifted, her ankle bothering her until she could get it in a better spot. “Did you grow up out here?”

“I did.” Joy flashed across Jerica’s face. “I went to Hays for school and came right home, finding my dream job in the ER. I never wanted to work in any other department.”

“Really?”

“Nope. I like the fast pace and never knowing what to expect.”

“Same here.” Bridget found herself smiling, and it felt good. So much better than staring at the white ceiling of her bedroom. “It’s as if every day is different.”

“It is.”

They fell into a quiet silence, but it wasn’t awkward or tense. It was gentle and oddly soothing. They talked on and off for hours that day, Eli bringing them lunch and then Jerica helping Bridget up the stairs so they could sit out on the deck.

Jerica pressed against Bridget’s side, her hands wrapped around Bridget’s arm as they watched the thunderstorm come in. The sky darkened, and the breeze turned colder. The conversation took meandering turns, and they were hours into

their second date, albeit unofficial, when Bridget realized she was relaxed for the first time in as long as she could remember. Years for sure.

“Hey,” Bridget interrupted.

“Yeah?” Jerica turned her face up to look Bridget in the eye.

Bridget stared down at Jerica, her gaze moving from her eyes to her lips. The memory of their kiss the day before flashed through her mind. That had felt wrong, but would it be the same today? Reaching up, Bridget brushed two fingers across Jerica’s lips.

“May I—”

Jerica didn’t hesitate as she surged forward, their lips connecting. Taken aback, Bridget held firm before her brain caught up with her body. Moving in more, she kissed Jerica back with as much emotion as she could muster.

Rain pinged onto the tin roof of the deck as the scent of wet dirt floated up to them. Bridget sucked in a deep breath as she parted her lips, Jerica mimicking the move. She gave her one open mouthed kiss before pulling away and pressing their foreheads together. Shame swirled in her belly, and she wasn’t sure what to do about it.

Anyone could have come by and seen them, any one of Eli’s guests or Eli herself. Closing her eyes, Bridget kissed Jerica’s cheek gently. “I’m glad you came up today.”

“Me too.” Jerica pulled away. “But I also suppose I should start driving back since I’m pretty sure this is only the start of a very long storm.”

Bridget shook her head. “I honestly haven’t looked at a weather report in weeks.”

“Good for you. Take the time for yourself.” Jerica pulled Bridget in for another soft kiss.

She was right. This time was different. It wasn’t awkward or full of stress, even if that niggling sensation of guilt pushed its way through her. Another five minutes of being close on

the porch swing, and Jerica finally rose to her feet. She said her goodbyes, gave Bridget a quick kiss on her cheek. Bridget watched her drive down the road until she disappeared into the distance. Bridget found herself smiling again before shame filled every crevice it could find in her body and in her mind.



The crunch was the first thing she heard, but she was already in a panic. Her belt kept her in place, locking her to the seat. No matter how she tried to get out, she wasn't able to. Bridget pushed harder, moved faster, but she was stuck.

Everything happened in slow motion, the crunching getting closer and closer to her, the rocking of the vehicle as it was pushed in abnormal ways. Bridget wanted to scream out, the pressure in her chest building as if she was going to burst, but no sound erupted. Everything swirled around inside her, and she was barely containing it, even though she didn't want to.

The crunch again, this time closer. Turning, she saw the black rubber of the large tire coming toward her, the spin as it moved in her direction. Bridget threw her hands up, blocking her face as if that would protect her as it crushed her into a million pieces.

Pain seared through her arm and her chest. She could barely breathe, gasping as if it would make any difference. Popping her eyes open, she felt weightless, as if she was floating above the world. She was so lightheaded, spinning in an instant of opening her eyes. Clenching them shut again, Bridget sank into what she felt. The noise was so loud that she could barely hear anything else, couldn't think, couldn't figure out where she was or what was going on.

The shake against her arm jarred her. Sitting straight up, Bridget opened her eyes wide, staring right into Eli's worried light brown eyes. Her chest heaved as she gasped for breath, a cold sweat covering her body and soaking her clothes and hair and sheets.

“You were having a nightmare,” Eli said, fear riding on the back of the worry. “I took me a bit to wake you up.”

Bridget sucked in a breath, cringing when she realized she was putting weight on her bad arm. Eli helped her to move so she was leaning against the headboard.

“Let me get you some water.” Eli disappeared from the room, and Bridget realized every light was on in the living area and her bedroom.

The dream must have been far worse than she thought, though the sting of it was already fading. Every nerve in her body was ready to go, fight or flight, and she gladly would have taken either. Except she was stuck with fright because she could barely move. Eli came back in, a water bottle in her hand. Twisting the top, she handed it over.

Bridget gladly drank, the cold temperature floating through her overheated body a soothing balm. Eli didn't just sit on the edge of the bed like Bridget expected, she crawled onto the mattress and sat next to Bridget, mimicking her position against the headboard.

“You've been having nightmares for days, but this was the worst one yet. I had to wake you up.”

“I've been...what?”

Eli frowned. “You don't remember them?”

Bridget shook her head in surprise. “I barely remember this one.”

“What do you remember?”

“I was in my cruiser, stuck, could hear the crunching of metal. Then it was like I was floating.”

“I wonder if that's the life flight.”

Bridget grimaced and sucked down more water. The rational side of her brain was already coming around and taking over, putting up barriers and walls right where they were supposed to be. It was the perfect way to distract and protect herself. “Probably. I don't remember any of it.”

“I bet you do, and that this is just your body’s way of telling you that you remember.”

“Great,” Bridget murmured. “Just what I wanted... nightmares.”

Eli shrugged. “Do you want to talk more about it?”

Bridget stayed put, staring off at the far wall before she answered. “I want to see my cruiser.”

“I can take you down there soon if you want, but I’m warning you, it’s not pretty.”

“I know. I just...I want to see it.”

“Then we’ll go next time we have to go to town, all right?”

Nodding, Bridget finished off the bottle of water and set the empty plastic container on the nightstand. “I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“Don’t be. That’s what I’m here for, remember?”

Bridget didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what to say. Instead, she settled her head on Eli’s shoulder, closed her eyes, and tried to relax her still-racing heart. She supposed the nightmare had been more of a doozy than she’d thought, but at least this time, she hadn’t tried to take off someone’s head or beat them up in the process.

They stayed there, quiet, for some time. Bridget wondered if Eli had fallen back asleep before she realized she didn’t even know what time it was. Shifting around, she grabbed her cell phone, glanced at the time, and saw a text from Jerica.

“I think she’s good for you, you know,” Eli murmured.

“Do you?” Bridget remarked, only halfway paying attention as she tried to unlock her phone through her sleepy haze and read the message.

“Yeah.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Why?”

Bridget gave up on the text, not able to read and have an intricate conversation at the same time. She sighed and put her head back on Eli's shoulder. "Because I'm so fucked up."

"What's to say she's not equally fucked up?"

Bridget was glad Eli wasn't looking at her and couldn't see her face because there was no doubt in her mind Eli would be able to read between the lines of what she was thinking, and that scared the living shit out of her. It was part of why she'd pulled away all those years ago. Eli was too good at reading her, about knowing what she was thinking and feeling before she knew it herself.

"Bridge?"

"What?"

"What's to say she's not equally fucked up?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "But my kind of fucked up isn't exactly what people want when they go to find the love of their life."

"Who said anything about love?" Eli shifted, and Bridget assumed she was trying to look her in the eye but didn't quite manage it because Bridget refused to move. "I thought you two were just dating."

"We are. Maybe. I don't know. I'm not sure I should continue it. I mean, the other day was fun and nice. She's a very sweet girl."

"Girl?" Eli yawned, covering her mouth with her hand. "I don't think I'd call her a girl."

"Why's that?"

"Well, she's a nurse. She's got to at least be in her early twenties."

"I guess."

"That doesn't make her a girl," Eli countered.

"Well, she's an adult. I'm not dating a kid." Bridget scoffed. "But she's young."

“How old do you think she is, really?”

“Old enough that she should know better than to date me.”

“Then why do you think she still wants to date you?”

That was the question that kept stumping Bridget. Why would Jerica want to date her? Why would she push to be in a relationship when Bridget came with so much baggage and detriment that any relationship she had was doomed before it even started? Her family would never accept a girlfriend, or God forbid, a wife. She'd be ostracized from them, tossed out to the curb on her own in a way that no one could come back from it. How was she supposed to be in a relationship with a woman when she ran for Sheriff next? Surely that would screw her chances over.

“Bridge?”

“What?” The bite in her tone was not wholly unexpected, but Bridget did regret it.

“I like her for you. I think she's a good match, and I think she pushes you in ways I never could.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Eli sighed and rubbed her hand against her thigh in a nervous gesture. “I don't know how to explain it. Can you just trust me on it?”

“No.”

“Fine.” Eli's tone was sharp. “Just forget it then.”

Guilt swam in Bridget's belly again, and she stopped. She really should listen and see what Eli was trying to tell her. Never once had Eli tried to steer her in the wrong direction. She had, but it was never on purpose. “No, I'm sorry, tell me.”

Eli didn't move, and they sat in silence for what felt like minutes before Eli finally spoke again. “I never challenged you. We just always were, and I think Jerica challenges you in a way that you need.”

“I need?”

“Yeah.” They fell into a soft silence again, Eli breaking it once more. “You need to decide what you’re willing to give up in order to gain love. That was something I could never convince you of, but I really hope Jerica can and that you’re in a different place now than you were when we were together.”

“I...I would have given everything to have you.”

Eli shook her head, and Bridget pushed herself to sit up.

“I would have—”

“You wouldn’t. You didn’t. And I don’t blame you for that, Bridget. Not anymore, but at some point, if you want to have more than a fling here and there, you are going to have to find a way to give up certain things for someone else, and that may include your family.”

Bridget shook her head. “How do I give up my family?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had to do it, but I think you need to remember that you have more family than you might realize, and that this town is your family. I am your family. I will always come when you call for help. Don’t you know that by now?”

“I guess I do.”

“Do you trust it?” Eli gave her a hard but sincere look, earnestly searching for the truth in Bridget’s words.

Bridget paused before she answered, wanting to make sure that the response she gave was as truthful and as honest as she could make it. “I do. I do trust you.”

“Good. That’s a good step. Now, find at least one more person to trust, because we’re not as scary as you may think we are. And there are more people here who love you than you know.”

Eli didn’t wait for an answer as she slipped out of the bed and Bridget’s room, leaving the light on as she went. She shut the door, casting Bridget into silence. The conversation wasn’t an easy one, and it didn’t sit well with her. She wanted to follow Eli, to ask her more questions and push her for more answers, but at the same time, Bridget knew Eli wouldn’t do

it. She'd given her advice, she'd given her words of wisdom, and then she left, like she always did.

Loneliness seeped its way into her heart, and she struggled to wrap it up and bundle back where it came from. Perhaps Eli was right and it wouldn't be as bad a falling out as she thought it would. Still, she couldn't understand what it would mean to cut her parents off, her siblings. She'd spent so much of her life trying to get their approval, and to just not seek it anymore? *Was that even possible?*

Gripping her phone, she checked on the message from Jerica, finally having the brainpower to read it. Her stomach dropped at the words, not because it was unexpected but because she still didn't have an answer to the questions she couldn't stop asking.

Did she want to see Jerica again? Did she want to potentially fall in love and risk her family and her career for a woman she barely knew? Did she want another date?

Because Jerica certainly did.

CHAPTER 10



JERICA HAD BEEN WAITING for a text from Bridget for two days. She'd sent a few others, just checking in and ignoring the fact the one asking when they could go on another date was equally ignored. She wasn't having any of it, and the longer she thought about it, the angrier she became that Bridget wouldn't just give her an answer one way or another.

They could talk about life, the farm, work, anything, but as soon as the conversation of dating or a relationship came up, Bridget would ghost her, ignore her, avoid her. Jerica stepped into the break room at the hospital and switched out the coffee grounds for some new ones. She added her special ingredient, vanilla bean, and set it to run.

She was just about to sit down and wait for the first cup when Ann walked in, her wide hips and salt and pepper hair always a welcome sight. "Are you down here for some extra hours?"

Ann nodded as she eyed the pot of coffee that was barely started. "Thought I could use the extra pay this week."

She slid across the table from Jerica and relaxed into the chair. "How's the world with you?"

Jerica sighed. Ann had always been a good friend the times they had spent together, including work and outside of work. Normally she would talk to her sister, but that was out of the question for a bit since her sister was so preoccupied with her own shit.

"It's going."

“That doesn’t sound like it’s going well.”

Pursing her lips, Jerica sighed heavily. “Have you ever had someone give you loads of mixed signals?”

Ann snorted. “Yes. But which mixed signals are you getting?”

Jerica eyed Ann up and down before she decided to dive in. Bridget wasn’t her patient any longer, and since it had been weeks since she’d been admitted to the hospital, surely it would be okay to spill the beans that they’d been on a date or two, right? “Bridget. You remember her?”

“How could I forget?” Ann eyed Jerica up and down. “Did you...talk to her outside of the hospital?”

“Yes.” Jerica answered slowly, treading the line of whether Ann would find this appropriate or not. When she said nothing and didn’t give any indication that she thought it was a bad idea, Jerica continued. “She’s been...I don’t know. We went on a date, which she agreed to. It didn’t go that well, but it certainly wasn’t the worst first date I’ve been on, more...amusing. Anyway, she then didn’t talk to me, so I showed up and we had a second date, a much better date.”

“And now?”

“Now she’ll text me and talk to me about anything other than dating.” Jerica sighed, rubbing her temple as the coffee pot gurgled.

“Interesting,” Ann murmured, her gaze sliding to the coffee pot. “Have you asked her what’s up?”

Jerica grimaced. “Not directly, but I have tried to get some understanding of what’s holding her back or if she really wants to date. I don’t want to force her into anything, you know? If she wants me to stop, I’ll do that. If she just wants to be friends...that’ll be a little harder but not impossible.”

Ann nodded. “When Heidi and I first got together, we were friends first, then we started other things. It wasn’t as easy for her. She didn’t have a lot of experience with dating, or being in a good and healthy relationship. She needed that time to adjust.”

“How long did it take?”

Ann snorted lightly. “A year before we had our first kiss.”

Jerica flushed slightly. “We’ve already done that.”

“And did it feel right?”

“The second time. The first? Not so much. I can’t quite put my finger on why.”

“Was she as ready as you? She was just in an awful car accident, work related at that, don’t you think that’s a lot of weight for a person to carry.”

Nodding, Jerica folded her hands and stared at the top of the table. “Yeah, it is. I get that, and I don’t mind taking it slow.”

Ann got up and grabbed a Styrofoam cup, pouring herself coffee before it was finished so the stream hissed against the burner. “Sorry, couldn’t wait for this.”

Jerica shrugged it off, but she didn’t grab her own coffee. She could wait until it was finished brewing. “I think it’s just hard to know what to do when there’s no communication to tell me what to do.”

“Ah, that.” Ann settled into the chair across from Jerica again. “Communication is key in any relationship that is going to survive. Though, be warned, it can take years and years to learn how to properly listen and talk.”

Jerica frowned, eyeing Ann as if she held the world’s secrets. Ann and her partner had been together for years, and yet they never seemed to have any problems. She’d always taken their relationship at face value, they were quiet about it because of living in a rural part of the country and being in a same-sex relationship, add in the fact they were both older, so it wasn’t as common then to be out and proud.

“Did it take you a long time to figure out how to communicate?”

Ann raised an eyebrow. “We’re still figuring it out, but it’s much better than it was two years ago. Trust me on that one. If

you'd asked two years ago, I wouldn't be sure if we'd see twenty years. Now? I think we'll make it."

"Twenty? Wow." Jerica pressed her lips together. "And here I am just wanted to get to the third date."

Ann chuckled lightly. "Go at whatever pace she needs."

"I'm trying to."

"Are you?"

Chastised, Jerica thought back to their conversations, to that first kiss she had kind of forced Bridget into. That had been why the second was so much better. They'd both wanted it, and it hadn't been awkward and out of tune with the sense of the conversation or the moment.

"You're right," Jerica confessed. "I need to."

"Start there. Being in a car accident like that is traumatic. She's going to need some time to get over that. Meanwhile, you don't know what else she's dealing with unless she's told you, but from when she was my patient, I'm betting she hasn't actually told you much. Just remember, we all have underlying trauma. She needs to tease it out for you to see, and then you need to shut up and listen when she does it."

Jerica smiled. "Who knew you were so wise?"

Ann laughed, her voice reverberating around the room. "I am not wise, but thank you for the compliment. I'm just well-lived, and I have a partner who has a host of trauma, most of it deep and severe trauma. It's taken us years to even begin to untangle it. Likewise—" Ann leaned in closer, dropping her voice "—I also have trauma when it comes to relationships, and it's not as obvious as Heidi's. It's taken years to recognize that's what it is, but once we started talking about it, all bets have been off."

"That's good to know." Jerica looked at the coffeepot, glad to see it was done. She made herself a cup and settled back at the table. "So you think I should ease up?"

"I think you need to directly ask her what she wants from you, and then I think you need to be very patient as she tries to

work that out. The answer might change. Let it, let her guide the conversation and relationship at the beginning. See if that changes anything.”

“Okay. I can try that.”

“Good. Now, I’ve got patients I need to check in on.”

Jerica gave a half smile as Ann stepped out of the room. She pulled her phone out of her pocket, staring at the last text messages they had sent. She wasn’t quite sure how to word it all, but she did need to get it out there. It had been weighing on her mind for the last few days so much that she found herself distracted.

Hey, I’d love to see you again, but I know the timing might be off. Let me know what you want, so I at least know where we stand.

She hit the send button, pocketed her phone, and grabbed her coffee. She wasn’t going to worry about it until she had time, until she was off work and could really sit down and think about Bridget and maybe call her. Perhaps it wasn’t even a conversation they could have over the phone and she’d have to go up to *Indigo* again. It would be a drive, but Jerica was pretty sure it would be well worth it. Checking on her patients, Jerica went back to work to finish out her shift.



Jerica hadn’t been able to get Bridget off her mind. They’d texted on and off for an hour after her shift and through the next few days she’d been at work, but as soon as her next day off hit, Jerica could not stop thinking about her. She’d sent a text an hour earlier and gotten no reply.

During the course of their conversations, Bridget had said she’d be happy to see Jerica again but had refused to set up a specific time. She was still just as lost as she was before. She

had no more answers to the questions she was asking. She'd met Bridget nearly a month ago by that point, her broken body wheeled in on gurney, but she was a whole person now. Well, as whole as Bridget would allow herself to be.

Taking a chance, Jerica touched up her makeup and grabbed her keys and her purse and got into her car. Pretty soon she would have the road to *Indigo* memorized. But she was coming to love it up there. It was absolutely beautiful to be so close to nature.

When she got to *Indigo*, people mingled on the deck who waved at her. She smiled at them before letting herself into the house. Her stomach was full of nerves and excitement. She'd surprised Bridget before and it had gone over well enough. She wanted to do it again and see if this time would get her the same result.

Searching around, Jerica looked for Bridget or Eli in the den, then the kitchen. She found Eli, who told her Bridget was downstairs and in a sour mood. Bolstering herself, Jerica headed into the basement with one goal on her mind. *Make Bridget smile*. It wasn't going to be an easy feat.

As she made it to the bottom of the stairs, she found Bridget on the couch with food and phone and drinks surrounding her, as if she'd made her own little moat of the essentials. Jerica had seen that kind of thing before. In fact, she'd done it herself before.

"Knock, knock," she said, hoping to catch Bridget's attention and surprise easily enough.

Bridget jerked with a start. "Hi. I wasn't expecting you."

"I know. I hope you don't mind. I had a feeling it would be better if I just showed up."

"Did you?" Bridget cleared away much of the food and drink so Jerica could have seat next to her. Jerica took that as good sign.

Sitting down, she made sure she was decently close, enough that Bridget couldn't avoid her if she wanted to. "I did. I wanted to see you, too."

Bridget's look was hard to read, but it seemed to be somewhere in between a pained expression and delight. An odd mix, but Jerica was determined to figure out why and what it was for.

"I'm sorry if any of my texts came off as pushy. I think it's really a conversation we may need to have in person."

"Maybe," Bridget mumbled. "I didn't think you were pushy. I wasn't exactly answering you."

Jerica pressed her lips together. At least Bridget was being open and honest about that. It would mean less work for her to do in the long run. "True, and I would like an answer, you know."

"About dating?"

"Yeah." Jerica gently put a hand on Bridget's knee, wanting her to know that she was there if Bridget wanted her to be, but not too forthright that Bridget felt as though Jerica was forcing a decision on her one way or the other. "I think you know my position on it."

"I do." Bridget clenched her jaw hard, the line of muscle along her cheek tightening as it ran down her neck.

Jerica hated to see how much stress and tension this was causing her. It almost would have been better had she left it alone and decided to let Bridget lead the conversation from a distance, even if they never got to some kind of resolution. But Jerica nixed that idea. She wanted resolution, she wanted an answer, one way or another. She did not like living with uncertainty.

"I would like to know yours," Jerica started. "But if you don't know it, that's fine too. We can take this as slow or as fast as you're willing and wanting to."

Bridget remained quiet, and Jerica's stomach twisted into even more knots. She liked Bridget, a whole lot. She couldn't even put her finger on why, or what was pushing her to be this patient and insistent, but she wanted to get to know this woman more, the woman who calmed when she was around,

the woman she had to spend the night near just to keep her heart rate steady.

“I think I should tell you something, but I’m not sure how weird it’s going to sound,” Jerica’s voice lowered, and she struggled to look Bridget in the eye.

“What?” Bridget’s brow furrowed, her thick eyebrows drawing together, her pale blue eyes such a contrast to her jet-black hair.

“Please don’t take this as odd.”

“I can’t promise anything.”

Jerica paused, not quite sure how to take that, but again, at least Bridget was being honest. “When you came in that night, when you were so out of it, and after surgery, they were struggling to keep your heart rate steady. Every time people would leave you alone for long, your heart rate would drop, your blood pressure would drop, and we’d all be rushed back in to try and deal with it.”

“I didn’t realize that.”

“You were pretty close to death, Bridget.” Jerica squeezed her knee and shifted so she leaned in closer. “But more than that, and this is the weird part and I apologize in advance, it wasn’t really people who kept your heart rate steady. It was—”

“You,” Bridget interrupted and finished for her.

Jerica nodded, her eyes wide with surprise. “Yeah, it was me. I had to keep my hand on your heart, otherwise...” She trailed off. “So I stayed after my shift and stayed with you in the ICU for the first night until right around the time you woke up. Then I left to go home and sleep.”

Her cheeks heated with the confession. It was strange but equally strange that she had such an intimate knowledge of what had happened when she was sure Bridget didn’t remember any of it.

“You weren’t there when I woke up.”

“I was the first time,” Jerica murmured. “You probably don’t remember it because you were still pretty out of it and

went back to sleep, but as soon as you were awake, we knew you were out of the woods.”

“We?”

“I knew.” Jerica dropped her gaze down to her hand, where Bridget had covered it with hers. Bridget entwined their fingers together, keeping a tight grasp on Jerica.

They sat in the silence, the tension from her confession running through her chest. She felt better having said it, but she still wasn't sure it was the best time and place to have done it. Bridget was so fragile.

“What I want to say is that I realize you're going through a lot. Not just with the accident but clearly some stuff with your parents and with Eli, and I'm willing to take this as slow as you want to. You can set the pace. Is that okay?”

Bridget didn't answer. Instead she lifted her hand, grabbed hold of Jerica's chin and pulled her in for a kiss. Their lips touched, and it wasn't brief. Bridget held her there, her grip firm but gentle as she parted her lips and dashed her tongue across Jerica's mouth. Humming in satisfaction, Jerica leaned in, pressing a hand against Bridget's thigh as she moved even closer.

It was a perfect moment. This was so much better than either time they had tried this before. She didn't know if it was emotion that tethered them together or something else, but Jerica stayed as close to it as she could. Bridget took the kiss slowly. She tasted and tested, holding Jerica to her for a long time as their tongues swirled together, as their breathing joined and became labored.

Jerica closed her eyes, feeling every sensation that rolled through her body. She didn't expect this, and she certainly expected no more. Bridget was still injured. It wouldn't be easy, but if she could, she would do whatever Bridget wanted or needed in that moment.

Bridget pulled away, nipping at Jerica's lower lip before she grinned, those light blue eyes locking on Jerica's face. “Straddle me, will you?”

“Sure.” Jerica moved, pressing one knee into the couch cushion on either side of Bridget’s hips. She sat back, her hands running up and down Bridget’s arms, finally getting a full view of her.

“This is easier for now.”

Smiling, Jerica nodded her understanding. The angle before couldn’t have been comfortable, and she wanted to make Bridget as comfortable as possible. She made sure the weight of her body wasn’t too much as she rested mostly on her knees, angling her body forward. Bridget reached up, her hand at the back of Jerica’s neck and dragged her down—this time for a brutally emotional and heated kiss.

Jerica threaded her fingers into Bridget’s dark hair as their mouths melded together. She didn’t want to stop. She wanted to get lost in the sea of Bridget’s passion—a sea that she seemed to already be drowning in. Bridget slid her hand up Jerica’s back, under the fabric of her shirt so there was skin on skin. Jerica rocked her hips into Bridget, keeping the pace slow and purposeful.

Bridget didn’t move to do anything else other than touch, feel, and slide her hand along the soft skin of Jerica’s back. Jerica stayed in that position, lips locked to Bridget’s, hands tangled in her hair as she moved in to direct the kiss, allowing Bridget to lose control in her. She was careful to mind Bridget’s sling with her broken arm, keep her as far away as possible while she got as close as possible.

Eventually Bridget broke the kiss, gasping for air as her eyes widened, and she stared up at Jerica. “I do want this.”

“Are you sure?” Jerica asked, realizing that it was already too late for that question. She was sitting in Bridget’s lap, they were making out, and she wanted nothing more than to get down on her knees and give Bridget a little bit of relief. She could take care of herself later if need be.

