

Greenbank Romances Book Three

Objection To Love



a sweet romantic comedy

KAREN THORNELL

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Also By Karen Thornell

For Tori Beck

The best cheerleader, wingwoman, and adventure-buddy
there ever was.



Em

***T**HIS WOULD BE A great place to kill someone.*

Em tightened her grip on the wheel, her knuckles growing white as she navigated the thunderstorm. Couldn't the rain have held off another twenty minutes till she got home from the office? Then her mind wouldn't be creating delusional scenarios of what could happen outside, where her headlights were cutting through the dark, blurry view.

Sheets of water fell hard against the windshield as the wipers waved frantically back and forth, and the silence inside her silver sedan was anything but, thanks to the noise of the storm. The canyon walls rose up on either side, looming down on her.

This would be a great place to kill someone.

She clenched the wheel even harder. Honestly, it wasn't the first time the thought had crossed Em's mind during one of her daily drives home from the office, but tonight felt especially ideal for some sort of horrific murder.

Of course, *all* murders were horrific. But with the pouring rain, dark sky, and the murder case she'd stayed late at work for, it was all a little too perfect. There was even a small stretch on the drive between Greenbank and Woodcastle where cell service cut out in the canyon.

Again: perfect.

Em drummed her fingers against the steering wheel. Maybe the Clayton case was entirely to blame for her macabre mood. It was taking up way too much of her time lately, but her boss wanted her to offer a plea, which she didn't think was the right option. So she was left pulling late nights compiling evidence for a first-degree murder charge.

Her phone vibrating in the cupholder made her jump. For half a second, she ignored it. The call would cut out in a couple of minutes anyway and it wasn't exactly the safest conditions to be answering her phone. But then she saw the name flashing on the dashboard's screen. She couldn't ignore her sister.

Correction: she couldn't ignore her sister for the *third* time that night.

She pushed the Bluetooth button on the steering wheel. "Hey, the call's gonna drop in about two minutes, so you'd better talk quick."

"Nice to hear from you too—I'll jump to it then. Want to come to dinner tomorrow?"

Em grimaced. She hated disappointing people, but this couldn't be helped. "I'll probably be working late."

"Too late for dinner? We could eat around seven or so if that's better?"

"Sorry, but this case is killing me." Pun unintended. "I doubt I'll get home any sooner than I'm going to tonight."

"Wait. You're only just heading home? Em, what is this—a personal record?"

Em let out a single laugh the moment before the tires of her car hit standing water and sent it spraying. She eased off the gas. "I know it's crazy, but after this week, it should get calmer."

There was a pause. Em glanced in her rearview mirror and moved to the right lane. She hated going fast through the canyon's turns, even though there were hardly ever any cars on this road. Especially at this time and in this weather.

"I'm about to lose you, April. Sorry about tomorrow."

"It's fine. Just... Em?" Her sister's voice was hesitant.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know that you've had a calm week since you started. You don't need to be perfect at your job to be valuable, you know? There's a lot more to life than work. And busyness does not equate to life satisfaction."

Em shook her head. "I know, April. But I love my job. I promise to make time for dinner next week. Sound good?"

April didn't answer, and Em glanced at the screen to see that the call had dropped. She focused back on the road. What had possessed her to live in Greenbank instead of Woodcastle, where the county offices were? The twenty-minute drive was starting to wear on her. She could be in a bath by now. She could be asleep.

Well, she could be reviewing the Clayton case. Which was the responsible thing to do.

The steering wheel pulled hard to the left.

Em startled and pulled it back, trying to recorrect. A loud, rhythmic thumping reached her ears.

"No, no, no, no," Em groaned.

Slowly, she steered the limping car to the side of the road. Her headlights blurred with the fall of heavy rain that was irregularly beating on the roof of her car.

She put the car in park, then stared into the dark of the night for half a heartbeat before dropping her head against the wheel. If she sat there long enough, maybe her tire, which she was ninety-five percent sure was now flat, would repair itself. But, after thirty seconds, her growling stomach urged her out the door. She needed food, and it was as unlikely that a hot, fresh pizza would appear in her pristinely clean car as it was that the tire would fix itself.

And so, in a show of incredible fortitude—for which she promised to reward herself with ice cream later—she pushed

out the door, wishing she'd remembered her umbrella that morning.

It was clear which tire was the problem almost the moment she stepped from the car. Even in the dark of the canyon, the sagging shape of the front left wheel was evident.

“Of all the things Dad failed to teach me, why did changing a tire have to be one?” She stared down at the offending wheel as if it would answer her. She'd grown up on a steady diet of *get good grades, be home by ten, and don't bother attempting something if you're not going to give it your all*. But changing tires? She must have missed that class.

She pursed her lips at the wheel.

Then she kicked it.

Surprisingly, it didn't help her feel any better. The opposite, actually. Because now her heeled boots were even wetter, and her toe hurt. She pushed dark hair back behind her ear, glaring at the wheel now.

It didn't care.

Pulling her phone out of her back pocket, she tried to open the browser to check for the nearest towing company. But no service.

No. Freaking. Service.

Okay. Okay. She could figure this out. She was the top performing prosecutor in her office. She'd graduated head of her class. She wore heels daily, and they only partially killed her feet after ten or so hours.

She could figure out how to change a tire.

Heavy raindrops fell on her head, soaking her hair and splattering her face and body. She glanced over her shoulder, feeling the prickle of hyper awareness that came with being alone in the dark.

Maybe she could just drive home on the flat. That wouldn't be terrible... right?

She looked down at the sad rubber circle. Something appeared to be sticking out of it, probably whatever had caused the flat. Yeah. She needed to change it.

But what was she supposed to change it with? Did her car have an extra tire somewhere in it? Yes. In the trunk.

Splashing to the back of her car, she opened the trunk. Blindly, she groped for the light switch. But before she could find it, light blazed behind her. Not that it was particularly helpful in finding anything in the trunk, with her shadow blocking half the opening.

She turned, squinting, and made out a truck coming down the road toward her.

This would be a great place to kill someone.

The thought popped back into her head, much less appreciated now that she was outside and perfectly set up to die at the hands of whoever was driving that truck.

The truck that just so happened to be slowing down.

I'm really going to die. She stumbled around the side of her car, pulling open the front seat. Her brother-in-law gave her pepper spray back when he'd been dating her sister and learned that Em lived alone. She still had it, right? Did that stuff expire? It couldn't expire, could it? Wouldn't it just get more potent? Hopefully.

She glanced over her shoulder, still groping aimlessly in her car's console. The truck was stopping now. The driver's door was opening.

Oh, geez, I'm going to die, and Peter is going to take over the Clayton case. And he'll botch it. I'll die, and my only legacy will be half a botched case.

Someone stepped out of the truck. Someone tall with broad shoulders.

Em finally found the object of her search and closed the car door. She should have closed *herself* in the car. But instead, she clutched the pink pepper spray in her hand and moved to the trunk, leaning her hip against it, trying to look at ease. Then she pushed back to a stand when she realized how wet her car was. Not that her cute slacks were going to survive this horrific beating anyway.

“Hey. You need some help?” His voice didn't sound particularly heinous... but that's probably how the good murderers lulled their victims into a false sense of security.

She cleared her throat then spoke loud over the sound of pouring rain, “It seems I've got a flat. Unfortunately, they

don't teach us how to fix those in law school." A rumble of thunder punctuated her words.

He finally drew close enough that the blinding light from his headlights didn't impede her view. She registered his strong jaw and ball cap-covered head. He raised a brow at her comment. It sounded vain. She hadn't meant to sound vain.

"Well, luckily they do teach it in construction management." His words had a hint of laughter in them.

She wrapped her arm around her waist, holding in her dignity. It was the one with the pepper spray. She pulled it behind her back. Couldn't have him knowing about her one weapon against him. The element of surprise was all she had.

He stepped around her, motioning to the back of her car. "Mind if I...?"

She shuffled to the side, keeping a good two feet of space between them. "No, go ahead."

With the crisp nod of someone who knew exactly what he was doing, the stranger opened her trunk and lifted a false bottom in her car's floor to reveal the spare. He bent down to look at it more closely for a second before straightening. He was taller than her. Even with her three-inch heels, he had at least two inches on her. That was surprising.

"When's the last time you had your tires checked?"

Em drew a blank. "Uh... last year, maybe? Why?"

He looked up at her. "Because it looks like your spare is flat."

“What?” She looked past him into the trunk. “Is that even possible?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Do you want me to call you a tow?”

“No service. We’re in a dead spot.”

He pulled out his phone, doubting her, but after a moment, his mouth turned down, and he tucked it back into his pocket. “Let me give you a ride. You can call a tow when we get service.”

“Umm...” She looked back at the supposedly flat tire. Was it possible he was making it up? An elaborate ruse to get her locked inside the doors of his GMC?

“I’m a Boy Scout if that helps?”

She looked back at him, brows pulled down in confusion. “What?”

“And my mom still calls me ‘honey,’ so you can be sure I’m not going to kill you, or kidnap you, or anything else nefarious in nature. Plus, you’ve got that pepper spray to keep you safe.” He pointed down to her partially concealed hand.

Em eyed him. He was smiling and seemed mostly genuine.

She shouldn’t just trust him at his word. But she was tired, wet, and hungry. And she needed to review the Clayton case before bed.

She bit her lip, glancing back at her car. What other choice did she have?

“That would be great, actually. Thanks.”

“Awesome. Grab what you need, and let’s go.”

Em ran for the driver’s door and grabbed her purse. She tucked the pepper spray inside next to her car keys. Then she pulled her briefcase from the back seat. She locked the door as she climbed back out, then followed her possible savior/potential killer to his car.

After he opened the passenger door for her—which was surprisingly chivalrous since it was pouring rain, but also made her reach for the pepper spray in her bag again—he ran around to his side, jumped in, and turned the ignition on. He pulled off his hat and tossed it onto the seats behind them before turning to her. “You okay?”

The question caught her off guard.

“Uhhh—”

“It’s a pretty bad storm out there. You weren’t stuck long before I got here, were you?”

She blinked. Since when had someone worried about *her* capabilities? It was an odd feeling to be seen as... weak? In need of help? Granted, she had been. Well, was. But it still felt weird to have someone she didn’t even know express such concern.

He dipped his head, looking at the wrinkle between her brows. Before he had to repeat his question, she shook her head... Maybe a little too exuberantly. Water sprayed out from her hair like she was a wet dog. And the stranger in the seat next to her got more than a few drops.

“Sorry,” she apologized as he wiped a hand down his face.

“Don’t be.” He laughed. “Better your hair than your pepper spray.”

The expression brought out a dimple in one cheek. The enthusiasm he exuded was contagious, but she refrained from smiling back until she could be sure he wasn’t laughing at her. Or celebrating because he finally had her cornered.

She snuck a surreptitious glance at the car door. Still unlocked.

“Sorry, it’s not every day you meet someone this way. I’m Garrett.” He stuck his hand out, and she twisted in her seat to shake it over the console. Her other hand gripped her purse in case she needed the pepper spray. Sure, he’d been nothing but solicitous, but a girl couldn’t be too careful.

She employed her firm handshake, the one she used to let defense attorneys know she wasn’t just a member of the *Legally Blonde* cast. Though, come to think of it, she’d never actually seen the movie. But she’d been compared enough to get the gist.

“I’m Em.”

“Is that short for anything?” He pulled his hand back, turned on the heat, and shifted the car out of park and back onto the road, glancing into his rearview, though the road was empty. How long would she have been stranded if he hadn’t come along? “Emily?”

“September.”

He shot her a confused glance. “That’s a nice month. But it’s actually June.”

Ha. Ha.

“No. My name is September. Em is short for September. Sept-*em*-ber.”

If she had a dollar for every time someone gave her the look he was giving her just now, as if he couldn’t decide if she was crazy or funny.

She was neither, for the record.

“My parents aren’t particularly creative. I was born on September fourteenth. Therefore, September.”

He watched the road as he drove, but she saw the twitch of his lips as he took that in and prepared his response. “So... do you have a sister named February, then?”

She gave him a flat look before choosing to stare out the windshield. “April.”

His bark of laughter didn’t catch her by surprise. There was something about him that told her he was the type of guy who spent more time laughing than not. She couldn’t decide if she was annoyed by it or not. Really, she envied the guy for his easy manner while she was wound tighter than the hair ties she used to pull her hair into a bun for court. Granted, he wasn’t in a stranger’s car driving away from his trusty vehicle—it made sense that he was a little more carefree than she was at the moment.

“I think it’s a great name,” he said, his wide smile still evident.

She gave him another dry look.

“I do. It’s unique. Everyone can spell it... unless...” He looked sideways at her, one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the console between them. “They don’t spell it with a silent ‘*f*’ or something, do they?”

She surprised herself by laughing, relaxing a bit for the first time since she’d realized she had a flat tire. That was a new one. She’d thought she’d heard all the quips there were to be had regarding her strange name.

“No.” Her laughter faded to a smile. “No ‘*f*.’”

“You have a great laugh.” His comment stilled her. Flirting already? And with her looking like a drowned rat? It was a little gratifying. Kinda made her want to sit up straighter. But she was already ramrod straight, the headrest of his stiff leather seats pushing her body forward an inch or two.

“But I can already tell it’s hard-won. I’ll consider this a monumental win, then.”

She frowned, some of the gratification leaking away. What did that even mean?

“Thanks?”

“You’re welcome. So. You’re a lawyer?”

At least this was a topic she could easily discuss. “Yep. Three years now. I’m a prosecutor for the county.”

“Wow. Must be a lot of work.”

“It is. But I enjoy it. What did you say you do?” Em glanced at her phone. Still no service.

“I’m in construction management. I’m managing a site here for the next few months, so the company sent me down temporarily.”

“Well, welcome then. When did you move in?”

“Today.” He smiled over at her. It was brief, and the expression was barely visible in the dim light. But the effect was strong. This man was attractive. Like, movie star attractive.

Surreptitiously—she hoped—she glanced at his left hand. Not married.

Why did that make her feel happy? That shouldn’t make her happy. *She* was happily married to her job. He could be happily married to a woman of equal attractiveness for all she cared.

But he wasn’t.

Stop smiling. She needed to get a hold of herself. He might be one of those guys who just didn’t wear his wedding ring. But he’d flirted with her—that said something. Not that she should care. She was too focused on her job to allow any distractions in the form of a male. She had a ten-year plan, and no part of that plan involved a man—she’d made that choice in law school and was still going strong five years later.

Plus, she wouldn’t see him after tonight anyway.

“I’m sorry about your tire. That’s bad luck.” He took another curve slowly.

Her brows rose at the sincerity in his voice, even though he still had his eyes on the road. “Oh... thanks. That kind of stuff just happens sometimes.”

“Yeah. But in the middle of a thunderstorm with no cell service?” He shook his head, but then his voice dropped to a more conspiratorial tone. “You didn’t happen to cross any black cats or walk under any ladders today, did you?”

“I would think you’re more likely to walk under ladders in your line of work.”

“True.” Garrett shrugged. “But I’m not feeling particularly unlucky right now.”

The radio sputtered back to life just then, indicating they were coming back into an area with service. He handed her his phone.

Habitually, she took it, but then just stared at it as if it were some type of alien lifeform.

“Put your address in, will you?” He pointed at the phone, still watching the road. “So I know where to take you.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.” She was not at all upset that he wasn’t asking for her number. Totally fine. Great even.

She entered the address to her small two-bedroom house and handed the phone back, then asked if he minded if she called a tow. He said he didn’t, turning down the radio and

humming along quietly as he followed the directions on his phone to her house.

By the time she got off the phone with the tow company, they were pulling onto her street. He hadn't killed her. He hadn't even tried to get her number.

"I really appreciate the ride. I'm not sure what I would have done if you hadn't come along."

He grinned at her. "It was no problem at all. It was great to meet you, September."

"Em."

He just winked at her as he pulled into the driveway.

She glanced out the window. It was the wrong driveway, but her house was right next door, so she didn't say anything.

The rain had slowed and was now more of a pathetic drizzle. He cut the engine.

"Thanks again." She smiled politely at him, then opened her door.

He opened his as well.

Em felt a flash of panic. "Oh, you don't need to walk me in. I'll be fine."

"Okay." But still, he stepped out of the car.

"Okay..." She turned toward her house, clutching her purse and briefcase in one hand and wrinkling that spot between her eyebrows. Was he secretly a weirdo? She didn't know weirdos could be so attractive. Weren't they supposed to have greasy

hair and bad teeth? Like that stalker her sister had gotten herself a few years ago.

When she reached the porch, she turned, hoping he hadn't followed her to her door.

He hadn't. At least, not *her* door.

She froze in place, staring. Garrett was standing on the porch next door, his eyes on her. "Goodnight, neighbor!" he called, waving. In the light of a streetlamp, she could see a crooked smile dance across his face.

Neighbor? No...

With one hand, he unlocked the door and pushed it open, then turned back in her direction.

She blinked twice. Nodded. Then ducked into her house as fast as her soaking-wet boots could carry her.

Only once she was safely inside did she let her mouth drop in disbelief.

Apparently, she'd just gotten a new neighbor.

A really attractive new neighbor.



Em

THE NEXT MORNING DAWNED bright and colorful. Colorado always came alive after a good rainstorm. It was beautiful and one of the reasons Em loved waking with the sun.

Well, she woke about five minutes before the sun. Habitually. Even on weekends she couldn't manage to sleep in. But today it worked in her favor because she needed to get her car before going into work.

She got ready for the day, dodging around Mr. Winkles while she pulled clothes out of the closet. Her cat was incredibly antisocial. More so than most cats, which was saying a lot. But that was intentional on Em's part. She had wanted a pet but didn't want the animal to be lonely while she was at work. So she'd spent three weekends at the shelter auditioning cats. They really had to be tested. She'd felt oddly guilty over the idea of bringing home a cat who would spend all day pining for her.

Or tearing up her carpet in spiteful angst. Which was what cats did when you ignored them for too long. But not Mr.

Winkles.

When he came into the shelter, Em knew he was the one, despite his unfortunate name. He was a short-hair cat, white with black and orange spots. It was three weeks after Em got him that she learned he was actually a *she*. Apparently, calico cats were hardly ever male. But the cat's name was Mr. Winkles when it came to the shelter, and Em felt strangely loyal to the weird name by the time she learned her cat's true gender.

So she was still Mr. Winkles.

Sometimes Em just called her Winkles if the cat gave her a bad enough glare.

A knock sounded, and she quickly placed the back in her earring before walking out of her bathroom and down the hall to pull open the front door.

“How are you not late?” Em asked April, who was swinging her keys and smiling at her from her front porch.

April pushed past her and into her living room. “I thought I was. Didn't you say six?”

“Nope. Six-fifteen. Which is the current time. I was really impressed when I heard you knock. I didn't expect you until six-thirty. Want some toast?”

“Huh. Jackson told me six.” April spun toward Em once she entered the kitchen. “Wait. I bet he told me that because he knew I'd be late. Jerk.”

Em laughed, skirting around her sister and opening the pantry. “You can’t really be mad. He just knows you too well.”

“I should hope so. We’ve been married for two years.”

“And having a baby soon.” Em turned to point at April’s stomach, which was barely indicating her four-and-a-half-month pregnant bump. “Gotta know someone before you have kids with them.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the hope at least. And yes, I’ll gladly take some toast. This morning sickness stuff is still killing me. I thought it was supposed to go away after the first trimester.” She sat at the peninsula.

Em stuck two slices of bread into the toaster, then leaned against the counter facing her sister. April was nearly a carbon copy of Em, except four years older, three inches shorter, and with hazel eyes instead of dark blue. But they both had the same oval-shaped face, mid-length brown hair, and thin nose.

But right now there was one other difference between Em and her sister—other than the baby bump. April looked tired. Really tired. And Em was the mean girl who’d made her pregnant older sister wake up early enough to take her to the tow shop. She would have asked April’s husband, but he’d been so busy lately with his company that April had offered.

“You doing okay, April?” The toast popped up, and Em turned to transfer the slices to plates.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired. And nauseated—I’m *always* nauseated. Don’t get pregnant, Em; it’s a trap. They show you

all these adorable baby faces and tell you it will make you grow closer as a couple if you create a human together. But really all it results in is having to sleep with no blankets because you're too hot, puking all the time, and exploding on your husband when he brings you the wrong fries. I think I'm killing him, Em."

By the time Em turned back around with the toast, April had her arms folded across the counter, and her head on top of them.

"Aw, I'm sure it's not that bad. Haven't you at least learned if he's the kind of guy willing to go out at midnight for his wife's favorite ice cream?"

"He is," she whined without looking up. "He's perfect. I'm not bringing anything to this relationship."

"You're bringing your hot bod." She set the toast in front of her sister, waggling her eyebrows. The expression was lost on April, since she didn't look up in time.

But when she did look up, it was to send Em a scathing look. She pointed at her rounding middle. Barely rounding.

"Ha! Good one, Em. I look like I've been subsisting on pizza and ice cream." She groaned and dropped her head back onto her arms. "I *have* been subsisting on pizza and ice cream. Jackson is repulsed by me, I know it. And they told me there would be a *glow*. There is no freaking glow."

Em crossed around the peninsula to sit by her sister. "That is the furthest thing from true you've ever said. And you thought

the lyrics ‘shot through the heart’ were really ‘shak-a-la-ha!’”

April looked up and gave her at least a hint of a smile.

“Seriously. You’re gorgeous and don’t even look pregnant, and I *know* what Jackson thinks of you. If anything, he’s loving the changes to the upper half of your body.” Em waggled her eyebrows.

April glanced down at her chest, which had grown at least a cup size. She finally smiled. “You’re not wrong.”

“Annnnd, that’s our cue to leave.”

April laughed but stood up, grabbing her toast. “We really should go. I’d hate to ruin the one instance I was on time by spending all our precious minutes crying about my changing hormones. Which, incidentally, are the reason I’m crying.”

Em squeezed her sister’s arm consolingly then headed for the door.

Once outside, she made a beeline for April’s car. But April did not. She stopped suddenly on the porch and hissed to Em, “Who is *that*?”

Em shot a look in the direction April was indicating. “Oh. That’s my new neighbor.” She lifted a hand in acknowledgment of Garrett and kept walking.

He waved back.

April ran forward to catch up with Em, skirting around her to circle the car and get in the driver’s side door. She was suddenly quite buoyant compared to how she’d been in the

kitchen. Her suggestive eyebrows didn't lower even once the sisters were sitting beside each other.

She was clearly waiting for Em to say something. So, in perfect younger sister fashion, Em said nothing at all.

After several seconds, April sighed with annoyance, then prompted her, "Your new neighbor? As in, the one who saved you last night? You didn't mention it was a *him*. And that he looked like *him*." April pointedly looked out Em's window, up to Garrett's porch, where he was nonchalantly sipping something from a mug.

Em understood her sister's reaction. He looked even better in the daytime, with a white t-shirt and basketball shorts on.

He waved again, catching them staring.

Em looked away, fighting embarrassment. "*Drive*, April. He isn't an exhibit."

She put the car in drive, mumbling, "He should be in one."

Em rolled her eyes, chancing one last glance at Garrett. He was still watching them, his eyes on hers. She couldn't determine the color of them from here, but they caught her all the same. She nearly turned in her seat to keep the contact as April pulled from the curb.

Thankfully, April's muffled laugh pulled her back to the present. Her sister glanced sideways at her. "Sooo... what are you going to do about that?"

"About what?"

“About your hottie neighbor.”

“Nothing.” Em crossed her legs and leaned back against her seat, banishing thoughts of Garrett and his piercing stare from her mind.

“Yeah. Let me know how that goes,” April said dryly, heading for the small city center of Greenbank. It shouldn’t have counted as a city center. It included a single road, lined on both sides with businesses, such as the post office, a bed and breakfast and hotel, the tow center they were heading to, and a beauty salon that Em still wasn’t sure was actually open. They had gotten a second stoplight the year before, though; so there was that.

“I will, thank you.”

“But not at dinner tonight,” April said with a teasing voice.

“No. Sorry, April, I still can’t come.”

“No problem. If I were you, I’d want to stay home and watch my hot neighbor too.”

Em rolled her eyes. “April! You’re married.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t have eyes.”

Em sighed, partially because she had just glanced at the clock and realized that, even with only a few minor distractions that morning, they were going to be cutting it close on time. But also partly because she, too, had eyes. And she couldn’t let her attractive neighbor become a distraction.

She was in a committed relationship with her job. There was no need to let her attention wander.



Garrett

GARRETT BLEW OUT A long breath as he watched the silver Honda Civic pull away from his neighbor's house. Someone ought to have warned him that his six-month lease came with a neighbor far too attractive for her own good. And his own good.

There'd been a mild amount of amusement last night when he'd looked at her address and realized just where she lived. Okay, maybe more than mild. But mostly in a funny coincidence kind of way. But when he got home, he'd had a hard time erasing her face from his mind as he got ready for bed.

And now he would have an even harder time erasing it after seeing her in daylight, no longer looking like a wet dog.

He shook his head. He hadn't intended to drink his herbal tea—a weird habit he'd picked up from his mom—on the porch, but the beautiful June morning had pulled him outside. The possibility of running into September had not played any part in the decision. None at all.

He set his mug in the sink and rinsed it before heading to his room. He would be on site today and intended to get some work in with the crew. If he jumped in next to them, they were always much quicker in accepting his leadership. Plus, he liked to get a little dirty now and then.

That thought definitely did not bring a cute brunette to mind.

He also definitely didn't enjoy a moment replaying her appearance in his mind while he brushed his teeth. Her brown waves brushed her collarbone instead of being slicked straight with water like they had been the night before, which naturally led his mind to think of her slender neck, then her full lips and angular brows. Those brows had spent more time pulled in together than they had relaxed. Garrett guessed you could tell a lot about September by her eyebrows.

Wow. He spit into the sink and rinsed his brush.

When was the last time he'd taken in a woman's appearance so totally? Sure, he noticed if someone was attractive or sparked an interest in him, but since when did he take note of pretty women's eyebrows?

Since yesterday, apparently.

He had no idea what Jenica's eyebrows looked like. She could have been missing them, and he probably wouldn't remember.

Garrett grinned. It was satisfying to think of Jenica with no eyebrows. Then maybe her outward appearance would

partially reflect her inner appearance. It had taken him almost nine months to realize the extent of her self-centered vanity, and he swore he wouldn't be taken in by another pretty face.

Especially one who told you her job before her name.

Who did that? Seriously.

But there was still the fact that the woman seemed to have some sort of inability to enjoy herself. At first he'd thought it was just the awkwardness of their situation—he didn't blame her for being tense. He was a random, strange guy whom she had to rely on to get her home. But even when she'd started to relax, she'd not really relaxed.

She'd clearly still been tense that morning... which meant she would be pretty fun to tease. And he could definitely tease a woman without falling prey to her attraction. Especially when he was only in town for a few months.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and swapped out his t-shirt for one that wouldn't require some sort of stain-removing magic after a day on a worksite.

Five minutes later, he was walking out to his truck, which was parked in the driveway. It was the one bummer to this rental: the house had no garage. That was the reason his guest bedroom was full of sleeping bags, a tent, climbing equipment, a few hiking backpacks, a snowboard, two hammocks, and a bike.

He really needed to get that organized before his mom came down to visit. She would probably object to sleeping with a

mountain bike.

Actually, for the first time in several years, his job had brought him close enough that he could probably visit his mom every weekend, so the mess could probably stay in the guest room. Maybe they'd even start back up Sunday Sundae night, which they hadn't done since he'd moved away for college. It would be a good situation. He could make sure she had a properly cooked steak at least once a month—like Dad had taught him. Mom could bug him about his dating life. The important things.

Garrett pulled out of his driveway. The next few months could turn out to be a pretty sweet gig.



Em

EM WOKE UP FIVE minutes before the sun, as usual. But this time her head and body severely protested.

“Ugh.” She rolled over, wishing she could sleep for another hour. But she was nothing if not consistent, and based on previous experience, she knew she’d just lie there until her headache got bad enough that she had to get out of bed in search of ibuprofen. Once the sun rose, she was incapable of sleep, no matter how much she might need it.

The night before, she hadn’t pulled into her driveway until close to ten. Then she’d spent another hour reviewing the Clayton case one last time. She would be presenting the charges to her boss today, and to convince him to support her decision of charging Mr. Clayton with first-degree murder, she needed to have thought of everything. Mr. Standson was incredibly good at his job, and he ran a tight ship of an office. Honestly, she’d been shocked when he gave her this case. It was high profile and usually would be given to a senior attorney... yet he’d trusted Em with it, letting her know he

believed she'd do a great job, which had been gratifying, to say the least.

But he'd handed the case over with a suggestion to charge Mr. Clayton with manslaughter. He'd only looked over the basics of the case, though, and after reviewing all the police records and digging further into the evidence, she was certain she could get Clayton sentenced with the higher charge. Everything, down to the insurance policy Em uncovered that Mr. Clayton had taken out on his wife two weeks before shooting her after finding her in bed with her yoga instructor, indicated he was planning on killing her for some time. It had taken some digging to find that information, and she fully expected Mr. Standson to be thrilled with her hard work. But she couldn't present anything less than perfection, or he might not trust her to continue the case.

She splashed water on her face then grabbed the bottle of ibuprofen. It would be a long day, and she couldn't have this lingering headache impeding her thinking.

It took twenty minutes before the painkillers sufficiently cleared the pounding, by which time she'd showered and blow-dried her hair. She swiped on mascara, under eye concealer, and ChapStick, ate a quick breakfast, grabbed her briefcase and stepped onto the porch.

Back when little old Erma June lived next door to Em, she never thought about how close her house was to the neighboring one. She had never thought about how her porch was so close to Erma's that if she stood on her own porch's

white railing, she could probably jump over to the white railing next door.

Not that she'd ever do that. But, still, the fact was that she'd never realized how very *close* that house was.

Until Garrett moved in and apparently took up a morning vigil on the porch swing facing her. His mouth lifted on one side, and he raised his mug in salute to her.

Em nodded in return.

“So, what did your sister think of me?”

Em stopped as she stepped off the porch. “What?”

“Your sister. That *was* your sister yesterday, right? You two look like you could be twins. I would guess you are, if not for the fact I know she was born in April and you in September.” He looked pretty pleased with his social deduction.

“She’s four years older than me.”

“And that makes her, what, mid-thirties?”

Em recognized fishing when she saw it. But somehow, his digging for information didn’t bother her. Much. After all, he really had saved her in the canyon. She could be a cordial neighbor.

“She’s thirty-two.”

“So you’re twenty-eight.”

“Happy to see your second-grade math is paying off. I’ll turn twenty-eight in September.” Em made it three steps down the walk this time.

“Thank you. My mom was always very proud of my subtraction skills. Still is, if I had to guess. Brags about it to her Bunco friends.”

Em turned, adjusting the strap of her briefcase. She raised her eyebrows at Garrett’s smiling face. That smile was doing odd things to her insides, which spelled trouble. Maybe she should be a bit *less* cordial. “Don’t you have work to go to or something?”

He stood up and leaned against the railing of his porch, either not catching her attempt to end the conversation or ignoring it. “Yes, but like most normal people, I don’t have to be there until nine. Sometimes eight. Never as early as this.”

“I work in Woodcastle. It takes over twenty minutes to get there.”

“Hey, I work in Woodcastle too. Maybe we should carpool.”

“Do you intend to start going into work two hours early?” Em asked as she took another step to her car.

“Nope. But I’m kinda hoping I can convince you to go in two hours late.”

“I don’t do late.”

“Yeah. I’m not surprised.” For some reason, his easy stance and teasing words were starting to grate. He was enjoying himself at her expense. It wasn’t a bad thing to be early. It was admirable. Respectable. Even if her boss didn’t even get in until 8:30 every day, it didn’t mean she couldn’t be there at 7:30 sharp. Her parents had always put being early for work

ahead of just about anything else. Even that time in middle school when Em had the stomach flu, they'd just tucked her in bed with some books and a phone and said they'd be back for dinner.

“Speaking of being late...” She took the final four steps to her car and grasped the door handle.

“Yeah, yeah, go on, you early bird.” He waved her forward, and she scowled.

She didn't need his permission to get in her own car.

Em pulled the door open, hitting herself in the shoulder. She ignored the sudden pain and quickly tossed her briefcase and purse into the passenger seat before ducking to sit, narrowly avoiding hitting her head in the process. She pressed her eyes closed, willing herself *not* to look back at Garrett as she turned the ignition on. But the second she opened them, her eyes darted against her will to where he still stood, leaning against his porch railing and sipping from that mug of his.

He was still smiling, his eyes crinkling annoyingly on the sides.

Em's scowl deepened, and she turned out of the drive too quickly, bouncing over the curb. She didn't look at him again; he was definitely laughing at her.



She was home by eight that night, and so treated herself with a bubble bath.

Mr. Standson had agreed to the first-degree murder charge, commending her on her hard work to prepare, and they were ready to move forward with the hearing. Then they would set a trial date. Everything was moving ahead the way it should, and Em felt like celebrating. She needed ice cream or something.

Too bad it was now nine o'clock, and the small town she lived in only had one supermarket, which would close in a half hour. The ice cream parlor closed at nine. And there were no restaurants or movie theaters either.

She settled on watching one episode of an HGTV show on her computer while in bed. She didn't even own a TV since she hadn't been able to justify the cost. She didn't actually own much of anything, if she was being honest.

Her phone pinged, and she lifted it to check the screen.

April: So, have you done anything about your hottie neighbor?

Em: Yes. He's here now, and you're interrupting our makeout session.

April: Oh, how I wish that were true.

April: Mom and Dad are having a dinner party this weekend. They want us both there.

Em frowned down at her phone. Her parents only ever hosted a dinner party when they were celebrating a major win at the firm, or when they were setting up her or April with

some *nice boy*. April had gone and gotten married, and Em would have heard about it if they were in the middle of a big case, so that only left one option.

Em: I'm busy?

April: I haven't even told you the day or time.

Em: I know. I'm busy.

April: 6pm. Sunday. Jackson and I will drive you.

April: Oh, and I heard he's cute. But probably not as cute as your neighbor! *kiss emoji*

Em shook her head before setting down the phone. At least Em had April on her side to fend off whoever would be waiting at the dinner party. Their parents were never particularly involved in their lives, but when it came to their jobs or the men they dated, they were suddenly laser-focused. Em had been set up by her parents no fewer than seven times in the last year. And only one of them had warranted a second "date," if attending an awkward dinner with her family counted as a first date.

April was lucky to have Jackson. Em needed a Jackson.

Her mind settled, against her will, on Garrett's grinning face. What would her parents do if she showed up to this dinner party with a date of her own? A cute six-foot-and-some-change date, with broad shoulders and a lopsided smile? How would he interact with her family? Was he the kind who

brought flowers and offered to do the dishes... or the kind who groaned about having to meet the parents?

Em pulled a pillow over her head. Could she smother her thoughts without smothering herself? It was worth a try. She needed to retrain her brain not to think of the guy. Which was beyond ridiculous since, less than seventy-two hours before, she hadn't even known he existed. The last time she'd been this preoccupied with a member of the opposite sex had been in law school. And *that* hadn't gone well, so she should be even more incentivized to clear her mind of all things Garrett.

A knock at the door forced her to pull the pillow from her face. She was halfway to the front hall before she stopped. Who the heck was at her door this late? And would it be overly cautious to grab her small gun from the safe beneath her bed? Or the pepper spray from her purse?

At least if someone tried to murder her, she now had a neighbor who didn't need hearing aids. See? She could think nicely and platonically about Garrett. Progress.

Just in case, she dialed 911 on her phone but didn't press send. A single woman living alone had to be careful. After all, Mr. Winkles didn't provide much protection. Even now, she was slinking around the corner into the spare room. She always chose the spare room over Em's room. It was fine with Em. She liked to stretch out in bed.

The knock sounded again, and she took a deep breath before pulling open the door.

"Hi, neighbor."

Em narrowed her eyes at Garrett, but by contrast, her shoulders relaxed with the fact that she didn't need her 911 call. She clicked the button to turn her phone screen off. "Hi?" She drew the word out in a question.

"I'm wondering if I can borrow a screwdriver? I haven't made it far enough into my unpacking to find my toolbox. But I'd really like to sleep on something besides a mattress on the floor tonight, so I'm trying to put my bed together." He smiled casually at her, and Em cursed her skipping heart.

It was only beating that fast because there could have been an ax murderer on the other side of her door.

"Uh, sure." How did he not know where a screwdriver was? He was a construction guy... Didn't he have a screwdriver in his back pocket pretty much always? But she wasn't going to refuse to help him out just because he was apparently a bit scatterbrained. Or because he made her insides feel all squirmy. "Come in, and I'll find it. But I warn you, I'm a blackbelt."

Garrett stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "You're also a bad liar, but I won't hold it against you. Like I said, I'm a Boy Scout and have no intention of harming you. My primary goals in life are to help little old ladies cross the street and build perfect campfires."

Em chuckled against her will.

"Ah ha! I got you to laugh again. I think I win some sort of prize or something."

Her laughter cut off, and she became suddenly aware of how dark her living room was and how alone the two of them were.

Speaking of...

She reached out and flicked on the light as she crossed to the hall closet. She pulled the small tool bag off the bottom shelf and handed it to him. It was a pink set her brother-in-law had bought her—partly as a joke and partly because Jackson was the king of always being prepared—when she moved in. It looked surprisingly small as Garrett’s hand clasped the handle, the tendons flexing.

A hand that was inches from her own... because she’d forgotten to let go.

She coughed, unsuccessfully covering her embarrassment. “You can keep the whole set as long as you need. I won’t be putting any beds together anytime soon.”

“You sure? I could help.” He winked at her, and Em felt the back of her neck go hot. What the heck was wrong with her? Was she about to start her period early or something? Her hormones had to be out of whack for her to be reacting like this to a guy just because he was kinda cute.

Kinda. Even she didn’t believe her own choice of descriptor.

“Well, if that’s all you need...” She stepped back to the door, purposefully trying to lead him and his kinda cuteness out of her house.

Garrett laughed but started backing from the room. “Message received. Thanks!” He let himself out of the house, shooting her a smile over his shoulder as he pulled the door closed.

Em walked back to her room and fell face-first into her pillow.

At this point, she’d take the good old smothering if it shut her brain up.



Garrett

GARRETT CLOSED THE DOOR of his house behind him, then picked up his own screwdriver from the side table in the entryway. He flipped it once, grinning, then set it back down before heading to his room with Em’s pink tools.

He used the excuse of needing to borrow tools as a reason to go over to her house. The least he could do was actually use them.

He was halfway through putting the bed together when his phone rang.

“Hey,” he said.

His friend’s voice came through Garrett’s headphones. “I’ve got tickets for tomorrow night to see that band I told you about last week. Want to come?”

“Didn’t you say they were terrible last time you saw them in person?”

“Yeah,” Noah gave no reason for why he was willingly choosing to see them again.

Garrett chuckled. “Should I be flattered you’re inviting me or offended that I’m your last option?”

“Who said you were my last option? I love hanging out with you. Bro time. Wing men. The two—”

“Okay, okay, I get it, you couldn’t find a date.”

Noah scoffed, but didn’t correct Garrett. “So do you want to come?”

“Sure, I’ve got nothing else to do. What time?”

“Seven. Want to drive? My car needs an oil change and I’ve been putting it off.”

“I’m assuming you don’t plan to buy my dinner either.” Garrett sighed, twisting in another screw on his bedpost. “Some date.” He gave the headboard a shake. Sturdy.

“Hey I bought the tickets.”

“Tickets for a supposedly terrible band.”

“I knew I should have called Will first.”

“He’s out of town on a business trip. I just talked to him yesterday.” Garrett stood, surveying his work.

“Too bad, he wouldn’t have complained so much.”

“Me? Complain? Nah. I’m a ray of sunshine and you’re lucky to be one of my friends.”

Noah barked a laugh. “Sure thing. Hey, I gotta run. See you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

The call disconnected, and Garrett hauled his box spring and mattress onto it. He loved moving around with his job... but the actual, physical part of moving was getting a little old. Sometimes it felt like he'd barely unpacked before he was already moving again. But at least this move had brought him closer to home. Closer to his mom's house and to his old high school buddies. Too bad the job was only a few months long—he could get used to being back in Colorado.



Em

SUNDAY CAME TOO FAST. The three days Em had to prepare to kindly let down whomever her parents had invited to dinner was not enough time.

April and Jackson had picked Em up at four, and together they'd taken the nearly two-hour drive to her parents' house.

Two hours was too fast also.

“Oh, September, I’m so glad you could come.” Mom reached out and kissed Em’s cheek as she entered the house. It was the only physical connection Em ever had with either of her parents. Both her parents, Diane and Dan, were a measure in contradictions. They appeared warm and inviting, but Em couldn’t remember the last time either had *really* hugged her. She’d never really thought it was weird until she’d gone to her best friend’s house in high school, and her friend’s mom had immediately wrapped her in a hug and welcomed her into their home. After that friend and Em had gone their separate ways for college, if it weren’t for April and a few dates here and there, Em might have forgotten what hugs felt like.

Essentially, Mom and Dad were all efficiency in their parenting. Never unkind. Never neglectful.

But also never really... loving.

And then there was the fact that Mom and Dad always praised Em's accomplishments but acted as if her failures did not exist. She couldn't be sure if that came from a place of love... or embarrassment. She tended to think it was more embarrassment.

When someone made a mistake, they weren't coddled or cheered up. Nope. Their failure was brushed under the rug or silently fixed by Dan or Diane. The Millers did not fail; therefore, Em's few failures did not exist.

Case in point, the man her mom was currently guiding her toward.

Secretly, Em was sure her parents saw her lack of committed relationship as a failure in life. They *never* talked about how she should be dating more, or how they wished she were married like April, but they *always* had a new son of so-and-so's to introduce her to. So-and-so was never invited to these dinners though. Only their son.

"September, look who joined us tonight! This is Marshall. Marshall Davies. You remember the Davies, don't you?"

Em didn't, but she dutifully greeted Marshall with a smile and a handshake. One of her firm ones. She never wanted these men to think she was as incapable and pathetic as they

probably assumed, given that her parents were always setting them up with her.

Marshall, for his part, was a fairly handsome man. He was exactly her height in heels, which was neither a pro nor con. She'd prefer he was taller, but you know the saying—tall girls can't be choosers—or something like that. He had light hair that was a little long on top, a thin frame, but not overly thin, and a fairly serious expression. That was a point in his favor. Em was developing a dislike for men who smiled too much.

“September? Do you have a sister named October?” The man's face broke into a small smile, and he lost a few more points.

“Nope. April,” her sister said from behind her. “And, yes, my birthday is in April, and Em's is in September. Hi. I'm April.” April stuck her hand out, and Marshall had the decency to look a little abashed.