“Yeah, I am. I know I haven’t been before now, but I am, really.”

Jerica smiled brilliantly, moving in to peck Bridget's lips. "I'm so glad."

Bridget gave her a genuine smile, and Jerica's heart thumped wildly at accomplishing her one goal. "I'm not easy to be with, though. I have to warn you on that."

"I think I figured that out already." Chuckling, Jerica ran a finger across Bridget's lips. "But I'm betting you're worth it."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"I think you are." Bending down, Jerica kissed her lightly. "Just trust that I know and trust that you are."

Bridget sighed, but she didn't reject the notion, which Jerica considered another win. She wanted to do so many things at once. She wanted to stay on top of Bridget, grind into her until she came, but she also wanted to get on her knees and pleasure Bridget. At the same time, she wanted to stay right where she was, kissing, but also talking and learning more about the wonderful woman she was with.

Quirking her lips up, Jerica bent in and kissed Bridget again. She would never get enough of that. "Bridget?"

"Hmm?" Bridget was distracted by scraping her nails lightly up and down Jerica's back, to her ass, and down the back of her thigh.

"Does this mean I can officially say you're my girlfriend?"

Chuckling lowly, Bridget stopped her roving hands. "I suppose it does."

"Does this also mean that you'll answer *all* of my texts?" Jerica leaned in, pressing her lips to Bridget's neck to get a sweet taste of her skin.

"I promise you I will do that."

"Good." Jerica bent down, pressing their lips together again. She wasn't sure she was ever going to get over that.

CHAPTER 11



FOR DAYS BRIDGET thought about Jerica, the way she had moved on top of her, comforted her but also pushed. It had felt natural in a way Bridget had never explored before. She wasn't afraid of it, not like she had been with Eli. She wanted to be in the relationship—that had never been in any doubt of her mind. It was whether or not she wanted the world to know.

But in those few days, Bridget had realized the relationship wasn't the issue. It was her own biases. She wanted Jerica. She wanted to make love to her, fuck her, spend time with her, but more than that, she wanted to be able to tell people about her. That had been the one major mistake that she'd made with Eli, and Bridget didn't want to make it again.

That had for sure been part of her hesitation about entering into another long-term relationship, but something about Jerica's patience and strength told her that this might be possible. That, and she hadn't stopped smiling since Jerica left that night. Eli had commented on it several times, but nothing in depth. Nothing that would reveal too much.

They had texted nearly nonstop, too. Every free moment Jerica had in between shifts, and even during some of them when she had a break, Bridget would get some sort of text, whether it was check-in or ideas for future dates or something random Jerica had seen that day. Bridget responded to each and every one of them—as promised.

Eli stepped off the bottom stair, startling Bridget out of her thoughts. The look on Eli's face was anything but happiness or ease.

“What’s wrong?” Bridget asked.

“Your parents are here.”

Bridget sighed heavily. “Did they say why?”

“I’m betting to check on you. It has been almost a month since they did that last.”

Pressing her lips tightly together, Bridget looked up at Eli. “I don’t want them down here.”

“Me either. Are you sure you want to talk to them in the public area of the den, though? The guests—”

“I’ll restrain myself.”

“I believe that.” Eli stayed still, as if she wanted to say more. “But will they?”

“No idea, especially with what I want to tell them.”

“Oh?” Eli raised an eyebrow as Bridget shuffled around to stand, grabbing her knee scooter.

“Yeah.” Gritting her teeth, Bridget moved toward the stairs. Eli stayed behind her as she hopped her way up each one until she got to the top. Eli set up the scooter in front of her, and Bridget moved herself through the kitchen to the living area and the den, taking the two steps like a pro this time.

At least if she was going to fall in front of anyone it wouldn’t be *them*. Eli gave her a look, obviously wondering if Bridget wanted her to stay or not. Bridget shook her head at Eli and sat down in a chair, eyeing her parents down.

“Hey,” she mumbled, trying not to lose her gumption.

“Bridget,” Edward said.

“How are you doing?” Sharon asked, looking Bridget over head to toe.

Bridget had to remind herself, multiple times, that somewhere deep inside her mother’s frozen and dried up soul, she did care, at least about some things, even if it wasn’t Bridget as a whole. Rolling her shoulders, Bridget looked her

mother in the eye. It was time she started taking her life back. “I’m good, thank you for asking.”

Sharon seemed surprised by her tone, but she didn’t comment on it. She did, however, glance at Edward as if he was going to put a stop to Bridget’s attitude. That was always how it was. Sharon would get upset and tell Edward to take care of it, and he was the one who came down with the iron cane.

“How are you two?” Bridget asked, deciding this line of awkwardly fake-pleasant conversation could be carried on in two ways.

“We’re good,” Sharon answered, clearly confused.

It sent a shiver of satisfaction through Bridget that she was catching her parents so off guard.

“I’m surprised to see you still using that thing.” Sharon eyed the knee scooter.

Confused, Bridget cocked her head at it and then Sharon. “I’m not weight-bearing yet, so I have to.”

“It’ll only ruin your career faster if you don’t get back to work.”

“I’m on a leave of absence, mandated by KBI since I had a work-related injury. I can’t go back—even to desk duty—until I’m cleared.”

“And when will that be?” The venom in her mother’s tone was not mistaken.

“When I’m cleared. I can’t control when that happens.”

“Of course you can,” Sharon muttered. “You have to think about your career, Bridget. You can’t be lazy about getting your job back.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Her eyes widened in shock. “I have my job. There is no getting it back.”

“Rumor has it that Wilkerson is doing fantastic, and they won’t give it back to you when you come back.”

Bridget scoffed. Her mother had absolutely no idea how these things worked, nor would she ever actually look into it either. She risked a glance at Edward, who seemed to agree with Sharon. Cursing under her breath, Bridget curled her fingers round the edge of the chair and prepared to try to explain to them how her job worked, even though she knew they wouldn't listen.

"They can't give my job away. I'm an elected official—"

"They can if they think you can't do it." Sharon's tone rose, her voice inching into the screeching levels.

"That's not how it works!" Bridget tried to bite back her anger, but it was so damn hard with them sometimes. She couldn't control herself when she was in the room with them. She wanted to remain calm during the entire conversation, but that was too much of an ask, obviously. Sighing, Bridget rubbed her temple. "I'm sorry. I will talk to them about when I can go back to light desk duty."

"Good idea," Edward added. "It'll get you out of this place."

"Eli has been nothing but a good host to me, and you two should thank her for that."

"She has *strangers* in here all the time," Sharon hissed the word as though no one could hear her except the two of them.

Bridget nodded. "Yeah, that's kind of the point of running a bed-and-breakfast. But if you're uncomfortable with it, don't turn your house into one."

"We came here to check in and see how you were healing."

"I'm healing well, thank you," Bridget quipped. "The doctors think everything is going like it should, and my bones are healing. I should be able to start walking with crutches soon."

"That's good, I suppose." Sharon glanced down at Bridget's leg. "I still don't like you being here."

"I know you don't, Mom. But this is where I want to be, and I'm a grown woman. You can't tell me what I can and

can't do anymore.”

Sharon's lips thinned, nearly disappearing as she held in her discomfort. Bridget could see it from a mile away, and as much as she wanted to poke the bear, she equally wanted to keep the calm they had seemed to achieve.

“I wanted to tell you that I'm dating someone.”

Edward gave her a blank stare, but Sharon narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“A nurse that I met while I was in the hospital.”

“A nurse?” Sharon screeched. “What kind of man would be a nurse?”

Bridget raised a single eyebrow at her mother, daring her to ask the next question or to make the damn connection, but her mother either couldn't or didn't want to fathom Bridget dating a woman. They'd already accused Eli of trying something, so she didn't think it would be that big of a leap for them to make. Apparently she was wrong.

“How can you be dating a nurse? Isn't that a violation of some ethics or something?”

“It's not. We weren't dating when I was a patient.” She had to curse herself as she naturally avoided any mention of Jerica's gender identity in the conversation. She was too damn good at that over the years, and the habit so deeply ingrained in her that she couldn't stop herself.

“I don't understand. You met him at the hospital and it's not a violation—”

“No, Mom. We just started dating. We weren't dating while I was in the hospital. There is no violation.”

“Oh. Well, that's good I suppose.” They fell into an awkward silence.

Bridget's stomach swirled with nausea as she tried to convince herself to try again, if only to get the fucking words out this time. One glance at her father told her that he had a pretty good idea what she was trying to say, but he wasn't any help in pulling it out of her.

Eli stepped into the room, catching Bridget's attention. "Just wanted to let you know that dinner is going to be ready in ten minutes. You're welcome to stay." She directed that comment at Sharon and Edward. "But you'll be eating with the guests like the rest of us."

Sharon gritted her teeth. Edward stayed absolutely silent as Bridget eyed him. Sharon stood up first. "We'll be leaving. We just wanted to check in on Bridget and see how she was healing."

"As you can see, and I think so too, she's healing rather well."

"Yes," Sharon agreed, much to Bridget's surprise.

After a slight shuffle, an awkward hug from her mother, and stern nod from her father, her parents left the house, shutting the door after them. Bridget glanced at the clock on the far wall and looked at Eli in confusion. "Dinner isn't for another hour."

Eli shrugged. "I just don't like them. Sue me."

Laughing, Bridget shook her head. "I suppose I should, but then you'd have to sue me for not accepting the helping hand when it came."

Eli burst out in a chuckle, her deep voice carrying through the room as she waited for Bridget to make her way out of the den. "And what if I did?"

"Then you'd be on your own. I don't have shit for money."

"Jesus, you're an idiot sometimes. What were you trying to do in there? Come out to them?"

"Yeah."

Eli stilled. "Why?"

Bridget paused as she reached the top of the stairs out of the den. "Because of Jerica."

Eli's smile said enough, but she made sure Bridget got plenty of teasing as they went into the kitchen to clean up and make dinner.

“I’ve got to run right after dinner,” Eli said as she slipped the food into the oven. “Sarah’s coming in tonight.”

“Oh yeah?” Bridget raised her eyebrows salaciously.

“Yes.” Eli blushed furiously, the red running all over her cheeks and down her neck. Bridget loved it when she did that. It was impossible for Eli to avoid being embarrassed sometimes. “So I’ll be in late, because it’s a long drive.”

“Sure, and there are pitstops along the road in ditches you might want to try out on your way home,” Bridget answered with a chuckle. “I’ll clean up down there as best as I can, too. Don’t want to bring your girl home to a disgusting house.”

“Thanks. Really. I appreciate that.”

“No problem.” Bridget sighed. It wasn’t much longer until they were all at the dinner table, eating.



It was dark, and the house wasn’t quiet. Bridget lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, people moving above her as they did whatever they did. While she longed for the quiet of her own house, she was actually quite happy to be around people, even if it wasn’t Eli. Even just hearing them above her reminded her there was something to live for.

She couldn’t stop thinking about Jerica, though. It had been hours since she’d heard from her, but Jerica was at work, so that wasn’t surprising. She should be off soon, and Bridget fully expected a late night of texting between the two of them.

She must have lost track of time, because she heard Eli’s ever-loud voice booming through the basement, the shuffling of feet as they walked through the living area and into Eli’s bedroom. Then Bridget wanted to claw her ears out. There was nothing like listening to her ex-girlfriend fuck her current fiancé in the room next to hers. The groans, the thumps, the murmurs she couldn’t quite make out—not that she tried.

Rolling onto her good side, Bridget pulled a pillow over her ear and tried to tune them out, but the walls were a whole

lot thinner than they probably thought they were. Not to mention it sounded like they were against the damn wall that bordered the two bedrooms.

Her stomach roiled with nausea again. She thought about climbing out of bed and going to the living room or upstairs, but there was no way she could do that quietly, and it would take forever for her to make it on her own while she dragged her scooter with her. Clenching her eyes shut, Bridget tried to drown them out. She thought of anything and everything but what was happening next door—at least, she tried to.

She wasn't exactly successful. Grabbing her phone, Bridget did the only thing she could think of. She called Jerica and sent up a prayer that she was off work and able to answer the call. As soon as Jerica's smooth voice came over the phone, Bridget was instantly at ease.

“Hey there,” Jerica answered.

“Hey,” Bridget mumbled, realizing too late she still had the pillow over her head. She knocked it off and tried again. “Hey.”

“I didn't expect you to call. I'm just getting into my car.”

“Good timing then.” Bridget rolled onto her back, staring at her ceiling again. She needed the distraction, the thumping from next door too much for her to take on her own. “I need a distraction.”

“Oh? What kind of distraction?”

“Any.” Bridget nearly broke on the word. “Just any.”

“Oh no. What's happening?”

“It's not been a great day.” Sighing, Bridget wanted to move but was confined by the sling. She really couldn't wait to be done with that thing or with the cast on her foot. Not only did it itch, but it was sweaty and getting to the point it was uncomfortable. But since it was her career on the line, she wanted to be sure she did everything the doctors said exactly as they told her to do it. She wasn't going to risk not being sheriff, as much as her parents thought she already had.

“Want to tell me about it?”

Pursing her lips, Bridget heard the sound change as Jerica connected her phone to the vehicle. She had no idea how far Jerica lived from the hospital—something she should probably figure out sooner rather than later—so she wasn’t sure how long she should keep the conversation light before she turned it to deeper subjects.

“Well, Eli’s fiancé came home.”

“Oh. Oh!” Jerica finally understood what Bridget wasn’t saying.

“So I’m listening to something I never thought I would have to hear, something I never wanted to hear, and something I never wanted to walk in on again.”

Jerica nearly choked. “Wait? What do you mean again?”

Scrunching her nose, Bridget debated how much she should share. In hindsight, it was a rather amusing story now that years had passed. Had it happened weeks ago, she probably wouldn’t have thought it was as funny. “It was right when they first got together.”

“You can’t stop there. You have to give the details.”

“It’s not that funny of a story.”

“Tell me!” Jerica pleaded.

Chuckling lightly, Bridget closed her eyes as she remembered the day. “I was mad at Eli, nothing new there. We’d just had another fight, I was jealous of Sarah, whatever. This was years ago, all right?”

“Okay. I’ll take your word that you are no longer jealous of Sarah.”

Bridget pursed her lips. Except she *was* still jealous of Sarah. Perhaps not in the same way she had been two years prior, but she was jealous of what Sarah and Eli had, of how open they were with their relationship, of the fact that Sarah managed to be famous and still be out and not have any consequences because of it.

“Bridget?”

Groaning, Bridget took Eli’s advice and followed the rabbit. “I am a little jealous still.”

Silence reverberated.

“Not because I still want Eli, to make that clear. I consider her a very good friend at this point, and that is all. But...I’ve never been out.”

“Oh.” Jerica seemed genuinely surprised by that. “I thought—”

“No. I’m not out. My parents don’t know, no one knows really, except Eli. I suppose her parents know, and probably her brother and sister, but no one else.”

“Do you want to come out?” Jerica asked, hesitation in each syllable.

“I do, I think.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. I think. I’m not so sure. It could be a lot of things I’m not sure I’m ready for.”

“It’s scary, isn’t it?”

“So scary.” Just that one confession put so much ease back into Bridget. She wasn’t expecting it, but she had to realize she wasn’t the first person to come out. She wasn’t the first person to break that news to family whom she knew wouldn’t be supportive. She wasn’t the first elected official who would come out and potentially ruin their career in the process. So many had gone before her, and she had to remember that. Including Eli. Including Sarah. Including Jerica.

“I’m here for you whenever you want to do that. And I strongly suspect Eli will be as well.”

“I know she will.” Bridget smiled, cringing when Eli clearly reached her climax. If only there was a way to truly have selective hearing so she didn’t have to witness this. “Anyway, I’m jealous that they’ve already done it. That they can be together right now without having that block them.”

“It’s a big step.”

“It is. But when I was jealous of Sarah because I wanted to be with Eli, I was also an idiot.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was out patrolling on the highway, and I saw Eli’s truck pulled off to the side, so I stopped. Well...she and Sarah...they were...Sarah was on top of Eli, fully laid out on the bench. And I was the asshole that pounded on the window to break it up.”

“Oh my God, you didn’t.”

“I did.” Shame filled Bridget. “I did, and then Eli got out, and we yelled at each other, and then she said something that made a whole lot of sense, and that was it. From then on I tried to be supportive of her and Sarah, but I still can’t get that image out of my head sometimes. If I hadn’t stopped them, I’m absolutely sure that’s what they would have done.”

Jerica was laughing, full out laughing. The sound muted for a second, but when she came in stronger on the phone, she was still laughing. “You’re adorable.”

“What?” Bridget’s cheeks heated. “What about *that* is adorable?”

“Are you a bit of a prude, Bridge?”

The nickname hit her harder than she thought it would. That was Eli’s name for her, and Eli was the only one Bridget had ever allowed to call her that. But it actually felt good, so she just shook her head. “I am not a prude.”

“Have you ever had sex in a car?”

“Yes.”

“Have you really?”

“Don’t sound so shocked. There’s not a whole lot of places to have sex when you’re a teenage lesbian in a town of fifteen hundred people. Neither of us were out. Where were we supposed to have sex?”

“In a car,” Jerica agreed. “I just didn’t peg you for being that wild.”

“I’m not wild,” Bridget countered. “Far from it. I’m too closeted to dare to have sex anywhere else.”

“And are you going to do something about that?”

Bridget pondered it for a moment. It was time. Jerica was wherever she needed to be, and she really wanted to talk about the upsetting conversation with her parents rather than the sex going on in the other room. “I tried today.”

“Did you? That surprises me.”

Bridget hummed. “My parents came up to check on me—without warning, mind you. Because God forbid they actually call ahead of time.”

“They sound like people who expect to get their way.”

“That’s an understatement. They were worried I was still ruining my career by not being back at work.”

“You’re not cleared.” Jerica reiterated Bridget’s argument from earlier.

Bridget nodded. “They don’t understand the process at all. KBI is finishing their investigation, and I should be able to take the psychological exam soon enough to at least go back to light office duty.”

“I bet that’ll be nice.”

“It will be. Something to do. Eli will have to drive me to town though, since my right side is severely handicapped.”

“I’m willing to bet she’ll be up for that.”

“Probably. I can always have whoever is on duty come get me too.”

“When do you think you’ll be able to stay on your own?”

Bridget sucked in a breath. As much as she wanted to be on her own again, she really was enjoying having people around her. Perhaps she had been isolated far too long. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe you could come stay here for a weekend. Give the lovers some time to themselves.”

“They’d probably like that, especially once they figure out I can hear everything.” Laughing at herself, Bridget shook her head. “But I did try to come out to my parents today. I couldn’t even get the words out.”

“It’s not easy,” Jerica re-confirmed.

“It’s not. I just wish...I didn’t have to try again.”

“Next time, why don’t you have someone with you who can help steer the conversation.”

“That’s a good idea.” Bridget fiddled with the edge of the blanket. “I did tell them about you. Though they think you’re a man.”

Jerica snorted. “Do they really?”

“Their assumption that I didn’t get around to correcting. Sorry for that.”

“It’s fine, Bridge. I don’t mind, really. So long as you know I’m a woman.”

“Oh yes. I know that.” The feel of Jerica pressed against her on the couch the other night came back full force. She wanted that again. She wanted Jerica naked on top of her doing the same thing so she could finger her, watch her come apart as Jerica writhed on top of her. Heat pooled between her legs, and she knew she was going to have to stop thinking about that if she was going to get any sleep that night.

“Good.” Jerica paused. “Hey, I’ve got to get some food and eat something before I crash. I have an early shift tomorrow.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.”

Bridget rubbed her lips together, listening next door and hearing only talking. She hoped they were done for the night, but from what she remembered with Eli, that likely wasn’t

going to be the case. “When do you think I can see you again?”

“I’m off the day after tomorrow if you want.”

“I hate that you have to do all the driving.”

“I won’t soon enough. Trust me.”

Bridget took a gamble. “Will you spend all day here?”

“If you want me to, I can manage that.”

“I would love it if you could.”

“Then I’ll see you then.”

They hung up, and Bridget couldn’t wipe the smile off her lips. She was managing to do what Eli had told her. Open up, be honest, be proactive. She really liked Jerica, perhaps even more since she couldn’t get her out of her head. Something about Jerica always seemed to come up any time Bridget had a stray thought or time to sit and think, which was a lot lately. Falling asleep with a smile on her lips was the best thing that had happened to her that day.

CHAPTER 12



BRIDGET'S STOMACH was a bundle of nerves. Crutches leaned against the wall as she waited for Jerica to arrive later that morning. There were no guests in the house, and the quiet, oddly enough, wasn't soothing. She missed the hustle and bustle of people moving around in the morning, of Eli making breakfast for the guests.

Eli had blocked out weeks of the bed-and-breakfast, leaving for the moment only three of them, though more people were incoming. Family. People Bridget had never met and ones she'd known for most of her life, and yet, the last impression she had left on them wasn't the greatest. She had no idea how they would react to seeing her, if she was going to be facing problems again or if they would calmly accept her presence.

More than once over the last week, Bridget had tried to convince Eli that she could go home and live on her own, especially now that she had crutches. Eli had promptly laughed and told her when she could go up and down stairs comfortably without falling or scooting then she could go home. Bridget pursed her lips at the thought. Perhaps Jerica could help her figure that one out.

It had been nearly six weeks since the accident, and she was getting closer to ending her leave of absence and heading straight into light desk duty. At least her deputies seemed far more likely to include her in what was going on in town now than they had in the beginning. That was a blessing in and of itself. The distraction had been most welcome, and Bridget

had to help them navigate some of the regulars down to the jail.

Still a lot of the days, Bridget couldn't help but think of Sonny, still in jail as they awaited a trial. He didn't have money enough to bail himself out, and he didn't have family enough to do it. Bridget hadn't taken a stand on what had happened, though. She wanted to go down to the jail and talk to him. It wouldn't be a good idea.

Sighing, she stared out the window, half-expecting Jerica's little car to be bumbling along the dirt road as she arrived, but there was nothing. Bridget checked her phone, knowing when Jerica had left and that she should be there any time.

"Would you stop it?" Eli whined.

"What?" Bridget twisted around in the chair with wide eyes and a hard look.

"Pining."

"I'm not pining," Bridget mumbled. "I'm waiting."

"Good Lord, because there's a whole lot of difference in that." Eli laughed as she started a new pot of coffee.

Sarah came up from the basement, went to the fridge, and grabbed an energy drink. She leaned against the counter as she drank, eyeing Bridget—but not with a suspicious look. Rather an amused one. Bridget would have prodded her for a response as well but figured that probably wasn't a good idea. The two of them were only just now finding a delicate balance.

"I haven't met Jerica yet, but from what Eli tells me, I think I'll like her."

Bridget narrowed her gaze and muttered, "Probably."

She still hadn't told Eli about how thin the walls were, and she definitely wasn't going to bring that up in front of Sarah. Nope, that was a conversation that could wait for Eli and her to be alone, although that had been tough to find since Sarah arrived. They did everything together.

When she glanced out the window, Jerica's car moved up the road toward the house. She grinned. She couldn't stop it,

and when she and Sarah made eye contact again, she knew Sarah understood the feeling. Bridget stayed put, not quite sure she wanted to test her ability on the crutches just yet, considering she still struggled with her mostly healed arm. Her ankle was what was taking fucking forever to heal, although she'd known that was going to be the issue from the start.

Jerica came right into the house, not bothering to knock and wait. Bridget smiled as she came around the corner, their eyes connecting. "Hey."

"Hey," Jerica answered with a grin. "Didn't want to try the crutches?"

"Considering the last time I tried to do something new with you around I fell flat on my face, no. I opted to stay seated right here."

Jerica chuckled and came to stand next to Bridget, a hand on her shoulder as she looked up, finally, seeing Eli and Sarah in the kitchen eyeing the two of them. "You must be Sarah."

"I am." Sarah came forward, hand extended.

"It's good to meet you. I've heard some about you, though I think Bridget failed to mention you were also Sadie Bade."

Bridget snorted. She had mentioned it once, but she couldn't tell if Jerica was being polite or if she had forgotten. "Oh, right, she's also Sadie Bade."

Jerica rolled her eyes, moving to stand against Bridget's side again. "Well, it is good to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Aren't they cute together?" Eli added in her two cents, making Bridget flush horribly.

Sarah elbowed her in the ribs, shutting Eli up really quick. Bridget was thankful for the semi-subtle move, but mostly the admonition of Eli's outburst. "We're going to be stripping the rooms upstairs to get them ready, so don't mind us."

Bridget narrowed her gaze. "If you need the room downstairs—"

“Leave it, Bridge,” Eli interjected. “You’re stuck here for a while longer, and it’s not like we don’t have space enough for everyone.”

“Right.”

Jerica looked slightly confused, and Bridget knew she was going to have to explain that. Eli and Sarah took their caffeine and headed up the stairs, leaving Jerica and Bridget by themselves. Jerica sat in the chair next to Bridget, smiling at her. “So what’s going on?”

“A wedding. But I didn’t realize everyone was staying here, so I’m taking up an extra room they could be using.”

“And you want to go home?”

“Well...yeah. Who wouldn’t? I miss my house.”

Jerica gave her a pitying look. “Why won’t Eli let you?”

Bridget grimaced. “I need to—according to Eli—be proficient with the crutches in going up and down stairs before I can sufficiently stay on my own.”

“Makes sense.”

“It does, but I still don’t want to be around when everyone gets here.”

“When are they coming?”

“They’re trickling in.”

Jerica pursed her lips. “I can help you with the crutches, but don’t you still have to avoid using them a whole lot because of your arm.”

Bridget nodded. “It gets sore after just going from the basement to the truck.”

“I’m not surprised.” Jerica reached over, her fingers covering Bridget’s injured arm, the one finally out of a cast and sling but still sore. “You’ll build your strength back up.”

“I know. I’m just...I’m tired of being patient about it.”

“I get it.” Jerica gave her a soft smile. “So start now. You can do some things now you couldn’t before.”