“Nice to meet you both.” He smiled at April, then ran his gaze down Em. His eyes widened appreciatively as he took in all of her, but Em just felt an annoying twinge at being ogled. He didn't elicit any sort of attraction or spark in her.

She smiled blandly then turned back to her mother. “Hey, Mom, where's Dad?”

Her mom frowned a bit. “He's in the office. We have a big case, and he's trying to wrap things up for the day.”

“I'm going to go say hi.”

“Don't you want—”

“Be right back!” Em darted out of the room and down the hall toward the study. Dad probably wouldn’t appreciate her interrupting, but she was trying to kill time before dinner. Maybe her interruption would cause him to just finish up and join the group.

She tapped on the beveled glass doors. Her parents’ house was the only thing that wasn’t a contradiction about them. They were successful private attorneys—who were still a little frustrated that their daughter didn’t join the practice, not that they ever mentioned it—and their house reflected that. It was a traditional two-story, complete with red brick, white columns, and a whole lotta pomp.

“Yes?” Dad’s deep voice sounded behind the doors.

Em pushed them open. “Hey, Dad.”

He glanced up then back to his papers. “September, hi. Is everyone here already?”

September leaned against the doorframe. “Yup. What’s the case you’re working on?”

He stood from his overly large desk chair and motioned her to him, his tall height indicating where Em got hers. “Nothing you need worry about.”

She crossed the echoey, bookshelf-lined room, and he kissed her on the cheek. Then he sat back down and rifled through some papers. She stood awkwardly beside him. Did she continue seeking refuge in here or go back out to the kitchen?

She'd always hoped that, after law school, her parents would talk to her more. They never talked to her about high school or her friends or anything a teenager would care remotely about, but she'd hoped they would at least talk to her about law. After they'd missed her law school graduation due to an immovable court date, Em had realized they didn't see her as seriously as she'd hoped.

But she was working her butt off to change that. It was part of the ten-year plan. Somewhere around year seven, they should come around.

He stopped rifling, signed something, then set it aside and looked back up. He seemed a little surprised she was still there.

She shifted, crossing her arms. "Well, *I'm* working on a murder case. The man, Albert Clayton, killed his wife in what was presumed to be a fit of passion. But I'm certain it was premeditated, so I'm charging him with first-degree. Can you imagine a man kill—"

"You probably shouldn't tell me the details, sweetheart. That's against client confidentiality."

"It's all public knowledge, Dad; it's not a private client. It's been in the papers and everything."

"Oh. Right." He looked over her shoulder into the living room. "I forgot you work in the public sphere. Did you meet Marshall?" He put a little extra emphasis on 'public.' Then he stood again, heading for the door.

And there they went, glossing over her failures. Em sighed. She'd try again once she won the case. They wouldn't be able to avoid being impressed then.

"Marshall, did you meet September?" Dad boomed as they walked into the living room.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, good. Diane, is dinner ready?"

"Yup! Let's all head to the dining room, shall we?"

The group moved as one out the other end of the living room, but April held back until Em reached her side. She squeezed her hand.

"It'll all be over soon. At least he isn't like that Carl kid. I swear he was five inches shorter than you and barely out of high school," April said in a low voice.

Em smiled, squeezing April's hand back. "Thanks, Ape."

"You know I hate when you call me that. I am not a monkey."

"Pretty sure apes aren't actually monkeys."

"I see how it is. I try to make you feel better, and you call me a monkey. How was I blessed with such an incredible sister?"

Em sighed, placing a hand over her heart. "Luck. Pure, unadulterated luck."

April teasingly knocked Em with her shoulder as they crossed into the dining room, where April slipped into her

chair beside her husband. Jackson pulled her into a half hug and pressed a kiss to the side of her head. They were nauseatingly adorable.

On the other side of the table, Marshall was waiting, holding out Em's seat. Both of Em's parents were smiling at him as if his gallantry was better than her law degree.

Em's smile slipped. To them, maybe it was.

She sat, careful not to touch Marshall's hands where they wrapped over the top of the seat, repeating April's words in her head. *It'll all be over soon.*



Monday was rainy and dark, and Em was still handling the frustration of Sunday's dinner which led to her starting the day in a bad mood. The only upside to the weather was that Garrett wouldn't be outside to heckle her when she left for work. Right?

Wrong.

"Morning, neighbor!"

Em froze, missing her chance to make a break for her car. Garrett was already standing and walking over to lean against one of the porch railings.

He looked out at the rain. "Sorta reminds you of when we first met, right?" He said it nostalgically, as if it had been years since the event in question, rather than a week.

Em wrinkled her nose. Why was he so insistent on making small talk all the time? She hadn't even been nice to him, but he kept talking to her.

And worse, she was starting to appreciate the attention.

She was pretty sure she was broken. Some screw had come loose in her brain the night she and Garrett had met. It was unnerving.

"I realized I don't know your last name," Garrett asked, not waiting for her to answer his first question.

"Is that a question?"

He laughed, taking a sip from his drink. "Yes, it is. But in case you think this is another way I'm trying to be a murderer or something, I'll tell you mine first. Because I'm sure you've been curious."

She hadn't actually. The only thing she'd been curious about was if he was as fit underneath that shirt as he appeared to be. But she wasn't going to voice *that* thought, so she just tilted her head at him, waiting for the offered last name.

"Clarke. Garrett Clarke." He paused, cocking his head. "Like Bond. James Bond. But a different person."

Even with her bad mood still hanging over her like a dark cloud, Em was startled into a laugh again. He was too good at making her laugh for hardly any reason at all. She really needed to locate where that screw went.

"Miller."

“September Miller. I like it. So, what do you do for fun, September?”

“It’s Em, remember?”

“I do.” He took another sip from his drink. “So, what do you like to do for fun?”

Em opened her umbrella. “I go to work.”

“Yes. I know that. But what do you do for *fun*? When you’re not at work.”

“I don’t have time for fun.”

Garrett narrowed his eyes at her. Rain fell softly between their two porches, but she could still see his incredulous expression through it. “No time for fun? Okay... What do you do if you make it home before midnight then?”

“Sleep. Watch a TV show. Take a bath.” She probably could have left that last one off.

“Alright. That’s a start, I guess.”

“Hey, don’t knock my hobbies just because they’re different than yours.”

“I don’t think most people would consider taking baths a hobby.”

“Most people aren’t very smart then. I need to go. I’m going to be late.”

“Be late, then. Add a little variety to your life.”

Em tapped a finger against the strap of her bag and lifted her umbrella over her head, anxious to get to her car.

“I’m serious. I bet it would do you a world of good to shake things up a bit.”

“You don’t even know me, Garrett Clarke. How could you know what would ‘do me good’?”

He shrugged and took another sip from his drink.

“What are you drinking?”

“Herbal tea.”

Em’s eyebrows flew up her forehead of their own accord.
“*Herbal tea?*”

“Mmhmm. It’s good. You should try it sometime.” He looked so relaxed, standing there with his arm resting against one of his porch columns and a lazy smile on his face.

Em, on the other hand, was feeling jolts of *something* down to her toes. These morning chats had to stop. She was starting to dream about this guy. And she was sure it was only because of her stress over him delaying her in the mornings.

At least, that should be the only reason.

“Okay. I will. I gotta go. See you around.” She waved and stepped off the porch into the rain.

“I’ll make you some tomorrow,” he said. As if they had tomorrows. As if this was some sort of relationship.

“Mmhmm, sure. Bye!”

She darted for her car and *away* from Mr. Garrett Clarke. Mr. Nosey, Strange, Too-Attractive-For-His-Own-Good Clarke.



Em

“HEY, STEPHANIE, HAVE YOU filed the motion for the Williams case?”

“Oh. Uh...” The twenty-one-year-old, perky blonde looked around her desk distractedly. “No, I haven’t. But I’ll do that ASAP!”

Em smiled at her, but the expression felt pained. Stephanie was nearing the end of her three-month trial period, and despite being Mr. Standson’s niece, Em was pretty sure she either needed to be fired or assigned to a different prosecutor. Stephanie’s lack of work skills was part of the reason Em was always at work so late.

Only part. But still.

She backed into her office but left the door open for when Stephanie inevitably forgot how to file a motion and needed to ask.

“Hey, Stephanie, a group of us are getting together after work for Rachel’s birthday. I hope you’ll join us!” Em recognized Parker’s voice, one of the juvenile prosecutors.

“Oh, that sounds great, thanks! Who’s coming?”

Through the half-open door, Em watched Parker sit down on the corner of Stephanie’s desk. Em barely refrained from sighing. With the exception of herself, Parker was the youngest member of the group at thirty-one. And he was always hitting on Stephanie. It was distracting at best and revolting at worst. The man would hit on anything with legs. Stephanie just happened to have the shapeliest legs of them all.

“Oh, pretty much the whole office. Derek can’t come because of his new baby, but everyone else should be there.”

Everyone else should be there? Be where? Em never got an invitation.

“Sounds fun, where should I meet you guys?”

“Same place we went to celebrate that win Peter got last month. I can drive you if you want?”

Stephanie giggled. Actually giggled. “No thanks, I’ll just meet you there. See you then!”

Parker pushed from the desk and smirked down at Stephanie.

You’re too old for her!

He didn’t receive her telepathy.

“Oh, hey, Parker?” Stephanie called after him.

“Yeah?” He turned around about two feet from Stephanie’s desk.

“Can you remind me how to file a motion?”

“Sure thing.”

Em groaned and focused back on her own work, ignoring the not-so-hushed voices of the two outside her office.

But what she couldn't ignore was her newfound knowledge. Apparently, everyone was getting together after work. Everyone but her.

She tapped her pen against the legal pad. She honestly couldn't claim a friendship with a single soul at work, and that had never bothered her before. But when the *entire* office got together for something, especially something like celebrating a case, which they apparently did last month, it stung to be excluded.

Em worked hard. Too hard, according to April, and not hard enough according to her parents. But it would seem that none of her coworkers cared about that at all. None of them cared about her. Granted... they *used* to invite her to things. Em distinctly remembered offers to go to lunch or get together for a bite after work. But when she'd first started, she was focused on proving her worth and skill. The ten-year plan hadn't had space for taking lunches and letting loose after work. She'd always assumed she could get together with coworkers when she was more established. When they respected her for her performance.

When had they stopped extending invitations?

Em swallowed, and before she knew it, she was calling Stephanie into her office. She was just grateful her

subconscious had at least waited until Parker vacated the premises.

“Yes, Ms. Miller? I just filed that motion for you. Did you need something else?” Stephanie appeared to be a strange cross between wary and proud of herself.

“No. Well, yes. Do you have plans for this evening?” Em couldn’t look Stephanie in the eye while she asked, so she kept her gaze trained on the papers in front of her.

“Oh.” Stephanie’s surprise was evident in that one syllable. “Well, yeah, actually. A bunch of us are going down to Marty’s for food after work.”

Em’s knee started bouncing of its own accord. She stuck her hand on top of it.

“Sounds fun. Do you go there often?” She reminded herself of Garrett, fishing for information. *Stop thinking of Garrett. Geez.*

“Oh, yeah, a couple times a month.” Stephanie was all bubbles and perk again, now that she knew she wasn’t being called in to give a detailed accounting of how to file a motion or some other mundane task.

Em finally looked up. She leaned back in the chair and tried to appear relaxed. “Interesting. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone getting together.”

“Oh, yeah,” Stephanie faltered, “well... The whole office thinks you’d rather work overtime for a month than hang out with any of them.” She shrugged, avoiding Em’s eye.

Em tried to laugh. But she was afraid it sounded more like that time Mr. Winkles got stuck behind the fridge. “Yeah. Ha ha. That’s me. I love work.”

“Yup! You’re the hardest worker in this place.” She smiled with the innocently given compliment. Compliment. So why did it feel like... not a compliment?

“Did you need anything else?” Stephanie asked brightly.

Em wasn’t sure she effectively hid her rapidly rising dismay. “Nope, that’s all. Thanks, Stephanie. Would you close the door?”

“Sure!” Then she practically skipped out the door, her ponytail swaying behind her.

“Stephanie, the door...” Em sighed when the paralegal sashayed straight past her desk and toward the break room. Em stood and crossed the room. As she closed the door, she caught the tail end of a conversation just inside Rachel’s office next door.

“Should we have invited Miller, do you think?”

“Nah. She wouldn’t be willing to leave the office before seven at the latest.”

“She doesn’t seem to know how to turn off work and have some fun, does she?”

“Nope. Hopefully she figures it out before she burns out like Jenkins.”

The other conversation participant mumbled something in reply, but Em didn't hear it. She closed the door and walked slowly back to her desk.

That couldn't be what the whole office thought... right? They should appreciate and admire all of her hard work. And why would they assume she didn't know how to have fun? They didn't even know her.

And who was Jenkins?

Em chewed her lip, spinning her desk chair around to gaze out the window of her third-story office. It looked directly into a parking garage across the street. Something she'd never even noticed before. Seriously... had they just built that? Em could have sworn her window used to have a mountain view.

She sighed, leg bouncing. She didn't want to be considered a failure to others. It was, possibly, the worst title she could be given. She'd been working her butt off for years to show she wasn't a failure. Besides the fact that she *did* love her job, she had to prove to her parents and coworkers that she wasn't too young to be working here. She wasn't too young to be successful and valuable.

But her coworkers didn't even value her enough to issue her an after-work invitation, which *everyone else* had received.

Well, everyone but Derek.

And Jenkins.

Who the heck is Jenkins??

Em tried to take a deep breath, but she felt like her world was spinning. Spinning more than this large leather office chair Em had always thought of as a representation of all her hard work. She'd gotten this job straight out of law school. Right after passing the bar. She'd thought she was doing so well. If things went according to plan, she could begin applying for a judgeship at the end of her ten-year plan. Maybe twelve years, but not longer.

But meanwhile, all the other prosecutors were talking about her like she was some kind of weirdo.

Em wasn't a weirdo. She was *successful*.

She glanced at the clock. 3:51. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Then she jumped out of her chair like it was on fire and slung her purse over her shoulder. She didn't even grab her briefcase. She would show them all. Em could have fun. She wasn't as attached to work as everyone thought. She had a life.

Pulling the door open, Em glanced at Stephanie as she breezed past her. "I'm leaving early, Stephanie. I'll see you tomorrow. Have a good night."

If she wasn't so busy recklessly abandoning her job an hour early—an hour and nine minutes early—she might have enjoyed the look of abject shock on Stephanie's face.

But reckless she was, so she strode through the office without a care in the world.

Except for that one niggling concern that she probably shouldn't leave her briefcase here. Should she go back?

No. That would ruin the effect.

Right?

Yes. Yes it would.

But that didn't change the fact that it physically pained her to open her car door and slide inside without a bulky leather rectangle to place on the passenger seat.



Em

THE TWENTY-MINUTE DRIVE HAD been uneventful, but thanks to the old, and frankly depressing, Enya CD she'd dug out from her glovebox, Em was still feeling distractedly upset when she pulled into her driveway. So distracted that she didn't even glance to see if Garrett was sitting on his porch swing.

She walked four steps from the car before realizing she'd left her keys in the ignition. Retracing her steps, she grabbed them and dropped them in her purse. Then she shut the car door again. It caught on her skirt.

Muttering under her breath, she opened the door yet again and yanked her skirt out. She was struggling to dig through her purse with just one hand for the keys she shouldn't have thrown in there, when the single step to her porch appeared out of nowhere.

And then she was falling.

Falling and forgetting to stick her hands out to catch herself.

Her chin hit first, sending a sharp, stinging jolt through her head. Then her body smashed into the porch, the vile step colliding with her chest and knocking the wind out of her.

And it *burned*. Her chin burned with pain and heat, and her lungs felt like they'd been caved in.

She tried to roll over. Tried to untangle her hands from beneath her and the strap of her purse. But before she was successful in either endeavor, someone was holding on to her shoulders and gently pulling her up.

Oh, great, and now she couldn't see. She'd gone blind. She'd hit her eyes in the fall—

Wait, nope. Those were just tears. Loads of them, clouding her vision.

Then Garrett's face was swimming in front of her, and she groaned. Maybe she should just throw herself back onto the step in order to avoid him seeing her like this.

“Are you alright?” His voice was laced with concern, and he ducked to look her in the eyes.

“Fine. I'm fine.” She wasn't fine.

Something warm and hot dripped from her chin. She touched a hand to it, and it came back red. “Well, that doesn't look great.” Her words were slurred, either from shock or the excessive amount of water flowing around her lips in the form of tears. Stupid tears.

“Yeah. It doesn't. Let's get you inside and clean that up.” Garrett gently turned her to the door and bent for something on

the ground. Her keys. He leaned around her and quickly unlocked the door, then grasped her elbow and led her inside.

He was taking a great deal of liberties, but her chin still burned with fire, her head was swimming, and breathing wasn't quite as easy as normal. Plus, his hand felt strangely comforting cupping the back of her elbow.

Em held a hand to her chin, wishing she could stop the flow of blood and tears. Maybe while she wished for the impossible, she should also wish to start the day over.

And a million dollars. That should never be left off any genie to-do list.

"I'm not clumsy, you know," Em muttered while Garrett guided her toward the kitchen. "I was just distracted."

"I know. Where do you keep your first aid stuff?"

"I don't have any."

"You don't have—okay. Wait here." He turned on his heel and let his long legs carry him out the door. He had very nice legs. Was that something girls noticed about guys? Em had never noticed something like that before.

They looked especially good in the basketball shorts he seemed to wear any time he was home. He had a lot of basketball shorts.

Within three minutes, he was back.

Em hadn't moved yet. She'd apparently shaken her brain up with that hit—knocked out a few more screws. Or she'd been

too fixated on his legs to realize his absence.

Nope, had to be the fall.

“Why don’t you sit on the counter or something?” Garrett suggested as he walked past her, opening a small white case and then tearing a paper towel off her dispenser by the sink.

“Yessir,” she said. But instead of hoisting her battered body onto the counter, she crossed around the peninsula and plopped onto a barstool.

Garrett slid his equipment across the counter, then came to stand in front of her. “This might hurt a bit, but that cut probably has a lot of dirt in it that we need to clean out.”

Em nodded numbly, wondering if the throbbing cut on her chin could possibly hurt worse than it did just now.

It could.

She gripped the edge of her stool while Garrett dabbed at her chin as softly as he could. At least, she hoped he was trying to be soft, because it really felt like he was repeatedly slapping her.

Which was mean, if it was intentional.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled three or four times before he was finished.

Okay, so *not* trying to be mean.

“Alright. The worst part is over. Now I’m just going to bandage it. Then I want to see your wrist.”

“My wrist?” Em lifted up her hands while Garrett turned back to the counter. Huh. Both her hands were scraped up, and her left wrist seemed to be bleeding too. How had she not noticed that? How was it not killing her? It looked like it should be.

Garrett focused his eyes on her again before his gaze lowered to her chin. He carefully placed an oversized Band-Aid over the injury.

She lifted her head to give him better access. And then immediately wished she hadn't. The pain in her chin was subsiding slightly, and Em was suddenly very aware of how close Garrett was, standing between her legs with his fingers lightly brushing her jaw. What if he finished his ministrations with a little kiss? On her neck. Then her lips.

STOP. Stop it right there. Those kinds of thoughts are not allowed.

“There we go. Can I see your hand?”

Em dutifully stuck out her hand, a little further than necessary. He had to step away from her a bit to look at it but didn't seem to notice.

Em noticed. Em needed space.

“Well, I'm not a doctor, but it doesn't appear broken. Maybe sprained. Either way, I'll clean it up and wrap it.”

“Couldn't we just wrap it and cross our fingers for a good outcome?”

Garrett chuckled and glanced back at her. Light green. His eyes were light green. A very light green.

“Sorry, but no. This one should be quicker, though. It doesn’t seem to be as deep as your chin was.”

“Okay. Do your worst.”

He was right; it wasn’t as bad as the chin. But it still stung like crazy. When he finally finished, he closed up the first aid kit and gathered up the trash.

“Where’s your trash can?”

Em pointed under the sink.

“That’s where I keep mine too.” He backed toward it. “Great minds, I guess. Definitely not a common place to keep a trash can.” He winked.

A small smile tried to cross her lips. *Ouch.*

So smiling was out.

“So.” He leaned across the peninsula, resting his forearms against the white quartz counter. “Why were you so distracted?”

“Work stuff.”

“Not surprising. But what *is* surprising is how early you’re home today. Why is that?”

“You seem to know my daily schedule a little well. Should I be worried?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not hard to know your daily schedule. You leave before most people are out of bed—”

“Except you,” Em pointed out.

“Yes, but I like to watch the sunrise. Something tells me that’s not the reason you’re up early.” He raised his eyebrows, and she inclined her head in acquiescence. He wasn’t wrong. “As I was saying, you leave when most people are in bed, get home after most people eat dinner, and don’t leave your house otherwise.”

Em frowned—which also hurt. That made her sound pretty boring. And a little too much like he agreed with her coworkers.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that; it’s *your* schedule.” He straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. “That was very impressive deflecting, by the way. But all it’s done is make me more interested in knowing why you were home so early.”

He seemed genuinely curious, and there wasn’t a hint of the teasing or barely tucked away smile that seemed standard for him.

So, against her better judgment, she told him the truth.

“I got some difficult news at work today and decided to take the rest of the day off.”

His face grew even more serious, his eyebrows pulling in as he studied her. “Is everything okay?”

Em stood up and paced to the sliding glass door, needing a little distance from the attractive form of Garrett Clarke standing in the middle of her small kitchen. “Yes. It’s nothing

severe. Stupid, really. I acted childishly about the whole thing. It's nothing."

He didn't follow her to the door, which she was grateful for. But he did press the subject.

"It doesn't seem like nothing."

Em pursed her lips.

Garrett lifted his eyebrows.

She sighed, her shoulders falling. "I made it sound worse than it really is. It would seem that my coworkers all get together after work... and they don't invite me. They think I'm a workaholic, that I don't know how to have fun, and that I'm going to burn out like some pathetic creature named Jenkins." The words came tumbling out of her mouth, and almost immediately, she wished she could scoop them all up and shove them back in.

This was not successful, impressive Em. This was ridiculous.

"I'm sorry," he said, with more than a little pity in his gaze.

Silence permeated the space between them, and, any second now, he would make an excuse to leave, and she wouldn't blame him.

But he didn't.

She relaxed her balled-up fists, not realizing she'd tensed them in the first place. "It's okay. I'm sure you agree."

"I don't agree."

Em hoped she didn't look as pathetically hopeful as she felt in that moment.

He lifted half his mouth in a smile. "As you've pointed out, I hardly know you. But I definitely don't think you're pathetic."

Em frowned. "But you think I'm a workaholic who doesn't know how to have fun."

Garrett stood and shrugged. "Only you know that, September. Other people only see what you show them. Do you know how to have fun outside of work?"

Em stared at him, then at her nails. "I... I don't know."

It was quiet for a few seconds.

"Then I think that might be your answer."

Em grimaced at his blunt response. She needed April. April loved to sugarcoat things—she would make Em feel better.

"But if you're so worried about it, why don't you do something?"

Em stiffened. "Like quit my job? Maybe when I die."

Garrett raised his hands in self-defense. "Wow, not quite what I meant. More along the lines of stop working late. Maybe do something fun on the weekends."

"Why would I do that?"

Garrett shrugged again. "Because you seem pretty upset. And, in my experience, if something upsets you, you change it. No use continuing on in some depressing vein. Would you

be happy going to work tomorrow without changing things, knowing what you learned today?”

Em’s mouth pinched to the side. She really wanted to say yes. But she couldn’t. “No.”

“Great. Then do something about it.”

“I don’t have any hobbies. What am I supposed to do for fun?”

“Hey, I thought your favorite hobbies were sleeping and bathing.”

“Thank you, but I can’t really prove to my coworkers that I’m fun by doing those in abundance.” Em glared at him, but it felt half-hearted. *She* felt half-hearted. As if she’d just realized that, according to everyone else, she was living half a life. It hadn’t ever bothered her before that her whole life was centered around work. It wasn’t like she’d grown up that way... It had happened gradually. So gradually she hadn’t even realized until now.

Switching from swim team to debate in high school when her parents never showed up for her swim meets but did for her debate competitions. Heading home early to study during undergrad so the next time Mom or Dad called, she was able to prove how hard she was working for her good grades. Planning to accept the next lunch invitation, but then worrying that, if she did, she wouldn’t have a chance to finish prep on her next case.

When had she become... boring?

Garrett had crossed to the stool she'd vacated and sat down while she was busy visiting memory lane. "Okay," he drew out the word, clearly turning something over in his head. "I have a plan."

"I don't think I'm going to like this."

He grinned at her. "Probably not. I propose a deal."

"A deal?"

"Yes. A deal of fun. And it should be a great deal of fun, if I may make such a bad pun." He laughed at himself, and Em almost smiled, though the frozen realization of just how lame she was had her lips wanting to stay in a flat line.

"Okay. I'm listening."

"You start coming home from work early every day—say, by six or something. And reserve three hours every Saturday for one fun activity of my choosing."

"That sounds more like a challenge than a deal. And not a very *fun* challenge."

"Ha ha, good point. Okay, we'll make it a deal. What do you want?"

Em stood up. Her chin was throbbing a little less, and she realized how ridiculous this whole situation was. She and Garrett were not friends. The people at work weren't even her friends. She didn't need to prove anything to anyone.

Garrett was watching her expectantly.

Em cleared her throat. “Nothing. I take it back. I don’t care what my coworkers say about me. I *am* a workaholic. And I’m proud of it. If more people were workaholics, the world would be a much better place.” If she said it a little louder, maybe she’d believe it.

His head cocked to the side. A challenging look entered his expression.

She spoke again before he could, “Thanks for helping me clean this up. With no first aid stuff, I would have ended up taping a piece of toilet paper to my chin or something.” Oh gosh, she was talking about toilet paper. Time to wrap things up. “I’ll replace the stuff I used. Thanks again.”

He rose slowly from the barstool. “Okay.” His eyes moved between both of hers, searching for something. She almost looked away but managed to hold her ground.

Finally, he nodded. “I’ll just head out then. Have a good night.”

“Thanks, you too.” The words came out too brightly, but he didn’t notice. He was too busy leaving.

Em breathed a sigh of relief when the door closed behind him. She rubbed the side of her head, feeling a headache coming on beneath the residual pain of her chin and wrist. She’d nearly made a big mistake. Sure, she was a little boring... but it had served her well all these years. She hadn’t been in the top five percent of her graduating law cohort by skipping studying on the weekends. She hadn’t been given this high-profile case because she was *a fun time* after work. No.

Her way of life might not be for everyone, but it was perfect for her.

She reached down to scratch Mr. Winkles behind the ears, but the cat dodged her, slinking off. Em watched her leave, piling on more reasons to fill the weird emptiness settling in her chest. Plus... she needed all the extra time she could find to prep for this case.

And... and she couldn't make deals with her neighbor. She couldn't be all buddy-buddy with him at all. Something told her the second she let him in, he'd weasel his way straight to her heart. And romance was not a distraction she could handle right now.



Em had only one goal on Tuesday morning: get through the Clayton hearing successfully, and set a trial date. But first she had to get to her car, and in order to get to her car, she had to pass Garrett.

From the window in her living room, she could see him out on his porch sipping his herbal tea, which was really strange, because he had the appearance of a man who would only drink black coffee or protein drinks. What other idiosyncrasies did he have?

She shook her head at her wayward thoughts. It was already 6:40, and if she didn't leave now, she was going to be late to work.

Well, late to being early to work, which was pretty much the same thing.

Acting as though she hadn't a care in the world—and as though she didn't currently have a massive Band-Aid on her chin—Em grabbed her purse and stepped onto her porch. She waited for the barrage of questions—the onslaught of random thoughts from next door—but none came. Out of the corner of her eye, she peeked over at Garrett.

He was sitting peacefully on his porch swing, sipping away at his mug. He caught her staring and raised the mug in salute.

But that was all. He didn't even offer any tea to her like he'd said he would the day before.

Bemused, Em made it to her car without hearing a peep out of her generally talkative neighbor.

Weird.

Not unwelcome, just weird.

With a shrug, she backed out of her driveway and started the drive to work.

No one seemed to notice her altered appearance at any point during the day. Not even her paralegal mentioned the fact that Em's entire chin was covered in bandages. It was humbling... to have evidence that something so big to her didn't matter a bit to anyone else.

At exactly five o'clock, Stephanie peeked her head into Em's office. "I'm heading out for the night. Have a good evening, Ms. Miller."

In a show of either friendly interest or masochistic tendencies, Em raised her head from the brief she was reading. “Are you heading anywhere fun?”

Stephanie apparently didn’t find anything strange in Em’s sudden interest in her paralegal’s social life. “A group of us are going for drinks, actually.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Oh, it should be. It’s karaoke night at Annie’s, and Parker and I have planned a mean rendition of ‘Under Pressure.’ You know, the one by David Bowie and Queen?”

“Yes, I’ve heard it.” Who hadn’t?

Stephanie bounced up to the balls of her feet, then back down. “It’ll be great.” For a brief second, her eyes fell to the bandage on Em’s chin, and an unspoken question lit her expression. But then she backed away, eyes flicking up. “Anyway, goodnight!”

She flitted away, grabbing her purse off her cluttered desk and skipping out of the office. The light in the break room turned off a few moments after Stephanie passed it, and a few more of her coworkers left for the day. They didn’t wave or say goodnight, just walked past her open office door as if she didn’t exist.

Em frowned.

She didn’t like karaoke. She was glad they hadn’t invited her.

But she did kind of wish that they even *noticed* her. She'd never realized before how very separated she was from the office. No one ever talked with her unless it was regarding a case. And even then, they usually sent emails. Even Rachel, whose office was right next door.

But that was professional.

Right? Em's frown deepened, and she tapped her pencil against the brief.

Movement in her peripheral made her glance out her door again. Mr. Standson was just stepping out of his office.

In Em's newfound recognition of how very isolated she was from those she worked with, she'd noticed that Mr. Standson, the boss, talked with nearly every one of her coworkers. Maybe she should be more interactive with him as well. She stood and rounded her desk, hurrying to get to her doorway.

"Heading home, Mr. Standson?" she asked with a strangely stiff smile as he passed Stephanie's desk.

He looked over at her, apparently startled. "Oh, Ms. Miller. I didn't see you there." He glanced at his watch then back at her. He was about fifteen years Em's senior and was balding in a perfectly round spot on the top of his head. "No, actually, I'm headed to meet some friends for karaoke tonight." His eyes danced in apparent anticipation, and the expression looked strange on her generally stoic boss.

Wait. *Karaoke?*

"Oh? Where are you going?" Em asked innocently.

“Annie’s. It’s a great little bar down the street from here. We try and go every few weeks.”

Em’s heart sank. There wasn’t any way her *boss* was joining the office group for karaoke? He was way too professional for that.

“Sounds... fun. I hope you enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, I think I will. Don’t stay too late, Ms. Miller.”

Em offered him a halfhearted smile. “I won’t.”

He nodded and walked down the hall, leaving Em frozen in her doorway.

Just because Stephanie and Mr. Standson were both going to karaoke at the same place tonight didn’t mean they were going together as a group. It was just a coincidence.

The lights in the common areas clicked off. It didn’t make the office dark, as the summer evening light still streamed through the windows, but it did feel strangely lonely. Usually, Em found this time of day peaceful. She could work without disruption. But tonight... tonight she felt abandoned.

She returned to her desk but reread the same line in the brief six times without comprehending any of it. It was useless. Yesterday had ruined work for Em. At least for today.

Plus, she felt a ridiculous desire to find out if Mr. Standson had really been invited to join the office for karaoke. For some reason, knowing he might have been included, when she was not, hurt more than the fact that everyone she worked with seemed to think she was boring.

After a half hour, she gave up. She was too distracted and couldn't work anymore.

She would just head home and work there.

And if she happened to pass Annie's on her way, so be it.

Five minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot of the popular bar. She felt creepy and a little stalkerish, but her mind would not calm down unless she knew the extent of her exclusion.

She thought she would feel better if she knew one way or another.

Unfortunately, she was wrong.

There, seated in a large corner booth, were three attorneys, two paralegals, and *Mr. Standson*. As Em watched, a group of four more people from the office walked up to the table and smiled and chatted with those sitting down.

Em swallowed hard.

She wasn't social... so why did it hurt to see all these people together, without a thought for the coworker they didn't invite?

It felt like she was in fourth grade, eating alone at lunch because the other kids thought she was weird. But at least in fourth grade, she'd had friends. Somewhere along the way, she'd stopped having more than acquaintances in her life.

With more than a little force, Em punched the car into reverse and pulled back onto the road. She needed to talk to

Garrett.



Em

GARRETT WASN'T ON HIS porch when Em got home that night, which was annoying. The man was always around, but the one time she needed him, he disappeared.

With a dirty look at his front door, she locked her car and stomped—or something resembling stomping but accomplished in heels—to her door. Mr. Winkles sidled up to her as she set her purse on the kitchen counter. The cat wound between her legs, purring deeply.

Em squatted to her level, scratching behind her ears. Her presence felt comforting, and Em smiled.

She didn't need a social life. She had her job and her cat.

With a flick of her tail, Mr. Winkles wound through her legs one last time, then slinked back down the hall. Em stared after her. Well. She still had her job. And her family. April, at least, would always be there for her.

Heading the opposite way from her capricious cat, she opened her fridge. It was empty.

Not totally empty, but with the exception of a loaf of bread, some milk, and condiments, there wasn't much to be had, which was fine. She would just order a pizza.

She walked back to her purse, pulling out her phone. She placed an order for a large pizza, though she knew she wouldn't actually eat the whole thing, then sat at her counter and waited.

Her fingers drummed against the quartz, and she looked down at her blank phone screen. Maybe she should call April and tell her about all the work stuff. April gave great advice.

But Em already knew what April's advice would be. It would be the same as Garrett's. Because, apparently, *everyone* in her life thought she worked too much. Except maybe her parents. Maybe she should call *them*.

She immediately squashed that thought. Em had stopped calling on them for advice long ago. They were either too busy to answer at the moment she called, or gave advice that somehow made Em feel worse. She could easily see her mom saying, "If your office doesn't appreciate you, just come work for us. We value hard work at our firm. I guess the public sphere of law doesn't."

A loud knock sounded at the door, and Em silently thanked the pizza man for distracting her. Pizza was capable of fixing anything. She swiped a few bills from her purse as she headed for the hall.

But when she pulled open the door, it was Garrett's grinning face that greeted her.

“You’re not pizza.”

He laughed. “That’s the best compliment I’ve gotten all day.”

Em rolled her eyes to cover the fact that she was unexplainably happy to see him. “Not my intention.”

“Are you sure? I mean... maybe you meant to say I look good enough to eat.”

“Did you need something?” Why did she just say that? After all, a half hour before, *she* ’d been looking for *him*.

“Well, I couldn’t help my curiosity.” He leaned against the doorframe. “Imagine my surprise when I pulled in just now, and your car was already sitting out front.” His smile grew wider, and crinkles popped up around his eyes.

Em nodded. “Yes.” Ah. Look at her. Finally managing something blandly pleasant.

“It made me think maybe you’ve rethought our deal.”

She met his expectant gaze. “Challenge. It was more of a challenge.”

“I was happy to offer you a reward. We could make it a bet, even.”

Em couldn’t help glancing down at his lips as he said that. Horrible timing on the part of her subconscious. She yanked her eyes back up, but too late. His smile had turned teasing.

“Any reward.” He emphasized *any*.

Em was torn between turning him down flat and accepting. She was leaning toward the latter for reasons she didn't want to examine. It couldn't have anything to do with the tingles that offer had just sent down her spine.

The actual pizza man pulled up in front of her curb, and Em latched onto something that wouldn't require her to accept or reject his offer. She turned to Garrett and asked, "Want some pizza?"

Garrett seemed surprised at her invitation. Or maybe just at the sudden change of topic.

Em wished she could take back the words. She shouldn't have invited him in. That was like inviting your unrelenting Grandma to comment on your life choices. Or, you know, inviting the guy you're more than a little attracted to into your house when you really just wanted to squash the attraction like a bug.

But he could always say no. Hopefully he'd say no.

"Sure," he said, sticking his hands into his pockets. He was wearing jeans today, and a button-up shirt rolled up to expose his forearms.

"You sure?"

He nodded. "I never say no to pizza."

Em offered him a brittle smile.

The pizza guy walked up behind Garrett, who stepped out of the way for the teenager. Em handed the boy his tip, thanked him, then turned on her heel and stalked to the kitchen.

She heard Garrett following her, closing the door behind them. How had this man swindled his way into her house two days in a row?

Sure, he'd been patching her up yesterday... and she'd invited him in today. But still. It made Em feel on edge. She set the pizza on the counter and turned to grab some plates and glasses from the cupboard.

"I should have pegged you for a vegetarian pizza kind of girl." Garrett had opened the pizza box and sat down at the bar.

"Do you dislike veggies?" Em was starting to hope he did.

"Yes, in fact." He smiled over at her, leaning back in his chair. "But, luckily, I'm capable of eating pretty much any pizza."

That's unfortunate.

Garrett laughed, and Em went hot. She must have said that last part out loud.

"I'm going to assume that since you invited me in, you don't really mean that."

"Want something to drink?" She set the plates on the peninsula.

His laughter settled into a relaxed smile as he leaned a hip against her counter and crossed his arms. "Water is fine, thanks."

She filled two cups with water, setting one down and pushing it toward him. He took it with a quiet “thank you.”

He waited for her to grab a slice of pizza, then pulled two onto his own plate. She had only gotten a single bite in before he started talking again.

“So, why *are* you home early today? That’s two days in a row.”

Em shrugged. “I didn’t have that much work.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I hate people who can do that, you know. I tried to learn for the longest time.”

“What? Raise one eyebrow?”

“Mm-hmm.” She took another bite.

Garrett alternately raised his left brow, then his right in quick succession until Em was covering her mouth with a hand and trying not to laugh.

“Some of us are just incredibly skilled.” He winked. “Almost as skilled as you are at deflecting.”

“It’s not a skill I was aware of until I met you.”

“You’re still deflecting.” He tore off a bite of his pizza.

Em sighed. “Fine. A bunch of people at work, including my boss, went out for karaoke tonight.”

Garrett nodded slowly. “Ah. And they didn’t invite you.”

It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway, sweeping a few crumbs from the table as she did. "Yup."

He finished off his first slice and brushed his hands together, leaning back in his chair. "So, have you reconsidered our deal then?"

Em looked casually out the large picture window above the sink, mulling over the question. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"I guess it would depend on the reward." She attempted to mimic the teasing tone he'd adopted so often, but it felt—and sounded—off. Luckily, he didn't comment on it.

"What about a trophy?"

She glanced back at him. "I don't like knickknacks."

He looked around the kitchen with a discerning eye. "Clearly. How long have you lived here?"

"Three years."

"Yikes. Remind me to never ask you to decorate my house."

She stuck her tongue out at him, then quickly covered her mouth in shock. Where had that come from?

"Okay, back to the deal. I'll drive you to work every day for a month if you win."

"No, no, that's no good. I still plan on going in to work early, even if I agree to this deal. And I refuse to be late. You'll make me late." She stuck her finger accusingly at him.

He laughed. "Alright, I'll make you dinner for a week."

“Are you a good cook?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’ll pass on that one.”

“Wait. Why do I have to offer some sort of reward for this? Shouldn’t your own self-satisfaction be enough?” Garrett raised an eyebrow at her.

“Uh-uh. But if you want to drop the deal, it’s more than alright with me.”

“Okay, fine. I can build you something?”

“Like what?”

“Whatever you want. Within reason.” He quickly added that last part with a raise of his palm.

Em walked to a barstool one down from his and sat. “I thought you were in construction management. Not construction, construction.”

Garrett shrugged one shoulder. “My dad liked to work with his hands a lot, so I picked up a few things.”

Em glanced down at his hands. They did seem capable and strong.

“I made my mom a rocking chair last year. I could make you some shelves. Or picture frames. Or a house for your cat.” He pointed at Mr. Winkles as she slinked around a corner.

“Mr. Winkles has a whole bedroom to herself; he doesn’t need a house. But I’ll take you up on the offer. With a few exceptions.”

“Mr. Winkles?”

“Don’t ask. Now, my exceptions. I have to be home by *seven*, not six. And I have to be able to veto any of your ideas of fun.”

“I will agree to the seven o’clock stipulation, but if you were allowed to veto my fun ideas, we would end up not doing anything. Or worse, we’d only do your hobbies: napping and bathing. Which, come to think of it, probably wouldn’t actually be terrible, but I still doubt you want to do them with me.”

Em glared at him, hoping the look would cover her flaming cheeks. “Fine. No vetoing. That brings me to the last stipulation. These are *not* dates. We are not dating. I don’t have time for that.”

Garrett chuckled, and Em crossed her arms, fending off a flash of offense.

He turned in his barstool, leaning an elbow onto the counter and leaning forward an inch or two. The distance between them filled with anticipation. His voice was pitched lower as he pierced her with a look that was half amusement, half challenge. “Don’t worry, September Miller, I have no intention of dating you.”

He pushed back from the counter and checked his watch. “Hey, I gotta run, but I’ll see you on Saturday. Get ready for some fuuuun. Oh, and you’d better be home by seven tomorrow.”

He smiled as he stood up, rinsed his cup and plate in the sink, and showed himself out the door.

Which left Em staring at the spot he'd just vacated and wondering why he didn't want to date her.



CHAPTER 10

Garrett

THESE ARE NOT DATES.

Garrett scoffed as Em's words rang through his head while he texted one of the crew members with a few last instructions. Thank heavens that woman was too vain for her own good, otherwise Garrett would be in real trouble. But he hardly needed to do anything besides poke her a bit, and up in arms she went, ready to defend herself, her job, and probably her strangely named cat, too.

It was entertaining. *She* was entertaining. And Garrett would claim that as the reason he kept seeking her out. Not the fact that she seemed to have hidden depth to her. Or the fact that she might just be the most beautiful woman of his acquaintance.

Beautiful women were never good news.

When he saw her exit her car in a complete state of distraction, only to face plant on her porch, he'd been racing across their lawns before he was even aware of it. He might have even jumped his porch railing. Yeah, he was pretty sure he had.

The fact that she'd been distracted by people not thinking she was *fun* was nothing short of shocking. She'd told him just a few days before that she didn't do fun. Why should she care if other people believed that as well?

Enter: hidden depth.

Or maybe it was just a natural human tendency to worry about what other people thought of her. But something niggled at the back of his mind saying it was more than that. He was probably crazy, but it was too late now.

Because now he had to figure out what he was going to do about the predicament he'd found himself in. He hadn't intended to make that deal with her, and he was starting to think he might be going crazy.

What sane guy would put himself through the torture of spending time with a woman like Em? He was essentially saying to himself: Look Garrett, you're attracted to this woman and don't want to be, so here's an idea! You can spend *hours* getting to know her, with the explicit knowledge that she's not at all interested in you. Then, if you're lucky, you might even start to *like* her. Then what, man? Whatcha gonna do then?

Idiot.

And to top it all off, he'd just lost a month of weekend excursions. He'd been looking forward to summer and all the activities the warm weather in Colorado brought. Last summer he'd been in Maine, which wasn't quite the same experience.

But now he would have to forego his rock climbing, hiking, and biking. Plus camping. And boating. He'd just willingly given it all up.

Or had he?

Garrett fell back onto his leather couch and squinted in contemplation.

Em had agreed to three hours every Saturday. That wasn't long enough for camping or boating, really, but it was long enough for a hike. Or rock climbing.

He grinned to himself. What he wouldn't give to see Miss September Miller attempting to scale a mountain. She'd probably try negotiating with the rocks before climbing them. He rubbed his hands together.

Well, if he'd gotten himself into this predicament, the least he could do was enjoy the time. And enjoy it he would.

He jumped up from the couch and paced to his spare room, surveying the mess in there. Which one would she like the *least*?

That thought was a little mean. He didn't intend to be cruel, really, but he did have the strangest desire to make September feel a little uncomfortable. Growth didn't come in your comfort zone. And this woman needed to grow. Like a freaking sunflower. Sunflowers needed sun, air, and water.

And Garrett needed to stop thinking about flowers.

He backed out of the room. *Definitely losing my mind*. He'd figure out what activity to do later. Sometime when his hands

couldn't distinctly remember holding the side of her face, which had been wet from tears, and tending to her cut barely twenty-four hours before.

Actually, that would probably stick with him for a while. The least he could hope was that the memory of sitting next to her, eating pizza, and watching her try not to laugh would fade by that weekend.

With more than a little force, he fell back onto his couch again and flipped on the TV. Em's house didn't even seem to have a TV, unless she kept it in her bedroom.

He'd have to ask her if she did. Or maybe just find out for himself.

He stopped there, physically hitting himself in the forehead with a fist.

Yup. I've lost it.



CHAPTER 11

Em

EM WAS BEGINNING TO worry that work would be forever ruined for her.

She had gotten half the amount of work done than usual during the remainder of the week. She blamed her decreased productivity on the fact that she had become painfully aware of every time a coworker crossed the office to talk to another prosecutor or paralegal. She had watched while they left in pairs and groups for lunch, and had noticed that no more than two people besides Stephanie talked to her each day. And even Stephanie didn't talk much. To Em, at least.

With a sigh, Em glanced at the clock. Five-thirty. Good enough. She couldn't remember the last time she was happy to leave work, but she was hoping that, by Monday, this itchy, distracted feeling would be gone, and she could return to work as usual.

Plus, Garrett would be really proud to see her home an hour earlier than they'd agreed on. Anticipation of seeing his response to her arrival made her quicken her step as she left the office and headed for her car.

Not that it ended up mattering, because, for the first time since they'd made their deal, Garrett wasn't sitting on his porch waiting for her to get home.

On Wednesday, he had been sitting outside with a large clock that read 6:59 when she pulled in. Where he'd gotten a clock that size, she'd neglected to ask. He had hemmed and hawed about her cutting it close, and she'd entered her house laughing.

Yesterday he was whittling a piece of wood with a knife when she stepped from her car. He had waved whatever he was carving in the air and told her he was brushing up on his wood-working skills and that she'd better not screw up the deal, or she would miss out on something amazing.

But today, he was nowhere to be found.

Em stepped slowly out of her car and tried not to look as if she was peering in his front windows. But she was. She walked slowly to the front door, then slowly unlocked and entered it.

She half expected him to show up at her door within minutes, but he didn't. Maybe he got home late from work a lot too, and Em just didn't know that because she was always later than him.

It was perturbing that she felt such a loss at his absence. She'd known the guy for not even two weeks and only had a handful of real conversations with him. Why should she care if he wasn't on his porch when she got home?

She didn't. Em was just a creature of habit, and Garrett had become a sort of habit. He was there when she left in the mornings, and he was, usually, there when she got home. He said or did something ridiculous, she tried not to laugh but failed, then they both continued on with their lives. That was all. She would just drop the habit, and then whatever she was feeling would disappear.

With that in mind, she tramped to the kitchen, kicking off her heels as she went. Ignoring all the rules of healthy living, she pulled open her freezer and extracted the mostly full carton of Ben & Jerry's ice cream she'd picked up on her Wednesday grocery run. Then she went to her bedroom and changed into pajamas, because you can't eat ice cream in a tailored pantsuit.

Mr. Winkles wandered in at some point and jumped up on Em's bed. As was the cat's usual custom, she spun in a circle a few times then lay down on the foot of the bed. But the second Em sat against her pillow, Mr. Winkles shot out of the room.

Even her cat thought she was boring.

She dragged her computer from her side table and pulled it open. But just like at the office, she couldn't get her mind to settle enough to effectively work. What did people do with free time? Why did she even have free time? Shouldn't she be working on something? Surely, she could find *something* to do.

She couldn't.

For half an hour, she scrolled through her work files, but everything was either tied up or awaiting responses from the defense attorneys assigned to her cases or the officers investigating them.

So, she called April.

“Hey, Em, what’s up?”

“I just thought I’d see how you and Jackson are doing. I haven’t heard from you guys in a few days.”

“Wow, usually I have to cram my life down your throat, but here you are asking for it. This is a nice change.”

Em recognized the teasing note in April’s voice, but she still felt a twinge of guilt. Her sister was right; Em was horrible at checking in, and most of their sisterly bonding came from April reaching out.

Em was really tired of these introspective realizations she was having lately.

“Hey, you guys wanna do that dinner tonight? The one I couldn’t make a couple weeks ago? I’m so sorry I never called to set something up.”

“It’s no problem, Em; we know you’re busy. But we already ate tonight. Maybe tomorrow?”

Em paused. “I think I might be busy tomorrow.”

“You think?”

“Well, I promised Garrett I would give him three hours. I don’t know which three hours he wants. Do you mind if I let

you know once he tells me what we're doing?"

"You... He... You're going out with Garrett?" The surprise in her sister's voice was eclipsed by the excitement. "Em, why didn't you tell me?!"

Em lifted her hand up to stop April's excitement before remembering she was on the phone. "I am *not* going out with him... We just made this stupid deal. I'm considering going back on it, actually. He caught me in a moment of weakness, and I don't know if I can follow through."

"Wait, wait, wait. You've completely lost me, and I don't think it's just because of my pregnancy brain. Start from the beginning."

Em sighed, but did as asked. Though she might have downplayed her total devastation at learning what her coworkers thought of her.

When she finished, April was quiet for a moment.

"So," Em asked, "I should back out, right? It's dumb... right?"

"Oh, heck no, you shouldn't! This might be the best thing that's ever happened to you!"

"Ouch. So I gather you don't think I'm fun either?"

April's voice softened, "No, Em, I don't think that at all. But I do think you could use... well... a little help letting loose." There was a shuffling on April's end, and Em imagined her sister was settling into a chair or her bed. "Listen, our parents weren't the easiest to grow up with. They

make it seem like you have to always be going, going, going, or you're headed nowhere. But that's not true. And that's not living. I think spending a little time dedicated to nothing but having fun will be good for you."

Em was silent. What was she supposed to say to that?

"Plus," April filled the silence with a comment guaranteed to be cheeky, based on her tone of voice, "I think a little alone time with your hottie neighbor would do you good."

"Whose hottie neighbor are you talking about, and do I need to be concerned?" Jackson's muffled voice sounded in the background.

"Nobody, babe, you're the only hottie I ever talk about."

"Mmhmm, and it better stay that way."

Em heard Jackson kiss April, and she considered just hanging up and giving the couple some space, but April beat her to it. "Hey, Em, I gotta run, Jackson and I are going to a game night at Natalie's. But you'd better go on that date tomorrow, and you'd better call me as soon as you're home."

"It's not a date."

"Uh-huh, sure. Love you!"

"Love you too."

And then the call cut off, and Em was left staring at her blank computer screen and an empty Ben & Jerry's container. When had she finished that? She shook her head and scooted off the bed.

April had only taken up fifteen minutes of her time, but that was fine because Em had just remembered that she did, in fact, have a hobby. So she walked into her bathroom, turned on the tap, and watched the tub fill up.

“I really know how to enjoy my Friday night,” she said aloud as she sank into the warm water. “Who needs fun when you have bath bombs?”

Mr. Winkles stuck her head in the door then promptly turned tail and left.

“This *is* fun, Mr. Winkles!” Em called after the cat. “Just because you’re a cat and don’t like water, doesn’t mean I’m not fun!”

And then she slid under the foaming bubbles and contemplated her boring existence.



CHAPTER 12

Em

EM HAD BEEN UP for seven hours before she heard anything from Garrett. That should have been her first tip that the day was not going to go well.

She had showered, gotten dressed, made breakfast, gotten dressed again because her first outfit didn't feel very fun, and then sat around throwing a fake mouse at Mr. Winkles.

She'd tried to do some work, but the looming knowledge that she should be hearing from Garrett any minute kept distracting her. Now she was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling and considering changing again.

A knock sounded at the door at exactly 12:37. Em knew this because staring at the ceiling had gotten boring about thirty seconds before the knock, so she'd switched to staring at her old black clock on her side table.

She jumped off the bed way too quickly and ran her hands down her outfit. She should have changed again. The t-shirt and jeans were too casual, and she was sure Garrett would make some comment about how he didn't realize she owned anything besides tailored pants and blazers. She looked at her

closet. She didn't really own much else, so changing again might be kinda difficult.

The visitor knocked again, and she abandoned the quick-change plan, opting instead to walk a little too quickly down the hall. When she pulled the door open, she didn't miss Garrett's quick perusal of her clothes. She waited for him to say something, but he just met her eyes and smiled.

Something about the way his cheeks creased with that action made her stomach tilt.

"I was beginning to think we weren't going to be participating in any fun today," Em said as she stepped aside to let him in. She only sounded a little breathless.

Garrett gave her half of a grimace. "Sorry about that. A couple friends were free, so we decided to take an impromptu camping trip. I just got back an hour ago."

Em shrugged. "Don't be sorry. *I'm* only sorry you came back. You got my hopes up."

Garrett laughed. "No way. I'm fully committed to bringing you up to speed on the rest of the world's idea of fun."

"Oh yay," Em said flatly.

"You are almost convincing with your enthusiasm."

She ignored that and closed the door. "So, what are we doing today?"

He raised his eyebrows at her. "I don't have to tell you, remember? But I am hoping you have something a little more

comfortable to wear. Maybe something you'd work out in?"

Em scrunched her nose. She didn't work out. She just worked. "I'm sure I can find something. Just a minute." She turned to walk down the hall, leaving him in the entry to her living room.

"I do have to say, though, I'm impressed you even own those jeans. I thought your closet must be full of suits and pencil skirts." Garrett's deep voice followed her down the hall, and Em couldn't help the feeling of success mingled with amusement.

"I knew you'd say that," she said over her shoulder.

"Aw. You know me so well. This is the start of a beautiful friendship, I can tell."

She shook her head, hiding her entertainment, and stepped into her room.

Something I'd work out in...

Her closet wouldn't have anything, but maybe some pajama pants? No. But she did have a pair of sweats.

She didn't really want to wear her sweats though. They weren't the most flattering, plus they had a small hole in the knee. That wasn't particularly alluring.

She wasn't trying to be alluring though. So she pulled out the sweats. And, like a gift straight from the heavens—practically glowing with heavenly light—some folded black exercise leggings she'd forgotten she owned were underneath them. April had bought them for her for Christmas two years

before, along with passes to a belly dancing class for the two of them. Em couldn't remember why she hadn't made it to the class, but she guessed it had something to do with the words *belly* and *dancing*.

But the leggings would come in handy now, so long as they fit. They still had the tag on and everything.

Shimmying out of her jeans, she pulled out the leggings and tried them on. A little tight, but maybe they were supposed to be that way?

She didn't have anything better than the t-shirt, so it would have to do. A pair of tennis shoes were gathering dust in her closet, so she freed them from their cobwebs and neglect. On her way out, she glanced in the mirror in her bathroom, grabbed a hair tie, and tied back her hair.

But when she arrived back in the entry, Garrett had disappeared.

She found him in the living room, looking at a picture on the wall. It was the only picture on the wall, and it was only up because April had helped her unpack this room.

“Are these your parents?” he asked without turning around.

“Yes. I think that picture was taken almost five years ago, though.”

He turned around. “Why not put up a more recent one?”

“Well, for one, I don't decorate, and, two, that is the most recent one.”

“That’s your most recent family picture? My mom makes us take one every year for the Christmas card, and it’s only her and I. We’re running out of poses.” He crossed the kitchen and looked down at her. He seemed especially tall now that she wasn’t wearing heels. “Ready?”

“Yup. Lead the way.”

“Great. Let’s go.” He offered her another of his lopsided smiles, bringing out the crinkles around his eyes that might actually be a permanent part of his face, he smiled so much.

She followed him to his truck, trying to ignore the butterflies twirling and diving in her stomach. In the courtroom, she was always perfectly in control and calm. Why did she feel so upended around Garrett?

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going now?”

“Nope.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “You’ll just have to wait and see. It’s really going to raise *the bar* for you on what you see as fun.”

He watched her, apparently waiting for a response, so she nodded. “Okay.”

He seemed disappointed. “We do have a bit of a drive ahead of us. Want to play a game?”

Em eyed him. “Depends on the game.”

“Twenty questions?”

“Nope. I’ve only played that once, and it’s horrible.”

Garrett laughed. “Only people who are bad at it say that.”

“Yes. Well.”

He laughed harder. “Okay, I Spy?”

“I’m pretty sure anything we spy would disappear by the time the other person could guess.”

“Alright, so I assume you are bad at that game too,” he said lazily as he pulled out of the driveway.

Em narrowed her eyes at him.

He didn’t notice.

“Alphabet game, then. You can’t find anything *to object to* with that. It’s easy and competitive. And once we start driving, there will be all sorts of signs to use.”

“Fine. Are we counting license plates?”

He looked over at her, and for some reason, she felt like she’d disappointed him again. But then he just said, “No way. Are you one of those lame people? I’m not so sure about this whole fun deal anymore...”

“For the record, I don’t play that way.”

Garrett turned off their street and winked at her. “Okay, then, what rules do you follow?”

Em sat up straighter. Rules and lists were a safe topic. “You have to find the letters in order. You don’t have to say them aloud until you get to Z, nothing on cars counts, and... I think that’s it.”

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Okay, ready... set... go.”

The car was quiet as the two of them competed to find all the letters in the alphabet before the other. Em was so focused, she didn't even pay attention to where they were going.

“Z.” Garrett pointed at a sign at a pull-out that said “authorized vehicles only.”

Em glared at him.

“Let me guess, you're still on ‘q’?” He came to a stop at a red light.

“Maybe.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I am quite skilled at this game.”

“Mmm... nope, doesn't make me feel any better. Hey, where are we?” They had passed the final block of the small town proper and seemed to be heading toward the mountains that Em drove beside to get to work. The infamous canyon was made by the outer edge.

“Just leaving town.”

“Why?”

He grinned over at her, and Em distinctly felt a pinging in her chest. “For fun, Em, remember?”

“Yes, but you're taking me to the murder spot.”

“The what?”

She pointed out the window. “This canyon. It's the perfect spot to kill someone. Are you planning to kill me?”

He looked sideways at her. “You don’t still think I plan to kill you and push your car into a river, do you?”

“I see you’ve expanded the plan to include pushing my car into the river. How much thought have you given to killing me?”

“More than usual lately. I guess we will see how the day goes, though.”

She glanced over at him to see his mouth twitching. “You’re not that funny.”

“Uh-huh, sure. The amount of times you’ve laughed at my jokes couldn’t possibly be an indicator of my hilarity.” His lips twitched again, and Em couldn’t fight the impulse to punch his arm.

“Excuse me,” he said, full-out laughing now as he rubbed his shoulder. “But just because I say I won’t kill you doesn’t mean you couldn’t kill us both by pulling stunts like that.”

Em shook her head, fighting a smile of her own. “Come on, the car didn’t even swerve.”

“Yes, but if I wasn’t so strong and masculine, it might have, and then where would we be?”

She gave him a look of long-suffering, which was wasted due to his diligent watching of the road.

“If you can curb your violent streak for a couple minutes, I will give you a hint about where we’re going.”

Em made a show of clasping her hands in her lap. “I’m listening.”

“You’ve never done what we are about to do before.” Then, with those cryptic words, he glanced over at her, chuckling at the apparent confusion she was surely displaying.

“How could you possibly know that? You’ve known me less than a month.”

“Oh, I know.”

“I can’t decide if that’s creepy or just scary.”

“How about exciting?”

“No. Definitely not that.”

He chuckled, and Em couldn’t help the slight quirk of her lips. She couldn’t be held responsible for her lightening mood when in the presence of this wholly annoying but constantly laughing man.

Unfortunately, he saw the expression and proceeded to gloat heartily over bringing what was really only half a smile to her face. They continued in that vein—him teasing, her fighting a second almost-smile—for nearly ten minutes before he pulled off on the side of the road.

“We’re here!” He turned off the ignition and shifted in his seat to face Em, his left arm slinging casually over the top of the steering wheel and straining the top of his t-shirt.

Em looked out the window. They were nowhere. It was a random pull-out in the middle of the canyon with thick foliage

to the right and the road on their left.

“Uh-huh. And here is...”

“You’ll see.” He opened his door and jumped out, pulling a bag out of the bed of the truck and slinging it like a backpack on his back.

All Em could think when she joined him at the back of the truck was that the bag looked heavy but not big enough to hold a body.

He must have caught her staring, because he looked down at the bag too. “What? Checking to see if your x-ray vision has kicked in?”

“Just judging the size of your bag. I’m taller than average, so I’m pretty sure I won’t fit if you do decide to off me.”

“Don’t forget, there’s always the river.”

“True. I’ll steer clear of deep, moving water then. Thanks for the heads up.”

He shook his head good-naturedly. “Well, beyond dwelling on morbid thoughts, have you figured out what we’re doing?”

Her eyes lifted to his light green ones, and for a moment she could only stare. He was criminally handsome.

With a clearing of her throat, she shrugged, looking away. “I’ve decided to wait it out. Hopefully you’ll tell me what we’re doing before throwing me into a waterfall or watching me walk off a cliff.”

Garrett adjusted a strap on the bag, then grabbed her hand to tug her around the car. “That’s the best idea you’ve had yet.” And he pulled her toward the foliage, letting go of her to motion her forward onto a narrow, hardly apparent path in front of her.

She stumbled forward, her hand feeling strangely warm where he’d briefly held it. “What idea?” she sputtered, attempting to right her steps before he noticed. “Throwing me into a waterfall? That’s concerning.”

“No, you deciding to wait. Less stressful to you, I’d think.”

“Hmm,” was the only response she could come up with, what with her rising fear of suddenly twisting her ankle or falling off a cliff. Not that she could fall off a cliff while inside a canyon. She would have to hike pretty far up to do that.

Oh, please say they weren’t hiking. Who thought hiking was fun?

But after another five minutes of walking on the incredibly narrow trail, ducking and swerving occasionally to avoid the trees and bushes that grew on either side, her fears began to solidify.

“Hey, it’s probably better if I lead from here. Do you mind?”

Oh, good. They were headed somewhere. The fun was not to be had in the hike alone.

Somehow, that didn’t make her feel any better.

“No, please.” She stepped aside on the narrow trail, trying to avoid all the treacherous-looking branches and bushes that surrounded them.

He turned sideways to pass her and would have crossed her in one wide step, but his bag got stuck on a branch, halting his progress directly in front of her. His eyes widened when he was jolted to a stop. He twisted to the side to see behind him, pushing dangerously close to Em’s personal space.

“Sorry,” he said. “Any chance you can see what I’m caught on? This thing is so big, I can’t reach back.” He gestured to the bag with one hand.

“Uh. Sure.” Em leaned to the side, trying to assess the damage. Branches were pressing into her back, and she was worried they would scratch her up nicely if she tried to step around Garrett. But she couldn’t see anything with his broad shoulders and large backpack impeding her view. And his eyes watching her and warmth enveloping her was not helping. She leaned farther. Farther. Then she tipped precariously on the ball of her foot, nearly able to see behind the backpack, only to topple to the side.

The treacherous branches dug into her upper arm for only a second before Garrett’s hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her upright. And incredibly close to him.

She blinked, staring at his jaw because she couldn’t possibly meet his eyes from this close. “Sorry about that,” she said, stepping back.

Only there was no back. There were only sharp branches and no space.

Garrett chuckled.

Em glared at him.

Which was a mistake, because of the previously noted proximity.

Her eyes caught his, and with his hands still settled on her waist, it was *way* too intimate.

“I’m going to just...” And she awkwardly sidestepped, sacrificing her left arm to the branches in order to escape. Her body brushed his—there was no avoiding that, but she breathed easier once she was finally at his side, not pinned to his front.



CHAPTER 13

Garrett

“CAN YOU SEE WHAT I’m stuck on now?”

“Yeah. Just a sec.”

Garrett felt a slight tug on the backpack as Em worked to free him. Not that he really needed freeing. He probably could have just pulled the bag out of the bushes with a little more force, and they would be well on their way.

But something about the expression on her face when he’d jolted to a stop in front of her—a mixture of surprise and interest—had made him want to test the waters. Only he thought it might have affected him more than her in the end. He’d do it again though.

He was a glutton for punishment.

Another tug and he could tell the backpack was free.

“There you go.” Em’s voice saved him from his thoughts.

“Thanks.” He looked over his shoulder. “I thought we’d be stuck here forever. I definitely didn’t bring enough snacks for that.”

She rolled her eyes, but it seemed half-hearted. Then she glanced over his shoulder, shifting her weight awkwardly. “You wanted to lead...?”

Hmm. So, maybe she wasn't as unaffected as he'd thought. That sparked both curiosity and a weird need to push the boundaries even more.

But that wasn't what today was about, even though his hands still buzzed with energy where he'd touched her waist. With one last look at her, he turned and continued down the trail, purposely reining in his long strides so he wouldn't tire Em out. Not that he should be so considerate. He was, after all, supposed to be edging her out of her comfort zone. But he also didn't want her to hate him, so he kept the pace slow. She had no clue what a gem he was.

“We're almost there.”

“Almost where?”

He smiled at the obviously leading question. “Almost there, of course.”

Garrett didn't need to turn around to imagine the annoyed look, or downright glare, she must be sending his way. He didn't usually poke bears for fun, but something about the woman drove him into dangerous territory. He found himself pushing the boundaries more and more, walking the line between rude and, he hoped, charmingly irritating.

“You're a terrible person, you know?” Em grumbled.

Maybe he wasn't walking the line as well as he'd intended. Similar to the law puns he'd been subtly throwing her way. Too subtly, apparently, because she hadn't caught on yet.

"No, I didn't know that. Must be an unpopular opinion, since you are very, very, very in the minority."

"I bet if I did a survey I wouldn't be."

"That's a bet I am willing to take." The trail in front of them opened up, and he turned to face Em, walking backwards toward the rock face in the clearing. He turned just in time to see a ghost of a smile leave her face. No, he was definitely walking the line perfectly well. Point for Garrett.

Em looked around, her sculpted jawline rising as she took in the rocks in front of them. "I'm not climbing that." Her tone brooked no argument, but her eyes held real fear.

"Actually," he dropped the bag to the ground, then bent to unzip it, revealing a large coiled rope and numerous carabiners and rock-climbing equipment, "you are."

She didn't respond, and when he looked back up to her, her eyes were trained, unblinking at the rock face. He rocked back on his heels, waiting until she pierced him with a look that was one part hatred, and two parts panic.

"Nope. Uh-uh. Not happening. I'll be in the truck."

She turned back toward the trail, and Garrett hopped back up to his feet, reaching forward to grab her wrist. "Hey," he said softly, dropping the "poke the bear" act in exchange for a more sensitive approach he hadn't known he was capable of.

She didn't move for a full fifteen seconds, and when she finally turned to him, the one part of anger in her look was replaced with vulnerability.

Garrett had to swallow hard before he could speak. He took a step toward her, still holding her wrist lightly. "I know it looks scary, but I promise it's worth it."

The fight seemed to go out of her as she looked past him toward the rocks. "I'm... I'm scared of heights, honestly."

"Me too." He lifted half his mouth in a smile as she looked back at him. "That's what makes it more fun. Plus, you'll have a harness, ropes, and me holding you up."

She glanced at the rocks again, then back at him. Her shoulders straightened. "I think you intended that to be more reassuring than it really is."

He could see the prickly Em returning and knew she had decided to see this challenge head-on. "I promise not to judge your athleticism," he teased.

"I'm less worried about you judging me and more concerned about you staring at my butt the whole time. You could get distracted. While my life is in your hands."

Garrett's grin widened. *She* was teasing *him*. He couldn't have been more surprised than if she'd run past him and scaled the rock face with nothing but her bare hands and tenacity.

She pulled her wrist from his hand. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

“Like I have three heads.”

“Well, what are the extra two for if not for looking at?”

She laughed, a smooth, pleasing sound filled with unrestrained joy.

Garrett felt that laugh somewhere deep in his gut. Felt it as she stepped around him and he tried to regain his proverbial footing. The little glimpse of vulnerability coupled with a laugh like that—well, he was suddenly feeling a bit off-kilter.

He didn't miss the steadying breath she took but was impressed by how quickly she seemed to tamp down her fear. Another point in her favor.

She nodded at his equipment. “So, what is all this stuff for, and what do I have to do to get you to take me home faster?”

Between the laughing, the teasing, and the phrase “take me home,” Garrett nearly lost control. What was a man to do when such an attractive, intelligent woman suddenly became agreeable and funny?

Kiss her, usually. But Garrett couldn't do that, because *this was not a date*.

“Here,” he said, bending to his bag and subtly shaking out his hands that wanted to pull her close. “This will be your harness.” He straightened to look at her. “Your legs go through here, and then I'll show you how to tighten it.”

Garrett had taken many women rock-climbing. Some friends, some more-than-friends. But as he stood close to Em and helped her tighten the harness around her waist and thighs,

and learn how to use the belay so he could set the route, he felt more aware of her than he had of all the other women combined. It was not how this day was meant to go.

He worked as quickly as he could and gave her a quick lesson in belaying someone. Then he stepped back and enjoyed a breath of fresh mountain air that didn't have some sort of warm, flowery scent laced through it. "I need to set the route before you go up. The belay is self-locking, so you don't need to worry about dropping me. It's pretty much impossible."

She smiled at him as she nodded.

He decided he didn't like her being nice. What was he supposed to do with *this* September Miller?

"Alright." He tightened the last strap on his harness and tied on his chalk bag. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."



"I really am sorry about your face." Em grimaced as she looked across the hood of the truck at Garrett's face. The bleeding had slowed, but he could feel the swelling starting from when he'd smashed headlong into the rockface when Em had panicked and clutched the rope, jerking him to a stop, then overcorrected by losing her grip on the rope altogether.

Garrett had been right: the belay system wouldn't let him fall completely.

But it did drop him about ten feet and swing him into the rocks.

“Don’t worry.” He leaned against the hood for half a second before pushing back. “But you should probably drive home. Head injury and all.”

“Oh.” Em froze in the act of opening the door. “Yeah, that makes sense.” But she didn’t move.

“Is that okay?”

Em shifted her weight. “Yeah, of course.” But her voice was higher than usual.

“Okay. Thanks.” He pulled open the driver’s side door, and she came slowly around his truck. He had an inkling of why she was so hesitant but was looking forward to seeing how she handled the situation.

She climbed into the truck, and he closed the door for her, then swapped over to the passenger side. By the time he was settled, she was staring intently at the steering wheel. She jumped a little when his seatbelt clicked and immediately buckled her own.

“Your car is a lot bigger than mine,” was all she said. Stalling.

He nodded. “Yup.”

“Hope I don’t run over anything.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not one of those guys who freaks out over a scratched hubcap.” He smiled. Any minute now they’d

get to the real issue.

She made a noise in the back of her throat. “It’s been a while since I’ve driven stick.”

Ding ding ding.

“Need a refresher?”

She shrugged. “Sure, I guess.” She was trying so hard to sound nonchalant.

He leaned over the console between them, pointing at the pedals. “The clutch is the most important part of driving stick.” A metaphor his dad had used once when teaching Garrett’s mom to drive stick came to mind, and he had to force a smile from his face. “It’s like an intimate relationship, working the clutch. You have to feel things out—know when to push and when to let up. When to be firm and—”

“Okay, and I push that before I turn the car on, right?”

Garrett’s smile broke through, but she wasn’t watching him anyway. “Yeah.”

She waited, but he offered nothing else. Finally, she just pushed the clutch in and turned the truck on. It turned on... but the second she tried to change gears, it stalled out.

“Okay, fine.” She turned to him, then pulled back when she saw how close he was. He moved back to his seat. “I’ve literally driven one stick shift truck, and I ended up in a ditch.”

His eyebrows flew up. “I might not care about scratched hubcaps, but totaling my car... maybe I should drive.”

“It was a small ditch.”

“I’d rather not be party to your getting into a car accident either way. One of us already has a head injury.”

“Just tell me how to drive this thing. *Without* the relationship analogies.”

“Hey, it’s a great way to learn things. Anything can be a relationship analogy if you really think about it. Driving stick. Building a house... climbing a tree. Fishing—that’s a really good one. Taylor Swift uses a ton of them. If I could put mine to music, I bet I’d be as famous as she is.”

Her eyes widened with both confusion and, he might have been fooling himself, entertainment. But then she looked out the windshield again. “No analogies.” She paused. “Or metaphors or similes.” She placed her hands on the steering wheel, knuckles growing white.

And honestly, his head was starting to hurt, so maybe he should stop teasing her.

“Okay, okay.” He pointed. “Clutch. Gears. You seem to get that part. You forgot to press the brake while shifting, that was your only problem. And let up on the clutch slow; it likes to be stall-happy if you go too fast. I haven’t seen a single car go by since we stopped here, so don’t stress about other drivers. You’ll be fine.”

She nodded once, sharp and no-nonsense. “Just tell me if I do something wrong.” The truck stalled the second and third

times she tried to shift into first, but the fourth time, she got it fine.

Garrett cheered.

And then she ruined the success of the moment by having to execute a seven-point turn in order to maneuver out of the pull-out Garrett had parked in.

“Don’t laugh,” she said under her breath, jaw clenched.

“I’m not.” He was.

Once they were on the open road, she did great. Her hands were clutching the wheel and gears as if they were the last piece of chocolate cake and she was a five-year-old with a sweet tooth, but besides that, she was a natural.

Still, Garrett kept an eye out for any ditches.

“You sure we don’t need to go to the ER? Your cut might need stitches.” She didn’t look at him as she spoke, staring hard at the road.

“Nah. My mom’s a retired nurse, and I’m supposed to go over tomorrow for Sunday Sundaes night. I’ll just have her look at it.”

She nodded slowly as she pulled into his driveway.



CHAPTER 14

Em

EM'S SHOULDERS HURT FROM the tension she'd been carrying while they drove. Garrett had told her every time she should change gears and had praised her when she did it successfully. Honestly, she had a sense of pride at getting them home in one piece. It was like when she successfully settled a case.

And she felt a little silly that driving a truck made her feel just as warm and content as she did successfully doing her job.

She put the car into park, glancing at Garrett for the first time in a half hour. His eye had started to swell. "I *really* am sorry about that."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. The scar will only make me more handsome, right?" He turned to face her, and the jagged line through his eyebrow stood out in all its red, grisly glory.

She grimaced.

"Well, that's comforting." He chuckled, opening his door.

She mimicked the motion, climbing out of the truck on her side. His truck was high but not unmanageably so. Still, she jolted a bit as she hit the concrete with both feet.

“And you’re sure you don’t need to see someone?”

“My mom will worry over me enough, thanks though.”

“Okay...” She pulled her keys out of her purse. “If you’re sure...”

“I am. One thing though.”

Em looked back at him. He was going to cancel their deal. He’d be crazy not to, and she felt crazy herself at the strange regret enveloping her over the fact that they’d only made it through one day.

“You owe me two extra hours next week since today’s adventure was cut short.”

Em stared at him. “I... what?”

“It’s only fair. If I’d known the bleeding was going to stop so fast, I might have made you stay out there with me.” He leaned against the post by her porch step.

“You still want to do this?”

“Yeah, of course. Though, come to think of it, I’m going to cancel our afternoon at the shooting range. I don’t trust you with a gun.”

“I’m very good with a gun, actually.”

It was his turn to look shocked. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. My brother-in-law made me take a few self-defense classes, buy a gun, and get my concealed carry permit when I insisted on moving out of my apartment and into my own house.”

“Wow. You never cease to surprise, September Miller. How often do you carry?” She saw his eyes drop to her hips, as if he’d find a gun there.

“Em,” she corrected.

He only smirked, so she sighed and answered the question, “Never, really. I don’t go anywhere that I’d need it. But it makes Jackson feel better, so I keep it up to date. My gun just sits in its lonely safe, probably never to be used.”

“Jackson is your brother-in-law? He sounds like a great guy.”

Em smiled. “He is. I’m so glad he and April figured things out.”

“Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“There is.” Em ignored the raised eyebrows on Garrett’s face. He would have to hear the story from April or Jackson. They told it the best. Mainly because it was never the same on both sides. Jackson insisted April fell in love first, unable to resist his charming nicknames and incredible business acumen. April always talked about some horseback riding incident and a hospital visit.

Garrett, apparently, accepted that she wouldn’t be sharing any more than that and simply nodded.

“Well, thanks for attempting to help me have fun, and breaking your face in the process.”

“Yeah, let’s remember who did the real breaking of my face.”

Em bit down on her smile. “I’ll see you later then?”

“Yup.”

She opened the door and stepped inside. When she turned back, Garrett was standing in the same spot on her porch, hands in pockets. She gave him a little wave, then began to close the door.

“Is it pink?”

She paused in the action of closing the door, tilting her head in confusion. “Is what pink?”

“Your gun.” His mouth lifted in what Em was learning was his teasing smile. He also had a secretive smile, a sarcastic smile, and a standard happy smile. There were probably more too.

She pretended offense. “I can’t believe you’d think I have a pink gun.” And with that, she closed the door, though she didn’t move from the spot.

“I’m going to assume it’s purple, then!” he shouted through the door.



The phone ringing pulled Em out of her focused reading of the defense's discovery file for the Clayton trial. She had to push aside several folders, notebooks, and printed briefs before she found her office phone. How such a hulking item could manage to be covered so fully was beyond her.

“County Attorney's Office, Em Miller speaking.”

“That's falsified information, you know.”

Em's mouth quirked into a smile as she leaned back into her office chair. “Why are you calling me at work, Garrett?”

“Because you are breaching our contract.”

Em actually laughed this time. “I think you mean ‘breach of contract.’”

“Sure, that. Anyway, have you looked at a clock recently?”

She spun her chair around, looking at the clock on the bookshelf in the corner of her office. 7:21.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*. You, Miss *September* Miller—which, by the way, is how you should answer the phone if you don't want to be falsifying information—are *breaching* our contract.”

“I, uh, I've been in an accident?”

“Nice try. Why are you so late? You've done so well for a week and a half now.”

She had. It was now Friday, and they had made the deal the previous Tuesday.

“I’m in the middle of prepping for a big trial at the end of this month. I guess I just got caught up in the work. Which is a nice change, I have to say. I’ve been distracted by this whole *fun* issue since last week. It’s nice to feel more like myself.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“But?”

“Who says there’s a but?”

“Your tone of voice. Go on, let it out.”

Garrett laughed, and the sound coursed through Em in a simultaneously comfortable, and wholly *uncomfortable*, wave. “I’m happy for you, but now you owe me something.”

“We never set any rules for what would happen if there was a breach in contract. We don’t even really have a contract.”

“Well, I know a lawyer, so we’re setting all that up now.”

Em laughed for the second time in their conversation. Which was weird. But not a bad weird.

“Okay. What do I owe you then?”

“Ice cream.”

“Easy enough. I’ll grab some from the store on my way home.”

“No can do, September. I’m thinking more along the lines of that little shop in downtown Greenbank.”

Em shifted the phone so it was sandwiched between her ear and shoulder while she quickly typed the name of the shop into Google. “That place closes at eight-thirty.”

“Better hurry then.” Em could hear the entertainment in his voice.

She sighed. “Text me what you want.” And she gave him her phone number, writing his down from the caller ID and thinking it seemed weird that they hadn’t done this before. But, really, they’d only hung out once.

Then, hanging up, she grabbed her purse and briefcase, collecting all the files she would need over the weekend. Quickly, she made for the door, waving to the janitor on her way out.

By the time she reached the shop in Greenbank, it was 7:53, and Garrett still hadn’t texted her. Not wanting to wait around inside for him to give her his order, she called him.

“Hello?”

“What ice cream do you want? You never texted, and don’t expect me to pick for you. I’m horrible at that sort of thing.”

“That could be another relationship analogy. How we think we know what’s best for someone, but really all we needed to do was ask. And, come to think of it—”

“Garrett, they close soon. What do you want?”

“Come inside, and I’ll tell you.”

“Come—” Em looked up and saw him waving at her from an inside booth. She’d been duped.

She locked the car while crossing the sidewalk into the little store. It was set up to look like an old 50s diner, and Em

couldn't be sure it *hadn't* been around since the 50s. The older gentleman wiping down the checkout counter who glanced up when she came in and hollered a welcome certainly looked like he'd been around since that decade.

She smiled at the man, then turned narrowed eyes on Garrett as she stalked over to stand at the head of his booth.

“You didn't mention you'd be meeting me here.”

“Oh? Didn't I?”

“You made me run all the way down here to get you ice cream when you planned to come yourself?”

“Oh, don't worry, I'll still let you get me ice cream.” Her expression must have been murderous because he started his usual chuckling. “I'm sorry, I was just trying to get you away from work. You work too much. Plus you *did* breach our contract. Recompense was necessary.”

Em rolled her eyes but slid into the booth across from him, recognizing when she'd been beat. She ignored Garrett's smile of triumph.

“So, what would you like?”

“Let's go up to the counter together, and we can pick.”

Em followed him to the front of the store. There were only three other people in the shop besides Em, Garrett, and the elderly gentleman who was waiting for them at the counter. A couple was cozied up on one side of a booth, seemingly oblivious to anything, including their melting ice cream. Two booths down from them was a woman who appeared to be

college-aged, sitting at a table with her laptop open and an empty milkshake glass in front of her.

“I think I’ll have a chocolate peanut butter sundae, please,” Garrett told the clerk, then looked at Em with raised eyebrows.

She scanned the menu for a moment. “Just a scoop of raspberry with dark chocolate chips.”

“You know dark chocolate is gross, don’t you?” Garrett whispered to her.

She turned to see his mouth struggling to remain in a serious expression. “I’m really beginning to question your judgment,” she replied, pulling her wallet out of her purse.

But by the time she extracted her credit card, Garrett had already handed cash to the man. He met her questioning look with a shrug. “You didn’t think I would actually make you buy me ice cream, did you?”

The clerk handed her her ice cream and turned back to make Garrett’s sundae.

“I did, yes.”

Garrett smiled. “Well, consider this your warning. I don’t intend to ever let a lady pay for me. Especially not when I forced her to join me against her will.”

The older gentleman handed Garrett his sundae, and he motioned Em to precede him back to their booth.

“But I did agree to the contract,” Em grumbled, feeling strangely cheated that she wasn’t able to settle her debt.

“We never even made a contract,” Garrett teased, throwing her former words back at her.

Em’s mouth twisted to the side, avoiding a smile. “I know a lawyer.”

Garrett shook his head with a bemused smile as he sat down. Em slid into the other side of the booth. She glanced at the clock. They had just under a half hour before the place closed.

“So,” Garrett asked when she looked back at him, unaware or uncaring about the time, “what’s this case you’re working on?”

Em scraped the top of her ice cream with the spoon, savoring the taste of raspberry and chocolate before she answered, “It’s a murder case.”

His eyebrows went up. “And you’re... prosecuting, not defending?”

She nodded. “I’m pushing for a higher sentence than my boss initially wanted me to go for... but it’s one of the nice things about my position—no one can tell me what to do.”

“I’d like to see them try,” he mumbled.

She smiled at her ice cream. “He—my boss—is on board now though. It’s a very high-profile case, but I’m confident.”

Garrett nodded, drinking his milkshake. “Do you get a lot of cases like this, then?”

“Not really, no. Lots of assault and drug-related crimes, usually.”

“Do you deal directly with the perpetrators often? Have you ever had any issues with any of them?”

She cocked her head at him. “Are you worried for me, Garrett?”

He leaned back, crossing his arms. “Of course not.” He paused, then added, “You have a gun, after all.”

“And it’s not even pink.”

He cracked a smile, but then his eyes focused on hers. “You don’t, though, do you? Run into any issues with the perpetrators?”

She shrugged one shoulder, taking another bite. “I don’t have social media, and my personal number is unlisted. They’d have to follow me home from work somehow to cause any problems.”

His eyes stayed on hers, his jaw tight. But then he nodded once.

“Happy?” she asked.

“Marginally. I just realized I’d hear if you screamed or something.”

She pushed back the surge of something that filled her chest at knowing he was actually worried about her. “We do have paper-thin walls, don’t we?”

“Seriously. There’s no way those things are to code.”

“What about the windows though? I swear plastic wrap would be more effective.”

“The owner of the house before me must have replaced mine because I think they are the only thing in the home from this decade.”

“Ah, you’re so lucky. I need to get mine replaced.”

“I know a contractor.”

“Are you any good?” she challenged. “Do you think companies would fly me across the country if I wasn’t?”

That sort of statement might have come across as arrogant from anyone else, but somehow, with Garrett, it seemed as if he was actually trying to be humble and not flat out say “yes” to her question.

“Across the country, huh? Where did you live last, then?”

“Maine.” He drank his milkshake. “And before that, Tennessee. Are you originally from around here?”

She nodded. “Denver area. My parents are still there. They force us into family dinners every so often.”

“Force?”

The lights in the back of the diner turned off, but the parlor lights stayed on. Em checked the clock on the wall, surprised they only had five minutes left until closing. She was even more surprised to realize she’d finished off her ice cream. Garrett’s milkshake was empty in front of him too. “I guess we should head out.”

Garrett looked back at the clock and shook his head. “We still have five minutes.”

“Most people would say we *only* have five minutes.”

“Most people aren’t me.” His gaze matched hers. “And most people aren’t sitting with you.”

Heat, smooth and delicious, puddled in her chest at that look. She had to clear her throat before she could say anything. “Guess we’re staying for another five minutes, then.”