“True.” Bridget’s lips turned up. She loved how positive Jerica always seemed to be, always looking on the bright side of life. It was something Bridget had never been able to do.

“So while they’re cleaning, what are we going to do?”

Bridget shook her head, the thoughts coming to her mind not something they could do at the dining room table. Flushed with heat again, Bridget gave a sheepish smile. Now that she had full use of her arm again, she wanted Jerica on top of her.

“Oh,” Jerica breathed out the word, a smile blooming on her lips too. “I mean, if you want—”

“I would love to, Jerica, but I don’t think today is probably the best day. I want to be able to do this right, not shit out halfway through because my arm gets sore.”

Laughing lightly, Jerica leaned in and pressed their mouths together in a tender kiss. “I think, even if that did happen, we would figure it out.”

Bridget hummed, reaching up with her formerly broken hand, her dominant hand, finally, and pulled Jerica back in for a kiss. Turning the kiss heated, Bridget swiped her tongue along Jerica’s lips and waited for her to part them, for her to have full access to the moment with Jerica as much as she could manage. She wanted it to be perfect when they were together the first time, something special and not just heated passion that fizzled out. She wanted to make it like nothing Jerica had experienced before.

Jerica leaned in, sliding a hand along Bridget’s thigh to her hip. She pulled away, a smile on her lips. “I will gladly have sex with you whenever you feel you’re ready. Okay?”

“Okay,” Bridget answered, not quite sure how to take that. No one had ever told her something like that before, but considering the healing from her injuries, living with Eli, her nightmares that seemed to be getting worse, not better—though she’d never tell anyone that—and trying to get back to work, her life was more than full of things. She really didn’t need one more to think about, although she had particularly loved thinking about this one.

“Good.” Jerica leaned in again, their mouths touching softly. “Until then, I’m going to enjoy kissing you senseless.”

“Not hard to do,” Bridget mumbled, nipping at Jerica’s plump lower lip. “I quite enjoy kissing you.”

Giggling, Jerica squeezed Bridget’s thigh and kissed her again. They were still lip-locked when Eli came back down the stairs, her hands full of sheets and towels. She scoffed, catching their full attention, and Bridget shook her head.

“You two are like teenagers.”

“Because you and Sarah aren’t?” Bridget raised an eyebrow, deciding now was the time for a small jibe at Eli. “It’s not like the walls are that thick, Eli.”

Eli blushed, furiously. Her entire face and neck turned red as her eyes widened. “I didn’t...I didn’t even think...”

“Yup.” Bridget wrinkled her nose. “So don’t go calling me out on things that you yourself can’t handle either.”

“Right. Sorry.” Eli was still bright red as she turned on her heel and headed to the basement.

Bridget laughed loudly as she sat back in her chair, just waiting for Eli to come up again and not be able to look her in the eye. Jerica shook her head. “You’re awful.”

“That was funny. I’ve been waiting to catch her alone to tell her about it.”

Jerica patted Bridget’s thigh again. “And what will you do when she says the same about us?”

Bridget’s jaw dropped.

“I’m not exactly quiet.”

“Oh fuck,” Bridget mumbled, all the hormones in her body raging, first from the talk, then the kissing, and now this.

“Yes, oh fuck, indeed.” Jerica gave her a pointed look. “Whenever you want.”

Bridget groaned. How the hell was she supposed to respond to that?



By the time morning came, Bridget had barely been able to sleep. Aside from listening to Sarah and Eli attempt to be quiet, she was incredibly nervous. She hadn't touched on it with anyone, but being in a house with Sarah's family, with Eli's family, with everyone busy and happy and looking forward to something she had almost ruined—she was not looking forward to it.

Bridget would be the odd woman out. She wouldn't be accepted. She was the ex, and not only the ex, but she was the one who had tried to break them up in the beginning, who had caused so many issues for Eli in the long run. The tension between the two of them had been high for years. It was only in the last couple that it had calmed down and only in the last few weeks since the accident that they had found a balance.

But adding in the family? That could very easily upset the even keel they'd found. Not to mention Bridget didn't want to be in the way. She already felt like a burden, but being there while they did the final touches on all the wedding planning? Bridget gulped. She was going to be there for the wedding if she didn't get home quick. Cursing under her breath, she pushed herself up and tried to figure out how she could get better quicker. She did *not* want to be there for the wedding.

Anything but that.

Heading into the bathroom, Bridget covered her leg with a plastic bag and hobbled into the shower. At least she was far more mobile now than she had been. It would help her case that she should just go home.

When she got out, she wrapped herself in a towel and dried off. It felt good to have a shower instead of a bath. Nothing like the simple things in life she'd missed over the past six weeks. Footsteps upstairs told her they were no longer alone at the house. Bridget pressed her lips tightly together and stared at the door.

She might as well face the music. Nothing was going to change how they treated her—it was going to be a disaster, and she'd beg for someone to drive her home in an instant. She'd much rather be there anyway.

Bridget took her time getting dressed. Grabbing her crutches, she maneuvered to the stairs, used the railing, and took them one at a time to get to the top. She was getting much better at that, although she still felt like she was going to fall down half the time. She'd never admit that to anyone unless she had to, but Eli often wrangled it out of her.

As she entered the kitchen, she was hit with a memory. Karen at the stove, cooking the two of them breakfast after a sleepover when they'd stayed up all night. Bob already out in the fields working or out on some emergency veterinarian call that had come in. Stacy trying to get their attention as if she was their third best friend when she was really a third wheel. Bryant ignoring them.

They all stared at her. She awkwardly shuffled to get the crutches under her arms and stared back, no idea what to say or even how to begin the conversation. She drew in a shuddering breath, searching for Eli, the only person she trusted in the room not to make her feel ostracized, shamed, or the guilty party in every crime.

“You look like you're healing well,” Karen said, her voice soft and soothing. There was no touch of anger to it, hardly any pity either, which Bridget was thankful for.

Bridget nodded. “I'm on crutches now.”

Karen gave a small smile. “Happier to move around.”

“God yes.” Bridget had almost cursed but caught herself at the last minute. It would not do her well to curse in front of Karen. Bridget always suspected she had it in her to whip her with a wooden spoon.

“I'm glad. Eli said you looked pretty rough when she got to you in the hospital.”

Bridget looked around again for Eli but didn't find her. Instead, all of the Wilsons, minus Bryant and Stacy's husband

—whatever his name was—stared at her. Bridget shrugged.

Karen stepped in close and put a hand on Bridget's shoulder. She leaned in, sliding her other arm around to encapsulate her in a hug. Bridget stiffened. Karen held on tight, pressing her nose into Bridget's hair. "I'm so glad you're okay. I was so worried."

Tears stung Bridget's eyes.

"Are you really all right?" Karen whispered.

Bridget sniffled. She nodded, then she shook her head. Reaching around as best as she could, she gripped Karen in a hug, not wanting to let go. She'd never expected this. Never thought she'd be welcome back into this family. It had been her family growing up. She'd felt more herself, more free, and more able to have fun and be a kid here than anywhere else. She'd never wanted to leave.

Karen lifted her chin and said firmly, "Why don't y'all go hang out in the den for a bit. We can eat in there."

The shuffling movement from the room gave Bridget what she needed to gather herself again. When she pulled away from Karen, she brushed her fingers under her eyes, capturing the tears that had already fallen.

"It's okay to cry, baby." Karen wiped thumbs over her cheeks. "You nearly died."

Bridget nodded, but she barely registered what Karen had said. Then she shook her head. "It's not that."

"What is it then?"

"I just...I never thought I'd be welcome here after what happened."

Karen sighed and lifted Bridget's chin so Bridget had to look her in the eye—eyes that matched Eli's, a soft brown that held so much depth in them. "You are always welcome in my family. Don't you let anyone tell you otherwise."

"Okay. Thanks, Karen."

Karen chuckled lightly. “Now I suppose you want to make it look like you weren’t crying, so go splash some cold water on your face and you can help me finish breakfast.”

“Yeah.” Bridget shuffled over to the kitchen sink and did as she was told. When she dried her face on the towel, she saw Eli and Sarah out the window, holding hands as they walked toward the house. Of course Eli would be out with Bob doing chores in the morning.

Karen sat her at the counter with all the mixings for pancakes. It had been their go-to when they were kids sleeping over. Bridget remembered it almost like it was yesterday.

“When did you all get in?” Bridget asked.

“Late last night. Bob insisted on driving from Arizona in one day.”

Bridget whistled. “Tough drive.”

Karen hummed her agreement. “I think he’s excited for the wedding.”

Bridget had expected to stiffen at the thought, but instead, she found it felt rather normal and good. “Eli said you’re cooking for it.”

“I am. In this dream kitchen she remodeled.”

Bridget had to agree. Eli and Sarah came in, Bob shortly following them. Soon the kitchen was buzzing with voices again. Eli glanced over, checking on Bridget like she always seemed to do. Bridget nodded, a silent exchange between them. She was comfortable. For the first time in ages, she was comfortable sitting with a bunch of people who knew she was a lesbian and didn’t care. They loved her just the same. It was the first and only place she had ever felt that way.

“What’s for breakfast?” Sarah asked.

“Pancakes,” Bridget replied, eyeing Eli as she said it. “I’ll make sure to put banana slices on yours.”

“What?” Sarah wrinkled her nose. “That sounds disgusting.”

“It’s amazing.” Eli poked Sarah in the ribs. “You’ll have to try it.”

“I think I’ll pass. No offense, Karen.”

“None taken. I think it’s disgusting, too. Even worse is when she spreads peanut butter all over it.”

“Oh my God!” Sarah’s eyes widened. “I think I’ll puke just thinking about that.”

Bridget snickered behind her wrist as she added in the milk and egg to the batter.

“It’s so good,” Eli defended.

Bridget wisely kept her mouth shut, listening to the banter. She had missed this. This was family, far more than her own family was. They rarely had moments like this in her house. They were never jovial, never teased each other. It simply hadn’t been allowed.

After they all sat down at the table to eat, Bridget rolled her shoulders while everyone helped to clean up. She gladly avoided that chore for as long as she could, claiming she was still too injured. She wished she had grown up like Eli had. Her life would have been so different. She wouldn’t be in her early thirties and still not out, most likely. She’d be happy.

Fuck, what would she look like if she were happy?

Jerica sprung to her mind, and she couldn’t stop the smile that flashed across her lips. Turning her chin up, she caught Karen’s eye, who gave her a questioning look. “What can I do to help today? Just lay it on me. Preferably anything sitting.”

Karen patted her hand lightly. “You don’t have to work for your stay.”

“I want to help. Eli’s been an excellent friend to me, and I want to repay her.”

With a soft smile, Karen nodded. “I understand. I’ll find something for you to do.”

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER 13



TWO DAYS with the Wilsons was enough. Bridget needed a break and a distraction. While she'd enjoyed the time, she was missing Jerica. They'd texted, but she hadn't had much time to call and talk to her, even though she wanted to. Sitting on the couch in the basement where it was relatively quiet for once, she snagged her phone and called Jerica.

She answered on the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey." Bridget smiled, heat rushing to her cheeks.

"I just got off work. You have good timing."

Bridget wasn't going to admit that she'd been waiting for the clock to tell her it was time, but that was exactly what she had done. She had waited until she knew Jerica's shift was over, and she had waited another five minutes just to be sure Jerica was leaving the hospital. Smiling, Bridget played with her sweats. "I suppose I do."

"You were waiting until it was time, weren't you?"

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "How did you know?"

"Because I know you, at least better than I used to, and I like you. How's everything going with the full house?"

"Not as bad as I thought it would." Bridget risked a glance to the stairs, knowing she was the only one in the basement at least. No one seemed to be coming down, so she decided to open up a bit more. "I wasn't sure how Eli's family would respond to me being here."

“Really?”

“Yeah, because we used to date, and because I was a bit of an asshole there for a while.”

Jerica laughed lightly. “You an asshole? I can hardly imagine.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“It is.” Jerica laughed again as her phone connected to the car.

Bridget shifted position to get more comfortable. She longed for the day when she would be completely carefree and truly able to relax. She needed it. It had felt like a decade since she’d sprawled out on a couch, completely comfortable. “What are you doing tonight?”

“I’m going over to my sister’s.”

“I can’t entice you to come up here, can I? I’ve been... working out my fingers and wrist.”

Jerica paused, the silence going on far too long. She wasn’t sure what Jerica was thinking, but it didn’t feel like it was going to end well for either of them. Bridget stared at the television on mute as she waited for an answer, not sure how to probe for that one. If Jerica had been a suspect, she might know how best to get a response, but this time, she didn’t want to push too hard or too far in the wrong direction and risk everything they had built up.

“I can’t tonight, Bridge. I’d love to, but I can’t.”

“Oh.” Cold washed through her. Bridget had no idea where to go with that, but at least Jerica had called her that gentle nickname.

“It’s the anniversary of her fiancé’s death.”

Bridget pressed her lips together, hearing what Jerica didn’t say. It might have been the anniversary of her fiancé dying, but it was also the anniversary of him trying to kill her.

“We’re all getting together at her house just to have dinner and hang out. I’ll probably end up staying the night.” Jerica

sounded disappointed. “I might need to do the same tomorrow, too, but Mom should be able to take a few nights this week, luckily.”

“Makes sense,” Bridget answered, her tone dropping. “I’ve worked quite a few situations similar to that. They’re tragic no matter what, so I’m glad you’re all going to be there for her. I’m sure she needs it.”

“She does.” Jerica sighed.

Bridget ran her fingers through her hair, pulling out the tangles. She wasn’t sure how to steer the conversation back to flirting. It had taken such a dark tone. Plus she wasn’t sure she wanted to bring it back around to the lightheartedness they had started with. “She’s seeing a professional, right?”

“She’s not.” Jerica groaned. “We’ve tried to convince her it’ll be good, but before everything, her fiancé took her to a quack and she’s sworn off therapists ever since. I don’t blame her in some ways. In others, I wish she would try just once more.”

“It’s so hard. I’ve been to some shrinks—good and bad, but mostly bad. The ones out here, in western Kansas? They mostly suck.” Bridget fiddled with her pants again, trying not to dive deep down the rabbit hole that had just showed up.

“You’ve been?”

“A few times. Never lasted long.” Bridget pursed her lips, still staring at nothing in particular. She wanted to talk longer, but she wasn’t sure that Jerica had the time or the energy, especially with what she was going into. “Keep trying to convince her, but it’s okay if she doesn’t go, too. Especially with the shrinks we have around here.”

“There are a few good ones,” Jerica murmured.

“I suppose, but I haven’t found them.”

“I hope she does. He did a doozy on her. Hey, sorry to cut this short, but I just got to her house. I’ll try and find a day I can come up next.”

Bridget gave a wan smile. “I can’t wait until I can drive. Then I can come see you instead.”

“That’d be nice.” Bridget could hear the smile in Jerica’s voice.

“Good. First thing as soon as I’m cleared to drive again, I’ll come down and see you.” It felt good to say that, to want it. She wanted to see Jerica in a place where no one else could interrupt them, wanted to be with her for hours and never stop making love to her during that time.

Bridget parted her lips in surprise at that image.

“I’ve got to go, Bridge. I’ll text and see you soon. Promises.”

“All right,” Bridget answered, her voice distanced. “See you soon.”

Hanging up, Bridget dropped her phone in her lap. *Fuck*. She was in love. There was no denying it. She’d thought it before, when she’d talked to Jerica for hours on the phone when she had a nightmare and didn’t want to listen to Sarah and Eli, but this...there was no denying this. Bridget was absolutely in love.

Jerica probably didn’t feel the same way about her. Bridget was pretty sure they didn’t stand a chance together, either. Not with the baggage she came with. Though it would fully explain why she wanted to attempt to come out to her parents. Jerica had pushed her to think about it just by her very presence.

Tossing her head back onto the couch, Bridget closed her eyes. First she thought of Jerica, sweet Jerica, with her full lips and soft cheeks with freckles. But her mind immediately turned to their conversation. Jerica’s sister. Domestic violence. She shuddered at the thought. Bridget opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling, but it was too late.

Images of the fights she had broken up between spouses, the beatings she’d seen someone take, knife wounds, gunshot wounds. Shuddering, she kept her eyes open, not wanting to close them and encourage the flashbacks from fully returning.

She was going to have a rough night of sleeping, if she got any sleep at all. Her bet was that she wouldn't. She'd listen to Eli and Sarah pretend to be quiet, and then she'd lie awake the rest of the night, wishing she could call Jerica and talk to her.

Instead, she was on her own for the entire night, and maybe could catch Jerica before she went to work in the morning. Sighing, she debated whether or not to drag her sorry ass upstairs and hang out with the rest of the crowd. Being with people could be a good thing or a bad thing, she couldn't decide. They'd be a good distraction, but she equally wouldn't be very good company—which would be a problem.

Both Eli and Karen would no doubt catch on to the fact that Bridget was being cagey and avoiding, and then there would be an inquisition. No, it was better if she just stayed where she was and wallowed by herself. Then no one else would be turned off by her bad mood. Rolling her neck, she tested her muscles. She was back to semi-working out at least, though her wrist would get sore easily.

She grabbed the bottle of water and held it sideways in her fingers, raising her arm up and lowering it in a curl with low weight. She needed the focus. She wasn't like Eli who could go out into the fields and hang out with the cows. She snorted at the thought of Buddy, one bull she wasn't sure she ever wanted to hang out with. He scared her, and with good reason.

Bridget continued her exercises, moving on to some of the ones the physical therapist told her to try out. They were going to start working her leg muscles soon, even though she wasn't completely cleared. She needed to get moving again. Sitting still like a bum was just not her, and it allowed her too much time to think about things she never wanted to think about again.

Shuddering, she turned the water and twisted the lid, downing half the bottle. It was cool against her heated throat, which was exactly what she needed. She finished the bottle in silence. Bridget stayed in the basement alone for hours before she dragged herself to bed and attempted to fall asleep. If the house hadn't been so full of people, she would have gladly

stayed on the couch all night, watching television. Instead, she was back to staring at her ceiling.



Bridget sat at the dining room table with plates of shit in front of her. Karen leaned over and showed her what to do and then abandoned ship. Bridget stared at all the things and tried to remember what Karen had told her to do, but this was not her strong suit. She didn't know what she was doing even though Karen had given her step-by-step instructions.

Sarah laughed as she came in from the front of the house, her melodic voice trilling through the living area and dining area. Bridget jerked her head up to see what the cause was, finding Sarah standing with another woman. She knew more people would be arriving, so this must be Sarah's twin sister.

Grinning, Sarah led her toward the kitchen. "Kara, this is Bridget, one of Eli's good friends."

Bridget tried to remember if this was her sister or not, but she couldn't. Extending her hand, Bridget held it out for Kara to take. "Nice to meet you. I'd stand up and shake your hand, but I'm not as quick on my feet as I used to be."

Kara's gaze dropped to Bridget's leg and then back up. "I can tell. Sarah told me about it."

"Ah." Bridget shifted uncomfortably. She wasn't used to people talking about her, not that it was necessarily behind her back, but she wasn't used to being the center of a conversation. "So you're Sarah's sister?"

Kara laughed lightly and shook her head. "No. I'm her best friend. I moved to Garden a few years ago with my daughter."

"Oh." Bridget was surprised. "I didn't realize you were so close."

"Yeah, I don't get up here as often as I'd like, but then again, neither does Sarah." Jabbing Sarah in the ribs, Kara pulled out the chair next to Bridget and sat down. "So tell me what the hell I'm doing."

Bridget grimaced. “I’m not exactly sure. Karen just kind of left after a really quick explanation.”

“Well, I think we can figure it out. What do you say, Sarah?”

“I guess.” Sarah pulled up her own chair and grabbed one of the small mesh bags. “I just want to point out these were not my idea, but we decided not to fight it.”

“I think it’ll look perfect for the photos.”

“You would know,” Sarah muttered.

Bridget perked up at that. “What do you mean?”

“Kara is a photographer,” Sarah answered. “She’ll be doing the photos the day of.”

“Ah.” Bridget grabbed her own mesh bag. Taking the tablespoon, she grabbed the birdseed and dumped two scoops into the bag. “How many of these do we have to do?”

“Hundreds,” Sarah said, groaning at just the prospect.

Bridget felt the same way. It was going to be a long day of birdseed. She was on her fifth bag before Kara piped up. “I think it’ll be perfect, the wedding day. Remember, the most important thing is that you end up married.”

Sarah snorted lightly. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. It’s taken us two and a half years to get here, and I suspect Eli will kill me if we don’t sign the damn piece of paper by the time it’s over.”

Bridget scrunched her nose up and filled another bag. She wasn’t sure where to interject or what to even say. She let the two of them talk for a while, but when Kara stopped and reached over to still Sarah’s hand, Bridget realized Sarah was shaking.

“What’s wrong?” Bridget asked, her eyes wide as she waited for the bomb to drop.

Sarah shook her head, took in a slow breath and let it out equally as slow. When she looked up and made eye contact with Kara, she seemed to have herself under control again.

“What was that?” Bridget questioned, bringing the attention in the room back to her.

Sarah shrugged. “I have anxiety, and with all these people coming and so much going on, it’s been getting the best of me lately. Eli and I have made it work two and a half years with the long distance and lots of time apart, but I do wonder sometimes just how long we can make it.”

“As long as you both want,” Kara interjected.

Bridget pursed her lips. Anxiety. She’d heard the term before, so it wasn’t anything new, but seeing someone work through a moment like that so quickly was. Cocking her head to the side, Bridget busied her hands with another bag, mulling through the thought. Conversation got away from them again, but she couldn’t let it go.

“What does anxiety look like? For you, I mean.”

“Oh. Well.” Sarah set down the bag she’d been working on. “Mostly I think of the worst-case scenario all the time. Doesn’t matter if something good is happening or not. It’s really hard to stay focused on the good and not let the negative in. In fact, sometimes it gets so bad that it affects me physically.”

“What do you mean?” Bridget settled and looked Sarah straight in the eye, absorbing as much of the information as possible.

Sarah glanced at Kara. “I get really bad stomach pains, and sometimes I’m so tense that Eli swears my shoulders are rock hard.”

Bridget smiled lightly in response to Sarah’s smile, but at the same time, she remembered Eli telling her the same thing. Every word Sarah said twisted something inside her, calling her, as if this was what she had been struggling with for so long. “How do you deal with it?”

“Different ways. Deep breathing exercises, distraction, obsession.” She laughed at the last one. “Music for instance.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“Some days. Every day is different but the same. Sometimes I just have to focus on the good. Eli is really amazing at bringing that out for me.”

“Yeah, she is,” Kara chimed in. “I’ve seen Sarah’s anxiety lessen in the few years she’s known Eli. It’s been amazing.”

Sarah’s look softened. Kara raised an eyebrow at her in response, and Bridget felt as though she was missing some silent communication.

“My girlfriend, Alicia, had some issues with anxiety. She’d actually be pretty pissed if she knew I moved back here, but she’d have to get over it.” Kara frowned as she tied the next bag up.

“Why doesn’t she know you moved?” Bridget started a new bag.

Kara sighed. “Alicia died in a motorcycle accident, shortly after I found out I was pregnant. I moved here because this is where she was from, and since we weren’t married, I had zero say in what happened after she died. Her parents dragged her back here and buried her here and pretended I didn’t exist.”

“Oh my God, that’s awful.”

Nodding, Kara tied the next bag a bit harder. “They have since acknowledged our daughter, although they don’t really want much to do with her.”

“Why? She’s the last legacy of their daughter.”

“She is, except they didn’t have a daughter. They had a son. So to them I am a memory of the child they lost, the reason they lost her, and my daughter is the product of something they could never approve of.”

“I’m so sorry, Kara.” Bridget’s heart broke at the thought.

Then she remembered her own parents, thinking they would react in much the same way when she came out. They wouldn’t accept her. She knew that as a fact. She had very little hope of it every happening. Yet she still wanted to do it. It wasn’t to prove a point—it wasn’t to make them like her more or understand her. They would never be able to do that.

She wanted to come out to them for herself. She wanted them to know who the real Bridget was, the real woman they had raised. She didn't want to hide anymore. No matter if they didn't like her or care for who she was, she wanted to be herself. She wanted to be able to walk down the street with Jerica and hold her hand. She wanted to be able to get married, in public, and have her friends and whatever family would accept her come to the wedding to celebrate her and make their own damn party favors.

Raising her gaze, Bridget looked Kara right in the eye. "How did Alicia deal with her parents?"

"She didn't. She moved away and cut them out of her life. They came and collected her because they had to. They acknowledged our daughter because I'm not going to hide who she is, and I want her to know who her other mother is, the one who wanted her and loved her even though she'd only just found out about her."

"I envy your strength," Bridget whispered. "And Alicia's."

Kara's lips barely quirked up. "I'm not sure if it's strength or stubbornness. But it is what it is. It's how I've chosen to live, and I want our daughter to live the same way. That first year after Alicia died was the hardest year of my life. Truly it was. And I was stupid enough to think that moving to a place where I knew no one in a conservative town while pregnant was a brilliant decision."

"But you still live there, right?"

"I do." Kara smiled. "I met a wonderful woman, and she helped me figure out a lot of my shit. But more than that, I've made a home for my daughter, and I don't want to leave it."

"Sounds like you're on the right road."

"She is," Sarah chimed in finally. "Dealing with these tough situations isn't something for the faint of heart. You've both come through terrible times."

Kara glanced from Sarah to Bridget. But she didn't say anything as she grabbed another party favor bag and filled it up with bird seed. It took them two hours to fill all the bags,

and by the end of it, Bridget's back ached from being hunched over the table. Sarah took the full basket and put it someplace out of sight, Bridget wasn't entirely sure.

Eli came in from being out in the fields with her dad. The two of them had always been inseparable when they were growing up, and it seemed as though that hadn't changed since Eli had taken over the ranch. They washed their hands at the kitchen sink and then went to find Karen to see where they could help out. Bridget was stuck at the dining room table, at least mostly—it was going to be a while before she could move easily enough that she would readily take the challenge to move on her own without good reason.