CHAPTER 15

Em

THE SATURDAY MORNING SUN felt brighter than it had the day before, and Em had an inexplicable desire to enjoy a moment on her front porch. She made herself a cup of hot chocolate and stepped outside to the sound of birds.

“Well, this is a surprise. Missed me, did you?”

Em’s mouth twisted to the side, but she glanced at Garrett with only half interest. At least, feigned half-interest. She was becoming like a moth to a flame with Garrett. She was attracted to his light... But she didn’t want to fly too close and get burned. Or worse... distracted from her ten-year plan by an unneeded relationship.

Crap. Everything *was* a relationship analogy.

She pushed her thoughts aside to answer him. “I simply wanted to enjoy a *quiet* morning.” She sat down on a chair. It wasn’t a rocking chair or a porch swing. Just an outdoor chair Em was fairly certain the previous owners left, and she hadn’t touched for years. But it did the job and was comfortable enough.

“I’m going to assume that means you missed me. I didn’t hear any sort of *objection*.”

Em took a sip from her hot chocolate, ignoring him. Trying to ignore him.

“Looking forward to our adventure in fun today?”

“Mmm,” was the only response she gave.

“My buddy Noah will be joining us. He’s in town for the weekend, and I thought it would be fun to have him along.”

Finally, Em gave him her full attention. Someone else to witness her humiliation? A friend of Garrett’s? Why did that make her feel so much anxiety?

“Oh?” she asked, hoping she sounded blandly curious, not anxious in the least. “How do you know him?”

“He’s a friend from high school. We’ve stayed close over the years, and he’s still in the area, so we see each other fairly often.”

Why, then, did Garrett have to see the man today, of all days?

“Judging by your expression, you’re not too thrilled.” His low voice floated between their porches. “But trust me when I say it’ll be fun. Noah is really laid back and likable. By the end of the day, you’ll probably be wishing he was your neighbor, not me.”

He grinned self-deprecatingly and took a sip from his mug. The swing he sat on rocked back and forth, and Em was a little

jealous that she only had the old chair to sit on.

“Currently, I’m wishing I didn’t have a neighbor at all.”

Garrett laughed. “Okay, okay. I was going to head in soon anyway. Be ready to go in, say, three hours?” He stood to leave.

“What are we doing?” Em asked, only half hoping he’d tell her this time. Also half hoping the question would keep him around longer.

He ambled over to the edge of his porch closest to hers and leaned against the railing. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“Can’t you, though? You didn’t tell me last time, and look how that turned out.” She stood and leaned against her own railing, offering him a challenging look. His bruise had started to heal, but it still had a nasty yellow tinge to it. And the cut was now a dark red slash.

“No, I’m pretty sure we’ll be fine this time around. I won’t be putting my life in your hands anymore.”

“But what about my life?”

“It will be infinitely better following our outing.”

“Better? As in, in a better place? As in dead?”

His laugh seemed to take him by surprise. “You’re funny, September Miller.”

“No, I’m serious. I don’t particularly want to die today. Or anytime soon, preferably.”

He pushed away from the railing and turned to his door. Em did not watch him walk away, eyes lingering on the expanse of his shoulders or the way his pants hung just a bit low on his hips.

At his door, he paused, looking back. Her eyes snapped up. “Wear something you would work out in again. Oh, and bring a swimsuit.”

Em groaned as he stepped back into his house. Not only did that mean she would have to be active again, it meant she had to do laundry. That or go buy new workout clothes.

And while that sounded more fun, it also meant accepting that she might need more stretchy pants in her wardrobe. Which wasn't really something she was ready to accept.

But she might need to go to the store after all. She hadn't been in a pool since high school and wasn't sure she owned a swimsuit from this decade.



“So did this friend of yours decide not to come?” Em’s voice sounded hopeful, even to her ears.

“Nope, sorry.” Garrett grinned at her from the driver’s side of his truck. “He’s going to meet us there.”

Em deflated somewhat. “And there is...?”

“I’m not telling you.” His sing-song voice softened the blunt words.

“Worth a try.”

Silence fell between them. It was the comfortable sort of silence, where you didn't need to rack your brain for something to say. After a few minutes, Garrett turned onto a highway that headed out of town in the opposite direction of Woodcastle. Em had lived in Greenbank for a few years now, and she'd never actually taken the time to figure out what was on this side of town. She hadn't particularly cared, but now she was a little annoyed with herself, since it meant she had no clue where the heck they could be going.

Though she still didn't trust their adventures, she was beginning to trust that Garrett really wasn't trying to kill her. So she let it go for now, switching to a different topic. “You said it was just you and your mom?” Small talk. Also a small attempt to learn more about him.

“Yup. For thirteen years now.”

“What...” She wanted to ask what happened, where his dad was, but she didn't know how to phrase it.

“What happened to my dad? It's okay, I don't mind talking about it anymore. My dad died when I was seventeen. He had a heart attack.”

Em stilled. “I'm so sorry; I had no idea.”

“It's okay.” He glanced at her with an easy smile, but she saw the way his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“You miss him?”

“Every day.”

“Will you tell me about him?”

Garrett was quiet for a minute, and Em worried she'd offended him or crossed a line. But then he started talking as if he had needed to say the words for a while.

His eyes cut to hers. “How long do you have? I like talking about him.”

“I don't know... How long until we get where we're going?” she prodded.

He shook his head with a small smile. “My dad was... the best.”

Em waited for him to continue. He was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, seeming to decide where to start the story or what to share. Finally, his fingers stilled.

“He always came to my little league games, was at every high school event, took mom out every Friday night. Helped me with my science homework—he was terrible at math, though. Mom had to help me with that. What were your parents like?”

“Oh, they...” Em faltered. “They helped me with my homework too.” Or, they did when they had time.

He raised an eyebrow. Em offered a tight smile. “Your dad sounds awesome.”

“Like I said... he was the best.” He paused as if he wanted to say more but wasn't sure about it. Em didn't say anything, letting him choose how much to share—heaven knew she wasn't a big sharer when it came to personal things. But

suddenly she wanted to know Garrett better. Know more about where he came from. What made him tick. The deep stuff.

Crap.

He made his decision before she could backtrack. “He worked too hard. Even though he took all that time for us, even though we knew how much he cared about us, any moment not spent with us, he was working. He came from a pretty humble background and was determined to change that for Mom and me. And he did. We had a great life, but at what cost? He was always tired. So tired. I just wish he would have slowed down a bit and taken more time for himself, you know? Then, maybe, we’d still have him.”

He didn’t look at Em, just continued staring out at the road. But Em could feel the pain that was still there. She traced the lines of his clenched jaw with her eyes, and her heart ached for him—a hollow, helpless ache. She understood now why he was so focused on finding joy in his life. Why he was forcing her to do the same. Why he sometimes appeared lazy. He wasn’t lazy at all; he was prioritizing.

He cleared his throat and tightened then loosened his hands at the wheel. “Anyway. He was a great man.”

“I bet he’d be proud of you.”

“I hope so.”

It was quiet a little longer before he spoke again. “Tell me more about your family.”

“Oh.” Em shifted in her seat. “There’s not much to tell. There’s just me and April, and our parents.”

“What’s April like?”

“You’ve met her. Kinda.”

“Oh, yeah, she ogled me. Like you did when we first met.” He waggled his brows, and Em laughed.

“I did not. Anyway, she’s like me. But shorter and with a bigger heart.”

He shot her an inquisitive look but didn’t say anything.

“She’s pregnant, you know. Due in December.”

“Does she know if she’s having a boy or girl?”

“Not yet. I think she finds out in a couple weeks.”

“Fun.” He turned off the highway onto a side road lined with pine trees. “And your parents?”

“Big-shot lawyers in Denver.”

“Ah, so that’s what made you want to be a lawyer?” Garrett asked.

“Mostly.”

He looked over at her but luckily didn’t make her elaborate. She didn’t really feel like telling him how, as a kid, she’d dreamt of becoming a lawyer to gain her parents’ notice and admiration. And how now that she was a lawyer, she felt like even more of a failure to them than anything. She hadn’t gone into business law; she didn’t want to take over the family

practice; she would never “make money” as a prosecutor. All things her parents thought she fell short on.

“We’re almost there,” Garrett said suddenly, pulling Em from her thoughts.

“And there is...?”

“Right here.”

He pulled into a parking lot, but a parking lot for *what*, Em couldn’t tell. It appeared to just be a small gravel clearing in the middle of nowhere. There were a few information signs on large wooden posts in the ground, but Em couldn’t read them from here.

“Yes. I see. Our illustrious destination is a parking lot in the middle of the forest. I can feel the fun beginning already.”

“That’s the spirit!” He put the truck into park and opened his door.

With far less enthusiasm, Em bent down to grab her phone.



CHAPTER 16

Garrett

WITH A HAND LIFTED to shade his eyes from the summer sun, Garrett scanned the parking lot for Noah's Jeep. His friend had said he would meet Garrett and Em here, and had mentioned last minute he might be bringing someone so he wouldn't be a third wheel.

For him to be a third wheel, Garrett and Em would have to be dating. Which they weren't. Garrett glanced back at his truck to see Em's long legs slung out the door while she typed away on her phone. She looked way too good today with her hair pulled back and not an ounce of makeup on her face.

What would it be like to date her? She was high-strung and cynical, but also had a surprising, dry sense of humor and was incredibly smart. And beautiful. Very beautiful. It was more than a little appealing. Hey, that would make a great lawyer pun, he'd need to find a way to fit it into a conversation.

Garrett shook his head, freeing his train of thought. If Noah wanted to bring his girlfriend of the week, Garrett wasn't going to stop him. September and Garrett could use all the help to limit their alone time. He'd nearly crossed a line the

night before with how close he'd tiptoed right up to flirting. And every bit of information he gave to and took from her brought them closer to that line.

A blue Jeep pulled into the lot, and Garrett recognized his friend's tanned face at the wheel. Garrett lifted a hand to wave but froze as he recognized the girl beside Noah.

Jenica. Jenica Reams.

Garrett groaned.

"Is that your friend?" Em came to stand beside him.

"Sure is."

"You didn't mention he'd be bringing someone."

"I—"

"Garrett!" Noah slammed his car door shut and made for Garrett and Em. A few inches taller than Garrett's six-foot height, with sandy hair flipping out from beneath his ballcap, Noah grinned at the two of them.

"You must be the month girl?"

Em glanced sidelong at Garrett. "The... oh, yes, that's me. September. And before you ask, *yes*, I do have a sister named April, *yes* I was born in September, and *no* my parents didn't have much of an imagination."

Noah's bark of laughter sounded, and Garrett couldn't help the twitching of his lips even as he shoved his hands deep into his pockets, awaiting the storm that was Jenica Reams.

“Nice to meet you; I’m Noah.” His friend reached his hand out to Em with a charming smile.

Em returned the handshake with apparent force, as Garrett caught Noah flexing his hand after she relinquished it.

“I like her,” Noah said to Garrett as he leaned against the tailgate of Garrett’s truck. Em’s mouth lifted in a half smile.

“Me too,” Garrett said. Em looked at him with narrowed eyes, apparently thinking he was teasing. He smiled back, enjoying the not-altogether-unaffected look her expression took on. No matter how much he might *think* about not flirting, that didn’t seem to translate into actual follow-through.

Then Noah’s passenger door finally opened, and the spell between him and Em broke.

Jenica stepped out. She had probably been touching up her makeup, which was ridiculous given the heat and their final destination. But she wasn’t Garrett’s problem anymore. He needed to remember that.

Attempting to relieve himself of some stress, he rolled his shoulders back and pasted a smile on his face as his ex-girlfriend sauntered up to them. “Jenica. Noah didn’t mention you’d be joining us.” Garrett refrained from glaring at his friend, but gestured toward Em instead. “Em, this is Jenica Reams, an old friend from high school.”

Jenica laughed her perfectly crafted laugh and flipped her straight blonde hair over her shoulder. Her hip popped to the

side as she placed a manicured hand on it. “Oh, come on now, Garrett, we’re more than that.”

He gave her a tight smile. “No, we aren’t.”

She laughed again, and Garrett took a steadying breath. This was going to be a long day. “Well, should we head up? I’ll grab our stuff, Em.”

He felt Em’s eyes on him as he stalked around to the side of the truck and pulled open his door to retrieve their bags. His had towels, sunscreen, his swimsuit, and water bottles, and, judging by how light Em’s was, hers only had a swimsuit. He inhaled sharply through his nose and shook himself. Having his ex show up had not been in the plans, but he could deal. He just needed to ignore her.

With more than a little force, he slammed the door shut and turned back to the group, which was now hidden partially behind his truck and the grim figure of Noah coming toward him.

“I’m sorry, man; she forced herself on me,” Noah said in a low tone.

“Then you should have forced her off. A cliff.”

Noah chuckled, but Garrett didn’t see the humor in the situation. His friend sobered.

“You’re right. You are. But I’ve never been as good as you at keeping the adoring crowd away.”

Garrett slung the bags over his shoulder, ignoring Noah’s ribbing. “Seriously though, how did she even end up here?”

“We ran into each other yesterday at the grocery store. I was picking up a few things for my mom. I was just trying to be nice, man. But she just kept talking. I ran out of things to say, so I mentioned I was going hiking with you today. And she latched on. Like a leech. I swear I tried everything to change her mind, but she was adamant about tagging along. I couldn’t flat out tell her no.”

“Yes, you could have,” Garrett grumbled, glancing over Noah’s shoulder to ensure Jenica hadn’t eaten Em. Em seemed to be holding her own just fine though.

Noah speared him with a look. Garrett sighed.

“Fine. Fine. But you still should have told me.”

“Sorry, man. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Please don’t. With your track record, you would probably buy me a pet alligator as recompense. And that would rival having to spend the day with Jenica.”

With a clap to Noah’s shoulder to indicate he wasn’t really mad—*that* mad, at least—he returned to the women. He was happy to see that Em looked perfectly content, though Jenica was pouting a bit.

“Alright, let’s head out.” And with an almighty tug to Em’s arm, he left Noah to fend for himself.



“So, when... exactly... does the fun... start?” Em huffed from a few paces behind Garrett.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. They should slow down. But then Noah and Jenica might catch up. Still, Em was clearly struggling, and he wasn't being the best instructor of fun at the moment.

Despite his misgivings, he slowed his stride, moving to the side of the trail so Em could walk up beside him. “Sorry, I forget my legs are longer than yours.”

“Not by much,” Em muttered while she unscrewed the lid to her water bottle. She wasn't wrong—she was only a few inches shorter than him—but he was trying to be nice.

“You're right; I'm just in better shape.” He grinned at her, but she was looking around them.

“Clearly. Do you mind if we sit for a bit?”

Wow. She must really be feeling crummy if his goading wasn't aggravating her.

“Sure.” He looked around for a flat rock or something. “I think there's a few rocks we can sit on just around that bend.” He pointed.

Em looked over his shoulder and shook her head. “Yeah, no, the ground will do.” With that declaration, she sat straight down, pulling her legs up to rest her arms on her knees. She looked pretty adorable like that, all curled up in a ball and red-faced. Not a trace of the attorney to be found.

Garrett shifted his weight, glancing down the trail to see if Jenica and Noah were catching up. He couldn't see them, and the relief at that was like bricks tumbling off his shoulders. He turned back to Em to find her watching him.

“Sorry to have set such a fast pace. I sometimes forget how strenuous this hike can be.”

“Something tells me the pace was not for a bad reason.” She looked pointedly down the trail.

Garrett smiled a little sheepishly. “You aren't wrong about that. But still, I'm sorry.”

She raised her eyebrows. “If you're really sorry, you'll sit next to me so I don't feel like such a bum. And so I can stop craning my neck to look at you.”

His mouth lifted a little at that. “You know, I do think I'm feeling a bit fatigued.” He sat down beside her with a healthy dose of dramatic exhaustion. Only his dramatics got in the way of his positioning, and he ended up knocking her onto her side as he came down beside her. “Oh, crud, I'm sorry, Em!”

She pushed herself back up to a seated position, brushing dirt off her arm and out of her hair. “Funny enough, that didn't make me feel much better.”

He felt the moment she realized how close they were. Her eyes caught his, and she stiffened. But surprisingly, she didn't scoot away. She stayed right there, her leg pressed against his.

Some hairs had escaped her ponytail, and without thinking, he brushed them back behind her ear, lingering a little longer

than he probably should have.

She watched his every move, and then, almost imperceptibly, her gaze darted down to his mouth. Could she be feeling the same electric pull as he was? Despite the fact that this was *not* a date?

He needed to remember that.

Her eyes strayed to his mouth again, and despite all the warning signs going off in his brain, that was all the invitation he needed. What was he supposed to be remembering? Nothing important. Bracing his hand on the ground behind her back and ignoring the small rocks digging into his palm, he leaned closer. Slowly, he tilted his head to the side to allow her plenty of time to pull away should she choose to.

But she didn't pull away. Her eyes fluttered closed as Garrett brushed his thumb down her jaw and toward her hairline. Even after the exertion, he could still smell the flowery scent that was her perfume. He felt the pull between them intensify. He was a breath away. Less, even.

"There you two are!" Noah's overly loud voice pierced the fog that was Garrett's thoughts.

Em blinked and jerked backward, jumping to her feet with athletic ability Garrett would swear she didn't actually possess.

He stayed seated, running a hand through his hair and cursing his friend. And the ridiculous woman trotting along beside him. If looks could kill, they'd both be gone in a

heartbeat. But, unfortunately, the hot frustration born of Jenica's presence and Em's sudden distance didn't translate into superpowers, so the unlikely couple caught up with them in mere seconds.

"I thought we'd lost you two in the woods. I was worried your mother would have my head," Noah joked, but it fell flat.

Garrett felt a brief twinge of guilt at abandoning his friend to the wolves—or wolf—but easily snuffed it out.

"Tired?" Jenica smiled pityingly at Em, but Garrett didn't miss the beads of sweat marring her makeup or the way her breath came quickly.

Garrett opened his mouth to respond affirmatively, so Em could rest a bit longer, but Em beat him to the punch. "Nope," she said. "Just waiting for you two to catch up. Shall we?"

Garrett saw Jenica's nostrils flare before her sickly-sweet smile returned. "Yes, let's. Garrett, I wanted to talk to you about your mother. Is she still having Sunday sundae nights?" She stepped close to him, putting herself between him and Em.

"Yes."

"Oh, wonderful. She always made the best vanilla ice cream." With a push to the back of his elbow, she maneuvered him down the trail.

Garrett clenched his jaw. Every inch of him wanted to just leave the irritating woman behind and stalk back to his friends. But his mother would be horrified at such a show of rudeness, and he'd been raised to be kinder than that. He understood a

little bit of how Noah must have felt when bullied into bringing her along.

So he waited a full thirty seconds before he ditched Jenica. A full thirty seconds in which Jenica talked *at* him. How had he ever liked this woman?

He left her to walk by herself and dropped back to Noah and Em. Noah was asking Em what sorts of things qualified as misdemeanors. Apparently, they'd been little criminals in high school. Trespassing, criminal mischief—which was an awesome name for a crime—even disorderly conduct. His mother would be mortified.

He walked in front of them, half listening to their conversation—half reliving that almost-kiss. It was probably a good thing they'd been interrupted... right? These weren't dates. He and Em weren't particularly compatible, no matter how much he was coming to like her and enjoy being around her.

Still. He could confidently say he wished they *hadn't* been interrupted. Shoot him.

They came up over a rise to see a fair-sized lake nestled into the base of the mountain. Tall trees surrounded it, reflecting in the deep-blue, shimmering water. Garrett was perfectly positioned to turn around and watch Em's reaction.

She stopped in her tracks, and her eyes widened, looking back and forth, presumably taking everything in. For the first time since Garrett had met her, she didn't appear to have any façades, walls, or frustrations in her expression. As she stood

there, breathing heavily and looking entirely exhausted, Garrett caught a glimpse of contentment behind her eyes. He knew the feeling. Subconsciously, he moved toward her, elbowing Noah out of the way.

“This is stunning, Garrett.”

He folded his arms, unable to take his eyes off her as her gaze swept the area, taking in the crystal blue water, lush green foliage rimming it, and snow-peaked mountains in the distance. “Worth the hike?”

Her mouth twisted to the side, and Garrett couldn’t stop his thoughts from wandering back to that spot on the trail. Would she have welcomed his kiss? She certainly seemed about to.

“I’m not sure about that. Maybe. Okay, yes.”

Garrett’s thoughts spiraled a bit before realizing she wasn’t talking about their almost-kiss. Too bad. He turned to stand next to her, looking out at the lake.

“Go ahead, you can say I told you so.” She nudged him with her shoulder, and he welcomed the sense of camaraderie that seemed to be growing between them. He needed to focus on that. Not any other *something* between them.

“Okay. I told you so. I knew you’d find this place *appealing*.” Boom. Got the pun in.

She cocked her head. “Is that supposed to be a lawyer pun?”

Hey, she’d finally noticed! “I plead the fifth.”

She laughed. “You’re ridiculous. So now what? Do we just head back down?”

“Nope. Now, we swim!” He swung his backpack down and zipped it open. But she didn’t move. He looked up at her as he pulled out his suit. “You’ll probably want to change first, unless you’d rather I throw you in like that?”

Em gave him a dry look. “No, thank you. I’m just trying to figure out how you expect me to change.”

Oh. Right.

He straightened up, looking around. “Noah and I usually just hold a towel up for each other. Maybe you and…” He grimaced, glancing over at Jenica. There was no part of him that wanted to force Em into her company.

Luckily, she seemed to understand his dilemma. “It’s fine. I’ll just go find a tree or something. Do you have an extra towel? I didn’t realize I would need one. Part of me was hanging on to the hope that you were taking me to some fancy swimming pool, and they’d have heated towels all rolled and stacked for us. I guess this isn’t a horrible trade though.”

Garrett blinked at her, surprised she wasn’t against swimming. “Yeah, here.” He handed her a towel, and she thanked him then disappeared into the tree line.

Reluctantly, he walked over to Noah and Jenica. They were in the middle of a conversation.

“Yeah, I won’t be swimming. I’ll just lay out here,” Jenica was saying. “I don’t even want to think about what might be in

that water.”

“Suit yourself. Garrett, wanna go change?”

“Yup.” And, like a pair of boys fleeing a newly broken window, they ran from Jenica and into the trees.



CHAPTER 17

Em

WITHOUT MUCH TROUBLE, EM slipped into her swimsuit behind a large pine tree. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd gone swimming—maybe on that overnight trip with her debate team senior year. She seemed to recall the hotel had a pool.

But she used to love it. She'd spent whole summers swimming at her grandparents' until they'd passed when she was in middle school.

With the towel tucked under her arm, she started back toward the lake.

“—I thought you swore off dating?”

Em paused her walking at the sound of Noah's voice. A twig snapped beneath her sneaker.

“I did. Em and I aren't dating.”

“That's not what it looked like when we caught up to you on the trail.”

“Horrible timing, by the way.”

Em could hear Garrett's frustration, and warmth spread down her spine at the thought of their near-kiss. She was supposed to be keeping a healthy distance, but instead she found herself regretting the interruption. A lot.

"Sorry about that."

"Add it to the list of apologies."

Noah laughed.

Well, this was getting awkward. Em knew she should go. But she couldn't be sure where the guys' voices were coming from, and she really didn't want to interrupt them now. She leaned against her tree, holding her folded clothes against her stomach. The bark was rough against her back.

"Anyway, you were about to tell me why you and Em aren't dating."

"No I wasn't."

"Well, you are now."

Garrett laughed, and Em imagined his wide grin. She couldn't help the smile that spread across her own face. How would he respond to Noah?

"She doesn't want to be."

That was true. And yet...

"Again, not what it looked like when we found you on the trail."

"Yeah, well, thanks to your bad timing, we'll never know what she wanted. We should head back. I don't want Jenica to

eat Em. She might not want to date me, but that doesn't mean I don't care if she becomes the witch's latest meal."

She heard their steps retreating; luckily, it seemed they'd been ahead of her. Em counted to ten before following. What part did Jenica play in Garrett's past? She was beautiful, though her insides clearly didn't match her outsides... and something about her made a drop (or seven) of jealousy settle in her stomach.

The trees thinned, and Em spied the guys standing about fifteen feet from Jenica.

Garrett turned as she came up to them, then froze. She watched as his eyes began to travel down the length of her black swimsuit before shooting back up to her face. That morning, she had run to the store and purchased a simple suit, but a picture sent to April had confirmed she looked good in it. The look on Garrett's face just now made the rushed shopping trip worth it.

He grabbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat. "Ready?"

Em nodded, her eyes taking him in as he had her. It should have been criminal to have that many muscles. She almost counted his abs, but that would have been weird.

Now it was her turn to clear her throat. "Is it cold?" Eight. He had an eight-pack. Jeez.

Something twinkled in Garrett's eyes as he walked close to her, looking down into her face. "I don't know. You tell me."

“What?”

With impressive speed, Garrett grabbed her around the middle, hoisting her over his shoulder.

Em screamed, pounding his back as his arms braced across the back of her thighs. She pounded harder, but there wasn't much space until the lake, and he ran the final few steps to the water.

Then he threw her, screaming, into the lake.

The water *was* cold.

Jerk.

Unfortunately for Garrett, though, Em had spent her first decade of summers at Grandma's with neighbor kids and older cousins. And this was not the first time she'd been thrown unwillingly into a body of water. By age nine, she had found the perfect way to get revenge on the person who threw her.

She gulped a breath of air, then ducked under the water, kicking her legs.

15...14...13...12... She enacted phase two and went limp, face down in the water, floating away from the edge.

5... 4... 3... All was quiet and still for a frigid moment. Any second now...

Then—

Loud splashing warned Em seconds before Garrett grabbed her waist and pulled her to him, kicking his legs back until he

was able to reach the bottom. “Em! Are you— Em!” He shook her frantically, and Em couldn’t hold back any longer.

She burst out laughing, blinking against the rivulets of water streaming from her hair.

Garrett stopped shaking her. “You... you punk! I thought you’d drowned! I thought you couldn’t swim.” Instead of pushing her away, he pulled her closer, his hands splayed across her back.

Despite her continued laughter, Em’s heart rate hiked up.

She glimpsed his scowling face and laughed again. “I’m sorry, but it serves you right.”

“Hardly.” He brushed hair back from her face, one arm still around her waist.

Her arms were pinned up against his chest, and she could feel each of his solid muscles she’d shamelessly counted against her. With suddenly intense eyes, he searched her face, and Em’s laughter died away.

“It is cold, by the way.” The words came out haltingly.

“I disagree.”

She glanced over his shoulder to see Jenica unabashedly staring at the two of them, and Noah pretending to be very interested in a rock by his feet. “Um. We should...”

Garrett blinked at her twice before twisting his head to see what she was looking at. He cursed under his breath before loosening his hold on her.

And, as it turned out, he was right. It hadn't been cold. But now that his body heat was gone, Em was suddenly shivering.

She felt his hand wrap around hers and tug at her, urging her farther out.

"Come on," he said, "if you swim around a bit, you won't feel so cold."

"Or I could just get out and wrap up in a towel."

"Yeah, that's not part of the plan." He released her hand and began treading water.

"What is the plan?"

"Having fun." He grinned at her, and his wet hair and broad shoulders only added to his appeal.

Em was in trouble.

"And what if I would have more fun on the shore?"

"Do you think you will?" He cocked an eyebrow at her.

She pulled her mouth to the side in pretend consideration, kicking her legs out and treading water. The cold was dissipating, and the combination of a weightless body and an attractive swimming partner was heady. "Mmmm... no. Probably not."

His grin reappeared. "Perfect."

And the dumb desire to kiss him re-emerged with his smile. She had to do something about that.

So, she used the only weapon in her arsenal. Cupping her hand beneath the water, she sent a large stream surging straight

into his face.



Em wrung water from her hair before slipping her tennis shoes back on. She'd managed to dry off enough to slip her clothes over her swimsuit but was pretty sure she looked like she couldn't find a bathroom quick enough, thanks to her still-damp suit.

With her shoes on, she glanced up. The guys had disappeared, promising they would be back in a couple minutes, so Em was greeted only with Jenica's cold stare. Lovely.

"Em, is it?" the haughty blonde asked. Em nearly laughed at the perfected tone of indifference and superiority.

"Yeah, and you're... Monica? Sorry we haven't had much time to get to know each other." Em had gotten all the time she needed during their brief introduction by the cars. Jenica had told Em she would look better if she wore a different color. Em had told Jenica she would look better if she wore a different face. Or something like that.

She'd kind of hoped that would be the end of their interactions.

Jenica smiled sweetly, ignoring Em's misstep with her name, and cut to the chase. "He and I used to be engaged, you know."

The air rushed from Em, and it took all her skill as a lawyer to maintain a stoic expression. “You and Noah?”

A tinkling laugh. “No, silly, me and Garrett.”

“My condolences.”

A tiny frown marred Jenica’s perfectly symmetrical face as she puzzled out Em’s words. Good. Em had meant her condolences for Garrett, not Jenica—not that the perky woman could know that.

“We were perfect together.”

“Mmhm.” Discreetly, she checked the tree line for the guys. Nothing.

“And it’s only a matter of time before we get back together.”

That brought Em’s eyes back to Jenica’s. She knew Jenica was only trying to egg her on and make her back off from Garrett, but the revelations still hurt more than Em could have expected. She straightened, finally standing from the rock she’d used to slip her shoes on. “How long ago did you break up?”

Jenica folded her arms across her chest. “Three years.”

Em nearly laughed with relief and entertainment. “If it’s been three years, I think it may be time to move on. Something tells me that ship has sailed.”

“Because of you, hmm?” Jenica’s lips pursed together, and her eyes narrowed.

“No. Because of you.”

Jenica’s expression turned thunderous. “Well, just know that Garrett Clarke isn’t available. Not for you or anyone. You may think he’s interested, but he’s really just passing the time before he moves to his next job site. You’re only a distraction.”

The words hit a little too close to home, but Em’s logical side was able to brush them off. This woman was clearly possessive and vindictive, and Em would do well to ignore anything she said.

“Thanks for the heads up.”

Jenica opened her mouth to say more, but the men trotting toward them with bags slung over their backs and mostly dry shirts clinging to them stopped her. Praise the heavens.

She had about two seconds to appreciate the pair of them, one dark-haired, one light, and both sporting incredible physiques, before they stopped in front of her and Jenica.

“Ready?” Garrett asked her, gaze roaming her face.

Em wondered if he was thinking about a couple hours ago, when he asked her the same thing before tossing her unceremoniously into the lake. Her mouth twitched into a smile at the thought.

She nodded, and Garrett held out his hand. Taking it felt natural, and his warmth sent a wave of feeling up her spine.

He pulled her toward the path and led her down the trail without waiting for Noah and Jenica. They walked in silence

for a few minutes, the sounds of nature peacefully surrounding them. She might not admit it to Garrett, but this day had been nearly perfect. She hadn't realized how much she missed slowing down, spending time with people, and swimming. That last one surprised her the most.

Occasionally, Em or Garrett made a remark on something or asked a question, but ultimately, they ended up just enjoying each other's company until they were passing the midpoint of their hike down.

"So... what's the history with you and Jenica?" Em asked eventually. She wasn't exactly jealous over what the woman had told her, but it would be nice to hear Garrett refute it either way.

He groaned. "Just your average relationship gone wrong. It's been years though."

Em picked her way around a divot in the trail. "She seems to, ah, affect you still."

Garrett slowed, glancing at her. His hair had dried and was sticking up at the back. She forced her hand not to smooth the rogue strands.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not exactly happy she's here. But not because I'm hung up on her or anything. Honestly, I just hate the reminder of the person I was when I dated her. Almost married her, if I'm being honest."

His eyes shot to hers, and she kept her expression neutral. "It frustrates me to think about how long I let myself stay in a

relationship that was going nowhere fast. Maybe she'll make some guy happy someday... but I'm just glad I realized before it was too late that I was never going to be that guy. Sorry if my mood has affected your afternoon."

She tucked her hands behind her back. "Not at all. I was just curious."

"Does this mean I get to dig into your dating history now too?"

"It's pretty sparse. The last guy I went out with more than once was in law school. Turns out he was just trying to distract me from studying so he could rank higher than me."

"Wow. That's... wow."

"I know. He didn't rank higher than me, by the way. But it helped me see that having a serious relationship didn't fit in my ten-year plan."

"Oh."

She cut her eyes to him. "Why does it sound like you just realized something?"

He pressed his lips together, but his eyes crinkled up on the edges showing the smile he held back. "Because I did."

"And?"

"And now I see why you were so adamant that these outings of ours can't be dates. I don't fit in your ten-year plan. It all makes sense now."

Heat crawled up her neck. Partly because she was sharing more information with him than she even shared with her sister... and partly because he was right.

“So,” he added, “at what year *do* you start dating?”

“Why?”

He met her eyes. “Just curious.”

She almost avoided the question. Shrugged him off. But she really had dug into his life a lot today. And why would it hurt to tell him this?

“I didn’t put it in the plan,” she said.

“Hmm. Maybe we should work on priorities after we teach you about having fun.” Thankfully, he seemed to be content with just that and switched the subject, pointing at her clothes. “You could have changed, you know.”

Em’s chest was having a hard time taking a full breath, and it wasn’t because of their downhill walk. “Wow, really? I thought I *had* to hike back in this wet swimsuit.”

“I’m sorry to not have enlightened you before.”

“You should be.” Suddenly, she was on the verge of grinning like a fool. Were smiles contagious? She was pretty sure whatever Garrett had was catching. “But, in case you didn’t know, a wet swimsuit is a lot harder to change out of than a dry one is to change into. Especially with only a tree as a changing room.”

He started walking at a brisker pace, but she didn't complain. It meant they would get home faster, so Em could finally change. Much as she might be joking about her swimsuit, it was starting to chafe.

"I probably should have just hiked down in my own suit rather than changing. Sorry to have abandoned you for so long."

"I'm a strong, capable woman. I don't need a man," Em teased.

Garrett looked over at her, his hand still around hers, though it didn't need to be. "I'm fully aware of that. Hey, Em?"

The look in his eyes sent more of those slow fireworks down her back. "Yeah?"

"I know you—"

Em's foot landed unsteadily on a loose rock. It slipped out from under her, and though Garrett quickly tried to pull her back to a stand, it was too late. Her ankle twisted to the side, and Em felt a *pop*. Pain shot up her leg, and she fell to the ground. The landing was soft. And dirty.

Garrett dropped to a squat beside her, his eyes worried as she grabbed her ankle. "Are you okay?" He reached for her ankle, then pulled back as if unsure.

Em bit down on her lip and tried to smile a little. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure I'll be fine, just a sec."

Garrett nodded, though the worried look didn't leave his expression as his eyes went from her ankle, to her face, then

back to her ankle.

Em gritted her teeth and tried to stand, pulling herself out of the muddy puddle she'd landed in to do so. But the second she tried to put any pressure on her right foot, it gave out and sent more pain sparking up her leg. She fell, without any trace of grace, to her butt. Tears burned her eyes.

Garrett placed his hand on her arm, then moved to inspect her ankle more fully. It was already starting to bruise and looked remarkably larger than the other. Em winced when he lightly touched her foot.

“I think it’s sprained. Badly, I would guess, but you already know I don’t have much medical experience. I do know that you shouldn’t walk on it, though.”

Em swallowed a groan. “I can call—”

Garrett cut her off, “I’ll carry you down.”

“You absolutely don’t need—”

“Yes, I do.”

“No. You don’t.”

He huffed a breath. “This is my fault, Em. The least you can do is let me help you.”

The air went out of her. “But I’ll get you dirty,” she tried one last time, pointing at the half of her body now covered in mud.

“I don’t care.”

Reluctantly, Em gave in and nodded. As much as being carried by Garrett Clarke sounded like some sort of wonderful... being carried by Garrett Clarke also sounded mortifying.

“It will be best if I can get you on my back. Can I help you stand?”

Em nodded, avoiding his eyes, and held out her hands. He tugged her upright, and she made sure not to put any weight on her right leg. He turned around, bent low, and she placed her hands around his shoulders. In seconds, he had her settled on his back, his hands firmly holding her legs, and her ankle throbbing horribly.

“I’m going to try not to jostle your ankle too much, but I also think it’s best if we get off the mountain as soon as possible.”

Em nodded, and Garrett must have felt the action, because he took off. Not running, but walking quickly. Em’s ankle swayed a bit, and she bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from crying out. She wasn’t even able to enjoy the proximity to Garrett in the twenty minutes it took to get down the trail, the pain was so bad. Every step or sway of movement shot sharp zings up her calf.

They finally reached his truck, and Garrett opened the tailgate with one hand before turning around to set her on it.

“You’re crying.”

Em wasn't sure if that was a question or a statement, but she touched her face in surprise. It was wet with tears, and she hadn't even noticed.

"Oh," she said lamely.

He brushed some of the moisture away from her cheeks. "I'm really sorry, Em."

She shook her head, and his hand fell to his side. "It's fine. It's my own fault. Payback for breaking your face last weekend. It's still a little black and blue, you know."

He chuckled. "Yes, I know. Adds to my appeal, doesn't it?"

"No."

He laughed outright. "Ouch."

"Yeah, me too." She looked pointedly at her leg.

"I'd like to take you to see a doctor, if that's okay?"

Em shook her head. "I'm fine, really."

"I don't think that's true. At the very least, we should have it wrapped."

"I can do that."

"I happen to know you don't even have a first aid kit in your house."

"My neighbor will let me borrow his."

"Your neighbor will do you one better. Come on."

And, without warning, he scooped her into his arms and walked her around the side of his truck. Em opened her own

door, and then he pushed it wide with his foot before setting her in her seat. He leaned against the door frame for a second, watching her with a pinched expression.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, buckling her seatbelt.

“My mom’s house.”



CHAPTER 18

Em

EM TRIED HER BEST to ignore the throbbing in her ankle and listen to whatever Garrett was saying on the drive to his mom’s house. She even tried to tune in to the nerves she had regarding meeting his mom. But the pounding pain and heat climbing up her leg made that impossible.

She kinda wished she’d just let Garrett take her to the ER.

It was about twenty minutes farther from Greenbank to his mom’s house—at least that was Em’s best guess. By the time they pulled into the drive of a ranch-style house in a sprawling neighborhood, she wouldn’t have been able to tell anyone where they were, how long the drive was, or what state they were in.

Okay, that might be a slight exaggeration.

“You don’t look great, Em,” Garrett said as he put the truck in park. “I should have just taken you to the hospital.”

“No.” She clenched her teeth. “I’m fine, really. Totally fine.” It did hurt less. A little.

Garrett didn't respond. He just got out of the truck and walked around to Em's door. Before Em could do anything to stop him, he reached in, unbuckled her seat belt, and pulled her into his arms. With pretty impressive skill, he balanced her enough to open his mom's front door without knocking.

"Mom! I have someone I want you to meet." He flashed Em a grin that turned into a grimace as he took in her pained expression.

"Honey, I didn't expect—oh, heavens! What happened?" A short, gray-haired woman wearing a knitted shawl, several layers of beads, and pink cat-eyed glasses stopped suddenly in the doorway to the foyer.

"Hi, Mom, this is Em. She had a... umm... accident."

Garrett's mom's eyes widened, and though she'd rather have hobbled home on her crippled ankle than meet someone this way, Em offered half a wave. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Clarke. Apparently hiking and I don't get along." She winced, and Mrs. Clarke jumped into action.

"Put her on the couch, Garrett, I'll grab my kit."

Garrett ducked through a doorway, carefully avoiding hitting Em's ankle on anything. Em started shaking her head the second she spotted the nice cream couches.

"Don't even think about setting me down," she said.

Garrett stopped in the middle of the room and waggled his brows. "Why? Enjoying the proximity?"

"No. In fact, you *can* set me down. Here. On my feet."

“September Miller, you might have forgotten, but you currently cannot stand on both your feet.”

“I’ll balance on one then.”

Garrett stepped toward the couch.

“No!” Em pulled against Garrett’s neck as if he were a horse she could control with a rope and halter.

“What is so wrong about me putting you down?”

“I will ruin your mom’s couch! Look at me!”

“Gladly,” he teased.

“Will you be serious for one second?” Em groaned, ignoring the pain in her ankle as she tried to pull away from him.

“My, you sound like my Gary and me.”

Mrs. Clarke had returned and was laughing openly at the two of them.

“September doesn’t want to sit on your couches. I don’t think she likes them very much, Mom,” Garrett deadpanned, and Em’s face blanched.

“Oh, be quiet, Garrett. You are being rude to your friend.”

Em may have imagined it, but she thought Mrs. Clarke put excess emphasis on “friend.”

“You are very sweet to worry about my couches, but the slipcovers are washable. Even still, I can grab an old towel if that would help you feel better?”

“I just don’t want to ruin them.” Em didn’t want to ask the woman to get her anything else, but also really didn’t want to put herself—in her current state—anywhere near those couches.

“Don’t worry, I’ll grab a towel.” And Mrs. Clarke ducked from the room again.

They were silent in her absence, and for the first time, Em noticed the intimacy of their situation. She cleared her throat, trying to ignore the heat blossoming from the half of her body pressed up against his abs. His eight-pack, her mind kindly chose that moment to remind her.

He turned his head to her, his face only a few inches away. She expected some sort of joke, but instead, his eyes just caught hers.

She’d never been great at staring contests. Just the thought of them made her eyes water. But something in the back of Garrett’s gaze made her want to remove blinking from her brain’s hardwired capabilities.

And then his lips lifted into half a smile. That smile sent a million little zaps of attraction through every one of her limbs.

Mrs. Clarke returned not a moment too soon, laid the towel out on the couch, then gestured for Garrett to put Em down. Garrett hesitated half a second, glancing down at her with an unreadable expression, then abruptly walked to the couch.

Once Em was sitting comfortably—as comfortably as she could—Mrs. Clarke helped her remove her sneaker and place

her foot on the ottoman.

“So, how did this happen?” she asked as she gently probed Em’s ankle.

Em glanced at Garrett, then back to Mrs. Clarke. “We were hiking, and I stepped on a rock wrong. I heard a pop then couldn’t walk on it anymore.”

Mrs. Clarke made a sound of contemplation. “Does this hurt?” She gently pushed on the top of her ankle with her thumbs.

“A little. Not bad though.”

“And here?” She felt around the soft part of her ankle with her fingers.

Em winced. “Yes.”

Slowly, Mrs. Clarke flexed Em’s foot, then straightened it. She sat back on her heels.

“I don’t think it’s broken, hun, but I do think you have a pretty bad sprain. You’ll need to stay off it for at least two days, then not do anything strenuous for a few weeks. Let me get you some ice for now.” She stood up, giving Garrett a significant look as she did. “Can I talk to you for a second? In the kitchen?”

Garrett didn’t seem surprised. “Sure.”

They both filed out of the room, leaving Em alone with her thoughts.

It wasn't broken—which was great. But how was she supposed to stay off it when she needed to be back to work on Monday? She had a fair amount of vacation days but couldn't take them *now*. Not with the Clayton trial coming up.

Garrett came back carrying a pile of folded clothes and a glass of water. “Mom has informed me that we are staying for dinner. And she wanted to lend you some of her clothes—”

“That's nice of her,” Em said, reaching out for his bundle.

Garrett handed them to her. “Well, yes, but then we both realized she was so short, none of her things would fit you. So I grabbed you one of my old t-shirts and sweats. You'll be swimming in them, but my mom says she'll wash your clothes while we eat.”

Em froze, holding *Garrett's* clothes. “Oh. Well... thank you.”

His mouth lifted. “No problem. And here's some painkillers.” He gave her the glass and a couple small pills.

She downed them with vigor then handed the glass back.

“Can I help you to the bathroom?” he asked.

“Actually, do you mind grabbing my bag from the car?”

“Sure, be right back.”

Within a couple of minutes, Em was in the bathroom, attempting to extricate her swollen ankle from the tight leggings. It wasn't a fun experience. But with her bag, which had her bra and underwear—still dry since she hadn't put them

back on after swimming—plus Garrett’s clean clothes, and a quick sponge bath using a wash rag, she almost felt like a new person.

A new person wearing really baggy clothes, but new nonetheless.

Plus, it was a good thing the clothes were baggy. Every place they touched seemed a reminder that they were used to touching *Garrett’s* body. The shirt folding in and grazing her stomach. The length of the pants that she’d had to roll up. The lingering scent of cologne that mixed with laundry detergent.

Her mind was going all sorts of places it shouldn’t be.

By the time she’d finished and hopped down the hall on one foot, dinner was almost done. She stepped-hopped into the kitchen, following the sound of laughter.

Garrett jumped to his feet from where he’d been sitting at the table. “Em, I didn’t hear you, or I would have helped you out.” He stopped suddenly, swallowing as his eyes darted to her clothes then back up at her. “You look better in those than I ever did. Come here; Mom’s almost got dinner done.”

He put his arm around her waist and helped her to the table, which minimized the pain of hopping a surprising amount. Em looked around as she sat. The kitchen was beautiful, with wood cabinets and white quartz countertops, a large island, and a fridge large enough for all three of them to fit in.

Mrs. Clarke stood at the stove stirring something. “I hope you like potato soup; it was the easiest thing to whip up.” She

smiled at both of them. So that was where Garrett got it from. Everything down to the way the right side lifted just a bit more than the left was a ringer for Mrs. Clarke's son.

"Whatever it is, it smells amazing," Em responded. "Thank you so much for everything, Mrs. Clarke."

"Call me Darla, and it's nothing." She waved the hand not stirring the soup with another smile. "I'm always happy to meet one of Garrett's friends. Especially someone besides Will or Noah." She laughed. "Those boys eat me out of house and home anytime they come by."

"Oh, Noah! Garrett, we just left—we never told them."

"I texted him a while ago. He's fine. Besides, he deserved to be left behind."

"What did he do?" Darla asked curiously.

"Nothing. I'll tell you about it another time."

His mom made a sound between acceptance and interest. "Dinner's ready! Garrett, will you grab the silverware?"



CHAPTER 19

Garrett

GARRETT HOPPED UP TO help his mom, but his eyes strayed back to Em. In his clothes. At his childhood table. He swallowed again, focusing on the task of counting out spoons. Three was a hard number to get right.

His mom nudged him with her shoulder as she pulled a hot pad from the drawer beside the silverware. “She’s really pretty,” she murmured.

Garrett only nodded. His mom had already grilled him over his involvement in the spraining of Em’s ankle... and then his intentions with the woman in question. Garrett hadn’t known how to answer then. And he didn’t know any better now.

He sat by Em, and his mom sat on his other side, filling three of the four chairs at the white, round table. For just a second, Garrett eyed the fourth chair sadly. His dad would have liked Em. Would have liked her drive and her quick wit. But his dad was gone. And now Mom was helping Em get her foot onto the fourth chair with an ice pack.

“So where were you hiking?” his mom asked as he filled Em’s bowl.

“Moonlight Lake,” he responded.

“Oh, that place is beautiful. Did you make it up or did you sprain your ankle on the way?” She asked this to Em, who thanked Garrett for the soup before answering.

Garrett didn’t quite know what to do with the shift in their relationship. After almost kissing, then the intimacy of carrying her back to the car, then this—dinner with his mom—it felt like a definite line had been crossed.

And it worried Garrett that he didn’t mind. Because he could only guess that Em did.

Somewhere, he’d lost track of the conversation. But he picked it back up easily enough. They stayed for over an hour. Hearing some of his mom’s recollections about ways patients had sprained their ankles. Laughing good-naturedly when his mom told the story of the time Garrett had snuck out of the house, only to find both his parents sitting in the front seat of his old car. They’d always been one step ahead of him.

Even Em opened up some, first sharing more about the murder case she was working on, then telling a few stories about her and April and their own forms of mischief growing up. Garrett got the impression that her family was a lot more straight-laced than his had been, but she’d still had a few good escapades.

At the end of the night, Garrett carried Em back to the car, brushing off some of the dried mud on the seat before setting Em on it.

“So what are you going to do about Monday?” he asked as he climbed in his side and started the car.

“Huh? Oh, staying off my foot? I’m not really sure. Probably just keep my foot up while I’m working.” She shrugged.

And before he could stop himself, he was offering an alternative. “Take the day off. We can do something fun. And guaranteed injury-free.”

“I thought about taking off, but I don’t know if I can with this case.”

“Oh, come on, one day won’t kill you,” he urged when he really should have dropped it.

“You’d have to take off work too,” she pointed out, apparently catching on to his use of the word “we.”

“Easy to do.” He shrugged. The guys could get on without him for one day.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Sure.” He looked at her from the corner of his eyes. Was she actually considering it?

“I might have to work late the rest of the week,” she hedged.

“We can extend your curfew to eight.”

She rolled her eyes at him, but from what he could see—she was smiling. “Okay. Just one day won’t kill me. I think.”

“You actually seem concerned.” Incredulous amusement bled into his voice.

“I kind of am.”

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun.”

“What do you want to do?” she asked, shifting in her chair to face him more fully. He didn’t miss the slight grimace as she did so.

“I’ll surprise you.”

She groaned.



CHAPTER 20

Em

“IT’S JUST A SPRAIN. I’ll be fine, really. But I’m taking the day off.”

There was stunned silence on the other end of the line. Em began to wonder if April had hung up on her. But, finally, the sound of her incredulous voice came through. “You. Taking the day off.”

“Yes. Garrett convinced me to. His mom said I needed to stay off my ankle for a few days.”

“His mom. Because you met her. With Garrett. Your hot neighbor.”

Em rolled her eyes. “Yes, April. Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh. Just shocked. Want me to bring you anything?”

“No, it’s okay.”

April must have noticed the hesitancy in Em’s voice. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Em looked to her ceiling as she sat on her bed. Fully clothed for the day. Just because she was taking the day off didn’t

mean she needed to take a day off looking nice. “Well. Garrett is spending the day with me.”

“Holy Hannah! EM! Why didn’t you lead with that? Are you dating?!”

Em had to pull the phone away from her ear for a second. “No, we aren’t.” The doorbell rang. “And I think he’s here; I gotta go.”

With one hand, she grabbed the crutches Garrett had delivered to her the day before, after Sunday Sundaes night with his mom. He’d handed them over with a note from Darla that had her phone number and an insistence to call if she needed anything.

“September and Garrett sitting in a tree...” April sang in her ear.

“I have to go, April,” Em said, exasperated.

“Okay, okay, but seriously.”

Em paused, having pushed herself off the bed, but she was unable to walk anywhere while still on the phone. A knock sounded at the door this time. “What?”

“You’d better call me if he kisses you.”

“He’s not going to kiss me.” She cupped her hand around the speaker of the phone while she said it... just in case Garrett could hear all the way outside. Paper-thin walls and all.

“Uh-huh. Sure. Love you, sis.”

“Love you too.” After throwing her phone onto the bed, Em hobbled to the door, pulling it open.

Garrett stood there with a bag, the same size as the one he’d brought rock climbing. She couldn’t be sure it wasn’t the same one.

She opened the door wider and pointed at the bag. “I’m not going rock climbing again.”

He laughed, stepping over the threshold. “These are just supplies.”

“What kind of supplies?” She was still eyeing the bag nervously.

“You’ll see.”

Em groaned. “I hate surprises.”

“I know. That’s what makes them so fun. Come on, where do you keep your TV?”

“I don’t have a TV,” Em said, following him to the kitchen.

She heard Garrett sigh. “What *do* you have, woman?” He turned on her after setting the bag on the counter.

“I have a computer.” She shrugged, which was surprisingly difficult to do while leaning on crutches.

“Does it have a disk drive?”

“Ummm... no.” At least, she didn’t think so. No, it definitely didn’t.

“Okay. Once again, I shall remedy your lack of preparedness with my own. I’ll be right back.” He turned and

walked from the room. Em leaned backward to watch his path to the door.

“I wouldn’t say having a TV is being prepared,” she called just before he stepped from the room.

“Then you, my dear, would have a very boring existence during the apocalypse.” He left, returning only a couple of minutes later balancing a fair-sized TV in his hands. She hadn’t even had time to overanalyze the “my dear” comment.

Em’s mouth fell open. “You’re bringing your entire TV over here?”

“It’s my smaller one,” he grunted, shifting his weight. “Where can I put this?”

Em looked around. “The kitchen table?”

He speared her with a dry look. “We are not sitting on kitchen chairs while watching a movie.”

“Well, okay then. Maybe...” She ducked into the doorway of the living room. There was a couch and a potted plant. A fake one.

That was it. Not even a side table or coffee table. She met Garrett’s incredulous look with a semi-apologetic shrug. Come on, it wasn’t a bad thing to be a minimalist. Even if she was only a minimalist by default.

“Really? There is nowhere in this house I can put a TV?”

She thought for a minute. “Well, there’s a dresser in my room, but—”

“That’ll do.” He turned and walked down the hall, peering into the spare room before turning into the master.

“Hey! It’s not gentlemanly to barge into a woman’s room!” She hobbled behind him, catching up as he stepped back from the dresser, the TV sitting nicely on top of it.

“I would be more than happy to drag the dresser out to the living room.”

“You’d scratch my floors.”

He laughed. “Okay, any other suggestions?”

“We could have gone to your house.”

His mouth dropped open just a centimeter. “Huh. That would have been smart. I’m just so used to bringing things *here* that it didn’t even cross my mind. Now I feel a little stupid for walking across the lawn with the TV. Thanks a lot.” He shifted, eyeing the TV. “Too late now though. I’m committed. Any *other* ideas?”

Em thought a moment, leaning forward on the crutches as she did so. They could just put the TV on the floor in the living room. But...

Her bed was comfy—the perfect place to watch a movie, and the couch was made more for looks than for sitting. Plus, Garrett seemed natural in her room, which was weird and something she refused to dwell on.

“Seriously, September, we can do something else if you want.” His statement held a hint of a question as he watched her and her apparent indecision.

“No,” she said, the word chasing itself out of her mouth. “This is fine. Plus then I can keep my ankle up.”

“I’ll be back with the snacks then.” With a small smile, he weaved around her and out the door. He didn’t touch her. But the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck lifted with the proximity.

Maybe they should have just put the TV on the floor in the living room.

“Okay, I have ice cream, popcorn, chocolate, soda, and chips. Which do you want first?”

“All of them?”

A surprised laugh escaped him, bringing out that dimple again. “And here I thought you were a health nut.”

“Just because I like vegetables does not mean I don’t like junk food just as much. It’s called balance.”

“A pretty good balance, I’d say.” He smiled at her as he moved to set the various food offerings on her bedside table. Then he removed a backpack that Em hadn’t noticed, and reached into it, pulling out a few DVDs and a DVD player, which he plugged in. “Alright. I brought all eight *Harry Potter* movies, and if you tell me you don’t like Harry Potter, you had better believe I will take my TV—and snacks—and leave right this instant.”

Em lifted her hands. “Calm down, big guy. I happen to be a lover of Harry Potter. I think my eleven-year-old birthday

party was Harry Potter-themed. My grandma threw it for me as a surprise.”

“That’s a good grandma. Did she get you a Hogwarts letter?”

“I was eleven—the age everyone gets their letters. Of course she did.”

“I like this woman even more.” He shifted through the DVDs, pulling out *The Sorcerer’s Stone* and popping it in the player. “I considered bringing *Legally Blonde*, but I thought you might take offense.”

“You thought right.”

“Aw, look at us, we know each other so well.”

She sent him a dry look, and he laughed. Which meant she had to laugh too.

“Okay, so how do you want to do this?”

Her laughter died down. He was gesturing at the bed, and Em suddenly felt very awkward. And hot. Like her cheeks were on fire.

“Well, that’s new.” Amusement laced Garrett’s tone.

Her gaze shot to his. “What?”

“You. Blushing. It’s pretty cute.” The lopsided grin on his face was aggravating. And attractive. But mostly aggravating.

“Shut up.”

He mimed zipping his lips, but his eyes sparked with amusement.

She looked around the room, but there was really only one option. “We can just sit on the bed. There’s nowhere else to sit.”

With a nod, he knocked his shoes off and jumped onto the bed. Jumped. Onto her bed. In his gray joggers and black t-shirt. Her frilly white comforter had never looked so out of place. She grabbed a spoon and the container of ice cream—Ben and Jerry’s, which raised Em’s opinion of Garrett—and sat down on the other side of the bed. With an entire pillow’s length between them. Garrett pointed the remote at the TV and settled further into the decorative pillows that had come with the bedding set.

“Hey, Garrett?”

He looked over at her, his folded arm propping him up on the bed, showing off his upper arms quite well. “Yeah?” His expression was open, full of interest, and Em couldn’t help turning the tables on him and his teasing just a bit.

“You have two TVs?”

His eyes narrowed, the interest fleeing. “Yes. Now be quiet, or we’ll miss the beginning.”

Em chuckled a little to herself before settling into the pillows on her side of the bed. But the bed suddenly jostled as Garrett got up. “What are you doing?”

He placed a finger to his lips, pointed at the TV, and ducked out of the room. Em watched the door with confusion until he returned with something in his hand. He came to *her* side,

leaning over and grabbing a pillow from his side of the bed. His chest nearly touched her stomach as he reached across the mattress. Overexcited butterflies erupted within her, and she held her breath. But then he pulled back and gently lifted her leg to stick the pillow under her foot. Even through her pants, the warmth of his hand sent tingles up her leg.

The unidentified object he'd returned to the room with was an ice pack wrapped in a towel, which he laid over her ankle.

“Take that off in fifteen minutes,” was all he said before he crossed back to his side of the bed and burrowed back into her pillows.

Em blinked a few times before the opening screen of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* came into view.

Who was this man? And how in the heck could she manage to keep him around?



CHAPTER 21

Garrett

EM HAD A LOT of throw pillows.

For someone who didn't even own a TV, she evidently held an affinity for pillows on her bed. And Garrett had never in his life been so thankful for such a seemingly pointless home decor item. Because, for all his making fun of her and her blushing, he was pretty sure *his* face was currently bright red. And if she couldn't feel the slamming of his heart vibrating through her admittedly soft bed, he would be astounded.

This was supposed to be a fun, easy activity. Something to get Em's mind off the sprain that Garrett felt responsible for. Yet somehow it had turned into something far more intimate, despite the nearly three feet of space between them.

Which he'd already devised about seven plans to lessen. The space, that was. Because if he was going to be lying on Em's bed, he'd much rather have her tucked up against him.

He was fully aware that he shouldn't be thinking that way. Em had indicated her total lack of desire to date him. And,

really, he shouldn't want to date her either. He wasn't in town for long, and Em was married to her job.

But she was also funny, smart, and in need of a little bit more excitement in her life.

And Garrett really wanted to be that excitement. Heaven help him.

He glanced over at Em through his pillow barricade, considering. An eighth idea popped into his head. "Hey, you aren't eating all the ice cream, are you?"

"I fully intend to," she responded without a glance his way.

"Nope. Not okay. That's my favorite kind." He had no idea what kind he'd bought. "Come here and share."

Her eyes slanted his way.

She was onto him.

Changing gears, he tried a different tactic. "Okay, fine, give me a spoon."

She complied, and he leaned over to take a scoop out, bringing it back toward himself.

"Ah! Stop!"

He halted, his ice cream midway between the two of them.

"You're going to drop ice cream on my bed!"

"Oh." He looked down as if just realizing the precarious situation his ice cream was in. "Sorry." Holding the spoon carefully, with a hand below it just in case, he scooted himself closer.

Victory.

Finally, he ate the bite of ice cream. Some kind of chocolate with marshmallow and caramel or something. It was good.

Now, three inches apart instead of three feet, it was a lot easier to share the ice cream. And when she handed him the carton in favor of the bag of chips, they shared those too.

“It’s been years since I’ve watched a movie,” Em admitted halfway through the bag.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I haven’t had time. Least of all on a Monday. Usually I just watch a quick twenty-minute TV show or something if I want to decompress.”

“Thank goodness you met me. I didn’t realize how much work I had to do here.”

Her eyes met his. She was a little lower than him, sunk fairly deep into the pillows. And everything about her drew him in. He swallowed. Heaven help him. More, this time.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with watching TV shows instead of movies.”

“Choosing to not watch movies is very different than not having time to.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it, apparently not having a come back.

“I rest my case,” he said, with a wink.

She shook her head at the pun, but her mouth had lifted at the corners. He knew, because his gaze kept dropping to it.

“What’s the last movie you watched?” she asked, thankfully distracting him. A little.

“Austenland,” he said.

Her lips pressed together as entertainment colored every part of her features. “What is that?”

“A movie where a girl pretends she lives in a Jane Austen book.”

“Now you’re kidding.” She shifted on the pillows to face him more directly. The smell of her perfume wafted toward him.

“Nope, not kidding. We watched it last night. It was funny.”

Her eyes squinted at him, considering.

“It was my mom’s turn to choose the movie,” he explained, and understanding lit her expression. Their own movie played in the background, mostly forgotten. Which was Harry Potter sacrilege, but the boy who lived would understand his distraction. At least, year five or six Harry Potter would.

“That makes more sense. Your mom is so sweet. Did you thank her for the crutches for me? It’s been so much easier to hobble around without having to hop.”

“Aw, but your hopping was so cute.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Without thinking, he brushed a fallen strand of hair back behind her ear. She stilled.

“I think we need to change the way we are thinking about things,” she murmured.

What things? This not dating thing? Because he was happy to change that.

“Every one of your ‘fun’ activities has ended in injury.”

“Huh?” His mind tried to catch up. Unsuccessfully.

“Our Saturday activities. They have not gone well.”

“Hey, I thought they were pretty fun.”

She gave him a dry look. He pointed a finger at her. “You had fun swimming.”

Her head cocked to the side. That same curl fell out from behind her ear again. His hand twitched.

“Okay, I’ll give you that one. Swimming was fun. Hiking, not so much.”

“So you want to do something non-dangerous?”

“Actually, I want to plan something,” she said.

“You?”

She rolled her eyes at the surprise in his voice. “Yes. I call this weekend’s activity.”

“What are you thinking we’ll do?”

“It’s a surprise.” Her eyes danced as she threw his own words back at him.

“Lucky for you, I happen to like surprises.”

Her gaze searched his face, half a smile hovering there. “I’m finding they aren’t so bad either.”

Garrett shifted up on his arm, looking down more fully at her and savoring the expression on her face just then. Unburdened. Happy. And something more. His chest had constricted with those words, and he didn’t think it would be loosening any time soon. Hardly noticing his actions, he lowered his head toward hers. She was like a magnet, and he was helpless against her pull. Her chin tilted up. His dipped down. Her breath caught. His stopped coming altogether.

The sound of the bag of chips being crushed between them stopped him. Not willing to accept the interruption, he grabbed it and tossed it lightly onto her nightstand, returning his eyes to hers. “Em?”

“Mmhmm?”

He took a deep breath. Now or never. “Can these be dates now?”

There was a heartbeat of silence as his eyes flicked between both of hers. He’d just jumped in the deep end. Would she follow him in?

Then, she nodded once.

He reached out his free hand, lightly grazing her jawline to tuck that maddening curl back. And, accompanied by the dramatic swell of the movie score, he covered her lips with his own.

Her reaction was immediate, meeting him kiss for kiss as he leaned over her, his hand threading further into her hair and bracing the back of her head. A swear almost escaped him at the fact that his other hand was propping up his body, so he had to make do with only one. He wanted to pull her closer, to lessen the small distance between them, but he held back, not wanting to rush things. Something told him this relationship was different than any he'd ever had.

So he took his time, enjoying only their kissing. A lot.

When he finally pulled back, he was gratified to see her looking as shell-shocked as he felt. She blinked a few times and took an unsteady breath, searching his eyes for something.

“Well, crap.”

He froze. Not what he'd expected. “What?” *What?* That was all he could think of?

She laughed. “No, not you. Not that. Well, kinda that. I told April there was no way you'd kiss me. I was wrong.”

“And you're mad about that?” He still had a hand at the back of her head, and, slowly, he trailed his fingers down her neck to her shoulder. She shivered.

“Well, yeah. I don't like to be wrong.”

“Personally, I'm not too mad you were.” He grinned at her as she turned red, hitting him in the chest.

“Stop that. You look too proud of yourself right now,” she responded with narrowed eyes, surprising him again.

“Do you blame me?”

“A little.”

He laughed heartily. “You’re really something, September Miller.”

“Do you intend to expound on that?”

“Nope.” He leaned back against the pillows, his arms crossed, his shoulder touching hers.

“Nope?”

“After that rude response to my kiss, I have no intention of sharing any of my thoughts with you just now.”

She sat up and cocked her head at him. “None at all?”

Against his will, his eyes dropped to her lips. Before she could react, he looped an arm

around her waist and pulled her down to him, kissing her deeply for a minute. Or twelve.

“None at all,” he murmured, settling her against his shoulder to finish the movie.



CHAPTER 22

Em

IT WAS RAINING, SHE was late, and she felt dumpy without heels on. But she couldn't wear heels with a sprained ankle.

Awkwardly grabbing her briefcase off the kitchen table, where she'd tried to do some work the night before—but was distracted by Garrett, who didn't leave until nearly nine PM—she made for the door, pulling it open with more force than necessary while balancing the crutches and her bag.

“Whoa! You're in a hurry!”

Em stopped in her tracks before barreling straight into Garrett's chest. “What are you doing here?”

“Good morning to you too.”

She offered a weak smile. “Sorry. I'm late, and I didn't sleep well.”

He propped his hip against the doorframe. “Didn't sleep well, huh? Something on your mind?”

“Not at all. Except I didn't want to be late to work today. Which I am.” She tried to glare at him; she really did. But with

him looking at her like that, all she could think about was his heart-stopping kisses the night before.

“It’s only 7:15. I bet your boss doesn’t get there for over an hour.”

“Yes. Well, I’m late for me.”

He pushed off the door frame with a grin. “I know. Come on, let’s go.”

“Let’s?”

“Yes. I’m driving you to work.”

For the first time, she noticed he wasn’t in his standard leisure wear. He was wearing slacks, a button-up shirt, and a sports coat. Which all looked incredibly good.

“Why?” she asked, still not moving, even though he had stepped out of her way.

“Because, for at least the next few days, your ankle is still going to hurt pretty bad, and I didn’t want you to have to drive on it.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Also because I think you’re cute and want to spend time with you.”

Her heart melted. Right then and there. Goodbye, sensible Em; she was now a puddle on the ground, and you wouldn’t find her complaining.

“I can’t say no to that, then.” She smiled, aiming her crutches onto the other side of the door frame.

“Here, let me grab that.” He slipped the briefcase from her hand and grabbed an umbrella from where he must have left it leaning against the porch railing. He popped it open and held it over her head. Together, they made it to the car without incident. Which was impressive considering their track record.

“So you have that trial this week, right?” he asked as he placed his hand on the back of her headrest and looked behind him to back out of the driveway. Something about that action was extremely attractive, though Em couldn’t say why.

“No, actually, next week. It starts Tuesday.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Not really,” she replied. But that was the *standard* response. The “I’m fine” of the workplace. And she and Garrett had clearly moved past standard. Catapulted past it, really. So, she tried again. “Okay, that’s not entirely true. I’m a little nervous. Since I convinced my boss to allow me to charge the perpetrator with a higher crime than was suggested, there’s a lot of pressure to succeed.”

His elbow rested on the console between them, and he swung his hand toward her, opening it and offering it to her. She took it, unsuccessfully ignoring the zinging up her arm as his fingers folded around hers. “Sounds stressful.”

Em nodded. “Some people thrive on the stress of trials.”

“Do you?”

She thought for a moment. “No. Not really.”

“Why do the job then?” He didn’t sound accusatory in any way, just curious.

“Even though law shows might disagree, the trials are really such a small part of the job. So much of my work is meeting with witnesses and victims and trying to find the best possible outcome. I get to do a lot of good. I get to help a lot of people. And paperwork. I do a lot of paperwork.” She made a face. “So the few cases that go to trial are going to trial because that’s our best option. Knowing that, I can handle the stress of them well enough. I just want to do right by all parties, you know?”

He squeezed her hand, nodding. “I’m sure you’ll be amazing.”

“That’s the plan.”

He stopped at a stop sign, glancing over at her. “I amend my statement, you *are* amazing.”

She ducked her head. “Thanks.”

There was a shift in his voice that told her some sort of joke was coming. “It’s probably some sort of *crime* how awesome you are.”

Em snorted. “Not tired of the puns yet?” she asked.

“Not a bit.”

“Too bad.”

He gave her a look that said he didn’t believe her one bit.

The rest of the drive was spent talking more about Em's case and the project Garrett was in the middle of. It was comfortable. Intimate, in a way.

He dropped her off in front of the building, carrying the umbrella over her head until she reached the door, then telling her to call when she was done. Whenever that was.

He said that last bit with barely withheld amusement. And though his eyes lingered on her lips for a moment, he didn't kiss her. She appreciated that. Clearly, he was aware that she liked to be professional at work.

But part of her might have welcomed a goodbye kiss. Okay, *would* have.

So, when he spun back, slipped a hand around her waist, and kissed her on the cheek, she was stuck grinning like an idiot as she passed through the automatic doors of the building.

"Umm, who was that guy?"

"Good morning, Stephanie. Do you have that case file I asked for?"

Her paralegal looked longingly over Em's shoulder as she handed her the file. "But, really, who was that hunk of a man?"

"That was... the guy I'm dating." Oh gosh. Admitting that felt way too good. But she had to wipe the ridiculous smile off her face before her coworkers stopped taking her seriously.

"He's cute." Stephanie still looked over Em's shoulder, though Garrett had already driven away.

“Yes. He is.”

“Hey, what happened to you?” Stephanie had finally noticed Em’s crutches and ankle brace—also gifted from Darla.

“Sprained my ankle hiking.”

Stephanie completely stopped walking on their way back to Em’s office. Em had to hobble in half a circle to look back at her.

“You go hiking?”

“Not usually.”

Why was her paralegal looking at her like that? Like she’d just gotten glasses and was finally able to see her boss. Did Em accidentally put mascara on only one eye or something?

“Huh.”

“I’ll be in my office, Stephanie. Patch any calls through.”

“Sure thing!”

Em closed the door to her office and forced Garrett from her mind. His warm hand around hers. His smile with that one dimple. His lips.

Agh.

She shook her head. This was not professional, and she had a lot to do to prep for this trial. The biggest one of her career yet.

She powered up her computer and pulled out the case file. While at work, she was going to work.

Then she could finish faster to see Garrett again.



“I promise to call you tonight and tell you everything, April, but Garrett is here to take me to work.”

It was Thursday morning, and Garrett was still insisting on taking her to work. And Em had no plan to fight him on it. Those twenty minutes before work—and the twenty minutes after that usually led to dinner at one of their places—were some of the best of her day.

Who was she kidding—they *were* the best. She’d never had conversations like they were having. About everything and nothing. Funny things and serious topics. It was getting addictive. Talking. Talking was becoming addictive.

Among other things.

“Okay, okay, but just tell me one thing.”

Em shifted the phone to her shoulder as she applied a quick layer of gloss to her lips. “Yeah?”

“Did he kiss you?”

Em paused, helpless to stop the smile growing on her face.

“Oh my gosh—he totally did, didn’t he?” April yelled in her ear.

“Maybe a few times.” She was sure April could hear her smile now.

“Ah! I’m so happy for you! We need to have a double date! Soon! When are you free?”

“Ummm... Let me check my schedule and get back to you, okay? Right now I really am late.”

“Fine, but you’d better actually call this time!”

Em smiled. “I will, don’t worry!” After a quick goodbye, she hung up and made it to the door.

“Hey! No crutches!” Garrett beamed at her from the porch where he’d apparently been waiting.

“Yeah.” She lifted her foot out. “I talked with your mom, and she said if it doesn’t hurt with the brace on, then I can ditch the crutches.”

“That’s perfect because now I can do this without interference.” He wrapped his hands around her waist as he spoke, his pinkies grazing her hip bones and his thumbs trailing along her ribs as he pulled her against him and pressed a quick, firm kiss to her lips.

Em dropped her briefcase beside her and looped her arms around his neck to prolong the affection.

“Mmm, you sure you need to be on time to work? And by ‘on time’ I mean, are you sure you need to be early to work today? I know a great little breakfast spot.” He didn’t release her while he spoke, and Em’s heart continued to hiccup at the contact. Three days of kissing him, and she imagined the novelty wouldn’t wear off for a while. The man could seriously kiss.

“Yes, unfortunately. This case is going to kill me.”

“Can I overrule you? Object? Plead my case? Make enough bad puns that you agree to breakfast just to get me to stop?”

“Would you really stop at breakfast?”

“Honestly, at this point I think it’s more compulsion than anything. But anything’s possible. After all, where there’s a *will* there’s a way.” His hands tightened around her as he winced. “Crap. See? Compulsion.”

Em dropped her head to his shoulder, shaking with barely suppressed laughter.

“So?” he asked again. “What’s the verdict?”

“The verdict is that you have a problem,” she said into his shoulder.

“Guilty as charged.” She could hear the cheeky grin in his voice.

Em shook her head with amusement, biting her lips together.

“Okay, fine, guess we’d better get you off.” He started to pull back.

“Well, I can be just a couple of minutes late...”

Not missing a beat, he put a hand to either side of her face, kissing her forehead, then her nose, then her lips again. She sighed.

“You know, I think your work owes you like a week off once you’re done with this case,” he muttered against her lips.

“They just might,” she agreed.

He stopped, tilting his head as his light green eyes bore into hers. “Okay, who are you and what have you done with September Miller?”

She laughed, shoving him slightly. “I just found someone I prefer being married to more than my job—” She cut off, mortification bringing heat into her cheeks. “That’s not quite what I meant—”

“Don’t worry, September.” He grabbed her back to him, pressing another tingling kiss to her lips. “I’d prefer being married to you over your job, too.”

Surprised laughter burst from her. “Come on, you jerk. Let’s go.”



CHAPTER 23

Em

DESPITE THE STRESS FROM her upcoming trial, Em's week had been one of the best she'd had pretty much ever. Garrett didn't even make fun of her when she didn't call for him to pick her up until nine-thirty at night on Friday, which was just the cherry on top.

"Want to watch a movie tonight?" he asked, grabbing her hand and kissing it before holding it loosely over the console. Em's stomach flipped a few times.

"Depends."

"On what?" He glanced at her then returned his gaze to the road.

"How much movie watching I'll actually be expected to do." Her lips pulled to the side, trying to hold in her smile.

He didn't even attempt to control his as he kissed her hand again. "Well, it would make good background noise."

They pulled up to a red light and stopped, and he looked at her more fully.

"What?" she asked under his pointed look.

“How do you still look like *that* after a fourteen-hour work day?”

“I will happily answer your question once I know if you’re saying I look good or bad.”

He chuckled. “Good. Very good.” Then, with a glance at the still-red light, he cupped the back of her head and brought her toward him, capturing her lower lip in a too-short kiss. He pulled back and started driving again. The light had changed.

Ignoring the desire to tell him to pull over and kiss her again, she changed the subject. “How is your work going? I’m sorry to make you drive out here twice in one day.”

“It’s no problem. Well worth the drive, I’d say.” He winked at her. “But work is great. This team is capable and efficient, which is a great combination. The job is well ahead of schedule. I think we’ll finish about a month early.”

Something occurred to Em then, which caused her stomach to drop a little. “What do you do when the job is finished?”

Garrett shrugged. “Start the next one. I’m contracted through about four major companies. Whoever sends me the next contract first gets me.” He smiled at her.

Em didn’t feel like smiling. “So you have no idea where you’ll be? How long until this job is over?”

Garrett slammed on the brakes. His hand pulled from hers to grip the wheel. Em jolted forward, the seat belt digging into her neck as it automatically locked up.

“Geez,” Garrett muttered as the dog who’d run out into the street barked at them. A little boy in pajamas came running from the house beside them, calling and waving at the dog. Garrett nodded at the little guy, whose scared face transformed into a toothy grin as he ran back to his house, dog’s leash in hand.

“Sorry, what were we talking about?” Garrett’s tense shoulders visibly relaxed.

“Your job.”

“Oh, yeah. I’d say this job has about another month left on it.”

Em blinked, wondering how to respond. Clearly, Garrett didn’t see anything wrong with what he was saying, but all Em could hear was that in a month Garrett was leaving to who knew where. Without her.

Em almost laughed at herself. Of course without her. They’d only been dating for a week. They’d only known each other for about a month.

“Hey, what are we doing tomorrow?”

Em startled back to the present. Their date. Right. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

Garrett grabbed her hand again, kissing it as he usually did before settling it between them. “I thought if I caught you off guard, you’d tell me.” He turned down the next street. “But it’s fine. I’m mostly interested in what activity you decided was fun enough.”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“What time do I need to be ready?”

“Mmm, five tomorrow?”

“AM?”

“PM.”

He nodded, and they lapsed into silence. And for the first time in a long time, it was awkward. At least on Em’s part it was. She felt that the air was filled with the questions she was too much of a wimp to ask. Did he just see her as a fling? Did this mean nothing? Was there a string of women he’d left behind in every state he’d worked in? Should she be protecting her heart better than she’d been?

Yeah. Probably.

When they pulled into Garrett’s driveway, she was no closer to asking any of her questions.

“So what movie should we watch?” Garrett asked as he closed his truck door.

“You know, I’m actually pretty tired. Do you mind if we take a rain check?” Em took a backward step away from his truck as she spoke. Back toward her house.

He watched her with an unreadable look. “Yeah, sure, of course.”

“Awesome!” That was a weird word to say right now. Especially with the false enthusiasm she’d colored it with. She

cranked back the happiness when she added, “I’ll see you tomorrow at five!”

And she turned and walked up to her door. Before he could walk away from her.

Because even though he was only leaving because she’d canceled their plans, after that conversation—or lack of one—it felt more symbolic than anything.

She reached her door when she felt his hand on her arm, softly turning her around. Her eyes widened to see he’d followed her up her steps.

With half a grin, he ran both his hands up to her shoulders, then back down to her wrists. Then he released them altogether and grabbed her waist, pulling her close for a slow kiss. “Until tomorrow, then,” he murmured.

She was unsteady when he let her go—her mind moving in a million directions.

And before she could react, she realized she’d lost her chance. He was walking away from her after all.



Em spent most of Saturday cleaning her house and reviewing her case files for the Clayton trial. And occasionally thinking about Garrett and how much she should be investing in this relationship.

Only occasionally.

For someone considered cutthroat in her job, she was apparently a serious pansy in her relationship. He'd texted her once that morning to see if she wanted to grab lunch, and she'd told him she was too busy. Then lunch by herself at her kitchen table passed, and she'd regretted letting her insecurities get in the way of spending time with him.

When five o'clock came, she was already mentally exhausted. But she'd decided to just enjoy the evening. She could do more worrying later—or, if she was feeling dangerous, she could be a real adult and just get the whole DTR thing over with. Either way, being with Garrett was always fun, and she really was looking forward to seeing his reaction to their activity. Plus, she'd spent about two hours perfecting the “I hardly tried” look with her appearance. Tight black pants, a relaxed white blouse, just enough makeup, soft curls in her shoulder-length hair, and—unfortunately—unheeled shoes. Stupid ankle.

When he knocked on her door and she opened it, all the effort was worth it. His mouth literally fell open as he took her in. She even thought she heard him say “whoa” under his breath.

It might have been “no” or something else that rhymed, but Em was going with the first option.

And when his hands immediately circled her waist and pushed her back into her house, kicking the door closed behind him, she thought she was right about what he'd said.

“Excuse me, our activity is out there, not in here.”

“Just give me a minute,” he muttered as he backed her against a wall. His eyes met hers, crinkling at the sides with a smile. “You look incredible.”

“Thank you,” was all she could say with him looking at her like that.

And then he was kissing her. One hand at the back of her head and the other on her waist. Until she didn't remember what they were supposed to be doing. For all she knew, this was exactly what she'd planned. A good old-fashioned make-out session.

When she finally surfaced for air, she kinda wished she'd thought of that. That would have perfectly suited the requirement of a “fun activity.”

“Ready now?” she asked. Instead of “screw my plans.” She regretted the words the second they were out of her mouth.

He groaned, stepping back. “If I have to be.”

She pressed another kiss to his lips. Then another. “You do.”

His response was half groan and half laugh.

She opened the door for the second time and stepped outside, Garrett close behind her, his hand on the small of her back in that way that was somehow possessive but not at all controlling.

When she walked to her car, though, he stopped. “I thought I'd be driving?”

She sent him a smile. “Not tonight.”

“You sure you’re up for it? Your ankle is okay?”

“Hardly even hurts anymore.” She opened her door.

“But it still hurts?”

She rolled her eyes. “Get in the car, Garrett.”

“It’s been a while since you rolled your eyes at me. I think I missed it,” he teased but opened his door.

“Did you? I can go back to that if you want?”

“No thanks, I prefer being on the receiving end of your kisses instead of your irritation.”

A little over twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of a warehouse. Em looked sideways at Garrett, awaiting his reaction. She watched as his eyes found the sign hung on the building.

A laugh escaped him. “An art exhibit? That’s what we are doing tonight?” He turned incredulous eyes on her, which immediately turned to some sort of fake pleasure. “I mean... what a fun idea...”

Em laughed. “I know it’s not your usual idea of fun, but I thought it sounded interesting. One of my coworkers mentioned it.”

“And you think it sounds fun?” Garrett asked, his voice carefully masked.

She shrugged. “I’ve never gone to an art exhibit. But we don’t need to put our lives in danger to have a little fun. Come on, Garrett, what are you so worried about?”

He still looked unconvinced, but he grabbed the door handle and opened his door. “Nothing,” he said, “let’s go for it.”

Em watched him climb out before she followed him onto the sidewalk. No one would say the place was crowded, but there were a fair amount of people mingling outside the entrance. Em handed their tickets over at the door, and they went in.

The exhibit seemed to have a chain of rooms, each with a different theme of art pieces. This first one was “rebirth,” if the large sign on the far wall meant anything.

“That one is... weird,” Garrett offered, pointing toward the painting to their left.

Em walked toward it, glancing at the pamphlet she was given when they walked in. “I think it’s supposed to be a caterpillar turning into a butterfly,” she said, then looked back at the picture, tilting her head.

“Looks more like some sort of exorcism,” Garrett murmured.

Em tried not to laugh. “This one isn’t bad,” she said, moving in front of the next painting.

“That’s because you can’t tell what it is.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“I have no clue. Probably an eagle on fire. Turning into a flower. About to be exorcized.” He said this all so seriously, Em actually searched the picture for any hint of his thoughts. Then she heard him chuckling.

Shooting him a dry look, she looked at the pamphlet. “This is an abstract representation of a lotus flower—meaning rebirth, enlightenment, and peace in various cultures—on fire,” she glanced at Garrett, who had a hand covering his mouth, “to represent the mortal struggle. In the distance, the artist has painted an eagle flying overhead—to represent the strength of mankind.”

A strangled laugh escaped Garrett. “They missed the exorcism.”

Em bit her lips together, moving slowly in a circle past all the paintings and occasionally referencing her pamphlet. Garrett trailed behind her, and she didn’t dare look at his face. She could appreciate the skill that went into each piece of artwork. But the meaning, and oftentimes even the subject of the painting, went completely over her head.

What did that say about her? Was she uncultured?

“Should we go to the next room?” Garrett asked into her ear.

“Sure,” she replied quietly. “It’s gotta be better than this one.”

“And here I thought you were enjoying yourself.”

Their voices were hushed, as were everyone else’s in the room. Which made it even harder not to laugh out loud.

She saw the title of the next room the second they walked in. A massive banner filling the entire back wall read “humanity,” with all the space around it covered in the same

word but various sizes and scripts. They walked all the way into the room. Then turned around.

Garrett's bark of laughter echoed through the room, and Em's eyes widened to twice their normal size.

"Sorry," Garrett said to the few people near them. He didn't sound sorry. They glared at him.

"Those look like..." Em couldn't even say it.

"Nude paintings," Garrett finished. "With... staplers? No, that guy has a potted plant. Are they all just holding random household objects?" His voice was strangled.

"Oh, my gosh. That one has a mop." These were not at all the classical, tasteful paintings one might expect in an art exhibit.

Garrett looked to the ceiling. "Oh, jeez, they're up there too. We can't escape them."

Em looked up, then down. Then turned around completely. Garrett turned with her, their shoulders together.

"I didn't know," she whispered urgently to him. Her face was bright red, she was sure. "I had no clue this was one of the exhibits."

Garrett's laugh rumbled through him, and Em could feel it against her, though she couldn't hear it. "Should we go into the next room?" he asked.

She shook her head and turned back around. "No. This was a horrible activity choice."

“So you want to leave?”

She nodded, and together they hurtled forward and didn't stop walking until they reached the exit.

They made it to the car without speaking, but neither got in. Em's face still burned, and she was avoiding Garrett's eyes. Of all the things they could have done tonight, she had to take him to an *art* exhibit? When neither of them even liked art? And then they'd ended up in a room full of naked paintings holding various, random objects. How long would it take to erase those from her mind?

She peeked at Garrett, who was watching her gravely. “I'm so sorry.”

His expression didn't change. “Me too.”

“Why are *you* sorry?”

“Because that was a pretty hard way to learn that we're uncultured swine.”

A beat of silence. Then they both started laughing. Several people gave them pointed looks of affront at their display of mirth outside such a serious, tasteful event.

Garrett grabbed Em's hand. “Come on,” he said between laughs, “I have an idea.”

She hurried beside him to the edge of the street. He punched the button to signal the crosswalk.

“Where are we going?” she asked, still smiling broadly.

“Bowling.” He pointed. Across the street was a bright neon sign for a bowling alley.