As much as she wanted to be walking again, she knew she wasn't ready for it. She still needed crutches and to take her time. Eli came back in and slipped into the chair next to Bridget. "I see you met Kara."

"I did."

"She's a fun one, isn't she?"

"I liked her, actually."

"Did you?" Eli raised an eyebrow. "Good, because I think she's going to be around a lot more, and I hope you are, too."

"You sure about that? Because I've been stuck here for weeks and I'm sure you want to get rid of me."

Laughing, Eli shook her head. "Not a chance. I kind of like having you up here. It gets quiet with only guests for company. They don't know me like you do."

"Don't talk to Ava much?"

Eli frowned. "Not really. She's been busy, and she lives out in Hutch still."

"Yeah. She's teaching out there, right?"

"Yup. Enjoying it."

"Good for her."

"Seems we all found our calling." Bridget smiled and crossed her arms. "So, what are we doing next? I'm sure your

mother has a list a mile long.”

Eli burst out laughing. “Of course she does. It’s the event of the year. Didn’t you know that?”

“I did. The question is, Elijah Wilson, did you?”

CHAPTER 14



BRIDGET WAS STUCK at the house. She wasn't able to go out and help with anything else, though if she stood on the porch or watched from the windows she could see what everyone else was doing. It hurt not to be able to run out and give a helping hand, especially with moving some of the bigger things around.

Eli had built a brand new wedding arch for them, one that was more their style than the original one on the property. Bob used the tractor to pick it up and move it where Eli wanted. Sighing, Bridget plopped down onto the swing outside and stretched her legs out in front of her.

It was such a beautiful day for it being so early in the fall. The air was still filled with warmth that kissed her cheeks, and the breeze was gentle and not too strong. Bridget smiled to herself. She'd rather be enjoying the time with Jerica, like the many times they had spent on the bench in the past few weeks, but Jerica was at work and still not sure if she was going to be able to come up and visit or if she was going to be with her sister for longer. It seemed as though her sister was doing well, but the family was unsure.

Bridget could understand. Going through something like that was so traumatic. Though after her conversation with Sarah and Kara the other day, she'd been spending a lot of time thinking about how she had been raised. Anxiety was nothing new to her, but in the big picture of her life, perhaps it was partly what her problem was.

Anytime her parents were nearby, she was overwhelmed with anxiety and fear about what she or they would do or say. Nothing was ever right, and it was equally a struggle to get anything across to them. They never listened, no matter how many times Bridget explained something or took a deep dive down their line of thinking.

Life had gotten so much better when she'd gone away to college. It had been the best part of life for her and Eli—well, her at least. She'd been so free to be who she was out there, unlike here. Sighing, Bridget rubbed her temple and closed her eyes, listening to the noises going on around her. All she wanted, for that day at least, was not to feel useless.

“Mind if I join you?”

Bridget's eyes snapped open and she stared into the deep hazel of Jerica's gaze. “What are you doing here?”

“Didn't you hear me pull up?”

“No. There's so much going on right now.”

Jerica smiled. “Mind if I sit?”

“Sure!” Bridget scooted over so Jerica would have room, but Jerica insisted on sitting so their bodies touched. Reaching out, Bridget covered Jerica's knee with her hand. “What are you doing here?”

“I needed a day off, so I switched shifts.”

Bridget couldn't help but smile. “How's your sister?”

“Surviving. Day by day, I think. She'll work through it again until this time next year. It seems to be that way.”

Nodding, Bridget squeezed her hand. “That's usually how it goes with things like this.”

“Yeah.” Jerica stared down at the deck. “But I wanted to see you.”

“I'm glad you came.” Bridget reached forward and touched Jerica's chin to raise her gaze so their eyes met. “I've been thinking about you.”

“Have you?”

“Yeah.” Bridget smiled as she leaned in, their lips brushing tenderly. She pulled away, but at Jerica’s contented sigh, she moved right back in for another kiss. With their lips locked, everything going on around them disappeared and became about Jerica.

Bridget loved when it happened like this. She shuddered as she drew Jerica in for a deeper embrace, their tongues sweeping together as they drew in unsteady breaths. The throat clearing caught her attention, and she pulled away to look up and find none other than Karen eyeing the two of them.

“I see you’ve got a friend who has joined us.”

“Uh…” Bridget’s cheeks tinged with heat. “This is Jerica. Jerica, this is Eli’s mom, Karen.”

“Good to meet you.” Jerica held out her hand, and Karen took it.

“You too. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Bridget with someone. But if you’re free—” Karen gave Bridget a pointed look to mean she wanted her to have time “—I have another project you can do.”

“Of course.” Bridget would agree to anything. This family had been so hospitable to her and her needs, especially Karen and Eli. “What is it?”

“We need to do the wedding favors, the ones that are being sent with people.”

Furrowing her brow, Bridget stared at the floor before looking up into Karen’s eyes. “Isn’t that what Sarah, Kara, and I did the other day?”

“Hmm? No. That was for the couple as they’re done with the ceremony and walking back down the aisle.”

“Oh.” Bridget raised an eyebrow. “So what are we doing now?”

“The favors for the guests as they leave. I’ve set it all up at the dining room table for you, and Jerica can help if you want.”

“Sure.” Bridget grabbed her crutches and moved to stand. They all waited for her until they shuffled into the house, Karen the last one through the door.

Bridget went to the table. If she thought there were bowls aplenty for the last project, this one was massive. “You’re going to have to give some pretty specific instructions.”

“I will.” Karen smiled and pulled out a chair for Bridget to sit in. Jerica moved in right next to her. The explanation lasted at least twenty minutes this time, but she felt slightly more confident in how to do this project compared to the last.

Karen sat down with them to show them, thankfully. Crafts were not in Bridget’s wheelhouse, and yet, that had been what she was stuck doing since she couldn’t be out helping to move the big heavy items. They still had a week and a half to the wedding, and she knew it was going to be packed with shit to do, if only because Karen had planned most of it.

As soon as Karen had put together two of the small sunflower globe things, she left Jerica and Bridget on their own. Sighing, Bridget grabbed a lid and a small sunflower that Karen—or someone—had gotten from the craft store. It wasn’t a real one, but they weren’t exactly in season and couldn’t last the next week and a half if they were real.

“Remind me,” Bridget started, “when I get married to keep it as simple as possible, and if Karen offers to plan anything, kindly reject it.”

“I heard that!” Karen called from the den.

Bridget cringed and yelled, “It’s beautiful! But so not me!”

Karen peeked her head around the corner of the living area into the dining room. “It’s not, but if I get to plan your wedding, which I sincerely hope you will let me, then I will make it perfect for you and what you want.”

“Eli really wanted all this crap?”

Karen shrugged slightly. “Not all of it. She’s not a detail person, you know that.”

“True. I think she’d rather just have a paper to sign and be done with it.”

“No, she wanted the whole wedding—ceremony, party, dancing.”

Bridget wrinkled her nose. She wouldn’t be dancing at weddings anytime soon, which sucked, but she did remember how much Eli loved the dances in town. It would make sense that she would want that for her wedding as well. “I suppose.”

“Now get to work, my little elves!”

Turning back to the project at hand, Bridget sighed. “There’s at least two hundred here.”

Jerica grabbed a sunflower and used the hot glue to put it on the lid. “Yup. Looks like we’re going to be here for a while.”

“We’re never going to finish this today.” Bridget just stared at the project, not sure she wanted to even start it. It was hopeless, and in her opinion, a little pointless.

Jerica nudged her with her shoulder. “Come on. We’ll get as much done as we can before I take you downstairs to make out with you.”

“Oh, I like that idea.”

Grinning, Bridget started on her first little sunflower. She had to concentrate fully in order to do it. Glue the sunflower to the lid, make sure it’s standing. She got that right. Then sprinkle the dirt to cover the base. Got that. Then screw the top dome lid, glass thing on. She stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she concentrated. Finally she moved on to tie the twine around the bottom with the tag that read “Sarah & Eli” along with the date of their wedding.

“Do people even keep these things?”

“Some do. Don’t you?”

“No.” Bridget wrinkled her nose as she set that one to the side where Jerica could move it to the kitchen counter and out of the way so it would dry. She started on the next one. “I really have never thought about getting married.”

“Why not?” Jerica was finishing her third or fourth one.

She was so damn good at this in a way Bridget was not. Not for the first time in the last few minutes was she reminded that crafts were not her specialty. Give her a gun to shoot and targets to aim for any day and she’d beat anyone, but this? This was something she always had seemed to fail at miserably.

“Bridge?”

“What?” Bridget jerked her chin up at Jerica’s tone.

“Why didn’t you think you’d get married?” Jerica looked so concerned.

Reaching out, Bridget brushed her fingers over Jerica’s cheek. “Because I never thought it was a possibility.”

“How so?”

“Because my parents are bigots, and because outside of Eli, I never really dated with that goal in mind.”

“And with me?”

Clenching her jaw, Bridget eyed Jerica. She knew what Jerica was fishing for, she wanted to know how deep Bridget’s commitment ran, how much she was willing to give up so the two of them stood a chance at surviving. Bridget didn’t have an answer for what she was willing to risk, but she did know that she was in love and she didn’t want this to end any time soon. If that was going to lead to marriage was anyone’s bet.

“With you I’m dating with a more long-term goal in mind.”

“I suppose I can take that.” Jerica’s mouth curled up on either side. “For now.”

“What do you mean for now!” Bridget teased. “What about tomorrow? Hell, what about at dinner time?”

Laughing, Jerica started in on her next project. “I still think you mean something else, but I’m not going to push you for it.”

Huffing, Bridget angrily stabbed the hot glue she'd put on the lid with the sunflower and waited for it to harden. "Well, what are your intentions, dearest Jerica?"

Jerica paused, then she leaned in so her lips brushed against Bridget's ear. "My intentions are to eventually get you in bed, under me, using your body like you will use mine. My intentions are to never have to find someone else again because I've already found you."

Bridget sucked in a breath, not quite sure where the hell to go with that. She eyed her, her mind spinning in so many different directions she wasn't sure which path she needed to follow to get anywhere. She knew which ones she wanted to follow, but holy fuck, Jerica had just tipped her upside down on her head.

Jerica grinned and leaned in more, taking Bridget's earlobe between her teeth and nibbling on it before swiping her tongue out to soothe the skin.

"Fuck, woman," Bridget breathed out.

Jerica's chuckle rolled around in Bridget's chest as she pulled away. Bridget's skin was on fire from where Jerica had touched. Clearly, she wasn't the only one struggling with the lack of sex in their relationship so far. She honestly couldn't wait for when they took that final step.

They went back to work, silence filtering between them, but it wasn't awkward. It was wrought with sexual tension. Bridget wanted to be done with the fucking project Karen had given them and take Jerica downstairs right then and there. Except, she was pretty sure Karen would come down and find them and they'd end up back here doing this fucking project.

"So what do you want for the future?" Jerica's voice was much lighter, much less seductive, thankfully. Bridget wasn't sure how much more that she could handle.

Bridget shrugged, however. She didn't really have an answer. Outside of her career, she didn't have any hard and fast plans for her future. "I wanted to be Sheriff, and I got

there well before I thought I would. Now I'd just like to keep the title and win reelections for years to come."

"Ah." Jerica rubbed her lips together, giving Bridget furtive glances. "But what about beyond a career?"

Sighing, Bridget stabbed another sunflower into glue. "I honestly haven't thought about it much."

"How could you not think about it? Didn't you ever want to be a parent, have kids, get married?"

Bridget remained quiet, though her body was tense. She wasn't quite sure how to explain to Jerica she hadn't been given those opportunities. It was expected of her, but she'd known from such an early age that she would never be able to fulfill them that she had given up on that dream. She'd given up on the possibility even.

"Bridge," Jerica's said, so softly that it caused Bridget to turn and look her in the eye. "What are you thinking?"

"No, I didn't think about kids or a wedding. Never have, really. I hated playing it when I was a kid and all the other kids wanted to play mommy and daddy. It just...wasn't my thing. I wouldn't play with them. Eli wouldn't either, but I'm pretty sure it had more to do with me not playing than with her not wanting to."

Jerica gave her a look of pity, which immediately got Bridget's back up.

"It's not a big deal, really."

"It is, but we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. What do you want now? Now that you're an adult and know yourself better?"

Bridget had to think about that. She still hadn't really spent a lot of time contemplating her future. She more went with the moment and wherever it took her, except in the last few weeks since being run over by a combine and a drunk farmer, she'd had a lot more time to think about shit she didn't want ruminate on.

Jerica let the silence fall, which Bridget was thankful for. She made her way through two of the awful looking sunflower things before she finally spoke. “Now, I want to come out to my parents, even though I know how that’s going to go, and I want to see what life will be like not being so hidden. I’m tired of hiding.”

“Really?” Jerica raised an eyebrow at her, pressing her fingers into Bridget’s wrist.

“Yeah. I think...I know that it’ll be better if I do it. I never really cared much for my parents anyway, so I guess it’ll just be the nail in the coffin they’ve already been building for me.”

“That’s such a fatalistic view.”

“Oh, but they’re worthy of it, trust me. If it hadn’t been for Karen and Bob growing up, I’m not sure how I would have survived. And having them here these past few days?” Tears stung Bridget’s eyes, and she cursed them as she attempted to hold them back. “They love me, Jerica. They love me in ways I don’t think my parents ever will, and I’m okay with that.”

Bridget jumped as arms wrapped around her from behind, folding her into a hug. Karen’s short hair tickled Bridget’s cheek as she squeezed tightly and then planted a kiss on Bridget’s cheek, wiping her own tears away. “We do love you, Bridget. We always have, even when you make stupid mistakes.”

“Like letting your daughter go?”

Karen shook her head. “No, I think that was a smart decision, actually.”

“Really?” Bridget stiffened and looked directly at Karen. “Everyone thought it was stupid.”

“No, I don’t. I think you two needed to break up. It was time. But that’s a conversation for another day. Promises, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but I came in to get something.” Karen stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Right, coffee.”

Bridget watched her carefully as she walked into the kitchen, though she strongly suspected that had not been what Karen had come in for to begin with. She likely was listening

in on the conversation to check Jerica out, like the overprotective parent she was. Karen brushed her fingers across Bridget's shoulders as she walked out of the room with a mug full of coffee.

Jerica shook her head. "You've got family, Bridge."

"I know. It's nice." She grinned. "But what about you? Since I'm answering all these questions, what about you?"

Jerica blew out a breath. "Well, I always wanted to get married, and always knew it wasn't to who people thought it would be. It took me a bit longer than you to realize I am gay. I figured it out in college, when my roommate freshman year was gorgeous! And straight as fuck."

Bridget laughed. "Straight crushes are the worst, aren't they?"

"So bad." Jerica grinned. "I almost didn't move back here, though. I have my family here, and I never really wanted to live anywhere else, but I struggle with the idea of being out here and raising a family in such a closed-minded space. I've worked hard in the last few years to find my people, so I think that's changed quite a bit, but I do still worry."

"Those people are going to be anywhere." Bridget finished another favor and set it to the side before grabbing what she needed for the next one. "There's no escaping them."

"I know, but...I'm ever hopeful, all right? I want the world to be such an accepting and loving place. Like when a patient comes in, I don't care who they are or what they believe. I just want to help them."

"Seems you found the right job for you."

"I did." Jerica's lips turned upward as she stood up and took the finished favors over to the counter, lining them up. "Nursing I knew I wanted to do before I knew I was a lesbian. How messed up is that?"

"Considering the family I come from? Not too bad if you ask me." Bridget laughed lightly. "What about kids?"

“I would love kids someday. I come from a big family. My parents only had two girls, but every other couple in my family has at least five or six.”

“Really?” Bridget’s brow drew together in surprise. “I can’t imagine that many kids in one family.”

“You should see how many people get together for reunions. It’s awful. We have to rent out space because there are so many of us.”

“Do you do them often?”

“Once a year. I haven’t been the last couple because I’ve been stuck working, but I’m hoping to go to the one next year.” Jerica stopped her work and put a hand on Bridget’s to still her movements. “I would love it if you came with me.”

“Where is it?”

“I think we’re doing it near my aunt’s. She lives out in Great Bend.”

“That’s not far.”

“It’s not from here. It’s another two hours for me, remember.”

“True.” Bridget finished the next favor. “I suppose if I were to be publicly in a relationship with someone, I would have to decide what that would mean for my career.”

Jerica gave her an odd look.

“I’m an elected official.”

“Oh, right. Politics, something I never really wanted to get into.”

Bridget hummed but didn’t say anything. She continued to make favors, setting them on the table until there were enough for Jerica to grab and bring to the counter. She hadn’t been wrong in her line of thinking. She was going to have to decide at some point what she was willing to risk for love, and her career would be a good portion of that. Going from Sheriff to underling wasn’t going to be an easy transition, though

switching agencies completely would help with that. But where would she go?

“You look so lost in thought,” Jerica’s smooth voice reached her ears.

Bridget nodded. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Good things, I hope.”

“Some. Other things not so much.”

Jerica frowned. “Well, I do hope that wherever we end up, you’re somewhere in my life, Bridget. I like you, a lot. I told you that before we officially started dating, and I’ll tell you that again, every day if I have to. I really like you.”

The smile came unbidden to Bridget’s lips, and Jerica leaned in, pressing their mouths together. “I like you.”

“I like you, too,” Bridget answered, really wanting to swap out the word “like” for another one. One that held far more meaning. But she couldn’t make herself do it. Not yet at least.

They made it through fifty favors before Karen bustled in and started cooking lunch, the conversation about the future dropping immediately as soon as a parental figure was in the room. Jerica lightened up on the conversation, and Karen probed her about her life and where she’d grown up. Bridget kept quiet mostly, wondering when Karen had become more like a mom to her than her own mother. If she truly thought about and analyzed it, it had happened somewhere around kindergarten, and that first sleepover she’d been allowed to go on.

That had been a fateful night in more ways than she’d ever thought possible at a mere five years old, because here she was, sitting in the Wilsons’ dining room twenty-five years later, more at home than she’d ever been in her own house. She’d help the two of them if she could, but she stayed seated until Karen tossed her a wet rag and told her to clean up the table. Bridget had never felt more accepted.

CHAPTER 15



JERICA DIDN'T REALIZE how late it was until she glanced at her phone, saw missed messages from friends and family, and then balked at the idea that it was close to midnight. Time had flown by since she'd come up to see Bridget again, and she'd spent all day getting caught up in wedding planning and doing whatever she could to help Karen and Bridget.

Instead of being home and wrapped in her covers sleeping, she was still in the den with Bridget, Sarah, Eli, and Eli's family. Alcohol flowed freely, and while it had been a while since she'd gotten a refill, she wasn't sure it was wise for her to drive home either.

Gripping Bridget's hand, Jerica gave her a squeeze to get her attention and then leaned in to whisper in her ear. "It's pretty late."

Bridget immediately looked at her watch. "Damn, you're right."

"I don't think I should drive home."

Nodding, Bridget turned to look her fully in the eye. "You're welcome to stay here. You can stay with me if you want or on the couch in the basement. I don't think anyone wants you driving this late."

"I'll have to leave really early in the morning to get home and changed before my shift."

"Probably safer than driving now." Bridget curled her hand around Jerica's. "Besides, I'd like it if you stayed."

Jerica smiled, warmth spreading through her chest and belly. She loved that Bridget could do that to her. She wasn't sure Bridget knew the effect she had. She'd have to share that information soon, but not in a room full of people.

"I'd love that, too. But I should probably be getting to sleep."

Bridget slapped her free hand on her thigh and raised her voice to announce to the room. "I'm going to bed. Jerica, would you help me make sure you I don't fall face first on my way down the stairs. Beer and crutches is a fun mix."

Snorting, Jerica shook her head. "Sure."

Everyone bade Bridget good night, and Jerica stood to follow her to the basement. The conversation picked up right where it left off as they left, the voices of the others echoing through the hall and into the kitchen. It did take some extra maneuvering to help Bridget down the stairs, but she sat on her ass and scooted for most of it, claiming she didn't want to risk more broken bones.

Perhaps Bridget had more to drink than Jerica had thought. When they got to the basement, Bridget showed Jerica into the bedroom, asking again where she wanted to stay. Stepping in close, Jerica put her hand on Bridget's hip, pushing her into the doorway they stood between.

"I want to sleep with you." She made each word clear as she leaned in and pressed their mouths together. She'd been waiting to do that all night but hadn't dared in front of the others, not to this extent anyway.

Bridget moaned lightly and tangled her fingers in Jerica's hair, holding her close as their tongues moved together slowly. Jerica was on her tiptoes as she pushed her chest into Bridget's, trying to increase every part of their body that was touching. She wanted more of Bridget—so much more.

Jerking back, Bridget eyed her carefully and brushed her thumb across Jerica's lower lip. Jerica wanted to say something, wanted to say the words that were on the tip of her tongue, but something in the look Bridget gave her held her

back. There was an underlying fear in the look, something uncertain. Jerica had no idea how to resolve it, how to give Bridget the power to say what she needed and wanted in that moment, so she held still, hoping the silence would do that work for her.

“I want you,” Bridget whispered, her gaze dropping to Jerica’s lips.

“I want you, too.” Jerica’s lips curled upward. “Are you sober enough?”

Bridget nodded. “I put on a show up there, but I drank less than you.”

“Did you?” Jerica laughed lightly. She hadn’t even noticed, but it would be in Bridget’s personality to be watchful of those things. “I haven’t had a drink in a couple hours.”

“I know.” Bridget swooped in and captured Jerica’s lips again. “I want you.”

“Then have me. I’m yours.”

Bridget shuddered, and Jerica couldn’t help the giddy feeling gurgling inside her. Bridget broke the embrace and hobbled to the bed, nodding toward the door for Jerica to shut it. She did, and she locked it. With everyone upstairs, they could be almost as noisy as they wanted. As she moved closer to bed, Jerica stripped off her clothes. One piece after the other, she dropped the fabric to the floor and swayed her hips saucily as she got closer. Bridget dropped her crutches against the wall and pulled herself back to lean against the headboard as Jerica walked.

By the time she got to the mattress, she was naked, her skin on fire as she waited for one simple touch from Bridget. Climbing onto the bed, Jerica straddled Bridget’s hips and bent down to capture her lips in a heated kiss. Bridget raised her hands to touch, sliding her fingers from Jerica’s ass to her breasts and massaging gently.

Moaning, Jerica rocked her hips and dragged in a deep breath. She wanted to feel skin against skin, to have Bridget fully unclothed underneath her, pressing into her, tasting her.

She clenched her eyes at just the thought, wet pooling between her legs. When Bridget trailed one hand back down her body, Jerica could have leapt for joy.

As Bridget entered her, one tentative finger before she slid in a second, Jerica groaned. She nipped at Bridget's neck, pulling the skin between her teeth and sucking before letting go and breathing heavily. "When your wrist gets tired we can do something else, don't worry about trying to get me off this way. I don't want you to hurt it and delay this again."

Bridget grunted, but she didn't speed up her movements. She took the exploration slowly, and that might have been Jerica's undoing if it continued. She slid her hips back and forth against Bridget's hand, her pleasure building slowly, as if the precipice wanted to take its sweet time. Everything with Bridget seemed to move slowly at first, so she should have expected this, the slow burn that would turn into a raging fire.

"Bridge," Jerica murmured, nipping at her earlobe and planting kisses on her cheek, neck, lips.

"What?"

"I want to feel you against me."

Bridget whined, the sound sending shivers through Jerica. Jerica kissed her hard, groaning when Bridget hit a particularly sensitive spot repeatedly. But she wanted more. She wanted Bridget naked under her, she wanted to feel what it would be like curled up against each other, what it would be like to wake up in the morning with Bridget plastered against her.

"Climb up here," Bridget demanded.

Reluctantly, Jerica moved when Bridget took her hand away. She walked up on her knees while Bridget slid down to lie fully on her back. Bridget wiggled around behind her, and taking a peek over her shoulder, Jerica saw her pushing her pants and underwear off the lower half of her body and to the foot of the bed.

Smiling, Jerica brushed her fingers over the top of Bridget's head. "Do I get to touch now, too?"

"Fuck yes."

Bridget didn't wait another second as she curled her hands around Jerica's thighs and planted her mouth against her clit and vulva. She licked and sucked, swiping her tongue with as much gusto as possible. Jerica grabbed onto the headboard for a second to steady herself from the onslaught of new and stronger sensations than before.

She was nearly lost in them, but she leaned back, twisting her upper body so she could reach between Bridget's parted legs and play her fingers between them. Bridget groaned, and Jerica smiled. She hated not being able to see Bridget's face and eyes but giving each other pleasure at the same time was almost just as good.

She continued until Bridget had her close to orgasming. Sliding back upright, Jerica grabbed the headboard as she moved in time with Bridget's mouth. It wasn't much longer until all her muscles clenched, and she hunched down as pleasure, sparks, tingles flooded her. Bridget didn't stop immediately, instead slowing her movements and taking longer, fuller licks.

As soon as Jerica was able to focus again, she moved off Bridget and lay flat on her back to stare at the ceiling. "Fuck that was good."

Bridget laughed lightly, turning on her side and reaching over her shoulder to drag her shirt off her body. "Good."

Giggling, Jerica turned her head and looked at the beautifully strong woman in front of her. She was a dark-haired beauty, one she knew many women and probably men should be after, but she was all Jerica's, at least for that night. But if Jerica had her way, it would be forever. They just had to take it one day at a time.

Bridget took her bra off and tossed it with her shirt. Finally they were both naked and together. Bridget rubbed a hand up and down Jerica's thigh as Jerica's breathing evened out and she found herself again.

"Ready for round two?"

Groaning, Jerica made eye contact. “Of course. Are you ready?”

Bridget’s lips played a smile that she kept well hidden under seriousness. “I haven’t had round one.”

“Then we should fix that.”

“I have an idea.” Bridget wagged her eyebrows. “Let’s do it at the same time.”