“I can’t remember the last time I went bowling,” Em said vaguely as they started across the street. She wouldn’t object though... anything was better than what they were walking away from.

“Well, that’s about to change.” And with a smile, Garrett pulled Em into the building.



CHAPTER 24

Garrett

“**Y**OU’RE HUSTLING ME!” GARRETT called.

Em walked back from her fourth strike in a row, mouth wide in a smile, and goofy bowling shoes a stark contrast to the rest of her outfit.

She looked good. Really good.

“You were horrible in our first game! What happened?”

She shrugged, but he saw the creasing of her cheeks. “Guess I was just warming up.”

“How long did you say it’s been since you went bowling?” He eyed her skeptically. This felt too much like the time she’d faked him out pretending to drown.

“I think the real question is... how long has it been since *you* bowled? I hate to break it to you, but...” her voice dropped to a whisper as she pointed to their screen, “you aren’t doing very well.”

Garrett took a drink of his soda, pretending indifference. “Well, I never claimed to be a world-famous bowler. You,

however, did claim that it's been *years* since you played. And I don't believe you."

"Em!"

Both he and Em turned at the same time to see a couple walking toward them. Even if Garrett hadn't seen April before, he still would have recognized her. The resemblance between her and Em was astounding, everything except their height and the barely visible baby bump April was sporting.

Garrett had a sudden flash of Em in a similar situation. With him. It was so surprising that he almost dropped his soda.

He'd only ever considered marrying one woman—Jenica—and that had gone so terribly he hadn't even considered matrimony—let alone kids—since. But suddenly Em was making him feel all domestic. He swallowed, hoping no one could read his thoughts through his expression.

"What are you doing here?" April and her husband had stopped in front of them, and she pulled Em in for a hug.

"A failed date," Em said. It was the first time she'd officially called one of their outings a date.

"Hey, I'm Garrett," he said to April's husband. He was a few inches shorter than Garrett, with lighter hair and a ready smile.

"Jackson." The man shook his hand at the same time the girls turned to both of them.

"April, this is Garrett. My..." Em looked at Garrett, seemingly confused as to what they were.

On a split-second decision, Garrett held his hand out to April. “Boyfriend,” he finished for Em. Then he watched as she tried not to smile.

April gaped at him for a minute, her gaze swinging back to Em for confirmation. Finally, ignoring his hand, she opened her arms. “I’m a hugger, not a hand-shaker. Especially not for people who manage to date Em.”

Surprised but not put off by the gesture, Garrett gave Em’s sister a quick hug.

“What do you mean by ‘manage’ to date me?” Em asked.

April gave her a sarcastic look. “As if you don’t know.”

Em rolled her eyes. Apparently he wasn’t the only one to elicit that reaction from her. “Are you guys meeting anyone? Our game is about done; want to join us?”

April and Jackson shared a quick look, then both nodded.

“That sounds great,” April said. Then she looked past them at their screen. “Em, are you winning? Have you even bowled since high school? That’s a really impressive score.”

With a triumphant look at him, Em spoke to her sister, “Beginner’s luck I guess. I think the last time I bowled was in middle school. Well, except for the game right before this.”

“So she’s really not an undercover bowling champion?” Garrett asked April doubtfully.

“Not that I know of.” April glanced at the screen again. “Who knew you had such a hidden talent, Em?”

“Yeah, it’s going to be useful in life, I’m sure.”

They all laughed as they filed into their half circle of benches.

Jackson didn’t sit when his wife did. “I think I’m going to order a pizza. Any requests?”

They decided on an extra-large pepperoni, and Jackson left to order it.

“So how did you guys end up bowling tonight?”

Garrett looked at Em at the same time she looked at him. Her eyes were sparkling with hidden entertainment. “Poor planning,” Em said at the same time Garrett said, “Nude portraits.”

April stared at both of them for a few seconds. “I’m sorry, what?”

Em’s lips twisted to the side in the telltale sign she was trying to hold in a grin or laugh. “I planned a bad date to an art exhibit, not realizing that one of the major exhibits was an entire room of nude paintings. We decided to cut our losses, and Garrett saw this place across the street.”

“Well, that certainly sounds... eventful,” April said.

“Yes. I’d say Em’s not really winning in the date planning department just now.”

“Excuse me, but you broke your face on our first date, and I broke—nearly broke—my ankle on the second. I don’t think my date is as bad as all those.”

Garrett cocked his head at her with a pretend look of curiosity. “And here I thought those first two *weren't* dates.”

Em’s cheeks went red, and she knocked into him with her shoulder. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You mean you wanted to date me all along.”

She actually punched his arm this time. Lightly—kinda. “That is not what I meant.”

“Actually,” April cut in, “I think it was.”

“April!”

Em’s sister held up her hands. “Okay, okay, *I* wanted her to.”

Garrett grinned. He liked April.

Jackson walked back with the pizza then, and Em went to bowl her last round—in which she got another strike. Again. Garrett didn’t even want to look at his score at the end of the game, so he just pulled Em over to the console. “Here, clear our game before I have to see just how dismally I performed. At least you can enjoy how well you did.”

“Do I still get to make fun of you?”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

With a little cheer, Em sat and started inputting a new game.

“So,” Jackson said from his spot, “why don’t we make this interesting?”

“What do you have in mind?” Em asked.

Garrett turned around just in time to see April shimmy her shoulders. “A bet.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Em said. “Your bets hardly ever turn out well.”

“Come on, Em, last time you made a deal, it worked out pretty well.” Garrett leaned against the computer.

She stuck her tongue out at him. Never in a million years would he have expected her to be capable of such a juvenile action. It was great. “That’s still yet to be seen.”

“Ouch.” But he grinned while he said it.

She stuck her tongue out again.

“Anyway...” April cut in, amusement lacing her tone, “back to this deal.”

Em turned from Garrett to look at her sister with raised brows. “Yes?”

“I propose that the winning team gets something...”

“Yes, that’s usually how bets go,” Em teased when her sister trailed off.

“Be quiet, I’m thinking.”

Jackson looked at Garrett with amusement.

“Okay, I’ve got it! The winner gets to skip dinner at Mom and Dad’s tomorrow.”

“We have dinner tomorrow?” Em’s brows pulled together.

April offered a sheepish smile. “She just called me on the way here. And, now that I think of it, there’s no way we can totally skip. Maybe the loser has to create a plan to get the winner out early.”

“You don’t mind Mom and Dad’s dinners though,” Em pointed out. Garrett wondered if that meant *Em* minded them. They hadn’t talked much about her parents outside of the bare minimum of names and jobs. Garrett had guessed there was more to be said but was waiting until Em was ready to share.

April shrugged. “Mom hinted that she wanted to go over my registry before I send it out for the baby shower. I don’t really care to have a fight over the specific crib I want, or anything else, so I wouldn’t mind skipping out a little early this time.” She looked almost embarrassed to admit it, as if that made her a terrible daughter.

Em was quiet for a second. “You know, this really is more of a bet for just you and me. Jackson, too, I guess,” she looked at her brother-in-law, “but mostly us.”

April looked not so surreptitiously over at Garrett. “Oh. I kinda thought maybe you’d bring...” She trailed off, and an awkward silence hung over the group.

Em looked at Garrett, and he thought he saw a little panic in her eyes before she composed herself. “We haven’t talked about meeting the family,” she said, but it almost seemed like she was asking him a question.

“I’d like to meet your parents.” Garrett lifted a shoulder. “If I’m invited, of course.”

April beamed. “Mom will probably have to *uninvite* someone, but I don’t think any of us mind.”

It was Garrett’s turn to look a question at Em. But she was too busy glaring at her sister to notice.

Jackson noticed though. “Poor Em gets set up with a different guy every time we have a family dinner. If you come, then it would be weird for Diane to keep whoever this dinner’s date is on the guest list.”

“Oh.” Garrett didn’t know how to answer that. His chest felt strangely tight at the thought of Em and another guy. Even just a blind date.

“But it’s okay if you can’t come tomorrow; you have Sunday Sundae night with your mom.” Em had stood at some point, and was now standing stiffly next to him, her arms folded.

“She’s actually out of town this weekend. Visiting a friend.”

Em smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Wanna come to family dinner then? I promise it won’t be boring.”

She looked so serious. How did a bowling game suddenly get so serious? Attempting to lighten the mood, he wrapped an arm around her waist, squeezing her side. “Time with you is never boring.”

Her smile seemed more genuine this time. “Maybe I should be promising you won’t be in any physical danger and that my parents’ taste in artwork is very vanilla.”

Just like that, the atmosphere perked up. “Oh good, then I guess I’ll come.”

“So it’s a date,” April said, clapping. “You guys better watch out; Jackson and I have been bowling once a month for the last year. You don’t stand a chance.”

Garrett highly doubted that. With Em’s skill, there was no way they could lose.

Which was why he was so surprised when she bowled a gutter ball on her first turn.

She turned around and grimaced apologetically at him. “Guess my luck is running out.”

Over the course of the game, she did slightly better than that first gutter ball, but nothing near how she’d been playing before her sister and brother-in-law showed up. In the end, they lost by eleven points.

Jackson and April entertained them with a very poorly executed victory dance, then started gathering their things and changing their shoes.

“Guess you guys will have to start brainstorming ways to get Jackson and me out of dinner now,” April teased. But in contrast to the lighthearted words, she fingered the strap on her purse. “But if you don’t want us to ditch out, we won’t.”

Em hugged her sister. “Nope. You won fair and square. Plus, I can’t have my little niece or nephew not getting their perfect crib just because their grandma is opinionated.”

April laughed. “You’re the best. We’ll see you tomorrow. I assume you don’t want us to pick you up this time?”

“You couldn’t leave early if you were our ride.”

“True. Okay, see you tomorrow. Should I call Mom or do you want to?”

Em sighed dramatically. “About uninviting my would-be date? I’ll call her. But thanks. Drive safe.”

“We will.”

They left, and Garrett and Em weren’t far behind. Garrett opened her car door before going around to his own.

“So, how hard was it for you to throw that game?” he asked as he buckled his seat belt.

Em bit her lip before giving in to the truth. “Harder than I thought it would be.”

“Hah—I knew your luck didn’t just run out. Why’d you do it?”

“Because April mentioning she might possibly want to *not* talk with our mom about her registry was the closest thing to complaining about our parents that she will ever do. She’s so non-confrontational, and our mom is so opinionated.” She shrugged. “I just thought she needed the win more than we did.” Then she winced. “But it does mean you’ll be stuck at my parents’ longer than we would have had to be. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Thank you,” she said. Quietly. Garrett wondered again why Em seemed so stressed about this dinner. But they’d already exhausted their tense conversation quota for the day, and he was missing her smile that had started to come easily—up until the last hour.

“Alright,” he said, and she stopped her action of sticking the keys in the ignition to meet his serious look, “what do I need to do between now and tomorrow night to be an acceptable boyfriend to your parents?”

As he’d hoped, Em’s expression lightened. “The list is too long to even worry about.”

“You are just full of compliments tonight,” he grumbled.

She’d been about to pull the car out of its spot but turned to him instead. “I’m only kidding. I wouldn’t change a thing about you,” she said, pulling his face toward hers with a hand on his jaw. He met her in the middle with a kiss that left him wanting more.



CHAPTER 25

Em

“SO, THIS IS GARRETT?” Mom dried her hands on a towel and walked over to where Em and Garrett had just appeared in the kitchen.

“Yes. Mom this is Garrett Clarke. Garrett, this is my mom.”

“Diane,” Mom said, reaching a hand out to shake Garrett’s. She was surprisingly gracious for someone who had bemoaned the fact that Allen had to be uninvited. He was, apparently, a new attorney in their office and destined for incredible career success.

Em had never been happier that she had her own date to bring to a family dinner.

“Nice to meet you, Diane. You have a beautiful home.” He gave her the bouquet of flowers he’d brought. *Without* even being prompted to bring anything. Em was more than a little impressed.

“Oh, thank you, these are beautiful,” Mom said, turning to grab a vase. “Em, your father is in the office if you wanted to say hi.” She turned and gave Em a speaking glance that was

more of a command than a suggestion. But there was no way Em was leaving Garrett alone right now.

“Go ahead,” Garrett said, releasing her hand and pressing a quick kiss to the side of her head. Em raised her eyebrows at him, and he just nodded.

“Okay, I’ll bring him back to meet you.” She turned and headed back down the hall, unable to keep from glancing over her shoulder at least once. Garrett was smiling at her mom and nodding at something she said. Still, Em hesitated before opening the door to her dad’s office.

“Hey, Dad,” she said as she stood in the doorway.

“September, I didn’t hear you come in. Here, sit down a second. I have to finish this real quick, then I have something to talk to you about.”

Em glanced over her shoulder again, biting her lip. April and Jackson should be there any second, so Garrett wouldn’t be alone long. Still, she hoped this little chat with her dad wouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes.

Dad finished up the last page of paperwork and then set it aside, folding his hands in front of him when he looked at Em again. It was as if they were at the start of an interview—not a discussion between father and daughter.

“Your mom and I have been talking, and we think it’s time you join the practice.”

Em’s mouth opened slightly before she snapped it shut. “I’m sorry, you want me to join your practice?”

“Of course. We always have but decided to give you a few years out on your own. It only makes sense that you’d join us. The firm is ‘Miller and Associates.’ Once we retire, there needs to still be a Miller. That’s you.” Dad sat back in his chair, perfectly relaxed.

Em was anything but. She’d known her parents weren’t thrilled with her decision not to come work for them, but she had no clue they had this planned. She bit back her annoyance, and calmly responded, “I’m sorry, Dad, but I love my job.”

He nodded as if expecting this. “We know. But you’ll love working with the family even more. You’ll become a partner immediately—it’s one of the reasons we let you go off on your own. This way, it won’t look like we are playing favorites. Even if we are.” He winked.

Did that mean he didn’t trust her abilities on her own? That he didn’t believe her capable of becoming a partner in the private sphere of her own skill and volition?

“And don’t worry, we’ll still train you in everything you need to know. I know it seems daunting to work for such a powerful group, but you’ll do great. We wouldn’t let you fail.”

Indignation rose. She wouldn’t have failed anyway.

“You’ll need to move closer, of course,” he continued. The way he was already planning the minutiae of her changing jobs, as if he couldn’t possibly see her declining the offer, frustrated her even more.

“No, Dad, I’m sorry, but I love my job. As much as I respect you and Mom, I don’t want to work for a private group.” Her jaw was stiff, but the words were calm enough. She deserved a pat on the back for that, really.

For the first time since she’d appeared in the doorway of his office, her dad seemed less than composed. His eyebrows pulled together. “I understand it’s a big transition, September, but you’d do so much better in the private sector. You’d make more money, more connections, and have more prestige.”

“Those were never my goals coming out of law school, Dad.” Honestly, her main goal had been to make her parents proud of her in her own right. Based on the incredulous expression on his face now, he wasn’t particularly proud.

“I’ll give you a few days to think about it,” he said with the finality of a man used to being obeyed. Unfortunately for him, she was a woman in the workforce, and she’d learned to stand up for herself long ago.

“I don’t need a few days,” she said in her most professional voice, though most of her wanted to roll her eyes at the presumptions this conversation had been stuffed full of. “I’m staying at my job.”

“Like I said, I’ll give you a few days.”

Em bit back a sigh. It wasn’t worth it to fight over this now. “Fine. Will you come out to the kitchen? I have someone I want you to meet.”

He pulled the papers back in front of him, waving her to the door without looking back up. "I'll be out in ten minutes."

She ground her teeth, stood stiffly, and walked to the office door. And here she thought her parents at least grudgingly accepted her life choices. She'd thought they might even be moving toward respect, with the strides she was making in her own job.

Strides she'd made on her own, despite the stiff competition.

She blew out a breath before stepping back into the kitchen. Garrett looked up from where he was sitting at the table. April and Jackson sat across from him, and her mom was carrying over a lasagna. At least he hadn't been alone this whole time. And no one looked tense or concerned.

Except for her, apparently. Because Garrett started to stand, and April's brows furrowed as they both looked at her.

"Everything okay?" April mouthed.

Em shook her head slightly. Hopefully communicating both that it was not okay, and also that she didn't want to get into it right now.

April got the message and nodded, though her forehead didn't relax.

Garrett came fully to a stand and walked to her, his eyes questioning her. She offered a tense smile. Thankfully, he didn't say anything, only grabbed her hand, squeezing it, and

led her back to the table. “Your mom said she made her world-famous lasagna.”

“Oh, yes,” Mom said, sitting down as well. “And he most definitely did not see me throwing away the Marie Callender’s box.”

Em managed a small smile. At least her mom wasn’t hurling insulting job offers at her.

“Did your father talk with you?” she asked with a little too much innocence. Em almost groaned. Maybe the insulting offer was just yet to come.

“Yes,” was all she said.

“Hmm. Good.” Mom seemed to be looking for more than that, but Em was saved from expounding by the appearance of her dad. “Oh, good, Dan, you’re just in time.”

Her father moved to his spot at the table. But just before sitting down, he saw Garrett and stopped.

“Dad, this is Garrett. My boyfriend.” The words still felt a little foreign. But good. Which was nice, since she’d had a bad taste in her mouth since talking with her dad.

Dad nodded. Then looked at Em. He seemed about to say something to her, but changed his mind and turned back to Garrett. “Nice to meet you; I’m Dan.”

“Good to meet you, sir.” Garrett offered a friendly smile. Dad’s wasn’t so warm.

Maybe bringing Garrett wasn’t such a good idea.

Dad sat down, then looked around. “Hey, I thought Allen was joining us?”

Em stiffened as her mom responded, with a pointed look at her and Garrett, “That would have left us unevenly numbered. I told him we’d reschedule, and I’d let him know what date we settled on.”

Okay, maybe she was feeling a little touchy, but the fact that her mom seemed to have only “rescheduled” her blind date instead of canceling it miffed Em. And, judging by Garrett’s tense jawline, he wasn’t too thrilled either.

“Jackson, did you get that email I sent you?” Dad speared some food with his fork as he spoke.

Jackson, used to the dynamics of the family, didn’t blink an eye at the sudden, direct attention. “About the case against a small business last month? Yes. I forwarded it to our in-house attorney. I don’t expect we will ever face a similar case though. For one, no one in our company is embezzling.”

“How much experience does this guy of yours really have though? Is he going to be able to protect your firm from an attack like that company in the email?”

“He’s more than qualified.”

“Hmm,” Dad said, taking a drink. “You should send me his information. I’ll vet him.”

“I offered to do that when he first hired him, Dan. You’ll remember,” Mom cut in.

Jackson's smile was looking the tiniest bit strained, but he still held his own. "And I very much appreciated the offer then. I consulted my partners before we hired Mr. Swan, though, and we have all been more than happy with his work over the last year."

"Hmm," Dad said again, then turned to April. "Your mom tells me you have a baby shower coming up. Why aren't you having it here?"

"She preferred to have her friend host it, Dan," Mom said with a bit of an edge.

"Natalie offered," April said, but with a tone of exhaustion.

"Mom, are those new flowers?" Em said at the same time Garrett remarked that the green beans were fantastic.

Mom smiled at them both. "Yes, September. Your father bought them for me to celebrate a big win at work last week."

"Oh?" April said when Em couldn't come up with a response that wouldn't keep the topic on work. "How's work?"

Well, crud.

Dad swallowed another bite. "It's great. We have several big clients we just took on. We'll need to hire a few new associates. Maybe even a new partner."

Mom glanced at Em with furrowed brows. "I thought Em was coming on as a partner."

“Em isn’t currently interested. I told her I’d give her a few days to think about it.” His voice was hard. Everyone turned to look at Em.

Her frustration had about reached a breaking point. It had been rising since they’d arrived here tonight, and mingled with the stress coming from the trial starting that week, her uncertainties with Garrett, and the general tension over introducing him to her parents. “And I told Dad I don’t need a few days. While I appreciate the offer, I am very happy in my current job.”

Mom laughed, her congeniality faltering somewhat. “At the prosecutor’s office?”

Em nodded. “Yes.”

Her mom pressed her lips together. “We’d always planned on you joining the firm, September.”

“Yet no one ever thought to tell me of those plans. I like my job, Mom. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

Mom stared at her. “What was the point of going to law school if you didn’t want to join the firm?”

Em blinked. She didn’t know what to say to that. To the presumption that the only job worth having was one provided by her parents.

“Hey, I wanted to show you the crib I chose, Mom,” April cut in, her voice wavering somewhat.

Mom ignored her. “September, we’ve told all the partners you’re joining. How would it look if we had to tell them our

own daughter declined to take the job? You are being handed a position most people work over a decade for. Don't tell me you intend to turn it down."

Em took a steadying breath. "I really am sorry to disappoint you both, but I wish you'd talked to me about this before talking to your partners. I am happy where I am—I love the public sector. I have since my second year of law school. I want to make a difference. Find justice for people suffering injustice. Work for victims who need lawyers willing to fight for them."

"So you think we don't do good work?" Dad responded, setting down his fork.

"That's not what I said at all."

Silence fell over the table. Steam rose slowly from the lasagna, and everyone seemed to be avoiding each other's eyes. Except for Garrett. From beneath the tablecloth, Em felt his hand find hers and squeeze it. She looked at him and was surprised to see the emotion there. For once, his expression wasn't dancing with amusement. He was entirely serious as he watched her. And something—pride, maybe?—shone from his eyes. It was enough to relax her shoulders.

"Oh my gosh," April said suddenly, her voice panicked as she looked at her phone.

"What is it?" Em asked.

"Our neighbor's house is on fire." She looked at Jackson. "They are worried it might spread to ours and are urging us to

come home immediately. But...”

“But what?” Mom asked, forgetting for a moment about the tense conversation that was just interrupted.

“But we got a flat tire on the way here—it’s why we were a little late. We have the spare on now, but all the shops are closed to have our tire repaired. I figured we’d just stay here tonight and take care of it in the morning.”

“You should just stay here, sweetheart. It’s a two-hour drive. There’s nothing you can do.”

April finally met her mom’s eyes, and April’s looked a little wet. “No, our sweet neighbor will need us. She’s eighty-seven and lives alone. The least we can do is get home and provide comfort. She may need a place to stay... Plus, we need to check on our house.”

“We’ll drive you,” Em offered, concerned at the shaking of April’s hands.

April nodded and stood jerkily. “Thank you so much. Can we go now? I’m... I’m so sorry to skip out on dinner, Mom and Dad.”

Mom waved her hand as if it were nothing. But it was accompanied with a heavy sigh that told the truth of her frustration. “Let us know how your neighbor is.”

Despite Em’s empty stomach, she’d never been so grateful to leave a table full of food.

Within a few minutes, they were all in Garrett’s truck. He reversed from the driveway as soon as everyone was buckled.

“I’m so sorry about your neighbor’s house,” Em said, turning around to look at Jackson and April. “I hope she’s okay and that your house is okay.”

Jackson was giving his wife a weird look. “My only question is when did our forty-seven-year-old divorced military vet of a neighbor become an eighty-seven-year-old lady alone in the world?”

April bit her lip. “When we all needed to get out of that dinner.”

Em’s mouth dropped open. “You lied?”

April nodded. “My hands are still shaking.”

Garrett laughed, and Jackson put his arm around his wife. “I’ve never been more proud.” He wiped a non-existent tear from the corner of his eye. April smacked him on the chest.

“Won’t Mom and Dad realize when they notice your car doesn’t have a flat?” Em asked.

“Oh,” April brightened, “it does, actually. That was just lucky.”

“I’ve never heard someone refer to a flat tire as lucky.” Jackson chuckled.

Garrett and Em exchanged a look. She could think of her own flat tire experience that was fairly fortuitous.

April shrugged, stretching out her fingers that really were still trembling. “Mom and Dad were only going to get worse. I’ve only seen them that way once... when I decided to study

graphic design instead of taking prereqs for med school. And, from experience, I can say they were only going to back off when someone started crying or one of them got an important phone call. Or, more likely, both.”

The mood in the truck turned suddenly somber, and April said quickly, “That makes them sound really bad. They aren’t that bad. They mean well... They just think careers are a big deal. A really big deal.”

Em nodded. “Thanks, Ap.”

“I’m not a monkey.”

That broke the melancholy spell, and everyone started laughing again.

“Guess this means we’re going to need to come back to get our car this week,” Jackson said.

April shook her head. “You’re going out of town anyway, I’ll get the spare fixed when I take you to the airport, then, when I pick you up, we can drive separate cars home.”

Jackson nodded. “That’s a good idea. Who knew I married a diabolical planner?”

April laughed. “Oh, that reminds me. Not the diabolical planner part, but the you leaving part.” She looked at Em. “Em, can I ask a favor?”

“Anything. I owe you my life right now.”

“Jackson has to go out of town this week, but Thursday was the only day they could fit me in for my twenty-week

ultrasound. Do you mind coming with me?”

Apprehension settled on Em’s shoulders, and she immediately felt guilty for feeling it. But it was a crazy busy week for work and would be hard to fit in any extra outings. Still, she owed her sister and, more than that, she wanted to be there for her.

“Of course, what time?”

“Three in the afternoon.”

Em nodded. They would be out of court by two. That should be enough time to meet April for an hour. Then she’d just work late to make up the hours.

“Text me the address, and I’ll be there.”

April relaxed. “Thanks, Em. I’m a little nervous to go by myself... I’m not sure why.”

Jackson looked frustrated. “And I’m mad that I have to be out of town. If we hadn’t had this meeting scheduled for several months now, I’d just bail. There’s a pretty big deal riding on my going, though, so I echo her thanks, Em.”

“No problem.”

“Speaking of thanks,” Garrett cut in, looking at Jackson in the rearview mirror, “I think I have you to thank for seeing that September has both a toolbox *and* a gun.”

Jackson shrugged, looking a little embarrassed.

April took his hand, smiling at him. “He likes taking care of people.”

Em gently knocked Garrett's arm with the back of her hand. "And I'm currently less taken care of than usual, because you never gave me back my tools."

"Oh yeah. Sorry about that." He merged onto the highway, but something in his expression sparked curiosity in Em.

"What's that face for?"

"What face?" He quickly wiped all expression from his face.

"The one that says you're not telling me something."

He glanced sidelong at her, his mouth quirking up. "I might have lied about needing your tools."

"Lied? Why?"

"Because I wanted to see my cute neighbor."

"Awwww," April cut in from the backseat, making Garrett's grin widen.

"I *knew* there was no way you couldn't find a screwdriver!"

Garrett caught her hand before she could jokingly hit him with it. He pressed a kiss to it. "You can't really blame me. Even with the lie I need to use like seven back doors just to get you to go out with me."

"Awwww," April said again.

Em shook her head, laughing. "Fine, I don't blame you. And because I think you're pretty cute, you can borrow my tools even longer. Just don't be surprised if I call on you for all my furniture-putting-together needs."

“Fair trade,” he said, looking over at her with a look packed full of warmth.

He held her hand tightly in his and Em settled back in her chair. With how good the last few minutes had made her feel, she’d almost forgotten how angry she’d gotten at her parents’ house.

“Hey,” Garrett said quietly once April and Jackson had started a conversation between themselves in the back seat.

“Yeah?”

“That was pretty amazing... you standing up for yourself back there.” He lifted her hand, kissing the back of it again.

“Thanks.” She smiled at him. She was pretty proud of herself too.



CHAPTER 26

Em

“CAN I MAKE YOU dinner?” Garrett asked after dropping off April and Jackson at their house. They only lived about eight minutes from Em’s.

She thought about it for half a second. Part of her was exhausted, part of her was still emotionally confused regarding Garrett’s leaving in a month, and another part of her wanted to spend every available moment with him. That part was winning.

“Depends,” she said.

“On?”

“If you’re a good cook.”

His low laughter was barely audible. “You should know—we’ve eaten at my house at least five times now.”

“But you never really *made* dinner. Just popped a pizza in the oven. Not that I’m complaining—I love pizza!”

He laughed a little harder. “I love pizza too. But regarding my being a good cook—I’m not really, to be honest. But I have a few good dishes that I can whip up.”

“Then, by all means, I won’t say no to a free meal.”

“Ouch, does that mean you’re only in this relationship for the monetary value?”

She made a noise of pondering, her lips twisting to the side.

“Nothing else?” he added. “Nothing at all?”

“The access to a first aid kit is a nice bonus.”

His responding laugh was much louder this time. “And here I thought you liked me for my body.”

“Are you disappointed to not be seen as only a piece of man-flesh?”

“Man-flesh?” he teased.

“Yes. Man-flesh. I don’t think I need to explain the definition.”

“Oh no, I definitely need the definition now. Straight from Webster’s, if you please.”

“Okay, I admit it, it’s not a real definition. Just a picture of you stuck in between the descriptions of ‘manatee’ and ‘mangle.’”

His grin stretched wide across his face, making his dimple pop out and his eyes crinkle as he looked her way. They pulled into his driveway, but neither made a move to leave the truck. He leaned back against his door.

“So you *do* like my body.”

She scrunched her nose at him. “I’m not answering that.”

“It wasn’t a question, more of a statement.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously attractive.”

She rolled her eyes, and he pushed off the door to lean over the console.

“I love when you do that,” he said, his voice low.

“What?” She rested the side of her head on the headrest, watching him in the fading sunlight.

“Roll your eyes at me. It’s ridiculously attractive,” he repeated his words from a second before, this time aimed at her.

“April says it’s juvenile.”

“Nope. Sticking your tongue out at me, maybe. But rolling your eyes just makes me want to kiss the crap out of you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Nobody’s stopping you, Garrett.”

“Thank goodness,” he muttered as he wove his hand through her hair to the back of her neck. It didn’t take much urging to get her to lean a little closer.

Their lips met in a slow, tender kiss. But then it deepened. She forgot all about the insulting job offer she’d received a couple of hours before. Forgot about the uncertainty hanging between her and Garrett. It was only Em and this funny, charming, sweet, *ridiculously attractive* man in a truck with rapidly fogging windows.

Her hands went to his neck, and she tried to move closer—but the console between them stopped her. Stupid thing. What use were cupholders and a place to keep some change when she wanted nothing more than to scoot her way into his lap? Whoever designed cars didn't have a great love life.

Garrett broke off first, breathing nearly as heavily as she was. Which was gratifying since she'd decided breathing was unnecessary about ten seconds before and had been willing to trade it in for the opportunity to keep kissing her boyfriend. Garrett smiled at her then, his hand still at the back of her neck, one corner of his mouth lifted higher than the other.

“Dinner then?” he asked, his hand slipping around to her jaw. The pad of his thumb rubbed along her cheekbone.

“I'm not particularly hungry.” Her stomach chose that unfortunate moment to growl loudly. Em sighed. “Clearly my stomach doesn't have its priorities in order.”

“Nope,” Garrett said, releasing her face and unbuckling his seatbelt. “I'm with your stomach.”

“Hey!” Apparently, neither Garrett *nor* her stomach had their priorities in order.

His hand was on the door handle, but his eyes didn't leave her face. The setting sun cast orange and red hues across his shoulder and the right side of his neck, illuminating the cab of the truck in a glowy warmth. When he spoke, it was in a low, almost strained voice. “If I don't get out of this car now, Em, I don't think I'll be capable of leaving. And I need to be capable of leaving.”

The warmth from the sunset was nothing compared to the warmth that spread through her then. The look in his eyes made it hard to catch her breath. “Okay,” she said slowly—reluctantly, “let’s go eat.”

He started to open the door, hesitated, then released it and leaned back across the console, pressing his lips to hers in another coma-inducing kiss. “Alright,” he said, sitting back with a groan. “Dinner.” He met her eyes one more time, his jaw clenching. “Now.”



Tuesday, and the start of the Clayton trial, was not off to a good start. Garrett had surprised Em with pizza and ice cream when she’d gotten home Monday night—to celebrate the beginning of the trial the next day. But unfortunately, she hadn’t gotten home until after ten. Which meant *he* hadn’t gone home until over an hour after that. And she hadn’t gotten to bed until much later—a combination of nerves and last-minute prepping keeping her up.

And now her stomach seemed clenched into a perpetual knot, and she couldn’t seem to force herself to eat even toast. She’d done dozens of trials over her years with the county attorney’s office. Why was this one throwing her so much?

Because it was so much bigger than any trial she’d ever been trusted with before. And if she failed, there’d be no one to blame but her.

She swallowed as she stepped onto her porch. Immediately, her eyes went to Garrett's house—but he wasn't there. Her mouth pulled down into a frown, and she turned to lock her door. But as her keys were halfway to the lock, she noticed a folded square of paper taped to the wood. She pulled it off.

Em,

I had to go to work early this morning to prep the site for a review. I know, I know, it's crazy that I had to go in before even you—the early bird to beat all early birds—but it's the truth. I would have texted, but this was more fun. I'm sorry I can't wish you good luck, but I know you'll do great. Call me when you're done.

Garrett

Her still-knotted stomach loosened a little as her eyes read the short note a second time, taking in the masculine handwriting and barely discernible signature at the bottom. She folded it back up and tucked it into her suitcoat pocket. She could have stuck it in her briefcase, but for some reason, she wanted the bolstering effect of having it nearby.

Her phone pinged as she climbed into the car.

April: Good luck today—love you!

Em smiled as she typed a quick reply. Just as she pressed send, another text came in.

Garrett: Did you get my note?

Em: Note?

Garrett: On your door.

Em: Oh, that was you? I couldn't read the signature.

Garrett: *eye-roll emoji* And you couldn't deduce who it was from?

Em: Could have been any one of my secret admirers. And look who's eye-rolling now.

Garrett: Look who's rubbing off on me.

Garrett: Good luck today. Can't wait to hear how it goes.

Em: Thanks *smiley face* I'm counting down the days till the weekend.

Garrett: Me too

Em's smile had started to pinch her cheeks, so, with effort, she tamped it down while pulling out of the driveway. She was halfway to Woodcastle when she realized the knot in her stomach seemed to have come untied.



CHAPTER 27

Garrett

“THE SITE IS LOOKING perfect, Mr. Clarke. I’m impressed with your team and your management here. So impressed, in fact, that I’d like to offer you another job.” The company executive crossed his leg, resting his ankle on his opposite knee, and watched Garrett with expectation.

Garrett met the gaze of the man. “I appreciate that, Mr. Stevenson. This team has been incredible to work with. What did you have in mind for the next job?”

“The company has appreciated each of your contracts with us so much that we’d like to offer you a more permanent position. As head of the western regional division.”

Garrett’s eyes widened, and Mr. Stevenson smiled then looked at his watch, standing. “I have a conference call I need to get back for, but we’ll send over all of the information via email. I think you’ll be pleased with the offer.”

Garrett stood as well, shaking the man’s hand and seeing him out of the office. After closing the door behind him, he turned back to his desk. Western regional division head? Where had that come from? He’d gotten a contract from one

of his other companies just that morning too—for a one-year position in Texas. It was good pay, and he liked the company.

But this was a steady position. Probably one with benefits and a salary and no concern of where he'd be six months or a year from now.

He sat down, drumming his fingers on his desk. The change was part of what he liked in this job though. There was a level of adventure in constantly moving around and doing something new. He hadn't wanted consistency in years. Not even when he'd been dating Jenica and planned to settle down with her. He'd seen a lot of travel for work in his future even then. Maybe some part of him had also known that if he'd ever needed to see Jenica outside of a long-distance relationship, they wouldn't have lasted.

Without realizing it, his eyes had strayed to his phone. Em was supposed to be out of court at two. But it was now three, and he hadn't heard anything from her. What would she think of these job offers? They'd only known each other a couple of months... only been dating a couple of weeks. Yet her opinion had become the most important right now.

Which was crazy since he didn't even have all the details. He had no idea where this regional job might put him. He should wait until he had all the information before talking to her.

His phone lit up, and he grabbed for it, accidentally knocking it off his desk. By the time he'd stooped to grab it

from where it slid under the desk, it had stopped ringing, and there was a missed call. From his mom.

He groaned. He loved his mom. But his mom was not who he wanted to talk to just now.

Still, he redialed her number.

“Garrett, hi, honey. I just left a message. I figured you were working.”

He settled back into his chair. “Just finished. I had to come in early today, so I’m off early.”

“Oh good. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” She paused, and Garrett zeroed in a little more on the conversation. Was this something serious? “Well, honey, I don’t really know how to tell you, but I didn’t want to spring a surprise on you this Sunday.”

“Surprise me with what?”

His mom took a deep breath. “I’m dating someone.”

Garrett stilled. He tried to respond, but nothing came out.

His mom must have taken his silence as some sort of answer because she started talking a mile a minute. “I know it seems like a bit of a surprise, but I met John at the hospital in Denver when I had my knee done last year. He’s a doctor there. A fetal surgeon, if you’d believe it.”

This time when she paused, he managed a strangled, “Oh,” which was enough to keep her talking.

“And he’s so nice; I know you’ll like him. We’ve been dating for a couple of months now, but I didn’t want to bring it up until I knew it was a serious thing. And now it is. Serious. I really like this man, Garrett. I know you will too.”

Garrett was still trying to collect his thoughts. “A couple of months?”

“Well... yes. As I said, I didn’t want to tell you until I knew it was serious. You know I loved your father. I still do—”

“I know, Mom,” he cut her off, his mouth finally catching up with his brain. “I know. Don’t worry. I’m just... surprised. I think it’s great you’re dating again. John, you said? Sounds like a... a good, strong name.” Oh, great, he was turning into an eighty-year-old, commenting on the strength of a name.

His mother sounded a little wary when she responded. “Good. I’m glad. I’ve invited him to Sunday Sundae night. If that’s okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course. Sure. Can’t wait to meet him. Hey, Mom, Em’s calling me. She had a big trial today, and I want to know how it went. See you Sunday?”

“Sounds great, honey. Why don’t you bring Em? I’d love to see her again.” She sounded a little deflated.

“Uh... sure. I’ll ask her.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.” He hung up and then stared at his phone. He wished Em had actually been calling. He needed a

distraction—needed to focus on something other than his suddenly topsy-turvy world.

He had two job offers, two months left on his current lease, and now his mom was dating again after she hadn't even talked about men in the last decade. He knew it shouldn't affect him as strongly as it was, but somehow he'd started to think it would just be him and his mom always. No one could ever fill the third chair at the table. No one could come close to being his dad.

He fisted his hands on his desk, staring down at it.

Mom wasn't trying to replace his dad. Logically, he knew this... but something in his chest was working really hard to convince him otherwise.

Closing his eyes for a minute, he grabbed his bag and keys and made for the door. In his truck, he shot a text to Em then turned toward the mountains. There was a change of clothes in the back seat—maybe a good trail run would clear his mind.



CHAPTER 28

Em

EM GLANCED AT HER phone. Texts were waiting from both her parents, April, and Garrett. But she couldn't muster the energy to look at any of them. Instead, she focused on the time. 10:07. There was nothing else she could do here that she couldn't do at home.

Numbly, she packed up her things and escaped the office to her car. The drive home was a blur of recollection. The day's events seemed to play in front of her eyes despite her wanting them to disappear completely.

She pulled into her driveway and got out. Halfway up her walk, she noticed a light on in Garrett's house. She turned toward it almost subconsciously, and at that exact moment, the porch light flipped on, and he stepped out the front door.

"Is your phone still working?" he asked.

She nodded.

He sighed, sticking hands in his pockets. "Two calls and four texts, Em."

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't answer."

His eyes peered at her in the disappearing light. “I know you had a busy day, but... I was about to call the cops. Part of me wondered if that murderer got to you.”

She grimaced. “With how well I did my job, he may be out of jail in a matter of years to do just that.”

His hands came out of his pockets, and he stepped off the porch. “That bad?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “I’m better than this. I don’t know what happened.”

He came close enough to wrap his arms around her. “Come inside. Tell me about it.”

She nodded into his shoulder. “Okay.”

His arm stayed around her while they walked up the steps and into the house.

“What happened?” he asked once she was settled on his couch and he’d brought her over some leftover pizza. She’d been eating a lot of pizza lately.

She shook her head. “My case is airtight, but the opening statement just went terribly. I couldn’t get my thoughts together, and I looked like a rookie—not the primary. It was humiliating, not to mention bad for the case. And then I found out the insurance rep I called as a witness was not the actual rep who set up Mrs. Clayton’s insurance policy. The previous

rep apparently left the company a month after the policy was opened. The current representative was able to testify to the legality of the policy, which may be enough, but it was still another embarrassing hit.”

“It’s not over yet though, is it?”

“No,” she said. “Thankfully not. The trial will probably last all week. I doubt a verdict will be made until Friday. If then.” She closed her eyes briefly and then shook her head. “But let’s not talk about it anymore. How was your day? You had some sort of review?”

He leaned into the couch beside her and rested his arm across the back, barely touching her shoulders. She leaned into him.

“Yeah, whenever we near the end of a project, someone from corporate comes down to check the progress. Catch any mistakes.”

“You make mistakes?” she teased halfheartedly.

“Not me. But other contractors have been known to.” He winked down at her, and her mood lifted. Amazing what a little dose of Garrett could do. But could those doses be about to end? Now was as good a time as any to bring the dreaded subject back up.

“Any idea what you’ll be doing when this project is done?”

She held her breath and couldn’t look up at him. Instead, she flicked imaginary lint off her pants. A good use of her time.

He didn't answer for several seconds. And when he did, his tone was... weird. "I've gotten a couple of job offers. One is in Texas. It's a year-long contract. The other is... well, they haven't given me all the information on it yet."

Em stopped perusing her pants for more lint. Texas? He was considering a job in *Texas*? She forced her voice to sound nonchalant. It wasn't like he was asking for her opinion or anything. He was just telling her about his possibilities. She could be cool about this. "Are you leaning toward one or the other?"

He shrugged, and she finally looked at him. But he wasn't looking at her; he was staring into the kitchen with a semi-blank look on his face. "I'm not sure, to be honest. I like moving around. It's fun. Adventurous. But I also have a pretty good reason to stick around right now if given the chance."

"Oh yeah?"

He glanced at her with a crooked smile. "Yeah. Kissing a pretty brunette."

"That's not a very specific description..."

He leaned down to her, his lips hovering just over hers. "How about... kissing *this* pretty brunette?"

The kiss was soft and sweet—a meeting of just their lips. When they broke apart, Em was smiling. "I feel a bit like you're just using me for my body."

"Pretty sure the feeling's mutual."

She laughed, but the conversation didn't feel finished. Had Garrett avoided answering her question? If he had... she had let him because kissing him was becoming her favorite hobby.

Okay. It *was* her favorite hobby. It had passed taking baths about two weeks ago. Approximately around the time he'd first kissed her.

“So...” she dragged the word out, not exactly sure how to ask what she was thinking. He raised his eyebrows at her. “Is there a possibility of you sticking around then?” She could have cringed. To her ears, she sounded like a ninth grader having her first DTR. *So, uh, are we like together together or just like kinda together?*

Garrett sighed, and Em could already tell she wouldn't like this conversation. “Honestly, I don't know. I don't have all the information right now. But I've at least got another month.”