“Fuck, woman.” Jerica turned on her side just as Bridget did. They moved as if they had done it before together, as if they knew what the other was planning and thinking. Jerica used her fingers at first, testing to see how wet Bridget was or if she needed more help and possibly lube. Bridget must have caught on because she reached behind her and grabbed something, tossing it over to Jerica.

Putting a dollop on two of her fingers, Jerica coated Bridget, playing with her clit lightly before entering her. She remained ever careful and aware of Bridget’s leg in its cast as it rested against the mattress, not moving much. Jerica didn’t want to hurt her any more than she was already.

Gasping as Bridget pressed her mouth against her again, she moaned. She nipped Bridget’s inner thigh lightly, trying to bring her brain back around to what she wanted to do, not just what she wanted to feel. As soon as she could think again, she gave Bridget the same treatment she was receiving, again. Using fingers and lips and tongue, Jerica brought Bridget up and over the edge of an orgasm, not once, but twice, evening the score.

As she cascaded through her second orgasm for the night, she rolled onto her back again. This time she didn’t wait long as she sat up and moved around to lie against Bridget, wrapping an arm over her stomach and half-lying on her side as Bridget pressed an arm against her back.

“I suppose we should get under the covers,” Jerica murmured. “Don’t want to get cold.”

“Can’t get cold with you here,” Bridget answered, her voice full of sleep.

“Come on. There will be more time for this later.”

It took some maneuvering and helping Bridget move her leg as carefully as possible until they were under the blankets. Bridget pushed against Jerica’s back, holding on to her tightly as she breathed deeply and steadily into Jerica’s hair. Sighing, Jerica fell asleep, knowing she’d just had the best night of her life.



Morning came way too early, but Jerica snuck out of Bridget’s room with kisses and touches that she could so easily have let turn heated. After she dressed in yesterday’s clothes, she grabbed a mug of coffee from the kitchen at Eli’s insistence, and then slid into her cold vehicle.

The entire drive back to town, she couldn’t stop smiling. In fact, she smiled through her entire shift. People even commented on it throughout the day, and Jerica was remiss in answering why. But she knew why. She was completely in love with Bridget. She’d thought from the start that they had a strong connection, but the night before had proved it for her.

Bridget was such a caring person, putting Jerica’s wants and needs first when she could, keeping Jerica sated, happy, warm. Jerica shuddered at just the thought. She finished out her shift, feeling so much better than she had for the weeks prior because of her sister’s impending anniversary. It affected the entire family.

Jerica had been working that night when her sister and sister’s fiancé been brought in, and if it hadn’t been for Chaplain Melville, she would have broken completely apart. This time, Bridget had mended her quickly, as had time.

As she drove home, she got a text, but she refused to read it until she pulled into the driveway at her house and parked. It was from Bridget, a sweet testament to what they had done the night before along with hopes for doing it again. Jerica grinned from ear to ear.

She had fallen in love with Bridget already, but the desire and lust she felt to be with her every waking moment was the best possible feeling ever. She'd never been this centered on one person before. She'd loved, yes, but it hadn't been like this. It hadn't been so all-consuming. Jerica couldn't go a day without thinking about Bridget. She wanted to think about her whenever she got a chance. She wanted to take care of her, love her, be with her and be there for her.

Nothing in the weeks since they'd met had swayed that, and while she'd restrained herself at first, she didn't have to any longer, and it felt so good. Grabbing her bag and phone, Jerica went to her front door and inside. She took the steps upstairs to the upper level and dropped her bag on the kitchen table.

She grabbed a drink before she shucked her jacket and hung it over the back of one of the chairs. She wanted all of her friends to meet Bridget. In some ways the isolation together had been good for them. They were able to get to know each other without the influence of others—other than Eli, of course—but Jerica wanted everyone to know the amazing woman she knew. The one who was strong, and bold, the one who had such a big heart that she would do anything for anyone.

Jerica fell into her couch cushion, exhausted from hardly sleeping and then working a long shift at the hospital. Still, she wanted to talk to Bridget, see her again. The physical distance between them was tough because it meant she couldn't just randomly show up, but they would figure that out eventually.

Instead of texting Bridget back, Jerica called her. Lifting the phone to her ear, she waited until Bridget answered, grinning again at the smooth deep tones of her voice. "Hey sexy."

"Hey back," Bridget stated. "How was work?"

"Long today. We had a lot of cases coming in, which for day shift is kind of unusual."

"Anything serious?"

“Nothing too bad.” Jerica played with her cup. She didn’t want to talk about work. She wanted to talk about the future, about when she would see Bridget again, but also about what all had happened the night before, the changes that they would feel because of the next step they had taken. Jerica whispered, “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Me either.” Bridget laughed lightly. “In fact, I stayed half the day in bed, naked, thinking about last night.”

Jerica’s cheeks heated. “I wish I could have stayed longer.”

“Next time perhaps.”

“Yeah.” Jerica set the cup on the coffee table and curled up on the couch, dragging the blanket from the corner of it over her legs. “When can I come up again?”

“Whenever you want. I don’t think Eli is going to kick you out of the house. I think she rather likes you.”

“She said as much this morning.” Jerica closed her eyes.

“You saw her this morning?”

“Mmhm.” Exhaustion floated through Jerica’s brain, and she knew she was going to struggle to stay awake and continue the conversation, as much as she wanted to. It had been such a long week, but the best part had been at the end. “She sent me on my way with coffee.”

Bridget snorted. “Sounds like her. Explains why she invited me to her wedding and told me I could bring anyone I wanted with a wink.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. So...I guess that means I get to ask you. Want to go to my ex-girlfriend’s wedding with me?”

“If you stop calling her that, I will.”

“Why?” Bridget sounded confused.

“Why what?”

“Stop calling her my ex-girlfriend? It’s what she is.”

Jerica sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “She is, but I think as everyone can attest, she’s far more your friend now—and then—than she was your girlfriend. You two have found common ground again. You’re more than just exes.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Bridget sighed. “So, then, will you come to my best friend’s wedding with me?”

Giggling, Jerica nodded even though Bridget couldn’t see her. “Yes, Bridge, I will go to the wedding with you. When is it again?”

“Um...in a week and a half from now? Not this Saturday, but the next one.”

“I think I actually have that day off.”

“Really?” Bridget sounded surprised.

“Let me check.” Jerica pulled up her phone where she kept her work schedule and skimmed through the next two weeks. Sure enough, she had that one Saturday off the entire month. “It’s our luck in timing. My only Saturday off, and I’m all yours.”

“Good. It’ll be fun, I promise, though I won’t be doing much dancing with this bum leg of mine.”

“Then we’ll have to dance at the next party.” Jerica closed her eyes and settled into the couch, weariness sliding its way into every muscle in her body. If she wasn’t careful, she would fall asleep right there while on the phone with Bridget. “Because I would love to dance with you.”

“I must warn you...I lead.”

Giving a tired laugh, Jerica stayed right where she was. “Somehow, I suspected that.”

“I’m sure you did.” Bridget paused. “You sound exhausted.”

“Someone kept me up all night, and then I had to wake up extra early to get to work on time.”

“Hmm...sounds like a rough night.”

“No. No, it was a beautiful night,” Jerica corrected. “One I don’t regret at all. Well, maybe drinking so much. I shouldn’t have had that much.”

“Did you have a hangover?”

“Very slight, and something easily remedied with a couple Tylenol and water.”

“Good. I’d hate for you to be compromised at your job.”

“Never.” Jerica couldn’t even pry her eyes open anymore. She really was going to fall asleep on the couch, with Bridget talking into her ear on the phone. It wasn’t as perfect as the night before, but it was damn close to as perfect as she could get while being so far away from her. “I saw Chaplain Melville today. She was asking after you.”

“She was very kind,” Bridget answered. “And I’m beyond grateful for all she did for me when I was in the hospital.”

“I’ll tell her you said that next time I see her.”

“Please do.”

“Bridge?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Holding back her giggle, but barely, Jerica braced herself for an answer she wasn’t sure she wanted to receive. “If I go to this wedding with you, are we going as a couple or friends? I know...I know you’re not exactly out, and it’s fine with me if you want to keep some distance from me while we’re there.”

Bridget hissed. “No. I’m not doing that. I did that with Eli, and I’m pretty sure that was one of the major reasons we had so many problems. Not the only reason, but definitely up there in the top.”

“So does that mean...?”

“Yes, Jerica, it means I want you there as my girlfriend. It means I want to hold your hand, and kiss you, and dance with you—even though I can’t do that well right now—and show you off on my arm.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Good, because I don’t plan on hiding you or our relationship. The rest of the world can fuck off if they have problems with it.”

Jerica smiled, her heart warming even more. Perhaps Bridget was ready for more, for the confession Jerica wanted to make before they had sex the night before. Still, she held back, wanting that conversation to happen in person, wanting to see the look in Bridget’s eyes as she said it, hear her voice as she responded—whichever way she did, but Jerica suspected the feeling was mutual. They had clicked, and quickly. Her friends had said that could happen, that one minute love wasn’t there and the next it was, but she hadn’t quite believed them. Not until she’d experienced it herself.

Shifting lower on the couch, Jerica lay down and pulled the blanket up to her shoulder. “I wish you were here with me tonight.”

“Oh yeah? What would we do?”

Laughing, Jerica said, “Not that. I’m too fucking tired. But maybe in the morning.”

“Pity.”

“I just want to see you again. I don’t know how to explain it other than that.”

“I think you said it well enough the other day.”

Furrowing her brow, Jerica tried to remember everything they had talked about. It had been so much. Between texts, phone calls, and being together in person, they had talked about so much together. “What did I say?”

“You said your intentions were to never find someone else because you’d already found me.”

Jerica hummed. “I didn’t lie.”

“I suspected as much, and I want you to know, I feel the same way.”

Jerica’s heart burst with joy. If she had more energy, she’d be sitting up and grinning from ear to ear instead of curled into a ball. Instead, she struggled to find words to respond, words

to skirt around what they weren't actually saying but what they were actually saying. "I'm so glad you feel the same way."

"I want to see you again," Bridget whispered, her voice dropping.

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"Spend the weekend with me. Have Eli bring you here, and stay with me. I'll have to work, but we'll get all the other time together."

"Yes."

Jerica smiled. "It's settled then."

"It is."

"Bridge?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm about to fall asleep."

Laughing lightly, Bridget whispered in that same beautifully deep tone. "Then go to sleep, love. Don't let me keep you up this time. Sleep well and dream better."

As soon as they hung up, Jerica dragged her weary ass to her bed and collapsed onto it, falling into a deep slumber.

CHAPTER 16



SHE'D DONE IT. She'd asked Jerica to go to the wedding with her, and yet, she couldn't stop the panic that welled up in her heart. On the one hand, she was ready to stop living in the shadows, but on the other hand, she couldn't imagine what life would look like going forward.

Would she lose her job?

What would Jerica think if she couldn't do it?

How much hate would she have to face?

Rubbing her hands wildly over her face as she sat at the kitchen table that morning, Bridget groaned. She wasn't sure she could do it. She wanted to, but that didn't necessarily mean she'd have the strength or the words to say something back when people were assholes to her.

At least at the wedding it would be relatively supportive people, right? Surely Eli wouldn't invite anyone from town who was a bigot. Shuddering at the thought of how fast word would get out, Bridget clenched her jaw. No, she was going to do this. She had to do this. It was time to stop living under a rock, because that wasn't really living.

Karen stepped into the kitchen to refill her coffee and put a hand on Bridget's shoulder. "I think I saw your parents' car coming up the road."

"What?" Bridget's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

Karen nodded serenely, the look on her face hard to read, but it looked like a mix of pity and annoyance. "Eli said

they've stopped by a few times.”

“Yeah, twice. I had the nurses kick them out of my room at the hospital.”

Karen cocked her head at Bridget. “What did they do?”

“You don't want to know,” Bridget mumbled, spinning her mug in her hand. “Guess it's a good thing I showered last night and got dressed in clean clothes today.”

Patting her shoulder again, Karen said, “Do you want me to tell everyone to keep their distance?”

“Pretty sure they'll do that naturally.”

“Maybe. I had some good times with your mom back in the day.”

Furrowing her brow in confusion and disbelief, Bridget shook her head. “You don't have to lie to make her seem like a better person.”

“No, I mean it. She was very nice to me when I first moved here. Sharon just...she seemed to get more bitter as the years passed.”

“As my father influenced her, you mean.”

“Perhaps.” Karen slid into the seat next to Bridget. “We were very close when you girls were young, since you and Eli were born the same year, and Bryant and Eddie were. We did a lot of things together.”

“Because you had to. I know how it works. When there are only twenty kids in each class, you're stuck with them for life.”

Karen frowned. “It wasn't just that. Sharon and I did things together outside of that. Something really changed when you girls hit junior high. I'm not entirely sure what it was, but she closed in on herself and became a completely different person.”

“Yeah, an old bitter witch.”

“Bridget, don't talk about your mother like that. She may not be the most pleasant person or the best parent around, but

she did raise you, and in her own way, she does love you.”

Bridget snorted but wisely chose not to answer. She wasn't sure it would get her anywhere. She had nearly forgotten what close friends Sharon and Karen had been. They had done so many things together, even though Sharon had been far more involved in school things than Karen simply because Karen had a paying job.

“Here they are. Do you want them in here or the den?”

“Here is fine,” Bridget mumbled. She really didn't want to waste her time moving from one place to the other in order to accommodate them. She was done catering to their wants and needs.

Karen greeted them as though they were long lost friends, her ability to be hospitable astounding Bridget every single time. These were people Bridget hated, and it was clear from the short conversation they'd had that Karen wasn't exactly fond of them either, but none of that seemed to matter as she greeted them at the door and showed them into the dining room.

Sharon sighed heavily as her eyes landed on her daughter. She settled into the chair Karen had just abandoned and sighed again. “You look a mess, Bridget.”

“Well, it's easier to wash my hair now, so that's a bonus.” She raised her now cast-free arm, glad to have that thing off for so many reasons, not least of which was washing her hair.

“Have you figured out when you'll be going back to work?” Edward asked.

“I'm still on leave, Dad. I'll be back to light duty soon.”

He frowned but didn't say anything else, always leaving Bridget to read between the lines. Sharon started in next. “I do wish you'd consider going back now.”

“She hasn't been cleared to return,” Karen chimed in from the kitchen where she made extra coffee. “So she can't simply just walk back in and go.”

Sharon huffed. “She's the Sheriff. Of course she can.”

Bridget was about to speak and remind her mother that wasn't how it worked, but Karen did it for her. "No, she can't. She has to go through several clearances in order to come off of leave, and those things take time. I imagine she'll be back to light duty in the next two to four weeks. Wouldn't you agree, Bridget?"

"Yeah." Impressed that Karen knew that much about her job and how it worked, Bridget raised an eyebrow at her. "I need to pass a basic physical exam, be cleared by the doctor, but also pass a psychological exam, too. They're not exactly easy to set up since I have to find providers with the proper certs, and out here, those are few and far between."

Sharon frowned. "I just don't understand why you can't go back to work."

Karen handed the coffee over and dropped into a seat next to Bridget. "Because that's simply not how it works in law enforcement. There are a lot of rules and regulations that must be followed."

Bridget's lips parted, but she didn't say anything. It had never occurred to her that the rules her parents had set for her growing up—those strict, insane rules she hated—gave her the leg up on navigating the LEO world and figuring out the nuances of each regulation, the ones she could bend and the ones that were hard and fast, never to be moved. *Huh*, she thought before being dragged back to the conversation at hand.

"When will you go home?" Sharon probed. "I can't imagine they want you here much longer with everyone coming to town."

Was her mother really so obtuse that she couldn't even say wedding? Bridget was about to answer again, but Karen interrupted. "She's welcome to stay here as long as she needs for recovery. We have plenty of room for her."

"Thank you," Bridget replied. "I think I should be home soon, now that I'm mastering crutches up and down stairs. It was hit and miss there for a while. I still can't drive, though, so some things aren't easy."

“I’m sure you can find rides to all your appointments.” Sharon blazed right by the fact that normal people would rely on their parents for that, and with the way she made the statement, Bridget was pretty sure that she and Edward weren’t going to be an option. Even though it could potentially give them more control over her life.

“Right, I probably can,” Bridget answered. “But I think I’ll stay here until after the *wedding*.”

Emphasizing the last word brought a thrill of joy to her that she couldn’t resist. She’d forgotten how fun it could be to poke at her parents’ conservative and bigoted nature some days. Sharon bristled, sitting up straight as she drank her coffee and said nothing in response.

“The *wedding* should be beautiful,” Bridget continued. “I’ve been helping make the favors and helping wherever else I can, being so confined to the house, that is. Eli and Sarah have been doing most of the heavy lifting.”

Sharon set her mug down heavily on the table, clenching her jaw so tightly Bridget worried she was going to bust a tooth. Edward stared at her with wide eyes as if he had no idea where the conversation was going.

Bridget lifted her chin as if she was staring down at them, daring them to say something in front of Karen. She probably shouldn’t try to get too much of a rise out of them, but still, it was so easy to poke at them.

“Were you invited?” Bridget asked, waiting for an answer.

“That’s a rude question to ask,” Sharon responded.

“So that would be a no,” Bridget surmised. “Doesn’t surprise me too much, I guess. I was surprised to find my own invitation locked away in my mailbox and to have it reiterated when I arrived here, but I’m quite looking forward to attending my first lesbian wedding.”

“It’s just not right,” Sharon murmured, risking a glance to Karen.

Karen cocked her head to the side. “I’ll not have you saying that in this house. This is where my daughter lives, with

her partner and soon-to-be wife. If you want to disrespect them at your house, feel free. You won't do it here."

Sharon's lips thinned so much they were barely noticeable. "I won't stay quiet about it."

"Then you can kindly leave, but I have a feeling Bridget had something she wanted to tell you." Karen sat back, crossing her arms and giving Bridget a firm look.

"I..." Bridget trailed off, flicking her gaze from Karen to her parents. "I did. You know, I did want to say something. I tried to say it last time you were here and gave up, because you two just don't seem to listen to me."

"We do not—"

Karen interrupted. "Sharon, in order to listen, you have to shut up."

Bridget gaped at her. She'd never have that kind of courage. At Karen's nod, Bridget decided she had to continue. "Right, so um...I thought I should tell you before it happens that at my first lesbian wedding I plan on bringing my girlfriend with me. You haven't met her, which is perfectly fine by me, but she's going to be there, and anyone in town will know that I have a girlfriend, because I'm not hiding it anymore."

Sharon paled. Edward looked like he was going to blow a gasket, but neither of them said anything.

Karen leaned in, opening her body language to each of them. "I know this isn't easy for you to understand or believe or love through, but I want to encourage you both to do just that. Bridget is an amazing young woman, and I have watched her grow and learn through these years. She's really come into her own these last few years, and she needs support and love right now. If you start yelling or saying things that are unkind, I'll remove you from this house. Do you understand?"

They both looked at her like she had ten heads. Bridget clenched her jaw, her stomach swirling with fear. She'd done it. She'd said the words she'd been trying to say for ages, the ones she had hidden for even longer, and she didn't feel any

different than before. She'd known how they would react, that it wouldn't be good, but it was probably better this way than the alternative.

Bridget sent a worried glance to Karen, trying to figure out what the hell she was supposed to say and do next, but Karen shook her head minutely, instructing Bridget to stay quiet for now.

"I have met Bridget's girlfriend. She's an amazing and lovely woman. She's a nurse and has a huge heart for helping others. I think you'd like her if you can ever get past your biases to meet her."

Sharon shook her head vehemently. "I won't. It's against God to do this."

"You can leave. Now." Karen dropped her tone and made it forceful enough that Bridget had to do a double check. "I'm serious, Sharon. You're not welcome in this house if you cannot at the very least be respectful of the conversation."

"There's no conversation to be had." Sharon leaned forward and pointed a finger at Bridget. "It's disgusting. It's dirty. It's just not right."

"You can leave now." Karen stood up, leaning over the table with her full palm on it. Sharon wrinkled her nose but stood up, grabbing her purse and walking out of the house with a slam of the door. Karen turned on Edward. "And is there anything you would like to tell your daughter before you leave as well?"

Edward flicked his gaze to Karen before settling it on Bridget. He frowned, and Bridget's stomach did odd things as she tried to read him, but she'd never been able to do it before. She'd never understood what went on behind those eyes. He nodded gently, his chin bobbing up and down as he remained in silence, the air in the dining room so tense Bridget was sure it could cut. It was cutting. The more she thought about her mother's words, the more defeated and broken she felt.

Tears welled in her eyes, and as much as she wanted to look away from him, hide again, she couldn't move her gaze.

Edward finally leaned in, his hand reaching out to her though he didn't touch. No, her father was never one for physical affection. This was the most she had ever gotten from him.

“I do love you, Bridget.”

She shattered. Tears dropped down her cheeks, her head pounding as she cried, as snot welled in her nose and her lips moved into a grimace as she tried to hold everything in and failed miserably.

“I'm not sure I can love you through this, not right now. But I want to.” He gave her another hard stare. “I can't say I didn't know. You and Eli? I knew. I didn't want to admit it. But now I don't have a choice, do I? I have to decide how to love you now.”

Without another word, he stood up and walked out of the house. He didn't slam the door, and there was an odd sense of calm that he left in his wake. Bridget was so thrown off by it, by him. She'd never expected him to say that. As soon as the car was on the road and away from the house, Bridget stared at Karen.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I think it means he's torn, and even though he had some warning on it, he didn't figure it out before and he's not sure he can figure it out now. My best advice to you, Bridget, is to be patient and set expectations very low—or better yet, have none.”

“Right.”

Eli stepped into the kitchen. She stopped as soon as she saw the two of them, raising an eyebrow at both. “What the hell happened in here?”

Bridget wiped her eyes, trying to cover up that she'd been crying. She'd done way too much of that lately. She had to figure out a way to stop it. Karen took Bridget's hand and squeezed it. “How many more chores do you have to do?”

“I have to go fix a fence. Buddy decided he wanted to check out Bill's milo to snack on.”

Karen gave a small smile. “Take Bridget with you.”

“I can’t help fix a fence,” Bridget answered, her voice still thick with mucus and tears.

“You can spend time out of this house, in the sun, and with your best friend. And I’m not giving you an option. Eli, bring the truck up here so it’s easier for her to get in.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Eli filled her travel mug of coffee and left out the back door again.

Bridget looked Karen straight in the eye, worrying her lip. “I don’t know how I would have done that without you.”

“I imagine it would not have gone well.”

“I’ve tried, you know, to tell them before now. Years ago, and even more recently, but I could never get the words out.”

Karen’s lips curled upward. “I had a feeling based on what you were saying that you might have been ready to tell them and get it over with.”

“Rip the Band-Aid off?”

“Yeah. I don’t imagine you’re going to hear from them any time soon, but know this, Bridget. You are always welcome in my house and in my family. I’ve always thought of you as a daughter of my heart.”

Bridget’s nose stung as tears welled back up in her eyes. She shook her head, but then she gave in. Leaning forward, she wrapped her arms around Karen’s shoulders and buried her face in Karen’s neck as they embraced. She hadn’t ever felt love before she came here, not true open love without expectations and walls that couldn’t be moved or broken down.

This was so different, and she had treasured it from the start. Dragging in a breath, Bridget cleared her throat and pulled away. “Thank you.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.” Bridget saw Eli pull up out front with the old truck she used only on the farm. She grabbed her crutches and

stood up, stretching what muscles she could. As she maneuvered her way outside and down the porch steps, she shook her head at Eli. “Ask and I’ll kill you.”

Eli threw her hands up. “Duly noted.”

As soon as they were in the truck and taking the uneven path out to the lower fields, Bridget sighed heavily and pinched her nose as pain worked its way into her head again. “I told them.”

“Told who what?”

“My parents.”

“I thought I saw their car.” Eli couldn’t lie for shit. Bridget knew she was aware of exactly what had happened in that dining room, and that Karen had been in there so she didn’t have to be. Bridget hadn’t realized just how much the Wilson family had always protected her and had her back. “Were they asses again?”

“When are they not?” Bridget leaned back into the seat. “I told them I was going to your *wedding*.”

“Which, I hope, naturally led to other topics of conversation.”

“Some.” Bridget nodded. “Dad said he loved me, but he wasn’t sure how he could love me through this.”

“That’s probably quite an honest answer. I imagine you’ve overturned a lot of their world today.”

“Maybe,” Bridget muttered. “But he knew before today.”

“He may have known, but he probably didn’t have to face it. Your parents are really good at avoiding life.”

Snorting, Bridget nodded. “That’s true.”

“They are also pretty toxic.”

Bridget wanted to object and say something different, but she couldn’t disagree with it. She’d known it, somewhere in her head, even if she hadn’t wanted to admit it. In some ways, she was so like her father, she supposed. Sighing, Bridget agreed. “They are.”

“Sometimes the only way to deal with toxic people is to cut them out completely, but that’s hard to do.”

“It is.”

“Other times, you can set some pretty firm boundaries, which I think you’ve actually been doing lately.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Eli drew her brow together as she turned to look Bridget in the eye. “You kicked them out of the hospital room, not once but multiple times. You refused to go stay with them even though they insisted, multiple times. You have withstood conversations with them, made your point and stuck to it. You’re really coming into your own, Bridge. I love it.”

Bridget’s heart warmed. “I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. I got to witness it.”

“How the hell do I deal with them living in such a small town, though? I can’t avoid them forever.”

“I imagine you won’t be the only one avoiding. Not after today at least.”

“True.” Bridget stared out at the cattle grazing in front of her. “Is Buddy going to try to eat me again?”

“Eat you? He never tried to eat you. He just wanted to join in on your little date.”

Bridget slid Eli an unamused look. “That was not funny.”

“It was hilarious. It’ll be hilarious when you and Jerica are married and I get to roast you at your wedding.”

“Jesus, we’re not getting married.”

“Not yet.” Eli put the truck into neutral and turned the engine off. She jumped out and went to the bed of the truck.

Bridget sighed and got out more slowly. Instead of helping to fix the fence, she grabbed a spot on the tailgate and hung her legs over the side. Karen had been right. Being out in the fields would help her soul that day. She needed the sun and the

air to clear her head—and perhaps some time with her best friend.

“Are you going to help or not?” Eli came back, her hands on her hips as she gave Bridget a mock glare.

“I can help by being a construction supervisor.” Bridget cocked her head. “You know, all talk, no doing anything.”

Eli bust out laughing. “I guess you can’t really drag quick set over here, can you?”

“Uh...no. You’re lucky I can manage to walk on this rough terrain and not fall on my face.”

“Guess you’re getting pretty proficient with those things, aren’t you?”

“I am, thank you.”

“Maybe you should go home.” Eli raised an eyebrow, but the look and tone didn’t tell Bridget she was pushing to get rid of her, rather giving her the option. The thought of going home and staying by herself was, for the first time since she’d been there, absolutely unappealing. She liked being surrounded by them all.

“Maybe I should,” Bridget muttered. “Maybe I should give it until I’m cleared by the doc.”

“Wiser choice on that one.” Eli grabbed the wire she’d need to replace. “I don’t mind you being here. You know that, right?”

“I do.” Bridget smiled, for the first time really feeling settled as though she belonged somewhere. She’d missed that feeling growing up, and even though she lived in the same place she’d been born, she’d never felt at home until now.

CHAPTER 17



BRIDGET SAT at the kitchen table, waiting on Eli. She'd already agreed to drive her to town under the guise of getting some things and she was just going to leave her at Jerica's for a few days. Bridget fucking hated not being able to drive. That was probably the worst part of the entire experience. Well, that and the nightmares she seemed to be having almost every night lately.

They were only getting worse, not better, but at least when she woke up in the middle of them, she'd been able to get herself under control—though she never quite fell back asleep. Rolling her shoulders, she sipped her coffee and waited. Eli had to finish her morning chores, and then they could be off.

It took another hour, and Karen had insisted on making breakfast, and then insisted Bridget eat it. Just as Eli was finishing hers as rapidly as possible, Bridget grabbed the small bag she'd packed and started toward the front door.

“Umm...excuse me.” Karen's voice was firm and loud. “Where are you going with that?”

“Uh...” Bridget paled. What the fuck was she supposed to say to that? She was thirty years old, and she'd never told a parental figure she was going to spend the night with her girlfriend so they could essentially have sex, sex, and more sex.

“Relax, Mom. She's going to Jerica's. She'll be fine. Jerica is a nurse, remember?”

Karen narrowed her gaze and folded her hands together. Bridget swallowed hard, pretty sure she was about to get a lecture. “You know the dos and don’ts of safe sex.”

“Mom!”

Cold washed through Bridget as embarrassment hit her hard.

“Trust me, Bridget understands how to have safe sex.” Eli put a hand on Bridget’s shoulders and prompted her to move forward and toward the door. “And she definitely doesn’t need *that* talk from *you*.”

As soon as they were outside, Eli shuddered.

“That was...unexpected.”

“Sure, somewhat. She thinks you’re her kid now, so you get all the shit I had to deal with.”

“She gave you a safe sex talk?”

“No, I lied and told her Azalea did that when I came out to her, and that we’d talked about it so I could get out of that conversation with my mom, but I was also like seventeen, not thirty.” Shuddering again, Eli grabbed Bridget’s bag and headed for the truck.

As they pulled onto the highway, Bridget stared at the fields and the muscles in her chest tightened. She had been thinking about it a lot lately, and Eli had promised at one point, but never made good on that promise as of yet. It took until they were a mile out from town before Bridget got up the courage to ask.

“Will you take me to my cruiser?”

Eli’s knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. “Today?”

“Yeah. You said you would, and I’d still like to see it.”

Sighing, Eli stared out the front windshield and said nothing for at least three minutes—well, it felt like that. “What do you want to get out of it?”

“Closure, I guess. I want to see how bad it really was.”

“It was bad, Bridge. I can tell you that. You were in ICU for days and they had to shock you back to life. I don’t think there’s any denying how close to death you came.”

“But I don’t remember any of it,” Bridget whispered. “I just want to see what happened.”

“Fine,” Eli answered tersely. “But for the record, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Bridget nodded her understanding but kept her face as blank as possible. She moved her gaze to match Eli’s and waited to see the cruiser. It had been her favorite cruiser, and hers for at least three years—though she’d been needing a new one anyway. She hadn’t put in the work order for it, but the office had told her they’d done that in her absence, so by the time she got back to work she’d have a new cruiser ready and waiting.

She hadn’t driven since the accident, though, and the thought of getting behind the wheel of a vehicle didn’t seem like the most pleasant experience, even if it was only driving around town or even down to Garden. She swallowed hard again as Eli took a left as soon as she got to the edge of town and drove the dirt back road along the railroad line to Jensen’s lot on the northwest corner.

She wasn’t prepared for it. Her eyes widened as she saw most definitely what was left of her cruiser, which wasn’t much. The entire right side of the thing had been completely crushed, much like her own body. There was a definitive pull down on the left side where the combine tire had circled exactly where she had been sitting, enough to avoid killing her but not avoid injuring.

Bridget stayed in the truck, staring wide-eyed at the damaged vehicle before her. Her heart raced, and she was cold and clammy. But she had to get out. It took every ounce of courage she had to open the door to the truck and grip her crutches like they were her lifeline. Eli didn’t move to follow her. When her feet were on solid ground, Bridget clenched her jaw and crutched her way closer.

Glass had been shattered in every window, and she knew some of it was from the jaws of life. She could see the marks where they'd used the tool to get the roof up to get her out. Tears stung her eyes, but she held them in, moving around the vehicle slowly so she could take the whole thing in. She hadn't realized how impactful this would be, how much she needed to see it firsthand.

It wasn't just a dream anymore. Every nightmare she had about it had been reality. Every moment of fear and panic when she woke up cold and sweaty was because of this moment. The moment when her work interfered with her life and nearly ended it. How the hell was she ever going to go back into that office and sit in another cruiser? *How was she supposed to still be Sheriff?*

Tears streamed down her face, and she hadn't even noticed it at first. Bridget let them, not even bothering to wipe them away or pretend like this didn't affect her. She wasn't going to kid anyone. This would be a shock to anyone who drove by and saw it, and she was pretty sure everyone in town already had and *that* was why she hadn't been told much about the accident itself.

As she got to the driver's side door, which was no longer there, Bridget could see the small trinkets she'd left in the vehicle just for her. She brushed some of the glass off the seat and awkwardly leaned in to grab them out, snagging the red quartz stone heart, the metal cross, and the very first badge she'd been given as a rookie at the academy.

She put her hand against her pocket and grabbed her crutch to stand up again, although it wasn't easy and she nearly fell over. Still, Eli remained in the vehicle and didn't come out to help her. God, she loved that Eli understood moments like this, that Eli knew to give her the space to process and think and just be by herself. There would be plenty of time to talk as they drove the rest of the way to town.

Bridget patted the only place of smooth metal that she could find, paused a moment, and then straightened her spine as she crutched her way back to Eli's truck. No one had been lying when they told her she was lucky to be alive. She was.

She knew that viscerally now, and there would be no denying it ever again.

The drive was relatively quiet, which was somewhat surprising to Bridget. She'd expected Eli to be talkative, probing Bridget to talk about what she'd just seen and experienced and thought and felt. The silence was almost unnerving, and she couldn't figure out why Eli wasn't talking, why she insisted on remaining silent.

Jerica had told her where the spare key was and to make herself comfortable. Eli made sure she got into the house and up the stairs, since she'd been surprised to find it a split-level house like her own. It would be a good trial run for living on her own soon enough. She couldn't stay with Eli forever, as much as that thought did appeal to her in some ways.

Eli left with a hug and a clap on Bridget's shoulder. Bridget was cast into the silence of being alone, something she hadn't experienced in nearly two months. Two months of being surrounded by people, especially the past week with everyone being there to plan the wedding and do the finishing touches.

Shivering, Bridget grabbed a drink and made her way to the living room. There was a couch against the far wall and a television in the corner. The remotes were on the back of the couch, so she grabbed one after she lowered herself to the cushion and put her leg up. All of the moving around with her crutches bothered her arm and her wrist, not that she'd admit that to anyone, so she was glad to give it a bit of a rest.

She really had to work on getting strong with that. Sighing, Bridget flicked through the stations, finding something mundane to watch that wouldn't take a whole lot of brain power. She hadn't been able to get the image of the crushed vehicle out of her mind yet, and she wasn't sure when that would happen, either.

If she'd known what an impact it would make, she might not have gone, but it would have been next to impossible to avoid as soon as she got back into the swing of work. Jensen's lot wasn't known for moving cars out quickly, and she had an

inking that her car might remain there for a decade before he finally sold it for parts after he'd pillaged all he could from it.

Putting her head against the arm rest, Bridget pulled out her phone and texted Jerica to let her know she'd arrived safely and couldn't wait for her to get home. She had plans for the few nights they would be together, plans that would involve all her muscles. The thought warmed her, although the overwhelming image of the car was still the reigning vision in her head.

It took hours for her body to finally give in to sleep. The nightmares had been so bad lately that she hadn't managed to get a good night's rest in days, maybe even a week. Though again, she would be hard pressed to admit that to anyone. The couch was so comfortable that when her eyes drooped, Bridget gave in and curled on her side with the blanket covering her and let sleep take her.

Waking in a panic, she flung her arms out around her as she tried to figure out where the hell she was and what she was doing. The sun was already setting outside, casting an eerie glow into the room. She had to blink several times and wait for the spinning of the room to stop before she managed to catch her breath in any reasonable manner—except she didn't.

The next breath was just as ragged, and she struggled to find the balance that she'd normally been able to get. Every muscle in Bridget's body was poised and ready to run, except she couldn't. She couldn't get up and run out the door, and she had nowhere to go. It took her far too long to even remember where she was.

Grasping her phone, she called the only person she could think of. It rang too many times, and the panic welled deeper in her chest until finally, Eli's gruff voice came through. "I thought you'd be spending time with your girlfriend."

Bridget could hardly do anything except breathe heavily, and that wasn't helping the situation any. She couldn't even explain to Eli what she needed.

Something must have clicked in Eli's brain, because suddenly her tone changed and softened. "Hey, hey, calm

down, Bridge. Take a deep breath for me, will you?”

As if on command, Bridget dragged cold air into her lungs, holding it. She had to consciously think about exhaling slowly rather than rapidly and forcing her body to do what it should normally. She did it again.

“There you go. Keep going. Is Jerica still at work?”

Bridget nodded, not even aware enough to realize that Eli couldn't see her.

“Did you have another nightmare?”

“Y-yeah,” Bridget stuttered out, finally able to form a word.

“Okay, keep breathing slowly. It's not real, not anymore.”

Those words brought on the tears. How the fuck has she ended up with such a compassionate friend? She'd never deserved Eli. Not from the start, and yet somehow, Eli had ended up in her life. Her parents would say it was God who had put Eli there, although they'd also probably say it was the Devil. Bridget didn't believe in such things, and she didn't know what she'd done to deserve someone who was so calm and with-it.

“When you can talk, I want you to talk to me, okay?”

“Yeah.” Bridget sounded much more cognizant that time than she had the last time, which was a good improvement in her mind. One step forward, no more steps back.

“Want to tell me what happened?”

“No.” Bridget tightened again, the images flooding her brain even if she didn't want them to. There was no way to get them out. The sounds, the sensation of being crushed by hot rubber. The scent of something burning. She gulped.

“Bridget, take another breath.”

She did as she was told.

“Can you call Jerica and maybe ask her to come home early?”

Shaking her head again, Bridget closed her eyes and attempted to focus. She didn't even know what time it was. She'd fallen asleep and it was still light out, but now it looked far darker than that. "What time is it?"

"It's about four in the afternoon."

"I fell asleep."

"I gathered," Eli answered. "At least you're giving more than one-word answers now."

"Yeah." Bridget chuckled lightly, but it was still nervous and not a full boom of her voice. "If it's four, then I think Jerica should be off soon."

"Look at your phone and see if she told you when she'd be back."

"Right." Bridget moved her phone from her ear and stared down at it. It took her another second to think about even opening up her text messages to read the last few exchanges between her and Jerica. "She's off at five."

"So you don't have much longer to wait then."

"I guess not."

"How are you feeling now?"

"Better. Calmer," Bridget corrected. "Like I know where I am and when I am."

"Well, that's a bonus. How many nightmares have you been having, Bridge? I know I don't wake up to all of them."

Bridget sighed heavily, but Eli had asked for openness. So she told her. "Every night."

"Bridget!" The shock was enough to tell her she should have said something before then, but Bridget still didn't want people to think she was weak or that she couldn't handle her own shit. "That's insane."

"I know. Not all of them are awful, but I think this one was bad because I'm alone and not somewhere I'm super familiar with."

“And you saw the cruiser today. I worried it might do this to you.”

Bridget rubbed her temple. “While that may not have been the wisest choice, I still think it was a good one. I would have seen it anyway, sooner or later.”

“Yeah, but you could have been more prepared for it.”

Bridget frowned. She wasn't sure she would ever have been prepared for that. Not in a million years, knowing what she saw. Bridget clenched her jaw and relaxed slightly into the couch. Eli was good for helping her out with this. She needed the calm, the steadiness of someone who was stronger than she was in that moment. Even through her fearful haze she could at least admit that.

“I don't think I could have ever been prepared for that,” Bridget admitted. “All I've remembered about it have been tidbits here and there, sounds or smells. Never anything as full on as realizing if he'd been two more inches to the left I wouldn't be here.”

“You almost weren't with us.”

Bridget had ignored that fact as much as she could, and perhaps it was seeing the vehicle that reminded her that she couldn't ignore it any longer. She had nearly died, and it was only by the grace of God that she hadn't, it was only because of skilled hands and quick thinking that she had survived.

“Yeah, I guess I wasn't.” Admitting that was harder than she'd ever thought it could be. She had died, and she'd been brought back to the land of the living only seconds later. She didn't have some out of body experience like everyone talked about. She didn't have a moment of clarity where she understood her purpose in life. Her near-death experience wasn't even significant—at least not in the ways everyone thought of those

“I would have missed you,” Eli whispered, as though the words pained her to say. “And I'm so glad you're not dead, Bridge.”

A fresh wave of sorrow filled her chest, and Bridget wasn't sure what to do with it. She hadn't thought her life meant anything to anyone, that anyone even cared for her beyond her job. Yes, she and Eli had been working on repairing their friendship—sort of. She had mostly ignored that too, but to hear those words from Eli's lips shattered her.

"I'm so sorry," Bridget answered.

"Don't be sorry. It's not anything you could control, but do know that I love you, and Mom loves you, and that you have family that would miss you if you were gone, and we're so happy that you're not."

Bridget fought back a new wave of tears even as she embraced them this time. Those words were the most precious she had heard from Eli, and it was something she could never live without. She'd tried, and those few years had been absolute hell. She didn't want to be alone again, not like that. It made her bitter and jaded in ways she couldn't begin to comprehend, but she knew she didn't want to be that person any longer.

"I'd feel the same way if I lost you," Bridget finally said back. "So don't be going and doing anything stupid on that ranch of yours, Eli, because I don't want to take that call."

Eli laughed lightly, obviously crying as well as she poured out her heart. "I promise I won't do anything stupid."

"Good." They fell into silence, and Bridget felt as though she was far more grounded than she'd been when she called. "I'll let you go, Eli. I'm feeling much better. Thank you."

"Any time, Bridge. Please know that. I'll answer your call whenever and wherever I am."

"I know that." A fresh wave of tears entered her eyes, and she pushed them away with her fingers. "Jerica will be home soon, and I don't want to be a mess when she gets here."

"Never," Eli answered. "Go take a bath or something to get looking good for your girl. Oh, and Bridge?"

"What?"

“I’m serious that I expect to be in the wedding party when you two get married. I will continue to take credit for this match as long as humanly possible.”

“Shut up,” Bridget muttered, shaking her head. “If anyone deserves the credit, it’s Sonny.”

“Eh, you’re probably right on that one. Call me, though, if you need anything. Please.”

“I will.”

They hung up, and Bridget was once again cast into silence. She zoned out, thinking about her friendship with Eli until the lock on the front door turned and Jerica popped her head in, a brilliant smile on her lips.

“You have no idea how amazing it feels to come home and have you here,” Jerica stated, coming right up the stairs. “I’ve been waiting all day, literally, for this moment.”

She swooped in and planted a kiss right on Bridget’s lips. Bridget reached around the back of her head and dragged her down, deepening the kiss as much as she could. The stability of having someone there in the flesh was exactly what she needed, and while she used the kiss to distract herself, she knew she equally had to tell Jerica about her day and what had happened while she’d been gone.

When they parted, Jerica grinned at her. “How was your day?”

Well, they were going to get right to it then. Sighing, Bridget wrinkled her nose. “Not too great, actually, but it’s much better now.”

Jerica looked absolutely concerned, and Bridget reached over as Jerica sat on the edge of the couch and took her hand, squeezing lightly. “On the drive down, I had Eli take me by Jensen’s lot to see my cruiser. That might not have been my brightest idea, but I also think it was a necessary evil.”

“Wow.” Jerica’s eyes widened. “How bad was it?”

“Awful. Oh yeah, here.” Bridget shifted slightly and reached into her pocket, grabbing the three items she had

pulled from the cruiser. “I took this while I was there. I put them in every cruiser I drive.”

Jerica held her hand out and took the small items. “What do they mean to you?”

“Well, the cross is obvious. I may not go to church or really believe, but I’m not going to discount there might be a God either, and if God is going to protect me, I’ll take that protection as much as I can.”

“And what about the other two things.”

Bridget pointed at the badge. “This is to remind me where I started and how far I’ve come. It’s a good memory, and I don’t want to ever lose it.”

Jerica smiled and pinched the quartz heart between her fingers. “And this?”

“That is to remind me where my heart always is, and where it always will be. But I think, instead of putting it in my next cruiser, that you should keep it.”

Jerica stared down at the small item, her eyes lighting up. She canted her head to the side, a mischievous look crossing her beautiful features. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I’m saying nothing in words yet.”

“But—”

“Uh-uh. You can wait a bit for those, I think. But keep it.” Bridget grabbed the cross and her badge and shoved them back into her pocket, leaving the heart for Jerica. “Let it mean what you want it to mean.”

“I don’t think that’s how this is supposed to work, Bridge.”

“Well, it’s how it’s going to work today. Leave it be for now. I have to tell you about the rest of my day. Then you can fill me in on yours. Deal?”

“Deal.” Jerica leaned in and kissed her fully. “Talk away, Sheriff.”

Bridget spent the next hour going through her nightmares. The one she'd had that day and the ones she'd had most nights before then. She opened up in a way she never had before, making specific decisions about what to share and taking those risks to be vulnerable. She never would have done that with anyone before, but Jerica had already seen her at her worst, multiple times. They talked for hours, eating dinner somewhere in the mix, and then falling asleep in each other's arms. It was one of the best nights in Bridget's life.

CHAPTER 18



BRIDGET HAD no idea when she'd fallen asleep the night before, but she had been nestled in Jerica's arms and it must have been early. Because it was barely five in the morning and she was wide awake—as if someone had given her a large dose of caffeine—and ready for the day. Slipping from the bed was easier than expected. Jerica had moved in the night and faced the other direction.

Grabbing her crutches, Bridget went as quietly as possible to the bathroom upstairs and relieved herself. Then she stood awkwardly in the vertex between the kitchen and living room, trying to decide which would be better. Her ankle barely ached, luckily, so she made a hard left and crutched her way into the kitchen. She could make breakfast for the both of them before Jerica had to go to work again.

She leaned her crutches against the counter and then stood at the refrigerator, attempting to figure out what to even cook. Usually she was an eggs or only coffee kind of morning person, but since living with Eli, she'd gotten used to far more elaborate breakfasts. She wasn't quite sure she could pull any of what Eli managed, though, especially when only cooking for two.

Next she tried the cabinets, opening and closing them carefully so she wouldn't make too much noise and accidentally wake Jerica up. Pressing her lips together hard, Bridget debated. There were eggs, and she could make those, but she had no idea how Jerica liked her eggs—something she was going to have to ask about. She could equally make a

casserole, but that would involve way more food than only the two of them needed and would easily last a week.

Nixing that idea, Bridget moved on to the next. Pancakes. It wasn't exactly her specialty, but they couldn't be that hard to make, could they? Except Jerica didn't have pancake mix, but she did have the ingredients to make them from scratch. Sighing, Bridget reached into her pocket for her phone and researched a quick recipe.

She could do this. She could surprise Jerica with breakfast before she went to work for the day, and then she could hang out, clean up, and do nothing all day while Jerica worked. Bridget frowned. She sounded absolutely lazy. She had to keep reminding herself that she was injured and recovering and *that* was her job, but it still felt lazy.

Bridget was used to being up early, going in to work, spending ten to fourteen hours working, easily, and barely being at home in general. When she wasn't working, she was volunteering for things, like going down to the school in a professional capacity, running the funeral lines from churches to the cemetery, or even coaching basketball. Still, she hadn't done anything in two months now, and it was killing her.

She really should see if she could at least coach basketball when spring hit. She missed her girls, and while she might still be on light duty and not able to run the courts, she should be able to yell and coach from the sidelines. Making a mental note to talk to the head coach about that, Bridget pulled out what she would need for the pancakes.

Snapping a quick picture of it, she sent it to Eli with the words, "*Who would guess? I'm up in the morning making breakfast for a woman.*"

Eli simply wrote back, "*It's about time, and don't burn it!*"

Bridget ignored the jibe and pulled up the recipe on her phone again. She very carefully measured all the ingredients she would need, leaning against the counter if the pressure on her ankle was too much. She grabbed a whisk and hobbled back over to the counter next to the stove and began mixing, making sure to get all of the lumps out. She had just finished

when she realized she was supposed to leave at least some lumps, wasn't she?

Panic welled in Bridget's chest, that she'd already messed up before she even got to the cooking part. Glancing over her shoulder, she made sure Jerica wasn't anywhere near her as she attempted to search via her phone if she was supposed to have lumpy pancake batter or not, and mostly coming up with the results that lumps were a good thing.

Cursing under her breath, she debated whether or not to remake the entire batter, but at that point, she didn't have much time to cook before Jerica's alarm would be going off and it would be time for her to head into work. Pursing her lips, Bridget decided to just go for it. She moved the cast iron skillet to the stove top, turned on the electric burner—which she hadn't cooked on in decades—and waited for it to heat up.

With butter finally sizzling, Bridget dropped batter onto the skillet and stared at it, hoping it would cook the right way. When there were no bubbles, panic welled in Bridget's chest again. She was going to fail this breakfast hard. With her jaw tight, she slid the spatula under the pancake and tried to flip it, but it melted all over the sides of the spatula and flopped onto the skillet.

Cursing, Bridget attempted to scrape it up and toss it into the trash, but she couldn't maneuver well enough for that. Instead she grabbed a clean plate from the cabinet and put it on there. Taking a steadying breath, she had to try again. With her second dollop of batter on the skillet, she was determined to let it sit there and cook properly this time. While that was happening, she took the plate to the trash and scraped it before rinsing it in the sink.

Bridget leaned over the stove top and stared at the pancake, as though by just looking at it she could make it cook faster. It didn't work like that, much to her frustration, even though she knew that was going to be the case. She almost texted or even called Eli to see if she could walk her through it since apparently making pancakes was not in her skill set any longer. It had been ages since she'd made breakfast, only

helping Eli, and even lately she'd taken to just not going upstairs for it since she slept in so late.

As she let that pancake sit, Bridget stepped to the fridge again and pulled out some fruit Jerica had stashed in one of the drawers. As she was cutting that up, she decided it was probably time to flip the pancake still in the skillet. At least this time it didn't melt on her spatula, but it was completely burned on the other side.

Instead of repeating the disaster of pulling off an undercooked side of a pancake, Bridget let it sit and continue to cook. She was halfway through chopping strawberries, when warm arms wrapped around her middle and a gentle kiss was pressed to her cheek. Bridget relaxed immediately.

"Morning," Jerica murmured.

"Morning. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." Jerica kissed her again on the cheek and then backed away slightly.

Bridget checked over her shoulder as Jerica leaned over the skillet and frowned.

"Did you make coffee at all?"

"Shit, I knew I forgot something."

"It's fine, Bridge. I can make it. My brain is still a bit slow." Jerica went through the motions of making the coffee while Bridget continued to chop fruit and stare warily at the clearly burned pancake.

She would eat it. It would be fine. She would smother it in syrup and strawberries and she would survive. It couldn't be that bad, could it? As soon as Jerica set the coffee pot to run, she grabbed the spatula and pulled the pancake off, dropping it straight into the garbage.

Bridget sighed, failure flooding into her chest. She couldn't even manage to cook her girlfriend breakfast, and this time, she couldn't even blame it on her injuries. Jerica deftly added more butter and then more batter to the skillet and waited.

“Sorry, I don’t cook breakfast much.”

Jerica gave her a pitying smile. “You don’t have to cook for me, you know.”

“I wanted to. Since you have to work all day and I’m stuck here doing pretty much nothing, I figured this was the least I could do.”

Sighing, Jerica moved in against Bridget’s side. “You are doing something, whether it feels like that or not. Healing is very important, because when you are fully healed, I expect you to be your spritely self for other adventures.”

Jerica pinched Bridget’s ass before cupping her left butt cheek. Bridget groaned, rocking into the counter as she shot Jerica a dirty look.

“How do you even know I’m energetic when I’m healed? You’ve only known me since I’ve been injured.”

“While you might have a calm personality on the outside, Bridge, you’re a Sheriff. And one doesn’t just become a Sheriff before they’re thirty by sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing. I strongly suspect you work more hours than you’re supposed to, especially being in a small town, that everyone calls you even if they don’t have to, and you show up. Because that’s who you are. You help people. You’re there for people, and it doesn’t even make a dent in how exhausted you are.”