Em almost laughed. A month? What was a month when she wanted forever?

She froze. Where had that come from? Since when did she have *any* thoughts about any sort of forever? She had a *plan*.

She'd gone off book. She'd only been dating this guy for a couple of weeks. What was she thinking? She wasn't. Her heart had not communicated anything to her mind. Instead, it had run off on its own—making up forevers and happily-ever-afters and tossing words like “love” around.

Uh-uh. No way. This was not a logical approach. Time to stuff that fantasizing little heart back into a box and think

through this. Falling for a guy who could be leaving in a month was not smart. That was like betting on love. And Em didn't bet. Not on anything.

Except for that bet with Garrett. Which had gotten her into this mess in the first place.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

She'd stood up at some point during her inner monologue and now she was staring into Garrett's confused face. “Oh. Sorry. I think I'm more tired than I thought; I should probably get home. And I still need to prep some stuff for tomorrow. Thanks for dinner.” She handed him the plate with her half-eaten pizza on it.

“And I'm sorry again about today... just a warning that I probably won't be much better about responding to calls the rest of this week. I'm sure I'll be running around like a crazy person with the trial. But it should all be settled by this weekend.” She was blabbering and promptly clamped her mouth shut.

He nodded slowly and came to his feet. “Okay,” he dragged the word out, still looking confused. “Oh, I told my mom I'd invite you to Sunday Sundae night. Want to come?”

Em made a noncommittal noise. “My parents want to do dinner again this Sunday when Jackson gets back in town. I'll see if I can get out of it though. I've had enough family dinners lately to last me half a year.”

Some expression crossed Garrett's face, but then he smiled. "Okay. Sure. Just let me know."

"I will." And she stepped out the door, barely refraining from saying the strangely natural words "love you." Instead, she pushed them back into the chained box she'd handcrafted for her heart.



With extra effort and focus, the trial went better on Wednesday. No new pieces of evidence came up to surprise their team, the jury seemed to be receptive to their arguments, and Mr. Standson had congratulated her on "turning it around." Em was choosing to take that as a compliment rather than focusing on the fact that she did poorly in the first place to receive such words.

She went into Thursday with renewed energy. They were going to win this. Even if the evidence didn't point so clearly to Mr. Clayton—which it did—just the man's jeering looks and angry outbursts in court the day before had to convince the jury. They'd had to take a recess at one point because the defense attorneys couldn't control the man.

The lunch recess was coming to a close when Mr. Standson walked up to the table where Em was reviewing her notes for the day. He tapped on the wood once with his forefinger. "This may very well be one of the quickest murder trials I've seen in my career, Ms. Miller. I'm impressed."

Em smiled confidently up at him. “Thank you, sir. We’ve not won it yet, but I’m certainly hopeful.”

“Myself as well, Miller.” He tapped the table once more, then walked back to his seat. It was a little nerve-racking to have her boss watching her every move, but she tried to think of him as just one more member of the team. They had two additional attorneys on the case as well, and a whole slew of paralegals. She had nothing to fear from Mr. Standson.

The bailiff called for everyone to stand as Judge Smith entered. This would be the final opportunity for the defense to call any last witnesses, then they would each have their chance for closing statements... After that, they’d wait for the jury. However long that may be.

Judge Smith cleared his throat in the silence of the room. “Council, are there any matters we need to discuss before we bring the jury back?”

“No, Your Honor,” Em said, but the lead defense attorney stepped forward.

Em hid her grimace. She hated that guy. If you were to look up the stereotypical slimy defense attorney, his name would be in the dictionary. Which was a pity because, generally, defense attorneys were great people. They got a bad rap at times, but Em had met dozens of great people who chose defense so they could make a difference.

Larry Evans was not one of them.

It didn't help that he'd asked her out about once a week for the first few months of her working at the prosecutor's office. Not only would he not take no for an answer, but he'd seemed to believe she was just playing hard to get, and therefore grew cockier and more insinuating with every attempt.

Larry caught her eye with a look of haughty gloating. Em nearly scoffed, but she was too professional for that. That guy just didn't know when to admit defeat—and Em had him beat.

“Your Honor, we'd like to add an Exhibit 23 to our previously provided exhibits.”

Em's eyebrows rose. New evidence? “What?” she asked. Both the judge and Mr. Evans looked at her. She swallowed. “I received no information regarding new evidence.”

“It was sent to your office, Ms. Miller.” Was she the only one who saw the sneer on Larry's face when he said that?

“If there are no other objections, you may proceed, Mr. Evans,” the judge said.

Em surreptitiously dug through her piles of papers. Any new evidence was supposed to be sent over to their office, even if it was just sent over during the lunch break. One of the paralegals ought to have received it and brought it to her attention.

Larry walked up to the bench to hand over a document. Em needed to find the information first—so she wouldn't be blindsided by whatever the defense thought they had over the case.

Her eye caught on a piece of paper Em didn't have memorized like all the rest. She pulled it out, her eyes scanning the information.

And her stomach immediately bottomed out.

No. No no no no no. Her gaze shot up to the bench, to the judge, who was just now gaining the same information as her. Then, against her will, she looked back at her boss. His brow was creased as he sent her a questioning stare. Em had nothing to say. Nothing that would prep Mr. Standson for what was about to occur.

“Ms. Miller, is this true?”

Em turned to meet Judge Smith's eyes. She liked Judge Smith. He was a great guy—always ruled fairly, treated everyone in his courtroom with respect, and had a love for Pez candy that made him seem somehow more human than a lot of the judges she worked with. But now he looked gravely concerned. “This is a major oversight, Ms. Miller.”

Em came to her feet, her heart slamming against her ribcage as she attempted to maintain the façade of confident ease. But it was hard to maintain such a front when inside she was panicking. Full-blown, *the plane is going down and the house is on fire* panicking.

“Your Honor, I was not aware of this new evidence. I am only just seeing it as well, but I looked into the insurance policy extensively, and the witness—a representative from the company, verified the policy. I can't believe this information is correct. Mr. Clayton took out the insurance policy on his wife

almost exactly two weeks before finding her in a compromising position with her yoga instructor, and subsequently killing her.”

“According to this document, the insurance policy was taken out *a year* and two weeks before Mrs. Clayton’s death,” Judge Smith said.

A collective intake of breath sounded throughout the courtroom, as the remainder of the attendees learned what was on that little piece of paper. Em ignored the desire to look back at her boss—or to look anywhere but the judge.

She grit her teeth. “I am not certain where the defense received this information, but as you’ll see in State’s Exhibit F, Mr. Clayton took out the insurance policy in December of 2019, two weeks before his wife’s death.”

Judge Smith looked at Larry, who was still smirking horribly. Em’s chest felt tight at that look. The look of a man who was one hundred percent certain he was right. And *she* was wrong.

“Your Honor,” he said, “I understand Ms. Miller’s confusion, but the date was inputted incorrectly. It took some digging, but I was able to find the original insurance agent who began the policy instead of just the current one,” he cut his eyes to Em here, “and found that, despite the date stating it was taken out in December 2019, the file had been in their system since December of 2018.”

The judge nodded. “And you have the witness to corroborate this claim?”

Larry indicated he did.

Em blinked. No. That couldn't be true. She opened her mouth to state that even Mr. Clayton had not objected to the insinuation that he took the policy out only two weeks before his wife's death. But then she remembered he *had* in one of his interviews. But he'd been overruled as the evidence clearly showed when the policy had gone into effect.

Incorrect evidence.

Larry turned toward her lazily, with one brow raised. Every part of him screamed *gotcha*.

"He—" Em cut off. She could have screamed. There was nothing to say.

Judge Smith cleared his throat, holding the paper out to the bailiff. "Once we have set a foundation for this new information, we will admit this into evidence and take an hour recess for the prosecution's team to determine their next course of action. Today will likely be a late day—please plan accordingly."

Em couldn't move for a full ten seconds. She was frozen to the floor of the courtroom, every possible response to this new information flitting through her mind. None of the scenarios turned out particularly well. Grasping for an option, she walked without seeing to a back room of the courthouse that her team had been using during various recesses.

A tap on her shoulder brought her back to life. She met the eyes of Mr. Standson and nodded, already knowing what he

would say. “Let’s verify the information and then plan our next move,” she said.

Mr. Standson shook his head. “I sent Jim to verify the minute the judge mentioned the insurance policy. It’s correct. We need to plan how we will nail Mr. Clayton for the lesser sentence.”

“I think we can still get him for first-degree murder. The insurance policy was not the only evidence against Clayton.”

“It was the evidence we built our case around, Ms. Miller. Everything else is circumstantial. This is not up for debate—the higher sentence is not going to work. We’re dropping to manslaughter, this appears to be no more than a crime of passion. It’s terrible, and Mr. Clayton still killed his wife, but it doesn’t appear premeditated.”

As much as it made her want to stomp her foot like an angry toddler, this was her boss. And unfortunately, this mess-up was on her—one hundred percent on her. That was the worst part—the fact that she’d convinced Mr. Standson to charge Mr. Clayton with first-degree murder, all based on faulty evidence.

Which was a mistake she hadn’t made since law school. Frankly, Em wasn’t sure she’d even made this bad a mistake then.

Trying to ignore the looks from her colleagues and focus on the task at hand, she planned her cross-examination of the defense’s new witness and outlined her new closing statement. It was grueling work, especially being on a time crunch, and it didn’t help that her phone kept pinging. But eventually, she

just turned it off, assuming anyone who wasn't currently at the courthouse with her could wait.

By the time they re-entered the courtroom, she felt, if not *good*, then at least confident in their new stance.



CHAPTER 29

Em

EM ATTEMPTED NOT TO drag her feet as she walked out of the courthouse while powering on her phone. She was mentally and physically exhausted, and all she could think about was getting home. Maybe seeing Garrett. Maybe finally having a frank conversation if she could emotionally manage it with her one-legged, half-broken brain right now.

Maybe just cuddling up next to him and ignoring everything for a while.

The second her phone turned on, several notifications started pinging. She had half a dozen missed phone calls and even more texts. Apprehension twisted her gut when she saw that several were from April. Something tickled the back of her mind—some reason her sister would have called so many times during the workday.

It dawned on her half a second before her finger pressed the icon next to April's name. The ultrasound. *Oh, no—the ultrasound!*

April: What time do you think you'll be off? Want to carpool? I can pick you up.

April: I haven't heard from you, so I'm assuming you're still in court. I'll see you there.

April: I'm in the waiting room. Far left corner.

April: Em? Please don't tell me you forgot.

April: They just called me back. If by chance you get here soon, just tell them my name, and they'll bring you to my room.

The horrible, hot feeling that slowly spread across each of Em's limbs had nothing to do with the summer sun beating down on her as she stood outside her car. Quickly, she checked the time. 5:13. Two hours and thirteen minutes after she had promised her sister she would be at the doctor's office. Her heart beat faster as she thought of April sitting there alone.

Em was the worst sister in the world. She'd never been anything near as amazing as April was, but she'd officially slid down the totem pole to last place. In fact, she was pretty sure she'd bypassed the pole completely and dug a hole twenty feet deep.

Skipping the voicemail from April, Em went straight to calling her. The phone rang enough times that when the rings stopped, Em thought she was getting April's answering machine. But instead, she heard a shaky "Hi," on the other end.

Em's already heavy heart dropped to somewhere near her toes at April's tone.

"April, I am *so* sorry. I'm terrible and horrible, and I can't believe I forgot the appointment. I made a huge mistake at work, we had to work late, and I didn't even pay attention to the time. And I turned off my phone after lunch so I never got your messages. I just now got off. I'm so sorry. I owe you big time."

"Oh, it's okay, Em. What happened at work?"

"I had faulty evidence that our whole case hinged on and—" she cut off when something registered. April didn't sound like herself. She sounded... subdued. And... wet. Something in her voice sounded like tears. "April? Is everything okay?"

Em thought she heard a stifled sob on the other end. "Yeah, it's fine. I'm fine. Just a little... hiccup at the ultrasound."

Her heart apparently had *not* been at her toes before, because now it felt like a weight had been tied to it, and it was sinking fast. Plummeting, really. "What happened?" she asked, her mind spinning into all of the horrible scenarios.

"There's something wrong with her heart. Oh. It's a her, by the way. Jackson and I are having a girl." Her voice broke on the last word, but she continued, "They aren't completely sure yet what the problem is, but they were talking surgery. As soon as next week. I... I have an appointment with my doctor tomorrow to discuss everything."

Em opened her mouth to tell her sister she would go with her. To tell her she would cancel her whole day, and she'd be at that appointment. But she couldn't make that promise. Not when tomorrow might not be the final day of the trial. So she told her the next best thing she could think of.

"I'm on my way, April. I'm coming over now." And she wrenched her car door open and broke about seven traffic laws to get to her sister's house as soon as possible.



CHAPTER 30

Garrett

EM HAD SAID SHE wouldn't be great about responding to calls this week, but he'd kinda thought she would have answered at least one of his messages over the last forty-eight hours. If she wasn't such a mature, bold woman, he would have thought she was ghosting him. He couldn't even catch her leaving in the morning, she was gone so early. He was pretty sure she hadn't even come home the night before.

Which was frustrating because he had things to tell her. Really good things, he hoped.

His current company had finally contacted him with the information on the regional managing job. And it was incredible. He could work from anywhere, though he would be required to join a meeting in Denver once a week and likely travel to various job sites—one or two a month—as part of the job. And the pay was higher than he could have hoped for.

When he'd first gotten the offer, he'd been ecstatic. Seeing the path that would so easily allow him to stick around made him realize how badly he wanted to stay in Greenbank. Or

rather, how badly he wanted to stay with one September Miller.

He felt like he was continually on the edge of his seat with the anticipation of talking to her. This trial was obviously important... but did it rank so far above him that she couldn't even send him a quick note to check in?

At least he'd see her that weekend, and hopefully, she'd be as excited as he was about this job offer.

His phone rang, and he glanced down, expecting to see Em's name and the picture he'd assigned her on the night of their first kiss flash across the screen. Except it was a spam call. Annoyed, he almost tossed the phone across the room, but at the last second decided to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Hello, sir, I'd like to talk to you about the warranty on your car."

"Oh, great, that's just the thing I wished to discuss." Garrett flopped onto his couch.

"Err... wonderful, sir. The warranty on your vehicle will expire in two days, but if you act fast, you can extend it for an extremely low cost. This offer is only available today and only available to the first one hundred customers to—"

"Let me just cut you off there, *sir*. You see, I lied when I said I wanted to talk about my car warranty."

Silence on the other end, then, "Yes... well, if you act today, you can save thousands. Your vehicle—"

“Is four years old and the warranty expired two years ago. Tell me... what’s your name?”

“Err... Silas, sir.”

“Silas. Great. Do you know much about women?”

The call clicked off. Garrett looked at his phone, then dropped it onto the couch beside him. “Yeah, me neither, Silas.”

His head fell back against the couch cushions, and he groaned. Since when did he worry about women calling him back within two days? He couldn’t remember the last time he’d even talked to the same woman for two days. What was different about Em?

Everything. Freaking everything was different about her.

She was real, honest, and hard-working—although that last one seemed as much a negative as a positive just now. But she was also funny, gorgeous, and, now that he knew her better, had a hidden depth he was sure she didn’t show most people. In fact, she might not be aware of it—which was somehow the most attractive thing in the world.

If he was honest with himself... he was pretty sure he was falling in love with September Miller.

He grabbed his phone, deciding then and there that he didn’t care how pathetic he looked leaving her another message. He dialed her number and didn’t have much time to second-guess himself—because she answered.

“Hello?”

“Em—you’re alive!”

“Oh, Garrett, I didn’t check the name before I answered.”

He deflated. “Ah—and you would have continued your avoidance of me if you had, huh?”

“I’m not... I’m not avoiding you, Garrett. I’m just really busy at work.”

“How did the trial go today?”

“Honestly, not great.”

Suddenly everything made sense. She wasn’t avoiding *him*; she was avoiding admitting that work wasn’t going well. “I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” She seemed distracted.

Garrett had an inexplicable desire to take her attention off whatever happened during the trial. “I got another job offer today. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

She was quiet for a second, and when she spoke her voice was strained. “That’s awesome, Garrett. I have a bit of a family emergency right now though. Can we talk about it later?”

He blinked. That was not how he’d seen this conversation going. “Yeah, sure, no problem. Call me when you get the chance. Or just come by. We’re neighbors, you know. In case you forgot since you haven’t seen me in days.”

“Okay, thanks, Garrett, I’ll talk to you later.”

And for the second time in ten minutes, the phone clicked off on him. He scowled at the offending piece of metal. She must have had a really bad day. But if you'd asked him last week whether she'd avoid him rather than seek him out after a bad day, he never would have seen this evasion as the outcome. And he didn't know what to do with it.

A text from his mom popped up on the screen he still held.

Mom: Is Em coming to Sunday Sundae night?

Garrett decided to take a page out of his elusive girlfriend's book... and ignored the message in favor of putting on running shoes and heading for the mountains.



CHAPTER 31

Em

EM TUCKED HER LEGS up under her, watching April on the other side of the couch. Her sister wasn't crying anymore, but her eyes were still rimmed in red. Her best friend, Natalie, was in the chair across from them telling a story about some couple who had stayed the last week at the B&B she owned. April had even laughed once or twice at the retelling of how Natalie and her husband had heard thumps all throughout the night and had chalked it up to the elderly couple having an active, ah, intimate life. Nope. They'd been reorganizing the furniture into a configuration that had better *flow*, or so they'd told Natalie at checkout.

Em's eyes dropped to the throw blanket she was cuddled under. April should have asked Natalie to come to the ultrasound. Even though she was unbelievably busy with work, she would have made time. She wouldn't have forgotten.

"Stop."

"What?" Em looked up at April's stern face.

"Stop berating yourself."

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can tell. Just stop it. Forget about it... It was an honest mistake.”

Em took a deep breath, shaking her head. April was too forgiving. Em would feel better if April had at least yelled at her once or twice. Instead, Em had gotten to her house, and April had immediately hugged her and asked what had happened at work, even while tears were still leaking in a continuous stream from her eyes.

Em had told April it was nothing and asked her instead to tell her all about the ultrasound.

It wasn’t great. The baby seemed to have some sort of obstruction in her heart that was only fixable by surgery. *Before* she was even born. April was a mess, Jackson was trying to get the soonest flight home, and April had just gotten off the phone with her best friend, who had arrived minutes after Em.

Em hadn’t asked if April had told their parents. She would, and they would want to know... any grandparents would. But at the moment, it was clear April needed comfort, not a barrage of questions and insinuations that April might not have chosen the best doctor and should get a second opinion.

“I’m making hot cocoa. And then we’re watching a movie until Jackson comes home, k? I brought several period dramas and am looking forward to enlightening Em on the finer things in life.” Natalie hopped up and left for the kitchen.

Em looked at her sister, striving for a lighter tone even though she still felt a hard lump in her chest that was constantly reminding her how horrible a sister and lawyer she'd been that day. "Just what finer things is she talking about?"

"Oh, you know. Colin Firth, Matthew MacFadyen, Johnny Lee Miller. A little Richard Armitage maybe."

Em must have looked confused because April's mouth lifted in a smile, some of the hollow sadness fleeing her eyes for a moment. "Jane Austen movies. And *North and South*."

"Oh. Of course."

"If you need to go, you can. Really. I know your trial isn't over."

Em was shaking her head before April had finished. "Not a chance. I'm here until Jackson gets home. However long that takes."

April scooted over, wrapping arms around her shoulders. "Thank you."

Em returned the hug, putting all the emotion she was feeling for her sister and little unborn niece into the action. As if her hug could fix the broken pieces of April's life right now. As if it could make up for Em's crappy sister status.

It couldn't. But Em was starting to think about what she needed to do to make sure it never happened again.

And it was making the heavy lump in her chest even heavier.



Em's headlights illuminated the front of Garrett's house when she pulled into her driveway. She'd stayed at April's until Jackson had gotten home around eleven p.m. He'd taken an Uber to April's parents' house and then brought their other car home. Em had left April in his capable hands. And the capable hands of the pizza, ice cream, and plethora of candy bars Em had ducked out to grab during their screening of *Emma*.

Emma's self-centered actions had gotten to Em, making her feel as if a spotlight was shining on her, reminding her just how self-centered *she'd* been. Reminding her that, despite her attempts to control things, everything had spun out of control. She didn't need to see it happening on the screen too. April warned her she would miss the best parts if she left, but Em had waved her off, saying she'd be back soon.

With a little more force than necessary, she put the car in park. Several hours with her sister hadn't numbed her anger. Anger at herself. Frustration hot enough that it felt like it might boil out of her eyeballs. Her hands still felt like they were shaking every time she thought through her day.

How could she have been so dumb? How could she have dropped the ball so completely? Not only at work, but with her sister. The one time her sister had tried to rely on Em instead of the other way around... Em had let her down.

She grabbed her purse from the passenger seat and almost made it out the door, the hot feelings spurring her into movement. Into action. But at the last moment, she slumped in her seat, her head falling against the steering wheel.

She didn't want to do it. She really didn't want to do it. But she needed to.

She needed to break up with Garrett.

Something needed to give. Before the last few months, she'd never struggled to be both a good sister and daughter, and a good attorney. But, all of a sudden, she was fighting with her parents, forgetting her sister, and making major mistakes at work. Nothing was working anymore. She couldn't just quit her job, and she wasn't going to quit her family, so the only option left was Garrett.

And he was probably quitting her soon anyway, so she may as well beat him to the punch.

Yet, somehow even that knowledge wasn't unraveling the mess of apprehension and regret already twisting in her stomach. It was like her entire midsection had turned to stone and a pile of snakes all at the same time. Em was fairly certain the snakes were venomous too, if the nausea was any indication.

Gathering what little strength she had, Em took a deep breath. She had to do it. It was the only option. Adjusting her grip on her purse, she pushed the door open. And before she could convince herself otherwise, she was striding up the walk to Garrett's house.

She knocked twice and stepped back. Any moment now he would open the door, and she'd have to say the words she'd practiced twelve times on the way home.

Except the door didn't open.

Leaning sideways, Em double-checked that the light was on in the front room. Then she knocked again. Still nothing.

The mess in her stomach was becoming more snakes and less stone. If she didn't do this tonight—while the pain of the trial and forgetting the ultrasound were still fresh and poignant, then she didn't think she'd have the nerve to do it tomorrow. And then Garrett would go accept a job in Texas or something, and Em would...

She would have failed. Her relationship with Garrett would have failed in addition to her family relationships and work responsibilities, and Em couldn't survive another failure. She needed to end this on her terms.

So again she knocked. He probably wouldn't answer; he was probably asleep and just left a light on. But she had to try one last time.

It wasn't a surprise when the door didn't open this time, but it still cut through Em's already hurting heart. She turned around. At the same time, a lock clicked, and the door swung wide.

The sudden movement startled her, and she jumped back, almost falling off his porch. Her purse fell from her shoulder, and she shoved it back up with painful awkwardness as she

turned back to the doorway. Garrett was there, grinning at her with wet hair, basketball shorts, and nothing else. No shirt. Nothing. Not even socks to maintain some sort of decency.

Em fought the heat crawling up her neck and into her cheeks as she tried really hard not to stare. It was as if she'd never seen him without a shirt—she had, though. She'd already seen him shirtless at the lake, and one would have thought the shock would have been less this time.

Nope. The man was even more attractive in the scant light from inside his house, with his hair wet from a shower. In his house. His house.

“Hey.” A smile lit up his face, and Em's chest physically hurt. “Want to come in?” he asked, humor lacing his words, clearly aware of his effect on her.

Em averted her eyes. “No, actually, I wondered if we could talk for a sec? On the porch maybe?”

“Oh. Sure, let me just grab a shirt real quick.”

Thank the heavens.

Less than a minute later, he stepped onto the porch. His newly donned shirt did nothing to reduce his appeal, and Em's resolve cracked.

But then she remembered April and the trial and the fight with her parents, and she regathered her determination.

He motioned for the porch swing—the only seat on his porch. It wasn't until they sat that she realized how small it was. There was space between them, yes, but only about an

inch and a half. And that inch and a half seemed to carry a current of energy between them, pulling them together. Em cleared her throat, shifting and trying to face Garrett without actually touching him. It was nearly impossible.

“So what did you want to talk about?”

She froze in her awkward attempts of moving on the swing. Her thoughts grasped unsuccessfully at the rehearsed speech she'd crafted over the last several hours. Instead, all that came out was, “I think we should break up.”

Silence beat uncomfortably, and Em couldn't look over at Garrett. Then he sighed. Em had always assumed sighs were meant to sound... pathetic. But Garrett's sounded disappointed. And unsurprised. “Is this about your trial?”

Em opened her mouth but didn't say anything. Yes, it was, but also it wasn't. She swallowed. “Not really, no. I just think... I think we have different goals in life, and I can't have the distraction of a... of a relationship right now.” She'd been saying that since the beginning. She'd had a *plan*. He couldn't blame her for something that she'd been clear about since they first met.

He couldn't.

“Okay.”

She looked sideways at him. His expression showed no feeling outside of a clenched jaw. He caught her watching, and his jaw tightened even more.

“Okay?” she asked.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” he said with an exasperated shrug. “I happen to know arguing with you is essentially pointless, and I don’t particularly want to have to argue you into dating me. That’s pretty pathetic.” His voice grew in bitterness until Em was wincing. He sighed again. “Sorry. This isn’t how... this just...” A groan slipped from him and he rubbed both hands down his face. “If this is what you want, then okay. But this *isn’t* what I want.”

He looked at her then. Really looked at her, with a fierce stare that Em wanted to avoid but couldn’t look away from.

“You understand that, right?” he asked. “You understand this isn’t okay with me?”

Em swallowed against the sudden surge of emotion. It wasn’t what she wanted either. But it was what needed to happen. She nodded. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

He shook his head and stood. “Then I’ll say again... okay. Okay, Em.” His entire person emanated his wish to leave her presence as soon as humanly possible.

Em stood as well, biting her lip. Had she made the wrong choice? How could a person as full of life and fun as Garrett look so... hurt?

“I’m sorry,” she said again, not sure what else to say.

He nodded and walked to his door. He pulled it open, and Em was sure he wouldn’t look back. But he did. Abruptly, he spun around to face her, his hand flexing on the door.

“I’m not sure what exactly prompted this, but you say we have different goals in life. Yes, we do. At least on the outside. But the September I’ve come to know in the last couple of months only *thinks* she needs the goals she’s made. She thinks she needs to be perfect and successful in every aspect of her life. I’m not sure why... but I can guess. And I’d guess you think you’re only as good as your outward success.”

His eyes pierced hers, and she wanted to back away. From him and from what he was saying. But she couldn’t get her feet to move.

“Well, that’s not true. It’s a load of bull, actually. I just hope you realize you don’t need that outward validation to be worth something. I hope you realize it soon. Because, Em, you already matter. A lot. Outside of work or any other success. You matter just because you’re you. That’s it. That’s—” He cut off and stared at her for a moment, then shifted his weight, suddenly appearing uncomfortable again.

The silence between them stretched. She wanted to say something. Anything. But her throat refused to work, and she was pretty sure the stinging in her eyes was about to become tears.

His jaw tightened one more time. “Bye, Em.” He closed the door just as she got her throat to work.

“Bye,” she said. And underneath the canopy of stars, her voice sounded really small. She stared at the door and willed the tears to stop crowding her vision.

What had she done?

She had been so sure she was making the best choice. For her *and* for Garrett. He was leaving soon, after all. Right? She'd never actually asked. It was part of the rehearsed speech she hadn't managed to follow.

Either way, it was the right choice. It had to be.

Why then had the bad feeling in her stomach not gone away? Why did she feel like she'd just ruined the best thing life had ever thrown her way?



CHAPTER 32

Garrett

GARRETT LOADED THE LAST bullet before closing the gun's chamber. Maybe shooting a few unmoving targets would help him get over some of the anger that seemed to be boiling under the surface of his emotions ever since Em broke up with him two days before. He vacillated between stomping over to her house and letting her know just how stupid it was to break up with him... and stomping over to her house and begging her to take him back.

Neither were great options, so a day with his friends, shooting fake deer and painted targets was all he was going to get.

The sound of an engine and wheels turning up dirt had Garrett turning around. He waved a hand as he recognized Will's truck and set his gun on his tailgate, the safety on.

"Hey, man!" Will called, jumping from the front seat and striding across the dirt lot. His cowboy boots kicked up about as much dirt as his truck had. He grabbed Garrett in a hug.

"Will—great to see you," he responded as another car turned into the lot of the shooting range. Noah waved at them

from his Jeep, parked, and started pulling things from his back seat.

“Noah made it sound like you might be bringing a girl,” Will said, leaning against Garrett’s truck, arms folded. It wasn’t exactly a question, and Garrett didn’t exactly want to answer.

“Did Noah tell you what girl *he* brought last time we hung out?”

“Hey, you make it sound like it’s all my fault. Of all people, you should know Jenica’s a leech—I couldn’t shake her.” Noah dropped a bag at Will’s feet. “Your camping stuff from last time. You left it in the Jeep.”

“Huh. I wondered where that went.” Will grabbed it and walked the few steps to his car to put it in the back.

“With how much of a wreck your truck always is, I’m surprised you noticed it was gone,” Noah said.

“Eh. By ‘wondered,’ I meant, ‘was starting to think maybe I should see if I left that stuff somewhere.’”

“Yeah, that makes more sense.” Noah turned on Garrett, and he braced himself. But his friend stopped. “Dude. You look terrible.”

Garrett looked down at himself. His t-shirt was a bit wrinkly, but so was Noah’s.

“I mean you look like you’re not sleeping. Something up? Or... late nights with the month girl?”

“Month girl?” Will had rejoined them.

“Yeah, Garrett’s dating a girl named September.” “That’s an awesome name—does she have a sister named—”

“April,” Noah supplied, grinning. “Is the sister dating anyone? I could use a date to my brother’s wedding next month.”

Garrett was ready to start shooting things.

“Earth to Garrett.”

“Huh?” Garrett’s head swung back from looking at the targets longingly.

“Where’s your girlfriend? She not into shooting things?”

“Actually, she has her concealed carry permit.” Garrett was putting off the inevitable.

“Okay, how do I get one of these women?” Will asked.

“She’s a lawyer too,” Noah added. “And she’s funny. Garrett is playing well above his league.” Noah’s ribbing was good-natured, but Garrett felt that ever-simmering anger start to boil over.

“Yeah, I definitely was. Guess that’s why she dumped me.”

Both his friends’ smiles dropped.

“Oh. Man, I’m sorry, I didn’t know... I swear you just told me you guys had started dating.”

Garrett nodded, his jaw clenched. “We made it about two weeks. Might be a record for how short a relationship it was.”

“That Jennifer girl and you only made it like four days in high school, right?”

“Shut up, Noah.” Will hit their friend, who snapped his mouth closed.

“It’s fine. It’s over, and that’s that. Can we just go shoot some stuff?”

Noah perked up at that. “I brought my AR if you want to try it. It took me months to build, and I haven’t even shot it yet.”

“I don’t think Garrett wants to be your guinea pig and try out a gun you built yourself. What if it blows up?”

“Half the reason I want him to try it instead of me.”

Garrett actually *almost* felt a grin cross his face at that. “Yeah, sure, let me see it.”

Thankfully, his first shot with the rifle went off without a hitch.

“How’s it shoot?” Noah asked, putting bullets in his hand gun.

“Great. Nasty kick though.” He checked that the area was clear before putting the gun back to his shoulder. He took a steadying breath as he aimed with the scope, trying to relax some of the tension he’d been feeling. It worked enough to shoot mostly on target. Not quite a bull’s-eye, but close.

Will came up beside him, leveling his own rifle to his shoulder. He sighted his target and pulled the trigger, hitting smack in the middle of the black circle.

“I’m still waiting for you to tell us you’re secretly in the CIA,” Noah remarked, stepping up to Garrett’s other side and shooting. He missed the target completely. “How did you get so good with a gun?”

Will shrugged. “Practice.”

“We’ve been practicing with you for years, and neither of us can shoot like that,” Noah countered.

Will just shrugged again.

Garrett sent off another round of shots, still not as good as Will’s, but passable. They’d at least made it on the target. He sent another.

And another.

He was getting worse with each round. So, he stepped back, lowering the gun and scowling.

Will glanced at him before putting his eye back to his scope. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not a bit.”

Will nodded, taking another shot.

“She says we don’t want the same things in life. It’s a load of crap.”

“Thought you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t.”

“That means he does, apparently,” Noah added helpfully.

“Remind me why we’re friends?”

“My good looks and quick wit.” Noah smiled winningly.

Garrett shook his head, but the joke lightened his mood a bit. “I was even thinking of sticking around after this job.”

Will lowered his gun too, emptying the chamber of the remaining rounds. “For her?”

“Yeah. For her.”

Noah stuck a fist in his jacket pocket. “That’s a bad hand.”

Garrett nodded. The worst hand he’d been dealt in a long time. Maybe since his dad had died... which really said a lot about how much he liked Em.

Who was he kidding? He’d been falling in love with her. Had been making plans for the future, even if he hadn’t fully realized it yet.

His eyes started to feel hot, and he shook his head. “Enough about that. Want to have a little competition? Worst marksman buys dinner?”

“Only if we give Will some sort of handicap,” Noah muttered.

Will grinned, then grabbed Garrett’s shoulder consolingly as he passed to go swap guns.

Noah watched him before turning to Garrett. “Her loss, man. Seriously.”

That was nice and all. But, unfortunately, Garrett didn’t agree.



CHAPTER 33

Em

WAS IT WEIRD TO look through her curtains before leaving?

It was. Definitely.

Em pushed aside the curtains one last time. If she was already weird, it didn't hurt to double-check that Garrett's truck was gone. Which, now that she thought about it, was weird in itself. It wasn't even seven, and he had left.

The curtains dropped back into place, and Em shrugged. She wasn't going to question her good luck in avoiding Garrett today. She was pretty sure if he had been out swinging on his porch swing, she would have jumped the small space between their houses and begged him to take her back. And there was no way she could do that.

After grabbing her briefcase, she made it to her car without incident. The drive to Woodcastle was similarly uneventful. When she walked into the courthouse, the judicial assistant greeted her as usual, and she found her way to the courtroom where she started to set up for the day.

The trial concluded without a hitch. She didn't get her desired first-degree murder charge, but they did get the manslaughter charge without any trouble. Her team gave everyone congratulatory handshakes, and she shared professional nods with the defense team before leaving. Likely, her coworkers would go out to celebrate, and they probably wouldn't invite her.

Essentially, everything was normal.

Why was that disappointing?

The sun was still fairly high in the sky when Em left the courthouse. With the trial finished, there was no pressing work for her to do, so she planned to just head home. She checked her phone's clock. 2:33. It might be a record for how early she'd left work. She should text Garrett—he'd be so proud. And then he'd probably get off early too so—

Nope.

Em groaned, tilting her head up to the sun but not feeling any of its warmth. Garrett would do none of those things because Em wouldn't text him.

Because they'd broken up.

Somehow, she reached her car without realizing it. But she didn't get in. She didn't even pull her keys out. Instead, she stared angrily at her sedan. It wasn't fair that she was still thinking of him—she'd ended things between them to better focus on her family and her work. But right now she wasn't focusing on either.

Frustrated, she kicked her car's tire.

Which, of course, reminded her of when she'd first met Garrett after he saved her from a flat tire.

“Uggghhh!”

“Ms. Miller? Are you okay?”

Em spun around. “Oh. Stephanie. Yes, I'm fine. Thanks.”

Stephanie looked unconvinced, but smiled and said goodbye anyway.

Em muttered something about stupid displays of emotion and finally dug through her purse for her keys.

The drive was uneventful. Again.

And when she pulled into her driveway, Garrett's truck wasn't there. And for some reason, that was hard to deal with, so she pulled straight back out of her driveway and drove to April's house instead. Her sister would be home—doctor's orders—and Em would see if she could make some dinner for April and Jackson or something. Anything to keep her mind off... off he-who-must-not-be-named.

Which, of course, reminded her of kissing Garrett for the first time while watching *Harry Potter*.



Em peered out her curtains again the next morning. It was Saturday, and she'd already been up for six hours, cleaned her entire house—like *deep* cleaned—and made two freezer meals

for April for after the surgery. She needed to get out before she started online shopping.

Well. Continued online shopping. But those two dresses, the new mascara, the entire wardrobe for her new niece, and the exercise clothes which she did *not* think about Garrett while buying, were necessities. Or nearly necessities. The mascara definitely was since she hadn't slept well the last week.

But finally—*finally*—Garrett's truck was gone, and she was free to exit her house without possibly running into him. And she was choosing not to dwell on the fact that she was acting like a thirteen-year-old about the whole breakup.

She ran for her car—again, like a thirteen-year-old fleeing her problems—and felt like an idiot when she made it without being caught. Quickly, she turned the ignition on. Then stopped. Where was she going? All morning she'd been trying to get out of the house, but she'd never planned where to go. Maybe April's? No, she was just there last night, and April had mentioned her and Jackson ordering food in and lying low before the surgery the next week. Em didn't want to interrupt that.

So Em went to the only other place she could think of.

Work.

It was a good thing, really, because she intended to take a day off for April's surgery the next week, so getting extra work in today was good. Not pathetic. Not lonely.

Her phone rang when she was five minutes from the office. She grimaced a little when she saw the name on the screen, but she hadn't talked to her parents since the infamous family dinner, so she felt bad ignoring her mother's call.

"Hey, Mom," she said into her car's Bluetooth.

"September. We hadn't heard from you for a couple of days."

It wasn't a question, but Em felt like it begged an answer. "I know. I'm sorry, I've just been so busy with this trial."

"Oh? And how did it go?"

Em hesitated. "We got the defendant on our manslaughter charge. Everything turned out as it was meant to."

Her mom made a noncommittal noise, then plowed forward, apparently through with the niceties. "We need to know if you will come on as a partner. The board needs a decision by Monday."

For the first time, Em waffled in her choice. It might be nice to have a new start. Plus, then at least someone in her life would be proud of her. Her parents would be thrilled if she accepted the position. The occasional Sunday dinners would be filled with talking about work *equally*. Maybe they'd even stop trying to set her up.

And really, private law wasn't a bad thing. It just hadn't been her first choice.

But when she opened her mouth, she couldn't do it. No matter how happy and proud it would make them... she didn't

need to follow a life path dictated by her parents to be worth something... right?

That sounded a little too much like what Garrett had told her, so she refused to dwell on it. But the decision had already been made in her head, and there was no going back. “I already told you, Mom, but I’m not interested in leaving my current position. I really appreciate the offer, but I won’t be accepting it.”

An exasperated sigh reached her ears. “Honestly, I figured as much,” her mom said. “We have another candidate lined up, but we’re still disappointed.” She paused, probably giving Em one last chance to change her mind. But when Em said nothing, she added, “It’s your choice though.”

Em had expected more of a fight. She’d also expected to feel better when her parents gave in to her. “Thank you for respecting my decision,” was all she could manage to say. “Hey, Mom? I’m heading into the office to work on a couple of things. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

It was a mark of her parents’ lifestyle that her mom didn’t even comment on it being a Saturday and therefore not a work day. Instead, she just said goodbye and hung up.

Em went into the office and started reviewing a few case files for the next week, making notes of victims and officers she needed to call and emails she needed to send come Monday. The work was comfortable and easy and took her mind off her personal life for a few hours. But when she

started to pack up for the evening, her mom's words seemed to bounce around her skull. *We're disappointed.*

And then, Garrett's words warred with her mom's. *Em, you already matter. Outside of work or any other success.*

But who was right?

"Oh, Ms. Miller, what are you doing here?"

Em looked up to see Mr. Standson standing in the door to her office. She stopped shuffling papers. "Just thought I'd get a jump start on next week's work."

Mr. Standson nodded. "You did great work at the trial this week. As I knew you would."

Em nearly scoffed, but that would be rude. "I apologize for my mistake in the evidence. It won't happen again."

"It might," Mr. Standson said, but before Em could get up in arms, he continued. "That's the way of things. The law isn't always cut and dried, and humans make mistakes. But you did your job well with the information you had, which is all I'll ever ask. But, Ms. Miller?"

Em was gaping at him, not able to fully process what he'd just said. She'd screwed up... majorly. But... he didn't care? He didn't blame her? She realized he was still watching her. "Yes?"

"Don't work on the weekends. You're one of my best prosecutors. I don't want you to burn out."

"Oh... ah, okay. Thank you."

He nodded again, then started to back out of her office. But something he'd said sparked a memory.

“Mr. Standson?”

“Yes?”

“Did someone named, ah, Jenkins ever work here?”

Mr. Standson thought for a moment. “Oh. Yes. Robert Jenkins. He was a great attorney.”

“Did he retire then?”

“Nope. Changed jobs.”

“Oh. Why? If you don't mind my asking.”

Half a smile crossed her boss's face. “Well, to be honest, he worked a bit too hard. It's not my place to share details, but it was clear his overwork was bleeding into other areas of his life. He was a great attorney, like I said, but ultimately, he realized prosecution wasn't for him. He's a guardian ad litem now and really enjoying it, as I understand. In Boulder, I think. Has a couple of kids. His wife sends us Christmas cards.” He paused. “Why do you ask?”

Uhhhh. “Just heard his name somewhere.”

Mr. Standson accepted that response. “Well, have a great weekend, Miss Miller.”

“Thank you. You too.”

He left, went into his office to grab something, then left the building altogether. Em watched him go.

So Jenkins had “worked too hard” and ended up leaving the position. But he hadn’t left law completely, just prosecution. That wasn’t really burning out... Something had just needed to change in his life, so he’d changed it. Like Em had.

Except, his change had been work-related, and hers had been personal.

That didn’t mean her change was wrong though.

But it might have been.



The next week was a blur of monotony. Em spent her mornings awkwardly trying to avoid Garrett—who seemed to be doing the same with her—and her days working on various cases. Her evenings were passed at April’s or at home either watching a show or taking a bath in an attempt at easing the knot that seemed to have taken up residence in the base of her neck. She was trying to work a little less. Only a little... Really, she’d just replaced her nightly looking over of cases. But it was something.

Thursday was the day of April’s surgery—exactly one week after they’d found out about their baby’s heart problems. As Em understood it, the little unborn baby girl had some sort of obstruction of her aortic valve that could lead to the left side of her heart not forming properly and causing lifelong heart problems. Modern medicine was incredible, and April and Jackson’s baby could be operated on while in utero. And then,

should everything go well, they would be able to finish off the pregnancy normally and deliver the baby full-term.

Though everyone was grateful there were doctors skilled in correcting the problem, no one felt easy about the surgery, which would take place in Denver.