Jerica moved to flip the pancake while Bridget gawked at her. How on earth did she know that from barely even knowing each other, and never while Bridget was actively on duty? Pressing a fist into her hip, Bridget narrowed her gaze. “Are you a fucking siren?”

Jerica snorted. “Hardly, but I am an observant person. And remember, I got to talk about you to Eli and everyone else out at the house when you weren’t around. All I had to do was listen to what was being said and what wasn’t being said.”

“So are you a little energizer bunny too?”

Shaking her head, Jerica moved in and pressed a hand to Bridget’s chest as she slid between Bridget and the counter.

“Probably not as much as you, but I’ve heard people call me energetic before.”

“Have they now?” Bridget raised an eyebrow, dipping her chin to capture Jerica’s lips in a slow, tantalizing kiss. If only Jerica could be late for work, she would take that challenge and test just how much energy they both had.

“They have.” Jerica kissed her again, this time sliding her tongue slowly against Bridget’s.

Bridget fell into the kiss, completely forgetting the undercooked and then overcooked pancake. If this was breakfast every day with this woman, she would take it. She loved this. In fact, she was finally ready to admit that she loved Jerica. Only two short months since they had met, and it wasn’t exactly the easiest two months of her life, but Jerica had been the highlight of it, and Bridget was pretty sure that the feeling rolling around in her chest every time she thought of Jerica was going to continue and not fade away, at least not any time soon.

Jerica broke the kiss and finished making the pancakes while Bridget set up the table for breakfast. It was a quick meal while Jerica scarfed down her food so she could get ready for work. Before Bridget knew it, she was cast into the silence of the house, left to her own devices for the day.



As soon as Jerica got home that evening, Bridget had dinner ready—ordered, but ready—as it sat on the dining room table. If she had to play the role of the housewife for a few more weeks, she would do her damndest to be the best recovering housewife possible.

Except, Jerica didn’t go to the dining room. She interrupted Bridget’s attempt to stand up from the couch by straddling her, bending down, and kissing her as though both their lives depended on it. Bridget gripped Jerica’s hips, her fingers digging into her flesh as she held on tightly. Jerica didn’t stop. The heat in Bridget’s body went from cool to

steamy, and she wanted nothing more than to get her hands on Jerica.

Breaking the kiss, Jerica closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to Bridget's. She took deep steadying breaths before she spoke, and Bridget lived into the silence, letting Jerica take whatever time she needed.

"I need a shower. Will you join me?"

"I uh...can I take a shower and get my foot wet?"

Jerica sat up, her shoulders straightening. "You should be able to. Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"He might have, but that medical speak kind of goes over my head."

"It's been seven weeks since surgery, right?"

Bridget nodded. "But I have to keep it dry. I do remember that."

"Yeah, but we can dry it after. Come on."

Jerica climbed off her and held out a hand to help Bridget up. With her crutches, they maneuvered into the bathroom. Jerica dropped her scrubs quickly, plopping them into the wicker laundry basket before she started to undress Bridget.

With steam filling up the small bathroom, Jerica threw her hair up into a messy bun and opened the curtain to slide into the spray. Bridget's heart thumped wildly. She'd only been naked with Jerica once before, but she'd thought about it so many times before and after that. She had to keep her cool.

"Bridget? You coming?"

Groaning as quietly as possible, Bridget stared at the shower curtain. This was either going to be a disaster or amazing. She still wasn't feeling super steady without her crutches, and adding in a slippery wet floor and woman weren't going to make that any better, but Jerica...naked...wet and naked.

Pulling aside the curtain, Bridget stepped over the side of the tub to get into the shower. Jerica grinned at her, already

soaped up from neck to feet. “Sorry, I had to get the day’s work off me. It was...you don’t want to know what ended up on my scrubs today.”

“I’m sure I don’t.” Bridget’s voice sounded so terse, but it wasn’t because of anything Jerica said, it was because she had to focus so hard to say anything.

Jerica turned around, rinsing in the hot water. Bridget took it as her chance and moved in, sliding her hands along the soft curves at Jerica’s sides to her hips and back up. She stepped in again, cupping Jerica’s breasts and playing with her nipples. Jerica hummed and leaned back into Bridget’s chest.

“I missed you,” Jerica whispered as she reached up behind Bridget’s head and lifted her chin so their lips could connect. “I thought about tonight all day, and it was one of the few things that got me through the day.”

Bridget said nothing as she rubbed their mouths together tenderly. She wanted to entice Jerica to think about something else, but at the same time, she wanted to give her the space to talk about whatever she needed.

“Bridge?”

“Hmm?” Bridget moved and nibbled on Jerica’s neck, small water droplets hitting her face as she allowed herself to be completely enamored with Jerica’s body.

“Touch me already.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Bridget didn’t wait as she slid one hand away from playing with Jerica’s dark nipples to between her legs. She started slowly, making delicate circles against Jerica’s clit. This was going to be slow, torturous if they could manage, although Bridget had very little patience in general, so as soon as Jerica started keening, she’d probably do whatever Jerica asked.

Jerica rocked her hips in time with Bridget’s hand, her eyes fluttering shut. Bridget kept the pace, not dipping lower, but keeping everything as rhythmic as possible. Jerica’s lips parted, and if they were facing each other, Bridget would have

taken them with her own. Instead, she kissed Jerica's cheek and shoulder, the small amount of skin she could reach.

"I'm close," Jerica whispered. "I've wanted this all day."

Bridget hummed, keeping everything as soft and tender as possible. She wanted this to be a sweet moment, where she was finally given the chance to take care of Jerica in whatever way she needed.

"Bridge..." Jerica's voice was lost in the spray of the water.

As she orgasmed, she gripped Bridget's head, her body twitched, and her eyes fluttered shut. As Bridget moved her hand, Jerica spun around and kissed her sweetly, deeply. Everything felt so settled, in a way Bridget had never quite experienced before, as though it was normal for Jerica to come home all worked up and needing to be taken care of by the one person who could.

Breaking the embrace, Jerica smiled. "Why don't you finish up and then join me in the bed. We can eat later, or rather, eat food later."

With a wink, Jerica was shifting out of the shower. Bridget was left speechless. How the woman could go from needing care to flirtatious in two milliseconds flat was beyond Bridget's ability. She always lingered in her feelings far longer than that. Sighing, Bridget grabbed the body wash and lathered herself up. She made sure to clean around her ankle since she hadn't done it with more than a washcloth since surgery. Wrinkling her nose at it, she gave it a second clean just to be sure.

As soon as she stepped out of the water, Jerica was there waiting for her with a dry towel in her hands. Bridget awkwardly made it halfway to the bedroom with the towel semi-wrapped around her chest and her crutches before she gave up, dropped the towel and moved far more freely into the bedroom. Jerica picked the towel up after her and threw it onto the floor of the bedroom before climbing onto the mattress and straddling Bridget again.

“I like you under me.”

Bridget chuckled. “I can tell.”

“Thank you.” Jerica leaned down and pressed their mouths together again. “I really needed that.”

“I could tell something was up.” Bridget skimmed her fingers against Jerica’s cheek. “Just tell me what you need, when you need it, and I’ll find a way to do it for you.”

Grinning, Jerica shook her head. “And that’s why I love you.”

Bridget stilled, not quite sure if she’d heard correctly, but her heart told her she had. Then she backtracked, not sure if Jerica had meant it that way or only as a turn of phrase. Confusion filled her and she swallowed hard, trying to come up with a way to dig deeper into that without completely ruining the mood.

Jerica, however, was brilliant as always and bent down, pressing kiss after kiss into Bridget’s bare skin. “I do love you. I think I have for a while now, but I wanted to say it, and I wanted you to know it.”

Letting out a shuddering breath, Bridget cupped Jerica’s cheeks and brought her up for a long, deep kiss. She tried to let her actions do the talking, but as she slowed the embrace, she realized that she had to say the words, too. There was nothing that would make those words have less of an impact than not saying them.

“I love you, too,” Bridget whispered.

Jerica grinned. Her eyes watered, and the pure joy reflecting from her gaze was exactly what Bridget had needed to see and feel. This was the best moment of her life. It was one of the few times where someone told her that and she actually felt it, not to mention, it was one of the rare times someone told her that at all. Dragging in a breath, Bridget tried not to cry—though at least this time it would be tears of joy.

She held herself together and wrapped her arms around Jerica’s body, tugging her closer until Jerica fell into her. They snuggled together for a while until Jerica started to tease her,

kisses here and there, light nips, then she ramped it up, sucking on Bridget's nipple until it was peaked, swirling her tongue in circles as Bridget threaded her fingers into Jerica's hair and held on tightly.

"Jesus," Bridget mumbled.

"What? Like that?"

Rolling her eyes, Bridget nodded. "Yes. You've got a wicked tongue sometimes."

"Only sometimes."

Laughing lightly, Bridget planted her good foot into the mattress and flipped them over. Jerica cradled her. Bridget pushed herself up to stare down into those hazel eyes. "You know, I think you like the teasing."

"Of course I do, don't you?" Jerica gave her a challenging look. "Teasing is more than half the fun."

Shaking her head, Bridget bent down and gave Jerica the same treatment she'd been given. This time, she didn't stop with just Jerica's breasts, moving down so she was lying between Jerica's thighs, swirling her tongue and flicking it as Jerica moaned and writhed underneath her.

This time it took far longer to get Jerica to orgasm, but Bridget was flat-out determined to have her way and get Jerica off. As she finally crested through her orgasm, a thrill of joy slid through Bridget at the thought that she'd made that happen.

Crawling up Jerica's body, Bridget collapsed next to her. Jerica leaned in for a kiss. "How do you want it?"

"Oh, it's fine if we don't. I just wanted to get you—"

"That's not what I asked, Bridge, but if you really don't want to, we don't have to."

Bridget paused a second before responding. "No, I want to."

"Then how?" Jerica's eyes lit up with excitement. "Fingers? Mouth? Toy?"

“Do you have lube?” Bridget asked, hesitating. “Because we’ll need that no matter what we do.”

“Absolutely.” Jerica rolled to the far side of the bed and pulled out a drawer in her nightstand. “I’ve got regular, thick and goopy—” she giggled as she said that one “—but also strawberry and vanilla.”

“You’re the one who’s going to have to taste it, not me. You pick.”

“No allergies?”

Bridget shook her head. “No.”

“Good.” Jerica grabbed a black bottle and put a few pumps of the lube on her fingers. “So is the rest my choice? You said taste, so I assume you want my mouth.”

“That seemed to work well last time.”

Jerica grinned. “We can always try something different if you want.”

“Maybe next time.”

“Oh, is there going to be a next time?”

“I hope so,” Bridget answered, excitement building in her chest.

Jerica kissed her loudly, then deepened the embrace as she slid her fingers between Bridget’s legs and rubbed the lube into her. “I’ll make you come any way you want me to.”

Bridget groaned lightly, already feeling the heat from whatever warming lube Jerica must have chosen. It was like electricity between her legs. She wriggled, and Jerica smiled in response.

“Seems like you’re ready for something a little more intense?”

“Yes,” Bridget hissed out.

Jerica moved into the position Bridget had been in, using her mouth and fingers in tandem to bring Bridget higher. It felt so good, but Bridget knew she was a ways off from

orgasming. She closed her eyes, focusing everything on the sensations Jerica caused, on the slight tingles, on the swipe of her tongue, the press of her fingers, the suck of her mouth. Everything in her being became about what Jerica was doing to her.

Jerica didn't give up, though, like a few of Bridget's lovers had. And instead of making Jerica give up like she'd done before with other partners, Bridget re-doubled her focus. She wanted to come. She wanted to get off. She wanted this to be easy. As if she'd commanded it, tingles flew from everywhere in her body, shooting through her nerves and straight between her legs right to where Jerica was working her.

She would say something, but she couldn't form words. Gripping the sheets, Bridget lifted her hips as she cascaded through her orgasm, breathing out heavily as she crashed down from it. Jerica slowed her teasing, licking her fully before resting her chin on Bridget's hip bone.

“Good?”

“Hell yeah,” Bridget answered on a breath. “You can do that any day you want.”

Smiling, Jerica moved up. “Are we going to eat dinner?”

“In a minute...when I can feel my legs again and stand up without falling over.”

“Well, I know how to help you walk,” Jerica answered with a taunt.

“Shut up,” Bridget wrinkled her nose. “Yes, we will eat dinner. I spent all that time ordering it, you know.”

Laughing, Jerica rolled to the edge of the bed and stood up. She grabbed some pajamas and started dressing.

“We can do more of this later. First, food to keep us going all night.”

“Oh God,” Bridget murmured. She was going to need coffee if they were going to do this all night.

CHAPTER 19



BRIDGET HAD BEEN out of work for eight weeks before she was finally allowed back into the office. That morning, she'd gotten up early with Jerica as she got ready for work herself. They were quiet, Jerica not really commenting or asking about work and Bridget letting her do her thing while she sipped coffee and watched.

They'd talked the issue to death, but it was such a freak accident that Bridget could barely fault her line of work as the problem, though she knew her job was dangerous. She was the Sheriff in a tiny town of fifteen-hundred people. It wasn't like she was a street cop in Memphis or something. Her life was not in danger daily.

Jerica slipped into the chair next to her at the table and gave a small smile. "Are you nervous?"

Bridget shook her head. "I'm not, actually. I know this is the right decision."

"Good." Jerica reached out and covered Bridget's hand with her own. "I think it is, too, not that my opinion means much."

"It means just about everything to me." Bridget curled their fingers together as she sipped her coffee with her other hand. "And I'm glad I have your support. I'll need it when I run for reelection."

"Think you'll win?"

"I honestly don't know, but if I don't, I guess I know where I'll be moving." Bridget laughed lightly, having already

joked about moving to Jerica's and taking job in law enforcement there or down at the jail. It wouldn't be Bridget's preference, but it would still be a job in the line of work she was called to do. "When will you be back tonight?"

"I'll be *home* as soon as my shift ends and as soon as I can get up here." Jerica leaned in and pressed a kiss to Bridget's cheek. "You can find your own rides, right?"

"Yeah. Fuck, I can't wait to drive again."

Jerica snorted. "But then I don't get to be your chauffeur to everything."

"You haven't been, but I appreciate the sentiment and agree with it. It's a good time together when we can have it."

"It is for sure." Jerica leaned in and kissed Bridget fully on her lips this time. "I'll see you tonight."

"Yeah." Bridget reached up, tangling her fingers in Jerica's hair before dragging her back down for a deeper, longer kiss. She'd gotten quite used to waking up with Jerica, and even though they still had both houses and weren't technically living together, they spent the vast majority of their nights in the same house, either hers or Jerica's. It wasn't something Bridget wanted to give up, but since she was back to working, she wondered if those nights would dwindle since she had to be in town to get rides to and from work.

Jerica broke the kiss. "I've got to go."

"I love you," Bridget whispered.

"I love you, too." Jerica kissed her again, quickly, and moved away to the refrigerator, grabbing her lunch bag. They'd made each of them a meal the night before.

The sun was coming over the horizon an hour after Jerica left, and Bridget knew if they moved in together, the sacrifice would be on Jerica, not on Bridget, since she had to live in the county she was elected to. Pressing her lips tightly together, plans forming in her mind, Bridget finished her third cup of coffee for the morning and went into her bedroom to get dressed.

Arriving at the courthouse in the cruiser was more emotional than she had anticipated. Her heart raced as Landon parked out front. “Here you are, Sheriff.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Thanks, *Deputy*.”

They never called each other by title, so she knew it was because he was trying to be a smart ass. He was going to go out and finish his patrols, so Bridget stepped out of the car and made her way inside, still slower than before because of the black cast on her leg, but at least able to walk without crutches finally.

She made her way to the elevator and punched the button for the third floor of the courthouse—her sanctuary, her home, the place she spent most of the hours of her day for years, and the one place she hadn’t stepped in for two months.

Bridget drew in a deep breath as she hesitated at the door to the Sheriff’s Department. Sonny had been sent home, so he wasn’t in the jail any longer, but still, her heart broke for him and his own stupidity. He didn’t mean to run her over—at least from her current understanding—he was just a drunk idiot. But at least she would finally have access to the incident report if she wanted to read it.

The doorknob was cold in her fingers. She’d spent most of the last two weeks finishing the requirements for her clearance and making sure this was what she really wanted. At the end of the day, she couldn’t imagine her work life looking any different.

As soon as she stepped into the office, the room erupted with clapping. Bridget grinned and put a hand over her heart as she looked at each one of her deputies and her dispatchers, Rose—the secretary who worked during the day, and other workers from the courthouse who had decided to join in the celebration.

Bridget shook her head as tears prickled in her eyes. She had no idea what to say. Fucking Landon had somehow gotten there ahead of her. He must have run up those three flights of stairs to beat her to it. Putting her hands out in front of her, Bridget tried to get the clapping to stop, but it only got louder.

“You’re all idiots,” she finally managed to cough out.

Landon moved to the side and showcased a cake. Bridget narrowed her eyes at it before stumbling forward to see it. It was a cake done up by none other than Jean, who everyone in town knew made the best cakes. On it, she’d written in fancy lettering, *Welcome back, Sheriff!* Bridget’s heart was ready to burst.

She hadn’t expected this. It was stupid because she should have expected something, but she hadn’t. She’d mostly thought about coming in to work and trying to catch up on the last eight weeks. Rolling her shoulders, Bridget turned to Landon and wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

Everyone got their chance to snag a hug from her as happiness and joy gurgled in her chest. This was more than she had ever expected. They cut the cake. People came and went from the courthouse all day to see her, say hi, check in. She got absolutely no work done aside from pulling up the schedule to figure out who the fuck was supposed to be working that week and when.

She was just sitting down during another lull when Rose knocked on the door impishly. “You have another visitor, Bridget.”

Sighing, Bridget straightened her back, wondering if it was the damn governor this time. She nodded at Rose, indicating she could let whoever it was in. She couldn’t remember the last time the Sheriff’s office had seen this much traffic. Rose was earning her pay today.

Hattie stepped into the doorway, a bouquet of flowers in her hands. “Hey, Bridget, sorry this is later than expected. I wanted to have them up here for when you came in to work this morning, but we had someone come in to make an order for funeral flowers.”

Bridget cocked her head at the bouquet. “Don’t worry about it.”

Hattie handed the glass vase over. “These are from a special someone, or so I’m told. I didn’t quite catch her name.

It didn't sound like English.”

Bridget tensed, clenching her jaw tightly. The undertone of racism in her fair town annoyed the fuck out of her, but she couldn't beat it out of them, unfortunately. “Thanks. I'm sure I'll figure out who they're from.”

“Yeah. So, how's your first day back?”

Bridget sighed, setting the vase on the corner of her desk. She'd have to look at the note later when Hattie wasn't around because she did not want to continue that conversation. She sat back down, leaning into her chair and crossing her arms over her uniform, which miraculously still fit well.

“It's been great. Mostly just one long party that hasn't quite ended. There's still some cake left, I think, if you want to grab a slice. Jean made it.”

“Of course she did.” Hattie patted Bridget's hand.

Hattie was her mother's age, had worked at the flower store since she was in high school, and had never thought about doing something else. In some ways, Bridget envied her, and in others, she couldn't even stomach that thought. Life had been easy for Hattie where it had been tough for Bridget—she supposed she would always envy that when it came up.

“Do you think you're ready to be back?”

“Sorry?” Bridget furrowed her brow. It wasn't the first time someone had asked her that, but it was the first time it had sounded so offensive. She couldn't figure out if it was because of the comment about the name or the prying or the jealousy bubbling up, but Bridget ignored it.

“I mean, you're still healing, right?”

“Yeah,” Bridget answered. “I'm on office duty for another two to three months easily. I won't be out in the field just yet, but I can at least help here and do some of the extra stuff once I'm cleared to drive.”

“You're not cleared to drive?”

Bridget froze. She'd forgotten that Hattie was one of the gossip-whores around town. It was the worst part about her

running the only flower shop and getting so many special occasion flowers. “I’m not. I will be soon, don’t you worry. Hattie, I hate to cut this short, but I’ve got two months’ worth of work to catch up on.”

“Oh, right.” Hattie smiled and patted Bridget’s hand. “I copied the name of who those are from off the credit card, so you should be able to figure out right quick.”

“Thanks.” Bridget nodded, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

As soon as she was cast into silence, Bridget snagged the card from the beautiful bouquet of flowers and read it. “Good luck on your first day back. Jerica.”

Bridget wrinkled her nose as a smile blossomed on her lips. She made sure those flowers had a prominent place on her desk amidst all the rest of the gifts she’d gotten that day. She wouldn’t even bring them home. She’d let them sit there until they died—though Rose would no doubt keep them alive as long as possible. She sent Jerica a quick text of thanks before digging into what was left of her day at work, bending over her desk.

The knock on her door surprised her. Bridget shot her head up, finding Eli leaning against the doorframe with a shit-eating grin on her lips. “I see you had quite the party.”

“I did. What are you doing here so early?”

“It’s after six, Bridge.”

Frowning, Bridget checked her watch. Eli was right, which meant it was also time to leave work for the day. The incident report had sat unread on the corner of her desk while she focused on the rest of the work that she absolutely needed to get done—and still needed to get done, because she hadn’t finished it. She was going to be neck deep in the last two months for at least the upcoming month while she tried to juggle what had happened in her absence and what was currently happening and what was going on in town in the upcoming months.

Bridget groaned as she stretched her back. “I finally started to get some work done in the last couple of hours. I suppose when everyone started going home.”

Eli snorted. “So you are more popular than me. Told you.”

“Shut up.” Bridget pulled face. “Thanks for the ride, though. You know I could have asked one of the deputies.”

“I know, but this way I get to see you on your first day back. Besides, I had to come to town to get flowers from Hattie. Something Mom ordered? I don’t know. She’s going a bit crazy with the wedding details right now.”

“Eli, you’re getting married in two days. I think this is the time the detail people are supposed to panic.”

“Yeah, but does she have to be so...so...panicky about it?”

Busting out a laugh, Bridget walked around her desk to grab her jacket. “You’re excited for it, don’t lie.”

“I’m excited for it to be over in some ways. We should have just eloped. Hosting a wedding is vastly different from planning one.”

“Sure it is.”

They fell into a comfortable silence as they took the elevator down to the main floor and headed out to Eli’s truck. As soon as they were inside, Bridget clenched her jaw. “Speaking of wedding—”

“Oh my God, are you getting married?” Eli’s eyes widened. “I called it! I so called it!”

“I’m not getting married,” Bridget muttered. “But I did want to ask you something.”

“Ask me what?” Eli pulled through the back streets the five blocks to Bridget’s house.

“At your wedding, since it’s going to be a big to-do and since we’ll be there, would you, um...would you mind if I asked Jerica to marry me?”

“Holy fuck,” Eli muttered.

Bridget's stomach clenched. She couldn't tell if it was shock, excitement, or consternation. Bridget held her breath as she waited for some kind of answer.

"Are you serious?" Eli asked.

"When am I anything but serious?" Bridget deadpanned.

Eli pulled up in front of Bridget house, putting the truck in neutral as she turned to look Bridget over. "You're serious."

"Yes. I thought we'd established that."

The grin that broke out on Eli's face was enough of an answer for how she felt about the situation. "I thought you were just going to come out to the town that night. I didn't think you were going to seal the deal! You haven't been dating all that long."

"I know." Bridget twiddled her thumbs together as she stared at her house. "But it feels right."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely."

"Good, because I love Jerica. And my answer is yes. I have to talk to Sarah, but I don't think she'll mind. Really. Do you have a ring?"

Cold washed through Bridget, and she nodded.

"You bought a ring already? Damn, Bridge! When you move, you move fast."

"I didn't buy it." At Eli's confused look, Bridget continued, "I have Gram's ring."

"How did you manage to snag that over your sister?"

"Well, originally it went to Eddie, but his wife didn't want it. So they offered it to my sister, and she didn't want it, claiming it was too old, so mom gave it to me."

Eli blew out a breath. "They are missing something with you, I swear. Let me ask Sarah, and I'll let you know, but I'm pretty sure it'll be a yes. How do you want to do it?"

"I was thinking at the reception."

“We’ve got this.” Eli had that look in her face, the one that meant trouble. “Let me plan this. Trust me.”

“You helped me plan the first date, and that did not go well. What makes you think I trust you to plan this?”

Eli giggled. “It’s my wedding. I have to plan it, but I promise I’ll really just tell you when and hand the baton off to you and you can propose however you want.”

“Thanks. No Buddy this time?”

Eli groaned and closed her eyes. “Sarah loves that damn bull. He will make an appearance for the wedding, but I promise you I will sell him if he comes near your proposal.”

“Promises are hard to keep when you’re making them to me and not your soon-to-be wife.”

“I know, but...I won’t let him ruin this moment. I swear.”

“Good.”

Eli grinned again, then leaned over and captured Bridget in a hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Eli. That means a lot.”

“I know it does. Now get out of my truck so I can go talk to Sarah. Oh, this is going to be a fun conversation.”

Happy at her best friend’s own excitement, Bridget climbed out of the truck and made her way into the house. She spent the first thirty minutes prepping dinner, and as soon as Jerica texted that she was driving home, Bridget slipped it into the oven to cook.

Somehow, now that she’d said it out loud, it became real. Proposing wasn’t just a thought in her head any longer, and sure, they hadn’t been together that long, but everything about her and Jerica seemed to click. And getting engaged didn’t mean they were getting married any time soon. Just look at Eli and Sarah for proof of that. They’d been engaged over a year and still hadn’t tied the knot.

Shuddering, Bridget pulled up her work computer and started in on some more office stuff to try and get a little bit

ahead since most of her day was a wash. She would stop as soon as Jerica got back so they could spend some proper time together. Except she couldn't get her head out of the place it was in. Proposing.

Bridget had always wanted that to happen. She'd always wanted to fall in love, get married, maybe have a family—no, definitely have a family. She wanted kids, and she wanted to do right by them unlike her parents had done by her. She would use them as a prime example of what not to do. She just hadn't thought it would ever happen, so she'd forgotten that dream.

She must have gotten lost staring at her computer screen, because she'd done no work by the time the front door opened and Jerica came inside. "Bridge?"

"I'm in the kitchen!" she called, loudly so Jerica would hear her. When Jerica came into the room and planted a kiss on Bridget's lips, she asked, "How was work?"

"It was good, not as busy as I expected it to be."

"Oh?"

"It's a full moon. I bet they all show up tonight."

"I hadn't even noticed," Bridget answered, closing the lid on her laptop. "My day was a wash. They brought in cake, though, and a bunch of other food."

"Oh yeah?" Jerica's eyes lit up as she pulled off her jacket and draped it over the back of one of the chairs.

"Yes, and—" Bridget tugged Jerica's arm so she landed in Bridget's lap "—thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful. I left them at work so I can think of you every time I see them."

Jerica smiled. "I'm glad you liked them."

Bridget kissed her, deepening the embrace and lingering for as long as she wanted. Jerica really was the one for her. She'd changed a lot since she'd been in love with Eli, and while she might still love Eli, she could equally see that Eli had found her own match—one where loving was far easier than it had been between the two of them.

Jerica nipped Bridget's lower lip. "What's for dinner? It smells amazing."

"Some spaghetti casserole thing Eli showed me how to make."

"Really? It smells good."

"I hope it is." Bridget kissed her again. "But I'm not quite ready to be done with this."

Jerica giggled but moved back in to kiss her. They stayed that way, lips locked until the timer on the oven went off. Jerica extracted herself from Bridget's lap with a couple more kisses and pulled out the food. She smiled. "I'm going to change before we eat. I feel nasty from my day at work."

"You do that." Bridget stayed put as Jerica made her way into the bedroom, already completely comfortable in the house.

They had talked about where they might live, what they might do, plans for the future, hopes and dreams. It'd been just about every conversation they'd had lately, and Bridget knew they both wanted the same things—marriage, family, kids, and careers they both loved.

Climbing to her feet, Bridget walked to the bedroom and watched as Jerica stripped down naked before pulling on loose clothing, eyeing her ass and tits every chance she got. When Jerica turned around, she pursed her lips. "While I love you in your uniform and think it's absolutely hot, do you want to get out of it?"

"I might need some help with that." Bridget raised an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"Oh, I think I could definitely help, Sheriff." Jerica walked closer, putting her hands on Bridget's hips as she leaned in, her lips so close to Bridget's ear that she could feel her breath. "And if you want, I can absolutely help with something else, too."

"Yes." Bridget turned her chin and captured Jerica's mouth with her own.

In seconds, Jerica was pulling at the buttons on her uniform and stripping Bridget as naked as she was. They stumbled around her cast, finally getting it off so they could get her pants down, but as soon as Bridget fell backward onto the bed, she knew she was home. Wherever Jerica was, that was her home. It wasn't a house, a building, a job, or a friend. It was this woman.

CHAPTER 20



JERICA AND BRIDGET drove up to *Indigo* mid-morning, mostly to help with the final touches for the wedding. The house was busting with people already, which Jerica assumed was the rest of the family finally having arrived, including Sarah's. Seeing a woman who looked very much like Sarah but equally different was the tip-off for that.

Bridget grasped Jerica's hand as they walked into the house, finding Karen in the kitchen directing traffic. Her gaze softened as soon as she saw the two of them. "Oh good, you're here."

"What do you need?" Bridget asked, squeezing Jerica's hand at the same time.

"Can you direct anyone coming in where to park and walk down to the wedding site?"

"Sure." Bridget's chest puffed out.

Jerica nearly smiled at the look, pretty sure that Bridget was made for this kind of helping. It was essentially police work but not at the same time. Karen stepped in and gripped Bridget's arm and kissed her cheek.

"You look lovely, by the way. You, too, Jerica." Karen did the same for her and stepped back. "It's good to see you both again. Now get, I've got to figure out which kid isn't listening."

"Yours or grands?" Bridget joked.

Karen gave her a flat look and pointed a finger at Bridget. “All the kids. Including you.”

“I’m on my way out the door.” Bridget turned, Jerica following as they went out the way they’d come.

She was walking much better with only the black air cast, which they both enjoyed. It was far easier for Bridget to maneuver around and do things she wanted to. Jerica kept their hands locked together as they made their way behind the barn where Eli had moved the wedding arch and they had set up chairs they’d borrowed from the church.

They still had about an hour before the wedding was going to start, so as soon as they got to the fork in the road, Jerica tugged Bridget in and pressed their mouths together in a tender kiss. “Karen is right, you know. You are very handsome in this.”

Bridget wrinkled her nose. “I can’t remember the last time I wore it.”

Jerica ran her fingers over the suspenders all the way down to Bridget’s hips and just under the edge of her jacket. Leaning in again, she stole another kiss. “Well, I for one had fun watching you get in it this morning.”

Bridget’s cheeks tinged pink.

“And I think I’m going to have loads of fun getting you out of it.”

With hands on Jerica’s hips, Bridget shook her head slowly. “Your mind is in the gutter.”

“It’s a wedding, Bridge. We’re supposed to be thinking about that kind of thing.”

“No, the wedding couple is. We’re supposed to do exactly what Karen tells us to do to help out around here.”

“Uh-huh, right.” Jerica kissed her again.

It wasn’t long before people started arriving, and Bridget directed traffic and told them all where to park. Jerica stayed mostly silent but helped with what she could. Bridget checked

her watch several times before grabbing Jerica's hand and walking toward the back of the barn.

Jerica had never been to that part of the farm, so she followed dutifully to the place they'd told everyone to go. She was surprised Bridget continued to hold her hand the entire way, twining their fingers and locking them together. She went with it, of course, because she loved it, but was surprised Bridget was being so forward with their relationship.

As they got to the site where the ceremony would happen, Bob waved at them from the front row. Bridget went full speed ahead, walking with Jerica right next to her as they got to the front.

"What's going on, Bob?" Bridget asked.

"You're sitting up here."

"Oh...um..." Bridget shifted her glance from him to Jerica. "We can just sit in the back. It's fine."

"No. You're family. Eli wants you up here."

"Okay." Bridget shrugged but moved to sit in a chair in the first row.

Jerica leaned into Bridget's side as Bob disappeared. He brought Karen down the aisle to sit next to Bridget and the rest of Eli's family. Another couple walked down, sitting on the opposite side, and Jerica could only assume they were Sarah's parents, and since they sat next to the woman who looked like Sarah, she bet she was right.

Next up was the minister. Bridget leaned over and whispered, "That's Pastor Scotty. She's the most open pastor in town."

"Is she?"

"Yeah."

"So she could do our wedding?" Jerica asked the question innocently enough, but she could feel Bridget tense uncontrollably, her entire body going rigid. It was probably too far to push that question just yet. They hadn't been dating that

long, although Jerica became more convinced by the day that there was no one else out there for her but this woman.

Bridget didn't answer as the minister moved her hands upward and asked everyone to stand. They shifted around, waiting for the next thing to happen. Music began softly, only a guitar and two male voices, weaving together in a tight harmony. Jerica looked to see where they were, trying to figure it out, and finally found them just off to the side in the back of the aisles.

Sarah came down first, the stark ivory suit she wore absolutely stunning on her. She'd barely touched her hair, just making sure it stayed out of her face as she and the two men with the guitars walked down the aisle with her. Jerica kept her hand in Bridget's, but she assumed they were the two men who were in the band with Sarah, although she didn't understand why Sarah's sister wasn't up there with them.

The tune stayed the same and they continued to play as Eli came down next. Bridget gave a shuddering gasp as soon as she was in full view. The dress she wore was very simple. It cut around her knees, dropping below in strips of fabric that swayed with her movement and the slight breeze outside. The top had short lace sleeves to cover her shoulders and a beautiful wide V-neckline.

"She's beautiful," Jerica murmured.

"I never thought she would wear a dress for this," Bridget answered as quietly as possible. "Never."

"People change, Bridge. Isn't that the point of growing up?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Two women followed Eli in, their dresses not matching in the least, but they still looked beautiful. "Eli's sister, you know, and the other one is Ava. She's Eli's neighbor and was also in our class."

"Ah. They must have been close."

"They were. I think they got closer after all the drama between us."

“I bet if you two had reconciled sooner, she would have invited you up there.” Jerica kissed Bridget’s cheek, wondering if that’s where some of this stress was coming from.

Bridget shrugged. “Who knows.”

Eli grinned at Sarah, then looked at Pastor Scotty before getting a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Before we begin,” Pastor Scotty said. “I believe Eli has one thing she wants to do.”

Confused, Jerica stayed still, her hands wrapped around Bridget’s arm as she held on tightly. She’d never seen a wedding like this, and she’d been to plenty with her large family. No one walked either woman down the aisle. Their attendants followed them, and now...this next thing was just odd.

Eli stepped away from the group up front and came straight to Bridget, that same mischievous look on her face. “Bridget.”

“Elijah,” Bridget stated, her voice firm and low. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Well, I think I’m missing someone up here. So, you coming or not?”

“What?”

“Get up here. I need you.” Bridget and Eli locked gazes. Jerica let go of Bridget’s hand with a squeeze and helped propel her to take a step forward. Eli nodded at Jerica and led Bridget up to the front, taking a position right behind Ava.

Karen reached over for Jerica’s hand, and she allowed her to take it. “Eli has wanted Bridget up there with her for a long time.”

“I’m glad it all worked out.”

Karen turned soft, watery eyes on Jerica. “It did, didn’t it?”

They focused on the ceremony. As the pastor began talking and they were all allowed to be seated, it was a beautiful thing

to watch. Jerica had rarely been to such an open wedding of two women in their part of the country. Usually her friends who were gay left town to get married, which meant she rarely got to attend.

This, however, was one of the most stunning and miraculous things she had ever witnessed. There were at least a hundred people there—the service was unique and so them. She smiled as they exchanged vows and rings, grinning at each other the entire time. Jerica even had to wipe some of her own tears away. She happened to glance up at Bridget, who stood tall and proud, but Bridget's gaze was locked on Jerica, not on Eli and Sarah.

The look was so powerful that it caught Jerica's breath and stole it. She wanted this for the two of them. Whether it was a big wedding or not, she wanted Bridget to be her wife, to be married and to never have to be alone again. If she hadn't known she was in love before, that single look from Bridget was enough to tell her exactly how they both felt then.

Maybe in the next year they could start actually talking marriage and wedding and kids. That was absolutely something Jerica wanted, and she wanted it with this amazingly beautiful and tough woman standing in front of her.

The round of applause distracted them, and their gazes broke as Sarah stepped in and dipped Eli down, kissing her passionately in front of the entire crowd. Jerica's heart burst with excitement as they came back up, hands clasped together. Bridget was crying, but so was Jerica and everyone else around her. She'd never felt so drawn to a family other than her own before, but this family radiated love. It was amazing to see so much support.

Sarah and Eli walked back down the aisle and stopped as they got to the end. Jerica had no idea who brought him over, but the bull from their first date stood tied to a post, even dressed for the occasion. Eli untied his harness and they walked with him back toward the house.

Pastor Scotty got everyone's attention and directed them toward the house, where there would be dancing and food out

in the front. As she left, all the attendants followed, Bridget last in line, once again making eye contact with Jerica. A shudder ran through her spine. Oh yes, she was going to have fun with Bridget later that night when they got home. She was going to take each piece of clothing off and torture her with kisses.

Her cheeks heated as Karen grabbed her hand and led her down the aisle with the family. They walked back toward the house, where Karen asked for Jerica's help in getting the food out for people to eat. Jerica gladly agreed to be of service.



Everyone had food and the dancing began. Jerica sat next to Bridget at a long table, talking animatedly with an elderly woman, Cady, who was there with her partner, MaryBelle, and apparently owned the hardware and lumber store in town.

"I'm so glad to see Eli and Sarah finally get hitched," Cady murmured.

"Oh?" Jerica raised her eyebrows.

"Eli moves slow as molasses, you know." Cady grinned. "Sometimes she needs someone to give her a good shove. Isn't that right, Bridget?"

"Yeah," Bridget answered, but she didn't really seem to be paying attention. She worried her thumb over the tips of her fingers repeatedly until Jerica grabbed her hand to still the nervous gesture.

"I've been cheering them on from the start." Cady grinned broadly and crossed her arms until MaryBelle sat next to her with another drink.

"They're certainly a beautiful couple together. I only started to get to know them recently, but I've taken to both of them."

Cady nodded and gave a pointed look to Bridget. "Sarah's made herself right at home here in town. She's very welcome."

Jerica wasn't quite sure what was going on between the two of them, nor was she sure she wanted to know, but she stayed in her lane and didn't ask or pry. At least not yet. She would get that information from Bridget later that night or sometime that week, but she wanted to know what was going on in the silent conversation.

Thus far, every person Jerica got to know at the wedding and in Bridget's life seemed like someone who would support her in being out, other than her parents. She couldn't figure out why Bridget hadn't taken this step before.

Cady even said she'd known about Eli and Bridget for years. Bridget had frowned but said nothing. Jerica slipped a hand onto Bridget's thigh and gave her a gentle squeeze before Bridget leaned in and whispered into Jerica's ear. "I'll be right back."

Jerica frowned as Bridget shifted out of her chair and walked away. She tracked Bridget's movements until Cady caught her attention again. "How long have you two been dating?"

"Oh, a few months now."

"Yeah?" Cady looked excited at that information. She sipped her beer and leaned in her chair.

MaryBelle shook her head. "Now you're going to start an inquisition."

Jerica smiled and lowered her gaze. "It's fine. I'm sure there are lots of questions as to who I am. Bridget is from here. I'm not."

"No, but are you from around here?"

"I grew up in Garden. Went to school in Hays and then moved back as soon as I could. I missed it, most days. But I got my dream job working in the ER. I'm a nurse."

"Oh!" Cady's eyes lit up. "I didn't know that. Did you hear that MaryBelle?"

"I did," MaryBelle answered, giving Cady a cheeky look. "She's not your personal nurse, remember that."

“I’d never think that.”

“She would,” MaryBelle interjected. “And if she starts in on that, just walk away. She won’t be offended.”

Jerica giggled, grabbing her own drink. The two of them were precious together. Jerica rarely found lesbian couples who had been together so long out in their area of the country, but she was loving the dynamic between these two. “How did you two meet?”

Cady grinned broadly. “We were high school rivals.”

“What?” Jerica nearly choked on her drink.

MaryBelle shook her head. “She makes it seem worse than it was.”

“It *was* bad!”

“No, it wasn’t. We weren’t rivals. We didn’t even go to the same school. I was calling on Cady’s brother’s best friend, so I was around a bit when Cady was there. She’s two years younger than me, and let’s just say Cady wasn’t always so outgoing.”

“No, I had to find you for that.” Cady chuckled. “It’s true. She was dating Ernie’s best friend, and they’d double sometimes, and she’d come by the house. Ernie had a car, and John didn’t, so they doubled a lot.”

MaryBelle’s lips curled up. “Actually, I always suggested we take Ernie’s car so that I could see her, but she’ll deny that.”

“I will not.” Cady pouted. “It took until the summer after she graduated for it all to start to fall apart. She came around less, and John sulked. Ernie thought he’d ask her out, so he sent me—who knows why—to talk to her.”

“And the rest is history,” MaryBelle murmured into her drink.

“No, it’s not.” Cady pouted. “Ernie sent me to her house to see if she’d go out with him, but instead, I got the girl. There, now the story’s done.”

Jerica laughed again at the two of them. She'd never met a more animated couple before, especially not one that had been out for so long in such a small town. She had so many questions she wanted to ask, none of which were relevant or even considered appropriate, but she wanted to know every detail about their story.

She tried to find Bridget in the crowd dancing. Her gaze swept through the people, but she wasn't coming up with anyone who resembled her Bridget. Sighing, Jerica grabbed her drink and distracted herself. She didn't mind being left alone, but Bridget had been acting odd since the reception started, and she wanted to make sure that it wasn't panic at coming out to so many people at once.

Whatever song was being sung died down, and Sarah stood up at the front of the makeshift stage they'd built. She had Jerica's attention as she grabbed a microphone, and Jerica was not-so-secretly hoping they'd get a private performance by none other than Sadie Bade. She sipped her drink as Sarah calmed the crowd down.

"You know," Sarah said, "that Eli and I tend to not be very traditional in anything we do."

There was a roar of laughter and agreement.

"So, it's no surprise Buddy joined us for the wedding, or that we didn't do things the proper way. One thing we didn't want to do either was to toss the bouquet."

Eli showed up at the front of the stage, in her hands a bouquet Jerica hadn't seen before. She furrowed her brow at it, wondering if they'd gotten a special one just for this.

"However, would all the unmarried ladies and gents and enbies come up here please." Sarah grinned as people shifted toward the front of the stage.

Jerica stayed firmly seated, having zero desire to participate in something so pedantic. Cady bumped her shoulder. "Get on up there, girl."

"No, I think I'm good here."

"No, go up. This is for you young people. Go on."

Chided, Jerica set her drink down and walked her way up to the crowd. Sarah arranged everyone, getting them to move so she could see everyone's face. It meant Jerica was suddenly thrust into the front of the crowd. Kara was nearby with her camera in her hands, ready to take a picture.

Jerica crossed her arms, once again looking for Bridget in the sea of people and not finding her. She just wanted to make sure she was okay—at least, that was what she kept telling herself.

“All right,” Sarah started. “Y'all ready for this?”

The crowd cheered. Jerica cocked her head at the stage and at Eli, who was staring directly at her. Everyone became hushed as they waited for Eli to throw the bouquet as was tradition. Time moved so slowly as they impatiently stood before both Eli and Sarah until finally, Bridget walked out in front of Eli.

She looked pale, her gait still off because of the cast on her foot, but she also looked far more confident than she had in weeks. Jerica grinned at her, finally glad to have found her again. Bridget walked right up to her, grabbing her hands and pulling her into the center of the semi-circle surrounding Eli.

The crowd of people moved back, splitting so the rest of those still sitting could see. Jerica's stomach had butterflies rampaging around in them as Bridget carefully slid down onto one knee, a ring she produced from somewhere in her hand.

Jerica swallowed hard, her heart racing as her mouth went dry. “Bridge, what are you doing?”

“Just give me a second.”

Time slowed down until seconds took minutes or maybe even hours. Jerica was lost in nothing other than Bridget's cool blue eyes as she stared up at her from the ground. Finally after what seemed like forever, Bridget spoke.

“I know it hasn't been very long, that we're only just starting to get to know each other. But you said to me once that you didn't want to be looking for anyone else, and I have

to say, I feel exactly the same way. I love you, Jerica Alvarez, and I want to marry you, if you'll have me."

Jerica pressed her hands to her mouth as she stared down at Bridget, this beautifully strong and amazing woman who kneeled before her. Tears stung her eyes, streaming down her cheeks. She had no words. She couldn't utter anything she was so stunned. Instead, she got down on her knees and wrapped her arms around Bridget's neck, dragging her into a kiss as she held on as tightly as she possibly could.

"I love you," Jerica whispered when she pulled away, tears hot on her cheeks. "I love you so much."

"So...you'll marry me?" Bridget's face was tight with anxiety, through and through.

"Yes. Of course. I love you."

They kissed again. The sounds from the people surrounding them came roaring into Jerica's ears, but she ignored it. All she wanted was to focus on Bridget and on no one else. This was their moment.

Eventually she stood up, and Sarah started the band going and sang with them. Jerica was so taken up by everything that she could focus on nothing other than Bridget and being close to her. They danced together for the first song, Jerica sure to not hit Bridget's cast in any way. As soon as the first song ended, everyone came up to congratulate them before Sarah took off with another song.

Jerica's heart was so filled with joy and happiness. She'd had no idea Bridget had planned this. The ring on her finger, however, felt absolutely perfect, and it was for her. There were no large diamonds. Instead it was a gold band with three small diamonds embedded in it so it wouldn't break gloves or anything. She might get away with wearing it at work if she wanted.

Leaning in, she kissed Bridget again and lingered this time. She didn't want to leave Bridget's side ever again. She'd known for longer than Bridget perhaps that she'd wanted to be with no one else, and this sealed it. It may not have been very

long, but they were meant to be together. Jerica was convinced of that, and it was something she would never give up. Bridget was hers, and she was Bridget's. Now they would be together forever.

CHAPTER 21



ONE YEAR LATER...

Indigo looked gorgeous this time of year. Bridget had been spending more time there in the past few months, hanging out with Eli and Sarah. Jerica had come too. Election season was coming up, and she was already working her ass off to try and keep her position, but so far, no one in town was running against her. While it wasn't exactly the way she wanted to win, she'd take it if she managed to keep her position.

Bridget was in the basement, moving in and out of the bedroom to the bathroom as she got dressed. It was one of the most important days of her life, the second one, actually. There was no way she was going to look like a run-down idiot as she walked down that aisle.

Sarah rapped her knuckles against the door. Bridget blew out a breath and closed her eyes as she leaned over the sink in the bathroom. "Yeah, come in."

Sarah smiled, which gave Bridget a thrill of hope for the day. "Well, you've got one gorgeous bride. Did you know that?"

"Yeah." Bridget grinned, thinking of Jerica. She hadn't seen the dress, something Jerica had insisted on even though they were far from a traditional couple. She wanted to do whatever Jerica wanted in order for this wedding to be perfect. "I think I got lucky with that one."

“We both did.” Sarah bumped her shoulder into Bridget’s. “However, if we don’t get you dressed, Karen is going to come down here and throw a fit about how no one is listening and no one is ready.”

Bridget eyed her. “You’re not dressed.”

“It’s more important that you get dressed.”

Snorting, Bridget sighed. “Fine.”

She straightened her back and started stripping off her clothes, dropping the comfortable ones she’d worn up there that morning onto the floor. Sarah turned around and left. As soon as Bridget had her pants and shirt on, she stepped out of the bathroom.

“What else do I need to do? Other than finish getting dressed that is?”

Sarah shook her head. “We’ve got everything covered.”

Frowning, Bridget pulled the ice blue vest out of the clothing bag and held it out to inspect. Jerica had chosen the color, specifically to match her eyes. She wasn’t sure it did match, but it was probably decently close. Sarah eyed her curiously, and Bridget ignored her as she pulled the vest on, buttoning it.

As soon as she they were both dressed, Bridget started up the stairs, but Sarah stopped her. “Uh-uh. That’s not allowed.”

“What do you mean it’s not allowed?”

“You don’t get to see the bride before she’s walking down the aisle.”

Bridget growled lightly and crossed her arms. “Are you really going to stop me from going upstairs?”

“Yes.”

“How the hell am I supposed to get out of the house to get to the gazebo then?”

“I will make sure the coast is clear when the time is right.”

Bridget pouted and flopped onto the couch, putting her feet up on the coffee table and not even caring that Eli would be pissed about it. She was not happy that she couldn't even go upstairs to get something—not that she needed anything.

It took another hour for Eli to come down and grin at them. “You ready, Bridge?”

“Been ready,” she grumbled.

“Then come on.” Eli's perpetual happiness annoyed her, though Bridget knew it wouldn't last long.

She went through the motions. Eli took her out to the gazebo while Sarah grabbed her guitar and strummed a song as she and Eli walked down to the front where Pastor Scotty was waiting. Her wedding wasn't as large as Eli's and Sarah's—well, at least her side of it. Jerica had more than enough family to make up for Bridget's lack of family.

It still stung that her parents refused to even acknowledge she was getting married. She'd sent them an invitation on a whim, not telling Jerica until after she mailed it, and had hoped somewhere in the back of her mind that they would answer and come. The pain from not seeing them as she stood at the front of all her friends and family was more than she'd anticipated.

The music changed, and Bridget's breath caught. Jerica's bridesmaids walked down one at a time, and it seemed to take forever for the last one to get there. When the music shifted again, Bridget stared up, looking straight into Jerica's eyes as she appeared from around the corner of the house.

God, she is stunning. Her dress flowed around her, catching in the wind. Her hair was in long ringlets down her back, and a crown of white daisies adorned her head. Bridget couldn't help the smile that grew on her lips. She wanted to run up and wrap her arms around Jerica, swinging her around in a circle.

She shared a look with Eli, leaned over and whispered, “Think she'll get mad if I go hug her?”

Eli grinned. “I think you should do it.”

Not needing any more encouragement, Bridget jumped off the top step of the gazebo and ran. Jerica looked surprised at first, but then her gaze softened, and she opened her arms in a welcoming embrace as Bridget grabbed her around the waist and did exactly as she had wanted. Jerica cupped her cheeks and kissed her tenderly until Bridget finally put her down.

“You’re supposed to wait.”

Bridget snorted. “I couldn’t.”

“Could you ever?”

“Nope. And there isn’t really a need to, is there?” She looked at Jerica’s father and nodded to him. “Sorry.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Don’t be. I couldn’t have picked anyone more perfect for her.”

He held his hand out in front of them, indicating they should walk the rest of the way together. Bridget wrapped their hands together and started down the aisle toward the gazebo, helping Jerica up the two steps to stand in front of Pastor Scotty who just shook her head at them with a grin.

“You two are incorrigible.”

“You like it, don’t lie,” Bridget quipped back.

“I do. But now, I think we should do a wedding. What about you?”

“Yes! Let’s do this. I’ve got everyone I need here.”

Jerica’s eyes glistened with tears of happiness.

“I don’t need anyone else.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian J. Smith has been publishing since 2013 but has been writing nearly her entire life. With a focus on women loving women fiction, AJ jumps genres from action-packed police procedurals to the seedier life of vampires and witches to sweet romances with a May-December twist. She loves writing and reading about women in the midst of the ordinariness of life.

AJ currently lives in Cheyenne, WY, although she moves often and has lived all over the United States. She loves to travel to different countries and places. She currently plays the roles of author, wife, and mother to two rambunctious toddlers, occasional handy-woman. Connect with her on Facebook, Twitter, or her blog.

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