Em drove herself to the hospital in the early morning; April and Jackson had gone the night before and stayed in the city. The silence of her empty car amplified her nerves. But then she would think about how nervous April must be... and Em's own nerves would grow even more. Her sister had seemed constantly on the verge of tears all week. And neither Em, Jackson, nor April's best friend, Natalie, seemed capable of relieving any of her fear for more than a few minutes.

Finding parking was confusing, as was finding the correct building for the neonatal surgery. But even though her hands were shaking and she was developing a headache by the time she found April's room, when she stepped through those doors, she couldn't imagine herself anywhere else.

"Em!" April's eyes lit up from her hospital bed. "I was worried you wouldn't make it."

Though the words were spoken without a hint of malice, they stung Em's heart. Her sister should never have to think that Em wouldn't be there for her at a time like this.

"I'm sorry," Em said, walking across the room. "I got lost at least seven times. How are you, Natalie? And where's Jackson?"

April's best friend waved at her from the chair beside April's bed, but her eyes quickly darted back to April with concern. "Jackson went to talk with the nurse about April's IV."

"I made the mistake of mentioning the tape was pinching my arm, and he ran off." April's voice held a note of amusement, but not enough to cover up the nerves. Plus, it was accompanied by her pulling nervously at her hospital sheets.

Em nodded her understanding, then glanced around the room one more time, notably missing a couple of people. "Where are Mom and Dad?"

Hurt flashed across April's face. "They are going to check in after. Um... something about not being able to get away from work."

Irritation flared. How could their parents not be here for April? For their unborn grandbaby? Especially when they couldn't be more than twenty minutes away.

Before she could say anything to express her frustration though, she caught Natalie's eye. Natalie shook her head slightly, with a look to April, which Em took to mean it was a sore subject that they should move on from. So instead, Em sat on the edge of April's bed and rehearsed the story of her nearly taking out four different pedestrians and a decorative fountain while attempting to find the correct parking structure.

Jackson came back with the nurse and hovered near April's side, holding her hand and shooting surreptitious looks at the

clock. Between the three of them, they kept April laughing—or at least smiling—until the doctor came in to take her back.

The three of them were directed to the waiting room where none of them laughed. They each silently dropped into a chair in the corner of the room, where Em imagined the other two were also experiencing the empty, clawing feeling she had. As if her chest were trying to escape the confines of her body but had nowhere to go.

And then they waited.



CHAPTER 34

Garrett

“WELL, IT’S NOT MUCH of a decision really,” Garrett said into the phone. “The regional manager position pays much better, and I’ll be able to stay near you.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so glad. I’m guessing a certain lawyer convinced you into staying too?” His mom’s teasing voice had the opposite effect than she’d probably intended.

Garrett grimaced. “Uh... honestly, it was a decision I made on my own.”

“Sure, sure, I believe you.” She clearly didn’t believe him. Which made sense as Garrett hadn’t informed her of his breakup... despite it being a week. Luckily, she kept talking, so he didn’t need to make any more comments. “Will you be coming Sunday? John and I missed you last week.”

“I know, Mom; I’m sorry I wasn’t able to make it. Will really needed my help though.” And Garrett had needed an excuse to avoid the all-important meeting of his mom’s boyfriend. He had come to terms with his mom dating again and planned to meet John eventually, of course. Just preferably

not thirty-six hours after breaking up with his girlfriend. His personal life couldn't handle that much change at once.

"It's okay, but will you be here Sunday?"

Garrett didn't have a ready excuse yet, so he reluctantly responded in the affirmative.

"Perfect," his mom said, "then I'll see you then! Love you."

"Love you too, Mom," he said before hanging up.

The phone call hadn't been over for a full thirty seconds before it rang again. As usual, Garrett felt the quick leap of delusion that it was Em. But it was his new boss instead. Hopefully offering a distraction from his pitiable pining.

"Mr. Clarke," the man said after Garrett had answered. "What are your plans this weekend?"

"Nothing set in stone yet, sir. Why?" Garrett felt a twinge of guilt at how quickly he threw aside his mother's standing invitation to Sunday Sundae night.

"I have a conference I'd like you to attend. My southern division manager was supposed to go, but his wife went into labor early, so he's had to back out. It will be a great networking opportunity for the company and you, I think."

"And it's this weekend?"

"Yes. And next week. Do you have a man you trust to handle the site until you're back? You'd fly out tomorrow morning. Early."

“I’ve got a great guy who can keep an eye on things. Where’s the conference?”

“It’s in Dallas. I’ll email you the itinerary and have my assistant book the flights if you’re available?”

Garrett nodded with excitement, so much so, he was grateful Mr. Stevenson couldn’t see him. “Sounds great. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Perfect. I’ll have Marge call you if there are any questions about booking.”

Garrett hung up in a much better mood than five minutes before. He was being handed an escape from reality for a bit. And though he felt bad about missing Sunday with his mom again, he promised himself he’d go and meet John the following weekend.

Another thought occurred to Garrett as he headed for his bedroom to pack. Noah had mentioned regretting agreeing to let his roommate’s family stay in their small apartment. Quickly, he pulled out his phone and sent off a text.

Garrett: Hey, still need a place to crash this week?

Noah: Yeah, I was about to ask my mom if I could just stay at home this week, but I’m not thrilled about sharing my old bedroom with Chad who apparently decided this was a good week to come visit.

Garrett: I’m going to Texas on a work thing. Want my place?

Noah: Heck yeah.

Garrett: Awesome, I'll leave the keys in the mailbox.

Noah: I owe you one.

Garrett: You're racking up the IOUs. Better watch out for when I cash them in.



CHAPTER 35

Em

TIME SEEMED TO MOVE slower in hospitals. There was nothing to break the waiting—just the muted news playing on a small TV in the corner and the occasional announcement or call over the speakers. Em would have sworn it had been a full fifteen minutes since she'd last looked at the clock, but according to it... it had only been two.

She blew a hair out of her face, glancing at her brother-in-law.

His eyes were closed, but his arms were crossed over his chest, and his knuckles were white where they gripped his biceps. On his other side, Natalie's knee was bouncing rhythmically. It hadn't stopped since they'd taken their seats.

If they didn't all succumb to the stress of sitting in this nearly deserted waiting room... Natalie might take the building down with that bouncing. They continued that way, the sun slowly brightening the room as it crept its way to the middle of the sky.

Jackson beat them to his feet when the doctor finally walked in, but Em and Natalie were hot on his heels.

The surgeon came toward them, and though Em was still shaking with nerves, the easy smile that crossed his grandfatherly face took the edge off somewhat.

“Everything went perfectly,” he said with a reassuring smile to Jackson. “Your wife is doing great, and your baby girl’s obstruction was fairly minor. We were able to clear the aortic valve, and I’m hopeful I won’t be seeing you for another surgery in the future. The rest of your wife’s pregnancy should be smooth sailing.”

Jackson visibly sagged with relief, and Em hugged herself to keep from crying with joy. All the pent-up fear of the week before and the stress of not being able to do anything about it seemed to want to leak from her eyes as it melted away. Just like that, the world seemed a little brighter. Happier.

“Can I see her?” Jackson asked.

“Yes. You can all come back if you’d like. They’ll be returning her from recovery any minute now.”

Natalie and Em shared a look, then both shook their heads. “Go ahead, Jackson,” Em said. “Go kiss your wife, and we’ll join you in ten minutes or so.”

Jackson smiled. “I won’t say no to that.”

When he’d left, Natalie turned to Em as she sank back into her chair. “I think this week has taken ten years off my life.”

Em nodded. “I think it took twenty off Jackson’s.”

“Seriously, though. I’ve thought he would collapse under the weight of all the worry. You’ve been so great to spend so

much time with them this last week. I know it meant a lot to April.”

Em shrugged. “She’s my sister.”

Natalie nodded. “She’s like a sister to me too. Outside of Cade, she might be the most important person in my life. No, she is the most important. She might even be fighting Cade for the top spot... Don’t tell him though.”

Em laughed, the bubbly feeling of relief still coursing through her and making everything appear happy and funny and great.

Natalie’s expression turned nostalgic as she watched the door Jackson had just gone through. “If I’ve learned anything this week, it’s that nothing is more important than the people we love.”

She was right, and Em started to nod in agreement but stopped herself. If Em believed that, why had she broken up with Garrett for her job? Sure, she’d also broken up with him for her family, but essentially she had ranked him third in importance, and therefore not important enough.

The thought was startling. Because that man should never be third on anyone’s list. He was number one material.

“How do you balance it all?” Em asked suddenly.

Natalie cocked her head. “Balance what?”

“Work. Family. Friends. You’ve been here for April just as much as I have, and you run your own business *and* you’re married. How do you manage it?”

A small frown crossed Natalie's face. "I guess I've never seen it as balancing. Sure, there are weeks where some things—usually my laundry—has to give, but somehow it doesn't seem hard to balance the things I love. When you put those things first, the less important stuff—again, like laundry—just naturally falls down on the list. So I guess it's a matter of priorities." She shrugged as if she wasn't sure she'd managed to answer the question well. But Em had frozen the second a certain word came out of Natalie's mouth.

Love.

Crap.

The key was prioritizing the things she loved.

And she was in love with Garrett.

Em's hand came up to cover her mouth in shock. When had that happened? Daily, probably. Hourly. Little by little, minute by minute, that man had snuck his way into her heart. And now life was boring shades of gray without him, and she was realizing what a complete idiot she'd been.

"Let's go break up the love fest, shall we?" Oblivious to Em's inner turmoil, Natalie stood up with a relief-filled laugh. "We've given them at least ten minutes. Now I want to see for myself that April is okay."

Em did too, so she followed immediately. But in the back of her head, she couldn't seem to stop the mantra that had taken up residence there.

I love Garrett Clarke.

And I made a huge mistake.



It was so late by the time they left the hospital that Em and Natalie decided to get a hotel rather than drive home in the dark. Natalie’s husband had put up a teasing fuss but relented in the end, so Natalie booked the room while Em called and left a message for her boss. She was skipping work tomorrow—though she didn’t phrase it that way—and she intended on begging Garrett to let her take him on a day of hooky if he could manage to look at her without spitting in her face.

Sure, he wasn’t the kind of guy who would actually do that, but after how she’d treated him, she had to be ready for anything. Including the possibility that he would say no. But she’d decided her priorities were wrong, and it was time to do something about it.

“Wow, these are the essentials, are they?” Natalie asked, holding up the little plastic bag the front desk had given her. A toothbrush, sample size toothpaste, and two Q-tips. “Now I feel like the welcome baskets I have at my bed and breakfast are a bit over the top.”

“What do you put in them?”

“Oh, toiletries, slippers, mini sparkling cider bottles, chocolates...” She cut herself off with a yawn. “More stuff that I’m forgetting now because I’m so tired. Do you mind if I shower?”

“Go for it,” Em said, sitting at the edge of one of the beds.

Natalie nodded, and took her essentials bag into the bathroom, leaving Em to stare at her phone.

Should she call him? The “I’m in love with you” conversation seemed like one she should have in person but she was feeling antsy not doing anything to fix the huge problem she’d created.

Her thumb swiped the phone open, and she clicked on his name. As much as she wanted to surprise him with a day catered to his spontaneity and love of fun, she should probably see that he was free for said day. Right? Right. Still, her hand shook as she pressed the call button. But all her anxiety had been worthless, because he didn’t answer. Granted—her eyes darted to the bedside clock—it was now 1:14 AM so he was probably asleep. She should have checked the time before calling in the first place.

Before she could lose her nerve, she shot him a quick text.

Em: Call me when you get a minute? Please.

There. That wasn’t too terrible.

But maybe she should have said something about how sorry she was. Or that she wanted to take him out the next day. Or...

The door to the bathroom opened, and Natalie walked out in one of the hotel bath towels. “I realized I have no pajamas so I

guess I'm sleeping in this." She stopped a couple feet from Em. "Everything okay?"

No. It wasn't. But Em wasn't sure she wanted to unpack the whole of it. It was taking all her mental and emotional energy just to exist at that moment. So she nodded, grabbed her own essentials bag, and slipped into the bathroom.

Em left the hotel earlier than even she was used to. She hadn't been able to sleep past four AM, so it was her best option to just get on the road. Quickly, she scrawled out a note for Natalie and ran for her car in the same clothes she'd worn the day before, and slept in—hoping no one would see her. That was one good thing about how early she was leaving: she could get home and shower before banging down Garrett's door.

The drive was too long. After so much time stuck in her head, she was considering skipping the shower, just running a brush through her hair, and groveling to Garrett before she lost the nerve. Or fell apart. She'd thought her stomach was a mess when she'd broken up with him, but clearly, she hadn't known the meaning of the word. Mess was what she was now. In a constant state of nail-biting, hair-pulling anxiety while simultaneously pushing her car to go ten—fifteen—twenty miles over the speed limit so she could get to him faster.

Which was how she ended up taking a curb and nearly knocking over a mailbox as she turned onto their street. If looks could kill, the old man watering his grass in the early

morning sunlight would have Em's head on a platter. With an apple in her mouth.

She offered an apologetic wave and slowed her speed for the last five houses until her own. And Garrett's.

Except when she pulled into the driveway... Garrett's truck wasn't at the house next to hers.

Curious but unwilling to investigate when she still looked like she might have survived a night in the mountains snuggled up beside a bear, she went inside, brushed her teeth and grabbed a hairbrush, then went back to her front window while pulling it through her messy strands. She and that window were becoming mighty good friends this past week.

Still, no truck was parked outside. Em bit her lip. No part of her plan included a backup for Garrett not being there. She'd just assumed he would be. Should she call again?

No. He hadn't even answered her text yet.

She trudged back to her room like a dejected toddler. Maybe this was a sign she needed to full-on shower before seeing him. It probably wouldn't hurt her cause.

Twenty minutes of hot water later, Em again paced to her windows. No truck.

Okay. So she was supposed to wear makeup for this apology. Got it.

But another fifteen minutes later, there was still no truck. She glanced at the clock in the kitchen. It was only 8:17. If he'd gone somewhere the night before—like his *mother's*

house, because of course that was the only place he'd go. Not an ex-girlfriend's or something catastrophic like her mind was not-so-subtly trying to suggest—he probably wouldn't be home for a couple of hours. Maybe he wasn't even awake yet. Maybe *that* was why he wasn't answering her text.

She stifled a yawn as she stood in the middle of the living room.

Maybe fate wanted her to have a nap. Em couldn't remember the last time she'd taken one of those. It probably wouldn't work, especially since it wasn't even nine in the morning. Her body hadn't had time to get tired yet.

She was, apparently, wrong—that was happening to her increasingly often. Within a couple of minutes of her head hitting her pillow, she was asleep.

Some time later, Em woke with a start. Her mind whirled to catch up with her situation, and it was several confused seconds before she remembered why she'd been asleep fully clothed at... she looked at the clock—11:32 AM.

11:32!

Em jumped from the bed, sending throw pillows tumbling to the ground, and ran to her front room's window. In the seconds it took her to make it across the house, her heart pounded dangerously at the certainty she would see Garrett's truck and then—

No truck.

Her forehead fell onto the glass pane. Everything had seemed so clear the night before. When she'd realized she loved him and had been searching for happiness and fulfillment in all the wrong ways, she was *sure* she would come home, find Garrett and fix everything.

Why then was nothing working out right? Was she wrong?

No. Nope. Talking to her boss and Natalie... Plus seeing Jackson and April together after such a harrowing ordeal had shifted something in Em. And that shift had her viewing things in a way she never had before.

If only a certain man's *truck* would freaking come into view right about now.

Em stepped back from the window before her entire face became imprinted on the glass, and ideas started forming. One more phone call. One more. Sure, he hadn't answered her text, but it wasn't like she could just give up and leave it at that.

Why then, were her hands shaking as she picked her phone up? And why did she wait a full twenty seconds before she threw caution to the wind and clicked the call button beside his name?

The second it started ringing, Em's heart took back up its stampeding death threat. The stampede increased during the second and third ring but started to calm by the fourth.

By the seventh ring, it had picked back up, because she was starting to think of something—that he wouldn't answer again, and she'd have to leave a message.

The ringing stopped, an automated recording told her to leave a message, and the voicemail beeped. And Em promptly hit the big red button and threw the phone back onto her bed.

She fell face-first onto the mattress. If she didn't leave a message, would he still call back? Probably not.

Ughhhh.

Gathering her strength yet again, she picked the phone back up and made a second call, trying to ignore how pathetic she felt about it. Again, he didn't answer, and again, the voicemail beeped. But this time, she left a somewhat stable-sounding message.

“Hi, Garrett, it's Em. In case your caller-ID didn't tell you or... never mind. Anyway, I wondered... Well, I wondered if you'd let me take you out this afternoon? I'd like to talk. If that's okay.” At this point, Em's sanity was slipping, and it was time to wrap things up. “Lemmeknow.Kbye!”

Then she fell back on the bed, questioning her life choices.

One thing was for sure: law school had been way easier than love.



CHAPTER 36

Em

GARRETT DIDN'T CALL BACK. All day Friday she had her phone glued to her hand and her eyes essentially glued to her window. But he didn't call.

She'd taken work off for nothing.

No, not nothing. It was all a part of her newfound determination to practice moderation in her job.

Still, she might have slipped in a few phone calls and emails during the day. She was coming to realize that she really did love her job. She just didn't love working twenty-four-seven like the devil himself was on her heels. It was exhausting constantly trying to appear perfect for her boss, coworkers, and parents. So she would work for herself and the victims that she'd chosen this field of practice for in the first place.

Saturday morning, Em woke up feeling sad. That was the best word for it. She was just sad. She thought about calling April and venting to her, but she couldn't bring herself to. Why, she wasn't really sure. Maybe because it was embarrassing. Or she didn't want to burden her sister after everything she had just been through.

Or maybe it was because if she told someone Garrett wasn't calling her back, she had to admit he might not ever call her back.

Around noon, she reached an all-time low. She sent him another text. Two texts, actually. Texts she wouldn't have even sent in the prime of her middle-school dating stage.

Em: Hey... Sorry to bother you. Just wanted to check if you got my message yesterday? Or my text the day before.

Em: Of course, if you did get them and aren't responding on purpose, that's okay too. But if you'd let me know, I'd appreciate it. I have a lot I'd like to talk to you about.

It had been two hours since she'd sent the texts. And no, they didn't get any less painful to think about after two hours.

Attempting to distract herself, Em sat at her kitchen table to work through some emails and then send in a grocery pickup order. But a noise outside her house pulled her from the tasks. A noise that sounded a lot like a truck pulling into the driveway next door.

Her ego still bruised from her unanswered messages, she tentatively walked to the window and peeked out. There was a car in Garrett's driveway. It wasn't Garrett's, though, and whoever had been in it had already gotten out.

With more than a little curiosity—and a frustrated groan—Em went back to the table. Garrett was too good a guy to leave

her hanging. He would call her back. Or text her back. Or something. She did not need to go barging next door for answers.

She. Did. Not.

She drummed her fingers against the tabletop.

She bounced her leg up and down.

She tried to stop looking toward the front of her house.

Em wouldn't have made a good spy. She didn't do well under pressure. And she, apparently, didn't do well with only her mind as company. Which, she'd like to point out, wasn't ever an issue until she met Garrett and he went screwing with her head and her heart. But screw with it, he had, and completely lose it, she did.

Which was how she ended up marching over to his house a few minutes after three PM.

Her loud banging on the front door was, perhaps, overkill, but she was fired up. She was a woman in court. She was here for answers. She had also gone a little crazy the last week.

The door swung open, and Em opened her mouth, only to shut it when she recognized the man behind the door.

“Noah?”

Garrett's friend leaned against the doorframe. “At your service. Though, to be honest, Garrett made it sound like I wouldn't be seeing much of you.”

Em was at a loss for words.

Noah waited with raised eyebrows, but when she said nothing, he asked, “Uhhh... Want to come in?”

She shook her head, finally finding her voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Garrett offered me his house.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because he’s in Texas.”

All the anger melted from her. So that was why he wasn’t answering her calls or texts. That was why he wasn’t even giving her the common courtesy of turning her down politely instead of straight ghosting her. Because he was gone. He’d taken that job he’d told her about. He’d left without saying a word, and therefore she was no longer worthy of a text.

“I thought he still had a month left in this job.”

Noah shrugged. “We didn’t talk particulars. All he said was that he had work in Texas, so he wouldn’t be here. He told me where he left the key, and that’s about it. I’m just staying for the week because my roommate has a bunch of family staying over and I didn’t want to go crash at my folks’ place. Too small and too many people digging into my personal issues, you know?”

Em nodded absently, but she’d already checked out of the conversation. She had to—to hold herself together until she could escape.

“Well, thanks, Noah,” she said, already walking down the steps.

“Sure... no problem.”

She walked across the lawn in a daze. Then she walked into her house and straight back to her bedroom. She needed ice cream. And a bath. But both reminded her too much of Garrett and the hole where her heart used to be, so instead, she just crawled into bed. It was too late. She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes, trying to keep the tears back, but it didn't work. Hot and wet, they spilled around her palms and down her face into her pillow.

Her chest hurt—physically hurt with the evidence of her heart breaking. She'd made the biggest mistake of her life, and there was nothing left for her to do.

She'd fallen in love and realized it too late.



Em might not have made a good spy, but she still made a good lawyer—and, newly, a good sister. She threw herself into work and spent an increasing amount of time with April and Jackson. She even managed a semi-harmonious conversation with her dad, wherein he informed her they weren't mad at her and were honestly thrilled with their new choice of partner. Of course, he'd coupled that with a couple of likely unintentional jabs over how competent the man they'd chosen was and how there couldn't possibly have been a better choice.

Em got the hint that she wasn't the best choice. She was getting used to not being the best choice. But in the ways she

could fix that, she was trying to.

Still, even with everything she tried to occupy herself with, Em had too much spare time over the next week. With her newfound determination to separate her identity from work, she was strictly working from eight to five. She still arrived earlier than most colleagues, but she left when they left and took lunch when they took lunch. Stephanie had even invited her to karaoke night the Friday after Em found out Garrett was gone. It was a nice invitation—and Em did appreciate it—but she turned it down anyway, with a request that Stephanie invite her the next time they go. Maybe sometime in the future she'd be up for a fun night out with the office, but right now she hurt too badly to put on a face.

After Em told April about Garrett—which she broke down and did the day after her run-in with Noah—April had continually tried to convince Em to call him again, just to be sure. Which was what she was doing at that moment.

“Come on, Em, you’ll regret not trying; I know you will. This wasn’t some fling,” she coaxed from her spot on the couch, wrapped up in a cozy blanket.

Em paced into the kitchen to pull a water bottle out of the fridge. “You don’t know that. By all accounts, it was just a fling to him.”

April shook her head—both at the offered water bottle and at Em’s comment. “I don’t believe that. A person only needed eyes to see how much he cared about you.”

Em grimaced. “That’s your biased-sister outlook. I bet anyone else could see he was out of my league and never intended me to be anything but a good time.”

“In his defense—” She raised her hands when Em turned narrowed eyes on her. “Hey, I’m on your side, but in his defense, you did break up with him. Maybe he thought you saw him as just a fling?”

Em bit her thumbnail. April had a point.

Her sister tilted her head to look in Em’s eyes until she stopped biting her nail and acknowledged her. “Call him, Em. Call him one more time. Then I promise I’ll stop bugging you.”

“I’ll think about it.”

That was enough for April, and she dropped the subject.

But Em’s brain wouldn’t drop the subject. It burrowed deep into her mind and seemed to poison every thought until she was sitting in her driveway staring at his name on her phone and clicking “call” against her better judgment.

The lights were on in Garrett’s house, but it was still Noah’s jeep in the driveway. The call went straight to voicemail. But another option had just walked past the front window. Noah already thought she was crazy—why not solidify that notion? After all, April was right, and Em was beginning to believe that for the rest of her life she’d regret not getting to the bottom of Garrett’s sudden absence. This was the first man she’d ever let in. The first man to make her look at life

differently. And it felt like a disservice to him to believe that the thoughtful, fun man she'd fallen in love with would discard her without hardly a second thought. Much as it seemed that way.

She slammed her car door and walked up the driveway and across the lawn to Garrett's. Her heels clipped against the brick steps of his porch with purpose, and in some strange way, the sound bolstered her confidence. It was the sound of a powerful woman walking into the courtroom. But it could also be the sound of a woman in love fighting for her man.

Oh, man, that was overdoing things a bit, wasn't it?

Nah. It really wasn't.

Noah opened the door with the same surprised expression as last time, but this time, Em asked if she could come in. He nodded and stepped back, making room for her to pass.

He closed the screen door but propped the main door open after she passed him, letting in the warm evening air and the occasional sound of a car driving by. "Want something to drink?" he asked, though he sounded confused.

"No. Thanks." She spun to face him in the living room. "I wanted to ask you a few things."

"Okay. Shoot." He passed her and dropped onto Garrett's couch. Em had no choice but to follow and seat herself on the edge of the loveseat.

"Why isn't Garrett answering my calls?" Might as well cut straight to the chase.

Noah's eyebrows shot up. "Well, I'd guess it's because he lost his phone. Why are you calling him though? He said you broke up."

"We did. But I... I need to talk to him. I can't get ahold of him, and I probably won't ever see him again if he doesn't answer my calls. But... you said he lost his phone?"

Noah nodded, eyeing her curiously. "Yeah. At the airport. He emailed me to let me know."

Okay. This was good. Really good. "Does he have a new number? Can you give it to me?"

"No, sorry."

Em sucked her cheeks in. "I imagine he asked you not to? Guess that's my answer then. Sorry for bothering you, Noah." She started to stand, but Noah's laugh caused her to stop, her hands on the cushions beneath her, prepping to push off.

"No, I mean I can't give you his new number, because he doesn't have one. I'm guessing he's waiting till he gets home."

Em searched Noah's lighthearted expression for some explanation of what he meant. "You've lost me. Isn't home Texas now? Why would he wait to get a phone?"

Noah laughed outright. "Texas? Not that I know of. Unless this trip is a house-hunting trip, which he told me it was a work thing, so I think the chances of that are slim, then there's no way he's moving to Texas."

Em was starting to feel dumb because she wasn't following this explanation at all. It pained her to have to ask more

questions for clarification. “But you said he was in Texas.”

“Yes. For a work thing.”

“You didn’t say he was coming back.”

It wasn’t a question, but Noah shrugged. “You didn’t ask, and you left pretty fast last time. Sorry.”

Em looked away for a minute, trying to figure it all out. It was then she noticed something. Garrett’s pictures on the wall. She looked back to where Noah sat, on *Garrett’s* couch. She turned to look at the kitchen. Which had Garrett’s table and chairs and another of his pictures.

“Now that I’ve answered all of your questions,” Noah’s voice brought her head back around to look at him, “I have some for you. Why are you so interested in Garrett? I thought you broke up.”

“I already told you we did. I want to talk to him.”

“Why?”

Em met his eyes. For the first time in the limited time she’d known the guy, they were completely serious as he watched her intently. A lot of reasons flitted through her head. Easy, superficial reasons for why she might want to talk to Garrett. But something in her made it impossible to lie now. About this.

“Because I made a huge mistake. I thought I had my life all figured out... but... well, the only important thing now is that I was wrong. Stupid wrong, really.”

“Wrong... as in how?”

Em sighed. “I shouldn’t have broken up with him.”

“Well, yeah, I could have told you that. But what made you figure it out?” His easy grin made it hard to be annoyed with him. But she was still beginning to be.

She’d spell it out then. “I’m in love with him.”

“Well, would you look at that?”

Em frowned. “What?”

“That. Did you hear that, Garrett? She’s in love with you. You can stop moping now and kiss and make up.” He didn’t say this to her, but over her shoulder.

Slowly, the heat on her neck already confirming who was behind her, Em turned.

Garrett stood just outside the screen door, a suitcase in one hand, and the door handle clutched in the other. He was watching her, and it made her stomach flip. Slowly, he opened the screen door, stepping inside.

He seemed to take half the air with him.

“I’ll just leave you two to it, then. I’ll be in your room with headphones in if you need me.” He started to walk backwards from the room. “Please don’t need me.” And he winked at Em before disappearing down the hall.

Garrett just kept watching her. His expression was unreadable, and it didn’t seem like he’d be starting the conversation.

“Ummm... hi.” Four years of college and three years of law school and *that* was what she came up with. *Hi*. Humiliating.

He dropped his suitcase and closed the door but didn't move. “‘Hi’ is nice, but I'd like to back up a bit. I feel like I missed something.”

“What, you think the I lov—” she choked on the word. “You think my conversation with Noah wasn't enlightening enough?”

His eyes crinkled. Just a little. But she could see her Garrett underneath the serious façade. “Not at all,” he said. “Start from the beginning. If you don't mind.”

“Well... I left you a couple messages.”

“I lost my phone at the airport.”

“So I heard.” She was still sitting, turned to look at him over the back of the loveseat. She shifted awkwardly.

“What did the messages say?”

“That I wanted to talk... more or less.” Em prayed those texts could never be recovered.

He lifted his hands, palms up. “I'm here now. Let's talk.” And finally, he walked into the room and took up Noah's spot on the couch, looking up at her.

It was now or never. And never wasn't an option. “I was wrong. I was so wrong. I didn't realize how screwed up my priorities were when we broke up, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But I grew up in a career-centered world, and I just thought—

well, you already know what I thought because you were the one to tell me. You and April. And Natalie. Mr. Standson too, really. Oh, jeez, I'm not explaining this well."

A hint of the smile she had missed *so* much started to creep onto Garrett's face. "No, not really," he said quietly.

Em took a steadying breath. "For the number of times I've thought about this conversation, you'd think I'd be doing a better job."

"I'm willing to give you another chance."

Em rubbed the side of her neck, unable to keep her hands still or her eyes on his. "How about five? Because I may need more than one chance to get through this explanation."

"No, Em. I mean, I'm willing to give *you* another chance. To give us a chance. More than willing, really." He chuckled, seemingly at himself. "If I hadn't been out of town, I probably would have been begging you to give us another chance..." The last traces of his laughter disappeared as he met her eyes. "You killed me when you broke up with me. I haven't been able to get you out of my head."

"I'm so sorry I hurt you," Em whispered.

"I forgive you."

Em stared at him. "Just like that? I didn't get to give my explanation."

"You can tell me later."

"I took off work... I—I had a whole date planned."

He stood. “We can do that later.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be this easy.”

Garrett stopped just in front of her, grabbing her hands and pulling her to a stand. “Love doesn’t need to be hard, Em.”

She swallowed. “Love?”

His mouth hitched up on one side. “Yes. Love.”

“Love,” she repeated, a smile pulling at her lips now too.

He brushed the pad of his thumb across her cheek. “I love you, September Miller. And let’s pretend I said it first, okay? For my manhood.”

“You did say it first,” she countered.

“Exactly.” He was pulling her closer, his hands slipping around her waist.

“No, really, you did. I told Noah I loved you, but I didn’t tell you. So, really—”

“Can we shut the lawyer off for a minute?” Garrett laughed.

“I’m not sure I can, actually. But I promise I’m working on it.”

“Good enough for me.” And his mouth covered hers.

Two weeks was too long for Em to have gone without Garrett’s kisses. Without his hands sliding up her back and cupping her face and angling her head in just the right way. Without the shiver of pleasure created when he whispered her name against her lips.

Em would spend the rest of her life making sure she didn't go a day without this—without Garrett.

“Garrett?” she murmured while his lips trailed down her jaw and made it hard to breathe.

“Mmm?”

“I love you.”

He pulled back, his eyes crinkling on the sides. “But I said it first, remember?”



Garrett

GARRETT PULLED INTO HIS mom's driveway with a feeling of apprehension. Em squeezed his hand from her spot in the passenger seat. He felt the comfort she meant to convey and smiled at her.

"It's just my mom's boyfriend. I shouldn't be scared of a fifty-plus surgeon."

"Did you confirm he was over fifty? I mean, just imagine the shock if we walk in, and he's actually a twenty-five-year-old gold digger?"

A laugh burst from Garrett. "He's digging in the wrong place if that's the case. But come to think of it, I don't think I did learn his age. Oh, jeez... What if my mom's a cougar?" He turned wide eyes on Em. She hit him on the arm.

"I don't think we need to worry about that."

"*Think?* Nope. I'm out of here. We can try again next week."

"That's what you said last week." Em laughed.

"And it worked just fine then."

“Come on. I want a sundae, and I’m not letting your fear of doctors or cougars stop me.”

“Brave woman,” he said with overdone solemnity.

“Stick close enough, and some of it might rub off on you.”

He almost didn’t notice what she was doing, trying to distract him from meeting the first man to romantically enter his mom’s life since Garrett’s dad. But he did notice. And he appreciated it.

They walked hand in hand up the front walk. “Did I tell you I signed the contract with American Builds? I’m officially their western regional manager.”

“You might have mentioned it once. Or seven times,” she teased.

“What can I say? I’m strangely excited to be settling down.” He released her hand and put his arm around her, pulling her close as they reached his mom’s front steps. She tipped her head up to him, and he gladly took the invitation, kissing her lightly on the lips, then on the forehead. “Hey,” he said, “settling. That’s the great basis for another pun.”

She rolled her eyes at him, which made him want to kiss her again. So he did.

“I’m pretty excited you’re settling down, too,” she murmured. A flurry of wind tossed itself around in his chest. Her words affected him even more than usual. Maybe because he’d begun thinking about a different sort of settling down. With her. One that involved a ring and a big white dress.

He might have already been in discussions with April about what kind of ring Em would like.

“But there is one problem,” he said. Neither of them moved toward the door now only a few steps away. She seemed to understand he needed just a minute longer.

“What’s that?”

“My housing contract is up in a couple of months.”

“Hmm.” She tapped her lips with a finger. “Guess you’ll need to find a new place.”

“Guess so.” He grinned.

The door opened, and they both jumped a little at the abrupt action. “You guys made it! Come in, come in!” His mom stepped aside, smiling at them both.

Inwardly cringing at the upcoming meeting, Garrett walked through the door. A slim, soft hand slipped into his as Em followed. He squeezed it.

They walked straight for the kitchen, and Garrett caught his first glimpse of the infamous John—who was, thankfully, graying and definitely not under the age of fifty.

“Garrett, Em, this is John. John, this is my son and his girlfriend, Em.” His mom made the introductions but was cut off at the end by Em’s quick intake of breath. He sent a questioning look her way.

She released his hand, stepping forward. Recognition lit in John’s eyes as well. “Garrett,” she said, looking back at him,

“this is John Nolan. The surgeon who operated on April and her baby!”

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Ms. Miller,” John said, shaking her hand.

“No, no, call me Em.”

“And how is your sister? I have a follow-up with her this week, I believe.”

Em nodded. Garrett was still staring at them both. “She’s doing great, thank you. For everything.”

John looked over to Garrett then, smiling. “Small world, I suppose.” He had a kind appearance about him. Like a mixture of Santa Claus and a grandpa. But one who worked out, from the look of him. “Smaller even,” he added, “because I hear you two like rock climbing. I have a friend I go with at least once a month. Any chance I could convince you two to let an old man like myself tag along with you once in a while?”

Em laughed, and it shook Garrett from his stupor. “Only if you don’t mind a bloody nose.”

“Or a black eye.” Garrett grinned as he stepped back to Em’s side.

He shrugged. “All part of the fun, I suppose.”

Em wrapped her arm around Garrett’s waist and caught his eye at the word “fun.” Then his mom called them to get their ice cream, and over the course of the evening, Garrett might have been convinced his mom dating again wasn’t so bad.

It helped to have Em's hand on his knee, sending him glances almost as often as he sent them to her.



EPILOGUE 2.0

Em

“WE SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN the champagne color. I know wedding dresses are supposed to be white, but champagne is just so beautiful. And has anyone checked on the napkin fiasco? I swear, if they didn’t get the embroidered ones, I’m going to have words with the planner.”

Em lounged on the chaise in the hotel room, staring out the window, half a smile playing across her face while her mother paced the length of the room.

“September, are you even listening to me?”

Em turned back to the chaos of her mother’s meltdown. “Honestly, no. I’m getting married in an hour. One hour. I couldn’t care less about the napkins, and I think I look great in my dress.”

Mom’s shoulders lost some of their rigidity. “Well, of course you do. But...”

April came up behind her mother, her four-month-old baby asleep in the crook of her arm. “How about we go check on the napkins, Mom, and give Em a minute?”

Em shot April a look of gratitude as her sister steered their mom from the room. Em never would have expected this side of Mom. She was the definition of a bridezilla... and it wasn't even her wedding. Since April had essentially eloped and deprived their mother of micromanaging *her* wedding, Em got twice the micromanagement. And April had been more than happy to help, with Em's cute little niece strapped to her chest while she and their mom debated flowers and invitations.

And honestly, Em didn't even care. She was grateful not to plan anything, and she had even enjoyed the time spent with her mom and April in semi-harmony.

But mostly, she was just glad she was getting married.

The door to the bridal suite opened, and Em shouted as she jumped to her feet, "Hey! You can't be in here!"

Garrett closed the door, fumbling a little to find the handle. "It's okay; I tied a tie around my eyes, so I can't even see you."

Em was still backing away. "But it's bad luck!"

"*Seeing* the bride in her dress is bad luck. Kissing her in it? No one said anything about that."

Em stopped her retreat. "Kissing?"

Garrett turned to the sound of her voice. "I mean... only if you want to." The humor threading its way through his words drew her to him.

She fingered his lapel. "You look great. Even with the lopsided tie around your eyes."

He pouted. “How rude that you get to see me, but I can’t see you. Just tell me... did you pick one of those really big dresses or something... tight?”

She gave him a little shove—not enough to move him anywhere. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

“Fine, fine. Well, I had more than just kissing in mind when I snuck in here... I have something for you,” he said, moving back just enough to show her he had a rectangular, wrapped object behind his back.

She took it from him. “I didn’t realize we were exchanging gifts?” She should have gotten him something. Was that a thing? Why had no one told her that was a thing?

He shook his head. “No, this is just something I’ve owed you for a while. But I haven’t had much time to work on it... Someone keeps monopolizing my free time.”

She smiled, not at all offended to be accused of monopolizing his time. “Should I open it now?”

“Yes. But tell me your reaction, since I can’t see it.”

She pulled the paper off, freezing as she saw what it was. A wooden frame, carved with several small pictures. But what was in the frame was what caught her attention. “When did you take this picture?”

His voice was quiet to match her own. “That second night you came over to my house for dinner. After you agreed to call our weekends dates.”

It was a picture of the two of them sitting on Garrett's couch. She was asleep, with her head on his shoulder, their faces lit almost blue from the reflection of whatever movie they'd been watching.

When she didn't say anything, he added, "You were just so cute asleep on my shoulder, I had to take a picture. I think I realized that night that I wanted more than a few dates with you. I wanted them all."

A lump formed in her throat. It was hard to say anything.

"Do you like it? The pictures around the edges are of our dates. I know I should have asked you what you wanted in exchange for completing my challenge, as you called it... but I wanted to surprise you."

"I love it." Her voice cracked as she ran a finger down the front of the glass.

"Are you crying? You're not supposed to be crying."

She half-laughed, half-sobbed. "They're happy tears. Stop, don't take off the blindfold, I'm fine. I just... I can't believe how lucky I got the day I needed a tire change in the rain."

"And here you thought I wanted to murder you. Turns out, I wanted to marry you."

"I think if you would have told me that right off the bat, I would have been more scared than if you were a murderer."

Garrett chuckled.

Her finger froze on the glass, and she brought it a little closer to her face, blinking away tears. “Hey, wait... did you carve the night we went to the art exhibit?”

His voice turned sly, “Maybe.”

She squinted. “*Both* rooms?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a thorough job if I hadn’t.”

Em bit her lips together to keep from laughing, but the hilarity bled into her voice anyway. “Too bad, guess we can’t display this in a common area.”

“The jury’s still out on that. It could be a good talking point.” He still hadn’t stopped with the bad puns, even months later.

She shook her head with half a laugh, then, with one last glance at the beautifully carved light wood frame and picture, Em set it on a nearby table.

Then she turned back, wrapping her arms around Garrett’s middle. He closed her in a hug. A tight one. When she finally pulled back, her fingers tiptoed their way up to his half-covered face. She pulled his head to hers, pressing her lips against his.

In less than an hour, this man would be her *husband*. Way sooner than she’d planned in her ten-year plan... but real life was better than she could have planned for. Thank heavens for an unanticipated neighbor throwing a wrench into her life goals and showing her what the *real* point of living was.

Em started to pull back, but he looped a hand around her waist and pulled her closer. “It’s not too late to elope,” he murmured before kissing her.

She smiled against his lips. “At this point, that would probably take longer than just going through with the ceremony.”

He gave an overbearing sigh, dropping his forehead to hers. “Why do you have to be so logical all the time?”

“It’s what you love about me.”

“*One* of the things. There are quite a few, actually.”

Her smile was so wide, it might have been smudging her makeup.

Garrett’s hands constricted at her waist, slipping down to grasp her hips. “On that note... Another one of those things would be that you clearly went with a tight dress.”

She pushed away from him. “Cheater!”

His smile was lopsided. “*Guilty.*”

“Get out of here.” But even her tone of voice wouldn’t cooperate with how stern she wanted to be. It didn’t help that her throat was still thick with happy tears.

He managed to blindly capture her hand and pull it to his lips. “Fine. But I’ll see you soon.” He dropped her fingers and stepped back.

“I’ll be the one in white.”

He smiled at her, one of his devastatingly handsome smiles that seemed to wrap her up in a hug even from four feet away. And then he turned and missed the door entirely, running face-first into the wall.

Em burst out laughing.

“You could have warned me that was there!” He lifted a corner of his blindfold just to locate the door, and grabbed at it.

“Watch out for the wall!” she said belatedly.

“You always have my back,” a hint of amused sarcasm colored his words.

“I’d be a bad fiancée if I didn’t.”

“Almost WIFE,” he called back as the door clicked behind him.

Em fell back to the chaise right about the time that someone—ahem, her almost-husband—started singing, off-key, “September and Garrett are getting married. And there will be lots of K-I-S-S-I-N-G...” It trailed off as he walked farther down the hall.

And Em, laughing, touched up her lipstick so she could let him ruin it again as soon as possible.

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REVIEWS!

Did you enjoy the story? Please consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or Bookbub! Reviews are HUGE for authors, especially new ones, and I appreciate every single one. Thanks so much!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Thornell grew up reading when she should have been sleeping, but it wasn't until 2019 that she started writing. Tired of ending books and saying 'goodbye' to beloved characters, she wondered what it would be like to have her own characters that lived in her head always. It was probably a mark of sleep deprivation that she wanted people living in her head, but the idea was planted regardless.



Karen lives in Utah with her husband and kids. When not writing contemporary or regency romance, she spends her free time doing endless loads of laundry, playing board games, and, yes, talking to those characters in her head.

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